REWRITING THE CREATIVE: TOWARD A HAPPENINGS THEORY OF
CREATIVE COMPOSITON
(Rhetoric and Composition Scholarly Dissertation)
&
THE LAST MONARCHIST: STORIES FROM NEPAL
(Creative Writing, Fiction, Dissertation)

A Dissertation
presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
at the University of Missouri-Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
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dissertation entitled

REWIRTING THE CREATIVE: TOWARD A HAPPENINGS THEORY OF
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THE LAST MONARCHIST: STORIES FROM NEPAL

(Creative Writing, Fiction, Dissertation)

presented by Khem Kumar Aryal,

a candidate for the degree of doctor of philosophy,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

____________________________________________________
Professor Donna Strickland

____________________________________________________
Professor Speer Morgan

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Professor Jeff Rice

____________________________________________________
Professor Mary K. Blakely
To my family and friends

REWRITING THE CREATIVE

To all those who lost their lives in the Maoist conflict in Nepal

THE LAST MONARCHIST
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ABSTRACT

*Rewriting the Creative: Toward a Happenings Theory of Creative Composition*

This dissertation explores the relationship between composition and creative writing in the light of the binary of rhetoric and poetics, and addresses the issue of creativity in composition by proposing a happenings theory of creative composition. The proponents of the notion of creative composition call for bringing the two writing fields closer based on the assumption that creative writing would help make composition more creative, hence the term “creative composition.” Wendy Bishop wants to erase altogether the line that divides the two fields, and Doug Hesse advocates for making a place for creative writing in composition studies. This approach disregards the fact that creative writing in the university is about certain genres of writing, just as composition is about other genres. That is, the term “creative” in creative writing does not necessarily invoke creativity any more than any other form of writing does. I maintain that we need to acknowledge the epistemological differences that constitute the two fields as two distinct writing disciplines and that, in order to practice composition creatively, composition studies needs to build on the theories and practices that are conducive to creativity rather than on the creative writing field and the genres that are practiced in it. Building on Geoffrey Sirc’s formulation of English composition as a Happening, I work with Gregory Ulmer’s notion of choral writing and Byron Hawk’s renewed emphasis on vitality in composition to constitute the Happenings as a theory of creative strategies. Thus this research reorients the focus of the existing conversation on creative composition away from creative writing and its genres to composition theories and pedagogies that are creative.
The Last Monarchist: Stories from Nepal

The nine stories in this dissertation depict individuals’ desperate efforts to keep their dreams intact in times of a national crisis. They are set in remote villages of Nepal and Kathmandu at the turn of this century, at the time when the Himalayan country transitioned from a monarchical state to a new republic as a result of a ten-year-long communist rebellion. On one level, these stories stand as a testament to a bloody war waged in the birthplace of the Buddha, for good or ill. And on another, they depict human frailty as well as resilience among those exposed by a civil war. Lokraj, the protagonist of a story, for instance, flees his village when Maoist rebels demand that he donate them one million rupees to support the so-called “People’s War.” But in Kathmandu, where he rallies against the Maoists, Lokraj finds himself further trapped in the continuing conflict as the rebels kill one of his colleagues and force his daughter, living back in his village, to fight the Maoist war.
PART I

Rewriting the Creative: Toward a Happenings Theory of Creative Composition

(Rhetoric and Composition Scholarly Dissertation)
INTRODUCTION

The division of writing instruction in the American university into composition studies and creative writing has troubled many composition scholars. Wendy Bishop claims that it confuses not only students but also teachers of writing; she found the division irrelevant because her pedagogy became more similar as she moved “as a teacher between these worlds of composition and creative writing classes” (“Crossing the Lines” 117). Doug Hesse complains that “the division truncates not only what we teach and research but how writing gets understood (or misunderstood) by our students, our colleagues, and the spheres beyond” (34). Discussing three different fields within the English department—rhetoric and composition, creative writing, and literary studies—as competing for space and domination in the discipline, Tim Mayers argues that creative writing and composition have more similarities than differences, and so they should come closer and their practices should be informed by each other’s theories (30-32). This scholarship arising from the intersection of composition studies and creative writing maintains that both fields will benefit more if we keep “more open borders” (Hesse, “The Place” 43), “eliminate the line [that exists between composition and creative writing] entirely” (Bishop, “Crossing the Lines” 117), “tear down the arbitrary boundaries and firmly establish writing programs that are informed by the dynamics of the creative process” (Moxley, “Tearing Down” 12), or inform practices by each others’ theories (Mayers).
In the context of the existing gap between the two writing fields and the conflict within the English department for resources and identity, these efforts to bring the two fields together should be viewed as a welcome move. In has encouraged teachers in one field to remain open to ideas from the other, and it has resulted in cross-pollination of ideas, at least on experimental basis for the moment. The practice of the workshop model in the composition class is an example of creative writing pedagogy informing the composition class. Similarly, some creative writing teachers have modified the traditional workshop and made it more interactive—allowing the author to speak—building on the practices in composition. Though it is hard to assess how much the two fields have benefited from such efforts, it has at least created a space for new experiments in writing instruction.

The scholars working in the intersection have focused on various aspects of the need to bring the two writing fields together—Mayers, for instance, highlights the political and institutional strength the fields could exercise together to challenge literary studies, and Bishop and Hesse discuss the issue of clarity for both students and teachers of writing—but most discussions revolve around the idea of creativity in writing, captured by the term “creative composition”. The term, which is in use since at least the 1930s and was popularized by Wendy Bishop through her 1993 article “Crossing the Lines: On Creative Composition and Composing Creative Writing” and subsequent scholarship, seems to be a fitting nomenclature through which to characterize the work done at the intersection of composition and creative writing. The scheme of bringing the two fields together and making composition creative has defined the discourse
surrounding the notion of creative composition in the last two decades or so. In this scheme, which I would like to call the Bishop framework, the term “creative” is used in the sense of employing one’s creativity in writing on the one hand, and in the sense of employing the a forms of writing called “creative” (i.e. from creative writing), on the other.

I identify two problems with the approach taken within the Bishop framework. First, this approach fails to identify and account for the differences that constitute the two writing disciplines, although both Bishop and Hesse have acknowledged in passing that the fields are in fact built on different principles. It falls short of acknowledging that the guiding principles of the two writing fields as they have been institutionalized now stipulate different theories and pedagogies. As such, the discourse on creative composition relies on the word “creative” from creative writing irrespective of the disciplinary baggage it carries from the field. The issue of crossing the line that exists between composition studies and creative writing calls for more than bringing the two terms from the two fields together, and it cannot be fully dealt with without addressing their disciplinary concerns. And second, it conflates creative writing with “creativity” and, as a result, it projects a false notion that writing in composition is dry, “uncreative” work that has to borrow genres from creative writing for a creative practice of writing. The solution to a creative approach to writing, according to this understanding, resides in creative writing and the genres practiced in the field. It is, thus, an outward-looking approach from the standpoint of composition studies, instead of looking at the creative practices that already exist in the field. This approach fails to acknowledge and build on the more transdisciplinary work that composition studies has already enjoyed, going back
to scholars Ken Macrorie, William J. Coles Jr. and Peter Elbow and more recent theories, pedagogical practices by scholars like Geoffrey Sirc, Gregory Ulmer, Byron Hawk, and Jeff Rice, who promote and practice theories and pedagogies that take “creative” approaches to writing and writing instruction without conflating creativity with creative writing.

This notion of creative composition as an approach to bringing the two writing fields together in the pretext of making composition creative rather than as an approach to teaching composition creatively has had direct disciplinary and pedagogical implications. On one level, it promotes the uncritical view about the division of the writing fields as unnecessary (resulting in the lack of the required level of attention to their distinct theories and pedagogies) and, on another, it strips composition of the opportunity to be creative in the real sense of the word. As such, the relationship between composition and creative writing needs to be understood in the new light and the notion of creative composition needs to be theorized as a method of practicing composition creatively rather than as a method of bringing the two writing fields together.

In this context, I contend that the notion of creative composition, the existing notion of which has turned to be creative writing composition (with word “creative” referring to creative writing and with the conflation of creative writing and creativity), needs to acknowledge that the two writing fields are guided by different fundamentals for it to provide a coherent theory of composing creatively. The Happenings theory of creative composition that I propose provides such a theory. The point of my intervention is located within the premise that transactional writing (as practiced in the field of rhetoric and composition) and poetic writing (as practiced in creative writing) are guided
by different fundamental principles, deriving from rhetoric in the case of composition and poetics in the case of creative writing. My research does not build on the conclusion that the rhetoric-poetics binary is neat and that texts always function within those defined territories of either rhetoric or poetics but on the contention that either theoretically or for matters of practical facility, we tend to work within the perceived binary of those arts and organize our practices within that binary.

In this dissertation, then, I reexamine the principles that guide the practices in composition and creative writing in order to maintain that any discussion about the creative practice of composition calls on acknowledging the differences that lie between the two writing disciplines, and, at the same time, looking at the term “creative” from a transdisciplinary position, which does not just tend to bridge the gap between disciplines but to create an altogether new perspective. Building further on that contention I propose what I call a Happenings theory of creative composition, a theory of composing that relies on the creative possibility of uncertainty and openness rather than on creative writing genres and the genre specific pedagogies as such. In the context of Geoffrey Sirc’s formulation of English composition as a Happening, I work with Gregory Ulmer’s notion of choral writing and Byron Hawk’s renewed emphasis on vitality in composition to constitute the Happening as a theory of creative composition. I argue that the Happening as a space for unsystematic invention strategies helps composition get out of the conventional structures of topoi and move on to chora, which, according to Derrida, “is the spacing which is a condition for everything to take place, for everything to get inscribed” (qtd. in Ulmer 71). Choral writing, as theorized by Gregory Ulmer, relies on methods that tend to work in the fashion of “dream reasoning” (70). I superimpose this
idea on the concept of vitality, a form of life force, for devising a theory of creativity. This theory takes Sirc’s theory of composition as a Happening beyond his binary of academic and versus other forms of writing (based on his reading of Bartholomae and Petrosky’s *Ways of Reading* and Macrorie’s *Searching Writing* in opposition to each other) and provides a theory of writing that is creative but does not rely on creative writing and the genres practiced in it, while redefining the relationship between composition and creative writing.

Discussions about bringing the two writing fields together are relatively new. Although there were some isolated voices, like that of Randall Freisinger who argued in 1978 that all significant writing is creative writing and claimed, “We should…view composition as creative writing, and we should teach it accordingly” (287), a sustained discussion began with Joseph M. Moxley and, more importantly, with Wendy Bishop in the 1990s. In the book he edited in 1989, *Creative Writing in America: Theory and Pedagogy*, Moxley argued for the need to “tear down the walls” (meaning the walls that stand between the writing fields as well as “around our [creative] writing classrooms”) (28). Although Moxley did not produce significant literature after that—except a journal article based on the same book—his voice remains significant even today because the orientation of the conversation has hardly changed since then. But a more sustained discussion began with Wendy Bishop’s work, including her 1993 article, “Crossing the Lines: On Creative Composition and Composing Creative Writing.” Bishop often spoke from the intersection of creative writing and composition no matter whether she spoke as a compositionist or as a creative writing teacher and scholar. She claimed that the two fields had more similarities than differences. Her books about creative writing pedagogy,
such as *Released Into Language: Options for Teaching Creative Writing*, turn out to be about composition pedagogy as well as she sees “more similarities than differences” between the two fields (“Crossing the Lines” 119). *Colors of a Different Horse: Rethinking Creative Writing Theory and Pedagogy*, edited by Bishop and Hans Ostrom in 1993, features many essays that explore the interconnectedness of the writing fields. The anthology has in fact a separate section called “Rethinking, (Re)vision, and Collaboration” in which authors explore the possibilities and the need of collaboration between the two writing fields. Equally compelling in this regard is yet another collection that Bishop and Ostrom edited a few years later, in 2003. *The Subject Is Story: Essays for Writers and Readers* builds on the assumption that a “story” approach to writing is a better approach to writing instruction. They call for the focus on story “as it relates to your writing and reading and . . . as it relates to your lives, with an awareness of how a person’s life outside college overlaps with that person’s life inside college—and how the outside/inside distinction is indeed more of a false story (a tall tale) than a true one” (italics in original, Preface and Introduction ix). The essays in the book explore the interconnectedness between stories and essays, hence advocating for the erasure of the line between creative writing and composition.

Building on these developments, in his 2005 book, *Re)Writing Craft: Composition, Creative Writing, and the Future of English Studies*, Tim Mayers makes his case for composition and creative writing’s collaboration, and proposes a number of “blueprints” for change. Mayers claims to have proposed a collaboration based on the two fields’ “guiding assumptions and ideologies” (11), but he is motivated more by institutional and political concerns than by the intrinsic values of the fields. Similarly,
Mary Ann Cain, Patrick Bizzaro, and Kelly Ritter have also explored the possibility of hybrid pedagogies, i.e. both composition and creative writing borrowing from each other to suit their purposes. Similar discussions continue in a 2009 special issue of *College English*, and Doug Hesse’s 2010 *CCC* article, “The Place of Creative Writing in Composition Studies.”

These conversations arising from the intersection of composition and creative writing differ from the rest of the scholarship that is concerned with a creative practice of composition in the sense that they assume creative writing is essentially creative and it is by taking creative writing to the composition class, or by erasing the line for that matter, that we can make composition creative. These conversations pay little attention to, if any, to creativity outside and beyond the disciplinary relationship between the two writing fields. Although theorists like Ken Macrorie, William E. Coles Jr., Peter Elbow feature in those discussions, they do not form their basis because those scholars do not frame their arguments around the division of creative writing and composition. In other words, creativity for them does not necessarily reside in creative writing. In their books, *Uptautht, Writing Without Teachers*, and *The Plural I*, respectively, their concern is not how to bring composition and creative writing together but how to create an atmosphere where composition can be done more creatively. Lynn Z. Bloom aims to do the same—create an atmosphere for creative practice—in her book *Composition Studies as a Creative Art*. Claiming that composition is “by necessity a creative art” (3), she calls for a creative approach to composition, but, unlike the creative composition scholars, Bloom does not speak from the intersection of composition and creative writing. Instead, she explains that she is concerned with the “creative dynamics that arise from interrelation of
writing, teaching writing—and way of reading, and the scholarship and administrative
issues engendered by both” (3). Because of her focus on the “creative” from the
standpoint of composition studies, or rather from a transdisciplinary approach to writing,
her work deserves a special place in the discussion of creative composition. However, her
treatment of the “creative” becomes too simplistic when she writes, “Our work, as
writers, teachers, scholars, administrators cannot be other than creative” (4), and, I
believe that the idea of the “creative” needs more theorizing.

And this theorizing will be possible not by conflating creativity and creative
writing or by erasing the line but by acknowledging the fundamentals that guide
composition and creative writing as different fields of study. It also requires that we look
at composition’s relationship with creative writing as well as literature within the English
department in a new light. D. G. Myers in his epochal book, Elephants Teach: Creative
Writing since 1880, provides a valuable insight into the relationship between composition
and creative writing by making a strong case that in the beginning “English composition
and creative writing were one and the same thing” (37) but later they emerged as two
different areas because of their conflicting orientations. Paul Dawson’s Creative Writing
and the New Humanities helps explain how creative writing as a field of study tends to
serve the humanist purpose of the English department. Similarly, Kelly Ritter and
Stephanie Vanderslice edited Can it Really Be Taught? Resisting Lore in Creative
Writing Pedagogy, and Dianne Donnelley’s Establishing Creative Writing as an
Academic Discipline make important contributions, hence helping us understand the
epistemological bases of creative writing (as opposed to those of composition).

There are some other equally important works that address the issue of the
relationship from the English Studies perspective. Robert Scholes, in *The Rise and Fall of English: Reconstructing English as a Discipline*, blames the division between various areas of study in English as the cause of the “fall” of English. In the words of Anderson and Farris, he “laments the schism in departments between literature and writing instruction and proposes instead ‘a discipline based on rhetoric and the teaching of reading and writing over a broad range of texts,’ including ‘poems, plays, stories, letters, essays, interviews, books, magazines, newspapers, movies, television shows’” (9). He envisions rhetoric as capable of guiding all the practices of the department in the right direction. In *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, Gerald Graff regards composition and creative writing as different “texts” of the department. But how those texts serve the humanistic purpose of the English department is a debatable issue. James Berlin’s work, especially his *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures: Refiguring College English Education*, discusses the relationship between literature and composition and, in turn, rhetoric and poetics in more explicit terms. Given his comprehensive study of writing studies within the English department, his failure to address creative writing’s place and the dynamics it creates in English looks odd, but his discussion of “rhetorical texts” and “poetic texts” (xv) and his concern with rhetoric and poetics as “competing paradigms” within the English department (26) provide a good basis for the discussion of the relationship between composition and creative writing. Similarly, Mark McGurl’s more recent book, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*, gives a new perspective on creative writing, helping us, in turn, understand its relationship with composition as well as literature in a new light.

The discourse on creative composition, however, disregards these relationships
and what emerge as the defining traits of composition and those of creative writing because of those relationships. The existing scholarship that has been produced at the intersection, calling for the blurring of the line, does not adequately explain the relationship between the two writing fields and the ontological differences upon which composition and creative writing are founded. As Patrick Bizzaro concedes, the fields’ epistemologies have not been fully examined (“Workshop”), although Bishop, Hesse, and Mayers acknowledge in passing that there are some intrinsic differences between the two fields.

Furthermore, the scholarship calling for the space for creative writing in composition does not attempt to explain the “creative” in composition studies except that it invokes creative writing. Also because the scholars do not account for the differences in the fundamentals of the writing fields, they take a simplistic and unexamined approach to the term “creative” and expect too much from creative writing. As a result, the issues of rhetorical invention and composition/rhetorical theories that provide the basis for creative practice have been missing from the discussion. The word “creative” in the term “creative composition” remains closely tied to the field of creative writing, still requiring clearer definition and theorizing, transcending creative writing.

It provides me an opportunity to intervene in the discussion on creative composition, explain the fundamentals that guide the two writing fields, and propose a theory of creative composition. In this dissertation, I first argue that the notion of creative composition has in fact turned to be “creative writing composition” by its dependence on the creative writing field rather than on theories of creativity. Then I explicate disciplinary writing practices in composition studies and creative writing. I maintain that
the fields are known, more or less, for particular genres of writing, and the term “creative” in creative writing does not necessarily invoke creativity, as is assumed in most of the discussion about blurring the line between composition and creative writing. To do that, I take a two-pronged approach—historical and theoretical. I establish that though both fields are concerned with writing and have some similarities, composition and creative are two different fields guided by different fundamentals. By drawing on the existing historical studies of the two disciplines, I demonstrate how the teaching of writing bifurcated into two disciplines and also how the differences in the kinds of writing they do contributed to that bifurcation. I look at rhetoric-poetic dichotomy and how this linguistic possibility has shaped the kinds of writing we practice in the two disciplines and how the fields’ theories and pedagogies have been shaped, in turn. Having established that the “creative” from creative writing discipline does not necessarily invoke a creative approach to writing, I propose a Happenings theory of creative composition building on Geoffrey Sirc, Gregory Ulmer and Byron Hawk. Since it is a theoretical dissertation, my research is based on textual analysis and synthesizing of theoretical models already available.

This study contributes to the understanding the relationship between the two writing fields in a new, more pragmatic way, by emphasizing not just their similarities but their differences. It helps us understand their theories and pedagogies as expressions of their intrinsic differences. This, in turn, helps us redirect our discussions of the “creative” in composition away from the existing efforts to find the “solution” in creative writing and, instead, focus on theories and pedagogical practices in the field of composition that transcend particular genres and disciplines. The Happenings theory of
creative composition that I propose will help fill the void that exists in the definition of the term “creative composition,” and redefine the direction of the conversation about bringing the two fields together for the “creative” practice of composition in the real sense of the word “creative.”

In Chapter One I trace the emergence and evolution of the term “creative composition” since 1932 when a book with the same name was published. Here I argue that the existing formulation of creative composition—amounting to the call to erase the line that exists between the two fields—has become a conduit for “smuggling” creative writing to the composition class under the cover of creativity/creative, and it does not necessarily make composition creative because creative writing is about certain genres of writing—poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, plays, and their variations—above anything else. By making the place for creative writing genres in composition, we only create what I call “creative writing composition.” I conclude this chapter with a contention that the term “creative composition” does not necessarily invoke creativity in composition, and it rather aims to effectively erase the line between the two writing fields, as Bishop and the early Moxley wanted. This scenario falls short of yielding any fruit on two important grounds: one, the “creative” we borrow from creative writing does not necessarily have to do with creativity as such, and two, the desire to introduce creative genres to the composition class negates the “epistemological difference” (Bizzaro) between the two fields.

In Chapter Two I argue that the division between rhetoric and composition and creative writing is based on the perceived binary of rhetoric and poetics, as manifested in the form of non-literary versus literary writing, and the genres that are practiced within
those disciplines are guided by the two different arts. In order to make my case, I first discuss rhetoric-poetics binary, and then show how the binary has defined the two fields over the past few decades and how creative writing and composition help to define each other in opposition. Then I discuss how teaching creating writing genres have a specific agenda of teaching literature, hence creating a bigger gap between composition studies and creative writing. I end the chapter with the contention that the tendency to look at the two writing fields as the same (or as almost the same) simply because they are about teaching writing is flawed, and so we need a better theory to explain the notion of creative composition apart from creative writing.

After establishing the need for a theory that can better inform creative practices in composition, in Chapter Three I expand on the notion of “composition as a Happening” into a Happenings theory of creative composition and argue that it is a better alternative to the efforts to erase the line between composition and creative writing and introducing creative writing genres to the composition class as an attempt to make composition “creative”.

I conclude my dissertation with a discussion of four pedagogical and disciplinary implications of reconfiguring creative composition through the Happenings theory. First, this theory will help us counter the notion that some genres are creative while others are not. Creativity is not genre-based although it is true that some genres may allow more flexibility than others. It will have a direct effect on how students in composition view writing in relation to creative writing. The Happenings theory places composition in the domain of creative practice, and it will help us eliminate the biased perception about writing in composition. Second, it will provide teachers of writing more flexibility in
terms of content, classroom structure and writing practices as a whole by redefining composition’s relationship with not only creative writing but also literature. Since Happenings promote the use of any and all materials available for a unique experience, there is no distinction between the types of materials that can be used in the composition class. Third, it will help maintain composition studies’ disciplinary identity (as opposed to that of creative writing) while practicing writing creatively. This approach to creative composition will show that even the genres in composition can be creative and so when we are talking about the creative we are not talking about a different field, creative writing. We still remain composition but practice it creatively, and there is no need to call for the erasure of the line that exists between composition and creative writing. And last, this approach to creative composition builds on what has already been achieved in the field. It will foreground the writers and scholars in composition and the practices that are rooted in composition studies. Overall, it will result in a richer pedagogical experience rooted in creativity, without conflating creativity with creative writing genres.
Chapter One

CONCERN FOR CREATIVITY AND THE MAKING OF CREATIVE WRITING

COMPOSITION

In 1932 *The English Journal* published a review of a book called *Creative Composition* written by Louise S. Camp and Eva H. Lycan. Virginia J. Craig, the reviewer, opens the review with the warning that the title could misguide the reader. She cautions that the title “may unduly alarm some worthy teachers” because it “is faintly suggestive of the assumption that every pupil is an embryonic Keats” (779). The fact that Craig made this observation at a time when creative writing was yet to establish itself as a separate writing field—or at best, was only beginning to carve out a separate identity away from composition—is meaningful. The term “creative,” as the reviewer suspects, could be mistaken to relate only to poetry and other imaginative writing genres. The teachers of writing could mistake the book to be primarily about teaching how to compose poetry, whereas—Craig makes her argument maintaining the binary between composition and imaginative writing—the book was primarily about teaching composition, not “creative writing” as such, although it included two brief chapters on verse and versification. She clarifies: “[O]ne swift glance within the covers suffices to dispel anxiety on this score. The emphasis is fortunately on prose, not on poetry” (779).

The anxiety over the attachment of the term “creative” to composition spoke of
the assumption that composition and poetry (i.e. imaginative writing) were different, and the term “creative” could apply only to poetry and other imaginative writing genres. Craig calls it “fortunate” that the book was about teaching composition, “prose” rather than poetry. In accordance with the belief that composition teaching and poetry teaching function differently, she states, “Furthermore, it is evident that the writers have come to grips with classroom realities” (779). In her definition, the classroom “realities” of composition relate to a “practical student” as opposed to “a youthful prodigy” of poetry writing (779). Hence, what assures the reviewer of the book about its relevance to composition teaching is the book’s emphasis on practical issues, including “punctuation and capitalization,” despite having the term “creative” in its title.

The anxiety that Craig—and the teachers of composition—had over eighty years ago has now been translated by some scholars into a potential opportunity. Since 1932 composition and creative writing have been established as separate writing disciplines, and despite this separation, an interest in “creative composition” has come back, albeit in a different form. For about two decades now, a number of scholars like Bizzaro, Hesse and Bishop have asked that the techniques of teaching creative writing and creative writing genres be introduced to the composition class to benefit composition students. Additionally, there have been calls to erase the line that divides creative writing and composition altogether (Bishop, Moxley). In whatever manifestation, “creative composition” over the decades has emerged as a way of making the place for creative writing in composition. While this approach may encourage the issue of creativity in composition on one level, it not only misconstrues creative writing—as opposed to other forms of writing—as being essentially creative, but also undermines the epistemological
differences between the two writing fields. In this chapter I trace the emergence and evolution of the term “creative composition” since 1932 when the book with the same name was published, and argue that the existing formulation of creative composition—amounting to the call to erase the line that exists between the two fields—has become a conduit for “smuggling” creative writing to the composition class under the cover of creativity/creative and it does not necessarily make composition creative because creative writing is about certain genres of writing—poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, plays, and their variations—above anything else. By making the place for creative writing genres in composition, we only create what I call “creative writing composition.”

The proponents of creative composition use the term “creative” as a floating signifier that oscillates between the literal meaning of being creative, inventive, on one hand, and a field-specific meaning that is derived from the creative writing discipline on the other, i.e. the forms of writing practiced in the field of creative writing. This oscillation has been mediated by the conflation of creativity with creative writing. Hence, the opportunity to approach composition as essentially creative, like any form of writing, has been altered by its disciplinary affiliation to creative writing instead of creativity as such. For composition to be creative, it needs to focus on theories and pedagogies that are creative instead of on creative writing genres.

*From Creative Composition to “Creative Composition”*

The book *Creative Composition* had nothing to do with creative writing as a field. Camp and Lycan’s focus was on the creative practice of writing. They did not aim to bridge the gap between composition and creative writing (because there was no such gap
as we perceive it today). And they did not mean to borrow creative writing pedagogies to teach composition—neither composition nor creative writing had yet claimed disciplinarity to have their own theories and pedagogies, and so there would be no possibility of the kind of discussion we have these days.

The book, instead, “utilizes all other sources of interest” and devises strategies that are helpful to students “[d]epending for interest on pupil activity” (Craig 779). The focus is on student interest and their creative involvement in writing activities. For that purpose, the authors employ a number of strategies to make the exercises appealing to students, with the intension to stimulate them to practice writing more creatively. The authors must have called the book *Creative Composition* because the textbook did not just lay down the rules for writing composition; instead, it attempted to exploit the possibilities that would activate student’s ability to think, explore and create—creative composition in the literal sense of the term “creative.” Craig concludes, “The vigor and the verve of *Creative Composition*, the diversified material, and the dynamic presentation make it probable that the book will enjoy prolonged favor as a high-school text” (780).

Whether or not the book enjoyed that “prolonged favor,” what is important is, instead, the “vigor and verve” that made the book a “creative” composition textbook. As such, the idea of creative composition—before composition and creative writing were established as writing disciplines, especially after the 1950s or so—had to do with the creative practice of prose writing, irrespective of the genres as they are practiced in the field of creative writing today—poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction, and plays.

A half century later, in 1993, Wendy Bishop published, “Crossing the Lines: On Creative Composition and Composing Creative Writing,” with a call for “creative
composition” but in a very different context than that of the writers of the aforementioned book, with a very different vantage point. Bishop’s primary focus is on bringing composition and creative writing—two separate writing disciplines—together, although her concern is also pedagogical. As someone teaching both creative writing and composition, claims Bishop, she found her pedagogy similar as she moved “between these two worlds of composition classes and creative writing classes” (“Crossing” 119). Although she was required to maintain the differences between composition and creative writing, she didn’t see the need to treat the two classes differently. She at least found it unnecessary to draw the line between composition and creative writing. Hence, her call for the erasure of the line that divides the two writing fields. She says, “We need to be crossing the line between composition and creative writing more often than we do. In fact, we may want to eliminate the line entirely” (119). Thus by “creative composition” Bishop means to bring the two writing fields together—the creative in the phrase comes from the field of creative writing, unlike in the title of the 1932 book. The ultimate purpose, though, may be similar—more “creative” practice of composition—but that the creative in creative composition comes from creative writing means that the term in Bishop invokes what one does in the creative writing classroom, that is, teach poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction, and plays. In other words, students “compose primarily imaginative work” (Bishop, “Crossing” 121). Bishop believes that students in the composition class can write more creatively if they are allowed or asked to practice creative writing, although she also concedes that the myth of free creativity in the creative writing class is false.

Advocating for a space for creative writing in composition, she writes, “I believe
we should teach ‘creative’ writing in the first year program, as has been done at my school for many years with good effects—and particularly on students and teacher attitudes—and no reported harm” (“Crossing” 129). This teaching of creative writing in the composition class is, in her formulation, the crossing of the line, creative composition. This kind of creative composition, Bishop argues, prepares students beyond what the traditional composition teaching would do. She writes, “Students are well prepared for future academic writing when they explore creativity, authorship, textuality, and so on, together, at once” (129). Although Bishop still views composition within the framework of academic writing, she wants to compliment that practice with creative writing. The “creativity” that Bishop talks about in the above statement comes from introducing creative writing to composition. This shift in the definition of creative composition is a huge change from what the term “creative” would mean in the 1930s. By the 1990s, the “creative composition” of Creative Composition becomes what I would like to call “creative writing composition.”

*Creative Writing Composition: The Place of Creative Writing in Composition*

In 1978, Randall R. Freisinger wrote “Creative Writing and Creative Composition” in *College English*. In the article, Freisinger’s aim was to lay out some possible areas where composition teachers could borrow from creative writing. The difference between the way creative composition is understood in the 1932 book and its review and this article is obvious: here the author is asking—if there can be creative writing why not creative composition?—a clearly disciplinary question. This move on Freisinger’s part is not as radical as that of Bishop in the sense that Bishop assumes a
complete overlap or let’s say a complete correspondence between composition and creative writing—a two way communication—whereas, Freisinger was concerned about composition borrowing from creative writing. But the shift in the understanding of the “creative”—from that of the 1932 book—is obvious. He is clearly talking about the discipline of creative writing, a separate writing field, that could help composition to make writing “interesting,” among other things.

Freisinger believes that creative writing students have more positive image of their course (creative writing) than composition students of theirs (composition). As a way of creating a more positive image of composition, he finds it relevant to borrow four of the six motives that Stephen Minot proposes for a creative class: “1) Partially conscious therapy; 2) Entirely unconscious therapy; 3) Childish delight in language; 4) Ego formation” (Freisinger 283). Freisinger’s conviction is that what composition class lacks is first and foremost a motive. So it is the responsibility of the composition teacher to help students find their motives for taking the composition course (as opposed to creative writing because creative writing is elective and whoever takes that course comes with a motive). Here is where Freisinger brings in creative writing and conflates the idea of creativity with creative writing, the field. He says, “To supply that motive, we must summon forth their creativity” (283). Following Minot, Freisinger makes a call to “encourage students to write close to the self, wrapping their own experience,” hence expressive writing (283). Here he obviously talks about creative methods of writing. Referencing to Ken Macrorie, he writes, “Writer and teacher must expose themselves, allow themselves, as Ken Macrorie has urged, to become vulnerable. We will encourage no such vulnerability by assigning sanitized and prepackaged essay topics and patterns
that have no reality or relevance for most students” (284). This aspect of writing is not necessarily creative writing as such, but a method of creative invention. But he equates such practices with creative writing and advocates for their introduction to composition. He specifically outlines four areas where composition could borrow from creative writing in order to be creative. They are the workshop model of creative writing, the openness of subject matter (as opposed to assigned topics in composition), shorter and less formal papers, and journal keeping (285-6). Freisinger does not yet call to erase the line, maybe because the process of dichotomizing of the two fields was not that strong yet, and the fields still slipped into one another’s territories. That is the reason he proposes, “We should, then, view composition as creative writing, and we should teach it accordingly” (287).

What is worth noting in Freisinger is that the disciplinary dichotomizing is not as strong yet as we see it in Bishop some ten or fifteen years later. He calls for creative composition, he even equals composition with creative writing, but his discussion is not based on as much dichotomized spaces as in Bishop and those who came after her. In that sense his discussion of creative composition at places sounds like a transdisciplinary approach. This essay makes a good case for us to see how the initial use of the term “creative composition”—without much reference to disciplinary spaces—is gradually moving to disciplinary spaces as composition and creative writing carve out rigid disciplinary boundaries.

Not everyone, however, who made a case for bringing the two fields together holds the same opinion about creative writing as being creative. Joseph Moxley in his 1989 edited book Creative Writing in America had a different reason as to why it was
necessary to “tear down the walls.” As the title of his chapter, “Tearing Down the Walls: Engaging the Imagination,” suggests, Moxley makes an explicit case for bringing the two disciplines together. But he is speaking from the standpoint of creative writing. He believes that the name is a “misnomer,” and every form of writing should have an aspect of creativity. He contends, “Whether composing monthly feasibility studies, poetry, screenplays, or the great American novel, writers are engaged in a natural, organic process of forming meaning” (Creative Writing 26). But, the writing we call “creative” promotes less creativity than the name might imply. Moxley takes an issue with the creative writing workshop on the ground that it makes very little space for prewriting activities, which means there’s little to do with the real “creative” in creative writing pedagogy. He clarifies, “. . . the implied assumption of the workshop methodology is that students already know how to gather, shape and revise material” (“Creative Writing and Composition” 1). The workshop only deals with the material which has already been created. At the heart of teaching creative writing is the teaching of craft, and “all they [creative writing students] need to master the craft is a little practice before a critical-peer audience” (1). On the other hand, composition had developed theories and pedagogies that could make writing truly creative. So he wanted creative writing to break down the wall and borrow theories and pedagogies from composition studies for a more creative practice of writing. That’s the reason he openly advocated for appropriating Donald Murray and Ken Macrorie’s theories in creative writing.

It is interesting to note that Moxley did not pursue that line of research and argument in his academic life after that, and once he became more a composition person, his concern for creative writing seems to have dwindled, and in fact he has said more
recently—in his preface to Donnelley’s 2012 book, *Establishing Creative Writing as an Academic Discipline*, that he has even changed his position regarding the idea of tearing down the wall, but it seems in the early 1990s Wendy Bishop responded his call to tear down the wall by the imagining the space for creative composition in composition, with her notion of creative composition, an approach to making the place for creative writing in composition.

In his 2009 article, “Writers Wanted: A Reconsideration of Wendy Bishop” Patrick Bizzaro praises Wendy Bishop: “One of her most important contributions, a task no one had previously undertaken, was to argue for the interconnectedness of creative writing and composition studies” (258). As someone who was trained in composition but wrote both poetry and “creative prose” and taught both creative writing and composition courses, Bishop was uniquely positioned to discuss the “interconnectedness” of the two fields. Although Bishop, like other scholars who worked in the intersection of the two fields, was “often seen at the fringe of both fields” (Hesse, “The Place” 37), her contribution to identifying the areas where creative writing and composition studies come together and benefit from each other is epoch-making. All the discussions that we have since the early nineties about the two fields’ “interconnectedness” in whatever form and the need to bring them together are indebted to Bishop.

In “Reconsiderations” Bizzaro makes a case for bringing Wendy Bishop into the spotlight. He maintains that her theories have largely been ignored in the mainstream conversation because her theory is considered expressivist—based on her affiliation with creative writing—and because she relies on cognitive theories that have been left behind in the field, with the emergence of social construction and social epistemic theories. He
argues that Bishop’s understanding of creative writing and the way she tries to combine “writer reports”—something that is still largely valued in creative writing—and composition theories needs to be viewed in a new light (261). As somebody who wrote as she taught and urged all teachers of composition to also become writers (just like the teachers in creative writing), Bishop maintained two distinct personalities—one who was trained in composition and taught it and the other who wrote poetry and taught creative writing. All her efforts are an attempt to reconcile those two personalities and the two experiences that she had as a writer who taught or a teacher who wrote. I contend that while Bishop rightly identifies the problems as well as opportunities in the division of the two writing fields, her attempt to bridge the two fields is motivated by her personal engagement in the two fields rather than theoretical underpinnings. Instead of inquiring into the nature of writing in the two fields, she relies heavily on her personal experience of working in the two fields. At the same time, although she agrees that all writing is creative she views the creative as something that is naturally attached to creative writing.

Bishop’s Released Into Language: Options for Teaching Creative Writing is her first seminal book about the interconnectedness, of the two fields, and Bizzaro believes it to be “arguably, her most important contribution to the profession” (“Writers Wanted” 260-1). Bishop starts a chapter in the book with the following excerpt from Peter Elbow’s Writing with Power: “I want to underline the fact that a good essay or biography requires just as much creativity as a good poem; and that a good poem requires just as much truth as a good essay . . . . It’s not good giving creative writing a monopoly on the benefits of intuition or giving nonfiction writing a monopoly on the benefits of conscious awareness” (15). This statement is based on two important assumptions about the perceived
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distinction between creative writing and composition. The first one is about creativity: writing a poem, for instance, naturally relates to creativity—and the other writings—say biography, as Elbow mentions here—*require* creativity. And the second assumption is about the process that goes into writing: one, creative writing, being an intuitive, a more mysterious process, and the other a conscious process where there’s little or no space for mystery and inexplicable inspiration. A creative process is regarded as more an intuitive process, whereas in less creative processes, we write more consciously, leaving less space for the unknown, the inspiration. It is a perceived distinction between poetry writing and essay writing. And Wendy Bishop in the aforementioned book aims to combine creative writers’ self-reports with composition research and theories. This I believe makes a good entry to studying Wendy Bishop.

By starting her chapter with the Elbow statement and asking to combine writer reports— which ultimately happen to be creative writers’ reports on their writing process—with composition theories, Bishop is making a strategic move to combine the two fields of writing. Although she does not specifically analyze Elbow’s statement as bringing the two fields together, her assumption is clear: one kind of writing that Elbow discusses, poetry for instance, is creative writing, and the other type, essay, is composition. In this sense, Elbow’s statement refers to the two fields of writing. Bishop applies this explanation at the disciplinary level of writing practices. In reality, though, Elbow does not seem to worry about the distinction between creative writing and composition. As we can see, he only talks about creativity, not about creative writing and composition as separate fields. I would not claim that Bishop falsely applies Elbow’s theory to her purpose, but that application does not necessarily yield what Elbow aims to
achieve by that statement, which has to do with creativity in any writing, not the writing fields explicitly. When we talk about writing fields, we also talk about the principles that guide those fields. Elbow’s concern is creativity, not the field of creative writing. In fact, he starts the book from where the quote is taken with this: “I direct this book to a very broad audience. I’m not trying to tailor my words to beginning or advanced writers in particular, or to students, novelists, professional people, pleasure writers, or poets” (Writing with Power 6). Elbow works on the assumption that the distinctions in writing genres with regard to creativity is irrelevant. He would not say that these features are creative writing features and these ones come from composition and this is how we can use them in each other’s field of writing—something Bishop does by asking to erase the line between the fields for the specific purpose of practicing those features in composition. Elbow writes:

It’s true that some of my language in the book may seem to apply more obviously to expository or nonfiction writing than to creative writing: phrases like “figuring out your main idea” or “deciding what you want to say” . . . . Yes because I put so much emphasis on tapping intuitions and standing out of imagination’s way in my approach to writing, readers and listeners sometimes think I am only talking about creative writing. In certain chapters in fact, especially those in the last section, the language will seem to apply more obviously to creative writing than to expository writing. (11-12)

So the idea is that the creative practice and writing itself is not field based, and so it is not discipline based understanding of the term “creative.”

But in Bishop the notion of the creative functions within disciplinary boundaries. She works under the assumption that creative writing genres (poetry, fiction) teach students special skills that other, “non-creative” genres (essays, for instance) would not teach. It is not that Bishop privileges creative writing over composition. In fact, she
speaks from the very crossroads of the two writing fields that she happened to have her feet in. At a time when there was not much creative writing scholarship, Bishop contributed through her book *Released Into language: Options for Teaching Creative Writing*, 1990, and the much applauded book that she edited with Hans Ostrom, *Colors of a Different Horse: Rethinking Writing Theory and Pedagogy*, 1994. She also edited another book, *The Subject Is Story: Essays for Writers and Readers*, again with Ostrom, in 2003. All these books, although they primarily deal with creative writing, especially the first two, have discussion from the intersection of composition and creative writing. But her 1993 article, “Crossing the Lines: On Creative Composition and Composing Creative Writing,” which I have briefly touched upon above, stands as the milestone in this conversation. In the following section I discuss in detail the article’s contribution to solidifying the conversation about bringing the fields together and at the same time show how the article prepared a framework for the future understanding of the idea of creative composition.

The opening two lines of the article—“We need to be crossing the line between composition and creative writing far more often than we do. In fact, we may want to eliminate the line entirely” (117)—summarize Bishop’s argument that come before and even after the article was written. These sentences not only provide a framework for the future discussions about the need to bring the two writing fields together but also acknowledge the existence of differences between them.

By sharing her experience of having her feet in both writing fields, she says she hopes to “describe what it has felt like to enter the creative writing classroom as a composition specialist and the world of composition studies as a creative writer” (117).
Then, based on her experience she suggests that “we rethink undergraduate writing curriculums and revise graduate education for writing teachers” (117). The very first thing that concerns her regarding the division is the confusion it creates among students. To exemplify it, she tells stories of three undergraduate students who express about their confusion the division has created. Two of them mostly complain about the lack of clarity and the distinction they are required to make about genres, and the last one highlights the need to get into the process of writing, instead of writing that “great American novel”—obviously, from the perspective of a creative writer. But over all, they express their discomfort the distinction between the two fields has created for students, not only in terms of how they understand writing (or fail to understand it thereof) but also in terms of how they practice it.

But in fact, the confusion is not only about students—it is about Bishop as well. Bishop assesses that as she moved “between these two worlds of composition classes and creative writing classes” she found her pedagogy similar (119). The existing institutional division, however, did not allow her to treat the two classes as similar. As a result she had to create what she calls “artificial distinctions” and practice her teaching accordingly. Bishop claims that she had to create an artificial distinction, but in fact it was she was required to work within certain distinctions that already existed. It is not that she had to create them. It was Bishop’s position—that she worked in both areas, or in the intersection of the two fields—that made her see the two fields as the same. Bishop’s effort to bring the two fields together was her act of resistance against the way writing instruction in the university was and has been organized. I call it an act of resistance because she calls the distinction artificial and irrelevant instead of finding ways to work
Bishop problematizes the distinction based on one of her student’s understanding that creative writing is done for fun whereas composition is required, so no-fun. When a course is made a required course, it has its restrictions but when it is an elective course, it provides more flexibility and as an author you are free to practice your “creativity.” This has helped give rise to the myth of “free creativity” in the creative writing class (“Crossing” 122). Bishop quotes one of her students, “In creative writing I feel that there is no set guidelines. It leaves room for experimentation and you can go into any angle or direction. In expository prose you have set guidelines of what you must write and how you should write it” (122-3). It is really telling that Bishop believes that this myth of creativity is “devastating for the creative writing class as it is for composition classes” (123). But it is also important to note that she finds it “devastating” not because of any other theoretical reasons but because even in introductory creative classes students are required to learn rules, “conventions like the intricacies of formal verse or plotting and point of view rather than simply being given free reign” (123). In addition to that, she finds it harmful that creative writing pedagogy makes students assume that they have to produce masterpieces, since their models are “great” literary pieces, and that is always harmful to their writing practice (126). This is all to mean that creative writing in itself does not necessarily equip students with the necessary tools for the creative practice of writing. Hence, she implies, there is no real value in the distinction. However, she concedes that here is more to it than just one being required and the other being elective. She is well aware that students compose different kinds of texts in the two fields. In her own words, “Creative writers compose primarily imaginative work, and composition
instructors excel at the academic essay or, more likely, the memo and class handout” (121). In one field they write poetry, whereas in the other they write academic essays. Instead of going into why the fields happen to the two different genres and instead of exploring what determines the teaching and practice of those two different and similar genres, she claims that there are commonalities between writing a poem and writing an essay. What actually gets one into trouble regarding this approach is that on one hand she sees commonalities between writing an essay and writing a poem, but on the other she asks to incorporate create writing into composition because a poem would have something more that an essay would not, supposedly to make composition more creative.

She recommends:

I believe we should teach “creative” writing in the first year program, as has been done at my school for many years with good effects—and particularly on students and teacher attitudes—and no reported harm. Students are well prepared for future academic writing when they explore creativity, authorship, textuality, and so on, together, at once. (129)

Here the assumption is that creativity even in academic writing—that she mentions in the last sentence—comes from creative writing and the rest perhaps from composition. She assumes that by introducing creative writing genres to the composition class we can better prepares students for “academic writing”—that composition teaches—because creative writing will help them explore “creativity,” among other things. And this is the basis for Bishop’s notion of creative composition.

Bishop asks for her students who are confused about the differences between composition and creative writing: “Is a composition class a place where they won’t be allowed to be ‘creative’? Or a place where they just can’t write poetry and fiction? And when they move from composition to creative writing, will they be asked to put away all
their compositional skills and never again write essays” (“When All Writing” 228)? These are, obviously, rhetorical questions, and Bishop rightly points out that just because we call a field creative writing does not necessarily make writing in the field creative. She is well aware that creativity has to do with how we practice writing. The problem with the traditional form of composition, that she calls “past composition” (228), “was often taught as a skills class” and the “product oriented” classes “resulted in formulaic writing and rarely offered students glimpses into the messy, generative, exciting process of writing” (228). Similarly, the creative writing classes that taught “for many years…in predictable ways; master poets or fiction writers asked students to share and critique a story or a poem each week (again, almost always this writing represented a ‘finished’ product)” (228-9). She argues none of the two approaches does really help writing students because both of them focus more on the product than the writing process—that is what Bishop emphasizes. She adds, “I think a well taught composition or creative writing class should allow you to explore writing beliefs, writing types (genres) and their attributes, and your own writing process” (229). But what is more important here is her focus on the need to practice outside already provided structures. Her complaint regarding practices in both fields is the practice in “predictable” way, which is a valid argument.

Bishop rightly argues, “Creativity involves risk taking” (“When All Writing” 230). She explains, “When writing classes don’t highlight risk talking, it’s hard to see the complicated ways authors go about their work” (230). It’s only by remaining open and taking risk that one becomes creative and is engaged in his or her writing. Bishop gives an example of one of her students, who says, “Then I wrote a paper that was required,
and it turned out to be fun. What??!? Yes, and it was an English (ugh! don’t say it!) term paper. I chose my own topic, so I wouldn’t get bored with it. Something totally off the wall, so fascinating that its appeal overwhelmed my intense hatred of term papers. It was on parapsychology” (230). Here the student’s “fun” comes from being allowed to work outside “formulaic writing” (Bishop, “When All Writing” 228). And that is a creative practice of writing. At this point, the notion of creative composition wavers between being a disciplinary make up and a particular approach to writing as a whole, irrespective of disciplines and genres of writing. Why would one need to rely on creative writing to practice writing creatively? In Bishop’s case it remains as a disciplinary make up in addition to being a particular method of practice to writing as a whole because she brings in the term creative as an attempt to erase the dividing line and she agrees that imaginative writing (maybe not always within the structure of creative writing programs) provides more openness and space for creativity. On one hand Bishop treats the “creative” as a method of practice, but at the other she cannot free it from disciplinary formulation. That is why very soon she moves to a different territory with the help of a statement from another student.

Juan, the other student, says, “I don’t find a difference when writing expository prose and when doing ‘creative writing.’ To me, it’s all essentially writing. To me, they’re very similar, just the writing research comes from two different areas: internal source or external source” (“When All Writing” 321). Bishop calls it “a matter of cognitive difference, thinking in somewhat different ways for different purposes” (231). Here Bishop goes beyond remaining open and taking risks in writing, and enters the domain of creative writing, and in fact, she tries to blur the line and make all the writing
classes “creative.” She not only says that “writers need classes that allow them to take risks and experiment with prose,” but also that they need to see similarities between the types of composing they do, adding a little jelly [after Stephen Tchudi, meaning imaginative/creative writing] to their bread-and-butter writing (and I might guess that sometimes their jelly writing would benefit if it grew from the solid base of bread-and-butter prose)” (231). The jelly in the bread-and-butter is the creative writing that she wants to see in composition. And that’s why all writing for her amounts to literature, or at least that’s how she wants to view student writing, and that’s how she wants to encourage her students.

One of her students, Sean, says, “I like to think all of my expository prose as creative. . . . Everything I write is literature and I’m offended that you’d doubt me. Sure student writing is literature” (“When All Writing” 232). Bishop wants to broaden the definition of literature. Discussing canons she explains that certain kinds of texts come and go— for instance, “sermons and letters have gone ‘out’ of the set [of canons]”—and argues student writings “have often been out [of canons]” but “someone has to write literature before it can be classified as such” (233; italics in original). She quotes another student, Charles, “Student writing is definitely literature; Literature is not only found in textbooks, it has to start somewhere” (233). Following him, she concludes, “I believe student writing is literature, too” (234).

It is in no way to argue that there is anything wrong with broadening the definition of literature, even to include student writing, but the point is what we are expecting of those texts by calling them literature. To the extent that she emphasizes risk taking and experimentation in writing, she works within the domain of the creative, but
very soon she enters the domain of literature by defining all writing as literature, which
she does as an effort to elevate all writing to a new position that only so-called literature
attains. Hence, her claim that “all writing is creative” slips into the statement “all writing
is literature.” She concludes, “When you view your writing as literature—through a
broad definition and understanding of that word—you allow yourself to share a
supremely satisfying human activity” (236). This desire to see all writing as literature is
based on the distinction between literature and non-literature and the assumption that
certain features can be attached to literature but not to non-literature. Why would we,
otherwise, need to see all writing as literature? Her proposition to treat all writing as
literature builds on the belief that literature allows more risk taking, more
experimentation, more openness, and so becomes more creative. Hence, when all writing
is literature, all writing is creative writing. Thus, “creative composition” in fact becomes
“creative writing composition” in Bishop’s formulation.

Wendy Bishop’s notion of “composing creative writing” further supports the
claim that her use of the creative in “creative composition” is motivated more by the
disciplinary formulation of the “creative” than creative practice itself.

The notion of composing creative writing exists in the dichotomous relationship
with “creative composition.” In other words, while creative composition is about
composition borrowing from creative writing, composing creative writing is about
creative writing borrowing from composition. This is the notion that Bishop plays with in
the title of the essay, “Crossing the Lines: On Creative Composition and Composing
Creative Writing.” Bishop does not go into detail in the article about this aspect of
writing, but after discussing the notion of creative composition, she moves on to the idea
of composting creative writing, and ends the article by asking a few questions:

In the creative writing class why do we devaluate critical theory and writing research? In what ways does it hurt us to find out that the muse can have regular habits and hours and that our writing processes can be illuminated, adapted, enhanced, and changed? What do we gain when we lose complete author-ity over our texts? And finally: who is served by the assumption that the academy taints “creative” writers and composition taints “creative” writers even worse than the generic “academy”? (130)

These questions tend to challenge the assumptions within which creative writing, in general, in the university is supposed to function. And they do so by placing composition in opposition to creative writing. Critical theories and writing research are part of composition and they are almost restricted from creative writing (speaking traditionally). Writing in creative writing is supposed to function more or less unpredictably, not by methodical process—another dominant assumption that is opposed to composition where writing is taken to be a craft that can be learnt systematically and anyone can write with practice. Similarly, the author in creative writing is supposed be a medium, an agent to convey the message of the muse; the author himself or herself has very little to do, and so texts are just written by some external forces, the author becoming only a medium. The last issue Bishop points out is the assumption in creative writing that institutional structures harm more than support creative writing—an issue that always lives in contradiction to its own existence. Hence, it is generally understood that the “academy” and “composition,” which is methodical, are opposed to the intrinsic nature of creative writing. But Bishop does not see epistemological differences between the fields and so she advocates that just like composition should borrow from creative writing, creative writing should also borrow from composition. She elaborates on this notion in the book, *Released Into Language: Options for Teaching Creative Writing.*
Although the question whether creative writing can be taught continues to be asked—based on the fundamentals of the creation of art, in all contradiction to what the creative writing programs are doing, on one hand saying that creative writing cannot perhaps be taught like other types of writing, and at the same time continuing to expand MFA and PhD programs—there are many who have no doubt that it can be. They believe that creative writing genres can be taught like any other genres and contend that the research and theories of writing that have been developed in composition studies should be applicable to creative writing as well. Wendy Bishop, understandably, is one of the pioneers to make the case. In Released into Language, Bishop argues that creative writing pedagogy is, in general, guided by writers’ self reports rather than writing research like in composition. The reports are based on the writers’ experiences of writing and they hardly explain the process that goes into writing a piece. In most cases such reports present the author as just a medium of what gets written.

In this pedagogy, “Writing is just a man alone in the room with the English language, trying to make it come out right” as John Berryman says (Bishop, Released 16). Another writer, Elizabeth Bowen says something that goes against Berryman’s assumption: “I am dead against art’s being self-expression. I see an inherent failure in any story which fails to detach itself from the author” (qtd. in Bishop, Released 17). Ray Bradbury says, “Writing is a continual surprise” and Ann Sexton says, “Craft is a trick you make up to let you write the poem” (17). Similarly, Somerset Maugham says, “There are three rules for writing the novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are.” And Friedrich Nietzsche says, “The author must keep his mouth shut when his work starts to speak” (17). Bishop’s point here is that in creative writing writer’s reports—like the ones
reported here—are based on individual writer’s experiences and feelings and they are not sufficient to explain the writing process although they are valuable. She observes that such reports are sometimes true and helpful but they are often contradictory. She concludes:

> In the reports of creative writers on their own writing processes, there is some unison, much contradiction, and a wealth of unsubstantiated yet intuitively accurate knowledge. A novice writer certainly gains from reading through collections of writers’ wisdom. However, such words should also be read with the understanding that each writer is telling us, primarily, about his or her own writing process as he or she understands it at that moment. (17-18, italics in original)

Since writers’ reports are not reliable, it is necessary that creative writing borrow from composition. She contends that “these writers’ insights can be joined to composition research and theory to further clarify what it means to be a writer and have a writing process” (18). And she would call it “composing creative writing,” which in fact, turn out to be creative composition when seen from another angle. After all, she wants it to be only one kind of practice with the erasure of the line. And nowhere can it be seen more clearly than in the creative writing syllabus that she proposes as “the transactional workshop” (37). (Appendix) The name transactional workshop has a combination of both composition and creative writing. The term “transactional” is comes from composition, whereas “workshop” is a creative writing signature term.

Before she proposes her syllabus for such a transactional workshop, she gives sample syllabi of three types of writing classes that she contends exist in English. The first of these three is “Introduction to Literature or (many) Writing with Literature (literature-based composition) Classes.” In this class “Exploratory” writing carries 15%, “Instrumental” writing carries 80% and “Imaginative” writing carries only 5% of the total
points. In the second syllabus which represents “Rhetoric- or Language-based Composition Classes,” “Exploratory” writing carries 20%, “Instrumental” writing 75% and “Imaginative” writing only 5% points, like in the previous syllabus. In the last of the existing writing classes, “Traditional Creative Writer’s Workshop,” “Exploratory” writing carries only 10%, instrumental writing carries no points, and “Imaginative” writing carries most of the points, 90%. So here, we can see that the main component of the composition class, whether literature based or rhetoric-language based, is “instrumental” writing, under which fall the genre of essay” biographical essays, critical essays, book reviews, argumentative essays and research papers (36). On the other hand, the traditional creative writing class has almost all imaginative writing—poetry, fiction, dram and “formal imitations” (36). This helps to show that Bishop’s formulation of the two fields and the effort to bring the two fields together has to do so much with the genres that are taught in the two different classes and when she asks us to cross the line, she obviously asks to cross the genre lines, and make the place for creative writing in composition.

In this vein, her notion of “composing creative writing” materialized in the form of a mixed workshop that she calls the “transactional workshop” (37). In this “suggested” course of study, instrumental writing—craft presentations, introduction to writers, reflections of their writing process etc.—gets 20-30% and imaginative writing only 30-40%, instead of 90 percent in the traditional creative writing workshop. Here by adding the instrumental writing, she aims to offer students “metacognitive” and “metalinguistic” analysis opportunities (37), which come from the theories in composition studies.

Thus, Wendy Bishop does not only stand at the intersection of theories but the
intersection of genres themselves. Creative composition in this sense is as much about making space for creative writing genres (imaginative writing) in composition as “composing creative writing” is about making space for composition genres (instrumental writing) in creative writing. Either way we go, there is the blurring or complete erasure of the line. Creative composition as it exists in Bishop is thus about disciplinary blurring of composition and creative writing. This form of creative composition is thus more about disciplinary dynamics and political positioning, that Tim Mayers contends is necessary in the field, than about creativity. When creativity has to do anything in this blurring it is in the conflation of creativity and creative writing genres. This form of creative composition makes a call to introduce writing genres to composition class, like Bishop did, like Doug Hesse does. This call for a place of creative writing in composition has become a defining feature of creative writing composition. And this notion of making space for creative writing gets even more explicit in the work of the scholars after Bishop and reaches a culmination point in Doug Hesse’s 2010 article, “The Place for Creative Writing in Composition Studies.”

As the title of the article, “The Place of Creative Writing in Composition Studies,” suggests, Doug Hesse makes a case for a place of creative writing in Composition in the vein David Starkey does in the introduction to the book he edited in 1998, *Teaching Writing Creatively*. Starkey argues for a “polycultural model for teaching writing” (i.e. bringing composition and creative writing genres, or any other forms, together) that he hopes would make writing “creative” (Introduction xiii-xiv). While Bishop pioneered the establishment of the notion of “creative composition” within the disciplinary boundaries of creative writing and composition studies, Hesse’s call for a
place for creative writing in composition complements Bishop’s project without asking to erase the line between the two fields. Hesse acknowledges the differences between the two fields more than Bishop does, and that is why he cannot repeat Bishop’s call to erase the line, but in essence his call to make a place for creative writing in composition reintroduces Bishop’s schema in a more palatable form when viewed from a disciplinary standpoint.

He asks, “So why ponder what ‘creative’ writing might offer composition studies, which seems to be doing pretty well, thank you, rich in research, rich in curriculum, important in multiple spheres, modestly growing its institutional prestige?” (“The Place” 34). He has two answers to his question: The first one, he says, relates to the disciplinarity of the field. He explains, “When creative writing and composition studies have little to do with one another, the division truncates not only what we teach and research but how writing gets understood (or misunderstood) by our students, our colleagues, and the spheres beyond” (34). And the second one relates to the identity of composition studies (again not so different from the first one). “To state my concern (too) starkly:” he writes, “we’re at a crucial professional juncture, needing to find a good mix between being “about” writing/composing (that is, as focusing on interpretation, on analyzing texts or literate practices) and being “for” writing/composing (that is, focusing on production, on making texts).” Thus, Hesse is mostly concerned about his interest in teaching and research, about how others understand composition, and also about making composition more about production-oriented (rather than “about” writing as the field looks like focusing more on). In short we can say that both these reasons have to do with how we, writing teachers, would like to teach writing and how we want to be understood
as a discipline, but not with theories that guide the writing fields. He in fact confesses at the very beginning that his call has to do with his personal position. He writes, “At this sixty-year juncture of CCC, I’d like to consider the relationship between creative writing and composition studies. To a large extent, my interest is personal, even selfish…” (33).

And this interest to practice both composition and creative writing genres—as he moves from one class to another, just like Wendy Bishop did—Hesse imagines composition and creative writing classes that remain open to practices that are more common in the other field of writing. He explains:

For composition, this might mean recuperating new interest in writerly activities and processes, including the levels of style and word choice, adapting an expanded persona of themselves as writers for readerships beyond other scholars, and making curricular or, at least, conceptual room for writing that does not “respond” to a rhetorical situation. (43)

The idea of “making curricular or, at least, conceptual room for writing that does not ‘respond’ to a rhetorical situation” all leads to the kinds of writing that are done in creative writing, and given the fact that when we are talking about creative writing, we are talking about certain genres, Hesse’s call for making space for creative writing in composition is a call to allow creative writing genres to the composition class. To the extent that Hesse focuses on “recuperating new interest in writerly activities and processes,” it would still relate to a creative practice of writing. But Hesse goes beyond that and conflates such practices with the kinds of writing that are done in creative writing. Hesse further states, “. . . I assert that composition should value dimensions of life in addition to work, school, and political action. There are dimensions of entertainment, engagement, or, more mundanely, simply how to pass time, and within these are realms of self-sponsored writing and reading” (47). This “self-sponsored writing
and reading” relate specifically to creative writing genres. Following Bishop, Hesse calls this process of making space for creative writing in composition “creative composing” and equates creative writing with creative composing thus: “. . . I suggest that composition studies unilaterally explore the place of creative writing—in teaching, in scholarship, and in our expanded sense of ourselves as text makers” (50).

This idea of crossing the line and making the place for creative writing for creative composition has been embodied in Chris Drew and David Yost’s 2009 article “Composing Creativity: Further Crossing Composition/Creative Writing Boundaries.” The authors want a safer route to introduce creative writing to the composition class because one of their graduate student’s effort “to smuggle as much so-call creative writing in as possible” to the composition class mirrors their own experiences (25). Like other predecessors as well as contemporaries—from Bishop to Hesse, they insist on introducing creative writing to composition, mostly to give student writers a sense of authorship, to dismantle “Author/student writer dichotomy” (30). The proposition that introducing creative to the composition class will help students overcome the dichotomy is flawed—because it presupposes creative writers as real “Authors” as opposed to other writers. At the same time, the tasks that they want to accomplish by using creative writing in composition class are neither urgent in composition nor something that only creative writing can do.

The first practice they propose is a “Mad Libs” kind of exercise, and they do it with Wilfred Owen’s poem “Dulce et Decorum Est.” For this exercise, they explain, the instructor presents an incomplete version of the poem, a canonical text, in order to
“demystify the text of a canonical author” (30). In Mad Libs style, students complete the text in their own ways, giving their own meanings to the text. They describe the process:

Students, we have noticed, often begin this exercise as a sort or contest or guessing game. Presuming the authorial text to be sacrosanct, students see their objective as reproducing Owen’s words as closely as possible, even if they’ve never encountered the original text. As the activity progresses, however, students note the variety in their own responses, and often debate whether the soldiers should be “glazed” with fatigue or “soaked” with it, donning “beetle-like” helmets or “musty” ones, or whether the dying man’s eyes should be “bulging,” “pleading,” or “retreating” in his face. Students come to see the text less as a church through which they must tiptoe, and more as a playground for them to explore. (31)

After spending half an hour on the text filling in the gaps, they further explain, the students “often react with much more admiration than we generally experience in a traditional class discussion of a poem” (31). And at the end of the process, the students “gain a great appreciation for the text by seeing it not the inviolable work of a remote Author, but as the work of a fellow writer who sat and wrestled with its words just as they did” (31-2). In addition, the authors argue that activities like this can be used to “increase student awareness of words as the building blocks of texts” (32). “Even more importantly for composition class,” they argue:

[S]tudents can use this activity as a jumping-off point to reconsider their own work. How do they choose the verbs that they do in their essays? How do these small-scale choices share the overall meanings(s) of their work? How would it change their essays if they replaced certain verbs or certain adjectives with close or distant synonyms? How do the class’s writers make these choices, and how long do they spend on them? Asking such questions would be a useful step toward a more precise, carefully considered, and engaging student writing. (32)

Next, they propose role-playing exercises, the way creative writing put in the shoes of different characters in order to learn “voice” and “tone.” This they argue compliments to what David Bartholomae describes as “performance,” the need to
perform as one of the members of the discourse community. They conclude that “a number of creative writing exercises requiring the imitation of an author’s style can be usefully adapted here” (34). And their third proposal: composition can borrow “show, don’t tell” mantra to “help students make their writing more precise, detailed, and persuasive” (36).

These exercises are some examples of how the line can be crossed and how creative writing genres and pedagogical practices can be introduced to composition. (Drew and Yost do not talk about the workshop that many believe is an important practice that composition can borrow from creative writing). These are the kinds of practices Wendy Bishop saw possible—and necessary—as she moved from the composition class to the creative class (“Crossing the Lines” 119). A crucial question here is “What do we accomplish through these practices that we would not accomplish by asking students to work on an essay, something closer to what they are expected to produce at the end of the day?” Here I do not intend to enter the debate whether to allow literature into the composition class or not, and debate the proposition that students are better off when they trained in various modes of writing that they encounter in daily lives, as Elbow, Hesse and others would like it. However, once we start with the objective of teaching composition in a defined form—as academic writing, for instance—then going back to creative writing to develop “taste” and “more admiration” for poetry and other imaginative forms of writing (Drew and Yost) to order to help them write better academic essays takes us back to the old debate that has to do with the bifurcation of writing instruction into two separate disciplines.

Thus, the desire to introduce creative writing to composition—more specifically,
the creative writing genres and practices that relate to them—is a major thrust of the idea of creative composition. The notion of “creative” in the term “creative composition,” as it has been understood and practiced, solely relies on the disciplinary position of creative writing—the term “creative” comes from “creative writing,” the field, not necessarily meaning “creative” in the literal sense of the word. The term “creative” is, in fact, arbitrarily used in creative writing, and is “largely a misnomer,” as David Smith calls it (quoted in Moxley, “Tearing Down” 26).

Hence, the idea of creative composition as it exists is not necessarily about creativity in composition. It rather invites the introduction of certain genres that are practices in creative writing with the assumption that they are more creative than the ones being practiced in composition studies. This understanding of creative composition negates the epistemological difference on the two fields are established. It is one thing to identify specific areas of collaboration and quite another to attempt to erase the line that divides the fields, because, as Patrick Bizzaro says, “creative writing is taught from a different epistemology altogether than are courses in literature or composition” (“Workshop” 41). The notion of creative composition as it is understood and used in the contemporary conversation hardly pays any attention to that aspect. Sure, even Hesse agrees that keeping the line between the two fields would perhaps be more practical, and says “From a disciplinary perspective, then, it might seem best to have composition and creative writing continue to fork their separate paths” (“The Place” 42), but the kind of practice he proposes does not seem to support that proposition. I argue that it is necessary to first acknowledge that the two writing fields are inherently different and any attempt at forging an alliance between two needs to pay attention them. It is one thing to make
composition creative but another to make it creative writing composition. Creativity in the existing formulation of creative composition is a myth that we want to believe in but remains dysfunctional because it is constructed on an unfounded belief that creative writing must be creative.

So, at this point what would better serve is an examination into beliefs and principles that guide our writing practices in the two fields. Sure enough, there are political, institutional reasons; there are personal (and maybe in some cases irrational reasons) behind the division of the two fields of writing in the university. However, what matters most at the end and what have influenced the constitution of the writing fields must have something more than personal whims or political power brokering. The fields did not come to existence from nothing—they have the same roots, and a history of more than one hundred years. And despite having the same roots, they have moved to different directions need more theoretical examination, and only a study of the epistemologies that guide them can explain that.
Chapter Two
RHETORIC, POETICS AND WRITING INSTRUCTION

In his 2010 article on the place of creative writing in composition, Doug Hesse contemplates the reasons behind the dearth of articles on or relating to creative writing in *College Composition and Communication*. CCC had published only 184 articles (including reviews and reports) with “creative writing” in the body of the text and “66 or so” other articles with the term “imaginative writing” in its “sixty-year history” (“The Place” 35). Although there could be several reasons for the dearth of such articles, Hesse argues, “[m]ost obvious is that CCCC was formed to focus on some kinds of writing and related matters and not others. (The journal hasn’t published many articles on recombinant DNA, either.)” (35). The same could be said of *The Writer’s Chronicle*. The *Chronicle*, which aims to “[p]resent the best essays on the craft and art of writing poetry, fiction, and nonfiction,” among other things (AWP), has published hardly any articles on composition in its history of over four decades. Whereas the articles in CCC relate mostly to rhetoric and composition, non-literary and “transactional” writing (Bishop), articles in the *Chronicle* relate to literary writing. The fact that these flagship publications of the two professional organizations—Conference of College Composition and Communication and the Association of Writers and Writing Programs—publish “some kinds of writing and not others” speak of the kinds of writing they are concerned with and the fundamentals that guide their practices.
In this chapter I argue that the division between the two writing fields—rhetoric and composition and creative writing—is based on the binary of rhetoric and poetics, as manifested in the form of non-literary versus literary writing, and the genres that are practiced within those disciplines are guided by the two different arts. Thus, I maintain that an attempt to bring the two fields together by making a place for creative writing in composition falls short of recognizing the fundamental differences on which the two fields have been established over time. In order to make my case, I first discuss the rhetoric-poetics binary, with a brief survey of the historical relationship between rhetoric and belles letters, and then show how the binary has defined the two writing fields over the past few decades and how creative writing and composition help to define each other in opposition. After that I demonstrate how teaching creating writing has a specific agenda of teaching literature, hence creating a bigger gap between composition studies and creative writing. I will end the chapter with the contention that the tendency to look at the two writing fields as the same (or as almost the same) simply because they are about teaching writing is flawed, and so our attempts to bring the two fields together without acknowledging their differences, for the purpose of making composition creative or any other similar purposes, need to be reconsidered. I do this by drawing on existing theoretical and historical studies of the disciplines and writing practices within those disciplines.

*Rhetoric-Poetics Binary and Writing Instruction*

The basic issues of contention about the relationship between rhetoric and poetics include whether they exist as two distinct entities; if so, whether they can co-exist; and
how they can function in relation to each other. Of course, this is an old debate, and it is beyond my scope to address it in much detail here. I will explore the issue to the extent it will help me establish the significance of rhetoric and poetics and their relationship with each other in regard to the teaching of writing in composition and creative writing. My aim will then be to demonstrate that the rhetoric-poetics binary guides the teaching of writing in composition and creative writing in the form of non-literary versus literary writing.

Doug Hesse does not elaborate on the above statement about the CCC as being established to focus on certain kinds of writing, not others, but his statement echoes what the noted early twentieth century scholar on rhetoric and poetics, Charles Sears Baldwin, argues about the relationship between rhetoric and poetics and the kinds of composition they call for. Baldwin contends that they have existed as separate arts since the antiquity and guided different fields of composition. In his own words, “Rhetoric and poetic connoted [in ancient times] two fields of composition, two habits of conceiving and ordering, two typical movements” (3). Baldwin continues, “The movement of the one the ancients saw as primarily intellectual, a progress from idea to idea determined logically; that of the other, as primarily imaginative, a progress from image to image determined emotionally, called literary forms” (3). The modes of writing—exposition, argumentation, description and narration—practiced under composition in the American university, he argues, are a continuation of the ancient division and the different habits of thoughts that the two arts summon. He writes, “[T]he four ‘forms of discourse’ widely accepted by American textbooks naturally combine into exposition and argumentation under rhetoric on the one hand and, on the other, description and narrative under poetic”
(4). Although he also adds that “the older, simpler, more fundamental division does not widely control modern pedagogy” (4), he maintains, fundamentally, the division still exists. For Baldwin this perceived division between rhetoric and poetics is fundamental to the “habits of composing” in different genres, literary or otherwise, which has existed since the antiquity.

Although the four modes of writing are no more a dominant mode of writing instruction in the American university, they have been streamlined and become dominant in the two different writing fields—narration and description in creative writing and exposition and argumentation in composition. It is not to claim that those modes of writing solely define the writing practices in the two fields—less so in composition studies, but the literary versus nonliterary binary largely defines the dominant modes of writing practices in the two fields and the flagship publications of the two professional organizations—the CCC and the Writer’s Chronicle—are a manifestation of the field’s affiliation to nonliterary (rhetoric) versus literary (poetics) writing.

I do not mean to argue for the rhetoric-poetics binary in absolute terms. There is always the possibility that the discourse that “progress[es] from idea to idea determined logically” (non-literary, rhetorical) may slip into a discourse that “progress[es] from image to image determined emotionally” (literary). Surely, there have been debates about whether rhetoric and poetics ever existed as two distinct arts. Jeffrey Walker for one does not believe that this distinction ever existed and has anything to do with the way we practice writing today. In his 2000 book, Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity, Walker dismisses Baldwin’s claim that rhetoric and poetics were treated as different arts in the antiquity as not worth discussing. He starts the preface of his book with a complete
dismissal of Baldwin:

Baldwin’s entire argument [in his two books] began, from the opening pages of *Ancient Rhetoric and Poetic*, with the inauspicious declaration that poetry and rhetoric were fundamentally different, even incompatible things, which the ancients had perversely persisted in confusing. One would like to dismiss that view as long since obsolete, but it has had surprising staying power. This is most apparent, on one hand, in what were to 1990 and to a great extent still are the received, standard histories of ‘classical’ rhetoric; on the other hand, we see it persisting too in what remain the prevailing notions of ‘poetry’ and poetics in contemporary culture. (vii)

Walker makes this argument on the premise that there never existed a rhetoric that was purely for practical, civic purpose. And it is true that as basic as Plato’s *The Phaedrus* exemplifies that point—the speech on love in the book is hardly a civic discourse in itself. He calls the notion of rhetoric as “an art of practical civic oratory” a standard history of rhetoric, and dismisses it. He maintains that rhetoric, especially Sophistic rhetoric with which he deals, included poetics as well, and rhetoric can never be separated from poetics (ix). By focusing on epideictic rhetoric, he maintains that poetry was understood “as the original and eldest form of rhetoric” (154). So, he argues, the division that has been maintained, especially in the antiquity, is false.

But on the other hand, the “surprising staying power” of the view that there always existed the division of rhetoric and poetics lies in their different orientations, and it should not be dismissed as irrelevant, especially in the context of how the two writing fields function in the American university. Here it is not my purpose to argue for or against the binary but to argue that there always exists the possibility of the binary between rhetoric and poetics and in the present context our practices in the two writing fields are guided by that perceived binary, for good or bad. For my purpose, I will now briefly look at the relationship between rhetoric and poetics, especially as devised by
Aristotle in his two books, *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*, and as put forward by Kenneth Burke and Tzvetan Todorov and then move on to how they have been practiced and what relationship they maintain with writing in the two writing fields.

In the simplest possible terms, rhetoric is an art of persuasion and poetics is an art of making poetry (or dealing with poetry) and, by extension, literature. Rhetoric, as the explanation goes, aims at action as a result of persuasion; its function is “to induce actions in other human agents” (Burke, *A Rhetoric* 41) and so it is a practical art. Poetics, on the other hand, is directed to itself, and it aims at pleasing, hence it functions as a “sub-field of aesthetics” (Richter 5); hence, it does not have practical value. This further means that the language of rhetoric is outward-bound and the language of poetics is inward-bound. Similarly, rhetoric deals with ideas and poetics deals with images. Going even further, form and content are separate in rhetoric (ideas have to be conveyed—or even explored as in “writing as a mode of learning,” or let’s say in epistemic rhetoric—through a medium) and there is no such division in poetics (it’s about images where form and content merge, or form is also as meaningful as content). This scheme of defining the two arts facilitates the classification of our discourse practices, and this is what we do through the division of the writing fields.

Aristotle’s two separate books, *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*, dealing with the two topics separately, often provide an easy means to discuss the division between rhetoric and poetics. Whatever position one takes about the relationship between the two arts, Aristotle’s discussion of rhetoric and poetics helps view the functions of language in them as different.

In Aristotle’s definition, rhetoric is “the faculty of observing in any given case the
available means of persuasion” (*Rhetoric* 1355b26-27). This definition highlights two aspects of rhetoric: one persuasion and the other observing the available means— invention. There has been much debate regarding the interpretation of the definition, but I base my discussion on the interpretation that rhetoric for Aristotle is primarily about persuasion. Aristotle explains that not every mode of persuasion belongs to rhetoric. The modes that “are not supplied by the speaker but are there at the outset—witnesses, evidence given under torture, written contracts and so on” are not part of rhetoric (1355b37-9). The modes of persuasion that belong to the art of rhetoric are those that “we can ourselves construct by means of the principle of rhetoric” (1355b40-1). “The one kind has merely to be used, the other has to be invented” for the purpose of persuasion (1355b41-2).

Just as invention and persuasion are at the heart of Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric, at the heart of his definition of poetics is imitation. He maintains that all arts are “imitative processes” (*Poetics* 1447a8). They are different only in means, objects and methods of imitation, and poetry does not lie in verse alone. One can talk about mathematical formula in verse but that does not constitute poetry. For something to be poetry it has to become an imitation of action. Interpreting Aristotle, Baldwin writes, “By imitation Aristotle means just what the word means most simply and usually, but also and more largely the following of the ways of human nature, the representation or the suggestion of men’s characters, emotions, and actions” (41). Baldwin continues, “At its lowest, imitation is mimicry; at its highest, creation. The latter is often implied in the Greek word poetic, . . . By whatever means, in whatever forms, it is a direct showing of life, as distinct from any account of life through experiment or reasoning” (141). In
Aristotle’s words such an account of life through experiment and reasoning would be produced by a “science writer,” not a poet (Poetics 1447b20). Aristotle explains it thus:

In fact we could not even assign a common name to the mimes of Sophron and Xenarchus and the Socratic discourses; nor again if somebody should compose his imitation in trimeters or elegiac couplets or certain other verses of that kind; (Except people do link up poetic composition with verse and speak of ‘elegiac poets,’ ‘epic poets,’ not treating them as poets by virtue of their imitation but employing the term as a common appellation going along the term with the use of verse. And in fact the name is also applied to anyone who treats a medical or scientific topic in verses, yet Homer and Empedocles actually have nothing in common except their verse; hence the proper term for the one is ‘poet,’ for the other, ‘science writer’ rather than ‘poet’).” (Poetics 1447b8)

This is revealing for my purpose of looking at writing practices through the lens of rhetoric and poetics—one being practiced by the poet and the other by the “science writer.” The difference between the poet and the science writer, according to Aristotle, lies in the way one treats action—whether through imitation or not. For Aristotle, Homer was “most truly a poet” because “he was the only one who not only composed well but constructed dramatic imitations” (Poetics 1448b1). Poetics in this sense is presented as opposed to rhetoric, which is not imitation but a deliberate speech made to achieve something, to persuade (although Aristotle does not use the term “rhetoric” here).

Rhetoric is related to thought, Aristotle says (Poetics 1456a34-5), and what he says after this is worth quoting at length:

Under ‘thought’ fall all the effects that have to be deliberately and consciously achieved through the use of speech. Elements of this endeavor are (1) proof and refutation and (2) the stimulation of feelings such as pity, fear, anger, and the like. Now it is evident that one must use the same practices in tragic actions as in everyday life, when it is a question of making things appear pitiable or fearful, or important or probable. There is just this much difference, that the emotional effects out to carry across to the spectator without explicit argument, while the proofs have to be deliberately produced in speech, by the speaker, and come as a result of the speech. For what would be the use of a speaker if things appeared in
the wished-for light without the speech?” (Poetics 1456a35-1456b5)

This idea of using language for some purported purpose and using it for its own sake has remained at the heart of the discussion of rhetoric-poetics binary. One more important thing to note here is that Aristotle does not deny the possibility of using rhetorical properties (not rhetoric itself) in imitation—through the mention of the use of feelings—but he also maintains that imitation should not require rhetoric if it (imitation) can do by itself.

T. S. Eliot precisely, but a little differently, captures this distinction when he says that when a dialogue is directed to the audience in a drama, “we are either the victims of our own sentiment, or we are in the presence of a vicious rhetoric,” and so “[a] speech in a play should never appear to be intended to move us as it might conceivably move other characters in the play” so that we can observe from outside (28). In this sense, the dialogues we, the audiences, overhear have a poetic function, whereas within the drama, the dialogues would have a rhetorical function. This is the difference between imitation (direct presentation of action—audiences only overhear: poetics) and action (presented through someone else—audiences are directly addressed and prompted for action: rhetoric). This helps explain the difference between composition and creative writing genres practiced in the two fields. The genres that are taught and practiced in the field of composition studies have to do with direct communication, for practical purposes, whereas the genres in creative writing are directed to the speaker himself or herself. The genres that are practiced in creative writing have little to do with practical affairs, and those genres work at the level of symbolic action, in the words of Kenneth Burke.

Burke explains the domains of rhetoric and poetics in terms of different symbolic
actions of language. In terms of language use, Burke sees a clear distinction between the
language of poetics, which is directed to itself, and the language of rhetoric, which is
cconcerned with external function, persuasion. Explaining the four symbolic actions of
language in his 1978 article, “Rhetoric, Poetics, and Philosophy,” (as opposed to three
that he talks about in his 1950 book, A Rhetoric of Motives), he writes:

Viewing our subject in terms of ‘symbolic action,’ we treat poetics as concerned with ‘symbolic action’ in and for itself, rhetoric as concerned with the role of ‘symbolic action’ in persuasion and identification, science as the use of ‘symbolic action’ to the ends of factual knowledge, and philosophy as the use of ‘symbolic action’ for the discussion of first principles. (16)

Although Burke discusses four symbolic actions of language, for my purpose I
concentrate on two of them only—rhetorical and poetic. Burke maintains the distinction
between the two in terms of their use, their audiences, their treatment of “truth,” and their
objects of study, with emphasis. Discussing Milton in his book, A Rhetoric of Motives,
Burke explains that rhetorical prose is written “with a definite audience in mind, and for a
definite purpose,” and he calls this kind of writing (his example comes from Milton’s
Areopagitica) “literature for use” (4, italics in original). In contrast to this, he says about
a poem, ”One can read it [Milton’s Samson] simply in itself, without even considering the
fact that it was written by Milton. It can be studied and appreciated as a structure of
internally related parts, without concern for the correspondence that almost inevitably
suggests itself . . . ” (4). This is also, he adds, “a kind of ‘literature in use,’ but use at one
remove, though of a sort that the technologically-minded would consider the very
opposite of use, since it is wholly in the order of ritual and magic” (5). It is worth noting
that Burke sees the possibility of a single text harboring both the arts, as demonstrated in
his example from Areopagitica, but what is equally important is the possibility of the
different functions of language use.

Burke’s discussion of rhetoric and poetics with regard to their treatment of “truth” and their objects of study further help explain the difference between them. He explains that one deals with idea (rhetoric) and the other with image (poetics). Rhetoric deals with probability, and opinion is more important than truth. He says, “Often, though not always, truth helps—yet many questions are called ‘rhetorical’ precisely because there is no ‘truth’ to which one can refer” (“Rhetoric, Poetics” 16). In contrast, poetics takes truth as its basic principle. Burke explains, “[T]hough truth may often contribute to a work’s appeal, I take it that some variant of what in the old days was called ‘verisimilitude’ is the basic active principle, which is in turn interwoven with the work’s ways of unfolding, that is, its form” (“Rhetoric, Poetics” 16, italics in original). Based on this, it is possible to view the genres in composition as concerned with making arguments and forming opinions (as manifested so well in the form of academic writing) and genres in creative writing as concerned with an eternal search for truth, however abstract the notion may be. Also, it is equally relevant to consider his discussion of objects of study: one dealing with ideas and the other with images. In rhetoric, and the genres in composition studies, we discuss ideas, and it is the ideas that matter most, unlike in poetics and the creative writing genres. In the second case we are more concerned with the over all effect of images instead of ideas language communicates.

Burke’s notion of “literature for use” and “‘literature for use’ but use at one remove” or “wholly in the order of ritual and magic” takes the form of different actions in Tzvetan Todorov’s thought. In *Theories of the Symbol* Todorov contends, “Rhetoric grasps language not as form—it is not concerned with utterances as such—but as action;
the linguistic form becomes an ingredient of a global act of communion (of which persuasion is the most characteristic type)” (61). This helps us explain the practical purposes of writing guided by rhetoric. The language that is “not concerned with utterances as such” but actions is the language of rhetoric. “Rhetoric deals with functions of speech, not its structure,” Todorov echoes Burke (61). This language is always outward-bound, meant to persuade and effect action. This language is not self-referential. Todorov further explains this idea in relation to Roman Jakobson’s notion of the poetic function of language.

Jakobson also maintains that poetic language works differently from other functions, say referential function. He says, “The set toward the MESSAGE as such, the focus on the message for its own sake, is POETIC FUNCTION of language” (qtd. in Todorov 272). The reference does not go beyond the message itself. It has no outward purposes, and it does not aim to accomplish action, as other functions do, let’s say like in rhetoric. Along the line with Kenneth Burke, Todorov goes on, “The poetic use of language is distinguished from other uses through the fact that, in poetry, language is perceived in itself and not as a transparent and transitive mediator of ‘something else’” (272). In this sense, “Poetic language is autotelic language” (Jakobson, qtd. in Todorov 272). It does not have any external function to perform. As opposed to this, rhetoric aims to achieve, cause action. “Its one constant is the objective it seeks to achieve: to persuade (or, in the terminology of the later age, to instruct, to move, and to please)” (Todorov 61). In this case even the functions that seem to relate to poetics (to please, for instance) are in the service of persuasion. This helps explain to a large extent the use of poetic elements in rhetoric, and in turn see rhetorical and poetic functions as two distinct possibilities. But
still Todorov maintains that such “[l]inguistic means are taken into account to the extent that they may be used to reach such objectives [of rhetoric]” (61). The New Rhetoric, the rhetoric since Cicero according to him, has ceased to maintain to be the kind it used to be before because it started taking up poetics within it after that (65). By taking too much of literature, he laments, rhetoric has lost its original meaning. He argues, “The new eloquence in no way differs from literature; the new object of rhetoric coincides with literature. And if eloquent speech was once defined by its efficacy, now, quite to the contrary, it is useless speech, speech without purpose, that draws praise” (67). It has happened so because, he says, rhetoric has embraced embellishment. This discussion helps to explain that rhetoric and poetics can be brought together, and it has been done at times—like in the eighteenth century Britain as discussed in the beginning of this chapter—but that only supersedes the original functions of rhetoric and rhetoric.

Hence, there is always the possibility of the binary between rhetoric and poetics and the rationale for taking up different writing practices in the two writing fields. Burke, however, is not comfortable with the kind of division we work with. He acknowledges that rhetoric, understood traditionally, is directed to external audience, but he also says that “… a modern ‘post-Christian’ rhetoric must also concern itself with the thought that, under the heading of appeal to audiences, would also be included any ideas or images privately addressed to the individual self for moralistic or incantatory purposes” (A Rhetoric 38-39). Here Burke and Todorov take conflicting views. While Todorov maintains that literature supersedes the rhetorical function, Burke argues that the tendency to look at idea and image as antithetical does not necessarily reflect our practices. As a way of looking at it, he says, “[A]ll abstractions themselves are
necessarily expressed in terms of weakened and confused images, a consideration which doubtless explains why Aristotle said that we cannot think without images” (*A Rhetoric* 90). He goes further in his 1978 article, “At the same time, we must not think of opinion and truth as necessarily at odds, since many opinions can be quite sound” (16).

However, if the division of the writing fields into creative writing and rhetoric and composition reflects anything about the nature of language use, it is about the different functions of language: rhetorical function in the case of composition and poetic function in the case of creative writing. Burke, in fact, revises that position (taken in *A Rhetoric of Motives* and *Permanence and Change*) in his 1978 article. Explaining his new understanding, his writes, “I would now make a flat distinction between the practical act of getting in out in the rain and the purely symbolic act of writing a poem about getting in out in the rain. The one is literal, the other figurative, topical, metaphorical” (19). The former falls under the category of rhetoric whereas the latter under poetics. I maintain, the practices in the field of composition studies and the field of creative writing maintain that division as ever. Writing in composition relates to one kind of language use (“getting in out in the rain”) and writing in creative writing another (“act of writing a poem about getting in out in the rain”). The two writing fields over time have been defined by that very distinction.

*Rhetoric and Belles Lettres: Relationships and Trajectories*

Although the issue of the relationship between rhetoric and poetics is not a new phenomenon, in that they were “commonly defined in relation to each other in ancient Greece” (Berlin, “Rhetoric and Poetics” 521), the two arts were brought together in the
modern era on the European continent in the late sixteenth and early seventh centuries (Golden and Corbett 8). James L. Golden and Edward P. J. Corbett contend that the “wedding” of the two arts was made possible by the revival of interest in classics and especially the re-emergence of the notion of the sublime. In the discourse of rhetoric and rhetorical persuasion, belles lettres are often understood and valued for their ability to persuade through affect—by creating sublime experience, giving an emotional gratification. This aspect of belles letters has been highly informed and shaped by Longinus with his idea of the sublime.

Longinus, the supposed second century author of *On the Sublime*, focuses on the excellence of language as a means of achieving special effect on the reader. He contends that only greatest poets and writers can achieve the state of sublime. According to Longinus,

... the Sublime is a supreme excellence and perfection of language; and that by this, and this alone, the greatest writers in poetry and prose achieved their preeminence, and won for their own reputations the guerdon of immortality. For grandeur and majesty persuade not, but astound; and the marvelous has a gift of producing amazement with which persuasiveness depends for the most part on ourselves, while those other forces, with tyranny and might irresistible, bend every hearer to their will. (2-3)

Hence for Longinus when an orator combined profound ideas with strong emotion and excellence of language, it would transport audiences and persuade them. Longinus asserts, “For I should confidently affirm that there is no language grander than the timely expression of noble emotion, under, as it were, a kind of phrenzy and spirit of inspiration, filling, as it does, with a weird and magical sound the torrent of its utterances” (25). This capacity to affect emotion and move readers is what counts in language use, and this is what persuades readers.
Longinus’ focus on “lofty style” and sublimity overshadowed many rhetorical canons for some time after him. Golden, Berquist and Coleman claim that “the progress rhetorical studies made during the classical period was abruptly halted” (63), meaning that the focus shifted to “lofty style” away from the emphasis on rhetoric as finding means of persuasion. When the book reappeared in 1674, Golden, Berquist and Coleman contend, “Almost at once the essay caught the imagination of French and English scholars, stimulating in them a strong interest in taste, sublimity, and genius as potentially useful criteria to be employed in criticism” (84). As a result other influential books on sublime appeared in the eighteenth century. John Baillie’s An Essay on the Sublime (1747), Edmund Burke’s A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas, the Sublime and Beautiful (1757), and Alexander Gerard’s An Essay on Taste (1759), had a huge impact in the thought of eighteenth century writers, rhetoricians and rhetors.

This new interest foregrounded the notions of novelty, grandeur, beauty and virtue, and the idea of good taste became important. The rhetoricians of that period focused on the elements that concerned taste and sublimity. They believed that the classics possessed the qualities that would inspire sublimity, and good taste relied on the perfection of style and maturity of expression. Perfection and maturity of expression, they believed, could be imitated from the classics. Golden, Berquist and Coleman argue, “It was within the context of a renewal of interest in the classics, of revolutionary advances in epistemological thought, and of an evolving theory of taste that the trend toward belletttristic rhetoric developed” (86).

Hence, the epistemology of the period was grounded on the classics that set the rules of composition and provided examples of what constituted good writing. The focus
of the period shifted to the study of literature and the imitation of the classics so as to produce texts of good taste that would inspire sublimity. The eighteenth century English essayist Joseph Addison believed that the characteristics of greatness, vastness, and newness gave pleasure to imagination. It is by creating something that appeals to that imagination that we can move, and consequently, persuade others. Similarly, another important eighteenth century figure Edmund Burke focused on emotion in addition to imagination. Burke maintained that passions like astonishment, terror, vastness, magnitude, darkness appeal to our emotions and move us. According to Golden, Berquist and Coleman the neo-classicists learned from Longinus “the value of combining rhetoric and poetic into a single, coherent system; and the meaning and significance of taste and sublimity” (83). This epistemology ignored inquiry, and rhetoric became confined to the study of belles letters, which would basically be a selection from the classics, and teaching and producing similar texts. All major rhetoricians of the period, like Adam Smith, Hugh Blair and George Campbell, maintained a close link between rhetoric and belles letters. William Riley Parker argues that the focus on written texts and the failure of elocution “to achieve academic respectability” caused the teachers of oratory to submit to “imaginative literature” in the nineteenth century (349). As a result, the nature of rhetoric changed dramatically in the nineteenth century. It did not remain merely an art of argumentation and persuasion. It became a means of moving people emotionally and also teaching taste. Explaining this form of rhetoric Thomas P. Miller writes, “Classical rhetoric had been concerned with the art of persuading the public to follow the leadership of the educated, but with the blurring of the boundaries between the educated and the public, the "New" rhetoric became more concerned with maintaining polite taste and
usage than with more explicitly political applications of rhetoric” (“The Rhetoric” 4). Writing in 1988, Michael Carter mentioned that the new development “de-emphasized the role of invention, the belletristic tradition in rhetoric, including current-traditional rhetoric, was a modernizing force, providing much of the foundation for today's rhetoric of composition” (12).

According to Berlin, this new form took rhetoric away from its traditional role of public discourse and a form of “persuasion in the public domain committed to making prevail the highest standards of a society was taken away from rhetoric” (“Rhetoric and Poetics” 523). “Poetics, on the other hand,” Berlin continues, “retained its historical purview and continued to develop and change as rhetoric became petrified, losing touch with poetics altogether” (523). At this stage rhetoric and poetics no longer shared the same epistemology, and as literature began to dominate the English department, “the radical separation of rhetoric and poetics was institutionalized” (Berlin, “Rhetoric and Poetics” 529). A major cause was that literature was slowly privileged, and rhetoric was pushed aside. Students were more encouraged to study their own language (i.e. English) and literature instead of traditional rhetoric. Berlin summarizes the consequences thus:

While literature courses were thus operating within the context of current poetic theories, the rhetoric course – now identified with freshman composition – becomes petrified in the service of an eighteenth-century positivist epistemology. Rhetoric is cut off from its classical roots in its commitment to the new scientific disciplines and severed from poetics because it no longer shares with it a common epistemology. (532)

Hence, the journey that begins with the conflation of rhetoric and poetics ends up not only removing rhetoric from its classical roots but also institutionalizing the binary—poetics in the service of literature and rhetoric in the service of “the new scientific disciplines.” In this new formulation, if rhetoric had to do anything with poetics, it was in
the form of helping interpret literature. In John Franklin Genung’s words, rhetoric became just “the constructive study of literature” (140). Instead of “making truth and virtue prevail” (Berlin, “Rhetoric and Poetics” 522), as rhetoric would traditionally be expected to do with its civic role, it remained as a mere recorder of scientific knowledge. Berlin writes, “The consequence was that a rhetoric of public discourse was lost: persuasion in the public domain committed to making prevail the highest standards of a society was taken away from rhetoric” (523). This condition prevailed until rhetoric was given new life with a renewed focus on invention and epistemology after the 1960s.

The focus on invention and epistemic rhetoric after the 1960s has enabled rhetoric to locate its trajectory independent of literature. This trajectory frees rhetoric from the hermeneutic enterprise of literature and acknowledges rhetoric as a knowledge-making practice, but the institutionalized binary continues to function in the English department, as reflected in the division of literature, creative writing and rhetoric and composition.

The Question of Writing in Composition

It is easy, and often tempting, to generalize that, since both the fields—composition and creative writing—are about teaching writing, they must be similar and they must have theories and pedagogies that will easily be applicable to one another. When Wendy Bishop says that she found her pedagogies in the both composition and creative writing classes similar, she falls victim to the same temptation, without a critical eye to the epistemologies of the two fields—what guides their theories and pedagogies and why they are different in their current form.

By now, 2015, as I write this dissertation, it is hard to claim that composition
studies is really only about teaching writing. In his 2000 essay, “The Death of Composition Studies as an Intellectual Discipline,” Gary A. Olson, for instance, argues that the idea of constituting composition studies only for the purpose of teaching of writing—“furthering and refining the teaching of composition,” in his own words—is “dangerously and unacceptably narrow” (24, italics in original). “As a field devoted to how discourse works,” he contends, composition studies is “perfectly situated” to participate in “cross-disciplinary investigations of the interrelations between epistemology and discourse” (24). Thus he defines the field in terms of two distinct areas of study—teaching of writing (in the above statement he uses the term “composition” as synonymous to “writing”), and intellectual work on discourse, very much in line with James Kinneavy—and, as a composition theorist, he speaks against the notion of privileging the former over the latter.

Teaching of writing, however, has always remained at the center of composition studies’ disciplinary work. In the following section of this chapter I discuss the teaching of writing in composition (both as a field and as a course of study, i.e. first year composition) in relation to creative writing. My inquiry is guided by a seemingly simple question: what do we mean by writing when we say writing in the field of rhetoric and composition? I also ask: do we mean any specific genre or genres of writing—like poetry or fiction in creative writing—when we say teaching of writing in composition, both as a course of study (the first year composition) and as a field in which many other forms of writing take place? I take up these questions as my point of departure for two reasons: one, we in the field hardly mean one thing when we say “the teaching of writing” and two, our discussions on collaboration between different writing fields (read rhetoric and
composition and creative writing) will be meaningful only when we can explain the writing practices in the fields independently as well as in relation to each other.

One hardly needs to define writing in creative writing, at least within the institutional setup of the creative writing program in the university. By writing here we mean the specific genres of writing that are taught and learnt: poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction, and play. Although we can argue that there are many mixed genres within literary writing, and we can also argue that so much writing is done outside those genres—for instance, the writing by many writers who we think do “composition” is also “creative writing,” it is the aforementioned genres that constitute writing within the institutional setting of creative writing. However, it is not as straightforward in composition. So, what do we actually mean by writing in composition, both as a course and as a field? Do we mean the same thing in the course and in the field?

In the field of rhetoric and composition the term “composition” has been used to mean “writing” (for instance, first year composition is also called first year writing) as well as a course of study (i.e. first year composition, which cannot be defined only as “writing”). However, writing and composition have not always been synonymous. Explaining the complex relationship between “writing” and “composition,” Doug Hesse, in his Foreword to David W. Smit’s book, *The End of Composition Studies*, writes,

> The two [“writing” and “composition”] are not synonymous. The former [“writing”] is the larger and, loftier. We call people who publish books and articles writers (or authors), reserving composer for musical production. Except for fairly snooty usages (one’s ‘composing a text’ is rather akin to one’s ‘penning a letter’), written composition belongs almost strictly to the college freshman classroom. Largely because they point to discursive worlds beyond the academy, technical *writing* and creative *writing* exist, not technical composition or creative composition. (ix)
On one level this distinction sounds logical, but in rhetoric and composition we tend to treat student writers as writers. First year composition students, for instance, are not called “composers,” and in this sense, the term “writer” is not reserved only for the producers of the “loftier” kind of writing. In fact, the field of rhetoric and composition functions against the supremacy of the final product, the “loftier” (published books), and, instead, focuses on the process of producing texts. So, Hesse’s description does not fully portray the reality.

Complicating the matter further, not all the writings practiced in the field are called composition; for instance, professional writing, which is mostly done under rhetoric and composition, is not composition the way first year writing is called. And, we even call the field that harbors various writing practices—like first year composition, intermediate composition, workplace/ professional/ technical writing, new media writing—composition studies. Furthermore, first year composition is sometimes practiced as writing in certain genres, like the teaching of academic writing (Bartholomae, Bizzell, for instance) and argumentation (Kroll, for instance), and other times it is practiced as an exercise in writing in general, like in process theories, or revision exercises, and even stylistics in some cases.

Thus the question about “what writing” becomes puzzling when we talk about writing within first year composition. Here we hardly have an agreement about what writing to teach or even whether it is a question of what writing: academic discourse as David Bartholomae and Patricia Bizzell say, or expressive, reflective writing as Peter Elbow and Ken Macrorie advocate, or critical consciousness and ideological issues as people like Ira Shor and James Berlin promote, or content about writing studies as people
like Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle have been advocating recently, or writing with images—visual rhetoric—as new media theorists like Jeff Rice have been championing or stick to stylistics, language, grammar and punctuation as some people in the field, like Paul Butler, still practice and advocate, or even argumentation as many contemporary textbooks stipulate. And we can add, amidst all these possibilities, why can’t “creative writing” be one to be practiced in first year composition? Thus, it is tempting to agree with Lynn Z. Bloom when she says, “Talking about composition studies is like talking about love; everybody knows what they mean by the term, few can define it to anyone else’s satisfaction, everyone has their own way of doing it” (3), although I doubt if everybody really knows “what they mean by the term.”

As a result, a number of questions have been raised about the lack of clarity in the understanding of “writing” and “composition.” David Bartholomae asked in 1996, “What Is Composition and (if you know what it is) Why Do We Teach It?” In his book, The End of Composition Studies, published in 2004, David Smit asked, “What is writing?” and “What is the end of composition?” (2). Three years later, in 2007, Thomas Peele wrote a reflection in College English in which he asked “What Do We Mean When We Say ‘Writing’?” Asked more than one hundred years after the teaching of some form of college composition began in American universities, and almost half a century after the traditional composition was claimed to have become Composition with the capital “C” (North 13), with which developed new theories, pedagogies and practices, these and similar questions demonstrate our lack of interest in dealing with the most basic issues that still deserve answers. In the context of the teaching of writing instruction taking place in various venues other than rhetoric and composition (for instance, creative
writing, journalism, communication, and even education), composition’s return to such questions might also mean a conscious effort to become more focused on work, but it seems such questions have never been entertained to the extent they deserve. Instead, such questions have often been dismissed as misplaced.

Sidney Dobrin, for one, has done so recently. Referring to Smit’s questions that also include “How is writing learned? Can writing be taught, and if so, in what sense? And if writing can be taught, how should it be taught?” (2), Dobrin, in his 2011 book, Postcomposition, claims, “These questions reckon a nostalgic connection to the process era’s desire for easy answers to such queries in order to solidify skills-based writing curricula” (9). Dobrin’s contention is that such questions drive us to the field’s master narratives that are woven around the question, “How do writers write?” which he says redirect inquiry from writing to the “more manageable subject,” the writer (10). His concern is, thus, such questions tend to oversimplify the issue at hand, hence restricting further inquiry in the field. In this regard, Dobrin refuses to treat composition as a space to practice any particular genre of writing (for developing skills in the genre) and so calls to merely study writing.

In this context, it may be hard to come up with a definite answer to the question “What writing do we teach in composition?” but I believe that questions like this can be better explored if we look at writing in composition (both as a course and a field) in relation to other writing practices in the university, and I will do so in the following section.
Composition “versus” Creative Writing

In his essay, “On ‘Rhetoric’ and ‘Composition’,” in *An Introduction to Composition Studies*, John T. Gage defines writing in composition in relation to creative writing. He writes:

Roughly, it [composition] means *the teaching of writing in school*, as in the phrase ‘the composition curriculum.’ However, that meaning must be qualified (and here the trouble starts) by observing that it is rarely used to describe the teaching of so-called creative writing, which is most often seen as a separate enterprise, as in the phrase ‘the composition and creative writing curricula.’ Not only does the term *composition* thereby take on the implicit meaning of ‘non-creative writing,’ but its definition will have to be smoothed over with additions like *the teaching of expository writing or the teaching of nonfiction prose writing*. For those composition teachers who view the process they teach as creative (as most do) or who see it as entailing processes shared by creative writers, such a qualification will not do. (15-6, italics in original)

Gage is aware that the problem does not end there. The term “composition,” he explains, stands for different concepts, and “those concepts are not necessarily compatible” (16). But one thing is clear: composition and creative writing function, or at the least, are made to function institutionally, as two different entities, although their territories are not as clearly defined as one might want, especially in the case of composition.

Just as “creative” is attached to writing in creative writing, the term rhetoric has often been attached to writing in composition, as in the name of the field itself—rhetoric and composition. Especially after the 1960s, rhetoric has been taken (or revived, in a sense) to be composition’s foundation, particularly through the works of the scholars like James Kinneavy, Sharon Crowley, P. J. Corbett, and Robert J. Connors who, in 1989, asserted that rhetorical history can provide us “roots” that we in the field commonly need (“Rhetorical History” 231). Raul Sanchez in his 2005 book, *The Function of Theory in Composition Studies*, discusses various theories being practiced in composition, and sums
up that rhetorical theory is “one of the earliest and most widely accepted intellectual traditions” practiced in the field. He states, “Even in the work of those who do not explicitly refer to rhetorical theory, some notion of rhetoric often is implied” (86).

Keeping in view the binary of rhetoric and poetics, it is easier to examine how the terms “rhetoric” and “creative” are preferred in two different places and how they define the fields and the genres of writing that they harbor.

Both the terms, “rhetoric” and “creative,” have always been contested in various ways. The term “creative” in creative writing would perhaps bother many outside creative writing because hardly anyone would call any form of writing uncreative. But in composition we hardly talk about writing as “creative” writing although we believe that what we teach is creative. In this case, the term “creative” from “creative writing” as a field has been understood literally, hence misunderstood; the term “creative” here is more about a particular field and genres of writing—because it’s about fiction, or poetry or creative non-fiction or play, and it’s been so obvious that no one even needs to define what writing we practice under creative writing, as I’ve already shown in the first chapter—than about “creativity” as such, or let’s say the genre of imaginative writing (although even this definition cannot completely capture the essence of creative writing as a discipline). Writing long back, in 1937, Lawrence Conrad attempted to define creative writing thus:

The distinction [between creative writing and others] is not made on the basis of how good the writing is nor how delicate the processes that enters into it. Writing is not to be called creative because it indulges in flights of fancy, nor because it seeks to attain a ‘poetic’ or a ‘literary’ flavor in language. In what we distinguish as creative writing, the source of the material is within the student’s real or imaginative experience, and the writing is ‘free’ in the sense that the student has chosen his own material and is seeking his own most adequate from of expression. (17)
Here he implies that creative writing is not about just being creative and elegant, “poetic” and “literary,” in language. It’s a genre or a group of certain genres in which the author writes from his or her own real or imaginative experience, without any obligation. In a sense, it is a form of “self-sponsored” writing, as some would call it now (Hesse, Sommers and Yancy 327).

George Kalamaras, in “Interrogating the Boundaries of Discourse in a Creative Writing Class: Politicizing the Parameters of the Permissible,” interestingly discusses the genre of creative writing in relation to composition. In his attempt at interrogating the boundaries of the two writing fields, he questions the so-called “functionalist” and “creative” motives of writing in the two fields (78). He questions the idea of “creative’ writing as a special process distinct from serious academic work,” but he does not view creative writing as a practice in certain genres (i.e. poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction, and plays). Instead, he attaches the idea of “creative” to creativity, and uses this idea to question why this practice would be used only to produce so-called “creative writing” (or literature), hence suggesting that creative writing class can incorporate all genres of writing—functional or not. But this explanation of “creative” and “creative writing” fails to understand the institutional construct of creative writing, and so interprets “creativity”—even in questioning it—in relation to creative writing, the practice of producing literature. This notion would promote the assumption that only the writing that are done in creative writing are creative and the rest are not necessarily so. In this understanding composition and creative writing are defined in their relation to creativity—one being creative and the other not. This approach does not lead us to the fundamentals that guide the writing practices in the two fields. However, it at least
maintains that creative writing is about certain kinds of writing, not others.

Almost like the tendency to conflate creative writing with creativity, there is another line of thought in composition that aims to give composition a literary bent with the assumption that literature is creative. Lynn K. Bloom is a good case in hand. Bloom—in her book *Composition Studies as a Creative Art: Teaching, Writing, Scholarship, Administration*—takes a whole literary bent as she talks about composition studies as a creative art. She claims, “It is not necessary to rehearse here the argument that such writing [which writing teachers do, in different genres including literary writing] is not utilitarian and therefore has no place in a college curriculum; Behar, DiPardo, Elbow and Scholes, among others, have addressed that issue . . . .” (5). She calls this inclination her “creative stance” and explains that it is “not a radical position” (5). The thrust of her argument is that giving a literary touch (especially through creative non-fiction) would make composition more creative. She explains, “The essence of regarding composition studies as a creative art is to engage in a process of intellectual or aesthetic free play, and to translate the results of this play into serious work that retains the freedom and play of its origins” (4). But, of course, the idea of “creative” or “creativity” cannot be confined to literary writing, and at the same time this approach does not pay attention to fact that the field was established to practice, and promote, certain kinds of writing, not others. Introducing literary genres to composition is almost similar to Wendy Bishop and Doug Hesse’s call to make a place for creative writing in composition. In addition, this view overlooks creative writing’s aim of teaching literature from inside, which I discuss toward the end of this chapter.

Hence, the word creative will not tell us anything about what writing is taught in
creative writing. To get an answer to it, it is necessary to look at the genres that are being practiced in the field, and they will tell us that it is about writing that is self-referential, literary—poetics.

On the other hand, composition relates to the genres that concern rhetoric, action-inducing discourse. However, the term “rhetoric” raises questions because it is not only common but also a tradition to talk about things like “the rhetoric of a poem.” So, what is special about attaching “rhetoric” to composition? In his attempt to explain it, Gage discusses two meanings of rhetoric: rhetoric as a property of a piece of writing (a poem or anything), and rhetoric as a genre—rhetoric itself being an object of study. He says that the confusion over the meaning of rhetoric “is present in many discussions of rhetoric and its relation to composition or other aspects of a curriculum” (19). He opines that this confusion has also to do with why composition and creative writing took two different routes from the same origin. In his own words, “It is one reason, for instance, that composition and creative writing have sometimes gone their separate ways: one allegedly teaches rhetoric (as a kind of discourse) while the other teaches discourse of the non-rhetoric kind” (19). Gage maintains that such a division in writing is not a natural process, and so he calls it confusion.

However, I argue that instead of interpreting the standpoint as confusion, it will be more helpful if we take this position as a vantage point to look at the specific features of writing in those two fields. This, to a large extent, explains writing in composition and writing in creative writing as practices guided by different principles. This also helps explore whether we mean to talk about particular genres of writing in composition (as we do in creative writing) or study and practice of writing itself.
Gage’s discussion hints at a historical reality that made different trajectories possible for the two different writing fields. History says, until rhetoric was replaced by institutional composition in the second half of the nineteenth century, writing/composition had hardly any division. It was the time when even the term “literature” had a different meaning, and all texts were treated as part of rhetorical education—from composing to delivering rhetoric/composition (Berlin, “Rhetoric and Poetics” 521). In the following section I discuss at how different historical trajectories led to the types of writing we practice as different institutions.

The Branching of Composition and Creative Writing

Most histories written from the standpoint of rhetoric and composition do not explain creative writing’s role in defining writing in composition in definitive terms, whatever there is. This role can be explained mostly in the form that creative writing branched away from composition, taking with it certain genres and practices that later established themselves as an independent writing field (hence, it makes sense to talk about composition and creative writing as opposed to each other, or at least one defining the other in the negative). A history told from the vantage point of creative writing constructs an important narrative about it.

In his much lauded book on the history of creative writing in America, The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880, D. G. Myers begins creative writing’s history thus: “Creative writing emerged over the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century as a means of unifying the two main functions of English departments—the teaching of writing and the teaching of literature” (xii). I
will discuss the issue of teaching of literature later in this chapter, but for now I consider it important that Myers highlights the teaching of writing as one main function of English departments (and here he is talking about the time when composition was still taking an institutional shape). Myers claims that composition started in the late nineteenth century as a course in creative writing; in the beginning creative writing and composition were one. When the teaching of writing began in American universities, there was no division of writing practices. There was just “writing,” and every form of writing was practiced under it—creative or non-creative. His argument holds truth because what composition displaced was a rhetorical tradition that was inherited from Blair and Whately, i.e. belletristic rhetoric. And when writing courses were created at Harvard, Yale or elsewhere, even though they were supposed to fulfill the practical purposes of the time, literary texts and exercises were still at the center of writing/composition. But gradually differing goals of writing were realized. Creative writing meant to enhance the reading of literature (Myers 35), whereas composition meant to serve more practical purposes, like preparing students for practical writing task (Berlin, Writing Instruction; Connors, Composition-Rhetoric). Histories from both fields maintain that composition emerged to address the growing population’s literacy needs, and the needs of the business community for technical/practical/skill-based writing, and creative writing emerged to serve literature.

The sophomore elective course that was later moved to freshman and became freshman composition (one way of looking at where exactly freshman composition originated) was more a creative writing course, according to Myers. At the least, it is safe to argue that composition had writing practices that were later associated with creative
writing. When the first freshman course was created in 1885 at Harvard, it became more technical, scientific, and mechanical, leaving out what would relate to literary (either writing or reading—interpretation) practices, although “plenty of literary topics were covered,” since the focus was on inculcating writing skill “almost totally based on Adam’s Sherman Hill’s *Principles of Rhetoric* (Brereton 11). Hence, Myers argues that creative writing emerged as an effort to “restore literary and educational value to the teaching of rhetoric” in the 1880s and 1890s (36). Stephen Wilbers, in his book, *The Iowa Writers’ Workshop: Origins, Emergence, and Growth*, also explains that Norman Foerster, the first director of Iowa writing program, maintained that the primary purpose of the department “was not to produce ‘masterpieces of imaginative and critical literature,’ but ‘to give all types of literary students a rigorous and appropriate discipline,’ so that the majority of students, who would become teachers rather than authors, could function more effectively in that profession” (44).

And so when the aspects of writing that had to do with poetics and thus related to literature moved away from rhetoric, what was left was the writing that rhetoric, as opposed to belles letters, would entertain and support. Myers explains that this effort—the establishment of composition writing—was known as “New English—an alternative to scholarly unconcern with literature as a creative act” (36). Here composition clearly contrasts with literature. About the formation of composition finally, he further contends, “Searching for a New English—an alternative to scholarly unconcern with literature as a creative act—the opponents of philology turned to rhetoric. Finding the old subject in despair, they rebuilt it from the ground up; and they renamed it English composition” (36). This implies that composition was still an effort to carry the burden of the concern
for literature. They named it composition because rhetoric refused to take literature’s burden, or else rhetoric had already been displaced by other practices. Based on this argument, Myers interprets composition as what we understand now as creative writing. “English Composition was also creative writing’s first name…,” he claims (47, italics in original).

He further argues that composition, as it existed then (the early twentieth century), was attacked as being too literary—supported by the fact that by then the Yale model in which “literary works prevailed” was prevalent in elite colleges (except at Harvard) (Brereton 16), and as a result it started becoming a heterogeneous field (37). This explanation helps to clarify that composition had already been practiced as a particular kind of writing that was not literary, hence more practical and technical kind of writing as opposed to belles letters, as Berlin maintains (Rhetorics, Poetics, and Culture 6). Myers also agrees that creative writing did not have a visible presence in documents in those early years because

[until about the 1920s, though, there was a small need for creative writing per se, because English composition and creative writing were one and the same thing. Creative writing only arose as a distinct subject when, under attack, English composition was redeployed to other than literary ends. The former might even be described as a reappearance of the latter under a more distinct literary banner and oriented toward composition’s original (but increasingly abandoned) goal. (37)]

Myers called it composition’s abandoned goal, but from a compositionist’s point of view (for instance, Connors’ or Berlin’s), it was a process by which composition gradually gave up the belletristic tradition and devoted itself to rhetoric’s practical purposes. In this sense, the territories of composition and creative writing were being defined in the new light of their affiliation to either rhetoric or poetics.
From the point of view of composition studies, Berlin argues that with the establishment of German model universities and a large number of people entering those universities in the second half of the nineteenth century when modern composition started taking its roots, the kind of rhetoric that was being practiced until then had been left behind and the focus shifted to exposition. Effective communication became a more important goal than any other things. Summarizing the developments, he writes, “Exposition, ‘setting forth’ what is inductively discovered . . ., becomes the central concern of writing classes. This is also, of course, the kind of writing most valued by the technologically oriented business community. Freshman English became a course in technical writing” (Writing Instruction 63). Berlin further argues that invention was left out of composition; since rhetoric now was only about communicating the already acquired knowledge effectively, there was no need of invention. Writing was only about exposing what already existed. Thus, with invention and persuasion taken away from composition, rhetoric only left “the scientific use of language” to the composition class (Writing Instruction 67).

The kind of rhetoric that was practiced before the 1850s concerned more with orality and eloquence, and when it changed to written rhetoric, then composition, with the new development since the 1870s, what it needed was correct, scientific structures and sentences. Robert Connors wonders, based on it, how the “elementary instruction [of grammatical correctness] took over a commanding place in most teachers’ ideas of rhetoric” with the start of freshman composition (Composition-Rhetoric 127-8). Connors further explains, “Grammar, punctuation, and spelling were added to the rhetoric course much to the regret of some old-line rhetoric teachers, for whom such materials were
shamefully elementary” (139).

What is important here is not what the specific concerns might have been at the time of composition’s emergence—whether it was like creative writing or not, whether it demanded mechanical correctness or stylistic sophistication—but how those concerns took different trajectories and led to different writing practices in the university, and how it helps us understand those writing practices more. According to Myers, the branching gradually led to more defined fields of writing. He explains, “English composition cleared the road for creative writing not in accepting poems and stories as academic work but in showing that literature could be used in the university for some other purpose than scholarly research” (41), and “The name Creative Writing came to be extended as a term for a certain kind of writing—poems and stories, fiction in general—because the academic discipline of writing was sharply differentiated from philological research and thus from the specific type of nonfiction that was produced (and esteemed) by the name scholarship” (40-41). This interpretation goes along with Peter Vandenberg’s argument that “creative writing was defining itself against the research ethos” that composition embraced (8). How much composition played its role in clearing the road for creative writing is not, however, as important as how the two fields identified different modes of writing as their objects of study.

Although we find very little discussion of creative writing as intertwined with the history of composition defining the kind of writing that is supposed to be done in composition, Berlin can help us understand this dynamic to a large extent. Hardly any other composition historians or theorists have attempted to explain rhetoric and composition in relation to creative writing although some have mentioned that they have
“tangled roots” (Goggin). In her 1999 article, “The Tangled Roots of Literature, Speech Communication, Linguistics, Rhetoric/Composition, and Creative Writing: A Selected Bibliography on the History of English Studies,” Maureen Daly Goggin wrote,

[D]espite the copious and growing body of histories, there is little evidence that scholars and teachers on the whole in literary studies, speech communication, linguistics, rhetoric/composition or creative writing are any better informed of their histories than when Carlsen, Ashmead, and others lodged complaints about the lack of attention to these. (63)

And that scene seems to have changed very little. However, Berlin’s discussion of the relationship between rhetoric and poetics in the English department helps explain Myers’ position discussed above.

Berlin summarizes his take on the relationship thus: “[T]he two [rhetoric and poetics] were at first thoroughly compatible, being grounded in a common epistemology. In time, however, this relationship changed—unfortunately, much to the detriment of freshman English—as rhetoric became petrified in a positivistic configuration while poetic continued to develop and grow” (*Rhetoric and Reality* 25). Although Berlin does not talk about creative writing as such, and although he might have seen the poetics he is talking about flourish in literature, what he maintains is that rhetoric, in the form of composition, did coexist with poetics, i.e. literature, at some point. In terms of writing, creative writing is the progeny of English department that is dominated by literature, whereas rhetoric “was concerned with the uses of language in carrying on the practical affairs of society in law, politics, and other essential social functions” (Berlin, “Rhetoric and Poetics” 522). By taking two different routes, they established themselves as the guiding principles of two different writing practices.

Discussing the developments in the English department after the 1950s, James L.
Kinneavy credits new criticism that started in the 1930s and continued up until the 1960s in some form. He argues that with the prominence of new criticism—with its focus on the text—“the influence of expressivism in its Romantic, Crocean, and Deweyte presentations” had a total demise “as far as practical conscious influences are concerned” (16). As English department itself was undergoing this change, he maintains, composition had also to change. As a result, the “creative” aspect of composition, whatever still existed so far, disappeared from it. He maintains, “The most notable effect was the gradual disappearance of a stress on ‘creative’ writing in composition courses” though some institutions still continued the old practice. Kinneavy claims, “This was one of the first times in the history of western civilization that the creative literary or expressive genres have systematically excluded from discourse education” (16). Composition, which Kinneavy equals with discourse or discourse analysis (2), was constructed outside “creative” and the literary.

Kinneavy discusses literature and literature writing as a whole rather than specific creative writing the way we understand it as a discipline. During those days, even though creative writing was being practiced separately, it was also practiced within composition—either in the form of assigning students to create literary pieces or using literary texts to teach composition or both. The new focus on the text removed literary from composition. Kinneavy explains it as one of the most important shifts in the whole history of discourse education. He sums up, “Oral dialectical expressive media were exiled in the 1800’s, rhetorical media in the early 1900’s, and literary media in the 1950’s” (16). And thus, literature writing and discussion about literature became part of creative writing, away from composition. This leads me to one last point that places
composition in opposition to creative writing: creative writing’s not-so-open agenda of teaching of literature.

*Creative Writing and the Teaching of Literature*

The field of creative writing was conceived not as a “vocational school for authors and critics” but as a space for “all types of literary students” to give them “a rigorous and appropriate discipline,” in the words of Norman Foerster (qtd. in Wilbers 44). Creative writing’s concern for literature—in producing it as well as interpreting it—places the field in a distinct contract to composition. D. G. Myers argues that the teaching of writing in the American universities began as “an experiment in education” (4). As opposed to creative writing’s present form—that it aims to produce writers/ help writers produce and at the same time it functions as a way of earning living for writers—it had a different goal when it began. When it began as an experiment, Myers argues, the “educational” goal was “to reform and redefine the academic study of literature, establishing a means for approaching it ‘creatively’; that is, by some other means than it had been approached before that time, which was historically and linguistically” (4). The basic philosophy behind it was that the best way to learn to appreciate literature is to write literature. Historical and linguistic analyses, which were the dominant modes of study of literature till then (Graff argues it’s the historical study of literature, the survey courses, that gave English department such a huge shape although compositionists would say it’s the first year composition), focus on issues other than what makes a work “literary.” Creative writing was, thus, invented not for any practical writing purpose other than serving literary needs. Myers further details, “Creative writing was the name that
might have been given to any effort that undertook to restore the idea of literature as an integrated discipline of thought and activity, of textual study and practical technique. It was a practice of literature (or writing) for its own sake” (4). This interpretation helps us understand creative writing in relation to/ as opposed to composition. With composition moving to more practical/ utilitarian affairs, attending to the needs of the business world (Berlin, Strickland etc.), and interpretation of literary work left to critics, literature needed a close, more intimate approach that only the practice of writing literature itself could provide.

Attending to literary needs without having to do with anything but ”for its own sake” meant being loyal to the traditional objectives of the English Department: serving the humanist agenda. Myers claims that creative writing “was founded on the humanistic argument that literature is not a genre of knowledge but a mode of aesthetic and spiritual cultivation” (7). This Arnoldian notion of cultivating culture makes creative writing a distinctly humanistic enterprise even though it is about the production of texts, like composition, in immediate terms. Creative writing’s unique position—related to poetics and the production of texts at the same time—places it in contrast with composition which privileges production over interpretation, and it further defines their territories along the line of rhetoric-poetics binary. Defining the distinction between rhetoric and poetics, Berlin argues it lies on production versus interpretation binary. He opines that rhetoric is primarily about how a text is produced—the process, the mechanics, and the effectiveness that goes into producing a text, while poetics is about interpreting a text (a literary text to be more specific) for humanistic purpose—for its own sake. Creative writing as a way of studying literature from inside places it under poetics in Berlin’s
scheme too.

Myers in fact does not make a distinction between utilitarian, action-oriented rhetoric and disinterested humanist literature. He says understanding literature as opposed to practicality is faulty. It is creative writing, he argues, that gives literature a specific trait by treating writing as being for itself, hence creating literature for itself, as opposed to other writing practices that have had practical implications. Hence, even in literature or English, those who preferred writing for itself and literature for not any particular social use went to one camp and the others who saw social use of literature and writing took another path. Ultimately, it helped create a binary of literary-nonliterary, “useless”-practical, rhetoric-poetics. Myers is worth quoting at length in this regard:

Prior to the emergence of creative writing—throughout the period during which creative writing was taking shape, in fact—literature was studied in American colleges and universities as a means to some other end. Creative writing by contrast has been an effort to treat writing as an end in itself. As such, it has acted with hostility toward two different conceptions of literature and writing, which for convenience might be labeled the scholarly and the socially practical. On one side are those for whom literature is primarily a genre of knowledge….and for whom literary learning accordingly, is ‘a matter of making connections between a particular verbal text and a larger cultural text,’ where the cultural text is conceived as a la race, le milieu, le moment, linguistic system, political ideology, body of theoretical propositions, or the like [cites from Scholes’ Textual Power p. 33]. On the other side are those for whom literature or writing is a social practice that serves either the dominant powers or the forces of opposition; for whom literary training, then, imparts either ‘the limited, functional writing skills needed to complete basic documents for school and work’ or skills which might be used to subvert the status quo.’ [Quotes Christie Friend in “The Excluded Conflict: The Marginalization of Composition and Rhetoric Studies in Graff’s Professing Literature,” College English 54 (1992): 276-82.] The one side has been content merely to understand literature, the other merely to use it. And in fact, scholarly and socially practical types have tended to reject the title of literature entirely, preferring ‘philology,’ ‘literary history,’ ‘critical theory,’ or ‘cultural studies’ on the one hand and ‘rhetoric,’ ‘business English,’ ‘technical writing,’ or ‘composition’ on the other. (8)
This helps explain how socially practical writing and writing with no such practicality
developed their allegiance to two different arts, rhetoric and poetics. In the meantime, it
also helps us see that creative writing has had a larger role than we generally assume it to
have in shaping the humanist agenda of the English department.

Seen this way, writing in composition can be defined to a large extent in
opposition to creative writing, or vice versa, made so whether consciously or
unconsciously. And it is obvious that their “intersection” (Donnelly) is not the same as
one would like to see. As Dianne Donnelly writes in her 2012 book, Establishing
Creative Writing as an Academic Discipline, “Although creative writing and composition
were considered one and the same in the early years of Harvard English education, their
bifurcated tracts since then are one indication why their intersection remains incomplete
today” (141). And that “bifurcation,” I contend, has to do with the fundamentals that the
different writing practices are guided by. Gage’s straightforward explanation, at the risk
of sounding a little too simplistic, helps explain the distinction between the two “tracts,”
to borrow Donnelley’s term. Those two writing “tracts” have been guided by the two
different arts—rhetoric in the case of composition, and poetics in the case of creative
writing, and any discussion about bringing them together or using one in another’s
territory needs to attend to the fundamentals of rhetoric and poetics.
Although the roots of English composition lie in an effort to rid student writing of “bad spelling, confusing punctuation, ungrammatical, obscure, ambiguous, or inelegant expressions,” as Adam Sherman Hill recounted in 1879 (qtd. in Brereton 46), the concern with creativity in composition, as I have demonstrated in previous chapters, is not new. As early as 1932, for instance, a book called Creative Composition that I have discussed in the first chapter had been published. However, there was a new interest in creativity in the field after the 1960s, as exemplified by an NCTE sponsored conference called “Creative Process and Composition,” held in 1968. This concern for creativity in composition has a special dimension to it as it directly relates to new developments in the field of composition. After the 1960s, traditional forms of pedagogies, characterized as the current-traditional rhetoric, gave way to more theoretical approaches to teaching composition, based on what many would call the New Rhetoric or epistemic rhetoric. This new development, marked by a new focus on rhetoric as a theoretical tool for composition teaching, shifted the focus of composition from effectively communicating existing ideas to creating meaning or meanings, hence the epistemic turn. Rather than focusing on student writing per se, the new composition as a scholarly field, now moving toward gaining the status of an academic discipline, invested more in “epistemological questions, definitions of problems, data gathering” (Connors 16). The epistemic turn gave
composition a solid theoretical grounding in rhetoric, but at the same time it shifted the focus from the author (student writers, to be more specific) to the external world for meaning-making rhizomes. The individual act of “creating” became less valued, and so the composition scholars and practitioners who still valued individual expression more than external factors, often branded as “expressivists” and sometimes as “romantics” (Berlin calls them subjective theories, a residue of “romantic rhetoric” following Emerson and Thoreau, *Writing Instruction* 9-10), got sidelined, if not completely dismissed.\(^1\)

At the same time, quite parallel to the new developments in composition studies, creative writing as a separate field of study was gaining momentum by the 1960s. Following Iowa’s suit, many universities, like Johns Hopkins and Cornell, started offering degrees in creative writing in the aftermath of World War II, and within a decade or so, creative writing programs had already established themselves as an “elephant machine,” in the words of D.G. Myers, “a machine for creating more creative writing programs” (146). This fact is relevant in the discussion of creative composition because when composition studies was establishing or was struggling to establish itself as a writing discipline, there was a separate writing discipline being established as “creative writing.” These two disciplines, sprouting on the same soil of the English department, formulated their identities in relation to each other based on the binary of creative and non-creative—whether consciously or not. Then it turns out the scholars valuing the creative in composition tended to look toward creative writing for the source of creativity or creative composition. As a result, we missed the opportunity to make the most of what

\(^1\) People like Macrorie are a good example of it.
already existed in the field as a creative practice. One such creative practice is the use of the happening in composition.

The use of the Happening as a creative strategy in composition began around the same time, the 1960s, when the Happening artists like Allan Kaprow realized that the museum, or any kind of institutional structure, imposed restrictions to creativity and so art and performances needed to get out in the open for a less limiting space. The Happening artists believed that creativity required a setting that defied conventional methods, putting not only the audience but also the artist in a situation that challenged conventional wisdom. Following the Happening artists, compositionists like Charles Deemer and William D. Lutz devised composition pedagogies that allowed students to practice writing in less structured, less formal and unpredictable settings, encouraging creativity. Those pedagogies, however, did not have bright days in the decades that followed with the epistemic turn in composition, as Sirc and Hawk label it. The expressivists like Ken Macrorie and William E. Coles Jr. would come closer to what the Happening theorists would practice, but they were either dismissed or sidelined in favor of cognitivist pedagogy and academic writing. It is true that expressivists—with their focus on the author’s self and the trust on his or her expressive role—continue to constitute a part, though often marginalized, of composition pedagogy (Peter Elbow, for instance, having some prominence in the field) but the Happening ceased to exist for a long time after what Sirc calls the Happenings era of the 1960s and the 70s. It is only recently that an interest in the Happening as a theory of composition has reappeared, with scholars like Geoffrey Sirc who see value in non-systematic invention strategies in writing. In the context of composition’s reliance on the field of creative writing for
theorizing and practicing creative composition, I argue that the Happening theory of composition can better serve in teaching writing as creative composition. In this chapter I develop the notion of composition as a Happening into a Happenings theory of creative composition as an alternative to the efforts to erase the line between composition and creative writing and introducing creative writing genres to the composition class as an attempt to make composition “creative.” The Happenings theory of creative composition acknowledges the role of unstructured and unpredictable methods of invention in writing not only in the kinds of genres practiced in creative writing—like poetry—but also in making arguments and producing other transactional writing, or more specifically, writing in composition. The Happening as a space for unsystematic invention strategies helps composition get out of the conventional structures of topoi and move on to chora, which, according to Derrida, “is the spacing which is a condition for everything to take place, for everything to get inscribed (qtd. in Ulmer 71). Choral writing, as theorized by Gregory Ulmer, relies on methods that tend to work in the fashion of “dream reasoning” (70). I superimpose this idea on the concept of vitality, a form of life force, from Hawk, for devising a theory of creativity in composition. The Happenings theory of creative composition takes Sirc’s theory of composition as a Happening beyond his binary of academic and versus other forms of writing (based on his reading of Bartholomae and Petrosky’s Ways of Reading and Macrorie’s Searching Writing in opposition to each other), and provides a theory of writing that is creative but does not rely on creative writing and the genres practiced in it. Geoffrey Sirc and his discussion of English composition as a Happening provide me the basis for the formulation of such a theory, but it is through the foregrounding of the notion of chora (after Ulmer) and that of vitality
(after Byron Hawk) that I devise a theory of creative composition. For that purpose, I first discuss the concept of the Happening and then demonstrate how the Happening relates to creativity.

The Happening

According to Michael Kirby, the author and editor of Happenings: An Illustrated Anthology, the term “Happening” or “Happenings” (these two terms are often used interchangeably by Kirby and others, so I may also be doing the same) originated in theater artist Allan Kaprow’s 18 Happenings in 6 Parts (10). Happenings, as they were called in the 1950s, emerged out of the performances, some of which were not even called Happenings. Hence, they didn’t develop, argues Kirby, “out of clear-cut, intellectual theory about theater and what it should or should not be” (10). As a result, there’s no overarching definition of Happenings, and Kirby claims that “Happenings, like musicals and plays, are a form of theatre” (11). He adds, “Happenings are a new form of theater, just as collage is a new form of visual art, and they can be created in various styles just as collages (and plays) are” (11). In the book Happenings: An Illustrated Anthology, Kirby considers five Happenings artists and their works, and defines the properties of Happenings as a new form of the theater. In this form, beside its focus on visual nonverbal characters, the main defining features come from the lack of rigid structures. Kirby explains:

Of the greater importance is the fact that Happenings have abandoned the plot or story structure that is the foundation of our traditional theater. Gone are the cliches of exposition, development, climax and conclusion, of love and ambition, the conflicts of personality, the revelatory monologue of character. Gone are all elements needed for the presentation of a cause-and-effect plot or even the simple sequence of events that
would tell a story. In their place, Happenings employ a structure that could be called insular or compartmented. (13)

As such, Happenings are a new way of creating meaning for the audience in non-traditional form of the theater. But that does not simply mean it is yet another avant-garde art form. They are not even a form of art. Happenings don’t have a fixed form, and no two Happening performances can have the same structure. As such, Happenings are a state of presentation in which various stakeholders, from the artists to the audience, immerse in a particular kind of experience that other structured forms of art cannot give. Hence, Happenings are open structures, always in a flux, maintaining possibilities for unforeseen things to happen. That is why Kirby maintains that one definition of Happenings, or two, may not capture the spirit of Happenings. However, Susan Sontag comes up with certain common features of Happenings and defines it as “an art of radical juxtaposition” (263). For my purpose of explaining the features of Happenings, I will rely on Sontag’s interpretation of the happening, for no other reason than that her discussion clearly sums up those features.

In her 1962 essay, “Happenings: An Art of Radical juxtaposition,” Sontag surveys Happenings’ historical roots and at the same time she works towards some commonly identifiable characteristics of Happening although different Happenings artists work in their own ways; after all they are Happenings artists because they didn’t rely on set

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2 They are not even called performances by many. Allan Kaprow even says, “The name ‘happening’ is unfortunate. It was not intended to stand for an art form, originally. It was merely a neutral word that was part of a title of one of my projected ideas in 1958-59. It was the word which I thought would get me out of the trouble of calling it a ‘theatre piece,’ a ‘performance,’ a ‘game,’ a ‘total art,’ or whatever, that would evoke associations with known sports, theatre, and so on. But then it was taken up by other artists and the press to the point where now all over the world it is used in conversation by people unaware of me, and who do not know what a Happening is” (47).
features of their arts and performances. However, she argues that it is possible to see some coherence, “an essential unity in the form,” in the performance of the Happening artists (265).

The most striking feature of Happenings, she contends, is “its treatment . . . of the audience” (265). In Happenings performances the artists not only neglect to “cater” to the audience’s desires but they also tend to use the audience as part of their spectacle and “abuse” them if necessary. These performances are not produced for “consumption” by the audiences, the way traditional arts and performances would be. The audiences are present as part of the whole spectacle and they have no clue what they are to expect.

Sometimes the audiences are exposed to near deafening drum noises and other times water is sprinkled to them, or some ominous smell is produced to disconcert/unsettle them. In some cases they are even forced to stand in the show or “fight for a space to stand on boards laid in a few inches or water” (Sontag 265). Sontag cites one example: in Kaprow’s 1961 performances, “when the Happening was over, the walls collapsed, and the spectators were driven out by someone operating a power lawnmower” (265).

Kaprow himself explains the scene thus:

Just at that moment, the plywood walls suddenly fell outward. (Three large panels on each side, they were hinged at the bottom and tied shut with cords stretched across the roof. At the proper moment, the cords were cut rapidly and almost simultaneously by the man on the roof.) The spectators sensed that this was their way out and quickly stepped onto the fallen walls. The implacable mowing machine pushed along the passageway, forcing the last few people out of the enclosure. When the mower reached the lobby, the horn gradually died down, the drumbeat slowed and ceased, and the motor and fan were turned off. All the light went on, and the audience wandered about among the skeletal supports and hanging curtains, seeing the space as a whole for the first time. (104)

This kind of “abusive involvement of the audience,” opines Sontag, “seems to provide
the, in default of anything else, the dramatic spine of the Happening” (265). If the audiences are mere spectators, the happening loses its essence, it becomes less intense as a happening performance. So the whole objective here is to give audiences the possibility to experience the show, not just become passive receivers of what is offered to them. And now we can see what happens when audiences, who in no way can be part of the preparation process of a happening show—neither the performers nor the audiences know what exact course such performances will take.

The second important feature of Happenings, according to Sontag, is the treatment of time—Happening performances are not bound by time constraints. Neither the performers nor the audiences know for sure for how long a particular show will run. Since no two performances are exactly the same, there’s a lot of variation in terms of their length. The shows don’t even have specific endings, and, as a result, for different audiences the performances may last for slightly different time periods. Sontag explains that in some cases the audiences have to be signaled to leave because they can’t figure out the ending. Sontag argues, “This unpredictable duration, and content, of each individual Happening is essential to its effect” (266). She explains, “This is because the Happening has no plot, no story, and therefore no element of suspense (which would then entail the satisfaction of suspense)” (266). For Happenings to work they have to rely on unpredictable structures, and they take their own courses irrespective of the performers’ initial time calculations. Sontag explains that Happenings “operate by creating an asymmetrical network of surprises, without climax or consummation; this is the logic of dreams rather than the logic of most art. Dreams have no sense of time. Neither do the Happening. Lacking a plot and continuous rational discourse, they have no past” (266).
This logic of dream and the lack of continuous rational discourse is what makes Happening performances exist in the present, and exist as they are created or performed. There is no second performance of the same show; there is no replication. Hence, Happenings exist free from time.

It is not, however, that Happenings exist completely out of order and with no sense of time at all. The Happening shows lasted typically from ten to forty-five minutes, and they even had some rough outlines and they did some rehearsal too. No doubt, they were performed within certain structures and they followed certain norms that would bind them within certain limits of time. But the issue here is that these performances took the liberty to the extent those structures—of time as well as space and that of plot—didn’t dictate their performances.

The materials constituted and used are another important characteristic of Happenings. There is a certain kind of preoccupation with the materials in Happenings. These materials used in Happenings do not have to have any special characteristics. In fact, they can be anything that are easily available for the performance at the moment, and the materials available are used in such a way that “one cannot distinguish among set, prop, and costumes in a Happening, as one can in a theater” (Sontag 268). In Happenings, materials are just there, with no predetermined roles to play, and as a Happening takes place, they are just made part of it. Sontag explains it in terms of an environment—the Happening takes place in an environment. She writes, “The Happening takes place in what can best be called an ‘environment; and this environment typically is messy and disorderly and crowded in the extreme, constructed of some materials which are fragile, such as paper and cloth, and other which are chosen for their abused, dirty, and dangerous
This particular features of the Happening frees itself from the constraints that medium imposes on the message, very much in line with McLuhan’s theory about the medium and the message. One’s choice of materials, either in painting, in music, or in a stage show, the materials define how the final product or performance is going to be. The Happening artists attempt to overcome the constraint by not relying on set materials.  

Another important aspect of materials is that even the audiences are regarded as part of it. They are often treated as ‘objects’ of the Happening, as also discussed above. Also, even the performers in the Happening are treated as objects, rather than characters. “The people in the Happenings are often made to look like objects, by enclosing them in burlap sacks, elaborate paper wrappings, shrouds, and masks,” explains Sontag (267). The ultimate purpose is then to “overwhelm and envelop the spectators” (Sontag 268).

This leads to another important Happenings idea—assemblages, which Sontag explains as “a hybrid of painting, collage, and sculpture, using a sardonic variety of materials, mainly in the state of debris, including license plates, newspaper clippings, pieces of glass, machine parts, and the artist’s socks” (269). These assemblages constitute an environment and the Happening “simply puts people into the environment and sets it in motion” (Sontag 269). It is not however to mean Happenings assemblages should always consist of mainly of debris, but the idea is that they made use of the materials that were easily available to them. Kirby explains that this aspect of Happenings was a result

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3 There is another aspect to the choice/s of materials. These materials are mostly taken from the streets, or wherever they are easily available. Some argue that this choice doesn’t have to do with high or low cultures and the materials that represent those cultures but with cost. When the artists had sufficient money, they’d acquire more expensive items as well.
of economic constraints of the Happening artists. So it was all about how the artists blend themselves into the environment and create meaning in relation to and with it.

This is where Sontag finds the core of the meaning-making process of Happenings. This aspect of Happenings, with assemblages and environment at their heart, Sontag argues, works in surrealist tradition. She explains that this surrealist tradition “is united by the idea of dismantling conventional meanings, and creating new meanings or counter-meanings through radical juxtaposition” (269). The boundaries are pushed beyond accepted norms: the audiences are “abused” and the materials are randomly picked and assembled and the concept of space and time are violated. There are no set paths for Happenings to happen except ethereal outlines that are conditioned, revised and determined by the surrounding at the very moment of the Happening. This method, Sontag explains, “recalls Freud’s description of his method as deriving meaning from”—she quotes Freud—“the rubbish-heap . . . of our observation” (270). So the meaning depends on “creative accidents of arrangement and insight” (Sontag 270). It was the surrealist principles that in the 1930s that gave rise to “a certain kind of witty appreciation of the derelict, inane, demode objects of modern civilization—the taste for the certain kind of passionate non-art that is known as ‘camp’” (271). The Happening artists picked up those surrealist features and worked with, in Sontag’s words, the “alogic of dreams” (271). In this sense, meanings in Happenings are left to the processes that can neither be explained nor outlined in advance.⁴ And thus, to go back to Happenings for creating meaning or any creative practice is to go back to at least some aspects of the surrealist tradition.

⁴ This notion aligns with what writers like E. M. Foster to V. S. Naipaul say when they ask how can I know what I’m going to write until I’ve written it?
The Happening, thus, as an art moment in the 1950s and the 60s—without going back to Duchamp—can be summed up as a theory built on an unspoken contract between the artist and the audience in such a way that the artist breaks conventional rules and performs at the spur of the moment within an environment with the aim of giving the audience an experience that is possible only by performing from outside the boundaries of predictable moves, even at the cost of abusing the audience. The Happening is about exploring the possibilities of how much one can exploit the surrounding environment, using objects—including objectified human subjects—in ways that might lead to newer possibilities of meaning, making connections that could not possibly be made logically, or at least let whatever is available at the moment the freedom of making connections and see what emerges from such juxtaposition, in surrealist fashion. Like any other avant-garde movement but going beyond them, Happenings explore possibilities of newer meanings in rupturing established conventions that provide an easy framework for practice in art or in any other practical area.

*Happenings in the Composition Class*

The concept of the Happening first appears in composition in Charles Deemer’s 1967 article “English Composition as a Happening.” Deemer proposes his idea of happening to “free” English composition, a “rigid child of a rigid parent” as he calls it, from the structures that he believed ruled it (121). He takes issues with the idea of the teacher as someone who can “teach” students within the existing system, and argues that the way the teacher assumes the role of the one who “knows” and expects students to follow him breeds inaction on the part of students, hence making composition...
unproductive. He writes, “Consider the fragmentation of the composition course in its daily inaction. The teacher speaks from his place in front of the classroom, sheltered more than likely by the wall of his podium, while the class in the rear listens or pretends to” (121). Whatever interaction happens within that structure happens between the “teacher-as-wise-authority” and the “class-as-recipient-of-knowledge.” This does not allow education, and composition in this particular case, to become “an experience” involving “both student and “teacher” (122).

Deemer argues the need to dismantle conventional structures, allowing students to be part of the overall activities of the writing process. He quotes McLuhan, “As audience becomes a participant in the total electric drama, classroom can become a scene in which the audience performs an enormous amount of work” (122). This not only removes the teacher’s authority but also opens up the space for the student to act. And this very position works for Deemer as a Happening space. Also quoting Sontag, who argues that the “most striking features of the Happening is the treatment of . . . the audience” (Sontag 265), he argues that composition should have “shock and surprise” as the “frequent moods” (124). “Let the ‘teacher’ shock the student,” he suggests (124). To Deemer, the Happening, thus, becomes a way of freeing composition from the rigid structures that do not allow students to “experience” but rather force them to follow the teacher in mundane ways. It allows “a revitalizing experience” (125), and opens up possibilities for unforeseen results.

Building on this possibility of dismantling the hierarchy between the teacher and the student, William D. Lutz further explores how the composition classroom can be, and should be, used as a space of for the Happening, a place for “doing.” In his 1969 CCCC
presentation, later published as “Making Freshman English a Happening” in 1971, he states five points as the basis for his idea of composition as a Happening. First, he claims, “Composition is creative” (35). But, he goes on to say that the classroom structure “does not provide the environment in which anything can be taught” (35). That is the reason he makes physical alterations in the classroom setting by lighting candles and similar other methods. He argues that the creative practice requires not only physical alteration but also the alteration in the very process of writing; hence, there cannot be a fixed writing process. He proposes that one way of making writing a creative practice is to “make the classroom practice a Happening: structure in unstructure; a random series of ordered events; order in chaos; the logical illogicalility of dreams” (35). For this purpose, as his last point here, Lutz goes back to Deemer’s questioning of the teacher’s authority.

The classroom as a Happening space builds around the expectation that it creates “an experience about which the student can write” (Lutz 36). Lutz gives us a glimpse of his classes:

The next class was held in the same room; only this time I made a few alterations in the physical arrangements. There were no neat lines of folding chairs. The students sat, stood, or lay wherever they wished. When everyone was comfortable I closed the drapes, turned off the lights, lit one candle in the middle of the room and a few sticks of incense, and played the same music as before. The class just listened to the music in the dark with the flickering candle and the scent of incense permeating the room. Again, when the period was over the students were asked to pick up their books and leave. Some of them did not want to. At the next class (held in the regular sterile classroom), I asked them to try to write about their two experiences in listening to the music. Was there any difference? Why? What did they feel both times? What effect did the candle have? The incense? (37-8)

This attempt to break the permanent structure of the classroom and to place students in a position so as to allow them to write from their experience imagines the classroom as a
Happening space where students do work, instead of just relying on their teachers and writing on the topics provided to them.

English composition is neither an art exhibition nor a theater performance. However, imagining composition as a Happening allows us to reconfigure composition class dynamics in productive ways. As understood traditionally, an art or a theater performance would have three distinct aspects: the artist, the art (text), and the audience (the consumer of the text). The Happening effectively dismantles that categorization—even the audience becomes part of the show, the artists make themselves one with the audience, and there is no clear division between what is part of Happening texts and what is not (as exemplified by the fact that sometimes the audiences have to be told to leave—they don’t know whether the “text” has ended or continues). Unlike performance, composition students are not supposed to be only audiences (consumers) of the texts teachers produce even traditionally—because the students themselves are expected to produce texts—but the traditional (or the conventional) way of teaching still assumes students to be passive followers of teachers’ frameworks; teachers tell them what to write and how to write. The texts they produce, as a result, reaffirms what conventional wisdom can define in the terms that are available to them handy. Hence, there are not many creative possibilities for students. To imagine the composition class as a Happening is to dismantle that structure and make space for students to create texts in a more open environment.

Geoffrey Sirc’s idea of composition as a Happening works against the broadly accepted notion of English composition as academic writing. Especially after the epistemic turn in composition, after the 1970s, there has been an emphasis on how
meanings are made in discourses and how composition studies can help us and how our students learn the meaning-making processes. David Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University” often takes the central stage in the discussion of this school of thought. Bartholomae argues that the overall aim of teaching composition should be to enable students to participate in the discourse of the academy. Bartholomae calls this phenomenon the process of “inventing the university.” A student should be able to use the language of the university and speak with the authority of an academic. This implies that the students in a composition class need to acquire the voice they have not yet possessed. The academic discourse is a specialized discourse which requires training to be an expert at. Composition students have to appropriate the discourse (or be appropriated by it) to become a member of that academic community (Bartholomae, *Writing on the Margins* 3). The first thing they can do to appropriate the language or to be appropriated by it is to mimic the language of the university. It requires finding a compromise between the individual history and the conventions of the discipline. The language of academia is the language that is rooted in the authority of privilege. This has to do with research, analysis and scholarship. However, Bartholomae argues that the “basic writers” usually slip into the codes that are easily available around them and in their personal experiences. So, composition can and should teach them the language that is specific, structured and agreed upon by a particular community or communities within the academic world.

As Bartholomae argues, this academic writing is reader-based rather than writer-based. So the emphasis lies in the external aspects of writing—the rhetorical situation, exigency etc.—rather than the internal, the author’s self. Hence the language of the
“discourse community” becomes a crucial aspect of academic writing (Bizzell). Bartholomae agrees with Patricia Bizzel that a writer’s main concern should be mastering the conventions of the academic discourse community.

This composition that puts the emphasis on a particular kind of discourse, and which Sirc calls “Post-happenings Composition” (Sirc, *English Composition* 8), offers—Sirc quotes Lindemann—“guided practice in reading and writing the discourses of the academy and the professions. That is what our colleagues across the campus want it to do; that is what it should do if we are going to drag every first-year student through the requirement” (8). In this sense, Sirc argues, composition works just as a kind of “training for work” instead of “intensification of experience” (8), one of the major concerns of the compositionists of the Happenings era, such as Ken Macrorie, William E. Coles Jr. etc., and even other so-called expressivists, like Peter Elbow.

This new composition has “strict boundaries” of what can and should be done in the composition class. It makes a clear distinction between what is “academic” (that we are supposed to teach our students) and what it not (what is “life”). This does not pay attention to what Peter Elbow would say that college is short but life is long (“Reflections,” 136). It separates “academic” from “a broader lived reality” (Sirc, *English Composition* 9). As a result, this composition becomes a “corporate seminar,” in Sirc’s words.

In addition, this composition also makes a distinction between “writers, texts, and contexts” (Sirc, *English Composition* 9), which is also the basis of Berlin’s whole idea of
social-epistemic rhetoric. Sirc calls it “Leavisesque distinctions” and contends that this kind of composition “styles students to,” in the words of Lindemann, “enter the conversation of the academy and begin to contribute to the making of knowledge . . . guiding students in those uses of language that enable them to become historians, biologists, and mathematicians” (qtd. in Sirc 9).

This notion of using composition as a tool for enabling students to make knowledge goes far beyond this. It pretty much opens up composition for any social and political theories that writing teachers would like to discuss in their classes. One very good example of such practice is Berlin’s famous “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Classroom,” in which Berlin argues that the composition class cannot be free from ideologies, and so it should be used to better prepare students ideologically because rhetoric, which provides composition theoretical base, can never be ideologically innocent (118). Also critical pedagogy, after Freire who advocated for the “pedagogy of the oppressed,” has much to do with what enters into the writing class. To sum up, as Erica Lindemann and Gary Tate summarize in their preface to An Introduction to Composition Studies, this new composition does not just concern with the act of writing but also with “broader questions about literacy by studying composing from historical, social, psychological, political, and academic perspectives, often burrowing useful concepts and methods from other disciplines” (v). This “attempt to answer broader questions” despite being a field that concerns writing well, takes composition in the direction that people like Sirc believe is not helping us.

Sirc maintains that composition in the epistemic era has not only taken up issues

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5 Berlin and Inkster’s 1982 article “Current Traditional Rhetoric: Paradigm and Practice” analyzes the distinction in detail.
that should not concern writing teacher and students but also deviated from what it used to be during the Happenings era, before the 1970s. Modern composition is marked by rigidity in terms of how it is organized and taught, not allowing any space for creative practice. Especially after the rise of theories in composition, driven by the desire to establish the disciplinarity of the field and the professional demands that go with it, composition closed its doors to what previously would allow to practice in uncertainty and unpredictability. Because it has strict boundaries—given by set institutional requirements and even textbooks—the space defines very much what goes into composition. Comparing the practice of composition with the art museum and art history, he argues that such rigid structures only help reproduce the modernist tradition, that such structures define what kind of art or writing in the case of composition are produced. He contends, “The scene of classroom writing is peculiarly overdetermined, then, as Gallery—as physical space in a larger institution (Museum/University), lying on the cusp between the curatorial and the commercials” (4). As a result, composition only becomes a “corporate seminar.”

Composition as corporate seminar or this “Modernist Composition” (7) forms a canon of if its own, and everything has to revolve around it, creating its own gods: “power, authentic voice, discourse, critical consciousness, versatility, style, disciplinarity, purpose etc.” (2, italics in original). Sirc contends that by talking this route, composition abandoned some discoveries made in the past. In the book, *English Composition as a Happening*, Sirc aims to “remember what we’ve forgotten” and “retrace the road not taken in Composition Studies, to re-read the elision, in order to remember what was missed and to salvage what can still be recovered” (12).
Sirc’s proposal in this book is to work out a theory of composition as a Happening in order to restore the theories and pedagogies that have been sidelined in composition for decades, in favor of a more open and contingent practice of writing. Borrowing the term “composition as a Happening” from Charles Deemer who published an essay called “English Composition as a Happening” in 1967, and building on Lutz’s 1971 article “Making Freshmen English as a Happening,” Sirc wants to “reaffirm the value in an all but forgotten era of Composition Studies, in the hope of finding an alternative to the current tradition” (13).

The Happenings theory of creative composition builds on Sirc’s emphasis on Macrorie’s expressivist theory, however not necessary ridding composition of its professed task of teaching transactional/academic writing and composing arguments. In other words, not necessarily focusing on the opposition of Ways of Writing and Uptauugh. This requires acknowledging that writing in composition is still transactional and Happenings strategies, like juxtaposition, can be used to make arguments, as Jeff Rice shows in his “whatever pedagogy.” But at the same time, it also needs to acknowledge the mysterious ways creativity functions and the role of the unconscious of the author. The notion of choral writing in Ulmer and the notion of vitality in Hawk help explain the mysterious to an extent, but I would argue that we cannot always expect to explain those elements in empirical terms, and creativity functions at the level of the surreal, individual experience.

Happenings and Creativity

In a 1970 article called “Theoretical Problems in Studying Creativity and
Richard Lloyd-Jones reviews four papers presented at an NCTE sponsored conference on Creative Process and Composition, held in 1968. Of the four papers, Lloyd-Jones discusses Milton Rosenbaum’s model of creativity with much emphasis, and I believe that the Rosenbaum model comes closest to explaining creativity in relation to Happenings.

Rosenbaum, Lloyd-Jones explains, takes an associative approach to defining creativity, which means that a creative text is known by how it maintains its association with readers and writers (Lloyd-Jones 261). Written texts maintain their relationships with the reader at varying levels of predictability of response. Some of those responses can be called usual responses, while the others are unusual. Usual or common responses are those that can be predicted. They are the responses that are more or less expected from the same way from any reader. Uncommon and unusual responses, on the other hand, cannot be predicted; they are not expected in a particular way. According to Rosenbaum, non-creative texts have highly expected responses to the language use. “We might call the latter ‘conventional’ and recognize it as the language of technical or academic writing, the language of affairs,” explains Lloyd-Jones (261). In the words of Rosenbaum, it is the writing of "dominant associates" (qtd. in Lloyd-Jones 261), where “conventionality allows a reader to associate his response exactly with what the writer had in mind” (262). In this sense, there is a high level of contract between the writer and the reader about how a text will be understood, and so the text does not challenge reader expectations. This kind of text communicates matters of practical concern.

The creative use of language, on the other hand, does not have such dominant associates. Authors work with codes that may not work exactly the same way for all
audiences; the audiences may come up with different meanings of the same text and also may experience in different things while reading the same text. Moreover, even the author may not have one fixed expectation from the reader. This openness and possibility is not allowed in the texts that are produced for practical purposes, for instance a progress report or a proposal. They are supposed to be understood exactly the way the author has intended while writing the texts. If readers understand those texts differently from the way the authors has intended, it will constitute a failure on the part of the author or the reader. In a creative text, on the other hand, there is no failure of this kind. Instead, if the author and the reader work exactly on the same level, with the same understanding, the text will most probably be said to be lacking in creativity.

One dominant aspect of creative use of language is, by extension, the ability to allow readers an experience of emotion that non-creative texts do now allow. So, according to Rosenbaum, writes Lloyd-Jones, “one of the elements of creativity may be the power of a construct to arouse emotional responses” (162). Lloyd-Jones contends that this kind of writing is possible outside conventions and “dominant associates.” By extension, students can produce creatively only when they are given space outside rigid conventions and rules that are useful only to produce texts that do not necessarily go beyond immediate meanings and so do not function at the level of emotion and affect. In this sense, teaching students to write creatively is also like allowing them to work from outside the bounds of accepted norms, and often at the cost of disorienting them. Lloyd-Jones writes, “I suggest that if we are to teach students to be creative, we must be willing to face the consequences of disorienting them, of getting them to see the world through their own eyes as well as those of the conventional society” (264). The idea of
disorienting them is the idea of allowing them to work from outside conventional rules that produce texts of dominant associates. Of course, any language use is a contract between the author and the reader and no “creative use” of language can be possible completely outside conventions, but the idea is how much we can allow the space to our students to practice writing by challenging those conventions so that they come up with something that might not be possible only by working within rigid boundaries.

In Rosenbaum’s scheme audience response is the key to determining the kind of text we are dealing with. It helps us explain how a text interacts with the reader and how a creative text functions in opposition to a non-creative text. In this sense, this formulation works at the level of produced texts and their consumption. In the process of that consumption, some texts mean exactly the way the codes are supposed to mean by the producer, the author, and others do not even have such codes with fixed expectations. Then, obviously, when we are talking about creative texts, we are asking about certain genres that are supposed to work with no fixed meanings, with no practical purposes of communication, such as poetry. Thus the idea of the creative is bound to take us to the domain of poetics. This seems to pose a problem in the practice of creative writing in composition. Composition, being about the kind of writing in which “dominant associates” determine the effectiveness of writing to a large extent, demands that the codes work according to rules and conventions. [Hence my argument that creative composition is not about making the writing in composition (let’s say the essays our students write in first year composition) look like the creative writing genres (let’s say like creative non-fiction, that they do under creative writing) but about how we practice the genres in composition itself in a way that enhances the effectiveness of the “dominant
Therefore the Happening for creative composition needs to be viewed not as a way of producing texts that allow the possibility of various audience responses according to Rosenbaum’s scheme but rather as an open-ended method of practicing writing that places the author—the students—in the whirlwind of various possibilities of assemblages, juxtaposition, and invention as well as expression of ideas in ways that make them appear new, fresh and “creative,” rather than “Engfish-y,” to play with Macrorie’s idea of “Engfish.” And this possibility of openness and uncertainty in the fashion of the dream logic of surrealism is available in the practice of the Happening.

The dream logic of Surrealism, Dalibor Vasely explains in his article “Surrealism and the Latent World of Creativity,” allows associations that our conscious mind cannot make. Rooted in the psychoanalytical method of free association, Surrealism creates a new reality for the functioning of mind to explore into the latent (unconscious level of thought, as Vasely elaborates). This process of free association (with some qualification that I discus below) known as Surrealist creative tool, works at the state of dream that is neither constrained nor fully realized by the reality one lives. “In dreams” writes Vasely, “time melts away; dreams take place repeatedly in the present, without any possibility of determining past or future” (271). Similarly, dreams have no “perspectives” because they don’t have borders—they don’t function within any fixed location, and “distances” cannot be measured in dreams. Moreover, the true oneiric world, as experienced by one, and the dream world we recount or recollect living in our reality are two different things. In other words, we can never fully experience the dream world in reality. So the associations that are made in the dream world are beyond what our conscious minds can
grasp. Hence, the mystery of the creative process keeps baffling us, but Happenings exploit that very nature of the process.

The Surrealist tool of creative process, however, is not completely a dreamwork, which psychoanalysts explain as free association. Of course, this is where the early Surrealists stood and found the dream logic a productive way of explaining the creative process and practicing art. But, it needed some limitations, some boundaries that would stop art from becoming meaningless and “inorganic,” in the words of Michel Leiris (qtd. in Vasely 267). So, the Surrealist artists worked with what Breton calls “premeditation” (qtd. in Vasely 268). This idea of premeditation in Surrealism is a method of entering the creative process of dream logic with some pre-planning so as not to get lost in meaninglessness. Vasely interprets this idea of premeditation in Surrealism as “a new stage in the developments of the Surrealists’ understanding of creativity” (268).

So the logic of the Happening as a creative space brings in the logic of the Surrealist dreamwork, not in its earliest form in which a completely free association would be imagined but in a form where some “premeditation” is expected and practiced. Even though Happenings are oftentimes understood as just happening there, there are certain “premeditations” that go with Happening performances. (It is important that we become clear about this particular aspect of the Happening because no composition work, which is always done within certain structures and boundaries, no matter how far we want to take it from those structures, is going to happen in an ideal world of all Happenings.) Michael Kirby clarifies this in his book *Happenings*. He explains that even in Happening performances there are structures but the difference is that the structures are “compartmented” (13). There are preparatory works; there is even some kind of an
outline of the script and the artists even do some kind of rehearsal before Happenings shows. But they work in compartments within a broader structure. Instead of working with an overarching structure that binds everything together, they function in their own spaces, without much affiliation to other structural elements. In other words, they function with a high level of openness. These structures allow freedom to various elements in play in ways that they find appropriate at the moment of Happening performances. This in fact is the very postmodern logic of dismantling the center and, instead, working with multiple centers and multiple nodes, that are scattered and make meanings in relation to each other or in associations that are possible in a number of ways.

To imagine creative composition as a Happening is then to accept the fact that the creative process is not fully understandable by our conscious mind. The ever lingering question “Can writing be taught?” still makes sense when by “writing” we mean creating something that can’t always be done consciously. Contemporary focus on mere craft in creative writing and on logic and argumentation in composition is an effort to work with the tools that are easily understandable and manageable by our conscious selves. The existing dissatisfaction with creative writing programs, especially the MFA, as voiced by people like Anis Shivani in his book Against the Workshop, is broadly based on the very idea that creativity works outside the bounds of our conscious mind. So, creative composition as a Happening opens up a space for what is not always explainable that we claim to be doing most of the time in composition pedagogy, claiming that writing can in fact be taught. In the following sections, I build on the alternative Sirc has provided and demonstrate how the Happening becomes a theory of creative composition when we
place the author’s experience in the midst of juxtaposition, the notion of choral writing and vitality in composition.

**Happenings and Experience**

One criticism of composition as academic and transactional writing is that it relies too much on the external to the author’s self. Instead of the author’s experience, too much emphasis has been put on craft that can be taught and learned and the things that exist outside rather than inside the author. Writing from one’s own experience and writing from the observation of the external world can be seen as two different positions about the process of text production. To an extent it has been accepted that creative writing is more about personal experiences—broadly defined to mean how much one writes himself or herself and speaks his or her heart or mind, while composition is more about the external, objective world. Hence, creativity often relates to how much the writing subject experiences the subject matter and writes from his or her own world of perception. Richard Llyod-Jone’s proposal to “disorient” writers and help the writer “see” the world through their own eyes, in addition to the conventional ways, explains that trust in the writer’s personal experience of the world. Llyod-Jones writes, “I suggest that if we are to teach students to be creative, we must be willing to face the consequences of disorienting them, of getting them to see the world through their own eyes as well as those of the conventional society. It may even be disturbing to try to imagine just what it really is that another man sees” (264). So, in the context of epistemic composition of the 1960s and after, which places emphasis on the language of the academy, or the discourse community, and the meaning-making process in relation to many external forces, those
who want to focus on more creative approach to teaching composition take up expressivist approaches and value student experiences. The idea of composition as a Happening builds specifically on providing students that opportunity.

The lack of opportunity to “experience” in composition is what mars the new, epistemic composition, Sirc argues. In this new form, the students are given architecture with an expectation that they will produce pieces that fit into that architecture. Requiring students to master the language of the university (Bartholomae), the academic discourse, or the language of the one’s discourse community (Bizzell), effectively draws the lines for the student who cannot think beyond the structures. Sirc further contends, “The materials, newly delimited—our flat, abstract, oil canvases—are now what is strictly specific to college writing,” and adds ironically, “the university continually re-invented (as the same traditional thing)” (17). In these newly delimited “canvasses,” “the student must work, technique-wise, on ‘assembling and mimicking [the university’s] language,’ and the form/ content of one’s work becomes,” he quotes Bartholomae, “‘the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community’” (17). This is a process that requires students to produce the kinds of texts they encounter at the university, by going through certain structures that are worked out for them by somebody else. They do not “experience” this writing but imitate. And this is regarded as something that mars creativity. The author does not enter the process of individual experience to be creative; writing happens at the level of a defining structure, the museum.

When we build structures and require one to practice writing within those structures, we can only expect what Ken Macrorie calls “Engfish,” “a language in which
fresh truth is almost impossible to express” (9). It is true not only of the kind of academic writing that the mainstream composition expects students to write by mastering the conventions of the university or the discourse of their disciplines but also of the so-called creative writing, the genres that are practiced within creative writing programs. Creative writing’s resistance to rigid theories and institutional structures, and skepticism toward “professionalization,” that would require/ and that has required the program to build itself around them, speak of this fact to a large extent. The lore behind the pervasive question about creative writing, “Can it be taught?” is the very assumption that there are doubts. There are doubts because there are no defined methods to guide writers through the creative process. When we want to define those processes in clear-cut terms, we take away the very nature of creative practice. That is the reason the field “as a whole rejects notions of itself as an academic discipline” and is guided by lores and “a patchwork pedagogy” (Ritter and Vanderslice, Introduction xi). As a result, the practices are guided by individual teachers’ own ideas about creativity and writing process.

It is this belief that guides many teachers of creative writing in the workshop pedagogy. There are numerous stories and instances when teachers held classes as only informal sessions, and some classes being held outside normal classrooms, some of them even extended to bars. In a recent book, Mentor: A Memoir, Tom Grimes recalls how some of his “workshops” would run back in his days. He recalls what happened after the class in which his novel chapter has been workshopped ended:

I stayed behind until the voices in the stairwell faded to silence. Then I slipped into my denim jacket and walked into the hall. Headed for the elevator, Frank [the professor, Frank Conroy] stopped when he saw me. ‘They [other students in class] didn’t get it,” he said. He compared my wild prose to the comic anarchy of Marx Brothers skit. ‘Worry about maintaining the power of the prose. Forget the rest.’ They he hopped into
the elevator. I took the stairs. I wasn’t eager to stop at the Mill [a bar], but I had to. Otherwise, I’d appear to be sulking, rather than confused by all I’d heard.

In the packed bar, though, students who weren’t in my workshop but had read one of the copies left on the hallway’s shelves said they loved the chapter. It was funny, many claimed. And they’d heard the class went well. Max Phillips disagreed with Frank on a minor issue. Frank had suggested that I change ‘wanna’ to ‘want to.’ As in, ‘I don’t want to hit.’ Max said, ‘But “wanna” captures the character’s infantile nature.’ I never made the change. To my ear, ‘want to’ sounded stilted. As writers, debating this minutia constituted out lives. (31)

This very nature of the teaching of creative writing, makes Paul Dawson call it “undertheorized and idiosyncratic” (90). But his very “idiosyncrasy,” to a large extent, this idea of practicing art outsides the bounds of defined structures, helps to keep creative writing “creative” as opposed to what composition is generally understood to be, the kind of writing whose crafts can be taught, learnt and practiced systematically. This “unstructured” structure in creative writing, on the other hand, allows writers to experience the subject, instead of requiring them to produce using a mold or something that rightly fits the existing museum.

This is the type of pedagogy, a pedagogy that can neither be fully explained nor theorized, hence replicated, is assumed to be guiding creative writing instruction, at least in its traditional form. Kevin Brophy in his book Creativity: Psychoanalysis, Surrealism and Creative Writing shares an experience of his encounter with a group of creative students at Victoria University of Technology at St. Albans, Australia. After giving a reading in front of the students, he asked them “what aspects of creative writing they would like to discuss” (9). After a moment of silence, one of the students said that she wanted to discuss endings of the short story. The next issue they wanted to discuss was beginnings. Brophy explains that what they wanted by asking him to discuss those
specific issues was “a map” (10). What the creative writing students wanted to hear from a writer, editor and a professor was how you begin a short story and end it—in specific terms. Brophy writes, “They wanted to be able to set out on a route clearly marked all the way to its destination” (10). But was it something that he could tell? Did he himself know how a short story began and how it ended?

“All I could tell them, truthfully, was that the map in my pocket had been no more than a comforting but useless presence on my way to their classroom, and the maps I had consulted had been misleading approximations of the territory I had cycled and climbed trough,” explains Brophy (10). The map he had printed out before setting out for the college had not been helpful for him; he had to work out the route as he moved forward. He asks, “What kinds of anxiety, and what kinds of understandings of creativity lay behind their requests for beginnings and endings? Were their requests dictated by an understanding that this particular creative activity constitutes a course they must pass by producing a certain number of ‘complete’ words” (10)? Brophy’s concern here is that the students, who were doing “creative writing” by name, wanted something that would take a form not necessarily creative. What they were asking for was a clear map made by somebody to fit in their stories or whatever writing they had to do. “For me,” writes Brophy, “it is still startling and strange to stand in a room with a class of students who have declared they want to be creative writers and can even name particular problems of their craft such as the problems of beginnings and endings” (10). This raises a number of questions about the nature of creative writing and we are bound to go back to the same question if it can actually be taught. But for now the issue is that creative writing is supposed to work differently, in the sense that these students should have been able to
figure out—can we say “create”?—their own beginnings and endings in stead of looking out for maps. What Brophy points out here is the lack of “experience” on the part of the students of what they were writing. He explains, “in seeking guidance on beginnings and endings, creative writing students do not look to nature or ‘life’ for clues, but to other short stories, and other writers who have managed the trick of starting then stopping passages of writing” (12).

So, what is lacking in this kind teaching, whether creative writing or any other, is the possibility of experience on the part of the writer, something that a “creative” exercise would allow. In the form as described by Brophy even if the students are doing “creative writing,” let’s say officially, they are not doing creative writing, but trying to imitate writing in certain genres, here the short story, a form of “creative writing.” In any case, creative practice of writing would require writers to go beyond the structures that have been laid out for them by somebody else. I suppose this kind of practice would not be different from the practice of Bartholomaean academic writing in the conventional understanding of the so-called academic writing, except that they practice different genres.

The point is, then, about how we practice writing rather than what genres of writing are named what. Creativity primarily relates to writing at the level of invention. It does not account to what form it takes at the state of expression. Here it is helpful to make a distinction between the creative and the poetic. The creative functions at the level of invention whereas the poetic functions at the level of expression or communication. To recall Rosenberg’s analysis, the poetic use of language has to do with the lack of dominant associates. Hence, to designate the poetic as “creative” is only arbitrary. What
is creative about the practice is, however, about how much space we make for the experience of the author. This is where the expressivists in composition studies would come to the closest to creative writing’s guiding assumptions about creativity, that it is about an individual’s experience of truth, or in more practical terms how a writer experiences the writing subject and captures that. This is the very concern that makes Sirc turn to expressivists Ken Macrorie and William E. Coles Jr. in his theory of composition as a Happening. And this is the aspect of composition that preserves the creative spirit.

In his discussion of expressive/subject theories of rhetoric James Berlin goes back to Plato, who, he argues prevails in this strand of rhetoric (the other two being objective and transactional, in Berlin’s words) through Emerson’s thoughts and cognitive psychology, among other things (*Rhetoric and Reality* 11-2). In this form of rhetoric, Berlin argues, truth remains outside the realm that we can objectively locate. Since truth “transcends the mutable material world,” it can be discovered only by the individual “through private vision” (12). And so there cannot be a particular method that can be taught to an individual to get to that truth—only the individual working on his own, through his or her own vision can reach there. The outlines Brophy’s students wanted do not lead them to that truth; they have to find it through their own efforts, as opposed to prescribed structures. And that is what Brophy, a creative writing teacher, concurs when he says that he found the students’ request “startling and strange.” I quote Berlin at length:

This conception of rhetoric creates special difficulties for the teacher. Since truth must finally be discovered or, at the least, confirmed through a private act of intuition, the teacher cannot communicate truth. Indeed, the teacher cannot even instruct the student in the principles of writing, since writing is inextricably intertwined with the discovery of truth. The student can discover truth, but truth cannot be taught; the student can learn to
write, but writing cannot be taught. The only strategy left, then, is to provide an environment in which the individual can learn what cannot be taught. \textit{(Rhetoric and Reality 13)}

This explains the assumption behind the creative practice of writing. Even though Berlin does not clearly about “creative writing” as such—indeed, he does not look at writing with that distinction—the theory he discusses here perfectly describes the creative process that is supposed to guide creative writing programs, again, at least in the traditional understanding of creative writing. This “environment” is what most creative writing programs (for instance, the Iowa workshop, as already quoted somewhere above) emphasize, instead of claiming that they can teach creative writing. Berlin explains this assumption further, “This environment must include provisions for encouraging the expression of private versions of experience couched in original metaphors, metaphors which show by their freshness and uniqueness that they are not simply imitative reports of the vision of others” \textit{(Rhetoric and Reality 13)}. This helps to explain the distinction between what Sirc calls epistemic composition does and composition as a Happening is supposed to do. If the problem with epistemic composition is with its lack of freshness and creativity, these expressivist theories are what can save composition, that Sirc attempts doing through the theories of the Happening. That is why expressivist approaches, like that of Ken Macrorie’s, still remain not only relevant but also pertinent to the idea of creative composition. The Happenings theory of creative composition acknowledges the presence of the private version of experience, and its value in the creative practice of writing. Individual authors enter the creative process and what counts most in the process is the experience of truth.

In this book \textit{Uptautht}, to which scholars keep turning to in any discussion of the
expressivist composition pedagogy, Macrorie debunks the very concept of academic writing by discussing his experiences through diary entries, his student write-ups, his brief commentaries and anything that help him express his notion of writing. Here he makes a formidable point that writing has to work outside the given structures of the so-called academic/university writing, or whatever one calls it, and—as the series editor of the book Susannah Sheffer says—launches “crusade against ‘Engfish’ . . . that he saw everywhere in student papers and in the writing of his colleagues . . . .” (Foreword vii). This Engfish, Macrorie, argues is the artificial, imitational language that the students themselves cannot feel, hence it is “the bloated, pretentious language” (18) of the university taught by most composition teachers. This kind of writing neither tells the truth nor relates to the real experience of the writer. My point is, however, that it is necessary to understand the “creative” at the level of invention. What form of expression it takes at the end is a less important thing—it may take transactional or poetic form, that is a different issue, though I agree with Macrorie that the writing that emerges from experience, internalization of the issue at hand or the writing that has the roots in insights, has the power to be fresh and more effective, not “Engfish.”

Macrorie contends that the whole idea of “academic endeavor” that the freshman composition class takes on, makes student writing lifeless. He writes that it teaches students “(n)ot to write truths that count for them. Not to connect their experience to what they read and hear about in the classroom, but to master an academic tongue and a manner of footnoting and snipping out other persons’ words and rearranging then in a new introduction-body-conclusion form” (8), hence a “language in which fresh truth is almost impossible to express,” the “Engfish” (9). The problem here is not with academic
writing as such but with the way we make our students practice it, not at the level of
invention but communication. In the name of academic writing and objectivity in
expression, we end up eliminating the roots of creative possibilities, by asking students to
concentrate on reproducing the language of the university.

Hence, the major feature that characterizes “Engfish” is the lack of opportunity
for students to experience the subject, the lack of space for them to writer from their
experiences. The academic setting and requirement of the university has become so
pervasive that for students to produce any fresh and meaningful text, they have to get out
of the structure. In a way that itself breaks the monotony of the standard academic style,
Macrorie writes, “My students were alive . . . And humorous . . . But they wrote dead”
(all titles of his snippets, 10-11), and gives an example of “dead writing”: “I found the
characters in this story very interesting. The plot was exciting and an outstanding aspect
of the story was its description” (11, italics in original). Next, he writes about another
student, McDonald:

Except for one boy, McDonald. After writing a few miserable, pretentious,
academic papers, he went away for a while. He returned with a paper
written in red ink. On the last page the words became indistinguishable,
the letters more and more uncertain until they finally squiggled off in a
wavy line. I was incensed. The red was so hard to read, and the
carelessness insulting.

But as I puzzled out the paper, I found McDonald had produced a
zany story of his adventures as exciting and humorous as Holden
Caulfield’s. Twice more McDonald turned in live, squirming papers. After
the final exam he took me aside and explained he had written those papers
while he was drunk. (11)

To those of us who want to understand the writing process in clearly definable terms,
such a scenario, especially the idea of doing writing in a drunken state, may sound too
obscure and dated now—especially because of our more scientific and cognitivist beliefs,
the beliefs that we can actually understand our writing process and we can have a control
over them—but it certainly helps to explain the unpredictable nature of a creative
endeavor and I agree with Macrorie in that aspect of creativity. For one to have
something fresh and meaningful, he or she needs to get out of the structure that has been
provided. Macrorie continues, “I should have realized that a cataclysmic event was
needed to break a student away from the dead language of the schools—some severe
displacement or removal from the unreal world of the university” (11). This
“displacement or removal from the world the university” was what Lutz meant to practice
by lighting candles in the classroom. In the Happening, the main focus is on how much
the artist can be “transported” to experience what is not possible through conscious,
predictable efforts. It is a method that allows him or her to explore into the depths of his
or her own mind and know the things as they are experienced. Deemer and Lutz’s classes
are unconventional attempts to create that atmosphere for student writers. And here it is
equally important to emphasize that even the methods that Deemer or Lutz practiced for
the Happening experience cannot be taken as the rules or the only methods. If translated
into rules and conventions, they cease to produce the kind of experience that writers
would need to be creative, and that way it would cease to be a Happening. Happening
methods as such cannot be concretely labeled down to certain rules—they have to depend
on the immediate circumstances and they should aim at creating the experience that
standard methods of practice would not allow. This requires writing outside traditional
topoi, the places of argument. Gregory Ulmer theorizes this place as chora. Choral
writing that happens outside the topoi allows the author the possibility of eureka
experience, a moment of realization of something new, something creative. By imagining
writing in an atmosphere of chora and providing it the “vitality of organism” (Kaprow), the Happening functions as a generative method. In the following section I discuss how the Happening helps the functioning of choral writing and vitality.

*Creative Composition in the Happening*

At the heart of any Happenings practice, either in writing or in other art, lies a resistance to predetermined structures within which to work. It is this resistance against structures that prompted Allan Kaprow to go out in the open, away from the confining boundaries of the gallery and the museum, where no structure determines the art one creates. Working within defined structures—of any kind—means conforming to those structures, and there is a very little chance of a new creation. One of the arguments made against the traditional ways of teaching composition—more specifically, the academic writing that composition is supposed to be teaching—is that we still rely on topoi, after Aristotle, to teach our students to compose their papers. For one, the topoi provide a rigid structure of argumentation, and we keep practicing it in the form of Toulmen’s rhetoric. At the same time they limit the scope of writing within traditional paradigms at a time when new media has become a new reality of the composition class, as that of the modern life as a whole. As Aristotle explains, the topoi, or topics, are “lines of argument” based on which we draw enthymemes to suit our subject and the occasion (ii.23.28). Those topics provide us with “rhetorical building blocks . . . from which to create discourse” (Rice, *The Rhetoric* 32). These lines of argument, the topoi, determine how an orator would deal with the audience, the subject, and the overall context. For Aristotle, any argument would eventually fall within the places of argument that provide the rhetor
with manageable tools, “useful or necessary to handle, having selected the propositions suitable in various cases” (iii.22.30-1).

The arguments based on topoi are not only manageable but also predictable. They tend to simplify the argumentation process by providing the rhetor with what is available to his or her conscious self. In the context of writing, we begin with what is already predictably available to us and move on from there. This is a process that is constrained by the line of argument and writing happens within the limits provided by topoi. Topoi can be useful for students to an extent because they, according to Jeff Rice, allow “students (and often instructors) the ability to work from a common repository of ideas” (The Rhetoric 33), but it has a limiting effect on the way our students practice writing.

“There exists, however,” writes Rice, a limitation to rhetorical work when we focus entirely on how to utilize topoi for purposes of persuasive, informative, or any other discursive writing. Because expectation is situated as the norm of rhetorical output in this kind of system, writers often face obstacles regarding how they engage language innovatively, how they fashion new ways of expression, or even how they adjust to formats and structures that don’t accommodate topoi well. (33)

The happening, on the other hand, tends to disrupt topos-based practices. It goes beyond what is predictable and what limits one’s practice within pre-formulated structures. It imagines a space where ideas can emerge in ways that cannot be predicted.

The notion of choral writing, as Ulmer theorizes it, replaces the traditional, topos-based writing in favor of the writing that happens on the spur of the moment. Ulmer discusses his theory in the context of new media interface but this formulation can be equally applicable in other writing environments, especially because new media is such a ubiquitous phenomenon in the present world. To compose in the Happening context is to
displace the topos, the fixed point of reference. It is a state where various elements come into play in the fashion of new media writing. Just like new media composition brings the linear and the “surficial,” sounds and images and hyperlinks together, the Happening allows possibilities for everything to converge. In fact, a Happening space in the present context, where digital technology is ubiquitous, can be described as a new media context. That is why I think Ulmer’s heretics and his formulation of eureka experience add tremendous value to the Happening in composition. By replacing the topos with chora, this notion destabilizes structures and makes the writing space a fluid one. Because we cannot still get rid of the McLuhan dictum that “the medium is the message,” it is only by destabilizing the medium, or the structures, that the message can emerge in a new or unexpected or creative forms. Gregory Ulmer calls it heuristics, “a heuristic approach to theory” (8), which is intended “to help with the invention process and revising paper practices in the light of the new possibilities of thought manifested in electronic technology” (16). And within his theory of heuristics, Ulmer explains the concept of choral writing.

In *Heuristics: The Logic of Invention*, Gregory Ulmer proposes a theory of writing that takes the act of writing beyond structuralism and places it in Derrida’s *differance*. In other words, Ulmer rejects the traditional modes of inquiry, of topos, and imagines a space where signifiers are free-floating. Writing in this formulation is not about choosing from various available meanings (or arguments, in the context of composition) but letting all the free-floating signifiers, “key terms,” come together and make meanings. Ulmer explains, “Here is a principle of chorography: do not choose between the different meanings of key terms, but compose by using all the meanings (write the paradigm)”
Writing is not just about getting information from a container and arranging them. It is a way of inventing meaning by letting information interact. He further explains, “The writer using chorography as a rhetoric of invention will store and retrieve information from premises of places formulated not as abstract containers, as in the tradition of *topos*, but by means of *Geschlecht*” (73), *Geschlecht* being a “complex of ‘sex, race, family, generation, lineage, species, genre/genus’” (71). “Chora, in other words, as a figure of spacing,” he goes on, “is another name for what has concerned Derrida in nearly every text he has ever written: *differance*” (73). Here my purpose is not to re-imagine the Happening space as a *difference*, where meaning is infinitely postponed (nor does Ulmer imagine that scenario for choral writing), but rather as a place where writing is not predetermined by topoi.

Discussing writing in the context of new media writing, Ulmer argues that electronic apparatus de-centers “structuration in which maps designed in terms of centers and peripheries, of frontiers and adventure, no longer correspond to the territory” (33). Writing is no longer linear and no longer based on the lines of argument. This writing is not confined to words on paper; it is rather composing in various modes at the same time—with words as well as pictures and sounds and numerous connections, hyperlinks, or hypermedia, “the digitized convergence on one ‘text’ of words, images, and sounds” (xii). Thus, *chora* replaces *topoi*. “In order to foreground the foundational function of location in thought, choral writing organizes any manner of information by means of the writer’s specific position in the time and space of a culture” (33). In this sense, choral writing is marked by instability and transience, which are at the very heart of the Happening. Ulmer describes this kind of writing through what he calls “mystory,” which
is “designed to simulate the experience of invention, the crossing of discourses that has been shown to occur in the invention process” (xii). He writes, “The chorographer uses the mystery to guide the exercises of the Method (actively searches for or creates repetitions among the discourses of society). And the repetitions do not produce ‘grand designs’ but ‘miniaturizations’ bringing the heterogeneous items of information into order around a detail or prop (a strange attractor) in the setting” (140). This chorographic writing, he argues, results in “eureka experience” that he defines as the “hyperbolic intuition” (140). This is a process that allows the author to become part of the convergence process of various items, a truly Happenings experience. “What exactly is the eureka experience,” he asks, “such that it might be simulated in writing or artificially manipulated in electronic technology” (141)? He goes on, “The canonical examples of scientific insight have been enumerated often enough: Newton observing the falling apple, Archimedes taking a bath, James Watt watching the kettle boil, Poincare getting on a bus” (141). Eureka experience is, thus, a moment of insight that one gets at the crossing of various elements. Such crossing is made possible by virtue of repetition “between quotidian and disciplinary experience” (141). Ulmer explains:

Analysis of instances of eureka shows that while environment, or place, plays an instrumental role in insight, it is in the style of an “accident” that does not have a logical relevance to the problem that an invention addresses. The definition of the eureka experience, reflecting the seeming arbitrariness of this triggering accident, resembles the basic strategy of surrealism, which was to juxtapose unrelated items. In eureka intuition, the materials of a disciplinary problem are brought into sudden, unexpected relationship with other areas of thinker’s experience, with the meditating link being precisely a Psychological Gesture. (141-2)

Eureka experience is the Ulmer’s way of explaining the workings of the Happening in the context of hypermedia. Hypermedia cannot be explained by the classical rhetoric that was
developed for “alphabetic practice” but, he argues, they have the commonality of the
dream logic of surrealism (17). So, when it comes of creating, inventing ideas, they both
need to allow for unexpected juxtapositions and relationships. The eureka experience, the
moment of insight, has to do with one’s information stored at the level of one’s emotion
and it gets triggered by accidents. Creativity, thus, relies not just on our conscious effort
to find something new and fresh but on feelings “that are based on eccentric, subjective,
idiosyncratic physiognomic perceptions” (Ulmer 142).

Ulmer argues that hypermedia “requires another radically different commitment
to space from that of the book (like Kaprow outside the museum or Sirc in the
Happening), a shift that chorography address in the substitution of chora for topos as the
name for the places of invention” (35-36). This has to take the fact into consideration that
information in the age of hypermedia is not stored in a particular place but everywhere
(distributed “memories”). Through invention, such information is “evoked” rather than
“found” (36). “In argumentative writing,” he argues, “the reader deals with a product or
end result of a reasoning process, whereas in hypermedia the process replaces the
product—the user works directly with the topics, having access to all the commonplaces
stored there, as if encountering what Benjamin called the composer’s card box, that
which is treated in the essay as ‘pre-writing’” (38). The speaker or the user of data has
access to the whole lot of possibilities the data provide. In this sense, “The chorographer .
. . writes with paradigms (sets), not arguments” (38). Writing becomes an act of entering
a paradigm, a process, a set of networks, and of experiencing the subject and inventing
something new. What becomes important here is the author’s, or the chorographer’s,
involvement as an experiencing subject. Thus, a chorographer’s space is a Happening
space. A chorographic experience is the experience that the artist gets outside the museum, in the open, in the intersection of unpredictable possibilities. Hence, Ulmer’s idea of chora helps us theorize the Happening space as a place for creative composition.

In composition studies where writing tends to be defined in terms of craft that can be learned like anything else, it is understandable why we have defined structures and why we tend to re-enforce them. For something to be able to taught and learned, there cannot be any space for mystery, any elements that cannot be understood and explained logically. In fact, the elements should be empirically explainable and replicable; the process has to be a science. (Here I recall the argument that composition should not be categorized as a humanities field but a science.) The Happenings theory of creative composition and the notion of chora challenge that assumption. When creativity relates to the experience of the author, there is no way we can guarantee that the process will be fully explained and replicated. We can explain this phenomenon only in symbolic terms.

This is why the notion of vitality—understood variously historically but in general explained as the inherent, life force, the inner source of power, of an individual—becomes so important in the creative practice of writing.

Discussing one of the features of Happenings, Michael Kirby writes, “In Happenings as in Surrealism we find a frequent blending, metamorphosis and interpretation of the animate and the inanimate. Ernst’s plants assume the forms of birds and men. Dali fuses man and object. Arp gives stone and wood vitality of organisms” (39). Kirby continues with more examples, “The ‘ball girls’ in Whitman’s Flower have been transferred from the human to the botanical. A cardboard box comes alive in Kaprow’s A Spring Happening. The men encased in burlap sacks who wrestle in
Oldenburg’s *Gayety* are vital but impersonal” (39). The fact that the atmosphere of Happenings provides both animate and inanimate the “vitality of organism” makes Happenings a generative space that can be utilized for purposes of creative production. “Vitalism,” understood as the intrinsic force of living organism, is traditionally detached from the physical and the material, and so regarded as unknowable through empirical methods. But when vitalism is extended even to inanimate objects, the source of life energy is made less obscure, if not completely demystified. In composition, the notion of vitality has often been dismissed or sidelined historically for reasons understandable, that it evokes to the mysterious and that it would be something creative writing would value more, not composition. Vitality does not comply with the structures of topos, or the predictable lines of argument. It relies on non-systematic heuristic systems.

In his book *A Counter-History of Composition: Toward Methodologies of Complexity*, Byron Hawk makes his argument primarily for a composition that values non-systematic heuristics based on vitality, as opposed to the form of epistemic composition, especially following Berlin, that dismisses anything expressivist as romantic. Composition after the epistemic turn in the 1970s became more invested in theories that could explain the writing process in concrete terms, rather than relying on pedagogies that could not be explained empirically. The focus has been put on the new topoi of race, class, gender etc. and students are given a “limited lens for invention” (Hawk 197), relying on methods that are more about cultural reproduction than the teaching of real writing, like the critical pedagogy that focuses on the production of the student as a political subject than anything else. Those methods do not make space for invention strategies that rely on accidents. Any method that relies on “mysterious”
methods is categorized as expressivist and romantic, and gets dismissed as unscientific, “unteachable,” and so does not carry much weight in the field. Hawk as such disagrees that vitality is a mysterious force that cannot be explained, but he argues that an emphasis on vitality would have made the field more energetic by making space for unsystematic methods of invention.

Hawk’s opposition to Richard Young’s misinterpretation of Coleridge’s vitalism leads him to place vitalism not in the mysterious realm of the self in the traditional sense but in the “systems and complexity theory in scientific disciplines and work such as Foucault’s, Gilles Deleuze’s, and N. Katherine Hayles’s in the humanities” (6). He argues that the way vitalism is viewed in the field, solely following Young’s misreading of Coleridge, has crippled the field by not allowing possibilities vitalism would otherwise provide us. He writes:

One only needs to look at uses of vitalism in rhetoric and composition to note the exclusionary terministic screen enacted through the term. Compositionists use vitalism as a term that denotes an ‘anything-goes’ approach to writing and thinking, as an ahistorical category that subsumes multiple divergent practices, and as an assumed negative counterpart to preferred rhetorical practices that establishes a binary between rhetoric and poetics. (3)

The terministic screen here is the mode of thinking that demands that composition pedagogies rely solely on methods that can be objectively explained, the methods that rely on topoi, not chora. These methods are craft based, formulaic, predictable. The methods that do not follow these simplistic forms of teaching writing are categorized under a different rubric, the rubric that can contain the kind of writing that is guided by mysterious process, the poetic.

Hawk does not, however, mean to advocate for the “mysterious” process in
composition. Instead, he dismantles the binary of heuristics and chance/mystery, and aligns himself with Victor Vitanza’s formulation of “nonsystematic heuristics.” One could raise questions about what exactly “nonsystematic” might suggest in this formulation, but this certainly helps explain the middle ground of the two extreme possibilities in the heuristics/chance binary. The dismissal of Coleridge and any theories and pedagogies that tend to rely on vitality, like expressivists, works on the basis of that binary and the assumption that anything expressivist lacks empiricism and so needs to be discarded. Vitalism for Hawk works at different points of a continuum. It is neither a total mystery nor something that can be explained in fully materialistic terms. He breaks down vitalism into three types: oppositional vitalism, investigative vitalism, and complex vitalism. Oppositional vitalisms in the early nineteenth century, he argues, “see polarity as the primary force of life” (5). This form of vitalism draws upon “earlier modes of animism” and “certain late-eighteenth-century idealism” (5), meaning that it tends to make a distinction between mysticism, myths, spiritualism, and science. He argues that Coleridge, unlike the way composition as a field has understood him, worked with the tension between forms of scientific theories and spiritualism. He writes, “Coleridge’s vitalism ultimately rests on the oppositional forces of attachment and repulsion or the productive tension of polarity, which is the highest law or most general form of nature: it appears and reappears in different configurations in higher levels of reality” (144). In this form of vitalism, “chemical, magnetic, and electric forces the life force” (145). When they enter into play as life force, combined with the philosophy of animism, vitality takes the form of “investigative vitalism.” Investigative vitalism becomes prominent in the later nineteenth century with the development of science and its effect on life as a whole. With
science explaining the phenomena long considered mysterious, only idealism and
mystery were considered inadequate to explain life and thus science entered the discourse
on vitalism. Hawk explains, “During this episteme (which Foucault assembles out of the
nineteenth century) both scientific and philosophical discourses began to investigate life
as a scientific and philosophical principle from Hans Driesch’s investigation of biological
cells up to Henri Bergson’s phenomenological investigation of movement and time” (6).
In this sense, vitality is rooted both in biology (materiality) and something beyond that.
On hand life is a kind of mechanism but on the other it is also part of a complex whole
that cannot be explained solely in mechanistic terms. It is a form of chora, which cannot
be explained by choosing certain meanings at the cost of others. Rather, it is about how
we bring all possible players into action and see meanings emerge. “Here is a principle of
chorography:” explains Ulmer, “do not choose between the different meanings of key
terms, but compose by using all the meanings (write the paradigm)” (48).

Going further, Hawk explains that complex vitalism is rooted in biology and
materiality, and that scientific methods in their complexity of systems of contemporary
life can explain life force. This form of vitality merges “scientific theories with work in
the humanities in an attempt to understand and map out the complexities of contemporary
life,” like Deleuze (6). Here Hawk makes a distinction between the theories of substance
and the theories of events to explain the problems in the field of composition to
understand and practice complex vitalism. He writes:

In rhetoric and composition, anything postmodern or poststructuralist is
read through the terministic screen of expressivism or social-epistemic
rhetoric, both of which are founded on theories of substance rather than
events—expressivism is centered on the individual body and social-
epistemic rhetoric is centered on a dialectic among distinct, pre-existing
elements in the world. This perspective obscures the possibility of seeing
something like Deleuze’s expressionism from the epistemic ground of the late Modern period, or what I am calling complex vitalism. (158)

In other words, our theories, according to Hawk, are based on our perceived binary of human action as active and material context as passive players. This approach does not account for the new developments in theories like those of Deleuze and Guattari that do not make the distinction between human and the material functions. Instead, their relationship is understood in terms of a desiring-machine (Hawk 159). The human body as a machine connecting with numerous other machines to perform functions explain the life force in a new way, in the form of complex vitalism. In this formulation, even the unconscious belongs to physics (164), and what matters is the complex play of desiring-machines. Hawk concludes, “[J]ust as the subject and expression cannot be seen as separate from their larger material ecology, rhetoric, techne, and heuristics have to be seen in the complexity of their ecological grounds. Complex vitalism recognizes this virtual potential” (165).

Hawk’s counter-history thus establishes the relevance of vitality as a useful and much needed heuristics in composition but he does so by freeing the romantic notion of vitality as a completely mysterious force impossible to explain and so something to be left to chance. This formulation, however, does not rule out the role of chance and so the unpredictability of invention. In fact, Hawk only dismantles the dichotomy of heuristics/chance and proposes a new method of complexity in which all possible means of invention come into play, as non-systematic heuristics. This is where his invention strategy enters the domain of chora. In the Happenings setting, chora provides an occasion for vitality to function. This can be further explained with the help of a diagram (Figure 1).
Figure 1: The Happening as a creative space

In the diagram, the circle denotes a Happening space. This space is made by dotted lines because there cannot be fixed boundaries of Happenings although there is an approximate territory. In other orders, there is a blurred lined between the Happening space and the rest of the world. This space brings in various meaning-making elements, various rhizomes, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari (6), allowing juxtaposition and connections that are not always made by the conscious self. This is an unsystematic invention space, a place for chora, as opposed to topoi. An author can position himself or herself at a number of locations between point A, the location of traditional topoi, and point B, the place of chora. At point A the author is guided by total heuristics, the formulaic methods of invention, whereas at point B the author relies on chances given the nonsystematic methods of invention. It is not to mean that the two points are opposed to each other, but they are located far apart on the continuum. Systematic heuristics has but
very little influence on the functioning of chora whereas mystery has hardly any space at the point of topoi. The Happening space provides an occasion for the creative force, here identified as vitality, to be solidified, as indicated by the solid line in the diagram. Vitality is strongest at the point of chora, which falls within the Happening space, and the further it moves away from the Happening space, toward topoi, the weaker it gets. Creative composition aims to exploit the occasion that chora and the Happening space provide. By placing the author at point B, or more toward it, instead of point A, we create a better environment for the creative practice of writing.

A Happening space merges the animate and the inanimate (inanimate objects are personified and the animate, the audience for instance, are objectified), the chance and the mechanistic (there’s some minimal structure but a lot is left to the spur of the moment); the boundaries of time and space are pushed (there’s no fixed stage and fixed time period for a performance); systems, structures, are deconstructed but with a purpose (of creating an experience, of creating a new meaning or meanings); and all throughout, there is always a search for a force, vitality in all the things involved; animate/inanimate, high/low, inside/outside, in all forms and their relatedness. And, this is what the strategy of juxtaposition, which Sontag argues is at the heart of the Happening, is supposed to do—dismantle binaries and bring disparate objects together to create a force, an experience.

Re-imagining composition in an environment of juxtaposition places the author in a unique position in the dynamic of the writing process. The author can no longer keep himself or herself separate from the other aspects of the process—from the medium to the material one is working with. The author becomes one of the elements in the
“environment” where the Happening takes place, where meaning is produced at the level of dreamwork, as discussed above. It so happens because the Happening artist does not just bring together disparate items as a conscious being but becomes one of them. In the art of radical juxtaposition, the artist goes beyond, in Artaud’s term, “psychological and social man” (qtd. in Sontag 272), into the realm of dream logic.

Jeff Rice’s theory of “whatever pedagogy,” as proposed in his 2003 article, “The 1963 Hip-Hop Machine: Hip-Hop Pedagogy as Composition,” exemplifies one such invention strategy that relies more on chora than topoi by proposing juxtaposition as a methodology for invention in composition in the fashion of the Happening. By using the year 1963 as a locus for digital sampling and juxtaposition, Rice theorizes hip-hop as the “whatever pedagogy” and performs how this pedagogy might work as a method for invention. Through an analogy of how hip-hop constructs an argument by digital sampling, he argues that the sampling works within the framework of rhetorical argument and so this same method can be exploited in composition. Just like the “snippets of rerecorded music and sound” can be juxtaposed “to construct new forms of meaning” in hip-hop (455), he argues, this method can be used in composition for the purpose of invention. This method of sampling and using the snippets in “whatever” form is a method that heavily relies on the Happening in the sense that you pick up disparate pieces and juxtapose them, and let them form a pattern to make a meaning or meanings.

Based on this, following “Sirc’s work on punk music” and Ulmer’s idea of sampling, Rice proposes “whatever pedagogy,” in which “whatever” is used as heuristic. This strategy—which also builds on Victor Vitanza’s idea of whatever-based invention that “allows chance and randomness a prominent role in discursive constructions” (Rice
Rice argues, “might redefine student relationships to the various genres and demands of academic writing: the argumentative essay, the research paper, and the critical analysis paper” (458). Whatever pedagogy relies on uncertainty and the unpredictability of the invention process. Every next step in the invention process is defined by what interaction takes place between the samples and what works on the moment by moment basis. He explains the process as it works for students: “The student writer looks at the various distinct moments she has collected and figures out how these moments together produce knowledge” (265). This kind of “mix,” claims Rice, equates with the Happening artist Kaprow’s 1962 Happening Words, and he calls the happenings as an early form of hip-hop composition. Rice’s formulation is valuable in the discussion of the happening as a forum for creative practice of composition because it recognizes uncertainty and unpredictability of the invention process and places a lot of faith on what we do not already see. We bring disparate things together and let them interact, and wait for a system, a pattern, to emerge. This in itself is an important step toward freeing composition from all structured methods of invention, like that of tagmemics of Richard Young, Alton Becker, and Kenneth Pike, or Burkean pentad.

But this understanding of the Happening does not account for its holistic form. In my interpretation and application of the Happening, I’d like to go beyond what Rice calls “a mix,” where various randomly selected snippets come together and give rise to patterns and new meanings. The Happening in its more complete form, with juxtaposition as the main feature of the art, include not just the snippets collected in whatever form, but also the audience and the author. In writing specifically, I argue, the author becomes a part of juxtaposition. In the Happening environment, the author lets himself or herself to
travel beyond what looks logical at the level of conscious juxtaposition of items. Juxtaposition in this sense becomes a method of transporting the author to the unknown, the surreal world. In Rice’s formulation the author is still a conscious actor. He or she is still the organizing factor in the act of juxtaposition at the conscious level. As Rice explains, the focus is still on the materials that are seemingly unrelated and random. He writes, “Student writing benefits from choosing contrasting samples and allowing the dissimilarities of the material to function as heuristic” (468). Hence the author still remains outside the play of juxtaposition—he or she brings the materials together and lets them interact as an observer.

In the kind of Happening that I have been relying on, though, the place of the author is more problematized and mystified. The classroom of Deemer or that of Lutz meant to take the role of the author to a different level. The author himself or herself directly becomes one of the objects that comes into play with the other objects. He or she does not wait for the outcome of the interaction of the snippets. The “mix” does not remain at the level of a lab, but rather goes beyond it. The author also enters the test tube and experiences the creative force, vitality, and comes up with the meaning that might be related or unrelated to what had been juxtaposed. It is a process of creation rather than just an assemblage. This, I argue, is the process of getting “expelled from the social order,” going beyond what is consciously possible, and being creative.

Geoffrey Sirc too, like Rice, works more on the level of texts that enter into play than how the author abandons the “social” for a more mysterious process of creating, the dream logic. But I would say Sirc goes a little further than Rice in assigning the author a more involved role. He writes, “My goal as academic curator is to mount a hip hop
exhibit that will satisfy the masses’ itch, as well as leave them with an intense formal, verbal, and conceptual experience, one that will give them cultural and discursive capital to do with as they see fit” (271). His concern with the “masses’ itch” and “conceptual experience” that the author has had through the act of juxtaposition opens us more space for the mysterious process of creativity.

Furthermore, there is a bigger, a more significant difference between the ends of Rice’s method of juxtaposition and Sirc’s use of the Happenings pedagogy. Rice still works within the premises of composition studies, composition’s professed objective of teaching argumentation, research and similar arts. He argues that the sampling method of hip-hop can analogically work for any academic writing as a method. Rice does not contest the relevance of teaching academic writing as such. Sirc’s premise on the other hand is that the focus on the so-called academic writing, which became prominent in composition studies after the epistemic turn and which is represented by what David Bartholomae has championed for, is a total loss of what composition is supposed to do, or used to do before the field abandoned the Happenings pedagogy after 1970 or so. Sirc, in this sense, is working with a clear dichotomy between composition as a Happening and composition as academic writing. He carves out his argument based on the dichotomous relationship between the two representative texts, Bartholomane and Anthony Petrosky’s *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers* and Macrorie’s *Uptought*. He concludes, “Composition as a Happening means the displacement of such texts [like *Ways of Reading*] for the writing class, substituting a basic awareness of how to use language and information, a cool project, and a sense of poetry” (277). In this sense, the Happening for Sirc works at the level of not creating arguments, unlike for Rice, but at the level of
language use. Hence his professed allegiance to Macrorie, though Sirc also makes it clear that he is not aiming for “melodramatic belle-lettrism,” unlike what he claims Macrorie does (269).

What we should be aiming at by juxtaposition is then an important aspect of how we would like to practice the Happenings pedagogy. A Happenings theory of creative composition needs to reconcile with both Rice’s and Sirc’s agendas. For one, composition as a field of study, with its own epistemologies as I have discussed in Chapter Two, has its own genres of writing, and our students are required to produce them. If we want to work within the current structures of the university, there is no way that we can erase the differences of genres and disciplinary expectations—the very premise of the beginning of my argument—and so we need to figure out how we can practice creativity within those structures. Rice’s proposal to use juxtaposition in the manner of Happenings for the purpose of making academic arguments is, on one level, a useful approach to creative composition. But this practice needs to go beyond working with the snippets, and get the author more integrated into the process, not just as a conscious author who brings in the cuts together and sees what emerges but as an author who is transported to a domain that is not always consciously understandable. Herein enters Sirc and takes us a little further, but his disengagement with academic writing leaves a gap in this effort to find a way to practice creative composition.

Hence, I find it more profitable for creative composition to turn to William E. Coles, Jr.—whom Sirc takes to be his yet another “model” compositionist—who places the author among the “selections” more actively, as someone who is in a search for

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6 “I love Ken’s spirit, then, but not always his letter,” he writes.
something that is not always clearly defined. On the outset Coles declares that writing as an art is not teachable, and so any effort to teach writing (and any effort to learn writing) is an effort “to make possible what no course can do” (11). According to him teaching writing as a “craft or a skill” is teaching writing as something else, not as writing. Hence, his argument that what we can consciously explain and teach, the craft part, is not fully writing—it does not involve the teaching of writing as a “creative process.” So, what a writer requires to do for a creative practice is to bring the parts of a puzzle together and get transported by them to the unknown. He explains his Humanities I course to his students thus: “It is a course in composing, selecting and arranging, putting together, and it could as well be called Puzzle and Problem Solving” (11). But he does not stop there. Explaining that writing is not just about using words but composing (“Our medium of communication will be largely the English language—largely, though not entirely, for you may wish to use colored pencils and crayons to make sketches or you may sometimes choose to express relationships in mathematical notation or with equation”), he argues that in the composing process, the author takes an unknown journey (11). He adds, “[W]e shall try to see how the composer, the problem solver, the writer in English goes about it” (11). The “we shall try to see” part is what makes writing and the teaching of writing more than teaching craft or skill, more than what can be explained. This is a true Happenings aspect of composing.

In this formulation, Coles’ composition course becomes different from what the general composition course as exposition is understood to be, a course “where the student writes book reports, essays on international affairs, research papers, reads everything from The Reader’s Digest to The Paradise Lost to William Golding and in general goes
on doing what he has already done in school,” and he asks his students not to “expect the usual course in expository writing (often seen as the polar opposite of ‘creative writing,’ whatever that phrase might mean) . . .” (11). Coles does not however mean to say that because this composition is opposed to traditional exposition, it is a creative writing course. But it is a course that relies on creative possibilities by assigning the author the roles that are not easily definable, and the author is expected to chart out his or her own paths.

Juxtaposition in creative composition as a Happening is, thus, a method of placing the author in a whirlwind of nodes and their possible connections that can transport him or her beyond what is possible by a conscious mind, allowing the author to work in a surrealist fashion. Happenings artist Allan Kaprow’s experience with professional “actors” helps to sum up this whole idea:

Since I knew very few actors, I did not go to them except when Julian Beck recommended a few, who immediately turned out to be useless to me because they wanted to act. They wanted to have stellar roles. They wanted to speak for the most part, and I utilized little verbiage in my work. And all the things which I suggested were quite contrary to their background. Even with the best of intentions, they were very self-conscious and awkward. But my friends, who were unaccustomed to acting, were quite capable because they sensed the origins of what they were doing in painting and felt that they were almost acting our places, spacings and images in an art form they knew. They did not have to worry about their ‘projectability,’ their verbal ability, their ‘onstageness,’ and so forth. (48)

The purpose of the Happening is getting into the “origins of what they were doing.” It is a process of getting deeper into the self in search of truths. In Ken Macrorie’s terms, it is a process of “losing yourself in trying to tell truths,” as is free writing (Searching Writing 2). The problem with “actors” here is that they are more into the rules of acting; the conventions and the craft. They are not into finding truths, hence creating an experience
that transcends what we can do consciously. In a Happening context, those structures become obstacles; they do not allow one to get to the “origins” of what he or she is doing.

To conclude, composition as a writing field has had ample theories, beginning as early as the sixties, that could have maintained the creative strain of composition through the decades when the mainstream composition got dominated by the epistemic form of composition. Composition’s need and its search for the creative can well be satisfied within theories that have already been developed or at some point in time have already been practiced in the field, and they can be theorized and explained in a Happenings theory of creative composition. The Happening provides composition required freedom from mechanistic methods of heuristics and at the same time helps the field from being oversimplified in the a few techniques of writing as a mere craft. The Happenings theory of creative composition provides the field a much needed framework within which to bring and practice writing pedagogies from those of Lutz and Macrorie to those of Sirc, Ulmer, Hawk, and Rice as creative composition, instead of looking to creative writing field and the genres practiced there searching for creativity.
Chapter Four
CONCLUSION: PEDAGOGICAL AND DISCIPLINARY IMPLICATIONS

Conflation of creativity and creative writing is a major flaw in the discourse on creative composition. It has resulted in unintended reliance of composition on creative writing genres at the cost of the two fields’ divergent guiding principles. Creativity is not genre specific. For composition to become creative, it needs to develop and rely on theories that are creative rather than on genres that are practiced in the field named creative writing, and the word “creative” in the term “creative composition” needs to free itself from its attachment to creative writing field. The notion of creative composition, which has evolved into creative writing composition with its reliance on creative writing field, serves better when it turns to the spirit of Creative Composition, the 1932 book I have discussed in chapter two.

The Happenings theory of creative composition reorients the focus from certain genres to strategies in a transdisciplinary atmosphere. Creativity in writing cannot be defined in terms of disciplinary practices though the genres that are practiced in the disciplines can. By imagining a creative space for the practice of writing, this theory helps redefine the notion of creative composition away from generic affiliation. In this chapter I discuss the following pedagogical and disciplinary implications of reconfiguring creative composition through the Happenings theory:

One, it will help us counter the notion that some genres are creative while others
are not. Creativity is not genre-based although it is true that some genres may allow more flexibility than others. It will have a direct effect on how our students view composition in relation to creative writing. So far a generally accepted notion is that creative writing is more fun while composition is dull because it doesn’t entertain creativity. The Happenings theory places composition in the domain of creative practice, and it will help us eliminate the biased perception about writing in composition.

Two, it will provide teachers of writing with more flexibility in terms of the content, classroom structure and writing practices as a whole by eliminating the debate whether to introduce literature in the composition class or not. In the context of composition’s indifference to (and sometimes conflict with) hermeneutics that literary studies practices and creative writing’s affiliation to literature, composition teachers are sometimes caught in the dilemma about the use of literary texts. Since Happenings promote the use of any and all materials available for a unique experience, there remains no distinction between the types of materials used in the composition class. It will be relevant in the context of creative composition because the more we remain open to possibilities the more creative our practices can be.

Three, it will help maintain composition studies’ disciplinary identity (as opposed to creative writing) while practicing writing creatively. It is an obvious fact that those who advocate for a creative approach to composition have been marginalized in the field because there’s always a suspicion surrounding this effort. This approach to creative composition in writing will show that even the genres in composition can be creative and so when we are talking about the creative we are not talking about a different field, creative writing, often understood in opposition to composition. We still remain
composition but practice it creatively, and there is no need to call for the erasure of the line that exists between composition and creative writing.

And four, this notion of creative composition will foreground our own writers in the field, and it builds on the research done in composition and in an interdisciplinary context; it will eliminate the need to look toward creative writing for creativity. In other words, it builds on what has already been achieved in the field of composition.

Overall, it will result in a richer pedagogical experience rooted in openness and creativity.

**Genre, Student Interest, and Creativity**

Toward the end of her career, and her life, Wendy Bishop published an article, “Suddenly Sexy: Creative Nonfiction Rear-ends Composition,” arguing that “there’s a real chance right now for letting the possibilities of creative nonfiction infuse, improve, and invigorate the teaching of composition” (259). In the article, Bishop calls for the integration of creative nonfiction into composition before it is too late and the division between the dichotomized thinking of “heart-based versus mind-based essays” becomes bigger. She argues, “Better to make the turn at the last possible moment than not at all” (259). Bishop believes that this particular genre—creative nonfiction, which is broadly thought to fall, and be practiced, under the domain of creative writing—can work as the much required form of writing to make composition something more than mind-based writing, more creative. She contends that this move to creative nonfiction is perhaps composition’s return to craft and style that was taken over by a new focus on disciplinary and cultural issues in the 1990s, and it will better prepare our students practice writing in
more creative ways.

In fact, although here she advocates for the integration of creative nonfiction into composition, she believes that all other genres of creative writing, even poetry, contribute to students’ ability to write essays, do composition (hence the need to erase the line). Highlighting the need “to get serious about creating new, fused pedagogies, ones that include rhetoric, composition, creative writing, and literature as partners in instruction,” she calls “those in composition to join those in creative nonfiction to develop a new and generous pedagogy for the genre” (“Suddenly” 273). While it may be generally said that any writing students do will contribute to their ability to write better, the research in the field has already opted out the notion that teaching poetry in the composition class is a good preparation for students to write an argumentative paper, or to do academic writing as a whole. The marginalized status of using literature in the composition class, despite some continued efforts to promote the integration of literature with composition, speaks of that reality. More importantly, this approach views writing in terms of genres alone—in this case, creative nonfiction as a genre practiced in the field of creative writing, which can be adopted and positively utilized in composition.

The genres, however, have no direct relationship with creativity except that some genres are more open-ended than others and allow more flexibility in terms of their structures. Genres by one definition are “ways of recognizing, responding to, acting meaningfully and consequentially within, and helping to reproduce recurrent situations” (Bawarshi and Reiff 3). That is to say, genres construct their own boundaries within which the elements involved in writing—the author, the audience, the text, and the context—are supposed to function to make meaningful utterances. Contemporary
understanding of genre as “social action” (C. Miller), as opposed to the traditional understanding of genre as a classificatory tool for the interpretation of text, places a text within the whirlwind of relationships and treats all texts in similar ways. Genres are such entities that they not only shape the expectations of the author and the audience but are also shaped by them. A genre within a rhetorical situation is a play that works in relation to all elements involved— influencing as well as being influenced by those elements. This understanding of genre does not make any distinction between a poem and an essay first year composition students write. A poem and an essay both become social functions within which we recognize them and respond to them.

To formulate an argument that a first year composition essay is less creative than a creative nonfiction piece that the same students may write is to assume that the notion of genre operates differently in the two different situations. When we claim that creative nonfiction is creative as opposed to a first year composition essay, we assume that the “social action” issue functions differently for them, and we in fact tend to define genre differently in the two situations. In other words, we associate certain characteristics to nonfiction that we do not do to a first-year composition essay. One such thing could be that creative nonfiction provides more flexibility for the author in terms of language use as well as the structure of the text than a composition essay. Here the issue is not about how we invent ideas and become creative but how we present information. They are two different genres and they function differently—they have different rhetorical situations—but they both are equally either supported or constrained by the elements of the particular genre category they fall into.

Amy Dewitt counters the argument that the notion of genre is a constraining force
rather than a creative one by claiming that “genre necessarily and simultaneously both constraints and enables writers and that such a combination of constraint and choice is essential to creativity” (138). If we take it and apply to two distinct genres practiced in the two writing fields—let’s say, an argumentative essay from composition and a poem from creative writing—we will see both genres functioning the similar way in terms of creativity. Both genres have their own demands, or constraints, and at the same time they allow possibilities in their own unique ways. The genre of the essay does not allow the imagination of poetry does not mean that the essay does not have its own possibilities, in this case it could be said to have the space to make connections and networks with new possibilities of meaning. My main argument here is that creativity does not reside in genres. Genres are an expression of the expectations of the rhetorical situation and whether they be poems, short stories, essays or any other kinds of writing, they come with both constraints and possibilities. As teachers of writing, it is our responsibility to help our students write within and beyond genres in ways they can see various possibilities available to them.

One problem with contemporary approaches to composition is that we have still let the notion that creative writing is creative while the rest is not rule over our students. Our students, without any knowledge about what writing in creative writing means, tend to assume that the genres that are practiced in the field are creative and those that they do in composition are not. Moreover, there is a misconception that the genres in creative writing provide more flexibility and so there is more fun than in writing they have to do in composition. Fran, Wendy Bishop’s student whom she quotes in the book she edited along with James Strickland, *The Subject Is Writing: Essays by Teachers and Students*,
summarizes this notion thus:

Is creative writing stuff that is done for fun, and composition stuff that the teacher make you do? That’s what it meant in elementary school, and later: Composition was writing about a specific topic, picked out by the teacher and had to be certain length and certain form. Creative writing was anything you felt like putting down on paper. (228)

Creativity is thus associated to fun stuff because students have more flexibility. It is something that they can do own their own, rather than in the direction of someone else, the instructor. What is missing hugely in this understanding is that creative writing hardly have had all this unrestricted flexibility and space. Understandably, there are rules of the genres practiced in the field; even within the genre of poetry there are various poetic forms and rules about the literary language. It may be true that students are allowed more flexibility in terms of the subject matter and such, but it does not mean that they are all free to practice their “creativity” the way they want and see it fit for them.

What the Happenings theory of creative composition does is discredit the notion that the genres practiced in composition do not have the flexibility of practice that the genres in creative provide. By approaching writing from beyond genre distinctions, Happenings make space for fun stuff in composition, where fun stuff does not mean less serious work but the work in which students can truly get involved and explore their selves, the ego formation aspect, in Freisinger’s language. It is true that writing in composition has more specific requirements, more practical objectives, but in terms of the invention process, students can be equally innovative in the invention process. It was one of the main concerns for Randall Freisinger when he discussed the notion of creative composition in the 1970s.

One thing that creative writing does but composition lacks, according to
Freisinger, is the motive. Creative writing gives students a motive to writing; they are motivated by their own desire to write, whereas in composition it is about the teacher’s motive. Students in composition tend to write for the teacher. The genres practiced in creative writing allow a possibility to explore their own selves and they write from their experiences. Based on Stephen Minot’s article “Creative Writing: Start with Student Motive” Freisinger argues that four of the six motives Minot discusses are directly applicable to composition: partially conscious therapy, entirely conscious therapy, childish delight in language, and ego formation (283). When students are given an opportunity to practice with these motives, they are more engaged and writing becomes their own.

Happenings, by allowing student writers to take control over their material, can provide that motive that is so required to practice writing as creative. In a Happenings setting, a teacher is not someone who instructs students as an all-knowing sage. Instead, he is there to give students surprises. Deemer asks the teacher to “shock” students. He writes, “Let him speak not from behind the podium, but from the rear of the room or through the side window. Let him discuss theology to Ray Charles records. As long as there is reverence for the student and the process of education, no shock is too great” (124, italics in original). And this applies equally to whether it be about writing an advocacy essay or a short story. Teaching a short story or a poem can be a rigid process if the instructor sticks to rigid structures as much as teaching writing an argument can be open-ended and fun and creative. Composition becomes creative not when creative writing genres are introduced to the composition class but when the environment allows students the possibilities which can transform their experiences. Practicing composition
in an environment of the Happening rids the discourse on composition worry about writing genres.

*Creative Composition and Literature*

The notion of creative composition also relates to the issue of introducing literature to the composition class. Although the issue of using literature in composition class and erasing the line between composition are two different lines of discourse—the first one being about using literary pieces for the practice of critical writing and the second one being about producing even literary pieces themselves—they are closely linked, and the issue of creative composition relates to the issue of integrating literature and composition. The debate is long and unresolved, and the Happenings theory of creative composition will help approach the issue from a quite a different perspective, going beyond whether to do to it or not by dismantling the binary of the literary and nonliterary when it comes to the issue of creativity.

The argument supporting the use of literature in the composition mainly builds on the Arnoldian notion of literature that it is best of what high culture produces. According to this thought, literature contains the best of what can and has been expressed in the language. So, introducing literature to composition class, we are giving our students the best models that they can imitate and become experts in language use. This position has however been challenged from various sides in the English department for decades, and the emergence of composition studies as an independent discipline has also to do with it. One major argument against the use of literature is that studying “great” pieces of literature and writing critical pieces on them does not necessarily prepare our students for
the kind of writing they are supposed to write in the university and in life after the university. The argument in fact questions very premise on which scholars support the use of literature in the composition class. One for instance, they start with questioning—why do we actually teach composition, and how does literature help in this endeavor?

Erika Lindemann in her classic essay “Freshman Composition: No Place for Literature,” the essay that ensued her famous argument with Gary Tate and others, begins making her case by stating that freshman composition “provide(s) opportunities to master the genres, styles, audiences, and purposes college writing” (312). She continues, “Freshman English offers guided practice in reading and writing the discourses of the academy and the professions. That is what our colleagues across the campus want it to do; that is what it should do if we are going to drag every first-year student through the requirement” (312). She thus defines the scope of freshman composition, and argues that teaching literature in the composition will only teach certain genres at the exclusion of so many others that the students need to learn at the university. Teaching literature and asking them to write critical essays on literature does not develop their writing skills required in many other areas. Lindemann—after Bartholomae and many others who believe the purpose of first year composition is to teach the academic language, the language of the university—argues that by focusing on teaching students only one genre, the genre of critical interpretation, will orient students to focus on so-called “great idea” of literature instead of on writing as a process.

Lindemann’s argument as a whole carries the spirit of composition as separate discipline that started coming into existence more concretely after the 1960s. With the advent of the process pedagogy, especially after the publication of Janet Emig’s *The
Composing Process of Twelfth Graders, which foregrounded the value of the process as opposed to the final product, the content became less important in the writing class. Writing activities became more important than the content because the focus was laid on the process, not on the final product. At the same time, an equal amount of value was accorded to student writing itself. It was the time when students also started to be regarded as writers and their writing started becoming models for practice. It naturally helped to dismantle the hierarchy of the high (literature) and the low (non-literature) writing. Once equal value was accorded to other forms of writing, literature became just one of the forms of writing, or one genre as Lindemann would call it. Interestingly, those who protest against the use of literature in freshman English do not see it even as one of the forms of writing that composition students might want and need to discuss. I can see that disciplinary politics has a lot to do with this position, but for now it is sufficient to state that the mainstream scholarship in the field still makes a strong case against the use of literature in composition. The mainstream composition course, following the process pedagogy, even though we have started talking about post-process pedagogy, tends to take the student though invention, draft, and revision process. A literature-based composition, according to Lindemann, misplaces the focus of freshman English.

The other side of the famous debate, Gary Tate, countered Lindemann’s position in the same issue of College English by arguing for a place for literature in freshman composition. His argument begins with a simple statement: “We have denied students who are seeking to improve their writing the benefits of reading an entire body of excellent writing” (317). Tate does not make any distinction between the kinds of writing that our students do. He does not worry about the so-called academic writing and any
special kind of discourse that composition students are supposed to learn as the apologists of the other side of the argument contend. For Tate, literature is a repository of excellent writing, and composition students will certainly learn how to read from reading those models of excellent writing. He argues, not allowing students to read literature, i.e. not using literature in composition class, is like “telling music students that they should not listen to Bach or Mahler” (317). Tate blames mostly the “Rhetoric Police”—the re-emergence of interest in Rhetoric after the 1960s—for the demise of the use of literature in composition and advocates for a more holistic approach to writing, going beyond academic writing, and making writing for life, not just for the academy. Peter Elbow argues that writing has to be for university as well for life—campus is short but life is long, he argues; more recently Sirc has made a moving case for the use of literature in his review essay “Resisting Entropy.” Commenting on Thomas Miller’s *The Evolution of College English*, Sirc writes, “To take such a prickly attitude toward literature, trashing it in favor of literacy (whatever it is), is incomprehensible (510). Sirc continues, “You know what’s great? Henry James if great. You want to teach students how to be more conscious writers? Show them Henry James—what he wrote, how he wrote, what he thought about writing, his technologies of composition, and how they impacted his prose. ‘Writing studies,’ you say? His is, indeed, writing worth studying” (510).

And the debate continues along the same two lines: one arguing that composition is supposed to prepare student for academic writing, writing for the university (Lindeleman, Bartholomae and others), and teaching literature will teach students to write only a particular genre—literary criticism—and that will not be enough for our students, and the other arguing that literature in fact contains what is excellent in writing repertoire and it
will teach students write for life as a whole. Understandably, the arguments from both the

camps are guided by certain assumptions about what composition is and what is should
be, and even though one side of the argument (that using literature is not the right way of
teaching composition) is more dominant—Tate quoted in the 1990s that only one fifth of
the composition classes perhaps used literature—the argument continues, and I see no
resolution to the argument in any foreseeable future; the resolution is not perhaps
expected, either. However, it is worth approaching the issue from a position that helps to
minimize the tension that exists in the argument. The Happenings theory of creative
composition provides a methodology for that.

The Happenings theory does not make a distinction between any content for that
matter. It is an approach that calls for making the use of what is available and what works
best or might work best to create an experience for the author. The argument about
literature or no literature is an argument about the content of the course that is in fact
“contentless,” though some scholars argue that its content is writing itself. English
composition does not have a content of its own. It is about helping students write well—
but yes, it is a vague concept and it means different things to different people. So, to
argue about whether to use literature or not is to argue about the content of the course.
We can take writing across the curriculum and writing intensive courses as an example.
We have been teaching students to write using content from engineering or from health
sciences. Writing intensive courses use their own content to teach writing. I do not mean
to say that those courses function in the Happenings setting, but it provides us an easy
analogy to discuss content for the writing class. What the Happenings theory does in such
a context is facilitate the use of any content that might help student writing creatively. In
fact, the method of juxtaposition encourages us to bring disparate items together and find meanings in their relationship or be moved by them, be carried away, and experience some truth, some meaning. Jamesian paragraphs and a student’s literacy narrative or a journal entry can work together in a Happening setting.

Issues about Disciplinarity

One of the important issues in the discussion of creative composition is the marginalized status of the discussion within composition studies. Wendy Bishop often complained of the marginalized position of the people like herself even though she once headed the CCCC. In his 2010 article, Doug Hesse concedes, “Teachers/ writers with feet in both composition and creative writing, including not only Bishop and Moxley but David Starkey, Hans Ostrom, and others, were often seen at the fringe of both fields—perhaps tolerantly or even compellingly so—not at their centers” (37). The scholars who work in the intersection of creative writing and composition have been taken as less committed to the disciplinary agenda for having their feet in two boats. It also happens so because, as discussed elsewhere in this dissertation, the disciplinarity of composition is maintained in opposition to creative writing—what is not “creative writing” is composition. At the same time, the politics of the English department, with literature at the center of the power dynamics, happens to keep the two writing fields in a constant battle—not only in terms of the kind of work they do but also in terms of the competition for resources and other administrative and political concerns. On the outset, it is more obvious that composition studies has had a long and sustained struggle with literature to carve out its disciplinary identity. Creative writing, being a field about writing literature,
has a closer affinity with literature—and in fact, creative writing began as a way of studying literature from inside. Creative writing would then work to contribute to the departmental goal set by literature, as opposed to what composition was and is meant to do although scholars, like Gerald Graff, have attempted to interpret composition within the framework of literature’s overall goal.

The “official goal of the literature department,” Gerald Graff says, was “the transmission of humanism and cultural tradition in the Matthew Arnold sense….” (3). But, he says, there were disagreements about “how that goal should be pursued” (3). Although composition was different from other projects in the English department itself—for instance, historical study or cultural interpretation of literature—it was made possible for composition to exist within the same premises of the humanist undertaking because it (composition) functioned just as a different cultural text but with the same ends. Graff maintains that all the cultural texts, including literature to creative writing and composition, constitute a “larger cultural conversation,” and there needs to be a close connection among them for the purpose of serving the overall goal of the English department. He contends, “The disconnection between the divisions that organize the literature department and the university tends to efface the larger cultural conversation to which works of literature refer. The cultural text tends to fall into the cracks separating periods, genres, and fields, criticism, creative writing, and composition” (10). Here, Graff treats different genres and different fields of study within the English department as different cultural texts that collectively contribute to the department’s larger goal. Composition and creative writing are such texts, which supposedly are, or were at one point, as responsible as literary studies in shaping how the humanist project would
sustain, and evolve.

This idea very much relates to Richard Ohmann’s claim long back in the 1970s that we, English, are a diverse field, but literature “holds our interests together in a loose confederation” (6). It may not be exactly true in the present context where composition has been so much developed away from literature—literature in the sense of imaginative literature—but this idea helps to explain why composition to creative writing—not to mention many other areas like cultural studies and folklore studies—are housed in English Department. Ohmann asks, “Literature is our subject matter, and this being so, an inquiry into the state of the profession must ask how we stand vis-à-vis literature: what are our responsibilities toward it, and how well are we speculating them?” (6). However, it is hard to justify composition’s “responsibilities” toward literature in the present context—and the question could in fact be dismissed as misplaced, though creative writing’s responsibilities and contributions could be easily justified.

This is one of the reasons why there has been less and less collaboration between the two writing disciplines. As I have argued, especially in the second chapter, the two fields maintain their differences primarily because their guiding principles come from two different arts, and going further, those differences get reflected on many practical forms that the scholars (and administrators) in both fields would like to maintain. There are instances where people from the two fields (though housed within the same English department) don’t even talk to each other. Those in creative writing (like those in literature) would think of composition as something related to practical, transactional writing, having nothing to do with more serious, aesthetically valuable literature. For those in creative writing, composition is a necessary evil (like those in literature) of the
English department. It is so well expressed even at the level of graduate students—those on creative writing would like to move on to teaching fiction or poetry from teaching composition. They teach composition because they have to; their love lies somewhere else. I know, it many not be case with everyone, but this is how it gets expressed in general.

Those in composition, on the other hand, look at creative writing as something that has no academic value and does not require the rigor of composition. (Here compositionists come closer to literature people). Creative writing for them is something that relates to emotion and imagination, not with research and fact. It is made up, and can be done in a lonely room of a writer. Since it does not involve research and the objectivity that writing in composition would require (as in any other university writing), it is less than university-worthy, academic writing. I am well aware that this is a generalization of the field that is so diverse and scholars have so different opinions (as it happens in the academia) but this is the dominant thought, and such generalizations help us look at the field in broad terms. Tim Mayers captures the spirits of the two fields thus:

Proponents of creative writing, a field that had its professional “beginnings” early in the twentieth century but did not flourish until the second half of the twentieth century, fought for prestige mainly by capitalizing on notions of the mystical, special, and rare nature of creativity. These professionals argued, both explicitly and implicitly, that creative writing is something only a few “gifted” individuals can do. They maintained that creativity is something impervious to analysis and defined their task as the recognition and nurturing of those rare “real writers” who might show up in creative writing classes. Proponents of composition studies, which emerged, according to various accounts, around the late 1950s and early 1960s, began to forge a place for composition as a scholarly discipline which like any other, not merely a collection of techniques for teaching required composition courses. Compositionists developed rich and varied theories of composing processes and also explored the relevance to composition theories from numerous other academic disciplines. Compositionists proved, in other words, that they
could “do theory” just as well as their colleagues in literary studies. Unlike creative writing, then, which attempted to distinguish itself as something different from an academic discipline, composition attempted to distinguish itself as a new kind of academic discipline. ((Re)Writing xiii, italics in original)

In such a context, the discourse calling to “borrow” from creative writing or erase the line between creative writing and composition is bound to raise questions among those who are committed to their disciplinary ideals. To advocate for the erasure of the line, standing on the soil of composition, is to fall short of acknowledging composition’s reliance on theories that creative writing would not care about or at the same time to dismiss the fact of composition’s belief in writing as something done by “gifted” individuals. I do not mean to say that Mayers’ characterization of the two fields holds the complete truth about them, though. A lot of changes are taking place in creative writing in the recent years, and a lot of focus has been placed on craft defined as something that can be taught. Also, the research component has been added to creative writing workshops, though in a different way than in composition classes. For example, many creative writing instructors require students to do research, meet the real people or visit the real places students write about. Creative nonfiction, more specifically, cashes on this aspect more than other genres. But still, there already are voices claiming that research has been overemphasized in creative courses (Sherman Alexie, for one), and it is true that creative writing is primarily imaginative writing. And even if research constitutes a part of creative writing, it features in very different way, it does not result in “academic writing,” and so it does not tend to be academic research.

At this point one might point out the need to borrow from other fiends, especially for composition since it is often regarded as a multidisciplinary field. Looking toward
creative writing for theories and pedagogies, in this sense, would be as natural as looking
to other fields of knowledge. However, it is equally essential to draw boundaries when it
comes to disciplinary identities. The issue of looking toward creative writing for theories
and pedagogies is an issue that relates to the issue of modes of inquiry in the field of
composition. How should our modes of inquiry be?

Since the 1963 convention of the CCCC called for a need to look at the
disciplinary identity of rhetoric and composition, scholars in the field of rhetoric and
composition have discussed it at various levels, from different angles, and at the heart of
those discussions has remained the modes of inquiry of the discipline. Writing in 1982,
Janet Emig attempted to explain a set of characteristic assumptions that could be applied
to determine the disciplinarity of a discipline. In the essay “Inquiry Paradigms and
Writing,” she mentions the governing gaze, a set of assumptions, a coherent theory or set
of theories, an allegiance to an intellectual tradition (history), and an adequate
methodology as the set of assumptions, and implicitly claimed that rhetoric and
composition abided by the demands of a discipline (65). She emphasizes inquiry as a
major distinguishing feature of rhetoric and composition. Janice Lauer also addresses the
issue of multimodal inquiry in her 1984 article “Composition Studies: Dappled
Discipline.” Lauer defines a new discipline as having “a special set of phenomena to
study, a characteristic mode or modes of inquiry, its own history of development, its
theoretical ancestors and assumptions, its evolving body of knowledge, and its own
epistemic courts by which knowledge gains that status” (20).

Although Lauer discusses many features of a discipline, her major concern is the
modes of inquiry of the new discipline. By calling rhetoric and composition a “dappled
discipline” she is referring to the modes of inquiry, the methodologies, that the discipline has borrowed, or rather adapted, from other disciplines. Both Emig and Lauer are conscious of the fact that the discipline, not having its own methods of inquiry, might need to struggle more to acquire its disciplinary identity. Writing in 1987, a year after Louise Wetherbee Phelps had written that “We are embarking on a quest for self-knowledge, searching for a keener sense of identity as a discipline” (182). William F. Irmscher showed his skepticism on the authenticity of the discipline based on the methodologies it employed. He writes, “Composition has established an identity of its own, not solely as a practitioner’s art, but as a subject for scholarly study” (81). Irmscher sees some problems within the field of study and that part of the problem lies in “the nature of research in composition” (82). He, who would prefer to remain within English departments, strongly objects to the idea of borrowing methodologies from other disciplines for the sake of establishing the new discipline. He agrees that the new discipline is being established but it is trying “on garments that are ill fitting” (84). He opines that “the solution lies in working toward a model on inquiry appropriate to our own discipline—composition as part of English studies—consistent with its values, supporting and enlightening it. Up to this time, we have essentially imitated other disciplines, borrowed without fully considering the context and bounds of our own discipline” (84).

Right from Janice Lauer to the present day critics, they tend to project the image of the discipline as the one that has been able to utilize different modes of inquiry, despite the fact that there are risks and hindrances in doing so. Janice Lauer warns that the diverse modes of inquiry can be “a terrain of quicksand for the unwary” (25). When
research methodologies from other disciplines are adopted, they may create confusion; it may be difficult to master diverse methodologies within a single discipline. In an effort to master diverse methodologies, and practicing interdisciplinary, the researchers in the new discipline may end up being nowhere.

Todd Taylor expresses this concern thus: “Unless composition studies is different from other disciplines, until it has a room of its own that is unlike others, it is either a subdiscipline or a nondiscipline” (143). However, Taylor spins it in another way and argues that multimodality is the modality of composition studies. “[T]he health of today’s academic disciplines,” Taylor agrees, “actually requires methodological diversity and interdisciplinarity rather than rigidity and insularity—much like a wide gene pool promotes immunity” (143). The interdisciplinarity of composition studies, however, has a lot to do with its opposition to literary studies’ hermeneutic enterprise and creative writing’s product focused orientation (a workshop, or instance, exists in already completed drafts). Crossing the line and adopting the methodologies that conducing to creative writing challenges certain assumptions based on which composition studies asserts its identity. In other words, not to see methodological differences between creative writing and composition is not to accept a separate disciplinacity of the field. Interdisciplinatrity cannot end up in self-annihilation. Its true that interdisciplinarity “increases our tolerance for variety of approach in our work, including non-theoretical research” (Taylor 149), but a discipline can function as a discipline only within its fundamentals. It is not to argue against methodological diversity and interdisciplinary approaches but to highlight that there are certain boundaries that require maintaining to function as a field. For composition to function as composition, it needs to maintain, and
has been maintaining, a certain differences from creative writing. As Gesa Kirsch maintains, a discipline needs to be “self-aware” of the epistemological issues, rather than gloss over them (247). Hence, erasing the line looks much less than a realistic ambition. What looks relevant at present is to respect the differences that the fields maintain and work within their disciplinary frameworks.

The Happenings theory of creative composition does not aim to erase line that exists between the two fields. This theory does not ask composition to become creative writing. In fact, it tends not to work through the line. Sure enough, the Happenings theory relies a lot on what is not consciously understandable and makes space for the surrealistic experience, but here the focus is still on how invention can be made to produce composition—transactional, academic writing (by academic writing I do not just mean at the level of language use but in the sense of speaking to and for the academic community in the related field). But in a different disciplinary context, it could also be a theory of creative writing. The Happenings theory thus allows the possibility for practicing creativity within disciplinary boundaries as necessary.

*Foregrounding Composition Practices*

The ultimate purpose of the Happenings theory of creative composition is still creativity and intention, but it does not rely on creative writing genres as such. Here the author is placed within a certain situation of juxtaposition and encouraged to go thorough the invention process. The Happenings theory of creative composition is a way of practicing composition creatively keeping it apart from creative writing. Instead of relying on creative writing, the Happenings theory of creative composition exploits the
art that makes us of techniques conducive to creativity. To rely on the creative writing field, especially the genres that are practiced in the field, is to rely on the fundamentals and the practices that are favorable to those genres. It has not only epistemological implications but also administrative and political.

This theory will help develop a pedagogy that will make it possible to see creative practices of writing outside creative writing. No wonder, creativity is not practiced in creative writing alone. Apart from composition, there are also venues where writing is practiced, like in journalism, education etc. The Happenings theory of creative composition will also help to correct the general misrepresentation of creative writing practices as belonging to the field of creative writing. As a whole, this approach will help establish a new venue for theories of creative practices of writing outside the field of creative writing. In fact, composition studies has now moved beyond freshman composition—although the fact still remains that composition studies is still largely defined by first year composition—to composing processes and strategies themselves. In the meantime, only argumentative essay does not define the first year composition. A lot of emphasis has now been given to different forms of writing, and with the ubiquity of digital technologies, composing has become an act that transcends traditional genre and methodological divisions. Theories of composing in the present context need to be trans-generic—especially in composition studies since this is the field that has shown more commitment and produced more theories and pedagogies in writing in general than other venues of writing practices—and become creative in ways that help the field become creative not defined by certain genes (unlike in creative field), but by the way they are practiced. For composition studies to project its image as a field of creative practice and
to make space for creative composing beyond any genre distinction, the Happenings theory of creative composition will provide a solid grounding. Hence, this theory will help keep the field apart from creative writing, and as a result those who discuss creativity in composition will not have to be attached to creative writing and hence assume a marginal status. At the same time, this theory will help composition studies develop practices that will also be conducive to practicing writing beyond genre distinction, something composition studies is moving toward by not being defined just by first year composition, by going beyond it and addressing issues that relate to writing as a whole.

This will, in turn, foreground our own writers in the field since it builds on the research and pedagogy already available in composition, and it will eliminate the need to look toward creative writing for creativity. It will encourage us to study our own writers, or rethink inventing the university (Bartholomae), so that what we are appropriating and inventing is the language we already engage with. It is the last but an equally significant implication of working through the Happenings theory of creative composition.

English composition has over time developed a distinct language of its own. This language builds on Harvard’s move to introduce the entrance exam, its president Charles W. Eliot’s aim of preparing good citizens, the Committee of Twelve’s definition of composition as the art of writing in the English language, the process pedagogies, epistemic rhetoric as well as the idea of teaching the language of the university. Especially after the 1960s, with the re-emergence of rhetoric within the English department and the theoretical basis it provided to composition, there began to develop a language that defines composition in terms of the context in which writing happens, the
rhetorical situation. This very notion helped to develop ideas of discourse communities and, combined with the initial objective of freshman composition, there emerged the notion of the writing for the university, the academic writing, writing meant for a particular audience within the context of the university. The notion of academic writing is thus closely linked to what Harvard did in the first place by introducing freshman composition course more than one hundred years ago.

But then, the language could not be confined to the language of the university alone. The university could not remain outside the bounds of social needs and responsibilities. Hence the notion of writing for life (Macrorie, Elbow etc.), and of course the whole issue of literacy and composition class as a “unique site of democratic politics and pedagogical commitment” (Strickland 6). To teach writing in composition is to position oneself in the dynamics of all these histories and methodologies—sometimes conflicting.

The contemporary discourse on creative composition attempts to correct the gap in composition—that it is dry, that it is not creative, that it is no fun, that it is rigid—by finding solutions outside composition studies’ domain, which is not just another area of study but an area that helps to define composition in the negative. Although it looks so natural to think of them as having similar goals—teaching writing, since we have already erected the walls by defining their own territories and since those very walls are an essential to maintaining the identity of each field, it does not look natural to attempt to introduce one’s language to the other. The desire to resort to the term “creative” from the field of creative writing does not address composition’s disciplinary expectations.

What we lack is not a creative strand but the misplaced emphasis, or rather the
neglect of a strand that would have saved composition from being perceived as something opposed to what is thought to be creative and fun. The Happenings theory of creative composition will help us reorient our attention to theories and pedagogies that make space for the creative practice of composition. It means that the scholars and theorists whose works have received little or no attention in the era of epistemic composition, as Sirc and Hawk have shown it, make a equally convincing case in the field of composition.

In this context, Ken Macrorie and William E. Coles would equally constitute the part of our composition pedagogy and so would Geoffrey Sirc and Byron Hawk. Equally important in the pedagogy would be people like Gregory Ulmer, Victor Vitanza and Jeff Rice in their “unconventional” methods of invention. These and other scholars provide an alternative to rigid, structured, museum-like structures of the composition and show the possibilities outside those structures for creative practice of writing. In fact, I can see a possibility of bringing all the pedagogical strands in composition that support the Happenings structure to constitute an alternative pedagogy in composition studies for eventually creating a richer pedagogical experience.
Appendix

Wendy Bishop’s Formulation of Transactional Workshop

**Introduction to Literature or (many) Writing with Literature (literature-based composition) Classes:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15%</td>
<td>Exploratory</td>
<td>reader-response journals, position papers, drafts of interpretations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80%</td>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td>biographical essays, critical essays, book reviews, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5%</td>
<td>Imaginative</td>
<td>imitations, creative writing options</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Rhetoric- or Language-based Composition Courses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20%</td>
<td>Exploratory</td>
<td>process journals, exploratory drafts, in-class freewrites, brainstorming, or invention activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75%</td>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td>essay modes: descriptive, narrative, expository, argumentative, research papers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5%</td>
<td>Imaginative*</td>
<td>imitations, creative writing options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(*Some composition programs require that no creative writing be allowed in composition classes.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Traditional Creative Writing Workshop**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Exploratory</td>
<td>suggestion to keep a writer’s notebook, reading notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0%</td>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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90%  
*Imaginative***
poetry
fiction
drama
formal imitations
(***Often the imaginative writing is limited by class to a single genre.***)

Fig. 1 Writing in three types of English classes

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**Suggested Introductory Creative Writing Workshop**

30-40%  
*Exploratory* (personal focus)
Writer’s journal or notebook with required and free entries
frequent in-class writing opportunities that may or may not be developed into portfolio drafts
exploratory drafts

20-30%  
*Instrumental* (offers metacognitive [MC] and metalinguistic [ML] analysis opportunities)
craft presentations
introductions to writers (class members share reviews of professional writers’ work)
Why I Write essays (MC)
How I Write essays (MC)
Writing Is Like essays (MC and ML)
summary of Personal Beliefs about poetry (poetics) or fiction or writing in general (MC & ML)
writing process analysis—cover sheet or essay that accompanies a piece of work and discusses the process of making a piece of writing (MC & ML)

30-40%  
*Imaginative* (includes all categories of “creative” writing)
poetry
fiction
drama
inter-genre forms like prose poems, sketches, dialogues, etc., which often develop from invention exercises
(final writing portfolio develops out of genre and inter-genre explorations.)

Fig. 2. Writing in the transactional workshop

(Source: Bishop, *Released Into Language* 35-37)


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PART II

The Last Monarchist: Stories from Nepal

(Creative Writing, Fiction, Dissertation)
Baneshwor Chowk in Kathmandu was already crowded early that morning. In the southeast corner a middle-aged widow and her teenage daughter served tea to a group of bystanders who wondered about King Gyanendra’s fate. In the southwest corner a couple of street vendors sold cheap Chinese shoes, and a few street children entertained themselves by listening to one Laxman Khadka, whose eccentric rants sometimes made more sense than any big-shot politician’s speech. The northeast corner was empty, though; the police had embargoed that area for the security of the Birendra International Convention Center. In the northwest corner were more street vendors selling cigarettes, chewing tobacco, cell phone cases, leather belts that they claimed were made of airplane tires, newspapers, and books. A curious crowd of people formed a semicircle around a vendor’s display and read newspapers free of cost.

Before he thrust himself into the crowd, Mr. Dharmadatta Kattel glanced at the people intent on reading and reassured himself that he was not one of them.

Mr. Kattel knew the people well. They were mostly ambitious but despairing young men who first scanned through the display headlines and then picked and read one item after another as long as they wanted. Some of them bought a newspaper or something before they left, but most of them simply read, sighed in despair, said that nothing good
was going to happen in the country, returned the items to their places, and sneaked away.

The vendor would pretend not to have seen them, hoping that they would buy from him some other day.

Mr. Kattel stooped over the display, most of which he felt was aberrant and unacceptable for a country blessed with the gift of the monarchy. In the front row were party-sponsored tabloids and fortnightlies that had mushroomed after the infamous palace massacre of 2001. Most distinct among them were Maoist propagandist periodicals such as *Kranti*, The Revolution; *Nawa Yug*, The New Era; and *Biplav*, The War, which touted the “success” of the so-called “People’s War.” Their covers showcased Maoist assaults on army camps and glorified their guerilla marches in the mountains. Then in another row were liberal magazines like *Nepal* and *Himal*, which mostly published fabrications on the new king’s arrogance, Maoist atrocities, democracy, press freedom, and political parties’ inability to lead the country—they knew what would sell well at moments of national crisis. In other rows were books like Marden’s *How to Get What You Want*, Gorky’s *My Apprenticeship: My Universities*, Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Devkota’s *Muna-Madan*, Wagle’s *Palpasa Café*, Gandhi’s autobiography, Che’s life story, Sangraula’s book on Dipendra Shah—the dead crown prince accused of patricide, matricide, fratricide, regicide, and suicide—and Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Then there were *filmi* magazines and how-to books—how to pass the driver’s license test, how to cure your chronic constipation, and how to become a successful executive of a multinational company.

Within arm’s reach of the vendor were daily newspapers, all but state-run *Gorkhapatra*, highlighting the four-day national strike called by an alliance of the major
political parties and set to start the following day. Some of them reported that the strike could continue until the king reinstated the parliament he’d dissolved four years before and handed over his sovereign power to the political parties, including Maoist rebels.

Mr. Kattel read the headlines with a heavy heart. It was disgraceful that no one in the country seemed to have any reverence left for the monarchy. Even the so-called democratic parties were tarnishing the king’s image and weakening his authority at the whim of Maoist terrorists. How could the country be saved by vilifying the savior, the glorious monarch?

Mr. Kattel found immense relief in King Gyanendra’s formidable portrait in *Gorkhapatra*. There was at least this daily to respect the centuries-old heritage of the monarchy. The headline read that His Majesty was committed to bringing all errant political parties onto the right track. Mr. Kattel bought a copy of the state-run daily and slinked off.

Once a few meters away from the crowd, he mused on how much he loved the king and the country—the crowd at the square knew nothing of that love. He prayed that the king would enact his supreme authority to save the country. His legs trembled with impatience at the thought of getting home and reading the news in detail. He quickened his strides.

Just as he turned left to Thapagaon from the Baneshwor Plaza, he heard a slogan: Long Live Democracy! He halted. Then, down the road, he saw a protest rally proceeding toward him, demanding the restoration of democracy. Mr. Kattel thought about turning back; the first thing that came to his mind was the newspaper that he held so dearly. Who read *Gorkhapatra* those days? He tried to imagine what could happen if one of the
protestors wanted to take a look at it. The big portrait of the king, his resolute stature, and the uncompromising headline. He panicked. The protesters could even ask him where he worked. How would they treat to him if they discovered he was a Palace employee? Would they let him go if they found he’d spied against political parties throughout his life? As the questions showered him, he felt his underclothes soak with sweat. *Rupa, Ye Aramka Mamala Hai*, Rupa, it’s a matter of comfort—he faintly remembered a huge billboard with an Indian actor advertising Rupa brand underclothes. His favorite brand. Indian, always good! Amidst the random images that came to his mind, he again thought about turning back and running away. “No, that would be stupid,” he said to himself. Before he could decide on his next move, a mass of protesters had already blocked his way.

“Long Live Democracy!”

“Reinstate the Parliament!”

“We Want Press Freedom!”

The newspaper fell from his hand. As the mass advanced toward Baneshwor Chowk, he saved himself by pressing his body against the brick wall of a butcher’s shop he visited every Saturday for goat meat.

After the last protestor went past his pitilessly trampled newspaper, Mr. Kattel took a long breath. He collected saliva, opening and closing his mouth as if he were chewing something odd, wet his lips, and swallowed. He bent down and picked up the newspaper like somebody stealing a wallet that had just been dropped. He pressed the newspaper under his arm like before and walked away nervously.
Mr. Kattel returned to his senses only after he found the kings’ pictures hung on his bedroom wall intact. On the wall facing his bed were three kings’ family pictures that he worshipped every morning. On the left was King Mahendra. Then there was King Birendra at the center, and on the right was King Gyanendra. All with their queens. The pictures were smeared with vermillion, and their frames were trimmed with garlands. On the floor right below the pictures was a narrow table with more pictures, smaller but well decorated, of the royal family. There were also items, including a packet of Shiv-Parbati brand incense sticks and a box of Damaru brand matches, which he needed every morning to perform rituals.

Feeling safe, he turned to the newspaper. Unfortunately, its front page was hardly readable, and the king’s picture was badly smudged. He glimpsed the pictures on the wall with a sense of guilt. Although he had prayed for the kings before setting out that morning, Mr. Kattel felt like worshipping one more time in front of King Gyanendra’s portrait for the monarch’s long life and his unhindered reign in the country. Had his boy not appeared with a cup of morning tea, he’d have struck the match, lit an incense stick, waved it in front of the king’s portrait for a few seconds, and closed his eyes to make his wishes.

“Do you know how long the protest will last, Kanchha?” he asked the boy, reaching out for the teacup. He wanted to ask Shanti, his wife, the same, but he knew, to his confusion, she hardly entertained such questions.

“What’s a protest, sa’p?” asked the boy in return, standing upright as Mr. Kattel had trained the eleven-year-old to do.

“Go, get lost! You won’t understand it.” Mr. Kattel frowned.
For the first time in his life, Mr. Kattel suspected that something was irreversibly wrong in the country. During the 1979 student uprising, he had been deployed to spy against student activists in Pokhara. His reports had led to the killing of two students in the tourist city. But he had thought that it was not a big deal; those revolting kids didn’t know the rule of law, and so they had to die. The world was okay then. The so-called People’s Movement of 1990 seemed to be a little more disturbing, but he knew that it was not going to shake the country, either. He would be assured of it every time he met with a second lieutenant at the Palace. A few people had died, and everything had returned to normal within a few months. The world was perfectly okay. But now the situation looked different. The whole country seemed to be rising. What could he do? He wished he were in charge of the army, or the police at the least. That he was nothing more than a mere electrician at the Palace, especially after King Birendra’s murder, made him feel helpless. He panicked over his inability to act despite his reverence for the monarchy and his responsibility toward the king. A sense of guilt drowned him when he recalled how the Palace had taken care of him at a time when his father had shown no sign of returning home from the Indian city of Haryana, where, they said, he worked as a watchman at a rice mill.

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According to his version of the story, King Mahendra was granting audience to local people during one of his district visits. As one of the onlookers, the Kattel boy’s mother stood at a corner, amazed that the king looked like a man! Her eyes rarely blinked as the fortunate villagers offered him flowers and garlands that his ADC received for him. Suddenly, the five-year-old boy, perching on his mother’s waist, shouted out of
excitement, “Raja!” The restrained laughter of a few villagers filled the air. By the time it subsided, the king had already made a decision.

Two days after the king left, two army officers ran an errand to Laxmi Kattel’s; His Majesty the King had granted her work at the Palace. When she wondered what she could do in the Royal Palace, the officers first said she was not expected to ask any questions—after all, she was moving to the Palace—then explained that there were numerous jobs, including taking care of children, assisting in the kitchen or garden, and looking after cows. The following day, mother and son were run to Kathmandu. The villagers said Laxmi Kattel was the luckiest woman in the entire world.

But Laxmi died after four years in a corner of the Palace stable. A few weeks after her death, Dharmadatta heard other women gossiping that Laxmi was the most beautiful woman in the Palace. One woman even said that she had never seen as beautiful a woman in her life and she didn’t expect to see one in the future. Another added that the most beautiful women would die the earliest. He wanted to ask why, but everyone in the Palace was taught not to ask questions. He thought she must have been very sick, incurably sick, because he also heard the women saying that the king himself was saddened by her death.

Like many other boys in the Palace, he was supposed to join the Royal Nepal Army. Unfortunately, the boy contracted jaundice right after his mother’s death, leaving him fragile for the rest of his life. In addition, he was an epileptic. So, the only option for him was to work as a domestic helper for an army officer.

When he was eighteen, Major Vishnu B. Khadka, for whom the boy worked, enrolled him in electrical training. A year later the Kattel boy reentered the Palace as Mr.
Kattel, the electrician. After three years, Major Khadka helped him get married and settle down in Baneshwor, then a sparsely populated area known as a haven for jackals and marijuana consumers. The same year, 1972, King Mahendra died of a heart attack.

Mr. Kattel’s mother was gone, and so was the king, but Mr. Kattel felt more attached to the Palace than ever. Mr. Kattel would recall much later in life, not without regret, that it felt as if he existed solely through his service to the monarchy.

Working at the Palace as an electrician meant more than being just an electrician. Mr. Kattel would also serve the Palace as a member of secret service personnel, like most other Palace employees. His job was comprised of furnishing the Palace authorities with information about the people in his area who he thought might act against the king’s authority. This undertaking had become essential in the context of King Mahendra’s imposition of the one-party Panchayat system in 1961 and the spreading of communist influence in various parts of the country. But the practice had continued until King Gyanendra replaced his brother, King Birendra, after the Palace massacre, years after the Palace had started collaborating with communists.

Mr. Kattel would claim later that he had suspected the massacre might mean much bigger changes than many people had realized. One distinct sign was that the Palace no longer valued people like him. He continued to serve the Palace, but no one even bothered about his performance as an electrician, forget about any intelligence work. It was obvious to Mr. Kattel that the new king, Gyanendra Shah, didn’t think about him the way his father Mahendra or his brother Birendra had done. Mr. Kattel even doubted whether King Gyanendra recognized him anymore, though he had worked as the prince’s young accomplice on many occasions.
But it all mattered very little; Mr. Kattel worshipped the kings’ portraits every morning, as few other Nepalese still did, with the belief that the king was Lord Vishnu’s incarnation.

*

That afternoon Mr. Kattel saw on television dozens of professionals—including journalists, lawyers and doctors—had been arrested from Baneshwor that morning while attempting to enter a restricted area. It pleased him, and he wished that the impending strike would fail miserably.

The following morning he decided not to go on his regular morning walk. For Shanti’s sake, he thought. Who knows whether the Maoists are ready with guns? He recalled how a police chief had been killed three years before while on a morning walk with his wife. He would not take that risk. He’d rather spend the morning praying for the longevity of the royals.

When Kanchho entered the room with morning tea, Mr. Kattel was still standing in front of the pictures and murmuring prayers, his eyes half closed. He changed his tone and asked the boy without looking at him, “Kanchha, do you know who I’d kill first if I could?”

“Why to kill, sa’p?” the boy responded with boyish curiosity.

“I’d kill that bastard Girija,” said Mr. Kattel, who then began to name-call all the party leaders he could recall. He was unaware of when the boy left the room, when he finished his tea, and when he fainted. When he regained consciousness, his wife was soaking his forehead in cold water and pleading with him not to die.
Shanti had been living for the last thirty-four years in a constant fear that her husband could die any moment. And her fear was legitimate. On the night they were married, Mr. Kattel was trying to flirt with his new bride as she hid her face behind an embroidered shawl. All of a sudden, the young man lost his sensuous smile and stared at her as if he were a statue. Before she could figure out what he was doing, he fell on the floor, foam oozing from his mouth. The new bride rushed out wildly, throwing away the shawl meant to cover her face for the first few days after marriage. The relatives and neighbors who sat chatting in the yard swarmed in and searched for a leather shoe when a next-door neighbor informed them that Mr. Kattel had epilepsy. Some started fanning him, a lady put a piece of wet cloth on his forehead, and a neighbor persistently held the shoe over his nose. After Mr. Kattel regained consciousness, he was ashamed of the disease rather than worried about it. He spent the honeymoon night struggling to convince his bride that the disease would not kill a person even though it sometimes gave one a little trouble.

“No, it’s not that damn thing; I am fine,” he said at last. Shanti continued to soak his forehead in wet cloth, as she shed silent tears hidden behind her shawl.

“Krishnaman was here this morning, again,” she informed him after her eyes were dry.

“That pig also needs a good lesson. What the hell was he saying?”

“He was saying that the whole country is rising, and even God cannot save the king. He threatens that anything can happen if you don’t quit your job—that loafer!”

“Was it his fucking father who gave me the job? All those rascals need to be taught. All those uncultured rascals!”
Shanti was uncertain about what she wanted to say; she stopped, even though she’d already opened her mouth.

Mr. Kattel looked out the window. A gush of dark-brown smoke rose high in the sky; the protesters had already started burning tires at the heart of Baneshwor Chowk. There was no sound of any vehicle, no sign of normal life, but an undistinguishable noise, like thousands of throats hollering together. As the couple would later watch on television, demonstrators were shouting slogans for democracy as they rallied in the capital city. No shop was allowed to open; no vehicle was allowed to move; no business was allowed to operate. The whole country was forced to a standstill on the first day of the strike, April 6, 2006.

Mr. Kattel spent the first two days watching television and listening to Kantipur FM, hoping to hear about police firing, killing of the protestors, and withdrawal of the strike. On the third day, the government imposed a curfew on different parts of the country. However, the number of demonstrators continued to increase day after day as they disobeyed curfew orders in and out of Kathmandu. On the fourth day, the Seven Party Alliance announced that it would continue the nationwide strike for an indefinite period. The following morning, Mr. Kattel did not feel like looking at King Gyanendra’s face for the first time in his life.

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The ninth day into the nationwide strike, the country was crippled by continuous curfew orders in all major cities. Mr. Kattel spent most of his time locked in his bedroom. For the last two days, his wife and Kanchho had heard him repeating whom he would kill first. In his fit, he now announced that he would kill King Gyanendra himself.
“Why, sa’p?” Kanchho asked, standing readily in front of him.

Mr. Kattel told him how great and how generous King Mahendra and all other kings had been. They traveled to rural villages, listened to their people’s woes, acted as everybody’s guardians. The monarchy was a true blessing for the country.

Mr. Kattel’s eyes filled with tears. And it seemed to confuse the boy: How could a man weep? Tears filled the boy’s eyes, too.

“The king loves you,” Mr. Kattel said, and embraced the boy.

When Kantipur FM reported that the curfew had been lifted for two hours in the morning to allow people out, it occurred to Mr. Kattel that he had to run to the Palace at once. He wanted to talk to the secret service officers about the situation outside the Palace. He wanted to counsel the king about the need to teach the unruly protestors a lesson. He wanted to lead soldiers out of the Palace and overrun the protestors and force them to hide in the dirty alleys of the city. It would be an opportunity for him to prove that he was still useful to the king and the country.

As he mused at the possibilities and struggled to control his agitation, his wife appeared with a grocery bag. It was, after all, a grocery break. Mr. Kattel pressed the bag under his arm and left, Kanchho following him silently.

“Sa’p, let me hold the bag,” Kanchho said, wanting to be a dutiful servant. But Mr. Kattel would not listen to him. The boy quietly followed his sahib, looking for an opportune moment to ask him again.

“Sa’p, bag!” he asked after a few minutes.

But Mr. Kattel would not listen to him yet. As if he were under a spell, he continued to walk, unaware of the boy following him. Thinking that it was disloyal to allow his
master to carry the bag, the boy approached Mr. Kattel and snatched it. Mr. Kattel made a swift one-eighty turn, his elbow swinging and hitting the boy on his left temple. The boy’s head struck a brick wall, and he fell in the alley, unconscious. Only then did Mr. Kattel realize that he had hit Kanchho. He squatted at the boy’s side, held him in his arms, and started asking him to rise and walk.

The boy would not respond, though. Before Mr. Kattel could figure out what had actually happened, a group of protestors rushed into the alley, following by a dozen policemen charging with batons. Mr. Kattel dropped the boy and watched absentmindedly as protestors and policemen ran over Kanchho.

The commotion of the alley came to a sudden halt when someone realized that a little boy was being trampled. Holding the boy up, one of the protestors shouted,

“Motherfucking Gyaney is a murderer. He’s ordered the killing of even children!”

“Down with Police Atrocities!” the protestor shouted, and the rest repeated after him.

“Down with Monarchy!”

“Gyaney, the Robber, Leave the Country!”

The slogans started repeating.

“He’s my son,” Mr. Kattel said, and motioned for Kanchho. But the protestors would not pay him heed.

“The boy has become a martyr for democracy,” said one. “We will avenge the murder.”

“Down with Police Atrocities!”
They kept shouting slogans with renewed energy, and the police melted away. As if everything had been preplanned, the protestors headed to Baneshwor Chowk with their newfound martyr.

The news that the police had killed a child early in the morning spread like a fire during drought in the Baneshwor area. Within minutes a big crowd gathered in front of Prashanti Sweet Shop. Angry young men and women shouted slogans, declared Kanchho a child martyr time and again, vowed to take revenge, discussed further steps, and disappeared with the boy when it was time for the return of the curfew.

Mr. Kattel decided to return home only because he had no other place to go to. He’d briefly considered reporting to the police, but he had lost faith in them—there was no law and order in the country. Avoiding eye contact with soldiers, who he feared might order him to disappear from the road that very moment, he continued to drift away.

Once he was home he set fire to the pamphlets and flags that the protestors had forced him to grab. Then he told his wife that the protestors, who claimed that the police had killed the boy, had actually killed him themselves.

Shanti did not react, as if she hadn’t heard anything or she didn’t believe what Mr. Kattel had said. Mr. Kattel spent hours struggling to convince her that it was not his fault and that everything would be fine with time. He hoped that Kanchho might not have actually died, and the protestors might have taken him to a hospital.

Mr. Kattel and Shanti spent that night and the following day watching Kanchho hailed as a brave child martyr on television. The following evening Mr. Kattel said that he saw only ghosts all around him; he wanted to turn in early.
At midnight he woke up. It was all silent—dead silence, as the protestors would call it. He looked out the window. The night sky was overcast. The weak moonlight could hardly penetrate the thick smog of the Kathmandu sky, but it was not all dark, either. Mr. Kattel made sure that Shanti was asleep, opened the door like a skilled thief, and went into the kitchen. He took a jar full of water and went out. He didn’t realize that Shanti followed him to see what he was up to.

As soon as Mr. Kattel crossed the road outside his house, he splashed water on the wall and started wiping it frantically. He splashed water again and wiped down the wall relentlessly. After a while, he stopped and stared at the wall. The slogans were still clearly visible, and a party flag still mocked him. He hated the slogans and the party flag, and he hated Krishnaman who’d written them in front of his eyes. He again splashed water and started wiping the wall.

Shanti couldn’t resist it any more. She begged, touching his feet, “What’s happened to you, hajoor? They’ve written with permanent paint; how can you wash it with water? Please, let them do whatever they want. Let’s go inside, hajoor. What will happen if they see us?”

Mr. Kattel followed her into the house like an innocent child, hoping that no one had seen them.

* 

But a group of local boys saw him peeling posters off the shutter of Manjushree Book Shop on the way home during yet another grocery break. The boys instantly captured him and ran him to Baneshwor Chowk where the usual crowd enjoyed the freedom they had
during those curfews. When others saw the young men holding an aged man by his collar and roughing him up, they immediately identified him as a “Palace-fed dog.”

“Is that kukkur going to save the king?” asked one.

“Give him a punch, give him a good punch,” yelled another.

“What did this saley do?” yet another asked.

Before the young boys could explain, Mr. Kattel received a few blows that forced him to fall on the ground. A gentle-looking, fifty-five-year-old man joined his hands pleading with teenagers for mercy. No sound would come out of his mouth, but his beseeching eyes looked more and more pitiful, and his lips twisted, revealing his pain, both physical and emotional. He had never thought that a man like Mr. Kattel would ever have to face such fate. He always thought good of the people; he always thought good of the country and the king—yes, that’s what he thought.

As the boys discussed further action, a group of riot police appeared from nowhere to take preemptive action. The boys threatened to chop off their victim’s hands and then head, in that order, if he tried peeling off the posters a second time, and left the scene. Two army vehicles sped to Koteshwor from Babarmahal, announcing that it would soon be the time for yet another curfew. The crowd slowly dispersed, and Baneshwor Chowk looked like a deserted town within half an hour.

Back home, Mr. Kattel refused to talk with his wife. He had never been insulted by such an uncivilized mob before. He had a life of royalty with its own dignity. King Mahendra had seen something in him when he was still so young. The Palace had taught him culture. He played with late King Birendra and King Gyanendra as a child. He knew what posture to maintain in front of the king and how to dine at the Royal banquet. He
knew the Palace language and courtesy. Mr. Kattel’s body melted, and he flowed down the gutter of utter humiliation. He refused to eat.

That evening, April 24, he saw on television that a sea of people had taken to the streets in Kathmandu. It was a sea; one could not see a man or a woman but a sea, a sea with hundreds of thousands of red flags floating on its surface. The reporter claimed that one and a half million people had taken to the streets that day. One and a half million people! More than half the population of the capital city, as they claimed. All peacefully! The government was waiting for a single incident of violence so that it could massacre the protestors, but even the Maoists complied with the principle of peaceful demonstration.

Mr. Kattel didn’t faint, but he started talking a little too much. He said that he was not responsible for Kanchho’s death, and he was going to be the next king of the country. Consoling his wife, he said everything would be fine within a few days. “It’s only a matter of time, Shanti, only a matter of time. No need to worry; everything will be fine,” he kept saying.

Late that night Shanti coaxed her husband to bed and coddled him to sleep like a little child. She thought the sun would never rise again, and she slept on the floor.

*  
The sun rose the following morning. Afraid to wake her husband, Shanti got up quietly and went to the kitchen. She started her daily routine by warming water that she had been advised to drink first thing in the morning to cure her chronic gastritis. While waiting for the water to warm, she remembered her son, who would now be thirty-one had he not died right after his eleventh birthday. He might have taken care of his father and helped
his mother at this difficult moment, she mused. Then she poured the lukewarm water into a stainless steel glass. The water this morning tasted very unusual, she thought, and she threw up in the ceramic kitchen sink. Streaks of blood smeared the sink even after the vomit had drained down the pipe.

Mr. Kattel opened his eyes and felt sorry for his wife. She often forced herself to spew bile in the morning. It sounded painful, but he could not share her pain. That he could not do anything for her made him feel guilty almost every morning. Doctors had said that hers was a chronic problem that had also to do with their only son’s death. It was not only a physical but also a mental problem, they had told him. He hoped that the physical aspect of the problem would go away one day, but he never knew what would happen with the mental one. Although he could hardly do anything, he hollered as a sign of concern.

Shanti felt that the kitchen floor was falling down and that she was sinking with the floor. She wanted her husband to go to sleep at once; she wanted him to go on sleeping and sleeping so that he would stop talking nonsense. How could she tell anyone that her husband had lost his mind? Oh, what a shame! she thought, and kept alert to hear if Mr. Kattel was talking anymore. No, there was nothing. *He must have fallen asleep again.*

“Shanti.” Mr. Kattel appeared at the kitchen door.

“Are you okay? Why didn’t you sleep some more? Everything will be okay!”

“But it’s already nine. Why do you want me to sleep more?”

“No, no; it doesn’t matter. There is no work to do. Please go and sleep. Everything will be fine.”

“But what’s happened to you? Is everything okay?”
Shanti looked at his face. He appeared to be normal.

“I remembered our son today,” she said.

Both observed a moment of silence.

“Shanti, I’m going to the Palace,” Mr. Kattel announced when she started cleaning the sink stealthily.

“Why would you want to go there?” she asked, splashing water on the sink wall.

“How can you go out during this curfew?”

“I’ll request the army,” he said, and waited. Why did he want to go?

“I want to have an audience with His Majesty!” Mr. Kattel continued.

“But will His Majesty grant you an audience?” asked Shanti, attempting to sound normal.

Mr. Kattel was not sure, but still he insisted that he wanted to have an audience with the king.

Then the couple was distracted by an intermittent sound in the distance. It was not the usual protest slogans. Very soon they knew that it was celebration. People clapped, played drums, and blew trumpets. The king had given in to the people. Mr. Kattel’s Rupa brand underclothes were soaked in sweat within a few seconds once again.

“The country has gone to hell, and so has the king!” Mr. Kattel whined.

A jubilant mass, beating drums and chanting victory songs, appeared outside their house. Krishnaman was dancing as though in a trance, his face smeared with vermillion. Dancing along with him were young people, old people, and children of Kanchho’s age. As the mass proceeded toward Baneshwor Chowk, more people rushed out of their houses to join the celebration. Mrs. Kattel watched curiously as everyone from her
neighborhood hurried to join the mass. It looked as if the whole country was celebrating the coming of a new age. She was elated, but the vermillion on everybody’s face reminded her of the blood in the sink, and she felt bad.

“You didn’t join them!” The words slipped out of Shanti’s mouth, her eyes glued to the dancing children.

“The country’s doomed. After all, it’s an accursed land!” Mr. Kattel announced, and left the kitchen.

“I mean . . . everyone seems to be happy now, and the sky didn’t fall.”

Shanti followed him to the bedroom, where the king’s pictures hung intact.

“Everyone is happy? You say everyone is happy? Kill me. Please kill me, for God’s sake, and be happy.” Mr. Kattel grabbed the narrow table with both his hands. It looked like he was demanding of the kings.

“I mean, if so many people can be happy now, why would His Majesty want it otherwise?”

Mr. Kattel did not like the question; he was not used to questioning.

“How dare I spit on the same plate I ate from?” he said, and started dusting the royal family pictures. “I want to hear nothing from you, do you hear me?” he said, as if he’d just realized that he’d been betrayed.

Television stations repeated the broadcast of the king’s address, in which King Gyanendra had called upon the Seven Party Alliance to take the nation on the path to unity and prosperity, ensuring peace and multiparty democracy. His arrogance had waned. And he looked more like a trespasser than a king—he had trespassed in people’s
territories and killed their aspirations. Mr. Kattel, unable to see the king utterly defeated, switched the television off.

And now Mr. Kattel felt that he was living in a country that was not his own. He was living in someone else’s country as a refugee or an illegal alien. The people to whom the country belonged could order him to leave its territory any moment now. A group of self-appointed vigilantes, perhaps led by Krishnaman, could enter his house any moment now and capture his property. Any moment now, he could be arrested and tortured. The country had slipped away from his grasp. The police, the army, and the administration were now working for a different set of people who’d learned politics in either India or the jungle. They didn’t know what Royalty meant; what they knew was the Bihari style politics—win elections by any means, mainly by mobilizing gundas, and pretend to be serving the country while you accumulate wealth. The Maoists had already been looting; now all other parties were ready for the same.

Mr. Kattel locked his door from the inside, made sure that the old tin box that remained under his bed for more than a decade was properly secured, and sat on his bed, facing the kings’ pictures. He evoked King Mahendra’s soul and ordered the other kings to behave properly. King Mahendra scolded them for being unable to keep the mass under control; he called them cowards and said they didn’t deserve to be born as his heirs.

On the second day of his seclusion, Mr. Kattel explained to his wife how he had killed Kanchho. He lamented that he had no answer for the boy’s parents, who might not still know about his death, in their remote village. Then he described how people gossiped about his mother: how she was, in fact, kidnapped by the King; how some
people believed that she was, in fact, killed mysteriously; how he heard that his father
died of alcohol bought with money the Palace arranged to send him after he returned to
his village; how he was refused a good education as promised; how he was declared
unqualified to serve in the army; how King Gyanendra neglected him after King
Birendra’s murder; and how scared he would always feel to live under the king’s shadow
though he was forced to believe that the monarchy would always protect him from all the
adversities of the world.

He spent the next week locked in his room.

Shanti spent all those days massaging his legs and consoling him that everything
would be fine, and she said it was the crowd that killed the boy. At times she would go to
the kitchen and press her eyes with a corner of her shawl so as to squeeze out all the tears
that her eyes could contain, surprised at times by how much water those small eyes could
produce. But when she came back to the bedroom, she would look as if she had gone to
get yet another shot of refreshing drink.

*  

On the morning of the second of May, Shanti saw Krishnaman standing at her door.

“Is Kattel Dai home?” he asked.

“But he’s been feeling unwell for a few days,” Shanti said, intending to avoid him.

“Oh, what’s happened to him? I must see him, then,” Krishnaman said, and pushed
his way in.

Mr. Kattel didn’t show any sign of concern when Krishnaman and Shanti entered; he
kept staring at the ceiling while lying on his bed. Krishnaman looked around the room:
Mr. Kattel’s bed was disheveled; the Belgian carpet on the floor had not been dusted for
weeks; the clothes-stand in a corner was fully hidden behind Mr. Kattel’s clothes; and there were the kings’ pictures. After this quick observation, Krishnaman wondered how a woman like Shanti could leave the room in such disarray.

“What happened, Kattel Dai?” he asked, settling on the floor.

“Just a little headache,” Mr. Kattel replied, surprised at Krishnaman’s friendly tone.

“Have you taken any medicine?”

“Yes, some homemade,” he lied, hoping that Krishnaman would not talk about politics anymore.

“Kattel Dai, I was here to invite you, but it seems you are unable to go out,” Krishnaman started. Then he elaborated on a mass meeting organized by the seven parties as part of the celebration of the people’s victory and the formation of a new government the same day.

“Why am I invited? What have I done?” asked Mr. Kattel, suspicious. The parties might have planned to take action against him in front of the mass, as it usually happened after each revolution.

“Look Kattel Dai, the past is past. Our party has decided not to take any action against you. Instead, we’ve decided to work together for democracy,” Krishnaman explained. “We will take action only against the big heads. We are the common people.”

Mr. Kattel sat up. He wondered for the first time in his life if he was really one of the common people like Krishnaman, like all those protestors who shouted slogans for democracy. *Why would King Mahendra love me? Why would King Birendra care for me? Why would King Gyanendra worry about me?*
He stood on the floor. He had it in mind to grab the kings’ pictures and do something with them—something that he didn’t know. Perhaps throw them out of the window. He stalled, though—after all, he had spent his life worshipping them. Even a piece of stone will become God if you worship it—that was enough. He stepped back and sat on the bed.

“He is too weak to go out today,” Shanti spoke for her husband.

“Yes, she’s right. I’ll join you some other day,” Mr. Kattel said.

Krishnaman left, wishing him good health. Shanti’s face revealed an unearthly comfort. She started cleaning up the room, humming an old lullaby that she used to sing for her son.

“Shanti, are you happy?” Mr. Kattel asked. Shanti continued to clean the room.

That evening Mr. Kattel complained that he had no right to celebrate with Krishnaman. He, who had spent his whole life in the service of the monarchy, had no right to become one of those people who had sacrificed their lives in the fight against that same monarchy. Shanti only listened as he continued to justify why he couldn’t be one of the people the way Krishnaman had claimed him to be. He’d perhaps become one of them only on the day the monarchy no longer existed. Late that night Shanti told him that she was feeling strangely lighthearted. Before she fell asleep she asked him whether it could be a good sign or bad, but Mr. Kattel had already fallen asleep.

*  

On the third of May, Baneshwor Chowk was crowded early in the morning, as usual. The vendor had already displayed his sale for the day. The news headlines didn’t show rage like a month ago. Instead, they all celebrated people’s victory. Some of them mocked the
king’s arrogance; others humorously depicted the king as already leaving the Palace to settle in an ashram, although his future was still largely unknown. G.P. Koirala had already become prime minister, representing all political parties, and the dailies printed his pictures in different poses. Maoist-sponsored papers declared that the king was already gone, and that people would now become the real masters of the country. The Gorky book, the Marden book, the Waglé book, the Shakespeare book, and the books claiming to cure constipation were there, as usual.

Mr. Kattel scanned the faces of the standing readers and stooped over the dailies. All celebration, all new hopes. Then he saw portraits of democratic leaders and portraits of martyrs who had lost their lives during the movement. He wondered how quickly they had printed them all. They were so committed, he thought, and he bought two portraits. This time he didn’t find it necessary to hide what he had bought.

On the way home, Mr. Kattel’s legs shook, not in fear but instead in agitation; he couldn’t wait to show Shanti what he had bought. He was no longer worried about who passed by him or what the noises were all about. He didn’t frown at the slogans written on the wall in front of his house. *Was this what it meant to be one of them?* he wondered.

Back in his room, he dismounted the king’s photographs that he had worshipped for decades. He removed the kings from their picture frames, replaced two of them with the portraits of G.P. Koirala, the new prime minister, and Kanchho, the child martyr—a kid staring straight through your eyes, in his school uniform. He mounted them back on the wall and left one frame lying empty on the floor. He did this all with such dexterity that it would be hard not to believe it was exactly what he’d wanted to do all along. (Was there
any other force in play?) He didn’t care even to look at the kings’ pictures as he scraped them under the narrow table.

He looked at the new pictures reflectively. His long dead son featured on Kanchho’s face. Wouldn’t Shanti like it? He hopped to the kitchen. But Shanti was missing. A stainless steel glass lay on the floor, water spilled all around it. The ceramic basin was streaked with clotting blood. Mr. Kattel bent over the basin and thought martyrs reveal themselves in various forms.
Two

A CASE OF REVENGE

When the young man stepped into my shop, I received him as any other customer. Maybe a little differently—with a little curiosity, with a little more respect. But right at the beginning, he started playing smart, that bastard! How much I charge my clients for a packet of tea is my business, not his—it’s not his father who’d invested hundreds of thousands of rupees in my business. But when I charged a woman a rupee more than the price I’d quoted him, he asked me, “Do you know, sahuji, what humanity is?” In a tone disgustingly formal. Just for charging a rupee more—not to him but to somebody else.

I called him “sir” afterward, that arrogant ass. He looked like a real rebel leader that I knew he was not.

I invited him to sit comfortably on a sack of rice beside the door. I don’t know what exactly the bastard might have thought, but I saw some rays of hope in his face. He might have thought I was about to surrender to him. An illiterate, small-town shopkeeper was going to obey an ass of an educated young fellow. He might have thought that he was fostering change in society; his education was paying off at last.

He picked one item after another from the nearby shelf and pretended to read labels on them. I knew he was looking for an excuse to keep himself busy and composed, that coward. He could not face my eyes. Or he didn’t want to, that ass!

I asked if “sir” would like to drink tea.
He looked surprised—a glass of tea that I’d order from the adjoining teashop cost me five rupees. He said he was fine; he didn’t want to drink anything. That coward! He was afraid that the tea I’d pay for might make him obliged to me. Or else he was too elegant to match my offer. Any offer.

I didn’t care about what he bleated. I ordered two glasses of tea.

When they arrived, he took a glass with such disregard that I pictured him shouting at me, *Look, you ignorant ass, I’m drinking this tea for your sake. Be grateful to me for my generosity.*

But he thanked me. He thought this civility kept him apart from us uneducated, small-town shopkeepers, who knew nothing but to screw barefooted peasants.

He didn’t speak a word until he finished his tea. But I would be a fool not to recognize the vulnerable heart he’d inherited from his father, though he pretended not to know me. He pretended not to know me! He acted like he was in an altogether new place, with a total stranger. I must have forgotten whatever had happened a decade ago.

Understandably, he’d undergone a big change since I last had a contact with him—an eighteen-year-old kid had grown up into a twenty-eight-year-old man. I decided I wouldn’t know him either, for a while. I wanted to see what the weakling was up to.

He had a long list of items that he needed to buy for his sister’s wedding. But he was in no hurry to make his selection. He waited as if he wanted me to pick and pack everything for him, bundle it all up, and find a porter to help him carry those goods to his village a few miles into the mountains.

*“Sahuji, how much for this topee?”* he asked, picking a Nepali cap.
“For you, eighty rupees, sir,” I said. “You know everything is so expensive these
days.”

I saw lines of irritation on his brow. It was hard for him to digest my special
discounts—*for you*. He played with the cap for a few seconds and put it back on the rack.

“It’s a nice *topee*, sir,” I said, picking up the cap.

He made his face and said without looking at me, “What else to tell!” . . . what else
to tell *this idiot*—he didn’t have to add the second half for me to understand him.

“No, sir. It’s really a nice *topee*. Original Palpa-made,” I said, busy folding the cap
as if I’d misunderstood him.

He glared at me, as if threatening, *If you go an inch farther I’ll crush your head.* He
seemed to have recovered from the nervousness that had distracted him.

I liked it, though. There was nothing to be threatened by—you know how such
insecure people’s minds work. I said, “But it’s sir’s decision.” It pacified him. I knew
that’s what he wanted. Sir, that asshole!

“I’m tired of the shopkeepers in this town,” he said.

“Why, sir?” I asked, as if I didn’t know.

“They don’t think their customers can think, too,” he explained.

Was he trying to provoke me? But I wouldn’t be fooled so easily. I had nothing to do
with him.

It had been quite a while since I’d had any contact with him, long enough to make
one forget any enmity there might have been. Since he declined to marry my daughter
Ganga—he’d recently passed certificate level—our eyes had never met, though I didn’t
mind that he had rejected my offer. After all, such decisions are personal; you can’t
You can blame a young man for not marrying your daughter—it’s a different thing that my daughter had cried in happiness when her mother asked if she’d marry the boy. I heard later that he’d laughed the proposal off, as if he were a prince who had been asked to marry an undertaker’s daughter. That bastard! But it’s okay; my daughter is married to a man who has a two-by-two-folding-seat night bus. My daughter only wishes that her husband had also gone to college.

He picked a couple of spice packets and put them alongside the other items he had selected. He didn’t bother to ask me the price, though he wanted to know each item’s price. He was complaining—not to me, but to himself—that the shopkeepers in this town didn’t put a price tag on any item.

“Sir, you live in Kathmandu?” I asked.

“Yes!” he replied, as if reminding me that it was none of my business whether he lived in Kathmandu or in Karnataka. Maybe he was right. But I hadn’t forgotten that Ganga’s mother was heartbroken by the boy’s rejection. I couldn’t help being unhappy myself for a few days, for both the mother and the daughter. But it’s okay; my daughter is married to a man who owns the biggest house in his village. My daughter only wishes that her husband spent a little more time with her.

“You live in Kathmandu, sir?” I asked again, as if I’d not heard him the first time, arranging goods in their proper places.

He said why, quite irritated. But when I asked what he was studying, he kept silent. He was certainly telling me, Why the hell do you need to know what I study, or even whether I study or run a whorehouse in Kathmandu? I knew what he was thinking. He was thinking that I could not understand his degrees. Bachelor’s, master’s, or whatever—
I wouldn’t know one from the other. So he’d keep that answer for those who understood its meaning. For the educated folks, the schoolteachers perhaps, or those who worked at a local project funded by the United Mission to Nepal. He remained silent, as if it would debase him to tell me his degrees! As if I didn’t know his upbringing anyway.

Obviously, I knew his father. A peasant, he also worked as a porter for me, carrying goods from his village. A few sacks of vegetables, and I suppose it was almost two decades ago. I felt bad for the man when the villagers talked about his son. They wondered how such an exceptionally talented boy could be born of those poor parents! His teachers often wished that the boy was born in an able family—he would easily become a doctor or an engineer. I’d sent him exercise books and pens as gifts when he was still a child.

As a kid, he was lovely. When Ganga’s mother pointed it out, I couldn’t help thinking about that kid playing with my daughter. I’d decided so early to offer him my daughter once he went to college. But it’s okay; my daughter is married to a man who earns tens of thousands a month. My daughter only wishes that he squandered a little less.

But even as a school kid, this young man never knew me well. He didn’t want to talk to us when he came to town, often with his mother. He didn’t want us to know him as a poor father’s son. He was ashamed of poverty at such an early age. At such an early age, he believed he was different. It was one thing I’d liked in the boy, though.

He stared at me again when I charged another woman, who always bought on credit like most of my customers, two rupees more than I’d charged him on the same packet of tea. He looked like he shouldered every responsibility of the world to keep it going fairly. But he didn’t complain. I wished I’d charged her a few rupees more.
After he went to Kathmandu—a distant relative had helped him get out of the village—he must have thought that he’d found his rightful place. While visiting home, he never stopped at any shop in this town to buy a toothbrush or a kilo of sugar. Most people in town knew him, but he didn’t want them to know him, as he didn’t supposedly know them. As if knowing us and talking to us would’ve brought him down to the dirt of our stingy town!

When I stressed the “sir” after answering his next question about the expiry date of some beaten rice, he fidgeted. Didn’t he know that he was, after all, a peasant’s son? He knew. And he knew that I knew it. But he would not come down to earth. He kept calling me sahuji, the generic name for the shopkeeper. Why the hell couldn’t he call me daju, older brother, as many did? Or kaka, uncle? No, he wouldn’t. That would’ve brought that bastard closer to me, the earth, the vulgar.

He was certainly different, though. My daughter had tried to take her life when he declined the proposal. That was also due to her age—sixteen years. Luckily, the window from which she jumped was not that high. But it’s okay; she is now married to a man who loves his wife. My daughter only wishes that her husband didn’t threaten to bring home another woman if she continues to complain about his staying out.

I wished for more customers to visit the shop, so that this young man could see me charge them much more than I’d done before. Oh, how much I wanted to shout at him when he started picking up items without a word of complaint!

God listened to me: an unfortunate woman entered the shop, and I charged her five rupees more than the price I’d quoted for him. As if I’d done it by ignorance, he reminded me of the fact.
I didn’t clarify my reasons, and I hoped that it would arouse him. But he kept quiet. He kept quiet as if I wasn’t worth an argument.

Then he picked a pair of leather shoes. He wanted them for his would-be brother-in-law. Having spent a few minutes examining them, he complained that the shoes were one size too big for the groom.

I was happy. I said, “No, sir, they will fit him.”

He said, “No, they are one size too big.”

I said, “These shoes must fit the man who is old enough to get married.”

He wouldn’t resist, yet. That bastard. He was too sophisticated.

I insisted, “They must be good for somebody who is going to marry, sir; they are made for him.”

He only crumpled his face to contain his anger. I almost killed him.

He scanned through his shopping list and hesitated, undecided what to look for next.

I continued to look at him, willing him to ask me something or to complain. But he wouldn’t even look at me. As if I were nothing. As if I didn’t exist.

“I just can’t be sure, whose son exactly are you, sir?” I asked him. Could I befool myself more?

He looked more relaxed. For a short moment, I doubted if I really knew him. My question must have convinced him that I’d completely forgotten him. He must have thought he’d changed so much. A decade is a long time in a young man’s life. He was not the peasant’s son anymore.

He didn’t reply. It should make no difference to me whoever his parents might be, he must have thought. It was not my business.
I spat through the door after clearing my throat quite noisily. He pretended he’d not heard and seen it—too base for him to pay attention. Or perhaps he thought that’s how we uncultured townsfolk always behaved. Gross! There was no point sparing words on people like us.

He picked another pair of shoes, inspected them from various angles, put one beside his foot for comparison.

“They won’t fit him, sir,” I said indifferently.

He glanced at me, thought for a second, and chuckled.

“They won’t fit a man who’s ready to marry. They are too small,” I said, and waited. He removed his eyes from mine as if saying, What else to tell such fools! and put the shoes beside him.

“Those shoes are not for sale, sir,” I said.

He didn’t even look at me. He replaced the shoes on the rack and said that he would pay and leave if his helpers had arrived from the village. He was too tired to do any more shopping.

He was defeating me. I ordered another round of tea.

He took the second glass as if he deserved it. No hesitation, no gratitude. Nothing. He looked like someone who had just fallen out of the sky.

I let my tea glass fall on the concrete floor. It didn’t break into as many pieces as I would have liked, but I was glad it broke. He watched the thin milk tea splash onto his dust-coated, black leather shoes; it made them look like he’d peed on them. Did he think so? I can guess how much he would hate that, if it occurred to him. He stared at the shoes for a long time and asked me if I had a problem—he meant to ask if I was sick or
something. He seemed to want to bestow pity on me. I said “No,” added “sir,” and regretted it instantly. I should have told him it just dropped, as if nothing had happened. Anyway, I didn’t care about his shoes. I didn’t apologize. But he was okay, that bastard. What would a man of the gutter know? I only knew to screw poor peasants, worried only about guzzling money, and culture was a distant thing for me. Oh, how filthy I was to him!

I’d never told Ganga’s mother that the boy had laughed at the idea of marrying an illiterate shopkeeper’s daughter. She would have cursed the boy for days and days, and I didn’t want that. I also hadn’t told her about the boy’s complaint that, like many other shopkeepers, I exploited the poor—he’d become a student leader by the time he was in eighth grade and gave speeches about the poor. He hated not only those who exploited the poor but also the poor themselves. There were rumors that he hardly looked at his father’s face because it was a replica of poverty. There was no way that he’d marry my daughter because then his father would have felt more obliged to me—an uncivilized, money-guzzling, small-town exploiter. But it’s okay; my daughter is now married to a man who mobilizes boys for a political party. My daughter only wishes that her husband didn’t go to jail so often, even if he gets released quickly.

“Despite all the hardship, you made it at last, babu. Poverty didn’t stop your progress,” I said, as if I had been watching his family throughout those years—and, in a way, I was.

He didn’t respond for a long time.

I weighed five kilos of Basmati rice for my next-door neighbor; I paid the teashop lady, who’d come to collect the empty glasses; and I sold a packet of condoms to a young
couple who left giggling. Only then did the young man ask, “What do you want to say, sahuji?”

“You can call me uncle, babu. We know each other well,” I said. Babu, a child, a son, or a younger brother.

He looked defenseless. I added, “Very few people can struggle like you.”

His lips trembled. “Who doesn’t have to struggle?” he said in a tone that suggested he intended to avoid the subject.

“But very few can struggle like your family. I appreciate your father,” I said. “He never gave up.”

“Why the hell are you worrying about me, sahuji? Who in the world are you to me?” he asked.

I was his no one, but in small places like this town, we can’t avoid worrying about some people. He knew that.

“Don’t you think we are like neighbors, from the same locality? And if you really want to know—let me tell, babu—we’re in fact related, though not very closely,” I said. “Your father values this relationship, even though you don’t.”

“Okay, then, what do you want me to do, huh? You want me to bow to you? Is that what you want?” He leapt out the door, sputtering, and then turned back quickly, uncertainty on his face.

“I didn’t say that, babu. Why are you getting angry?” I asked. As he looked too vulnerable, I added, “I was only counting you as my family member.”
“I know. I know what you want. You want me to return to the gutter. You want me to lie under your feet. You want me to lick your bum. Sala cheats! You all need to be taught,” he said, and again hopped out.

He said I was a cheat. I knew how these upstarts might one day behave. I’d gone through many ups and downs in my life. I’d dealt with hundreds of people like him. By the time they stepped out of the village, they believed they were princes.

He was standing on the other side of the road. I called to him with a command to return to my store.

When he reentered the shop, his face told me, Okay, we’re done. We have no business with each other. We are each other’s no one. Let’s stop everything here! He waited as I fished an old accounts register from my drawer. Turning the pages, I said, “Didn’t you call me a cheat, babu? Ah, but you don’t see the service I provide the villagers. Many of them don’t pay their credit, and I don’t press them. I just don’t feel like doing it when I see their hardships. I’ve never asked your father to pay the three hundred rupees that he has owed me for years.”

He grabbed my desk with both his hands. “What? What?”

“Yes, it’s been almost a decade,” I said and showed him the details. One kg sugar, one Moti tea, five liters kerosene, one kg salt, two kg potatoes, ten kg rice, cumin seeds – Rs. 300.00.

“I know what you want, you crook! Three hundred rupees, and you want me to be your debtor, huh? This is the reason why an armed rebellion has started in the country,” he said, and paused. “Why the hell didn’t you ever ask me to pay up? Wouldn’t I do that? Couldn’t you call me as I passed by?”
“Oh, you support the terrorists? No, babu, you never turned to my shop. Your father didn’t pay up, and I didn’t feel like asking him. I knew the trouble he’s going through,” I explained.

“You dirty villain! I know you were waiting for this day. You vulgar cheat!” he said, squinting at me. “Tell me, how much money do you need? Huh? How much?” Amidst the fire of his anger, a suppressed sob overcame his voice. I don’t think I ever expected him to break down so much. “That day is not far, when you’ll be brought to justice,” he said.

I said there was no reason to be angry with me; I’d done no injustice to anyone. I said I didn’t need the money anymore. I said I just thought I’d let him know about it.

“Yes, that is what you crooks want. I know,” he said in a determined tone, and he grabbed the accounts register. He looked at his father’s account details and folded the page, then tore it into hundreds of pieces and threw them like confetti. He said, “Okay, are there more accounts to settle? Huh, any more accounts left out to settle?”

I didn’t care. I could ask my next-door neighbors to help me out. But the old register had already given him quite a blow, more than I could imagine, more than what I might have thought at the whimsical moment when I’d decided to let the credit remain that way.

He looked at me, his eyes hungry rather than angry. I said, “It’s okay, babu. Now it’s an old matter. Let’s have another round of tea,” and I reached for the register he was still holding.

“No, it’s not okay. Hand me the rest of the registers. Hand me all of them,” he commanded, pointing at my drawer.
What? Why should I hand him my accounts registers? I tried to look angry, but I don’t think my expression was helping me. I was drained after his reaction to the old credit, as if exhausted by a long mission. I was not prepared to take up any new challenges. I attempted to reach the register in his hand a second time like I was trying to wrest a cell phone from a kid.

“What? Do you think it’s a child’s play?” he spoke as a different man. He opened the drawer and grabbed the rest of my five accounts registers. I could not wrestle with a young man of twenty-eight, three decades younger than me. I didn’t want to let my neighbors know that a young man was assaulting me, either. It would be a sensation very soon. That would not be good. Times were bad. The Maoists could pick on me.

“What will you do with them, babu? That’s the whole record of my customers’ credits,” I pleaded. “Hundreds of thousands of rupees.”

“I know. I know for how long you’ve been sucking these poor people’s blood,” he said, and waited for a few seconds, as if he were unsure. Then he went on, “Thought I’d keep it secret, but seems you need to be taught.”

“What do you mean, babu?” I asked.

“Looks like the Maoists need to know about you,” he said, as if he worked for them. “Though I thought I’d keep my eyes closed.”

I said there was no need to threaten me, that I also knew quite a few Maoists. But I didn’t tell him I paid a couple of Maoist boys on a weekly basis. Why would I?

“Whom do you know?” he asked.

I said I knew some but there was no need to tell him. I was respecting him so far, and I wanted him to respect me as well, I told him.
“Have you heard about Gaurav?” he asked.

Perhaps. There were scores of boys with that name in town. But why would I care?

“Comrade Gaurav,” he added.

It clicked in no time. Comrade Gaurav, whom we hadn’t seen but had heard about. The new Area In-charge of the Maoist rebels. Known for planning some cruel attacks on police posts in the last few months.

“Why should I know him, babu? I’m doing my business, he’s doing his business,” I said. “What would I do by knowing the terrorist?”

“Terrorist? Yes, you can call him a terrorist,” he said.

“It’s too much, babu. Let’s not waste our time. You have your work, I have mine,” I said, attempting to acquire the registers. A few of my customers had already been put off.

He stared into my eyes, and as if he were taking revenge for all the injustices he had seen the world endure, he said, “You’re talking with Comrade Gaurav.”

I laughed him off.

How could I have expected the quiet, vulnerable Gopal Prasad Gairey of an adjoining village to become the fearsome Comrade Gaurav? Still denying his new identity, I asked him how such a brilliant young man with a bright future could become a criminal.

He dismissed me with contempt.

“I’ve done nothing wrong, sir! I’m just a poor shopkeeper,” I pleaded when I saw no one but a cruel Maoist rebel in front of me. But he would not listen to me. He started shouting that every shopkeeper in this town cheated the poor.
I begged him to calm down—I’d done nothing wrong by selling goods to poor villagers on credit. Instead, I was helping them cope with their hardships. I’d never denied anyone a thing because he’d not cleared his credit. But he wouldn’t listen to me. I said I was ready for any action his party might decide I deserved.

But it all worked as a stimulant to his anger. He continued ranting—soon drawing a curious crowd of onlookers. It looked as if years of his suppressed anger against the town had at last found an opening to gush out.

I could do nothing to pacify him as he left the shop. In fact, I was relieved when he started shouting in public. I was no more his sole target; he blamed all the businessmen of the town for extracting money from the poor. He also claimed that the country could not rise from poverty because of people like the shopkeepers who exploited villagers and forever crippled them. The more he shouted the more I felt that he was coming down to earth, the dirt. Down to me and the town he despised.

As he continued ranting, someone in the crowd asked, “Who is he? Talks like a Maoist.”

The young man looked alarmed but did not stop his outbursts.

Yet another said, “Yes, he must be a Maoist. Who else would talk this nonsense?”

I had an urge to reveal his identity, but I resisted. Our business was done. I didn’t want him ruffled in front of me. I also knew the risks. I wasn’t ready for them.

But that didn’t stop a boy from pouncing on the rebel. I found it hard to look as more boys joined the attack. One of the boys—actually, he’s my son-in-law’s ally in this town—snatched the young man’s pistol from his inner pocket and shot in the air. The boys were quick.
Within minutes, the young man’s bloody body lay like a discarded jute sack on the road in front of my shop. I honestly didn’t want it to happen; whether I should have tried to stop the boys or let them continue to assault the young man! I’d kept saying, “Slow down, slow down!” But they’d said, “You don’t know anything, uncle. He needs to be taught a good lesson.”

I could not bring him into my store, though it was heartbreaking to see his body lying on the road. I could not take the risk. No one would want it; everybody knew by now that it was a political case. Even the two villagers who’d arrived to assist him to carry his goods stayed away. The shopkeepers closed their shops, moved to their residences on the upper floors, and perhaps turned on their televisions, pretending that nothing had happened. No one was ready to have witnessed the incident. Yes, the townspeople didn’t know anything about it. I’d later tell the police that I saw a few strangers beating him as he ran for his life; they were shouting that he was a Maoist rebel.

His body, bloody and unconscious, lay on the road until the police arrived after an hour. Peeking out of the window, Ganga’s mother said that she pitied the boy. For the first time, I told her that I always hated that bastard.

*  
The police say he’s in critical condition, a week after the incident. Perhaps I don’t want him to die, though I don’t know where in his story I will fit if he’s ever able to tell it. If he survives, they might send him to jail, but who knows what happens next?—the Maoists are breaking jails to free their colleagues, kidnapping people from hospitals, robbing weapons from police posts and army camps. Or the police might even let him go free, citing the lack of sufficient evidence to detain him.
The Maoists have called for a nationwide general strike today, though this town has remained closed since the incident. They have already abducted a dozen of our young men, and the town is dead except for those few policemen who are knocking on shuttered doors and windows, asking us to disobey the rebels and open our shops. I’m tired of watching television, but I’m still undecided whether to open my shop tomorrow, or ever again.
Three

BETRAYAL OF A GOLDEN WATCH

A middle-aged man—a shiny trunk on his back and a faint smile on his face—stopped by Lekhnath Upadhay’s house and greeted him with a verbal Namaste. Lekhnath responded promptly but spent a few seconds observing the man, finding it necessary to confirm that he knew the stranger. The watch the man wore had puzzled Lekhnath.

“Aren’t you Kami Kanchho?” Lekhnath asked, climbing down a bamboo staircase from where he was painting his house—a preparation for approaching Dashain.

“Yes, I’m Kahersingh,” replied the curious Brahman’s untouchable Kami Kanchho, and he cocked his head as if to assert, Of course, I am Kahersingh.

Lekhnath glanced over Kahersingh’s appearance as they exchanged a few words. Kahersingh’s white shirt and black trousers were neatly ironed. His shirtsleeves looked too long for him even as they were folded, and the trousers, hanging from his thin waist with the help of a belt, were at least three sizes too big. But his shoes fit him well, except not in style—their embroidered toes were too fancy for a man like Kahersingh Kami, especially with a load on his back. Lekhnath guessed Kahersingh might have received the garments as a jadauri, a gift of used items that bosses gave their domestic helpers.

Kahersingh’s smooth but sunken cheeks, red sparkling eyes, and thick, jet-black mustache, like that of Indian dons, gave him an alien, suspicious look in Lekhnath’s eyes. His hair was long, heavily oiled—the smell of coconut oil made him an authentic lahorey—and had perhaps been neatly combed before he put a strap on his scalp to carry his trunk. As he gripped the strap on both sides of his neck, his elbows projected out, and
his arms looked like they deliberately displayed his ornaments: his right arm had an aluminum ring, and his left, the incredible golden watch. *How come an untouchable Kami, working as a lahorey, is wearing a golden watch?* Lekhnath wondered.

Kahersingh Kami worked in Delhi, as Lekhnath himself did a long time ago. Gulf countries were not yet open to Nepalese workers, so India was still a major destination for the unskilled population. Those workers—known as *lahorey* back home—served mostly as domestic helpers and spent most of their lives away from home for a meager income, barely enough to sustain their families. Every Dashain, many of them came home for a month or two. Kahersingh was one of those returning to the village that year, a decade before the Maoists raised weapons in the name of the poor and more than two decades before the only Hindu kingdom in the world abolished the centuries-old Monarchy and the country became a secular republic. But the Kami’s return didn’t look normal—he was wearing a golden watch.

The following afternoon, Kahersingh Kami remained at the center of conversation among villagers as they gathered to repair the village trails.

“I’ve heard that he’s returned with a pension,” one Kashiram Bhandari said.

“Must have earned quite a lot; he was telling me yesterday about his plan to build a house, get married, and settle down,” Lekhnath said. “He was wearing a golden watch!”

“A golden watch? Like Shreeprasad dai’s golden watch?” Kashiram asked, playing with his Citizen watch his son had sent him from Kashmir a year ago.

“Seems he’s got a good job despite being a Kami!” a young villager joined in.

“You know, he was sharp from his early age. It’s a pity that he was born a Kami!” a villager with a white beard and a bald head said.
Kahersingh Kami was the youngest of Birsingh Kami’s sons. Some village gentlemen still remembered that when he was born, his father had refused to accept the boy as his son. Birsingh had even called the panchayat to force his wife to confess that she’d slept with some other man before he had returned from Nautanwa for a Dashain. Kahersingh was born within seven months of his return—that was the source of his worry. But the panchayat declared that a child born in the seventh month must have been his own. No one in the panchayat wanted to take the trouble to identify the man who might have slept with Birsingh’s wife. What difference would it make, after all? Were she a woman from an upper caste, it would matter. She would have been forced to pick a man and, supposedly, spend the rest of her life with him. But because she was Birsingh Kami’s wife, the members of the panchayat decided to drop the matter. Birsingh left the meeting quietly after hearing the panchayat’s verdict that Kahersingh was Birsingh’s own son.

But many years later when Kahersingh said one morning that he wanted to go to school, Birshigh again grumbled that he had been betrayed—first by his wife, and then by the entire village. How could he imagine that his son would one day want to go to school at a time when even Brahman boys stayed home to attend to their cattle?

The same week, Birsingh sent Kahersingh to Nautanwa with his eldest son, who had replaced his father as a watchman at a sugar factory. But Kahersingh returned home within six months, announcing that he would rather work at the anvil with his father or become someone else’s plowman in the village. The same year, Kahersingh’s second brother was killed in a drunken rivalry at a village fair, and after three years the villagers advised Kahersingh to marry his sister-in-law, his brother’s widow. But before he could
decide, she eloped with a man from a nearby village. At age seventeen, Kahersingh ran to Delhi with a girl, only to return in three months. Within a year, Kahersingh married another woman after his first wife left him for a lahorey who worked in the Indian army. But this marriage lasted only for a few months because the woman decided that a young man much younger than herself wasn’t suitable for her. He married again and lived with this new wife, Batuli, until she eloped with one Jhakku Kami. Eventually, he separated from his family, sold his hut to his cousins to clear a loan, and ran to Delhi at the age of twenty-five.

When he visited the village three years later, he smoked and drank a little too much, but he talked more sensibly than he did before. Now a young man of twenty-eight, he spoke Nepali with a Hindi accent and offered Gold Flake cigarettes to anyone he met. He stayed at his cousin’s for a month, drank twenty-five out of the thirty days he stayed, and returned to Delhi, saying that he had a responsibility. When he visited the village a second time four years later, at the age of thirty-two, he was thinner but looked like a mature man. By this time his mother was already dead, and his father had returned to Nautanwa. Some villagers asked if he wanted to settle down in the village, but he again said that he had a responsibility in Delhi. Some asked him if he had a wife, but he said he was in no mood to get married. But he also added that he would return to the village to settle down one day. Very few cared about it, but the villagers had the impression that Kahersingh Kami had a decent job in Delhi.

After spending eight more years in Delhi, here was this Kahersingh Kami back in the village, with a golden watch.
“How come Kahersingh made a fortune within these few years?” Lekhnath asked as he leveled protruding stones on the trail.

“Did he rob his malik?” one guessed.

“Who knows?” another said.

“But I’ve heard that he has a good job; his malik made him parmenty within two years of him joining in,” yet another said.

The villagers continued to guess about Kahersingh Kami and his luck as they worked on the trail—leveling potholes, trimming the bushes, and sweeping the trail with brooms made of twigs. Then they guessed who others might return home within the next few days, occasionally switching to talks about goats for Dashain.

“Lekin, Thiralal will arrive within this week,” a weak voice joined them.

Then the villagers saw the dazzling golden watch, then the arm that bore the watch, and then the man that bore the arm—the untouchable Kami. He was busy hacking off the branches that encroached the trail. “When I heard that you were working on the trail, I thought I’d join you,” he said.

Some asked when he returned, and others asked if he returned in good health. Their interest, however, lay on the watch Kahersingh wore rather than on the man who’d returned to the village after so many years. Within a few minutes a small crowd surrounded Kahersingh, everybody’s eyes peeping at his watch. Kahersingh continued to work, but the villagers pushed their boundary so close to him that he had hardly any space to move. He dropped his sickle on the ground as if preparing to flee.


Kahersingh squatted on the trail, supporting his head with both hands.
“Are you okay, Kanchha?” Kashiram asked. But Kahersingh would not speak a word.

But his watch spoke. It spoke a lot. It was a watch that no one in the village except Shreeprasad Aryal could afford—or, at least, so thought the villagers. They didn’t know much about it, but they believed that the watch was very expensive. It was a golden watch, after all. It stunned everybody—a Kami, a low caste, untouchable Kami—wore a golden watch like that of Shreeprasad Aryal’s!

After eventually satisfying their urge to look at the watch, they resumed the work, and they returned to their previous topics, including goats for Dashain. And here Kahersingh took a chance to join in. He asked, “Lekhnath Kaka, what if we had a feast after we finish today’s work?”

Lekhnath, full of questions, looked at him.

“I’d buy a goat if you said,” Kahersingh clarified.

When Lekhnath announced that Kahersingh would buy a goat for a feast after the work was over, the atmosphere became festive. Most of the villagers wondered how much money Kahersingh might have earned and continued to reflect curiously on the Kami’s fate.

Then the talk turned to who in the village owned the fattest goat.

Kahersingh had nothing to do after he paid for the goat. He could not touch it once it was slaughtered. Even the water he touched would not work for the upper-caste villagers. He sat in a corner of Lekhnath’s yard and watched the villagers prepare the meat, send it into the house to be cooked, bring it out, and distribute it to everyone on leaf-plates. All the while they stole looks at his watch. Lekhnath’s daughter-in-law put a leaf-plate beside
Kahersingh, cautious not to touch him; she would need a sprinkle of gold-dipped water if she did.

“Kami Kanchho at last challenged Shreeprasad,” the gentleman with a white beard said. “Who in the village would have the guts?”

There was a moment of silence. Sometimes some villagers grumbled behind closed doors against Shreeprasad, but no one would ever speak against him in the public unless that person had nothing more to lose—having lost everything—and nothing more to expect from him, like the gentleman with a white beard. The villagers just listened to him, and as soon as they had a chance, they switched to some other topics. To align with him would mean unnecessary hassle with Shreeprasad, leading to unimagined consequences.

Kahersingh looked unsettled; he scanned the faces of the villagers busy chewing on the goat meat the untouchable Kami had bought. When people started leaving, he said to Lekhnath, “Could we send some meat to Shreeprasad bajey?”

“Do you mean we carry meat for him?” asked Lekhnath, reluctant to carry out the Kami’s order.

Kahersingh rose quietly and left. Once the eating was over, he was of no use.

* *

Even before they entered their teens, every village boy and girl knew about Shreeprasad’s legendary father and the family’s authority over the villagers. Ganapati was not a rich man. Once on his yearly trip to Batauli to sell a tin of hard-earned ghee and to buy salt, kerosene, and rice, he heard that a Rana prime minister was in the terai on a hunting trip, and he was hiring young men willing to prove their courage to him. Ganapati instantly
thought it was his windfall. He was solidly built and courageous; it wouldn’t be hard for him to win the whimsical prime minister’s favor. Within a week of his hiring, he proved himself as the most courageous among the local recruits by fighting a wounded tiger. That battle changed everything—he received not only a baksis of silver coins, but also a birta, a large piece of fertile land that made him the richest villager and, by default, village chief.

By the time Shreeprasad took his father’s position, the village revolved around his family. When somebody had to buy or sell a piece of land, Shreeprasad declared the final deal; when a wedding was to take place, Shreeprasad decided if the boy and the girl made a good match; when two neighbors quarreled over their boundary wall, Shreeprasad issued a verdict above the locally elected panchayat; when somebody returned to the village with a few thousand rupees, mostly from India, Shreeprasad took hold of the money in the name of saving the villager from squandering it; when somebody needed a loan, Shreeprasad became a last refuge.

The white-bearded gentleman’s words confused Kahersingh. How could he challenge the old man and why would he even try? How could a Kami survive in the village without the man’s blessings? Kahersingh thought more about it on the trail leading to his cousin’s. He had to accomplish a lot—buy a piece of land, build a house, and get married. He thought about giving Shreeprasad a visit right away. But by the time he approached the point where the trail split, he’d decided to follow his instinct. He went straight to his cousin’s, drank home-brewed alcohol, quarreled with the cousin over when they should stop drinking, and slept in his cousin’s bed with him while the cousin’s wife and children lay on the floor.
The following morning, however, Kahersingh put on his white shirt and neatly folded black trousers in preparation to go visit Shreeprasad. He soaked his black hair in Nariyal brand coconut oil and smoothed it with a comb that he always carried in his pocket along with a wallet lashed to his belt with an aluminum chain. Then he folded the cuffs of his shirt halfway up his elbow, found a rag, and shined his shoes before he put on them. As the last thing on his to-do list, he found his watch under a pillow and put on it without looking at it. Then he left. A little boy, constantly sucking his teeth, had announced to him, “My grandfather thinks you should give him a visit.”

All the way to Shreeprasad’s, he was busy adjusting his shirt around his waist, keeping his shirtsleeves folded, and making sure that his hair was properly set. He walked down the village trail with long strides as if he were walking on a smooth road, trying to maintain a gentlemanly stature. As a result, he tripped on protruding stones so many times that the little boy started giggling. But Kahersingh refused to acknowledge the boy. Instead, he looked as if he were meditating. He would not see anyone who might pass by him, and even if he did by chance, he would not speak a word—he was going to see Shreeprasad. It was not his arrogance but a subtle form of nervousness, created by a combination of fear and shame with reverence for Shreeprasad.

Once in the yard, he saw Shreeprasad sitting in the veranda. Kahersingh stopped, joined his feet, then his palms, bowed a little, and said, “Mailey dhogen, bajey,” Bajey, here I greet you!

Kahersingh’s watch shone in the morning sun. The villagers were right, Shreeprasad thought. The Kami wore a watch like his own. He wore clothes like that of an officer’s,
and his shoes were most unsuitable for the village trails. The strong smell of coconut oil that wetted Kahersingh’s hair invaded the rustic aura of Shreeprasad’s house.

Shreeprasad didn’t ask him when he’d arrived from Delhi or whether he’d arrived well, as he would do with other villagers. Having ordered him to sit down, after which Kahersingh squatted in the yard like a criminal waiting for Shreeprasad’s verdict, he began, “You know, Kami Kanchha, I fed your mother and your siblings all throughout those years your father wasted in Nautanwa.”

“Yes, bajey!”

Shreeprasad waited for a while and then resumed: “What would that stony piece of land of yours yield? Where would your mother grow corn had I not given the land to work?”

“Yes, bajey!”

“Who would give your mother a single rupee to buy an aspirin tablet when you were sick if it were not for me?” Shreeprasad continued.

“Yes, bajey!”

Shreeprasad’s ears turned red. He took his eyes off Kahersingh for a few seconds and said, “Who would give you a single rupee when you wanted to go to Delhi if it were not for me?”

“Yes, bajey!”

“What the hell are you saying ‘yes, bajey, yes bajey’? You bastard. Don’t have any other words?” Shreeprasad said, standing.
A neatly striped cat slinked out the door, stopped briefly to look at Kahersingh, and darted across the yard to disappear behind the cowshed. A stray dog barked twice behind the house and howled—someone must have hit it with a stone.

Shreeprasad went to the cowshed, gave the cattle dry corn stalks, and returned. Kahersingh was playing with his watch like a little boy.

“How much money did you bring?” Shreeprasad asked.

“How much, bajey! But I wish I could build a hut,” Kahersingh replied. “I want to get married and settle down.”

Shreeprasad did not respond.

“I’d work as your hali if you allowed,” Kahersingh said, expressing his desire to serve as Shreeprasad’s plowman.

“Work as my hali? You’ll work as a hali in that white shirt and those leather shoes? You’ll work as my hali with that golden watch?” Shreeprasad fidgeted in the veranda.

“You’re making fun of me? Don’t I know your class?”

Confused, Kahersingh stared into midair.

“Go, get lost! There’s no work for a loafer like you,” Shreeprasad ordered him.

Kahersingh walked away with long strides, like a real gentleman.

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More Lahoreys, emitting pungent smell of Nariyal brand coconut oil, came back from India. Thiralal returned with two shiny trunks: he carried one himself, and he’d hired a porter to carry the other. Shyamlal returned with a huge plastic drum, everything he owned loaded in it. The villagers said that the drum would work great for storing wheat—no worries about pests spoiling the harvest. But some pointed out that Shyamlal’s land
would hardly yield sufficient wheat to fill up the drum—what the hell would he do with such a gem of a robust drum? Dhanapati’s fourteen-year-old son returned with two thousand Indian rupees. Some villagers wished that their sons were equally enterprising. Eaknarayan came back with the same bag he had left home with—he said that he’d been looted on the way home, in Gorakhpur—but many believed that he was only making an excuse, like some others who squandered every rupee they earned on prostitutes and alcohol but had to return home anyway. Shivshankar returned with an addiction to alcohol despite being a Brahman. Chetnarayan came back with an Indian woman, double his size and fifteen years older than him; the villagers said that he was already gone to *narak*, to hell.

As soon as they visited Shreeprasad, he asked each of them, “What did Kami Kanchho do in Delhi?”

Even though not all of them knew the answer, they each said that Kahersingh had a good paying job. They said he worked in a *kothi* of a businessman who would regularly go to Dubai and London. Chetnarayan said Kahersingh would have become very rich had his boss not moved to Dubai.

Shreeprasad thought about calling Kahersingh again. It was rare for someone to return with money and not ask Shreeprasad to take care of it. What worried him more was that it might start a new trend in the village. What if the villagers who returned from India didn’t ask him what they could do with their money? How could that happen in the village where he had ruled ever since he was a young man?

When Shreeprasad called him a second time, Kahersingh wore the same white shirt, but he’d changed his trousers and shoes. Like the previous ones, his oversized trousers
were hung on his thin waist with the help of a leather belt. He wore slippers that bore deep footmarks and water bites.

But his watch was equally shiny. Averting his eyes from the gold on Kahersingh’s wrist, Shreeprasad said, “Kanchha, I’ve heard that you’ve got a good sum of money. Hope you won’t squander it!”

“No, bajey. I don’t have much money,” Kahersingh replied.

“But you told me that you wanted to build a house.”

“Yes, bajey, I want to get married.”

“Want to get married? Who will marry you, whom three women have already left?” Shreeprasad asked. “Why don’t you bring that last woman back? She’s living with her parents.”

Kahersingh remained silent. When Shreeprasad insisted that he deserved a woman only like his last wife, Batuli, he left without another word. One couldn’t tell whether he was angry with Shreeprasad or with the woman who had left him long ago.

He spent that afternoon squatting outside the local teashop. People came, and people went away. Some of them asked what he was doing, as a minimum sign of concern. But most of them saw him and pretended not to have seen anyone. Even the Lahoreys who had worse jobs than Kahersingh’s pretended not to have noticed him, especially when there were other people more important than Kahersingh Kami. Although some of them enjoyed his company at Suntali’s over homemade liquor, there at the teashop, they didn’t want to demote themselves by talking to Kahersingh Kami. Even Lekhnath, who’d praised Kahersingh during the goat feast, knew when to speak with the Kami and when to look away.
After he left the teashop at twilight, there was no talk other than about Kahersingh, his watch, and the possible amount of money he might have earned in Delhi.

“Didn’t you see how arrogantly he sat there the whole day?” commented one.

“Wanted to show his watch, don’t you know that?” asked another.

“Seems he’s earned quite a lot,” yet another said.

“A lot? How much is a lot? These Kamis think they are kings if they have five hundred rupees in their pockets. Don’t we know that?” said another.

Everybody agreed that Kahersingh must have brought some ten to fifteen thousand rupees. Then one commented right away, “The Kami shouldn’t have behaved so arrogantly simply because he’s earned fifteen thousand rupees.”

Kahersingh returned to the teashop after an hour, staggering. This time he sat close to the villagers and announced that he planned to build a house, get married, and settle down.

“Who do you want to marry, Kanchha?” someone asked, eager to play with Kahersingh’s jolly mood.

Kahersingh didn’t reply for a while; he seemed to be struggling to maintain his gentlemanly stature.

“Lekin, I want to get married,” he said.

“Who will marry you if you continue to drink like this?” asked Kashiram, sounding concerned.

“Right, bajey. No one will marry me. I’ll bring Batuli back,” he said.

At first it astonished the villagers, but soon they realized that it was fine for a man like him to bring his ex-wife back.
“Good, Kanchha, good!” some of them said.

Encouraged by the villagers, Kahersingh moved to a nearby bench, settled himself at an end, and folded his shirtsleeves. An odd silence ruled over the teashop until Lekhnath burst: “You asshole, behaving like a king in front of us? Haven’t we seen the damn watch before? Why the hell do you want to display it here? Who cares whether you looted your malik in Delhi?”

Kahersingh slipped away from the bench and squatted on the ground, confused and lost.

* 

The following morning, Kahersingh went to Lekhnath’s and offered to work as his hali.

“Do you think a mad dog has bitten me to keep a ladsaheb like you as my hali?” Lekhnath said in one breath, and went to clean the buffalo shed. Unable to decide his next move, Kahersingh sat in a corner of the yard where the goat he paid for had been slaughtered a few days before, as if waiting for Lekhnath’s change of heart—for God’s sake. A few children came running from a nearby house, played hide-and-seek for a few minutes—some of them hiding behind him—and left. A group of newly married women threw furtive looks at him as they passed by on their way to a nearby jungle to fetch fodder for their cattle.

“Why would a ladsaheb like you need to work as a hali?” Lekhnath said, emerging from the shed. “Seems you can keep a hali yourself. Why don’t you announce at the teashop that you need to hire a Bahun boy?”

Kahersingh started sweating. How could Lekhnath think that a Kami might hire a Brahman boy, who is not allowed even to touch a plow, as a hali? And why would he
need a *hali* after all? He didn’t even have a piece of land. In a fit of nervousness, he folded up his shirtsleeves.

In no time, Lekhnath spat and yelled, “You donkey! Off you go, or I’ll crush your head with a wood split!”

Kahersingh darted off like a stray dog scared away by a firebrand. His legs moved so fast that he wondered at his own energy. They stopped only when he landed at Suntali’s, where, after having a bottle of homemade booze, he said that he was going to bring Batuli back, build a house, and settle down. After emptying one more bottle, he announced that he was considering keeping a *hali*.

“Keeping a *hali*? But you don’t even have a piece of land,” Suntali wondered.

“I’ll buy it!” Kahersingh replied. Suntali believed him.

By the next day, the news that Kahersingh was considering keeping a *hali* had spread all throughout the village. When the villagers gathered at the teashop, Lekhnath let everybody know that Kahersingh mocked him the other day by offering to work as his *hali*, and he also made it clear that he would crush the Kami’s skull if he spoke such a word again. Then Kashiram theorized this is what happens when *dalits* get to earn a few thousand rupees: they forget their ground and start behaving like royals. Lekhnath said that he never thought Kahersingh Kami could act so absurdly.

When Kahersingh told Kashiram the following day that he really needed to work as a *hali* at someone else’s family so that he would get a guardian and a piece of land to build a hut, he was instructed to let the dog’s urine drain out of his body first and then come back to talk. But Kahersingh would not confess that he was drunk. Looking much more sober than he ever was, Kahersingh muttered that he wanted Kashiram to enslave him.
“Do you know what I’ll do if you keep talking nonsense? I’ll dump both you and your damn watch into that garbage pit!” announced Kashiram, and he started winding his Citizen watch. As if reminded of an important task, Kahersingh removed his watch from his wrist, pinched the crown between his forefinger and the thumb, and started winding it. At first it annoyed Kashiram, but the revelation that even a golden watch needed manual winding kept him composed.

Kashiram continued to wind his watch, as did Kahersingh Kami. But what an anomaly! The Kami wound his golden watch, and Kashiram, a respectable Brahman, his cheap Citizen. As they continued, Kashiram heard Kahersingh’s watch making a sound much louder each time he rotated the crown. By the time he was done with the watch business, Kahersingh’s watch made such a huge sound that it was the only sound Kashiram could hear in the entire house. KIRrr… KIRrrr… KIRRR… Before Kahersingh could even notice, Kashiram pounced on the Kami, snatched his watch, and hurled it twenty meters away into the garbage pit. Kahersingh sprung off the yard and jumped into the pit so fast that he was almost alongside the watch as it flew. Kashiram bawled: “You bastard, showing off your ass to me? Don’t we know the rogue you are? Showing off your father’s skull? You donkey!”

Kahersingh picked up his watch, put it into his pocket without wasting the time to look at it, and left the same way he’d left Lekhnath’s house.

A few houses away, he stopped to think about what had actually just happened. He had only offered to work for Kashiram—it was not his watch’s fault. Why was Kashiram so angry with him? Kahersingh wished he knew how to offer to work for someone in the village. He thought about returning to Kashiram’s to apologize for whatever had
happened and to request of him one more time; after all, it can’t be a crime to offer to work for somebody. Or should he go back to Shreeprasad?

But his legs led him to Suntali’s, as they often did. He spent the next couple of days drinking at her place, where a few Brahman men joined him after midnight, and he got lost for a week.

* 

When he reappeared after the festival was over, his white shirt was no longer white. Washed in muddy water, it was dyed a cream color, and it had innumerable stains from unknown origins. His trousers were creaseless but stained, and his leather shoes were barely visible beneath the dust and mud coating, except for a few black patches from water splashes. His hair was equally oily, not from Nariyal brand coconut, but from local mustard oil. When mixed with days-old sweat and his bad breath, the oil gave an odor of a decomposing mouse under the bed. His watch was hidden under his shirtsleeve.

“Look, Kami Kanchha, I’ve always looked after your family when in need,” Shreeprasad said as soon as Kahersingh stepped into his yard. “I wanted to give you some advice when I first called you. But you behaved like a ladsaheb. I called you a second time, and you were the same. When will you Kamis have a sense of who you are? I heard that you were talking about having a hali for yourself—you, who don’t even have a piece of land!”

Kahersingh started drawing abstract lines on the rough surface of the yard. Shreeprasad added a few more stories about how he’d helped Kahersingh’s family in the past, but that didn’t inspire any expression on the Kami’s face. He seemed to be resistant to any sentimental story, as if he had more important things to worry about than what
Shreeprasad coerced him to believe. Or was he just unready to believe what the old man was boasting, as Shreeprasad suspected?

“Why don’t you speak anything? How much money did you bring from Delhi?” he asked sternly.

“Not much, bajey. Ten thousand rupees,” Kahersingh revealed.

It confused Shreeprasad. Ten thousand rupees, and the Kami was behaving like a king!

“You lie to me? Will I loot your money?” he asked.

Kahersingh’s silence added to Shreeprasad’s anger. “Are you here to fool me, an old man?”

Kahersingh would not speak yet.

Shreeprasad went on. “With ten thousand rupees in hand, you want to build a house, get married, and settle down, huh? I tell you again, bring Batuli back and behave well.”

“She’s already back, bajey,” Kahersingh said, and it turned out he’d spent the week of the festival at her parents’.

It didn’t impress Shreeprasad. As though he didn’t care about what the Kami did, he asked, “What do you hope to do with the ten thousand rupees?”

“I want to work as your hali, bajey! This is the only money left with me,” Kahersingh said as he fished a wad of hundred-rupee Indian bills from his inner pocket and handed it to Shreeprasad. “Five thousand.”

Shreeprasad became thoughtful—Kahersingh sounded sincere, and he needed help. The couple would work for him almost for nothing if he provided them a piece of land and helped them settle down.
Shreeprasad looked at Kahersingh, whose face was equally expressionless. How could he look so indifferent at a time when he needed someone else’s favor? Was he fooling him? Kahersingh was known for his crooked mind, a sharp mind with perverse intentions. Shreeprasad found it hard to trust him.

As the silence lingered, Kahersingh straightened his body, stretched his left hand, and started folding the shirtsleeve. Shreeprasad kept watching until the golden watch flashed out. A golden watch. Like Shreeprasad’s own. Flashier. Newer.

“I’ve already told you, Kami, that I don’t need any ladashaeb to work as my hali. Want to play a game with me? Don’t I know who the hell you are?” Shreeprasad rose and instructed, “Get lost with your damn money! I need no ladashaeb to work for me! Do not dare show me your face again!”

*

The following day, Kahersingh was called to Shreeprasad’s house. As soon as he stepped into the yard, where a group of village gentlemen had gathered, and settled in a corner, Kashiram began, “Listen, Kami Kanchha, did you take away Jhakku Kami’s wife?”

“But Batuli is my wife, bajey!” Kahersingh said, and everyone laughed.

Jhakku Kami, who was there to collect his jari—compensation for losing his wife to somebody—looked around uncomfortably. One could clearly see his frustration: he could neither claim that Batuli was his wife nor accept that she was Kahersingh’s. After all, she was first Kahersingh’s wife, but she had eloped with Jhakku Kami, and now she had come back to Kahersingh. But Jhakku Kami had paid five hundred rupees to Kahersingh’s family when Batuli eloped with him. How could he let her go without a jari?
“But I paid his family five hundred back then, bajey!” Jhakku said.

“How much did you say?” one asked from the crowd. “How much do you claim?”

“You were there when I paid five hundred rupees many years ago. Even the interest would make it more than ten thousand rupees by now,” replied Jhakku.

“Ten thousand? You know what you can do with ten thousand rupees? You can marry twice with that much money,” Shreeprasad said.

“But bajey, I paid him five hundred then, and even the interest would make more than ten thousand by now!” Jhakku’s meek voice repeated.

“You motherfucking Kami, did you take Batuli as a mortgage to invest five hundred rupees? Either talk sensibly or get lost from this village!” Kashiram rose in anger.

After a brief discussion with Jhakku and the other villagers, one of his two aids who’d come as mediators said, “Okay, he’ll settle for five thousand rupees.”

“Five thousand? How can I pay five thousand rupees, hajoor?” Kahersingh objected.

“Why the hell did you take away someone else’s wife if you couldn’t, you shameless donkey?” With that, Lekhnath silenced Kahersingh.

No one spoke for a while. Shreeprasad’s daughter-in-law served tea in stainless steel glasses and bronze bowls.

“Are you ready to pay him five thousand rupees or not?” Kashiram broke the silence again.

Kahersingh continued to drink his tea, looking at the distance as if he had no concern with what they were saying. Suppressing his anger at Kahersingh’s indifference, Kashiram asked again, “Will you pay him five thousand rupees or not?”
He waited for a few more seconds, but Kahersingh would not respond. He was lost in the empty bowl that now sat in front of him.

That was not acceptable to Kashiram, who stood up for a third time. He rolled his lungi up to his waist, displaying his wrinkled cotton underpants, and panted, “You shameless Kami behave like a kaji when you wear a damn watch? Don’t we know whom you robbed in Delhi? You thief! Behave like a ladsaheb in front of us?”

A fleeting moment of tension, then Lekhnath spoke out. “I believe a watch makes a perfect jari.”

All the eyes in the meeting searched for Kahersingh’s watch. Yes, the watch. The damn watch! The watch that had disconcerted the villagers so much. The watch could be given away as a jari. A perfect jari!

“Lekhnath is right. A watch makes a perfect jari.” Shreeprasad announced, “Kami Kanchho will give away his watch to Jhakku. Is that okay, Kanchha?”

Kahersingh didn’t have to speak after Shreeprasad gave his verdict. But Jhakku Kami was quick to express his discontent. “Forgive me, hajoor! Only a watch?”

“What kind of watch is that? Do you know, you Kami?” someone from the crowd tried to silence him.

“But hajoor, that’s just a watch! What do I do with it?” Jhakku begged for more.

After some more negotiation, Shreeprasad gave his final verdict. “Listen, Kahersingh will give you his watch and one thousand rupees. After all, she is his own wife!”

A few curious women and children, who were not allowed to participate in such meetings, giggled in the nearby cowshed.
Kahersingh took off his watch and counted seven hundred-rupee Indian bills. Kashiram converted the currency into one thousand and fifteen Nepalese rupees, said that Jhakku Kami would return Kahersingh fifteen rupees, and handed them to Jhakku Kami.

Unlike what many expected, Kahersingh remained calm and composed. How could he value his watch so little? Some thought he might still be really rich, but most gentlemen in the meeting displayed a rare satisfaction at his humbling.

After everyone left, Shreeprasad reminded Kahersingh once more how he always took care of Kahersingh’s family—gave them food when they went hungry, provided a piece of land when they wanted to work. He also said that Kahersingh’s father and he were like friends when they were young. And Kahersingh was like his son.

In response, Kahersingh went to the cowshed, cleaned the cow pen, and gave the two oxen and a cow dry corn stalk for fodder. Before the Kami left, Shreeprasad let him know that Kahersingh would build a small house on a piece of land that Shreeprasad would provide him, settle down with Batuli, and work as Shreeprasad’s hali.

* 
A month into his new role, Kahersingh had transformed into a real Kami, Kami Kanchho, as the village gentlemen would want him to be. He wore a loincloth and a T-shirt double his size at the neck. His hair was cut short—at home—and he walked barefoot. He also had a sickle-holder tied to his waist.

“Hey, Kami Kanchha, have you finished plowing your field yet? Got to hire you for a day or two,” Kashiram said to Kahersingh one afternoon at the local teashop.
There were a few more inquiries about his availability to work for the villagers. Someone threw a Deurali cigarette at him without asking if he wanted it. The shopkeeper put a glass of tea beside him—Lekhnath had bought it for him without his notice.

On the way home—that was Shreeprasad’s house—Kahersingh Kami contemplated returning to Delhi. Never to come back.
The boy’s name was Govindev—Govinda Prasad Gautam, speaking legally—but no one called him by that name or any of its derivatives. Were he born in a wealthy and respectable family, he would be called Govinda Prasad, or Govindu, with affection. Were he born in an average family, he would be called by his first name, considered neutral. And were he born a son of a man who hardly earned anything and, as a consequence, who often quarreled with his wife, especially during meals, or were he born of a man who hardly inherited any fortune and, even if he did, squandered it all on alcohol or women or gambling or all of them, the boy would be called Govindev, as long as his father headed the family. This last derivative would also be used for any other people, young or old, who didn’t belong to any of the previous categories but could sometimes be useful—for instance, when someone in Pipaltar fell seriously ill and had to be carried to town on somebody’s back.

But the boy didn’t belong to any of the categories to secure him a name. As a result, the villagers knew him as *that boy*. That boy sang and danced at the villagers’ call at a local teashop.

One evening his mother lamented her husband’s disappearance, claiming the falsity of a local adage that even the stream turns back in twelve years. Govindev hadn’t realized until then that he also had a father—the man had left home a few months before the boy was born, more than twelve years ago, never to return.
That evening, sitting in the porch of their straw-roofed hut that her husband had built for her, she called him a cheat who’d promised her a more comfortable life than she had with her previous husband but instead disappeared from the village just months after their marriage. She beat her chest and swore that she’d rather spend her entire life with the impotent man—that’s what everyone said of her previous husband—than live with the burden of raising an unlucky kid. When the boy looked at her teary eyes accidentally, she raised her voice and proclaimed that her husband should have cut her throat before leading her astray.

Govindevy didn’t look too concerned, though. He continued to stare at a stray dog that sometimes slept beside him and followed him to the local teashop. The more the woman complained, the more the boy focused on the dog that looked quite satisfied and unaffected by the family grief. As Govindevy continued to stare, the dog looked more satisfied and eventually closed his eyes, as if pretending asleep. Govindevy’s face turned red, his lips twitched and trembled, and his eyes rolled in restiveness. As if in an attempt to keep himself sane, he ran into the kitchen, returned with a firebrand, and swung it on the dog, like axing firewood.

The dog jumped away, howling, giving the villagers a good reason to believe that someone was slaughtering a dog to control rabies.

Govindevy laughed hysterically, and he said he’d never thought the skinny dog possessed so much strength to jump like that. “He jumped like a leopard,” he added, as if he’d ever seen a leopard jump. He had, though, heard villagers talk about their encounters with the beasts in the nearby forest, where they went to fetch fodder for their mountain
cows—kept for worshipping on special occasions rather than for milk—and for their buffalos.

His mother wept for another half hour, complaining about the boy’s insensitivity. Pressing herself against the slowly peeling terracotta wall, she said that the son was her only reason to live, but he behaved worse than his father. Even at that age, he looked like an eight-year-old and played with kids in the street. He didn’t go to school; he sang and danced whenever asked, chatted and giggled with grownups, made vulgar jokes in front of his seniors without knowing what his words meant, fought anyone who was ready for it, wandered around the village aimlessly, got lost for a week and reappeared from nowhere to explain to her that he had been to his distant uncle’s or a friend’s, and never showed concern for his mother’s suffering. The son was no different from his father, and there was no future for her and the boy. She cried for a long time, hoping that the son would join her at some point.

Govindevy didn’t cry, though.

But the following morning he refused to sing and dance at the teashop.

*  

The village gentlemen who gathered at the teashop believed they were among the most privileged people on Earth because they could feed their wives and children adequately. In addition, they could afford to visit the teashop every morning and spend a few rupees on tea and cigarettes. For those gentlemen, Govindevy was an icon of family irresponsibility and shame. No one knew whether his father was already dead, whether he had settled in a faraway village with another woman, or whether he was working as a
buffalo herder in a remote corner of Bihar, India. They made guesses as it pleased them and boasted of their own fortunes.

And Govindey provided them with quick gossip and a pastime at the teashop. Whenever Govindey showed up, one of them was certain to ask, “Hey, boy, sing your song!”

Then Govindey would start “Chhori bhanda aama taruni . . .,” the mother younger than her daughter. He sang and danced as the onlookers cheered, and he joined them as they laughed at him. In return, he received half a glass of thin milk tea, or a piece of biscuit, or a cigarette that he sometimes took to his mother, and above all else, company—company that no other children his age could imagine.

Govindey had started singing at the age of six, when all other children his age began to go to school. As he was left without anyone to play with, he began to sit beside the village folks and listen to their conversations. Gradually, he learned the adults enjoyed certain things, like talking about Kumar Basnet’s songs. He first heard “Chhori bhanda aama taruni . . .” on the radio at the same teashop. A few days later, he sang it in front of the shopkeeper, who gave him a few pieces of biscuit. A six-year-old kid singing “Chhori bhanda aama taruni . . .!” Everyone in the shop, Govindey discovered, liked him and the song. In no time, the song became his brand. Within the next few months, he was taught other songs that were fun for the villagers to listen to when no women were around.

It had continued for all those years, newer songs adding to Govindey’s list.

*
But that morning, Govindey went to Karney, who worked as a ploughman for a villager and often squatted outside the shop, expecting a cigarette or a glass of tea from a generous soul.

“Karney Dai, how are you?” Govindey asked.

Karney inhaled deeply on a cigarette stub and readied to crush it on the ground. Govindey snatched the stub and sucked on it until his fingers burned. As he tossed the butt, he heard the shopkeeper: “Hey, boy, sing a song!”

“No more singing. No more dancing,” Govindey replied. And, with his eyes wide open, he scanned through everyone’s faces for their reactions. But the villagers continued with their own talks and teas and cigarettes; Shantaram, the shopkeeper, continued to boil thin milk tea. As a last resort, Govindey turned to Karney, but he, too, was more curious about the teashop talks than Govindey’s decision.

The villagers dispersed for lunch, and Shantaram closed the shop, but Govindey sat on the porch for a long time, alone, expecting somebody to come by and ask him why he wouldn’t sing and dance anymore.

A week passed without Govindey singing a single song at the teashop, though the villagers sometimes coaxed him, “Hey, boy, won’t you dance?” By the end of the month, almost everyone stopped asking him to perform. The villagers had other people to make fun of. There was one, Ranabirey, who was arrested at the Sunauli border while trying to hand over his wife to a pimp from Mumbai; there was another, Kisney, who was rumored to have fled to Nepal from Delhi, having murdered for a few grams of gold an old couple he worked for as a domestic helper; and there was one, Bishney, who had recently returned from Kathmandu just to jump off the local bridge into the Kaligandaki River.
(He had later explained that he had been overwhelmed at seeing the holy river after his long and monotonous life as a factory worker in Kathmandu. But the villagers had found that he was under the influence of alcohol and an unknown black substance that lay in his bag.)

Most of all, they had politics. Even after the 1990 revolution, common people’s living conditions had not improved. Instead, the leaders who wore two slippers of different colors before and during the revolution now owned five-story buildings in Kathmandu. Hardly any leaders visited their electorates, and none of them spoke about the scarcity of drinking water and aspirin tablets in the remote villages. The political parties continued to fight within and among themselves, and they had forgotten the promises made only a few years before. And amidst it all, some leaders in Kathmandu were talking about yet another revolution.

One evening, Radio Nepal, the state-run radio, announced that one of the left parties in Kathmandu would declare an armed rebellion if the government failed to fulfill its demands within the next two weeks. The following morning, a local leader summed up the impending crisis: “No one knows what’s going to happen in the country.”

“But we had such a big revolution just five years ago,” Shantaram said, his eyes fixed on the tea boiling slowly on a kerosene stove he’d brought from India.

“What do the fucking leaders in Kathmandu want?” asked someone in the gathering.

“They are spoiling the country,” added another.

“All those motherfuckers need to be hanged,” claimed an infamous supporter of the monarchy, who had fought the villagers during the 1990 struggle against the king’s totalitarian regime.
This provoked a heated discussion that Govindey did not understand. He sat silently in a corner, trying to make sense of what they said. In his effort to understand the debate, his facial expression continually changed; at one moment he looked as if he understood everything, and at the very next his face displayed misery, fatigue, and defeat.

After some heated exchanges, the villagers agreed to fight against any unwanted element that might attempt to infiltrate the village. Then they dispersed, leaving Govindey alone, like most other days.

Govindey awoke six times that night, and his mother suspected that he might have been possessed. When he sat up on his bed the last time, his mother grabbed him by his arm and yelled, “What the hell has happened to you, boy? Are you going to die this very night? Better you do it before you drive me crazy. When will you start behaving like a man?” After a pause, she continued, “You’re already twelve but haven’t done a single thing to support your mother. Look at Dhaney—exactly your age—he’s sending his mother money from Delhi.”

Govindey listened to her without any reaction, as if he were already dead as a result of her curses. However, he felt bad about one thing: before he’d stopped singing and dancing, he could at least earn a few cigarettes for his mother now and then. He struggled to sleep like the humble child that he was not. When his mother started her daily chores the following morning, he was still struggling. He fell asleep only when he imagined himself singing a latest hit by Kumar Basnet and dancing at the teashop. In his dream he saw that the villagers listened to him and cheered for him. They demanded, “Once more! Hey, boy, you rock! Once more!”
That day, after a month’s break, he again danced at the teashop. He again sang “The mother younger than her daughter . . .” He sang and he danced with such zeal that he seemed determined to compensate for all the past days he had not performed. He sang, he danced, and he giggled.

At the height of his excitement—having sung a song that said “Young is their daughter, not our fault”—he patted an old man. The old man glanced at the boy with scorn, but he knew that the boy entertained the villagers for a flash and then vanished, vanished into the unknown—or irritated them for a second and disappeared into oblivion—even before the villagers could react. There was no point in feeling embarrassed by him.

Govindey opened yet another song.

“You shut up, son of a whore!” Dhanabahadur, the royalist, yelled at the boy as an expression of his hatred toward the would-be rebels. A village gentleman had just shared that the Maoists were soon launching an assault against the government.

Govindey stopped, a wicked smile still flickering on his lips, and gaped at Dhanabahadur, as if thinking of a possible mockery. Had Dhanabahadur paid him attention, the boy would have made him look silly; he might, at the least, have said that half of the man’s mustache was missing. That was a skill the boy had acquired through those years as a teashop boy. He knew the world, yet he did not know it. He was only a boy, yet he was not only a boy.

When the boy saw that Dhanabahadur would not care about him, he lost his enthusiasm. The mischievous smile that flickered on his face vanished quickly.
A few seconds passed, but no one seemed to have any concern for the boy. Everybody had his own business. Most of them talked about politics; some talked about their sons in Dubai, Malaysia, or America. Shantaram was busy boiling milk tea, one glass after another, on the stove from India. Govindey’s performance had been enough for the day, although no one bothered saying so. No one complimented him; no one cared anymore that the boy had stopped singing.

Govindey’s eyes scanned the porch for a space to sit. A couple of young men had occupied the benches outside the porch while they waited for a carom board match to start. Some self-assured village gentlemen sat on worn-out mats on the low walls used as benches and assumed an air of uncontested wisdom—as if they knew everything about the village, the country, and the world based on what they had heard yesterday evening on the BBC Nepali Service. If someone from Kathmandu arrived just then, they were sure to ask, “Why do you think Clinton didn’t grant audience to our prime minister when he visited America last week?”

*Why can’t anyone make a little space for me?* Govindey thought. He considered pushing himself between Dhanabahadur and a villager as they debated politics. But he hesitated. *What if they also shunned me?* A mixture of pain, hatred, and anger on his face made him look like a little villain.

He almost shouted at Shantaram as he smacked on a wooden pole and walked away.

*On the day the talks between the Nepali Congress-led government and the Nepal Communist Party (Maoist) broke down—February 13, 1996—the Maoists declared an armed rebellion against the government and the two and a half centuries-old monarchy.*
Contrary to the claims made by the government and the major political parties that the Maoists would be eliminated within the next two months, the guerillas continued to attack police posts, capture banks, and destroy government offices in remote villages. Within the next couple of months, the otherwise quiet village of Pipaltar experienced the threat of Maoist infiltration, which entailed armed coercion to support the rebellion and the risk of government military operation further infringing on the villager’s peace. The people who believed in multiparty democracy wished that the Maoists would never enter their village. Conversations at the Pipaltar teashop turned to the need to protect the village from Maoist insurgents. And after each discussion, the villagers vowed to fight the Maoists until the last minute to keep them from entering the village.

Govindey did not show up at the teashop for months. To where did he disappear? No one cared. He might have run to Delhi—like so many village teenagers did—to work as a domestic helper. He might have gone to Butwal to work as a khalansee, a helper on a shabby city bus. Or he might have started working as a cleaner in a roadside hotel in a nearby town. Who would care? After all, he was just that boy.

* 

Govindey returned to the teashop six months later.

“Shantaram Dai, you’re still open?” he asked, sitting on a wall.

Shantaram was closing the teashop to go home for lunch. He threw a dismissive glance at Govindey as he struggled with the door lock and asked, “Hey, boy, where were you lost for so long?”

Govindey didn’t have to reply. He waited for a while and said, “You know, Shantaram Dai? Maoists are planning to enter our village.”
Shantaram dropped a bunch of keys on the floor.

“`I’ve heard that they’re coming to our village very soon,” Govindey went on.

Shantaram’s eyes opened wide. He looked as much surprised by Govindey’s demeanor as by the message itself. Even while talking about the Maoists, the boy was peculiarly composed.

“What do you mean?” he asked, attempting to sound indifferent. “Do you come here as their messenger?”

Govindey leapt across the porch, out into the open. His eyes were so wide open that he found it hard to blink. He stood with arms akimbo and stared at the horizon. The birds in flight hung in the sky, the air stalled, the lullaby-like song of the children memorizing *two one-za two, two two-za four* in the nearby school vanished—the world stopped moving for a moment. Govindey held his breath. Yes, just imagine that the Maoists had entrusted him with the message! Just imagine him as part of the Maoists! Just imagine Govindey standing in front of Dhanabahadur, the local leader, as a Maoist messenger! At the height of his excitement, Govindey almost said that he’d been recruited as a Maoist guerilla.

In a while, the birds resumed their flight, the air started to move again, and the school children continued with their multiplication table, *two one-za two, two two-za four*.

“No, I just heard,” said Govindey, equally dubious.

Shantaram was alarmed. The Maoists were said to have recruited thousands of children within the last few months, and *that boy* could easily be one of them. His hands
failed him time and again as he struggled with the door lock. He dropped the bunch of keys for a third time.

“But we will finish them if they dare come here,” the boy said.

Shantaram was not convinced. The boy could have been cheating him; the Maoists could have taught him the art of deception. Shantaram recalled Dhanabahadur’s insistence that the communists should never be trusted, not to mention the Maoists—they were an extreme. Who’d know? They might have sent the boy to measure the villagers’ guts.

When the door finally locked, Shantaram said, “Okay, Govindey, I’m in a hurry!”

Govindey’s face glowed with excitement. No one had to tell him that he was strong enough to fight the Maoists—Shantaram, the poor shopkeeper, who was nervous at hearing their name, couldn’t fight the rebels. Only Govindey could lead the villagers in the fight against the Maoists. Only he could stop the insurgents from entering the village.

* 

Each villager assembled at Dhanabahadur’s house a week later had a story to tell. Chaitanya had heard that the Maoists planned to invade the village any time within the next two weeks. Sitaram had been told that the Maoists planned to form a local committee of their party. Shankerdev said that they planned to force every household to provide them a fighter.

As they shared their stories, the villagers recounted Maoist atrocities in different parts of the country. The rebels slaughtered local leaders of other political parties for resisting the so-called “People’s War.” They crucified schoolteachers for allegedly spying against the Maoists and supporting the existing feudal system. They justified
capturing properties by claiming that the landowners had amassed their wealth by exploiting the poor. They invaded villages, formed their own local governments, established their own courts to decide who would be hanged and whose legs would be chopped off. They declared on the spot whose land had to be seized and to whom it was to be distributed. They forced the commoners to donate to the Maoist party in order to emancipate the poor! No victim would have a chance to prove his or her innocence—once the rebels made a decree, that was it. The rebels didn’t have the time to listen to those who, according to the Maoists, were reactionaries and agents of imperialists. The Maoists knew what people wanted and what had to be done.

“That’s out of the question. We can’t support Maoist terrorists,” declared one participant of the meeting.

“What’ll happen if the Royal Army knows it?” asked another.

“I’ve heard that they also plan to flash out a list of feudalists in this village,” Chaitanya added.

“Who for God’s sake is a feudalist in the village?” Dhanabahadur said, and spat, his head slightly cocked. “We’ll show the terrorists who we are.”

The atmosphere became tense as nobody spoke for quite a while.

“As long as we are united, they won’t kill a fly,” said Dhanabahadur. “We must stop them from infecting this village.”

“But who knows if they’ve already sneaked into the village?” Shantaram expressed his concern.

Who knows? Everyone’s eyes asked the same question. You can’t tell one from his or her nose.
“I’ll fight them. I’ll fight the Maoists,” Govindey blurted from a corner.

“Boy, you shut up!” Dhanabahadur gagged Govindey. “You’re behaving too smart these days.” He had no doubt that the Maoists were mostly the people like Govindey—Govindey himself could be one of them. Who knows? Dhanabahadur looked around and waited, as if he were expecting someone to second his thoughts.

As the villagers discussed their strategies to keep the Maoists beyond the borders of the village, Govindey sat comfortably in a corner, indifferent to the villagers’ anxiety. Rather, he seemed to be enjoying the sense of uncertainty that the villagers suffered.

That boy must have become a guerilla—many seemed to think, but no one dared express it. Nobody wanted to risk picking on a Maoist, if the boy happened to be one. What could they do even if they knew that he was a Maoist? If they harmed a single Maoist, the rebels could avenge it by taking the lives of dozens of villagers. And, one Maoist in their midst might mean a battalion surrounding the village.

The village assembly dispersed, determined to stop the insurgents from entering the village at any cost. The villagers would now keep their eyes on every stranger who might enter Pipaltar, and the villagers who wanted to leave Pipaltar would be required to notify their own parties of their destinations. In a subsequent meeting, they formed a village defense committee. They planned for a group of young men to keep guard at the village entrance, a bridge connecting Pipaltar with Siransa Mountain. They also decided that Govindey would remain in Dhanabahadur’s custody and work as his assistant.

When Dhanabahadur said to him, “Govindey, you’re my assistant now,” the boy was elated, though he didn’t know what it meant to be the man’s assistant. He guessed he’d
perhaps run errands for him, help him to irrigate his paddy field, or help his wife in her household chores.

He smiled mischievously. It didn’t matter to him whether he stayed home or went to a nearby town or spent a week or two at someone else’s house helping to fetch water or graze cattle or irrigate paddy fields. The villagers’ intention to keep him under their vigilance didn’t matter. What mattered to him was that he was now a Govindey.

Govindey mused on the incidents that had led him to work in a hotel in a nearby town, where he happened to see Maoist rebels with his own eyes. They were fearsome creatures who coerced his hotel owner into paying thousands of rupees each month to support their “People’s War.” They said he had to pay the amount willingly—they didn’t want to force him, but he had to pay. They talked about the country, the need to change its face and to liberate the people. Based on what he’d seen and heard while cleaning plates in the hotel, Govindey could tell that the Maoists were fearsome; even the otherwise formidable hotel owner feared them.

While working in the small town, he had also read slogans written on the walls—they talked about freedom and people’s rights; they talked about kranti, revolution; they talked about the poor. Although Govindey didn’t know what exactly a kranti meant, he did know that he was a poor boy, abandoned by his father even before he was born, and that his mother struggled day and night to make ends meet. It was thrilling that something strange was happening.

*  

Then began one day the preparation for the defense work. Govindey led a group of young men to a nearby forest, where they prepared bludgeons with which to equip the villagers.
By the third week following the assembly at Dhanabahadur’s, a group of young men stood ready at the village entrance to fight the insurgents.

The first night of vigilance was full of excitement. Armed with the bludgeons made of raw wood, the village youths vowed to protect their village from the rebels at any cost. They kept watch of the trail coming down the mountain across the river. On this September night, a clear sky and a glowing moon reminded them of approaching Dashain. The trail led to the top of the mountain and then down to the town of Waling, where they were told that Maoist activities were escalating. No one knew where the guerillas would go during the day, but as the night matured, they appeared in mass and scattered pamphlets, conducted janakarabahi (action against those who the Maoists thought were an obstacle in their mission of emancipating the poor), painted slogans on the walls, and did whatever they thought was necessary in a “People’s War.” The young men who volunteered to defend the village believed that the insurgents would walk down the mountain trail holding cheap “Made in China” LED torch lights.

The moon continued to move toward the southeast corner of the sky; the river continued to flow down to the terai districts; waves of cold breeze continued to pass by the villagers’ ears; but the Maoists did not show up yet.

“We’ll teach them a lesson one day,” Govindey spoke, as their waiting seemed to be fruitless.

“Those sons of bitches need to be hanged one by one,” another angry young man joined in.

“Those motherfuckers are ruining our country.”

“Fighting for the poor? By capturing peasants’ crops? Did you hear that?”
“They’re mobilized by India, those motherfucking Indian agents!”

“India wants to oust the king in order to turn Nepal into another Sikkim.”

“No, by China; they are Chinese agents.”

“Motherfucking Chinese agents!”

The boys waited until three o’clock in the morning, but they saw no sign of any light coming down the mountain trail. Some of the boys fell asleep on the ground, their weapons as their pillows. Others said that the Maoists would not come at that hour, and so they could return home for the night. Govindey said he was ready to return if others wanted, though he preferred to stay until morning.

On the way back home, they boasted in unison of successfully defending their village.

On the second night, the number of people intending to defend the village doubled. Even those villagers who previously thought that it wouldn’t be easy to fight the Maoists felt safe to join the defense team.

“I’ve heard that the Maoists have their brains on their asses!” Govindey cracked a joke at midnight. It enlivened the other boys, who then started inventing their own stories. One of them claimed to have heard that the Maoists had no heads at all. But Govindey disagreed. He insisted that they had heads and even brains, but, unfortunately, on their asses.

As they cracked more jokes and made fun of the invisible enemy, they continued to stare at the trail up the hill across the river. Past midnight, one, two, three . . . no human soul came down the trail. Morning chill stung their ears yet another night, and their drowsy eyes longed for a warm sleep. The river continued to flow down to the flat land
and then to India. The young men declared again that the Maoists would not show up that night, and they had saved their village from the insurgents for yet another sunny day, allowing people to paint their houses as part of the preparation for Dashain.

Before the fifth night of vigilance, Dhanabahadur suggested that it was not necessary for all young people to remain on duty every night. Instead, they could form a few teams and take their turns. After all, the whole village would be behind the defense teams in case the rebels really showed up.

Everybody agreed with a sense of relief. The excitement of the adventure that prevailed the first couple of days had vanished, and many villagers now doubted that the Maoists would ever show up.

“But I’ll volunteer every day,” said Govindey.

_We know a rascal like you will do that!_ Everyone eyed him with disbelief. What, after all, had that vagabond to do? He ate at Dhanabahadur’s, did a little of this and a little of that for him, and wandered. But when it came to speaking, everybody praised Govindey: what an energetic young boy he was! Dhanabahadur even said that he was proud of Govindey. His words, “Govindey is a gem of our village,” almost provoked the boy into crying.

Govindey wished he could really fight the Maoists; he wished he would encounter them that very night. He fancied how he would pounce on them and crush their heads one by one. He pictured himself slaughtering each one of the guerillas on the bridge and throwing their bloody corpses down into water that now became a bloody stream. In the bright autumn moonlight, the river looked like a purple stream and, to him, emitted a stench of fresh blood. It intensified Govindey’s urge to kill more insurgents. And he did.
Within seconds, all the villagers ran out to witness what the twelve- or thirteen-year-old boy had done. With the determination of the Marquez boy in the ghost ship story, Govindey would save the village from the insurgents who had enjoyed bloodbaths in the name of empowering the powerless.

In his vision, the villagers gathered at the riverbank to watch Govindey board a *pushpaka biman*, the plane used by gods, wave his hands at the awestruck villagers, and begin his journey to a world that every human being would aspire to after accomplishing his or her mission here in this mortal world. The villagers sang in his praise as sweet-throated birds filled the sky. Govindey then disappeared into the unknown.

That night, he did not speak at all. He fixed his eyes on the trail and waited for a sign of light and any human soul. Others talked and shared their jokes, but Govindey continued to pray that the Maoists would come, that they would come declaring war against the village through a loudspeaker. His eyes became more ferocious, and his ears became more acute. His friends continued with their usual talks, but he only heard the words: Maoists, insurgents, rebels, traitors, cruel killers, blood-thirsty terrorists.

When the team declared at last that the Maoists wouldn’t show up even that night, Govindey hated the rebels for their cowardice. He reluctantly followed the young men back to the village, frequently turning back to see if he might find a trace of a human being climbing down the mountain.

The following night, Govindey almost crossed the river to see whether the Maoists were waiting on the other side of the bridge. As the days passed, he walked a few meters up the mountain trail and returned in utmost despair. He stopped speaking at all unless asked a question, and he looked as if he were sleepwalking.
Then one night, at the end of the month, a group of boys followed him halfway up the mountain trail and captured him, claiming that he was a Maoist accomplice running away to join his comrades in the nearby town. “You treacherous villain!” they said.

To everyone’s shock, Govindey did not resist.

* 

Govindey did not resist even when he was presented as a Maoist cadre who’d conspired against his own neighbors to the village assembly the following day. As he sat on a slab, refusing to respond to any comment—like an obstinate kid refusing to reply to his parents’ questions—some villagers still expressed their doubt whether he really was a Maoist. Others wondered what the rascal of a kid might have wanted to do by joining the rebels. He only threw occasional glances at the crowd and looked away at the horizon.

The bigger the crowd grew and the more questions the villagers asked him, the more indifferent the boy looked. Gradually, it seemed as if he did not know that he was surrounded by villagers asking him questions and threatening to break his skull if he continued to be adamant. The crowd, the noise, the scolding, the spitting, and the swearing—he saw nothing and he heard nothing. Instead, after a while, he started murmuring something.

A few seconds passed, and someone in the crowd shouted, “What the hell are you muttering?”

The noise subsided, and Govindey’s murmur became distinct: “I won’t let them go. I won’t let them go!”

“What the hell won’t you let go, you asshole?” a desperate voice inquired.

Govindey acted as if he did not hear anything.
“When the hell are the sons of bitches coming, you son of a whore?” another asked.

“Don’t we have any other jobs to do, you scoundrel?”

“He deserves a nice bit of lesson.”

Dhanabahadur punched Govindey’s face, and the boy fell flat on the ground, blood oozing out of his mouth and involuntary tears filling his eyes. But Govindey’s gaze denied the pain that his body experienced. He did not have the heart to cry.

The boy received more blows. With his clothes torn to rags and his face smeared with a mixture of blood and dust and saliva and tears, he looked like the frightful madman that the village women invented when they had to frighten their babies, especially to herd them to bed. He was no longer recognizable as Govindey. All the villagers could see were his eyes, two distinct spots filled with water, at times winking to let the excess liquid trickle down his cheeks.

With nothing left to do, the villagers cursed at the boy a last time and dispersed one by one. Only then Govindey felt like crying. He felt like crying loudly when Shantaram closed his shop and left without even glancing at him.

*

The following morning, the stray dog that sometimes slept beside Govindey woke up at its usual hour and left home. Govindey’s body wanted more sleep, but Govindey did not. He washed his face, dismissed his mother’s admonition, and stepped out. Did he want to go to the teashop? He did not know.

As he strolled, wondering where he might want to go, a good-hearted widow called from her veranda out of love for the poor boy who, she must have heard, had been beaten
unfairly the other day. “Hey Maobadi, come to have some milk. You, ill-fated boy, only invite trouble to yourself!”

Sipping the buffalo milk freshly boiled in an age-old iron vessel, Govindey wondered if he was really a Maoist. A radio that was hung on a veranda pole was broadcasting news of Maoist atrocities. To the boy’s excitement, the radio reported that last night the Maoist insurgents had destroyed a police post in Rolpa, killing at least seventeen personnel. About twenty-five dead bodies of Maoist guerillas had been recovered from the rubble, and one of them had been identified as Govinda Prasad Gautam from Pipaltar.
For the first couple of days after landing in Kathmandu, Lokraj seemed to be proud of his displacement. While his mother, his wife, and their two daughters continued to pray—back home in the outskirts of Nepalgunj—that the Maoists would not rough up the womenfolk for God’s sake, Lokraj bragged in front of street-level party activists that he’d been forced to leave his village because of Maoists rebels. As if being displaced were an accomplishment, he boasted, “I’m Lokraj from Nepalgunj, I’m a displaced”; “I have a rice mill in Nepalgunj, I’m a displaced.” It seemed as if he were showing his missing enemies his worth: See, I’m displaced, too. Fuck! When would the Maoists ever force his poor neighbor, the nondescript Tikey Badi, to leave his village? Why would the rebels fight against his other neighbor, Dayaram, who struggled day and night to make ends meet? Yes, his cousin brother Jagannath and a few other extended families could have been forced to leave the village had they not already migrated to Kathmandu. But not those poor villagers. As if his displacement had made him equal to his relatives who’d done better than himself, Lokraj seemed to celebrate it. Nothing gave him as much pleasure as standing outside Gulmeli Teashop on an early January morning, a steaming glass of lemon tea in his hands, and commenting on national politics—“King Gyanendra’s stupidity will cost him big”; “Maoist terrorists ruined the country”—always adding at the end, “I’m a displaced.”
This folly didn’t last long, though. A week after he’d left his village, his wife urged him on the phone to return home without delay. The Maoists were threatening to raise their demand if he continued to evade them. As he hung up the phone and entered his hotel room, Lokraj thought what the rebels could’ve done to him had he really spied on them for the government forces. He sat on his bed in his ten feet by ten feet by ten feet room of the Kantipur Guesthouse and stared at the charred spots on the covers. “Motherfuckers!” he said, his eyes wide open. Why would he pay the sons of whores one million rupees to acquit him of a crime that he never committed? They had intelligence that he’d spied against the rebels? How mean a trick! How dishonest. How ungrateful. Where did their fathers’ katto that he’d given them all those years go?

He stroked his balding scalp and sighed. He could possibly pay the rebels one million rupees, he thought. He could take some loan. He could sell half his land. Or do something instead of risking his own and his family’s safety.

But no. One million rupees! On top of what he’d paid them all those years. How could he be certain that they’d leave him alone after he paid them this time?

His second week in Kathmandu: Lokraj met with Neta-ji, the leader who had represented his constituency until King Gyanendra had scrapped the parliament two years ago. He pleaded for help to avoid paying the rebels, and the leader assured him they’d fight against the Maoists together. Lokraj telephoned Jagannath but ended up just telling him he was on a visit to Kathmandu and he wouldn’t perhaps have the time to visit the cousin’s place. He visited a party office in Balkhu, hoping that he might see some people who could help him. He had, after all, worked for the party until a few years ago. But he was discouraged by the unfamiliar faces and a squad of young men who looked more like
street fighters than party workers. He called on a couple of relatives who’d moved to
Kathmandu to provide their children with a better education—their version of the story,
when in fact they’d moved to the capital to avoid Maoist extortion—and there he ended
up just congratulating them for their comfortable lives that they boasted of.

As he wandered the streets of Kathmandu, the rebels increased their demand to two
million. In another couple of days, they captured his land and announced that they’d now
distribute it to the poor, obviously to the people like Tikey Badi.

* 

A gust of wind surged into his room before a windowpane hit hard on the frame and
closed. The frosty water on the windowpane with a layer of dust on the outside and stains
of sputum and what looked like traces of snot and speckles of chewing tobacco on the
inside broke randomly into pathless trickles. Behind the windowpane the sun, blurred by
the fog, looked like a reluctant traveler to a hopeless afternoon. You never know life’s
intricacies. You don’t know what it’s got in store for you until you get it. You can only
do so much. Beyond that you are only a puppet, a puppet in the hands of dark forces.

His index finger scratched a stubborn stain that occupied half of a white square in the
checkered bed sheet. It felt cold and dirty. He withdrew his hand and looked around the
room with a vague desire to wash the finger. The room was empty except for his travel
bag in a corner, his shirt, a pair of trousers and a sweater that needed washing, a pair of
slippers that lay beside the door—he didn’t want them there (after using them in the
toilet) but he was not allowed to leave them outside; he’d tossed his Nike shoes under the
bed—and the bed itself, a twin-size, too short for his height. At night he had a hard time
making sure the blanket covered the undersides of his feet.
He kneaded his finger on the bed. And as if suddenly aware of his too self-conscious
moves, he briskly positioned the pillow against the wall—the blue paint peeling off at
places and showing the white primer—and reclined, his stretched feet covering the ugly
stain and the scorched spots, like renouncing their existence. The Maoists were playing a
dirty game, he thought. He claimed he didn’t support their politics, but he’d donated to
them numerous times. He’d sympathized with the rebels that they were fighting against
those who he thought he was fighting until a few years before as a party activist, and
against those relatives who regarded his father—disowned by his grandfather because
he’d married a lower caste woman—as a disgraced man. But how could an idealist
coating justify violence? He saw what exactly was wrong. Violence hurts when it occurs
at your doorstep, and the romance of rebellion dies a miserable death when you’re at the
receiving end of the sword’s blade. Only when it’s waged in a distant land does war
sound valorous, or in a story. Lokraj knew his vulnerability; war had arrived at his
doorstep.

That morning Lokraj felt an involuntary affinity with a young woman he’d first seen
at Gulmeli Teashop on the first day he visited the teashop. In response to a suggestion
made by the teashop owner she’d said, “Who’ll listen to a fucking displaced? You go file
a complaint, they’ll rape you, instead!” But he’d neglected her as no business of his. He’d
seen her a couple of times since then, but he hadn’t cared. He’d believed that he was
different; he could still work his way out. But that morning when he saw her again, he
felt like approaching her, listening to her stories, and sharing his own. Also, he felt a
strange sensation in his body—he needed human warmth. A fucking displaced! Her aura
had stimulated Lokraj in such odd ways that he knew he wouldn’t be able to look at her eyes for many days to come.

That very afternoon Lokraj chanted slogans in a protest rally in Ratnapark—
*Reinstate the parliament! Down with dictatorship.* The rally was protesting King Gyanendra’s takeover of the country’s executive power, and it gave Lokraj a much-needed refuge; it gave him an illusion of a protest against the Maoists. As he flowed with the crowd, he was convinced that he was doing something of worth.

Lokraj was still deep in his indulgence when the protest rally advanced toward the Royal Palace and the riot police started charging with batons. The slogans changed into desperate calls to flee, to attack the dictator’s agents, to smack the sons of whores, to kill the motherfuckers, and lengthy promises of vengeance as the protesters retreated into Kathmandu’s narrow alleys.

Lokraj squeezed himself into a corner of a *momo*-shop, a local dumplings restaurant, and, by depressing his guts and raising his shoulders so that he could tilt his head in the midst of the crowd, he examined his body. His limbs still shook, and his heartbeat felt like it was pushing its way out of his ears. But he was unscathed. Assured, he glanced at *Neta-ji*, who’d convinced him that the only way of solving the nation’s problems was forcing the king to surrender to the political parties. The leader stood triumphantly beside him despite a bump on his forehead. A young man at his side looked at him apologetically, as if he himself had hit *Neta-ji*.

“We’re going to win this battle!” *Neta-ji* said.

Lokraj’s face displayed hope rather than conviction.
“Only our party can cure the country’s ills!” the leader said as he inspected the faces of other demonstrators who’d swarmed the *momo*-shop despite the owner’s effort to block them out.

Lokraj was hopeful.

When the streets returned to normal—the police taking to the corners, a few three-wheelers readying themselves for passengers, and pedestrians returning to their natural pace—the protesters walked out of the restaurant and dispersed. The protest was over for the day; they would assemble at the same place tomorrow.

Lokraj followed *Neta-ji*. He hoped to convince the leader that his problem was really serious and it needed immediate attention. He started by clarifying his conviction that *Neta-ji* was always ready to help his constituents and that he never doubted the leader’s intention, nor his ability to do something for him. But even before Lokraj could touch upon his point, *Neta-ji* expressed his confidence that the king would very soon surrender to the political parties, and his party would hold the country’s reign. Then everything would change for good. The Maoists would no longer be a problem.

But the protests were going nowhere, and the Maoists continued to intensify their operations. “*Neta-ji,*” Lokraj pleaded with the leader at the end of his third week in Kathmandu, “today the rebels ordered my mill closed, forcing my assistant to join them. How long can I wait? When will the government act?”

“I know, I know,” said *Neta-ji*. “We will succeed one day.”

It was only after this that Lokraj visited his cousin brother. “What the hell is wrong with asking an able relative for help?” his wife had insisted. But he wouldn’t tell
Jagannath about his problem yet. *Oh, this Jagannath! There’s no way he can help me.*

*He’ll rather laugh at my condition.*

At an early age, Lokraj had been made aware of the differences between himself and Jagannath and other kids born into the family. While Jagannath lived in the three-story building of his grandfather, Lokraj lived in his single-story house at the edge of the land that his grandfather had afforded his father. Everybody treated Jagannath as the prince of the family, but Lokraj was often reminded of the “disgrace” of his parents. Lokraj wouldn’t even be allowed to enter the house until one day the old man showed pity on him, saying, “Stop punishing the boy for his father’s recklessness!”

Only then had the kid started becoming somebody. His charming personality quickly won favors for him—some gossiped that the cross between two castes always produced good-looking kids, though it was not something to be desired.

Jagannath, on the other hand, was a boy who even Lokraj doubted would ever become a man. He was short and thin, almost malnourished despite every effort of his mother to fatten him up, and his jawbones seemed to be pushing out even at an early age (now they made his face look like a disfigured triangle). As a student, Lokraj had fun bullying him. Jagannath was a less than mediocre student, and when he’d said in class that he wanted to become a *hakim* in future, a government officer, everybody had laughed.

It felt like just yesterday. Now, although Jagannath had in fact become an officer, lived in his own house in Kathmandu, and was said to have good connections, too, Lokraj was not sure with what gravity to vouchsafe his worry. Sipping on thin milk tea, he said at last, “The Maoists ordered my mill closed,” and waited.
The detail didn’t seem to bother Jagannath at all. What the hell? Lokraj then told him everything in one breath—from the way he struggled after his father’s death to how the Maoists ended up capturing his land and ordering his mill closed, and his wandering in Kathmandu. By the time he finished his story, his eyes were wet.

“I didn’t know you were such a great fool, brother,” Jagannath said. “Coordinate with Ramesh Silwal instead of rallying behind Neta-ji.”

“What’s there to coordinate with Silwal, a displaced like me?” asked Lokraj. “He’s also wandering the streets begging for help.”

“Yes, but he’s the leader of the displaced,” Jagannath replied. “Coordinate with him; you may receive a few hundred rupees of displacement allowance every week.”

Lokraj’s lips trembled. Then the words came out: “Do you believe I’m here expecting a few hundred rupees from the government? My land has been captured, my business has been closed, and my family is in danger, the rebels want me to pay them millions of rupees, and you tell me I’ll get a few hundred rupees a week? Do you think I’m here asking for alms?”

The cousin smirked. “You expect the government to send troops to save your land?”

Lokraj asked what the hell the government was doing to protect its people from Maoist atrocities. He name-called Prachanda, the rebel leader, Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa, and then King Gyanendra. “The head eunuch,” he christened the king.

“Hey, hey, no defaming the King, okay? He’s the one who’ll save the country, okay?” Jagannath blurted. Then he turned to the kitchen and yelled, “Hey, look at our miller cousin. Look at our miller cousin! He wants King Gyanendra to send troops to save his property. Look at him! Look at him!”
Jagannath’s two sons giggled in the kitchen. One of them said, “The miller uncle seems to be interesting. How could the Maoists be so cruel to him?”

More giggles followed. Lokraj started taking off his shirt as if in protest. The white underclothes he wore displayed traces of sweat.

“I’ve asked Silwal to coordinate with the displaced. All the support goes out through him,” Jagannath said.

Lokraj grabbed his shirt and stared at the floor, unsure if he’d heard Jagannath correctly. But he didn’t want to ask him for clarification; he never thought an ass like this cousin would one day be in a position to help him out, and he was correct.

But it turned out, as a government official Jagannath had been charged by the head of a small unit at the Home Ministry with listening to the grievances of the displaced and supporting them to survive the cold winter of Kathmandu and, as Lokraj could understand it even if Jagannath didn’t say it specifically, covertly instigating people against the rebels. Silwal, a self-appointed leader of the people forced to leave their villages and small towns, had become his de facto liaison.

“You know I can’t deal myself with every displaced person,” Jagannath said, as if he were shouldering all the responsibilities of all the victims of the bloody conflict.

Lokraj refused to dine at his cousin’s. He grabbed his bag and said, leaving, “I’ll figure out if I can do something myself. You’ve become too important to help me.”

“I have reports that you supported the Maoists. Why this drama now?” Jagannath said as Lokraj got out.
It felt like a dream to Lokraj that he’d once revolted against his own family and fought against the king’s totalitarian regime. It wasn’t long ago, but things had changed so much. It was humiliating to be asking for Jagannath’s favor.

Lokraj had a plain naan and mixed vegetables at Lumbini Tanduri Restaurant near the prime minister’s office, and when he found a hotel near the Bhimsen Tower in Sundhara—not even trying to get a room at Kantipur guesthouse, where he’d stayed before—it was ten at night. Tired and dejected, he wished for the sky to fall and crash on everything that gave an illusion of justice in the world. He was so ready to be part of that force.

The sky didn’t fall. Instead, a teenage boy had forced his door open. “Dai, you need something?” he asked. “Only one thousand, dai,” he continued, as Lokraj took a few seconds to think if he really needed anything. “Okay, seven hundred. Five for her and two for this poor brother,” the boy bargained. “It’s hard to do this business, dai. The sons of whores are always preying on us.”

Lokraj wished it were the widow, the “fucking displaced.” But she happened to be a teenager—thin, almost malnourished, and poorly clad—and the encounter ended miserably. As soon as Lokraj uttered a few words, she said he spoke like her big brother who—she said—hoped she’d one day become a big, big singer. Had the brother not joined the Maoists and been killed by the army, she lamented, she wouldn’t have to work in a garment factory that paid her so little, forcing her to sell her flesh to survive in the city. She threw herself into Lokraj’s lap and wept, our Lokraj staring in the air like an embattled hero left alone with a dying princess.
After she left with her money, Lokraj looked out the window, as if to shake her off of his thoughts, yet another character in the harrowing story of the Maoist war.

Across the street were a few restaurants with neon lights flashing. At the entrance of each restaurant was a brightly lit signboard that said either “dance restaurant and bar” or dohori sanjh, restaurants for traditional folk songs mixed with alcohol and, as the night matured, occasional sex deals—as he’d heard, and it seemed quite plausible now. In the street there was a consistent commotion—cars, taxis, and motorbikes dropping off or picking up people. At one point, a young man and a girl briefly scuffled, and another man forced her into a taxi. Lokraj continued to observe, puzzled. It was hard to believe that he was in the same country where people were being displaced from their houses and villages and cities each and every night, in the same country where fighting was a ritual and the number of the dead was growing day and night. Untouched by those calamities, Kathmandu was feasting just fine.

The following morning, Lokraj told his wife over the phone that he was meeting with important people in Kathmandu, and he would return home soon. “Just tell them I’ll be home as soon as I manage my money.”

After he hung up, he spent a long time in the small cubicle from which he’d phoned home. He picked up the old phone book and flipped its pages, looking over the names and numbers without a particular person in mind. Some names in the book had become so old that he didn’t even recognize them—where might all those people have gone? He recalled some of his old friends with whom he had fallen out of touch, especially after his marriage. It felt as if they had different routes and different destinations. They had
progressed and made names, while he’d been stuck as a miller. It was especially painful that so many of them were his inferiors, including that ass of a cousin.

The more he scanned through the phone book, the ruddier his face turned, and he became restless. How come everybody was fighting and progressing, but he was looking for somebody to have pity on him? It had just been a few years since he’d bullied many of them, but now he seemed to be a real coward. Even the ones who owned nothing were fighting and living with dignity—who were the rebels, after all? They were now dictating to him, a man who had once fought against the king himself.

Lokraj found the cubicle to be too small for him. He pressed himself into a corner so that he could open the door and step out.

“The Maoists have ruined the country. We need to fight,” he said to the shopkeeper, paying for the calls he had made.

“Is that it, dai?” the young man at the counter asked, as if he didn’t know anything. But the dismissal in his tone was apparent.

“Why? Can’t you see that? They’ve ruined the entire country,” Lokraj said.

“It goes like this, dai. Whoever has the stick owns the buffalo—no comment!” said the young fellow, his face displaying the arrogance of an upstart.

Lokraj didn’t agree. How could the young man be so indifferent to the plights of the people? “That is irresponsible as a citizen,” he said.

Those words unnerved the salesman; he shut his lips tight, counting money.

“You want to fight the rebels the army is fighting? With your bare hands?” he asked, handing Lokraj the change. “Okay, go and become a martyr. All the best!”
Lokraj stepped out, regretting how coldhearted the Kathmanduites had become. The country was burning, people were being killed or displaced, but the capital city continued to play its flute.

That afternoon he didn’t participate in the Ratnapark protest. Instead, he went straight to meet with Silwal at Bajeko Sekuwa, a small barbecue restaurant near the airport.

* * *

“I’m serious about it, Silwal-ji,” Lokraj said.

“Serious about what?” Silwal asked, munching mutton barbeque.

“About the fight. We must resist the rebels,” Lokraj said.

Silwal chewed for a while more and said, “Anti-Maoist protestors are being attacked everywhere. You know that, don’t you?”

“But it’s the capital city!”

“You think Kathmandu is clean?” Silwal said, putting down his beer glass. “They are everywhere. They may be right here in this restaurant.”

It had a numbing effect on Lokraj. For a moment he forgot why he’d come to Kathmandu in the first place. Then he realized that the situation had already gone out of his control. At what cost would the Maoists allow him to return home and do his business? He recalled Neta-ji, who’d asked him the last time they met, “Do you think the rebels will allow you to return to the village?” When Lokraj replied he’d done nothing wrong, Neta-ji had asked, “Then why had you run away from the village?” Lokraj had replied that Neta-ji already knew it, but the leader had said, “The rebels don’t want you in the village, comrade. They’ve done everything according to their plan.” “I’m doomed,”
Lokraj had said. “No, not yet!” Neta-ji had declared, and said that they’d continue to fight.

Continue to fight! As if the country knew only fighting, nothing else. Everybody talked about fighting. The Maoists were fighting, the proclaimed fighters. The political parties were fighting. The king was fighting. And people were fighting either from this or that camp.

“Aren’t you afraid of incarceration, Silwal-ji?” Lokraj asked, wondering at the relaxed Silwal, the so-called leader of the displaced, who was supposed to be organizing the people like himself against the rebels, but he would only guess about rebels sitting in the same restaurant where he was drinking beer. Lokraj lowered his head and chewed mutton sekuwa and puffed rice, occasionally biting on pickled ginger to help his mouth water. Silwal for him embodied yet another mysterious face of the city. What was Lokraj actually doing by opening up his heart to this Silwal? Silwal so far had been just one more displaced person in the city, struggling to find a way out of Maoist threat in the village, like himself. But now he seemed to be much more than that. He looked comfortable, and easily accepted the Maoist presence around himself.

“Killing me will have bigger consequences. They know it,” Silwal said, still calm. “They don’t want to provoke the government and rights activists too much, just like the government doesn’t want to provoke them unnecessarily.”

Lokraj’s heart sank. The deaths of different people meant different things. Who’d care if a nondescript Lokraj died that very evening? In Silwal’s equation the people like Lokraj carried no value. That was the politics of the day—you’d become either a self-appointed leader who commands the fate of the mass at his will or a nondescript follower
whose needs and aspirations are trampled by the leaders’ ambitions. There was such a huge disparity between being a leader and being a follower.

Silwal was proudly speaking from the position of a leader, no matter whether the displaced acknowledged him or not. And Lokraj? He had spent a few days protesting for Neta-ji, in Ratnapark, and now here was another leader to follow.

This was not who Lokraj had been.

His parents’ effort—by sending him to a college in Kathmandu after he’d passed the SLC exam—to make him a “big man” and not to let him fall behind Jagannath had failed. He had been forced to return to Nepalgunj when the Amrit Campus, where he’d been enrolled, closed as part of the state’s effort to contain the student protests against Julfiker Bhutto’s execution in Pakistan. He’d then joined a local college—wasting hard-earned money by sending him to Kathmandu didn’t look quite right at that time.

As the country prepared for the referendum on the country’s political future that the 1979 student protest had resulted in, his campus became more a political theater than an educational institution, like most other colleges in the country. Lokraj bunked classes, mobilized local boys, and distributed pamphlets in favor of multiparty democracy, despite his grandfather’s insistence that the King, not communists, knew what was good for the country and its people. After the king won the 1980 referendum, Lokraj found himself working for an underground party. He gave up his studies and continued to work for the party despite his father’s continual pleadings—for the sake of his grandfather—that he stopped the nonsense. Lokraj replied that he’d already glimpsed the rays of democracy, and he couldn’t turn back. His parents hoped that he’d become a family man after his marriage, but he continued to think that he was doing something important,
something that no Jagannath could ever do. Lokraj maintained this political affiliation until King Birendra conceded his defeat in 1990, when the party activists swarmed into Bhadrakali’s house, forced the octogenarian out into the yard, smeared his face in soot mixed with mustard oil, and took him around the town on the back of a starving mule, a garland of worn-out shoes around his neck.

The old man didn’t survive beyond a month after that humiliation. Even his father, who’d lived the last three decades with a deep chasm between himself and his father and a never-ending want for fatherly warmth—on top of the disgrace he was living with—showed signs of resignation that would end his life soon. Lokraj’s family implied that he was responsible for all the disgrace in the family, and some neighbors blamed his second daughter, born the week his father died, for the death. His mother wouldn’t tell him a word, but the silence of a widowed mother couldn’t be more troublesome. On top of that, the same democracy brought nothing but corrupt leaders, lawlessness, and chaos. He was effectively silenced as soon as multiparty democracy was restored in the country.

All those years wasted in the name of democracy, and he’d been left with nothing but the land that his father had preserved for him, while Jagannath had continued his studies and “progressed.” Hence, one day, he’d decided to settle for a mill, something regarded as progressive by the standard of those days. At age thirty-three, he had two daughters—one five and the other three years of age—and his widowed mother to care for. He was now a family guy stuck in his small world. When the Maoists launched the armed rebellion in 1996, Lokraj was busy making sure that his mill husked rice properly.
With the mill closed now and all the hopes of getting any assistance to stay safe back home and do his business dwindling, he decided that he’d now fight his own war. He’d not just follow Silwal, but become his co-traveler. He’d rather lead.

If Silwal could, why couldn’t Lokraj?

2.

The small park in Baneshwor was full of people making the best of the winter sun and killing time. Young men had spread newspapers, Union Jacks, and American Flags on the scalded ground and sat on them. Some reached out their hands and plucked whatever grass remained nearby, as if they were weeding the park. Some ground with their thumb and index fingers the leaves that they plucked from the small pine plants. Some broke peanut pods and threw the shells around themselves. On the pavement along the park, a couple of barefooted children kicked a stuffed sock—their soccer ball—and shouted obscenities.

Lokraj waded through the men and women, placed a wooden chair, which a teenage boy carried for him, in the middle of the park, hopped onto it, and clapped his hands as an invitation to listen to him.

A few pairs of hands clapped after his, like spectators of a magician’s street show.

Then Lokraj began his speech: “Respected mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters!”

He paused, looked around, and corrected himself, “Respected brothers and sisters!”

Then continued, “The country has been crippled. People have been killed; people have been forced to flee their homes, but the government is sleeping with mustard oil in its ears.”
A few members of the audience giggled.

Then he saw a young woman beside a trashcan poke another girl and grimace, like she was making fun of yet another so-called leader on the street talking big to fool the poor. Lokraj’s spirit failed for a moment when he realized that it was the same woman who’d expressed her frustration at the teashop: “Who’ll listen to a fucking displaced?” But at the same time he felt a strange sensation and an urge to do something for himself, for the woman, and for the others like him, if he really could. Was she challenging him?

He continued. He said that the rebels had to stop their attack on the common people, the government had to provide security to the displaced, and so on. Most passersby slowed down as they approached, pricked their ears for a while, then resumed their walks. But some of them pressed onto the walls, curiously eyeing the speaker. He spoke of the people’s suffering. He criticized the government for its failure to provide security to its people, not to mention other needs like drinking water and acetaminophen tablets. He disparaged the Maoists for making people’s lives hell.

When Lokraj finished his speech, a small crowd surrounded him in appreciation. He shook hands with strangers, patted unknown shoulders, asked them if they were in good health, as if he’d known them for years and he cared about their condition, and as if it really mattered that he asked. A young man offered to carry the chair for him. A middle-aged man wearing a cross-khukri on his black cap held his hand, as if they were known to each other for ages, and proposed Lokraj to have a glass of tea with him.

A couple of similar performances. A new leader was born, like many others in the country.

*
The next time they met, Silwal greeted Lokraj with a protest plan for a full month—demonstrations, letter of memorandum to the prime minister, sit-ins outside the prime minister’s residence in Baluwatar, complaint letters to major political parties. And if the government didn’t heed them yet, a Kathmandu valley closure—a strike in the capital.

Lokraj was appointed as the second man to Silwal and made responsible for the coordination of the protest plans. When their protest plan was carried by the press the following morning, Lokraj’s cousin brother called him and said, “I hope you’re not angry anymore. Why do you need to stay in a hotel while I have the whole house here?” (And in fact, Lokraj returned to Jagannath’s.) After the displaced showed their presence at a few places, especially after the sit-in outside the prime minister’s residence, Neta-ji told him they now needed to form a strong alliance and participate in each other’s protests.

“After all, we have the same ends,” he asserted. “Defy any kind of dictatorship, and restore democracy.”

Lokraj was not ready to listen to his wife’s pleas to return home even when the Maoists threatened to vacate his house if he continued to evade them and rally against the Maoists “as a puppet of the reactionary forces.” He told her that he, instead, planned to bring the whole family to Kathmandu for a few months. He would arrange for their move as soon as he found a suitable apartment. It was not just his property that had been captured; the whole country was suffering. Once the Maoists were defeated—it wouldn’t take long to eliminate them if the political parties and the king were committed—the land would be there where it was now and the house wouldn’t go anywhere, either, he insisted. Although his wife begged that he think sensibly and return home before it was too late, he silenced her by asserting he knew better.
Jagannath, however, didn’t seem to think so. One evening, in a restaurant, he said that he had a small piece of advice for his cousin brother.

“What advice? I’m open to any,” said Lokraj.

Jagannath said Lokraj needed to slow down a little. “I’ve been told that you’ve become too aggressive, and certain people are not happy,” he added.

Lokraj defended himself. The displaced were fighting for their rights. The Maoists had to listen to them, and the government had to provide them security and protect their lives and properties. “Certain people? Who the hell are those certain people?” he asked.

Jagannath said Lokraj knew it well.

“You once blamed me that I supported the Maoists. Now you’re asking me not to protest against them?” Lokraj demanded.

Jagannath looked thoughtful but not worried. He seemed to be saying, I know I know!

“But the issue is a little complicated.” He spoke like a real bureaucrat. “Hasn’t Neta-jji told you about the ongoing negotiation between Maoists and the other parties?”

“But you support the king, don’t you?” Lokraj asked.

“That’s not the issue,” said Jagannath, annoyed.

Despite the agitating parties’ disagreement with the Maoists on many issues, there were efforts to aggregate their strengths to fight the monarchy. After King Birendra’s murder in 2001, regardless of his brother’s crowning as the new monarch, the Maoists had declared that the country had already become a republic. Although the rest of the political parties didn’t aim to eliminate the monarchy, they were getting increasingly fed up with the new king, especially after July 2002, when he’d deposed the elected prime
minister, assumed executive power of the country, and cancelled parliamentary elections scheduled for November the same year. The political parties were negotiating an alliance with any force that might help them confine the king within his ceremonial role as the head of state. Although their own local leaders and activists were being killed by the Maoists, the top leaders were courting the rebels, which was intriguing to many, and which explained the complexity of the ongoing conflict. It was hard to tell who was fighting against whom. Lokraj had to learn how he could possibly manage it.

“I mean, you’d better be less aggressive against the Maoists,” Jagannath said. “You don’t know what’ll happen tomorrow.” Then he sympathized with Lokraj’s troubles.

“Are you my cousin?” Lokraj asked spontaneously. “Or what?”

Lokraj suspected Jagannath’s lack of sensitivity. Did he care that the rebels had captured his cousin’s property and threatened to displace the family altogether? Did he care about that? Lokraj was not ready to listen to Jagannath’s explanation. He asked him at least not to interfere in his work, if he was unable to help him out. Jagannath begged him at least to try to understand what he meant, but Lokraj said it was enough. He knew what he was doing.

But how could he be so foolish? His wife pressed him the following morning. Wasn’t it outright stupid to take to the streets against the rebels while the whole family still lived in the village? When would he understand that and return home? Now the Maoists had given him a week’s time, and if he failed to show up, they would force the family—his wife with two young daughters and his aging mother—to the streets. Or, they threatened, the family would have to pay an even higher price.
For a moment he thought about dismissing her, too—she might be speaking Jagannath’s words—but no! He was truly running out of time. He decided he must have a final talk with Neta-ji.

*

With a resolution that he’d force the leader to act or tell him clearly that he was unable to do anything, Lokraj entered the leader’s residence. Then he became skeptical of his own sanity. How do you know that your senses are still working properly? And when do you know that you’ve lost your mind? Was what he saw in Neta-ji’s residence his fancy? A young man who’d fled with a young woman’s necklace in front of his eyes in the broad daylight two days ago was dusting off Neta-ji’s Prado in the garage.

That day he was returning from Ratnapark after a protest. When he got into a bus, he saw a young man who occupied a whole seat supposed to accommodate three by stretching his leg. Lokraj eyed the seat, hoping the young man would remove his leg and let him sit, and the young man glared at him like an angry bull. He then moved to another seat in the back. By the time the bus stopped at the Baneshwor stop, it carried passengers twice its capacity. Those who wanted to get off pushed their ways through the standing passengers, swearing and grumbling—Don’t you have your eyes? Stepping on my foot! My bag, my bag it is. Watch out, you motherfucker! Then a woman cried that her gold chain had been snatched from her neck. A moment’s silence, and then a burst—There he goes, the thug; grab him! Punch, punch at him! Don’t, don’t let him escape! Amidst a bustle at the door, a young man scrambled to free himself, and once he snapped off the bus, he ran a few meters and turned back to ensure no one followed him. Lokraj saw the same young man who’d glared at him before, now a knife in his hand, warning the
passengers not to give him chase. The looter took a combative position for a few seconds, and once he was safe enough to escape, he dropped the knife and fled.

The passengers complained about the lack of law and order in the city and tried to console the woman. One suggested that she report the incident to the police. And many others denounced the police for their worthlessness and said that the city was no longer a place to live. Lokraj had then gotten off the bus with a sense of guilt over his inability to do anything, not even spare a few words, to comfort the woman he thought he knew but couldn’t quite recall.

And now, the same young man stood in front of him, live.

No doubt, he had lately been spending a lot of time thinking—thinking a little too much. He had once mistaken the route to Pashupatinath Temple for the route to Singhadurbar; he had been speaking in his sleep—Jagannath’s son had made fun of it just two days before; he had been reminding himself at times, *No, no, she can’t be my daughter. I’m in Kathmandu, how can I see her here?* But how could he be dreaming about this young man? Was it possible he was so disturbed that he couldn’t see anyone but the scowling young man everywhere? Was he mistaking one face for another?

_No, that’s not true_, he thought as he gaped at the young man who threw a scornful glimpse at him and continued to run a piece of cloth over the side of the car.

_“Neta-ji’s inside,” _the young man announced, wiping the windshield. He sounded confident and neglectful as though he were a different person. By not paying attention to Lokraj, he seemed to be asserting that he didn’t know the visitor—_No, I’m not the guy you think. Why don’t you mind your own business?_
Neta-ji was on the phone, telling the person on the other end that he’d do it very soon, as soon as the king gave in to the political parties. He’d then hold a good position—might become a minister, no joke—and it wouldn’t take him long to meet the aspirations of his constituents. A half dozen expectant faces followed the leader as he moved from one corner of the living room to another. Neta-ji grinned at Lokraj and signaled him to sit on a shapeless couch.

Where would he start the talk? Tell the leader that the Maoists were threatening to expel his family from his house? Plead with him to request and even bribe somebody at the Ministry of Home Affairs so that his property and family would be protected? Would that really work? How much influence would the leader have, in fact?

Or should he board a night bus that very evening and surrender to the rebels? Would anybody really be able to do anything for him and his family?

Or what of that bastard, the thug? What the hell was he doing there?

Or the poor woman who had been looted? Oh, here he recalled—the woman dressed differently, in a sari and full make-up, was in fact the same woman. “Who’ll listen to the fucking displaced?” Hadn’t she looked at him with pleading eyes, as if she knew him? Shame and guilt overcame him as he recalled how he had talked about the suffering of the people in the park just a few days back, in front of the same woman. She must have laughed at his cowardice and his insensitivity toward a poor woman. Why couldn’t he spare at least a few words of consolation?

Neta-ji bid goodbye to the rest of the visitors, promising to take up their issues seriously—they were the bloodline of his politics, he said, and added that he hoped to see them at Ratnapark in a while.
It discouraged Lokraj. Did the leader do anything other than make promises and stage protests?

“Lokraj-ji, it’s very wise of you to be part of these protests,” Neta-ji said. “It’ll pay off soon. I’m happy.”

*Oh, really? I wish it were true,* thought Lokraj.

“But I think you need a bodyguard now,” the leader went on.

“A bodyguard for me?” Lokraj sounded utterly vulnerable.

“I mean it’s good to have somebody who joins you as you go around,” Neta-ji said.

“There are boys who just want to escort leaders. No need to pay.”

*Neta-ji* looked out the window. “See, I already had two. The other day that boy came to me—actually, one of my assistants introduced him to me—and said he’d be glad to be my bodyguard, or assistant, whatever you wish to call it,” he explained. “It makes sense to have these boys. In fact, you can’t do politics without them. Frankly, you can’t.”

*Neta-ji* also explained why he would rarely be arrested in the protests. He said he might not need to explain it—there were always those boys protecting him, helping him get out of any mess.

Lokraj ended up saying he had nothing to say. “Just thought I’d stop by and say hello,” he added.

Neta-ji didn’t forget to *hope* to see Lokraj at Ratnapark in a while.

When Lokraj broached the idea of a bodyguard with Jagannath that evening, his cousin said it was not a bad idea. The times had changed. Party leaders trusted those boys more than they did the police.
Lokraj resisted. His conscience would not allow him to be protected by street thugs. “Where is the state? Where the hell is the state?” he asked. And he said he was losing his mind.

* 

Despite his waning faith in himself and the local protests he’d been part of, and the increasing risk, Lokraj led a team to make effigies of the rebel leaders, Prachanda and Baburam, to be burnt during the anti-Maoist protest on February 13, the ninth anniversary of the launch of the “People’s War.” While the Maoists elsewhere prepared to celebrate the completion of yet another “glorious” year of revolution and devised newer techniques to fight the Royal Nepal Army, Lokraj and company made fun of Prachanda’s wicked eyes and Baburam’s crooked nose as they worked on their effigies, though they hardly knew how the rebels looked—they were still underground. It gave Lokraj a strange sense of authority over the rebels as the anti-Maoist activists carried the effigies—some of them spitting at the rebels, others punching them spontaneously, and most of them showering curses on them—during their protest on the thirteenth. When the protesters threw petrol on the effigies and set them on fire, Lokraj had the loudest voice in the crowd: “Down with the Rebels!”

The slogans stopped when Silwal clapped and readied to give a speech. He said the protest was a good blow to the rebels, who would face quite a loss if they failed to listen to the Maoist victims. Encouraging his fellow activists, Silwal said that he would fight Maoist atrocities till his death. There was no way he’d back down from his mission despite the rebels’ demand to close his Kathmandu office or be prepared to face death.
With a renewed hope, Lokraj thought that the next time his wife called him he’d assure her to bring the whole family to Kathmandu as soon as he found a reasonable place to live. The anti-Maoist protests were gaining ground; the government seemed to be intensifying its operations on Maoist strongholds.

But two days later, on the evening of February 15, he called his wife, instead, and announced, “I’m returning home tomorrow morning; I will face the Maoists whatsoever.”

That afternoon two Maoist cadres had shot Silwal dead in front of his office, forcing Lokraj to believe that his wife had been right all along. There was nothing he could do other than compromise with the rebels to save himself and his family. The government had been so ineffective and unresponsive that it could not defend its people even in the capital city.

He said he’d negotiate with the rebels and surrender whatever they might want. He had his family, and they wouldn’t die of hunger. As if to convince himself, he said to his wife quite a few times, “We have our beautiful family. I’ve done nothing wrong. Why should I worry?”

But Lokraj worried the whole night. By daybreak, he was fully aware of the trap he was in. He was no longer the Lokraj who was said to have left the village to arrange for money to pay the Maoists.

As if longing for the days when he’d just come to Kathmandu, as if wanting to start it all over again so that he could take a new route and get out of the trap he was in, Lokraj went to Gulmeli Teashop early in the morning and ordered a glass of lemon tea. But
unlike those early days, he avoided talking with the curious party activists who’d readily engage themselves in any issue—from corruption in the country to the twin-towers attack in America. He sat on a bench at the entrance and thought *No, the state can’t abandon its people.* Then he felt helpless; he had been abandoned. There was no place he could go, there was no one he could talk to. He had exhausted his energy, and he was in a worse position than he’d started. He wished he could bury his head into somebody’s lap and cry like a baby, letting his heart come out.

He cupped the glass in his hands, too careful not to let it fall as well as to keep his hands warm, and threw his forlorn eyes at a woman in front of a temple two blocks from the teashop. The young woman, a baby slung on her chest, was sweeping the street. Lokraj watched her intently, preparing himself to move if the dust came his way.

The broom ruffled the dust, paper waste, and plastic bags that lined the pavement where there still lay brick mortars from the previous day’s protest—after hearing about Silwal’s shooting, Lokraj was hurrying to his cousin’s when the protest erupted in Baneshwor. As the pedestrians passed by the sweeper, she paused and glanced at their faces, although none of them would care about her; they only hopped past her to avoid the dust. Once, the woman smirked at a teenager who looked terribly offended by the dust. Lokraj’s eyes followed the boy, who continued to cover his face with both his hands long after he’d moved through the dust cloud.

“What’s the time, dai?” the woman stood in front of Lokraj, asking.

Lokraj returned to himself, and only now did he realize that he’d been observing the young woman all along. As she stood in front of him, he could only hear, “Who’ll listen to a fucking displaced?” There she was again, as if she were an embodiment of his
displaced self that would always roam around himself, like a ghost, they say, around the body after one’s untimely death.

Almost apologetic in his tone, he told her the time—it was eight.

“Already eight? So, she cries,” the woman said and stood her broom against the wall of the teashop. She loosened her sling that held the baby and sat on the steps next to the bench where Lokraj sat, still observing the woman. It was the first time he’d seen her with a baby.

The woman, in her late twenties, had a creepy smile. As she adjusted the baby in her lap and ordered a glass of warm milk from the teashop, she looked more curious than affectionate toward the months-old baby. She hit her palate with her tongue and cajoled the baby into smiling. Then she jerked her upper body as if to adjust her blouse, displaying the size of her breasts. Lokraj quickly removed his eyes from her—he’d been wondering all along why she was not breastfeeding the baby—thinking that he must have looked lewd. To justify his position, he murmured something without meaning.

“This is not my baby,” the woman said.

Then Lokraj noticed her watch as she fished a cell phone from her waist. Oh, even a cell phone! Then he saw she wore jeans inside the sarong. He finished the remaining lemon tea in a gulp. The woman was mysterious.

“Where’re you from, dai?” she asked, reading on her cell phone screen.

Lokraj thought for a moment if he really had to reply. But there was something alluring, something warm in the woman. Something that he needed desperately. He said he was from Nepalgunj and thought about telling her he was visiting Kathmandu for a few days. Then he remembered she already knew who he was.
The woman started feeding the baby.

“Whose baby is that?” Lokraj asked, this time sounding like a guardian.

“My sister’s. She’s away for a few days,” the woman replied. “I’m also working for my sister as a neighborhood sweeper, an hour a day.”

Lokraj’s appearance changed from that of a guardian to that of a puzzled onlooker.

“Don’t you drink milk tea?” asked the woman out of the blue, staring at the empty teacup that had a few lemon seeds with the dregs.

It was an odd question, given the pun the word “milk” carried in the local language.

“Yes, I do,” Lokraj said. And as if reading the pun, he tried to strike a positive note by repeating, “Yes, I do.”

One thing led to another. Within the next ten minutes, Lokraj was sitting on a bed in the mysterious woman’s single-room apartment behind the nearby temple. His heartbeat raced, and a new excitement relieved the stress he’d endured the last few weeks.

“There’s no milk for milk tea,” the woman giggled, after putting the baby in her bed.

“I know where it is,” spoke Lokraj, a strange man to himself. Then he stripped off the woman’s blouse. Just minutes later, both of them promptly dressed, they stared at each other as strangers. Each looked like they were asking the other, *What the hell are you doing here?*

“Give me some money,” the woman said.

Lokraj said he could not believe her, as if she’d proposed him sex out of love.

“Give me money,” she repeated.

Surely, Lokraj thought, he’d been cheated. He took out a five-hundred-rupee bill and tucked it in her blouse.
“Who do you think I am? Your rundi?" the woman asked.

*Rundi*, a whore—Lokraj never thought he’d ever touch a whore, at least a woman who so openly attributed herself to such a disgusting word, especially after he’d had that encounter with the girl who claimed to be a rebel’s sister. Better get rid of her as soon as possible. He fished for another five hundred bill.

“You promised me five thousand,” claimed the woman.

Lokraj’s head reeled. Five thousand! For a whore that he didn’t look for himself. Five thousand. That much money could buy everything the woman had in her room: the cheap bed on which they both sat, a disfigured table in a corner, a kerosene stove, a few utensils, a fourteen-inch, surely black-and-white television on the floor in another corner, a few clothes hanging from a nail on the door. Why five? Two thousand rupees would buy everything. How could she demand so much? Oh, yes. The cell phone. How did she get it?

“If you refuse to give, I will shout,” said the woman.

At this point, Lokraj’s eyes watered. He took out his wallet and surrendered it to the woman, who counted all the money, kept two thousand rupees for herself and tossed the purse with a few hundred-rupee bills in it onto his lap.

“Keep it! You may need to eat,” she said.

As he exited the front door, the stench from a nearby toilet made him feel like throwing up. A middle-aged woman washing clothes in an aluminum basin—indifferent to the public display of her bulky breasts and thighs—gave him a suspicious look. It was no secret that he’d visited a whore; there was no need to show any deference to him, such an ass. The woman looked confident, even threatening. Would he even think about
visiting a whore again? *Impossible,* he thought. Why had he fled to Kathmandu, and what was he doing? An urge to return home safe almost made him collapse once he was out in the open.

But that evening, the same day, he found himself sitting on the same bed with the same woman, fondling her breasts. In front of them lay two glasses filled with gin, mixed with hot water and lemon cuts. The woman was calm and apologetic, and Lokraj seemed to be playing a guardian, albeit an exploitative one.

That morning, after recovering from a near collapse, he had wandered the roads in Baneshwor for an hour, not knowing what had happened—it had been like he could not stop himself from drifting in the air. Then he’d headed to Babarmahal. After crossing the bridge at Bijulibazzar, he turned right and walked all the way to Singhadurbar, the prime minister’s office. He stared for a long time at the building that housed the prime minister’s office, and then he turned to Dillibazaar and finally reached old Baneshwor and then Gaushala around eleven o’clock. He had no intention of worshipping at the Pashupatinath Temple, though. He crossed the Bagamati River and climbed the steps, turned left, and sat on a bench overlooking the temple and the cremation stalls across the river. By that evening he’d counted seven cremations, some more performative than the others, but at the end all the dead had faced the same fate. They all had been turned into ashes and thrown into the murky water that would now take them down, down to the unknown caves of the earth. Life at the end was nothing.

After sundown, Lokraj returned to his cousin’s. As soon as he entered the house, Jagannath’s wife asked, “Do you care that the killers have forced your daughter to join them?” She informed him about his wife’s call after he’d left home that morning and
said, “Tikey Badi swarmed into the house with a squad of goons and yanked her out. Don’t you even bother to call home when they’ve ravaged your house?” She accused him of failing altogether, as a husband as a father, and as a son, and said she was ashamed of him as a man.

Lokraj left the house like a newly castrated bull, without a word.

He didn’t have the courage to call home. He returned to the same teashop as that morning and sat on the same bench, his head hung like in a trance. Around him were discontented party activitists, who equally disparaged King Gyanendra, the Maoists, and all other political parties for the ills of the country. Lokraj had a feeling that they all complained for nothing; they had no idea what real suffering was. Without realizing that he was speaking, he murmured in contempt: “Tikey Badi! Sala Tikey Badi!”

When the same woman appeared at the teashop, Lokraj glared at her as if to challenge her that he was ready to face anything. He was not going to be a coward anymore. The woman smiled at him, like someone she intimately knew. It was unbelievably comforting to Lokraj. Within the next few minutes, they were in her room, with the two glasses in front of them.

“Why do you look so scared every few minutes?” the woman asked.

“Scared? No, I was only thinking about crimes and all in the city,” Lokraj said, attempting to sound normal.

The woman laughed it off.

“What’s there to think about?” she asked.

“I mean, you don’t know when a bullet will pierce through your head.”
“Fuck your childish talk!” she said as she removed his hand from her chest. “You pretend to be a leader, but you talk like a coward.”

Lokraj asked her to forgive him; he wanted to leave. Then he murmured that he didn’t know what to do about his daughter and that his head was about to burst.

“I’m sure your veins contain no blood. Start rambling after a single shot?” the woman said. “I knew you were a coward when I saw your face the day the gunda snatched my chain. You were damn scared.”

“I’m sorry you lost the chain.”

“No, it’s okay. It was fake.”

Lokraj gawked at her.

“Do you expect me to wear real gold in this city of looters?” said the woman. “But I expected you to do something. You talk big, no?”

Lokraj stared at the woman’s chest and said he’d had enough blood. “I’ve never before sat with a woman drinking, though,” he said.

“This fucking city will teach you all kinds of things, even to fuck your mother,” said the woman.

“You talk like a dangerous woman,” Lokraj said.

“Dangerous? Yes, I am dangerous,” said the woman. “What do you expect from a widow with no one to care for her? Huh? What can you expect from a helpless widow other than being dangerous?”

Lokraj almost jumped out of the bed.

“Wait, I won’t kill a coward. I want nothing from you. When I saw you, I only felt pity for you. That’s all. I doubt that you can survive in this city.”
Lokraj rose. “I need to go. Sorry. I need to go.”

“Not so easily.” The woman tugged him onto the bed.

“Why? I don’t want anything from you. I didn’t come here myself. It was not my fault,” Lokraj said. “Please let me go, my daughter is sick.”

“Who is not sick in this country? Everybody is sick!” said the woman, pushing him into a corner. “Who said it was your fault? I want nothing from you, either. I won’t rob you.”

“Just let me go! If you want nothing, why all this?”

The woman thought for a moment, shook her head, and said, “I don’t know. But you wanted to come, no? Why did you want to come with me? Just to fuck? Then fuck me and get lost!”

“No, I want nothing.”

“Yes, you are a coward, I tell you again.”

Never before had anyone called him a coward so comfortably, except his mother, who used to goad him to overcome his fear at night when he was still a child, afraid to go to the toilet across the backyard. But there was so much comfort and such a sense of safety—maybe too much safety—in that derision. He examined the woman’s face as he reflected, and said, “You look like my mother.”

“What? Nonsense! You see your mother in my face this moment and fuck me the next. That’s the problem with you cowards. Motherfuckers!”

Lokraj cringed.

“You spend a whole day with a lonely widow, you see this abject condition, and yet you don’t ask a word about me—where I’m from, why I’m so deranged—oh! dangerous,
right?—what happened with my world. You’re afraid to ask. Yes? You’re afraid even to ask, you coward!”

Lokraj went dumb momentarily. Why hadn’t he asked her anything? Then he thought maybe it was none of his business.

What was his business then? Why was he there? Lokraj wanted to leave again.

“The butchers kidnapped my husband, threatened to kill me if I reported to the police,” the woman said, and filled the empty glasses. “I still did, and they dumped his beheaded body in the village well the following week. Then they wanted me to join their army if I wanted to live. What could I do? I ran to Kathmandu a year ago, pleading with everybody for justice. But—can you see that?—everybody here is too busy with their own businesses. Can you see that? Who has the time to listen to your sorrows? Nobody. Do you hear that? Nobody.’”

“This thing is a miracle,” she said, lifting her glass of gin after a pause. “I don’t know how I’d survive if I didn’t know it.”

“How did you start drinking?” Lokraj spoke at last, finding no risk in asking this.

“How did I start? I started working in a cabin restaurant where my sister worked, and drank. Isn’t that easy?”

Then the woman narrated how a customer had forced her to gulp nasty-tasting beer—her second day on the job—how she’d started enjoying intoxication, and how she’d found a new life in the chaos of the city. She also revealed that the sister with whom she stayed in the single-room apartment and worked alongside at the restaurant had been arrested in a midnight police raid three days before.
“It could be me, but they got her instead, along with two other girls,” she said.

“Luckily I was at the counter after gratifying a bull.”

With one foot on the floor and his body slightly bent toward her, Lokraj looked as though he were fighting his urge to flee as much as listening to her.

“The restaurant has been closed since then,” the woman went on. “Those sons of bitches come and fuck you today and arrest you tomorrow. Treacherous!”

“When will they free your sister?” Lokraj asked, as if out of concern for the baby, who’d started crying in her bed.

“Here you ask about her, you whore-fucker! Need yet another woman?” she asked as she drank more. “Looks like she won’t ever be free. They’ve charged her as a Maoist supporter. Maybe she was—she was fucking a rebel who sometimes slinked into the restaurant. Even this bastard belongs to that bull.”

“Stop this nonsense,” Lokraj yelled, and jumped off the bed.

“Okay, then, what the hell do you want? To fuck?” the woman asked, blocking his way with arms akimbo and her chest almost bare.

“For God’s sake, let me go,” he shouted, “you whore!” Then they ripped off each other’s clothes. The child continued to cry in the corner.

* 

When Lokraj woke up the following morning, he found himself alone with the baby in the room. Instinctively, he wanted to flee, but he had no courage to step out. He fancied that the whole world had seen his fall; there was no way he could save himself now. He could no longer show his face to the world. The world knew how rotten he was. There was no place for him anywhere. When he remembered his kidnapped daughter, he buried
his face in the bed until he could convince himself that he was still a responsible father and a responsible husband.

He looked at the baby; she was asleep. Where was the woman? Had she gone to fetch milk for the baby? Had she gone to sweep the street for her sister? Had she abandoned the baby to him? Oh, he couldn’t be fooled. He couldn’t be fooled anymore. He had to get out of the room right then. Before the baby awoke. Before the beguiling woman reappeared.

He pulled on his trousers and straightened his shirt. He put on his jacket that had been lying on the floor, wrapped his muffler around his neck, and opened the door.

As if he’d opened the door for somebody else, a stranger entered the room, bracing her shoulder against his, as he struggled to slink off. The young woman didn’t look surprised, but her words were harsh: “Widow-fucker.”

Lokraj tripped over the doorstep and hopped over a basin—the woman who had been washing clothes yesterday was busy in her work also today as if she always washed clothes in front of the room as an excuse to observe who laid down the lonely widow. She shouted at him, “Are you blind, you dirty bull?” As she spoke, her legs were set apart and her hands were stretched out as if she were ready to hunt for Lokraj. She was so negligent of her bare thighs and poorly covered bulky breasts that Lokraj had a fleeting urge to ask her to cover them up.

Once he was in the open, out on the road, he slowed down. But he’d lost the courage to look in anyone’s eyes. What would he say if he encountered the widow? Every female figure threatened to castrate him, and this fear thrust him into the fire of guilt and shame. Oh, what a quagmire he’d fallen into! He wanted to get rid of the whole business as soon
as possible. But the farther he went the more vividly he recalled: *widow-fucker, dirty bull.* Was he such a dirty man? No, they were wrong—he tried to console himself. He thought about the displaced widow, her sister, and the illegitimate child born of a guerilla. Were they all dirty? The woman washing clothes, all the time washing clothes, the display of her private parts, or rather, her negligence—why was she so careless? Was she also a displaced? Was she also dirty? Did the house shelter only the displaced and the dirty?

He had no answers, and he saw only the displaced in all the faces on the street. So many people—what were they doing there? The streets were full of people every day. Those hungry people from remote districts. What were they doing in Kathmandu? Who’d rescue him from his displacement in this city full of displaced souls?

His pace increased, and after a while he started trotting.

Unaware of what he was led by, Lokraj went past the abandoned trolleybus station in Minbhawan, turned left at Shantinagar, and headed to Gaushala and the Pashupatinath Temple. Gentlemen on morning walks, with sticks in their hands as a sign of authority, smiled at him as they passed. Young boys and girls glanced at him and continued at their own pace. Shopkeepers’ curious eyes followed him suspiciously as long as he was within their sight. A few dogs barked at him. At one point, he dropped his muffler. Somebody wanted to point it out to him, but he only quickened his strides.

“Thief!” a boy, burning trash in an empty lot to keep himself warm, shouted.

A couple of boys ran after Lokraj, who now dashed like crazy. But not long after, a boy grabbed him by the shoulder, at which Lokraj turned back, stared at the boys and burst into laughter, as if he were mocking them: “Thief, huh? Ha, thief! Thief?”

The boys were vexed.
“Thief? Ha, no thief! Displaced. Yeah, displaced!” Lokraj kept laughing, pointing at the boys.

It didn’t take the boys long to dismiss him. They must have thought he was just yet another harmless lunatic in the city.

Lokraj’s speed slowed after the boys returned. But his walk was erratic, as if he were not sure where to put his steps, an inch further or right there where he’d almost put them. By the time he reached Gaushala, he seemed to have found a new rhythm in the erratic movement. He briefly paused at the crossroads, thinking which way to go, and headed to the Pashupatinath Temple in the same fitful manner. A few meters toward the temple, he suddenly stopped, one foot on the other for lack of coordination between his mind and the body. On the other side of the road he’d seen Jagannath and Neta-ji returning from the temple, talking. Lokraj’s mouth opened automatically, but no words would come out. He continued to stare at the duo until they came close, right across the road from him, expecting them to stop and talk to him.

But they didn’t stop. They greeted him without surprise, slowing down just enough to acknowledge his presence.

“I thought you’d already returned to Nepalgunj!” Jagannath said, and they resumed their normal walk, talking as they’d been doing.

Lokraj was not sure whether to be happy for not being caught after the night with the woman or sad for being treated as so insignificant. His eyes followed them all the way to the intersection, past Maharaja Sweets, past Gauri Stationary, past Mitra Communications, and stuck to a pole with tangled wires as the duo disappeared around the corner.
Lokraj thought that he once believed he was a displaced. And he laughed out loud.
Six

DEVANANDA THE SOLDIER

The afternoon a crow landed on the statue’s head and discharged white excreta on its nose, Devananda decided to seek a transfer. His belief in himself had been shattered a month ago, when an army jeep had dropped him at the statue in Sitapaila and sped away. He’d then sat on the pedestal steps and cried. Now he was certain that his fate had tricked him; he had not wanted to become a soldier to stand sentry to a statue in the first place. As if the statue’s existence—requiring a stupid-looking sentry—were the reason he wouldn’t get to experience the adventures of war and to prove his bravery, he felt like gouging its eyes that had become the target of his hatred lately and breaking its nose with the butt of his rifle. He certainly needed a transfer to save himself.

But getting a transfer was not easy. Even if he managed it, he would most probably be sent to one of the security checkpoints, which were newly established due to heightened Maoist operations in the districts surrounding the capital city. Other soldiers told him he was lucky to have the assignment of guarding the statue and working for Major Thapa, and that he would be more than a fool to seek a transfer. Many had congratulated him on having impressed Major Thapa and landed such a safe assignment despite being a nobody from a remote village, with no connections to people in power.

The following morning, the major’s wife, whom he served as a household assistant, asked him coquettishly, “Kanchha, what’s all the fuss about the Gurkha in your sleep?”
Devananda was troubled he’d started speaking in his sleep. On top of that, the woman could hear him in his guardroom that lay a few meters from the woman’s bedroom. He said he didn’t know what she was saying and looked her straight in the eye for the first time. She was a beautiful woman in her late twenties—long, pointed nose, sculptured cheekbones, deep doe-eyes, broad forehead. Devananda had a hunch that he’d seen her long before. But where? He couldn’t look at her eyes twice.

That night Devananda said in his sleep that the world still had women as beautiful as Samjhana. And the following night he said he was a coward who didn’t deserve anything better than guarding a disgusting statue and serving a major’s family. To him, it was like being introduced to his secret self by a stranger. He almost collapsed when the major’s wife said he was too childlike but sounded so brave during his sleep. She asked why he wouldn’t talk to her directly instead of fussing in his dreams. “There’s nothing wrong about finding somebody beautiful,” she said.

That afternoon he realized for the first time that the statue had Major Thapa’s eyes. The Major Thapa who’d chosen him to be his part-time household assistant, a job that entailed him to guard the statue during the day and help the major’s family the rest of the time. The Major Thapa who’d told him that he couldn’t find a better assistant than Devananda, who was still thin and hadn’t grown beyond the height of five-foot-four. The Major Thapa who’d said that Devananda looked like his wife’s younger brother, who’d just entered high school. The Major Thapa who’d concluded that Devananda was a perfect match for household chores such as accompanying children to school, helping with grocery shopping, and cleaning the house. The Major Thapa who couldn’t entrust
just any young man with his family while he would be away in Somalia, leading the U.N. peacekeeping force.

The whole day nothing but eyes haunted him. Eyes of the leader whose statue he guarded. Eyes of a Gurkha who had inspired him to be a soldier and was busy fighting, supposedly, for the British queen. Eyes of the major who was busy keeping peace in Somalia. Eyes of the major’s wife. Samjhana’s eyes.

When his shift was about end, Devananda thought about his own eyes, and the mirror at a single-chair, open-air barbershop on the roadside, and the barber who’d intrigued him by the way he enjoyed his work and who flattered him by saying that he liked like a British Gurkha, which he’d wished to be in the first place.

The barber almost lifted his customers as he seated them in the chair, its legs leveled on the rough surface with the help of bricks. He draped a piece of stained cloth around their shoulders and asked, “What style, sir?” Whatever one said, he cut his hair in the same style, but he always asked in the end if that was what the customer wanted. As he worked, he moved his jaws along with the scissors, as if he were chewing something odd with his gums, though his teeth looked perfect. The scissors cut the air about five times before they really touched hair. The moment they cut hair, his mouth would twist and twist and twist until the scissors started cutting the air again. After he finished—which he actually did even though it looked like he’d never be done with a single person’s hair—he held a mirror against the customer’s neck, looked in the other mirror that was hung on a bamboo pole in front of the chair, and asked if the finishing was okay. Whatever the customer said, he gave a final touch around the ears, and asked, “What is your evening program, sir?” If the customer said there was a party or something to that effect, he said
he needed to know it earlier—he would’ve spent more time for the customer. Then he held the “rearview” mirror again to assure the customer that he had, however, done his best. When Devananda’s spirit failed, the barber helped him recover, at least for a while.

Approaching the barber, Devananda asked, “Didn’t you say that you want to cut my hair one day?” “Yes,” replied the barber. “You look like a British lahorey.” The first time Devananda heard him say that he looked like a British Gurkha, he’d suspected the barber knew his past and so wanted to ridicule him. But once he found that the barber had no ill intention, he prompted him to repeat it. It gave him a sense of relief, though momentarily, from the pain of having to guard the statue as sentry.

No, Devananda was not a British Gurkha, but that’s what he’d dreamed of becoming, and that had taken him all the way to this damn statue.

He was born in the early eighties amidst a hullabaloo, but he grew up almost invisible. When he was visible in the early nineties, he’d become a storyteller, by which the villagers meant a liar. But he lied about certain things in a certain way. If he saw a monkey spring from one branch to another, for instance, he said he’d never before seen monkeys that flew like birds. His favorite lie was telling a bull owner that his bull had fought so fiercely in defeating a neighbor’s bull that the defeated one didn’t stop running until it had crossed a hill. What surprised his neighbors was that he always made up stories about jumping and flying and fighting, but his body looked like it would never grow to adulthood. Devananda was often reminded by village women that he was born so small that his father had put him in his palm and showed the neighbors, as if in self-mockery: *Look at this thing of a boy, born twenty years after marriage and hundreds of visits to doctors, witch-doctors, and all the temples in Nepal and India.* Some said that
the mother had consumed so much medicine that the baby was all chemicals, and it was understandable why he was minuscule.

When Devananda was twelve, he showed some hopeful signs of growth, but still he continued to be a real “character” among his peers: short, thin, fragile, and a little too emotional. As a result, he learned to take refuge in stories and developed a good taste for them. The stories that the Gurkhas told were his favorite.

The Gurkhas, some still working in the British Army or in the Indian Army and others already retired, told stories that were full of adventures: their struggles to survive cold winters in Jammu and Kashmir, their fights in Falklands’ jungles, their blasts on Japanese bunkers in Burma. The Gurkhas who served in the Indian Army referred to India as *hamara desh*, our country, and the ones who fought for the British referred to Queen Elizabeth as *our queen*, expecting to give an impression that they were far superior to those who served in the Nepalese Army. By always making jokes and referring to life as a two-day affair—hence it had to be enjoyed—they meant to show that they lived more fulfilling lives than those of mere school teachers instructing kids two ones two, two twos four and nothing more, or those of the civil servants who wasted their lives in the confines of dilapidated office buildings, or those of mere farmers who worked eighteen hours a day and still had a hard time making ends meet. What made their stories really interesting was that they genuinely believed what they said.

Most villagers bit their tongues in awe when the Gurkhas—with their clean and oily hair, camouflage uniforms, and shiny boots—started narrating their stories of valor, and they invited them for tea or even a meal. Devananda was as spellbound as anyone. One
day he found himself dreaming of being a military man, and he was thrilled. What could be a better way of fighting the prejudice against him?

When Devananda was fourteen years old, a young Gurkha added fuel to his nascent desire. A group of youths from an adjoining village had organized a *rodi*, an evening of singing and dancing, to celebrate some Gurkhas’ homecoming. A local schoolteacher’s daughter, Samjhana, readily smiled at a young man who, Devananda was sure, was in the British Army—so handsome, so well dressed, so charming. She even agreed to dance with the young man. Never had Devananda thought that such a beautiful girl, with such a dignified demeanor and a high family status, and who was in college—or so he’d heard—would ever smile at a young village man. He had always imagined that an anonymous city man would one day land in the village to pick her up, and she would disappear from the village forever, without ever knowing how much Devananda adored her. That evening he shed tears for the first time in the name of a girl. He had been both heartened and disheartened; the girl was not as far away from him as he’d thought she was, but he was not a Gurkha.

Two years later, that Gurkha came home again, married the girl, and took her away with him, allegedly to England. Devananda stopped storytelling and devoted himself to early morning push-ups and running in a nearby meadow.

When he turned eighteen, he applied to join the British Army. But, although he was smart, his physique could not impress the *gallas*, the recruiting agents. After two rigorous attempts, he gave up the hope of entering the British Army and thought about his second option, the Indian Army.
He was so confident about his recruitment in the Indian Army that it took him a long time to realize he’d been rejected. The field where hundreds of boys—wearing loose knickers and numbers written with marker pens on their bare chests—ran as part of their first physical test was emptying. Some soldiers were chasing off the boys who still loitered on the premises, the loiterers who had failed the test and didn’t know what to do next. A soldier with a smirk asked Devananda what he was waiting for in such a miserable state—still unclothed and staring on the horizon. Devananda realized only then that he’d been brushed aside, because he was one of the boys who’d continued to scramble hopelessly even after the time had run out. All his early-morning push-ups had gone to waste.

His father refused to talk to him for three full days. On the fourth day he asked him, “Will you join the Maoists now?”

The Maoist rebellion that had started a couple of years before had reached a new height. The rebels had just declared the abolition of the monarchy after the massacre of King Birendra and his family despite King Gyanendra’s crowning as the new monarch. And the fights between Maoist guerillas and the government’s newly created armed police force had intensified. The rebels had reportedly killed many innocent villagers, and the state media had established the Maoist identity as synonymous with crime and cruelty. Joining the Maoists would mean an utter downfall on the part of Devananda.

His father avoided his son for a whole week, not eating well and blaming his wife for giving birth to such a useless ass who couldn’t join even the Indian Army. He avoided his neighbors for weeks.
Although the mother had her own worries, she consoled both the father and the son. She insisted that she never wanted their son to go away, that she always prayed to God, and that He listened to her. “Nepali Army is the best,” she said in summary. She even added that there was no greater virtue than serving one’s own country. “Why do you need to work for foreign sahibs?” she asked the boy.

Despite his fears—they say that a dog hit by a firebrand always fears the lightning—Devananda made it through the selection process for the Nepalese Army without much hassle. His parents held a little pooja to thank their family deities for the success, and they threw a small party for their relatives. Devananda had become the first person in the family to enter the brave world of the military. On top of everything, he’d proved that he was as capable as any other boy despite his discouraging past. His father met with more relatives in that week than he’d done in the last few months.

Thus had Devananda begun his military service.

The training period was tough, as a rule. He sometimes considered fleeing from the camp to Delhi, where he could easily be employed as a security guard at a private residence—he’d only have to stand at the gate with a baton as tall as himself and do nothing. He recalled the faces of his neighbors who came home with fairer skin and bigger bellies. Without any sweat, he thought. But nothing deterred him from living a dream. There must be more girls as beautiful as Samjhana, he mused.

While Devananda was still training, the ongoing peace talks between the government and the Maoists collapsed on November 23, 2001. The Maoists killed almost two hundred army and police personnel the same night. The following day, the government
declared a nationwide state of emergency and decided to mobilize the army to subdue the Maoist insurgency.

On the convocation day, Devananda ran a high fever. As a soldier, he was not going to fight—as he’d fantasized since childhood—foreign invaders to save his country, like the heroes Amar Singh Thapa, Bhakti Thapa, and Balabhadra Kunwar had done in the country’s distant history. His fate had decided otherwise for him. Now he would have to fight his own countrymen within the territory of the country’s own borders. He would have to fight in his own villages and cities instead of on the distant battlefield he had fancied. It sent a chill into his bones. He started arguing with himself that he couldn’t kill his own countrymen or be killed by them. There was no glory in such a fight. By the time of his deployment, he didn’t know what he wanted.

And so when the army jeep dropped him at the statue, he was lost. He’d wanted to join the army but not to stand idle at a statue or to fight his own people or to do daily chores for an officer. The Gurkhas’ stories were far different. He tried comparing himself with the soldier who’d won Samjhana’s heart. And he repeatedly failed.

A couple of days later, he looked at the statue of the prime minister who’d come to power after the 1990 revolution. The people had pinned their hopes and aspirations on the man and his party, but within a few years, all leaders had turned into money-mongers. The country had set new records in corruption. Nepotism and lawlessness had swelled. That was the news everywhere, and people were confused. Devananda had no reverence for the man whose statue he guarded. It was ironic that the leader who’d won the people’s hearts and secured the prime minister’s chair only a couple of years before had become such a despised figure. His statue had to be protected from his own people.
Devananda hated the way the leader folded his arms. He despised the way he wore the Nepali cap. The leader’s long nose was irritating. And yes, his eyes were crooked.

The monotonous chores for the major and the threat of Maoist attack added to his dislike for the statue. Then, on that fateful day when the crow disfigured the statue, he knew he could not take it anymore. It spoke of his disappointment that a thing as trivial as bird shit would work as a catalyst in his decision-making. His visits to the barber’s had become more frequent since then.

“I tried the British Army four times, failed, and decided to go to Germany,” continued the barber. “Spent a month in Mumbai before my manpower agent flew me to Dubai. Spent another three months in Portugal. Six months in Russia, and don’t know how many months in some other countries that I can’t even name. By the time I entered Germany, my father had to sell the last piece of land to send money to my agent. Within a week the immigration agents arrested me, detained me for fifteen days, and deported me to Nepal. Dairekt. My father died after a year, and I started working as a peon at a boarding school. The Maoists ordered the school closed two years ago, when I came to Kathmandu and started cutting hair,” the barber said in one breath. “Seen the world; this world is nothing,” he concluded.

“This world is nothing?” Devananda asked.

“No. This world is nothing.”

Devananda wondered at his own question and the barber’s reply. He felt like telling the barber that he was wrong.

As if the barber were only reinforcing what Devananda’s fate had already decided for him, Devananda regretted the uselessness of his efforts. Just like the barber had been
forced to settle for cutting hair, Devananda had been forced to stand sentry. The excitement he once experienced about a military career had vanished, and it seemed his purpose behind joining the army had also disappeared. Why had he been so passionate about becoming a soldier? As if he didn’t remember the triumph he and his family had experienced only a few months before, he considered quitting the military.

On the way home in the army jeep that picked him up, he asked the driver, “Are you happy as a soldier driving this jeep?”

The driver said he was the worst driver in the world.

“I mean, anyone can be a driver, no?” Devananda added.

“I don’t know what you mean, but I’m not a good driver,” was the reply.

Devananda kept silent for a few minutes. Then he blurted, “Then, why the hell are you driving this jeep? Why don’t you just quit your job?”

The driver pressed the brake hard and released it with a jolt. Devananda’s face showed that he enjoyed the excitement of the bump. After the jeep returned to its normal speed, he said to the driver, “If I were you, I’d quit the job today. Today!”

“What are you talking about, you motherfucker? Need a mental doctor?” the driver asked.

“Only motherfuckers drive army jeeps.” Devananda heard himself become defensive.

“Yes, you are right,” the driver said pensively. “And most of the time, it’s your mother that they fuck.”
Devananda looked disoriented. Even during the training period, when the new recruits often indulged in obscene talks, he’d never once uttered a word that he could not say in front of his parents. What had happened to him just now?

“But I’m quitting my job,” he spoke out.

“What could a coward like you do other than quit?” the driver asked. “Afraid of Maoists?”

Devananda didn’t reply. Instead he told the driver to drop him at a corner so he could walk home.

As he walked, Devananda spotted a magazine hanging on the shutter of a stationery shop. A good-looking guerilla girl squatted on a stone, a gun draped on her shoulder. In the background were dozens of fighters marching in high mountains. The cover highlighted its lead feature in red: Brave Women Fighters Changing the Country.

Devananda bought a copy of the Maoist propaganda magazine, *Kranti*, along with a state-run tabloid.

* 

That evening Devananda ran a fever. At its peak, he muttered that he was no coward to quit his job, there was nothing left for him to do, the efforts of people like him meant very little, he did what he could, after all he was no one—a poor boy from a remote village, there was nothing for him to be afraid of, the driver was obscene, Samjhana would not like such dirty words.

Early the next morning, an army paramedic felt for Devananda’s pulse, took his temperature, ran his stethoscope around his chest and back, and said that the patient was fatigued and a little stressed, like any other soldier in the field. Violence was increasing,
and every cadre on the ground was under tremendous pressure. Devananda would be fine after some rest.

But Devananda refused to stay home or at the office. He insisted that he was fine.

The first thing he did when he arrived at the statue was visit the barber.

“The world is nothing? Haha, you joke!” he said to the barber.

The barber looked at him with suspicion. “What do you mean, sir?”

“Nothing,” Devananda replied, looking in the mirror that hung on the pole.

“I will cut your hair one day,” the barber said again.

Devananda stood close to the mirror.

“You have jaundice, sir,” the barber said, looking in the mirror over Devananda’s shoulder. “Yes, you have jaundice,” he repeated, as if he knew that it was something, but he believed that it was nothing.

Upon returning to the pedestal, Devananda’s jaundiced eyes inspected the statue. He hated the statue’s eyes, and he hated his own. That evening his fever returned, and it didn’t subside. He suffered from much more than jaundice. Had it been possible, he’d have gone back to his village. There was nothing left for him in the city, he’d decided. His parents would have wanted their sick son, born to them when they were already in their forties, to live with them. But as a soldier, he served the old regime. He was on the rebels’ enemy list; they would not spare him if he ever visited home.

Then he started dreaming about Nibuwatar, his village.

The village of Nibuwatar had been raped. At night Maoists fighters raided the village and declared control of the territory. During the day, government security forces came and accused the poor of collaborating with terrorists. Both the parties arrested a couple of
people each time they came. By the time the detainees were set free, some lost their hands and others, their legs. Some would never return, later to be explained as being shot dead in encounters.

History had failed the people, and the present showed no better prospect. Statues had been erected, statues had been struck down. There seemed to be no resolution to the ongoing cycle of replacing old statues with new ones.

Back home, Devananda's father had stopped talking about his son. His mother moaned and accused her husband of killing their son by encouraging him to join the military. No logic about protecting the country consoled the family, and no explanation about the people's liberation sustained their hope. Bravery had lost its meaning. There was no heroism left in the world. There were only tortures and killings.

When one day Devananda appeared in the backyard of his house in his dream, his mother thought he was a specter. She rushed into the house and closed the door behind her. There was no son for the mother and no mother for the son. When he asked why she shunned her son, he heard her cry from behind the door that they would kill him if he stayed home. They came day and night and asked when he would come back. They threatened to kill the family if he didn’t resign from the army and join the rebels. Since it was already too late, she wailed, they would kill him anyway.

Devananda woke up, soaked in sweat. It was hard to think that he’d become a threat to his aging parents. He guarded a statue here in the city while his parents lived under Maoist threat in a remote village—it was demeaning.

*
The major’s wife visited the guardroom quite a few times during those feverish days. She reminded Devananda to take his medicine, served him food even though he insisted that he could still cook for himself, and conveyed her husband’s message not to be stressed. But Devananda tried to avoid her as she asked him about the Gurkha and the girl he often talked about in his sleep. What a shame to be shouting about a man he didn’t know and a girl he would never meet. What a shame not to be able to control himself. Some nights he wished that he could stay awake until the morning. When he was a little boy, he was so shy that the neighboring women suggested he was a girl. And that had made him shyer. When his peers told him one day that one of his testicles was smaller than the other one, he’d cried for a whole day but had been too shy to check them. He lived with that shame until he was sixteen, when his hesitant inspection proved his peers wrong. He hated everyone and everything he deemed meant to shame him.

That morning he mustered the courage to ask her, “Madam, did I talk about the Gurkha last night as well?”

“Yes you did, but you talked more about the Maoists,” she said as she watered flowers in the yard. “You seem to be scared of them. Have you received their threats?”

“No, Madam,” he said, approaching her to help.

“Why can’t you act as courageously when you are awake?”

“Do you think I’m a coward?” he asked.

“Now you talk like a man,” she said.

“I’ve decided to quit my job,” Devananda announced, as if to prove he didn’t lack courage.

The major’s wife didn’t look surprised. She asked, “What will you do after that?”
“Maybe join the Maoists,” Devananda offered, neither as an answer nor as a question.

The major’s wife dropped the hose. The water from the pipe filled a flowerpot and overflowed, making a quick stream that passed by Devananda’s feet.

“You are a coward,” she said. “Do you think the Maoists will instill enough courage in you to love a woman?”

Shame. Devananda felt she knew him more than he knew himself. But she didn’t know how tiny he was born, how unnoticeably he grew up, and how miserably he had failed to join the British or the Indian armies; he comforted himself with the thought of her ignorance.

“You are a coward, and you’re running away from your duty,” she said.

Tears seeped from the corners of her eyes. Devananda wondered about how familiar those eyes looked.

“I know you,” he declared, his face genuinely bright for a second or two.

“You do?” she said, as if she were chiding him.

He sat beside a flowerpot, looking defeated.

“No, I don’t,” he said and hastened to the guardroom, where he started dumping everything into his aluminum trunk. He spent a few minutes gathering objects, even more minutes taking the objects out of the trunk and putting them back, guided by no particular rationale. When he saw that the major’s wife was looking at him from her bedroom window, he started throwing himself from one corner to another, picking and throwing up objects and opening and closing the trunk.
After about fifteen minutes, he slouched out the door, tilting to one side due to the weight of the trunk that he carried. He went to the front door and waited. As soon as the major’s wife appeared, he said he was leaving, and there was the key.

“Well, where are you going?” the major’s wife asked.

“I’m leaving; here’s the key.” Devananda stretched his hand.

“I’m asking you, where are you going?” she pressed him.

Then Devananda broke into tears, put the key on the veranda floor, and said, “I don’t know you. I really don’t know you. I’m leaving.”

He put the trunk on the floor and sat on it. A few seconds passed in silence.

“You were leaving, no?” the major’s wife asked.

Devananda focused on breathing.

“For the last four days you’ve been murmuring her name in your sleep,” she said, “but you don’t know her when she stands in front of you, huh?”

Devananda had thought he wanted to become a soldier. But it seemed he had become more of a lover than a soldier. “I don’t know you,” he insisted.

“I realized just three days ago that you were the same, tiny Devananda. I’d even forgotten your name,” said the major’s wife.

“I’m sorry,” Devananda said, and plunged his chin into his chest.

“Sorry for what?” she asked.

The flowers that had received water looked fresher than the rest, but winter had still prevailed over them all.

The major’s wife settled onto the veranda and narrated—sometimes serious, sometimes flirtatious, often guardian-like—that the young man whom Devananda had
mistaken for a British Gurkha was Major Thapa; her parents had moved to Kathmandu right after her marriage because of Maoist threat; she remembered the village kid who showed excessive fondness for her; she didn’t know for long that the soldier Major Thapa had picked as his assistant was Devananda—after all, he had been such a tiny little boy that she couldn’t imagine him joining the army; she’d been shocked to hear him call her by the name used in her village, then she’d found it interesting to listen to his stories—it felt like going back in time. She said she was sorry for him, and she loved him.

Devananda showed no interest in her story. He looked as if he were saying, *I know that girl better than you do. You have changed so much.*

“That’s funny,” he responded when she stopped.

“Isn’t it?” she said.

*That evening Sabi introduced Devananda to her children as their uncle from the village, and both gave him a hug. They said they loved their uncle.

Back in his guardroom after dinner and undecided whether to open the trunk or not, Devandanda wished he were still that tiny little boy who’d hardly shown any prospect of growth. The drizzle that had started in the evening turned into a light rain after a couple of hours and into a shower after midnight. Devananda had not experienced such a heavy rain in his life of over twenty years. It obscured the movement into and out of his room. He couldn’t exactly tell whether someone had entered his room, whether someone had felt around for his body, whether bodies had stumbled on the floor, or he’d just fantasized it all. Once the lights were turned off and thunders accompanied the shower, there was no way he could tell.
The following morning, he had a sense that he’d rather leave his dream as a dream if he could reverse the course of the life events. He packed promptly, returned to his barrack, and reported that the major’s wife didn’t need him anymore.

“I’ve decided not to quit my job,” he said to the driver on the way to his duty station.

“Do you think I believed you?” the driver asked.

“I always wanted to become a soldier,” Devananda said.

“I doubt it,” replied the driver.
Seven

A FATHER’S WORRY

1.

Most boys in the town of Kalikanagar grew up into full-blown men at the age of fifteen or sixteen. But Chintamani Pandey found one day that his son—already eighteen—had stopped growing a couple of years before—not so much physically, but otherwise; the boy’s peers had left him behind.

Some of the boys drove public buses, and the drivers treated their assistants like ten-year-old kids—some of them really were ten years old. Some managed their fathers’ shops, and the customers called the boys sahuji, respected shopkeeper; some of the customers even called the teenage boys dai, older brother, although the customers might have grandchildren the shopkeepers’ age. Some boys helped the drivers wash their TATA buses and Mahindra jeeps in the nearby stream, and some repaired radios. One was even a painter who’d put a sign in front of his shop: Kanchan Arts, in English, cursive fonts—Kanchan being his wife’s name, and wrote signboards and banners for political parties. Some others who didn’t have such involvements—those unlucky souls—formed local gangs, readily waiting to call anyone a motherfucker for no reason and start a duel, and to sell themselves to political parties during elections.

By the age of fifteen or sixteen some of them would already have eloped with village girls, and when they returned after their families’ anger subsided, they behaved like they’d reared half a dozen children, and they smoked in front of their parents. One such
exemplary young man named Muktiram had eloped with his neighbor’s wife four years ago, and when he returned after two years, he’d started preaching—like an Indian swami-ji on Astha TV—that life was uncertain and unpredictable, so the young men in town needed to take their lives seriously. All at the age of eighteen.

Chintamani himself had realized his maturity at the age of fifteen. Now in his forties, and adorned with a few stitches on his chin and a deep scar on his head, he was no longer proud of chicken-stealing and such, but he still believed that those pre- and early teen rackets were instrumental in launching him through maturity. Those actions spoke of his manly vigor that had led him to take up a job at a road construction site at the age of fifteen, as a mature young man. He believed it was the best thing that could happen to him because there’s where he had met a contractor’s daughter, his wife Sushila, three years later. The contractor’s family had arrived in Kalikanagar on a beautiful Monday in spring, and by the following Wednesday, Chintamani was gone with the contractor’s daughter, to return to Kalikanagar only four years later, with a baby that slept twenty-four out of twenty-four hours. He’d been the proudest young man in the village then; he’d married a contractor’s daughter.

But at eighteen, Chintamani’s son never sat behind the wheel. Unlike some of his peers, he didn’t have a shop to inherit from his father; he was too timid to join the local gangs; women only made him wary; and he still wore his high school uniform even though he’d left school a year ago—the sky-blue shirt and navy-blue pants, stitched by a local tailor who believed that the longer the collars of your shirt, the smarter you looked. Two buttons of the shirt were missing, and the stitch on one of his pants cuffs had loosened; as a result, one leg looked longer than the other when he went out, invariably
with children much younger than himself. Chintamani suspected that this all told of the boy’s inability to transition to manhood. The boy lacked the smartness—which basically meant toughness—to prepare himself for life. For those who could afford to be good, it was okay to remain calm and civilized and to wait for good fortune—it was sure to come by one day. But for people like him and his son, people who had nothing to inherit from their fathers—except maybe a loan—and people who had no political connections, things worked differently. His son could not waste his time just being good and waiting for a windfall. The boy had to be proactive and find his own path. He had to navigate around the possibilities that would come his way only through action. He’d heard some neighboring women praise the boy’s oddly attractive face—thanks to a crooked tooth—and his excellent performance in school, but that had not impressed Chintamani. It had, instead, confused him. Some neighbors’ teasing whether he’d hired somebody to have a son better than himself had doubled his anxiety that his son didn’t belong to him.

Chintamani Pandey became grave. Although his wife considered him utterly disqualified to interfere in their son’s life, he decided to do something before it was too late. After all, the boy was his son.

* 

The following morning the troubled father stood in front of Muktiram.

“How are you, Chintamani Kaka?” Muktiram asked, busy collecting brains on a banana leaf, scooping it with his index and middle fingers after axing a goat’s skull, his middle finger twisted a little to match with the other one.

“Chicken or goat, kaka?” he continued, wiping his hands on a bloody rag that hung on a pole supporting the zinc roof of the butcher’s shop.
“I need nothing, Mukti,” Chintamani said, his voice so deep that his heart must have broken into pieces for the words to translate into air and hit the vocal cords.

“Buy on credit, no problem.” Muktiram sounded as if he didn’t care about money but the welfare of his neighbors. He’d already reached that far! It assured Chintamani of the gravity of his son’s situation.

“I’m worried about Ramakant, Mukti,” Chintamani said.

Muktiram frowned. He tossed the goat brains into a corner and started chopping the skull. For the next few seconds, he looked like he was fighting the urge to assault Chintamani.

“He’s not going to do anything of worth, kaka. He’s a kid,” he said at last. “When will he mature?”

Muktiram and Ramakant had attended the same school together up to the fifth grade, when Muktiram quit school and started to mature—first fighting with other children on the street, then pickpocketing villagers, ruffling passengers from one public bus to another for a commission, wandering the roads that made way for open sewage on both sides, and picking this or that item from the shelves of the local shops, staring at shopkeepers if they showed signs of disapproval and protecting them the next day when the government authorities visited the shops for inspection, especially to stop the shopkeepers from tampering with their weighing machines—something that the latter believed was their privilege. At the age of sixteen, having proved his maturity, he’d eloped with his neighbor’s wife. By the age of twenty, Muktiram had claimed a wife, a child, and this butcher’s shop that opened only in the morning so that he could still team up with his gang the rest of the day.
“He’s just a kid—you know that, kaka,” Muktiram said, picking the fat from the goat’s intestines. “But sometimes he plays smart with us.”

Chintamani despaired; Muktiram was making his son seem more obscure. Ramakant rarely listened to him, and his mother hadn’t seemed much worried about the boy. Were they conspiring against him?

“But you boys have to do something for him. I can’t allow him to waste his life,” Chintamani said. “Why don’t you invite him when you get together . . . and talk? He’s too shy otherwise.”

Muktiram said Ramakant was his friend at one time, after all; he’d give it a try.

Chintamani returned home feeling like a real father. But as soon as his wife heard about his effort to help their son, she turned into Kali. “Who in the world wanted you to worry about my son?” she asked. “I know what my son will do. Keep away from polluting him!” She claimed that Mr. Chintamani Pandey had already wasted his life, and there was no point in pretending to help his son. “Don’t lie on the street, drunk—that’ll be your gift for me,” she concluded.

Upon returning to Kalikanagar with his wife and a son, Chintamani had spent the first two years boasting that he’d married a contractor’s daughter, more beautiful than anyone else in the entire area, doing nothing. Then he had begun to broker for bus operators and the owners of roadside hotels that fed long route passengers, charging them three times the price they’d charge local customers. He’d then led local gangs, often messing with their rivals from neighboring towns, and at last turned into a unacknowledged mediator between the local boys and the police. He’d spent the rest of the years pretending he was doing something of worth, doing nothing, while his wife
sustained the family. By the time he was forty, he was like a retired lieutenant—he had a lot of stories to tell and experiences to share, but hardly any of them had a practical use—gladly displaced by newer generations. Sometimes he acted as their counsel—for good as well as bad causes—but mostly he was on his own, and now he was slowly given to drinking. He had this increasing pain that he didn’t own his son, and his wife cared about him less and less.

“I will see . . . I will see what your son will become!” Chintamani refused to concede his defeat.

2.

As his parents debated—or rather, as his mother protested against Chintamani’s chinta, the worry—Ramakant remained silent. He furtively grinned at her, but he knew what his father meant. As soon as Chintamani left home, Ramakant announced his intention. “I have to change myself, anyway. Don’t you think Dad is right?”

Ramakant was old enough to know the struggle the family was going through. While his father idled away his days, his mother, who still believed that her son would one day do something different, something different than all other boys in the neighborhood, struggled on her own to keep the family going. She kept a few chickens that Chintamani completely ignored, and recently, she’d started selling home-brewed liquor to a few townsfolk and gentlemen from nearby villages. Ramakant envisioned that one day she could start letting them drink on her porch behind a floral curtain, turning the house into a local pub in need of more money. Then he saw his porch full of a rowdy lot. What if a drunken rascal turned violent? Would he be able to defend his mother?
He had to think about the family. As the eldest son, he was responsible even for his two siblings. When the father cannot deliver on his family responsibility, a dutiful son always shoulders the burden.

“Who said you don’t?” she asked. “But will you drive a bus? Do you think your mother wants her son to become a driver? Or a butcher?”

Yes, that was the problem. He could not become a driver. Or a butcher. Although his mother still hoped that her father, the contractor, would one day help her son go to a city to get a college degree, the dream was becoming more and more distant. In recent years, the grandfather was going out of business—*Party workers are the new contractors*, he explained. *Honesty robs you off in this country*—and his son, Ramakant’s uncle, was in search of a foreign employment agent who might help him enter the U.S., no matter how many months he might need to spend in Guatemala or Mexico on the way.

And, Ramakant’s chances of getting a job were slim. At best, he might become a primary school teacher, but for someone like him with no political connections, even that was next to impossible. The only remaining option would be to fly to an Arab country as a laborer. But that was not easy, either. First he’d have to replace his old citizenship card with a new one, showing that he was already twenty-one. That would require him to bribe a government official. Then he’d have to pay a manpower agency almost two hundred thousand rupees. Where would be get that much money?

Like most other days he spent the evening listening to the radio. Corruption by leaders, rampant nepotism, broken promises, the growing frustration of the people, routine strikes, anonymous threats and kidnappings, Maoist rebellion—there was so
much of it in the air. The town looked normal on the surface, but so much was going on underneath that it was hard to navigate to a hopeful future.

* 

Ramakant dropped by Muktiram’s shop the following day.

“What do you plan to do in life, boy?” Muktiram asked, grabbing money from a customer.

Ramakant waited until the customer left with a squasy ball of polythene and said he did not know.

“How can you be loitering around like a kid at this age? Ashamed of joining us, huh?” Muktiram asked as he axed a goat skull and scooped the brains, something that he seemed to do whenever he felt like breaking somebody else’s skull.

Ramakant left without a word, paling, as if he were frightened that the butcher would force him to scoop the brains from the opened skull. First, Ramakant couldn’t imagine killing a goat, and second, playing with the brains, putting the brains on a banana leaf? It looked too obscure. The brains, which possessed life, taken out of the body and heaped on a leaf! How strange—acting like God, or rather against him. God put the soul in there, and Muktiram scooped it out as decomposing chicken keema.

It was while fleeing the butcher’s shop that Ramakant caught sight of a fresh wall painting on the road. “Let’s make the People’s War a success!” it said.

Ramakant read and re-read the slogan. With a hammer-and-sickle flag at its side, the call to join the Maoist rebellion looked like a promise to end all the ills the country suffered from. Hearing about the Maoist war on the radio or watching the rebels on television was one thing, seeing them in action in your own town was quite another.
He knew the country’s history, and he knew the struggle of the families like his own, but he’d never thought about his part in the struggle. Now it felt as if he’d always been part of it. Wasn’t every poor citizen fighting a war on a daily basis? He liked the idea of going into “war” to change the country’s face.

That afternoon he sat close to his father, close enough to count the stitches on Chintamani’s craggy chin. He wanted his father to tell him that he could not behave like a kid anymore; he needed to grow up and do something. He wanted his father to challenge him. But Chintamani moved a little farther, as if making enough space for himself, and lay on the mat, his right hand across his eyes blocking the sun.

“I met Muktiram this morning,” he said after a few minutes’ wait.

“Plan to be a butcher?” his mother, who was combing her hair, asked promptly.

“Why only a butcher? There are many things he can do.” Chintamani looked triumphant as he sat up. *See, whose son is he, after all?* he seemed to be asking the boy’s mother.

When Chintamani went to visit Muktiram the next time, he was overwhelmed with gratitude. He smiled broadly at the butcher from afar, and as he entered the shop, he looked as if he were going to hug Muktiram. He patted the young man’s shoulder as he shook his hand.

“Chicken or goat, kaka?” asked the butcher.

“Today I want both. In fact, I want none of them. Maybe only chicken?” Chintamani instinctively lifted a goat head by its horn from the stump. Then he looked confused
about what to do with the scalded goat head. He put it back on the stump and said, “In
fact, I’m here to thank you, Muktiram. For talking to my boy.”

Muktiram blew his nose, spat into the gutter crammed with chicken feathers, goat
fleece, and sewage, and said, “The boy isn’t going to do anything, kaka. He thinks he’s
too smart to talk to us.”

Chintamani looked like betrayed.

“Forget about him,” said Muktiram. “So, no meat today?”

Chintamani paled. The stitches on his face seemed to be going loose as he searched
for words. “You don’t care about other people, do you?” he asked.

“The boy thinks he’s too smart,” Muktiram repeated.

“What the fuck does that mean? You keep bleating he’s too smart; what the hell is
he?”

“Is he your son or what? You keep asking me as if . . .”

Chintamani snatched the machete from Muktiram’s hand, threw it into the gutter,
and slapped the boy in his face. It was so sudden that the boy kept staring at the machete
that had sunk in the gutter past its hilt, as if he were uncertain what had happened.

And that vexed Chintamani as well. He seemed to be asking, Did I really slap you,
boy?

“You’re my son, you know? You’re my son,” he tittered.

Only now did Muktiram seem to have come to his senses. He blinked several times,
and said, “If only you were not Chintamani Kaka.” Avoiding eye contact with
Chintamani, he stepped out of the store, picked up the machete, and started washing it at
a nearby pipe, like a subservient kid.
“This is the last time you slap me, you hear that?” he said. “I’ll bear it no more. YOU HEAR THAT?”

Muktiram was a real man now. When would Ramakant become a man like him? Chintamani said he heartily loved Muktiram—he was industrious, he was brave, and he was honest. Chintamani wished Ramakant would learn from Muktiram.

“I said he won’t fucking change. He will die a kid, or what, I don’t know,” Muktiram said as he gathered chicken paws and put them in a polyethylene bag. “Want them?” he asked.

“Appease your dead parents with your chicken paws.” Chintamani showed friendly anger. “You insult me?”

“Haha, insult! I offer you meat, and you say I insult! Not different from your son!”

Chintamani left the shop holding the polyethylene bag of chicken paws. He’d become so indifferent about them that when Muktiram handed him the bag, he’d grabbed it without thinking what he’d do with the paws. The farther he went from the shop, the more humiliation he felt about eating chicken paws. Chintamani Pandey—chicken-paws eater. That didn’t sound quite right.

He stopped, held the bag up against his face, turned back—the butcher shop far behind—and threw the bag into the ditch. As if he’d forcibly freed himself from spiteful claws of demons, he almost ran home, waving his hand at the two faces who bid him an uncertain greeting as he entered.

He cleared his throat and hollered at his son, who ambled into his room.

“Who were those boys?” Chintamani asked.

“My friends from another village,” the boy replied.
“They didn’t look good to me. Making friends with some loafers?”

“Didn’t I tell you it’s none of your business?” his wife shouted from the kitchen.

“Can’t my boy make his own friends? Why can’t you just shut up?”

*

In the following days, Chintamani was not himself. Because he didn’t ever leave home, his wife asked him on the third day what a wonder it was. He replied that the world was full of intricacies, and his wife only laughed, cursed her own fate, and blamed the booze for his condition. Chintamani insisted that it had nothing to do with alcohol. He only worried whether he would ever own his son—at which his wife giggled. “This hut houses real characters,” she said. It was a declaration that she didn’t have to fight her husband—she was the uncontested winner. She neither expected anything from him, nor did she have any responsibility toward him. Especially in the last couple of years, when Ramakant’s voice changed from an adolescent’s to a man’s, she had emerged as the winner, and Chintamani had become more a loser every day.

“You stole my son,” Chintamani said during lunch the following day.

His wife dismissed him with no response.

“Where’s he gone for the last two days?” Chintamani asked.

She replied he didn’t have to worry—Ramakant was visiting his friends in the adjoining village.

“Are they good boys?” Chintamani asked. “They looked very strange to me.”

“Good or no good, they are his friends,” was her reply. “They are not butchers and all, at the least.”
Her face was victorious as she left the room to answer the door, but when she returned after a few minutes, she looked like a disoriented child.

“What is this? What the hell is he going to do?” she demanded, thrusting a note into Chintamani’s hand.

Chintamani’s face lit up as he read Ramakant’s note. He glanced at his wife and turned back to the note—Ramakant had joined the Maoists. Explaining the reason, he’d written, “I’ve realized that the condition of the people like us won’t change until we change the whole system. I’ve decided to join the Maoist people’s war for the sake of the country.”

Chintamani folded the note neatly and declared, “He’s not a kid anymore. Good for him!”

“Good for him? Your son joins the Maoists and you say it’s good for him?” she wailed. “How will I show my face to my relatives?”

For the next two hours Chintamani roamed the town with the note in his pocket. He fought the urge to accost anyone he encountered with the note and say, Look, my boy has become a Maoist. But he restrained himself, not knowing what actually it might mean. No one from the area had so far declared himself or herself a Maoist, and it was hard to predict the reaction of the townsfolk.

When he returned home, his thirst for sharing the news with somebody had doubled. He repeated to his wife that it was nonsense to worry about the son, who he said was now a mature man, and left the house again, ensuring with his hand that the note was still in his pocket. This time he had a clear destination.

*
Muktiram was heckling one of his boys when Chintamani met him outside a roadside teashop.

“What do you think about Maoists?” he asked, sitting on a bench on the porch. He turned to the girl at the counter and ordered a glass of tea as if he didn’t care about Muktiram’s response.

“Maoists? What’s there to think about the terrorists?” replied Muktiram.

The other boys used a few expletives—one boy even said he could become a fucking Maoist one day if the local police continued to harass him on the street over his long hair and earrings.

“Ramakant joined the Maoists,” announced Chintamani abruptly, as if he didn’t want any other boy to top him.

The boys grumbled that the motherfucking Maoists, the asshole Prachanda of their leader, the sons of whores were butchering the people.

“I knew he’d do it,” Muktiram said calmly.

“You did?” asked Chintamani.

“I knew there was something wrong with that boy,” Muktiram went on, equally calm.

Chintamani thrashed the note on to Muktiram’s hand, asking, “What the hell is wrong with fighting for the country, huh? What the hell is wrong?” He looked at the other boys for their reaction. “Wouldn’t the country benefit if you fought for the country instead of loitering on the streets? When will you understand it, you aimless donkeys?”
The boys didn’t look impressed, especially Muktiram, who scanned the note and threw it back onto Chintamani’s lap. “You’re also a real mystery, kaka. Exactly like your son!” he said.

The boys used a few more expletives and name-called Ramakant.

“I hope you know who the Maoists are.” Muktiram spoke like a counselor. “You’re boasting of your son joining the terrorists. Can’t you see that the police might arrest you at any time?”

“The police! Fuck the police,” Chintamani replied. “You threaten me with the police? You teach me?”

He put the letter into his pocket, told the girl at the counter that he didn’t need tea anymore, and left. He was sputtering, “Terrorists, huh? You don’t want to see my son doing better than you. Jealous! You are jealous!”

And indeed, the police took him into custody the following afternoon.

* * *

It had been a long time since he’d last been arrested—more than a decade. Since then he’d visited the police post as a mediator between the local boys, the affidavits, and the police. Until a couple of years ago, when he started withdrawing and spending more time drinking, he was a friend to the police. But now the police post looked different, like a real police post. It was not only he who had changed; since the Maoist insurgency started, the police station had been fortified, and the officers, who used to act more like accomplices of the local gangs than law enforcement officers, had been replaced by more officious personnel.
When the sub-inspector ordered his subordinates to lock him up—*Lock up that bastard*—without looking at him, Chintamani shook. He opened his mouth to claim his innocence, but as he still struggled to formulate any meaningful words, he was pushed into a room lit by a 25-watt bulb dangling on a naked wire from the ceiling.

“Sir, let me explain. Let me explain first,” he pleaded with the officers, who didn’t care even to look at him once he was locked.

A couple of hours later, two policemen entered the room. When they neared him, the smell of locally brewed alcohol hit Chintamani’s olfactory organs so pungently that he momentarily found it hard to believe he was in police custody. It was exactly like shoving the stained curtain away and entering Kanchhi’s local pub after eight—stimulating and relieving at the same time. His most cherished moments in life in recent years. The intoxicating aroma that filled the pub would reassure him a thousand times that there were still reasons to live in this world.

Chintamani grinned at the policemen.

But the policemen had their own business. They picked a worn-out Goodyear tire that lay in a corner and suspended it from the ceiling next to the bulb. Then they lifted Chintamani, who was still in Kanchhi’s pub, like a baby and inserted him halfway through the tire. Laid on his belly, his hands and legs stretched, Chintamani looked like a Twin Otter preparing to take off. Before he could react, one of the policemen said that the son of a whore would now see what it meant to be a Maoist, went to a corner, and took a position like a sprinter ready. Then he took as much a run as the space allowed, landed his foot on Chintamani’s head, and fell on the floor, obviously drunk. Chintamani grunted like a goat being slaughtered with a blunt machete as he swung erratically on the tire. The
second policeman complained that the motherfucker of his colleague had drunk too much booze despite his warnings, and spat, his head cocked over his shoulder.

The policeman on the floor glared at Chintamani like an angry bull and kicked his nose. A stream of blood drew an abstract image on the rough floor.

“Behave well, you motherfucker!” shouted the second policeman.

“Don’t try to teach me, you coward,” the first policeman shot back, at which his colleague started whipping Chintamani with a belt.

They put tape over Chintamani’s mouth. One officer hit him on the head while the other pounded on his bare feet. They whipped his body in turns, stripped off his clothes, occasionally accused each other of being too cruel, shared more booze from a Jalamreet water bottle, and dislodged Chintamani from the tire when he ceased to react to their blows.

Chintamani had a vague sense of being alive when he heard the policemen talk. One of them was complaining that the booze seemed to have been treated with Urea. The other was saying that the pub owner the whore had denied him sleep yet another night.

At daybreak Chintamani started complaining of the injustices of the world—why was he punished for a crime he had not committed? He hardly knew anything about Maoists; he’d never sympathized with them. He’d never been involved in a terrorist plot. His son, a good-for-nothing rascal, had joined the Maoists, and the father was being punished. It was so unfair. How could a father be responsible for his son’s actions?

When the sub-inspector insisted that afternoon that he must have consented to his son joining the Maoists, Chintamani jumped on his feet despite the pain his whole body
sustained, supported a side of his swelling face with his bruised hand, and blurted, “You will know, you will know one day, sir, when your son grows up.”

The sub-inspector—a young man in his twenties—smiled at his officers, looked at Chintamani’s body from head to foot, and as if he’d just noticed the bruises, he asked, “Oh, who else did it all?” Then he turned to his officers. “Those boys? Hey, did you?” The police officers looked like they were congratulating each other on their boss’s crooked way of approval.

Chintamani was not new to such police tricks. “There’s nothing you can do,” he said. “You can do nothing as a father. You’ll know it one day.”

Chintamani spent that day and the following one at the police station, attempting to explain to the sub-inspector every two hours that a father could do nothing to influence his adult son’s course. By the time the police decided to let him go, Chintamani had started acting like a guru of father-son relationships. Since he accidentally used the term “karma” to describe his own fate, he’d used it quite a few times to explain that everybody, including his son, would be responsible for his own actions.

* 

On the way home, Muktiram and other family friends who’d received Chintamani from the police station disparaged the police for their cruelty in an effort to comfort Chintamani. But Chintamani maintained his stoic posture, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with them. He only listened and walked on, as if his sufferings were above such remarks. Once home, more well-wishers came by to show their concern. They claimed there was no reason for the police to maltreat Chintamani. Some even suggested he knock on the court door. He only listened, as if he were a mathadhis, a religious
leader, just returned from a rare pilgrimage—no one would expect him to speak, but to listen. He would be doing favor to the speakers—in fact, relieving them of their sins—by listening to them. It looked like Chintamani would never again speak.

But he did speak.

“Will the son ever return home, Sushila?” he asked, after the family friends left them alone and the town fell asleep.

Sushila bolted the door and sat beside him—calm and quiet, like a mother who believed that her son would never err. Then she stretched her hand to switch the light off. “Ramakant was home last night for ten minutes,” she whispered. “He says we need not worry about him.”

“Sure, we don’t,” Chintamani said. Then his eyes filled with tears.
Eight

THE VILLAGE UNDER SIEGE

The Maoist rebels entered Khaireni after dinnertime. The dim filament lights that dangled from veranda roofs turned off one by one as the guerillas passed by them. Men and women, busy discussing their days’ farm work, stopped in the middle and went to bed. The ones who were already in bed pretended to be fast asleep. Stubborn children became obedient, and the elderly—unable to sleep—cleared their throats as if to tell the world that the houses sheltered the chronically ill. By the time a squad marched onto Premnarayan’s yard, half the village seemed to be dead.

Premnarayan was following the news about last night’s Maoist assault when he heard the sound of marching feet stop in his yard. He flicked off the television, unlatched the front door, made a slit and craned his neck to look down in the yard. For a brief moment he suspected that a man in his sixties could well be tricked by his vision. But the guerillas were real. Almost a dozen of them—their guns slung on their shoulders and their faces half hidden behind masks and red strips—stood in the yard, facing each other, as if planning an assault.

Premnarayan’s heart pounded. Had the guerillas just jumped off the television screen? Everything on the screen looked surreal. The Maoists had attacked and leveled the historic Palpa Palace, which housed the chief district officer and other government offices. The ruins spewed black smoke that now filled the otherwise blue sky above Tansen, a popular hill station of the country. The dead bodies had already been removed
from the battlefield, but the camera panned to scattered shoes, charred clothing, and
clotted blood that could belong to either party to the conflict, Maoist fighters or
government forces. And the news report included footage of Maoist rebels undergoing
training at unknown locations in the name of People’s Liberation Army—some guerillas
carrying SLME rifles and others, rifle-length batons for lack of real firearms—running
for cover after attacks on police posts, or lying dead in mountain trenches.

Unable to face the Maoists, who were presumably planning an assault,
Premnarayan crept back, latched the door, and wished that the guerillas would just
disappear. He also wished that he and his wife, who was still at work in the kitchen
downstairs, had already put the lights off and gone to sleep. Then he realized what he’d
promised his wife—he had to fight the Maoists. He had to strangle them; he had to crush
their heads and pluck their eyes. He’d said he wanted to annihilate them.

“Two comrades will take shelter in here”—when a stern male voice said that in the
yard, Premnarayan almost shouted that the house was not a terrorist shelter. Then he
wanted to wipe them out of his memory.

Premnarayan’s resentment of the Maoists had reached a new height in the last two
years as his health continued to deteriorate. In retrospect, it had made no sense when he’d
vowed to his wife to bring the rebels to justice if he ever got a chance. Now they were
here—what could he do? How could he punish the killers of his son?

He stepped out to the upper veranda, holding the lower end of his lungi with both
his hands up above his knees—a sign that he was still angry, a little too angry. A female
guerilla—her camouflage uniform and the nozzle of her gun partly visible in the
crisscross of light and shadows—stood in the yard, facing the entrance. Premnarayan let
the end of his lungi fall down to cover his calves and thought about the second of the two
guerillas. Had the rebel already entered the house? What was his wife doing in the
kitchen?

“We are like your daughters, mother. Don’t be afraid,” a stranger spoke at the door
right below him. The second rebel. Premnarayan could feel his wife’s fear and her
reluctance to allow the rebel into the house.

The rebel at the door first requested, then demanded, and then claimed the shelter
as if it were a birthright. The other girl joined her comrade, “We fight for the people like
you, mother.”

What do you mean by “fight for the people?” Afraid of his own vulnerability and
unable to decide his next move, Premnarayan swore in the name of family gods and
devils. This was the day he’d been waiting for. He’d assured his wife, despite her
skepticism, that he’d one day bring the criminals to justice and peace to his son’s soul.
And here the rebels showed up. Wasn’t this the time for action?

* 

When one evening—three years ago—a rebel had appeared in front of him, Premnarayan
had gone momentarily dumb. The sun was setting behind the Govardhan Mountain that
the villagers worshipped annually with the belief that the Kali-yuga would not take its
full effect as long as the mountain existed on earth. Shepherds were returning home with
their cattle, leaving behind a familiar cloud of fine dust. A few cranes that had migrated
from Siberia to escape the winter chill soared in the sky, looking for wetlands.
Premnarayan was busy studying a Hindu calendar for an auspicious date to pay annual
homage to his deceased son. Suddenly there stood a young man in front of him, upright and quiet as a statue, as if he had been there forever, a gun draped over his shoulder.

“I’m a Maoist fighter,” the young man said.

Premnarayan gaped at him, speechless.

“I’m a Maoist fighter,” the young man repeated, as if being a Maoist fighter meant a lot more than Premnarayan took it to be.

Premnarayan dropped the calendar on the veranda floor, but his eyes did not move away from the young man’s face.

“I have a question to ask,” the young man said.

Premnarayan’s posture didn’t change.

Nor did the Maoist ask his question. Rather, he seemed to wonder how he’d know from Premnarayan’s appearance that he could be deaf and dumb, and left. (He would be found dead in an adjoining village the following morning, with a suicide note in which he’d written that he hoped his younger sister might take care of his parents. The young fighter didn’t expect his family to forgive him for all the crimes he’d committed at such a young age.)

The sun set behind the Govardhan Mountain, the shepherds and the cattle settled in their respective places, and the Siberian cranes disappeared from the sky—they’d perhaps found a wetland. But Premnarayan sat through the evening at the same place without ever altering his position. When his wife returned home, he looked like a meditating saint, staring all the time at nothing. Shantidevi had to serve him a jumbo glass of water mixed with yogurt and a huge glass of tea, and expend quite a few nice words to cajole him into speaking.
That night Premnarayan said to his wife that he wished he were as young as his younger son, who now worked in Dubai. He also wished that he possessed a gun, and his heart were not so weak. Shantidevi insisted that everything would be okay eventually, but he said that he would not spare an opportunity like this one again. He had been deeply hurt.

Then they lay awake and silent through the night, as they had been doing too often since the Maoist rebels had attacked the headquarters of Arghakhanchi on the night of September 8, 2002, killing his son, among others.

The following morning, Shantidevi had said that God would bring the killers to justice. But Premnarayan had disagreed. He had insisted on doing it himself.

* 

Premnarayan descended the wooden staircase, his legs unsteady with agitation. As soon as he stood on the lower veranda, Shantidevi ran from the door.

“Those bitches want me to cook dinner for them. At this hour of the night,” she said in a single breath.

“We’re not bitches, mother; we’re your daughters,” an answer came from inside, calm and indifferent.

The couple flinched; Maoist rage threatened them even more than the potential grilling from government forces for sheltering rebels.

After a short while, Shantidevi blew her dry nose as if to let the strangers know that she was still around and didn’t neglect her guests. Something she certainly couldn’t do.

A few seconds passed, then one of the girls spoke up, “I’m sick of these villagers. They don’t know their friends from their enemies.”
“We’re like your daughters, mother. Why are you afraid?” the other girl shouted out.

Premnarayan let the length of his lungi fall down to his ankles as if he’d found the rebel’s claim comforting.

“Can’t they see that we are fighting for them? Why’d I quit my college at the age of eighteen and hold a rifle if not for their liberation? But they just don’t understand it. Sometimes I wish I could wipe out all the unfortunate villagers and shoot myself dead.”

Premnarayan’s heart raced. The sense of comfort he had a few seconds before deserted him. He looked away into the darkness and asked Shantidevi to go in.

“They encourage their children to toil in the Middle East as modern-day slaves rather than fight for their rights in their own country. And they treat us as aliens,” one of the girls complained. “Fighting for the ignorant is truly humiliating.”

“We’re not your enemies, mother,” the other girl insisted.

Shantidevi covered her head with an end of her sari and walked in. She looked like an intruder in her own home.

Left alone at the door, Premnarayan had two competing thoughts—whether to go in and confront the rebels right away or to run to his next-door neighbor for consultation.

He peeked inside the door. Shantidevi sat by the oven, readying herself to cook dinner for the rebels—rice, vegetable, lentils. With a charred piece of firewood, she scooped out glowing coals buried in the ash. He could see reluctance in her face. Hardly any villager would be happy to cook for the rebels—at this hour of the night, at gunpoint. No villager would expect to awaken the sleeping fire until the following morning. Any decent guest would know the villagers’ belief that it was indecent to oblige one to make
the fire once the coals were buried in the ash after supper. But those girls? They would have no problem making fire even after midnight. They, in fact, burned villages and towns after people went to sleep. Premnarayan’s eyes fell on their rifles. As they stood against a low wall that divided the floor into kitchen and living area, they projected blurry silhouettes across the lighted half of the kitchen area and a quarter way up the yellow wall. As shadows, the rifles looked much bigger than they were.

*

In the last ten years of Maoist insurgency, the village of Khaireni had remained relatively calm, at least on the surface. No villager had so far been slain in front of his or her family; no dead bodies of school teachers had been found in the nearby jungle; no guerrilla leader had so far coerced the villagers to *voluntarily* send their young family members to join the so-called People’s War; no villager’s property had so far been confiscated by the decision of the Maoist-run people’s court; and even the private English boarding school—which hired high school dropouts from Darjeeling as English teachers and used the textbooks which told children that the national animal of the country was the tiger (instead of the cow) and the national flower was the lotus (instead of the rhododendron)—was allowed to do its business as usual.

It was a different thing that the Maoists had killed a few young men from the village elsewhere in the country; the schoolteachers put aside fifteen percent of their salary as Maoist levy; almost all the young men without work in the village had left to unknown destinations for fear of being asked to *volunteer* to kill or to be killed for the liberation of the poor; the villagers had been giving shelter to Maoist leaders without question when they visited for their deals, despite repeated threats from government
authorities; and the English boarding school had been paying fifteen percent of student fees to the Maoists. There were also rumors that the school principal had accepted Maoist party membership as part of the deal, although Premnarayan thought it was a bogus claim meant to tarnish an industrious young man’s character.

Gradually, without their realizing it, the villagers’ lives had been thrown into an intricate web of conflict, and there was no easy way out. When the whole country reeled from uncertainly, one could hardly expect the village to breathe in peace. The villagers could be awakened and coerced to vacate their houses any moment. The peace that appeared on the surface was only a pretext for lulling children to bed.

Early in the morning that day, February 1, 2006, the villagers had heard on local F.M. radios—the sound of one radio drowning out another’s—that more than four thousand Maoist guerillas had stormed the historic city of Tansen, the district headquarters, and destroyed police posts, army barracks, the historic Palpa Palace, and half a dozen other government offices, leaving more than a dozen security personnel dead. After a five-hour rampage through the city, the Maoists had captured more than three dozen security personnel and other government employees and fled the scene. At daybreak, the army started an operation, but the guerillas had already disappeared into the mountains.

Although the villagers had already felt ripples of the attack, they didn’t expect the attackers to breathe in their faces with the fresh smell of gunpowder. A platoon of more than three dozen fighters had chosen the village of Khaireni as a safe haven for a day or two on the way to their hideout miles away in the mountains. To protect themselves from
being betrayed, and for logistical reasons, they’d decided to make every house their shelter.

*  

Premnarayan had no idea that there would be more rebels waiting at his nephew’s. He considered returning home right away when he saw two Maoist fighters talking with his nephew. He waited at the door, undecided.

Real Maoist guerillas, about whom so much had been presumed—some villagers claiming that the rebels ate holy cows and ceased being humans—were living with villagers and telling them stories of their assaults on district headquarters, the police, the army. They were telling stories of their fight for the people’s liberation and killing innocent people. It was nerve-wracking. Premnarayan wished that their stories were as romantic as they sounded and their hands as clean as they claimed them to be.

After a few moments of contemplation, he tied his woolen muffler around his waist, adjusted his sweater sleeves, took a deep breath until his heart expanded and he felt strong enough—at least for a second or two—and entered the house.

“Lal salam, comrades!” he said, raising a fist.

The rebels promptly responded with a red salute and made a space for him beside them. But instead of settling, Premnarayan started rambling, “You Maoists, you think you’re fighting for the people? That we believe you’re fighting for the people?”

The fighters became alert.

Premnarayan continued, “Is that how you establish democracy? By killing innocent people? Is that how . . . ?”
One of the rebels, who wore a red headband with a star on it, grabbed Premnarayan by his arm. Premnarayan didn’t seem to have the strength to resist.

“He’s my own uncle; he doesn’t mean anything bad, sir,” the nephew said. “Let him go, sir. He’s a little stressed. No one in this village would speak against the party.”

The nephew’s calmness intrigued Premnarayan. Was the world conspiring against him? Had the nephew become a Maoist supporter?

“Maoist is the people’s party. We’re fighting for you,” said the other guerilla, who still preserved the clichéd Lenin beard.

“What’s the problem, father? Tell us!” asked the Lenin-bearded guerilla, after Premnarayan sat beside his nephew.

Premnarayan didn’t speak; only his lips flickered, inconsistently. Instead, his nephew spoke for him, “He has some family problems, sir.”

*What family problem? Why can’t he say frankly what happened?* Premnarayan almost yelled that the rebels had killed his son. *Does he mean it is dangerous?* he thought, and rose to leave.

“How far is your house, father?” the Lenin-bearded rebel asked. “I think you’re staying here with us tonight.”

“What will I do here? I am going.” Premnarayan sounded sincere.

“But we think you’ll stay here!” said the star-bearing rebel.

“My house is only next door. I’m going,” Premnarayan insisted.

“We said you won’t go anywhere!” commanded the Lenin-bearded rebel. “You’ll remain in our custody until we leave this village.”
A moment of disconcerting silence prevailed at the rebel’s verdict. Gradually, the sound of simmering rice, accompanied by the occasional sputtering of firewood, took over the void. With time, the sound became so monotonous that it irritated Premnarayan. As if he didn’t care about the Maoist’s order, he repeated his intention to leave. “My house is only next door. I’m going.”

The star-bearing rebel grabbed him again.

“Want to inform the police, huh? The army? Spying against us at this age?” he asked.

His nephew came to Premnarayan’s rescue again. “He can’t be spying, sir. I will guarantee it.”

Premnarayan looked grave. *It is unacceptable*, he thought. He deserved much better treatment than that. He muttered, “Why would I spy? Why on earth would I spy?”

“Okay, I’ll escort you home. Don’t get agitated,” the Lenin-bearded rebel said.

“And mind it—you can’t leave your house until we leave this village.”

On the way home, Premnarayan heard gunfire in the mountains across the river. As if it was none of his business, he kept pace with the guerilla, his muffler wrapped around his neck, his ears and chin safely covered.

*It is unacceptable*—Premnarayan kept thinking as he climbed up the wooden stairs on the veranda.

*He sat on his bed. But it felt as if the bed pushed him up, like a spring that wouldn’t settle easily. He gripped the mattress with both hands. He pressed his legs against the floor. The spring kept pushing him up.*
He stood on the floor. How could his son’s murderers treat him with so much disrespect? It was unacceptable. Reports said the rebels had captured his son wounded, a bullet hole on his thigh. But they returned him dead. They had killed him in cold blood. Murderers.

He reached the door and stopped.

But no. He had to settle his accounts with them. They couldn’t harm the family anymore. What would they achieve by killing an old couple who had already lost a son?

He climbed down the stairs. He would not care even if the rebels killed him in front of his nephew. But he would not let them go scot-free. They had to answer his questions. They had to justify the murder of his son. Was it his son’s fault that he served the country as a policeman? They had to answer to Premnarayan and confess their crime. They had to ask for him for forgiveness.

He again stopped—he was a murdered policeman’s father. Who did the rebels spare, from aged teachers to innocent peasants?

Next, he thought about the girls. He could possibly talk to the girls. He could possibly force them to confess that they had committed a crime, an unforgivable crime. How could he let them go unpunished?

He stood at the door. Shantidevi was silent. The girls were silent. They had perhaps put him under surveillance. Every villager was their potential spy. There were many cases of the elderly being mutilated and left to die in the jungle on the charge of spying. You can’t trust anyone in the war zone with so many zealots prepared to die for their beliefs.
He returned to the staircase. Step one. Step two. Oh, he couldn’t make any noise. The girls were still silent. They had him under surveillance. Otherwise, why wouldn’t they speak? Step three. Four. He should have built a concrete staircase. Even climbing on four legs didn’t help. Five. Two more steps. Just two. Oh, creaking kills. The girls might run out the door and arrest a feeble old man. One. Just one more to go. Pray, no more creaking!

As soon as Premnarayan lay on the floor upstairs, a lump sagged in his throat. Felt like he won. Felt like he lost. When he caught his breath, he wished to create a hidey-hole in front of him, in the air, and hide in it forever so that he would never have to face the killers again.

* 

Past midnight, the rebels blew away the bridge that linked Khaireni with neighboring villages. Not a living soul in the village, except the rebels, dared to breathe comfortably for a long time after the blast. Half an hour passed, and the Maoists announced that their enemy had spotted them. They said they’d been betrayed and no villagers would be allowed to step out of their houses.

Then the rebels launched an investigation into the case of betrayal—who in the village might have the nerve to inform the King’s Army about the Maoist shelter? They declared the probable informant their “enemy,” put together a list of possible suspects, and awakened the unfortunate villagers who made it to the list. After each grilling, the rebels reminded them that any betrayal against the Maoists would result in “people’s action,” which might mean anything between a fine of a few hundred rupees and execution by bullet in front of their families.
Having interrogated a few villagers fruitlessly, the Lenin-bearded rebel announced, as if enlightened with revelation, “It must be that old man. I knew he was going to do this.”

Then the commander led a squad to handcuff Premnarayan.

As his aides executed his order, the commander expressed his regret that a man like Premnarayan would betray the Maoists. Then he said the old man would not live to see a new sun had he not reminded the rebel of his own father, who had disappeared since the army raided his village two years ago. Before the commander led his squad away—to defend the village against the aggression of the King’s Army, as they claimed—he instructed the two rebels, staying with the family and claiming to be two daughters of the aging couple, to take charge of Premnarayan. Their glorious party would decide on the spy’s fate the following morning. Premnarayan ceded to the rebels without resistance, as if he’d in fact committed the crime.

Shantidevi fixed her eyes on the girls, whom she’d fed like her own daughters a few hours ago, as if she’d never seen them before. *We are your own daughters, mother!* The couple never had any daughters. They had only two sons; one of them now just in memory.

After the squad left, Premnarayan reclined on his bed, his hands resting on his crotch between his raised knees, and stared at the ceiling beams that his deceased son had managed to fetch from the nearby sal forest more than a decade ago. He recalled how proudly a huge sal tree stood in the forest among smaller trees, and how glad he had been when his son felled it and produced those steel-like teak beams with the help of a few carpenters. His neighbors had praised his house for having the best beams in the village;
some had said that an industrious son always held his father’s head high. But now the villagers had started constructing different houses. The new houses had concrete beams and concrete pillars. Who cared anymore if a house had teak beams that would last one hundred years? Times had changed. People had forgotten the magnificence of teak beams.

“Father, who did you inform about us?” one of the girls keeping guard asked.

Premnarayan had no words. The girl wouldn’t understand the language of teak beams. She was on a mission that she believed would change the world. *Fuck your teak beams!*

“Who did you inform about us, father?”

But Premnarayan would not speak yet. The beams would last for more than one hundred years, and his son would not die as long as the beams lasted.

“We didn’t expect a man like you to betray us.”

Premnarayan did not respond. What could the son have done even if he had been around, still alive? *May his soul rest in peace!*

Fresh gunfire pierced the night. A couple of stray dogs barked in unison in the neighborhood and then stopped one after another.

The commander reappeared with two policemen, both handcuffed and blindfolded. One of them could hardly stand by himself. Three rebel fighters, one of whom masked his face with a handkerchief that displayed stars of the European Union flag, supported the policeman. Handing them over to the girls, the leader said that the house was the safest place to keep the detainees, and the girls would keep watch over them as well.

After the policemen were laid on the floor and their blindfolds were removed, the
commander stared at Premnarayan, murmured something that no one in the room could understand, and hastily untied Premnarayan’s hands, as if he were prompted by forces beyond human control.

“I’m sick of these ungrateful hogs. Let them all go to hell,” he said as he left, followed by his comrades.

The wounded policeman, his left leg wrapped with bloody rags and his right eye hidden behind a bruise, groaned. “They were detained from Tansen. Lucky ones who escaped death,” one of the rebel guards said, as if she had been asked.

*

The sun rose as usual the following morning. Its winter rays seemed falsely metonymic. At this time on any other day, the villagers would be feeding their cattle, cleaning pens, and milking buffalos. Some would be preparing to collect fodder for the livestock or to work in the field. Others would be taking the morning’s milk to a local dairy. Some village gentlemen who hardly worked in the field—they believed that it was womenfolk’s job—would be walking to the local teashop for a glass of tea, hit-and-run gossip, and political ruminations. The lucky children would be doing their homework sitting on the veranda, while the less lucky ones would be joining their mothers, grudgingly, to collect fodder or firewood. And Premnarayan and his wife would be drinking tea, sitting beside the oven on which Shantidevi had cooked late last night to feed the guerilla girls guarding them now.

But today, little happened. The villagers pretended that the sun had not risen yet, or else they were still asleep. They had been ordered to remain home until the Maoists told them otherwise. Both the government and the private schools were announced closed.
The dairy that collected milk from the farmers would not open. The owner of the local teashop would not risk opening his doors.

Only one, Gangaram Gairey, who had lost his nine-year-old son in the 1990 revolution, wandered the village trails, claiming that the boy was watching them from the sky and he would come down one day with justice for everyone.

The sun rose higher. A buffalo in the nearby shed repeated her call for milking.

Late that morning the Maoists relaxed their order. At a public tap beside Premnarayan’s buffalo shed, a middle-aged woman offered water libation to the sun and joined her hands, saying Namaste. She cleaned her copper vessel and put it under the running tap. The sound that came from the tap changed its pitch as water filled the vessel, until it eventually stuck to a monotone.

Life seemed to be returning to normal, or so thought Premnarayan. And only now did he seem to understand what the girls had said last night, a few hours ago: “They were detained from Tansen. Lucky ones, who escaped death.”

The rebels could not be more ruthless in their mockery of the poor couple. Having killed their son, they had thrust upon the couple those two images to double their grief. It was unacceptable.

Premnarayan rolled his lungi up to his knees, and announced, “Look, madams! You cannot hide these policemen here. You cannot.”

The girls showed no sense of urgency; they continued to play with their braids, as if Premnarayan’s complaint meant nothing to them. With a sense of added insult, he rolled his lungi further up and said that the Maoists had already broken the couple’s hearts; they needed no more suffering. “We’d be happy if you killed us,” he added.
The rebels still didn’t react. The fire in Premnarayan’s eyes extinguished, as if he were defeated by the girls’ passivity. His face looked like a scorched landscape, and his lungi covered his ankles.

In a few seconds, he realized that he had not, in fact, told them anything. What he said would not affect the rebels. He had to speak out. He could not become a fool.

He started ranting. When he said, “This is not a Maoist camp,” the girls became alert.

After insisting that the Maoists had already given his family enough pain, Premnarayan exited to the veranda. “You’ve already broken our hearts. You are murderers,” he said, and stopped halfway down the stairs. He sighed. Oh, yes—he’d said it at last. They had killed his son. They were murderers.

As if their enemy had just launched a new assault on the Maoists, one guerilla grabbed her SMLE and caught up with Premnarayan, who resisted. He was saying, “This is my house, you know. This is a poor man’s house.”

* 

That afternoon, the commander stood in front of a group of villagers picked at the guerillas’ discretion and thanked them for their support for the People’s War. He promised not to betray their aspirations and invited all the villagers, from children to the elderly, to join hands with them more actively so that they could overthrow the age-old monarchy and the feudal system, the major cause of all the ills in the country. He said that the King and the reactionary government worked only for the benefit of the bourgeois and foreign agents. He insisted it was the time for everybody to unite and
establish a people’s rule. And only a people’s war would free the poor, who had been
denied human dignity for centuries, he said.

Premnarayan pressed into a corner and began to murmur the Gayatri mantra, his
last refuge, for lack of anything better be could think of. Never before had he found his
life so insignificant. Never before had he thought that an attempt to speak out would rob
him of his entire voice. He repeated the mantra and waited like the other villagers who
gathered there for the Maoists to decide on his fate.

Then the commander laid out a plan for how the villagers could now support the
“People’s War.” He read out a list of the young men—including underage boys—who
would join them and undergo guerilla training. Then he read out a list of those who had to
pay a certain amount of money—his glorious party would decide on the amount later—
for they had no family members to send to fight in the battlefield; their children lived in
Kathmandu, or in Bahrain, or in America. And then he read out the list of those people
who would work on the local committee of the Maoist party they would form now.

Premnarayan was picked as a committee member. “You’ve become our responsible
party member, father,” the leader said.

Premnarayan hiccupsed twice. As dozens of eyes fell on him, he blinked nonstop,
rose abruptly, rolled his lungi to his waist, waited for a moment as if he were expecting
someone to rescue him, and ran into the house. He was shouting, “You murderers! You
sala murderers!”

The crowd stirred, and the leader paused. The guerillas heightened their vigilance.
In an instant, Premnarayan ran out the door with a clay pot that he smashed against a
stone slab, water and shards splashing against his own legs. The commander fired a few
shots in the air and ordered the villagers to stay calm. Already nabbed by a couple of guerillas, Premnarayan sat on the wet floor, his head hung like that of a subdued burglar.

“Is he mentally ill?” one of the rebels asked.

“Yes, he’s been ill for quite some time,” Premnarayan’s nephew replied.

“Sometimes he behaves irrationally, sir. Let’s continue.”

Shantidevi collected her disheveled hair and made her way toward her husband.

“Who is ill? Who says he is mentally ill? Who behaves irrationally?” she shouted. A couple of female guerillas led her into the house, but she continued to yell at the nephew.

“Everybody seems to be insane in this house,” someone assessed from the crowd.

“Sometimes they behave like mad, sir. Let’s continue,” the nephew said.

“Yes, sometimes we are mad. Why sometimes? We are always mad,” Premnarayan retorted. But his remarks didn’t seem to bother anyone anymore.

“Let’s continue, sir,” the nephew insisted, as the situation appeared to be under control.

Premnarayan closed his eyes and sighed in despair. His nephew, the private school principal, had already become a Maoist. The rumors were true.

The gathering turned into a ceremony that ended with villagers wearing vermillion on their foreheads. A few who honestly believed that they were going to change the country threw fistfuls of vermillion on each other’s faces and turned the ceremony into Holi, the festival of colors. By that evening, when the Maoists started disappearing one by one, with a few of their new recruits and the two detained policemen, every villager had been turned into a Maoist accomplice.
The villagers became aware of this only when fighters of a new creed, the royal army, entered the village late that evening to hunt for Maoists.

Were there any Maoists in Khaireni?

The army patrolled the village through the night. They conducted a search operation and arrested a few, especially those who had tried unsuccessfully to wash the vermillion off their heads, and the soldiers fired a few rounds of bullet when they saw suspicious movements.

The following morning, the villagers listened to a report on the state-run Radio Nepal that said the village of Khaireni had been freed from Maoist guerillas; the army had done a commendable job.

The sun rose high. But the villagers were not busy feeding their cattle, cleaning pens, and milking buffalos. They were not preparing to go out to collect fodder for their cattle or to work in the field. Nor were they taking the morning’s milk to the local dairy. The village gentlemen were not going to the local teashop. The lucky children were not doing their homework sitting on the veranda, nor were the less lucky ones joining their mothers in the field. Premnarayan and Shantidevi were not drinking tea, sitting beside the oven on which she had cooked food for Maoist rebels.

Only Gangaram Gairey wandered the village alleys, claiming as usual that his son was watching them from the sky and he would come down one day with justice for everyone.

The army continued to patrol Khaireni.
Somprasad Guragain was a well-intentioned man. He never thought ill of anyone, and he was always available when the villagers needed him. He readily offered to take his *rango*, the buffalo bull, to his villagers’ when they suspected that their buffalos needed one. He climbed up tall trees for village women to collect fodder for their livestock. He also served as a trusted cook at the village weddings, cooking rice, lentil, and vegetables in large copper containers. Like his father in his time, Somprasad was well known in Noumuley for his ability to estimate how much water was needed for twenty kilos of white rice and how much salt and spices would flavor mixed vegetables for two hundred invitees. The village women used to comment that they never had to eat poorly cooked rice or overly salted vegetables when Somprasad served as a cook.

And he showed no political preferences, although he sometimes felt that some politicians were better than others. When two villagers met, either at the local teashop or at someone else’s house, they would ask, “What do you think ex-King Gyanendra will do now?” or “Do you really believe that the leaders will write a new constitution on time?” and start debating along their party lines. But Somprasad never took part in such debates, and he never blamed one party in favor of another. He knew that politics was for other people, not someone like him.

This all helped him to cope with the hardship with which he lived.
But recently Somprasad Guragain had a problem: The villagers suspected that he sympathized with the Maoist party, a party responsible for the killing of thousands of innocent people in a decade-long rebellion. If not, why would a Maoist leader spend a night in his house? Their suspicion of the man multiplied when they found one day that the scar on his belly was from selling a kidney of his own, not from a surgery to cure an intestinal ulcer as he’d told them. Although the villagers didn’t exactly know what harm there might be in selling one’s kidney—except for that a person with such an “incomplete” body wouldn’t go to heaven—it added to their conviction that a Maoist supporter could not be trusted.

In the latest show of that distrust, Somprasad was brushed aside at Ganga’s wedding when he was preparing to cook—the task that he took both as his service and privilege; it ensured him a status among the villagers who were sent areca nuts of invitation to events like weddings, unlike some other upper-caste people who were treated like dalits simply because they were poor. At the wedding, the villagers didn’t even care to let him know about the new arrangement. They just dismissed him as if he didn’t exist. As he returned home—making an excuse that he needed to feed his rango—he blamed the bride’s father more than anyone else. Eakprasad Kaka, the father, could have said, “Why should you cook at all the feasts, Somprasad?” And Somprasad could have replied, “That’s right, kaka; the food will have a different taste when different hands cook.” But Eakprasad didn’t seem even to mind that there was cooking to do. When Somprasad asked for his permission to leave for a short while, Eakprasad replied that Somprasad could leave at any moment to take care of his business.
The thin rope that linked Somprasad with the society seemed to have snapped. He seemed to be degenerating into one of the untouchable dalits from an adjoining village who were assumed to be real Maoist supporters. By the time he reached home, the middle-aged Somprasad felt like an octogenarian, ruthlessly discarded because his service wasn’t required anymore.

Standing beside his rango, Somprasad Guragain bent slightly, lifted his shirt panels, and looked at the scar on his belly. The scar was long, with deep marks of stitch. He gently ran his fingers over the scar—his little finger projecting out, and the thumb pointing at his nose, pressed on the scar slightly to measure the degree of pain it gave him, and he released his shirt. After a few seconds of reflection, he again lifted his shirt panels.

His frequency of inspecting the scar on his belly had doubled since the villagers had begun to suspect him of leaning toward the Maoists. He had this new feeling that the wound had perhaps not healed well, and so it gave him a dull pain all through those years. The agent who’d insisted that selling a kidney would have no ill effects—Many people in the world live with a single kidney. The second kidney is just for “in case,” which rarely happens. Don’t worry—had been quite wrong, Somprasad thought. The missing kidney, he was certain, gave him a constant pain.

Somprasad released his shirt panels furtively when he saw a neighbor approaching him.

It was Rameshwor, his one-time playmate. As soon as he was within the hearing range, Rameshwor announced that his buffalo needed the rango. He didn’t bother to ask
Somprasad about his health, nor did he ask about Somprasad’s cattle or children, as he stood beside the bull. He just waited for Somprasad to herd the *rango* to his house.

To Somprasad’s disappointment, even his well-wisher had started behaving like a stranger. He didn’t like Rameshwor’s Nehru-style Jodhpuri coat. The coat was a sign that Rameshwor had become more of a politician than a clerk. Since his party made him Area In-charge—as a reward for his resistance to Maoist influence in the village—he wore the coat even at work in the bank.

“Is she giving a mating call?” Somprasad asked, preparing to lead the *rango*. “Isn’t it a little early in the season?”

He didn’t hear Rameshwor’s reply, nor did he feel like asking him again.

“It seems Eakprasad Kaka has found a decent man as his son-in-law,” Somprasad said after a while, attempting again to begin a conversation.

“Has he?” Rameshwor replied, and kept quiet. He didn’t start advising Somprasad on issues he thought were important to his struggling friend, as he would have done until a couple of weeks ago.

It worried Somprasad, even though he knew that Rameshwor’s advice was often meant to remind him of the divide between them. Had the villagers decided collectively to exclude him from their society? Somprasad thought about opening a conversation again—any conversation, even Rameshwor’s never-ending innuendoes, would be less disconcerting than silence. But a new fear that crept into his mind stopped him from speaking up: what if Rameshwor asked him why he wasn’t cooking at the wedding?

*
Neither the buffalo nor the *rango* was enthusiastic that day. Nor did Somprasad feel like whistling at the bull to stimulate him. After trying a couple of times, he let the *rango* do whatever he wanted, which included licking the buffalo’s belly.

“Better you sell your damn *rango* and start working for your party!” Rameshwor grumbled.

The *rango* stopped licking his mate’s belly as if Rameshwor had alerted him. The buffalo started grazing around the stake she was tied to.

“What do you mean?” Somprasad asked after a long silence, as if Rameshwor’s words had taken that long to travel to his ears.

“Why the hell do you pretend to be innocent?” said Rameshwor. “Join your Maoist comrades; they might appoint you as a minister. Who knows?”

Somprasad denied being a Maoist supporter. He could never become a Maoist, he insisted.

“Why? Do Maoists have horns?” Rameshwor asked.

Somprasad’s kidney pain felt worse. He leashed the *rango* and led him back home.

* 

Somprasad didn’t return to the wedding as he’d promised. After the children were sent to bed, he asked his wife, who’d stayed there whole day, who cooked the feast, whether anyone asked why he didn’t, and how the groom looked. When she informed him that some villagers complained about him not helping in the wedding, his mind went blank.

The village slept, but Somprasad kept recalling Rameshwor’s question: “Why? Do Maoists have horns?” How could he think that Somprasad supported the Maoists? Simply because he gave a night’s stay to a Maoist leader? Having reached the same conclusion
repeatedly—that Rameshwor had been unfair to him—he decided to call on him first thing in the morning to clarify his position. How could he survive in the village if he lost the villagers’ trust? Today they didn’t entrust him with cooking, tomorrow they might not exchange their labor with his family, the day after tomorrow they might not hire his rango, and after that they might not talk to him at all. How would he save his little piece of land and the house against the mortgage if he were asked to clear his loans? And where would his children play?

*No, I must clarify it right away*, he thought, and looked at his age-old wristwatch. It was a few minutes past midnight, and his wife snored beside him. He slunk off like an adulterer.

The night was calm, the village deep asleep. A few dogs barked at the unknown walker as he went past solitary houses. It was discouraging to walk stealthily while everybody was asleep, but he walked faster with each new dog barking at him.

More dogs were agitated in the neighborhood as Somprasad stepped into Rameshwor’s yard and called him out. He found it more discouraging. Should he go back? *No, I must clarify it*, he thought, and waited until an upstairs room lit up and Rameshwor hollered, “Who’s that? Who’s shouting at this hour?”

Somprasad announced himself.

“What the hell do you want at this hour of the night?”

Somprasad said that he had something to discuss.

“What on earth do you have to discuss at the hour of the demons? Won’t the sun rise tomorrow? Are you drunk?”

“How can you talk like that, Rameshwor? How could I be drunk?” Somprasad asked.
“Why? Do drunkards have horns?” came the reply.

Somprasad’s spirit failed. How could Rameshwor even think that Somprasad Guragain, a Brahman who so often cooked for the high-caste villagers, would drink alcohol?

“Come back tomorrow if you want to talk.” Rameshwor switched off the light and grumbled, “Sala Maobadi!”

Somprasad’s return home was like sleepwalking. Rameshwor had been his intimate childhood companion. They had gone to school together until eighth grade. They swapped their clothes and ate from the same plate. Rameshwor used to say that they would remain close friends forever. But now, things had changed. Rameshwor worked in a bank; he had a good house, and he lent money to villagers on interest, like his father did. Having left school early, on the other hand, Somprasad had started working in the field with his parents. Soon after, he had lost his mother to chronic asthma. Then his father sold half of his land to pay only a portion of his debt, and fell sick, never to recover. As the only son, Somprasad shouldered the family burden. He got married and inherited his father’s responsibilities along with his debts, the number of his children increasing every two years in hopes that one day they would have a son.

Life had to go on. When many of his contemporaries ran to Kathmandu and various Indian cities in search of prosperity, he toiled in his own field and tended his cattle. Later on, the others flew to Dubai and Malaysia or entered politics, but he continued to experiment with every possible means of livelihood in the village. (His wife sometimes accused him of becoming a coward for not stepping out of the house, although both of them knew that they had to stay put in order to have a boy.) He kept a hybrid buffalo and
sold milk until he realized one day that it was nothing more than a pastime at a high price. He switched from subsistence crops to cash crops, but that earned him more sympathy than money. He opened a teashop that he closed in three months, saying that he was too nice with his customers. He raised goats with support from an NGO only to realize a year later that raising half a dozen goats was just a way of helping NGOs prepare colorful donor reports. And at last, he sold one of his kidneys. It was after this that he’d considered keeping a rango, despite his wife’s reluctance.

Somprasad himself was not enthusiastic about keeping a rango, but when his wife insisted that she didn’t want her husband to go around the village encouraging his rango to mate with the villagers’ buffalos (although she didn’t mention anything about his adjusting the rango’s penis—something that made her nervous and left her nauseated—so that the chances of breeding would be higher and fees would be paid without hesitation), he’d convinced her by invoking the idea of helping the villagers. He’d said he would not only earn hard cash but also serve the villagers, who would otherwise have to run their buffalos to a nearby village during the mating season.

But now the same villagers treated him as a stranger. Even Rameshwor behaved like an enemy. It shook Somprasad’s world, and his trust failed him. Should I go back to him tomorrow? he asked himself, unsure whether talking to Rameshwor would improve his condition at all.

*

The following day, May 4, 2009, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, the ex-rebel leader Prachanda, resigned as the first elected prime minister of the Republic of Nepal, citing his disagreement with the president. Somprasad Guragain felt bad. The Somprasad Guragain
who always thought that politics was a distinct territory where people like the village
chief Ghanashyam Karki, the school headmaster Eakprasad Kaka, or even Rameshwor—
the people who were different—resided felt bad. The Somprasad Guragain who had
enough of his own wars to fight, whether it be with his rango’s mood or his missing
kidney and the scar it had left behind, or the never-ending cycle of debt and the
responsibility of raising half a dozen children, felt bad at Dahal’s resignation. To his own
amazement, he wished for the rebel leader to remain at the helm.

Somprasad didn’t care about the 2006 uprising, when many villagers had gone to
Kathmandu to protest against the king. That was the time when Somprasad was busy
ushering his father to places where the villagers suggested the old man could possibly be
cured. While the country was rising against the king, Somprasad was contemplating his
kidney sale to keep himself moving. There were others to worry about the country.

But Dahal’s resignation disconcerted him. He used to believe he couldn’t trust the
Maoists, their promises to rescue the poor, their dream of a so-called New Nepal. But
now he panicked as if his hopes had been taken away. Had he already become a Maoist at
heart? Were the villagers right to suspect him?

The very thought of becoming a real Maoist petrified him. He was not ready to trade
the sense of security that his reality—no matter how hard it might have been—gave him
for the abstract dreams the Maoists floated. He spent the night with his thoughts swinging
between Rameshwor and the Maoist leader who’d stayed in his house.

When Rameshwor came again the next morning, complaining that the bitch of a
buffalo still needed the rango, Somprasad said he’d quit buffalo breeding.

“You told me to sell him and work for the Maoists, didn’t you?” he asked.
Rameshwor said it was nonsense.

“I’ve already sold him,” Somprasad continued, dusting his waistcoat that he wore on special occasions.

Rameshwor glanced at the *rango*, spat with a bitter face, and asked what the hell was that in the shed.

“He’s already sold,” Somprasad repeated.

Rameshwor waited for a while. Then he said, “Listen, Somprasad, my buffalo urgently needs him. God knows what’s happened to the bitch in this off-season. Are you taking the *rango* to her or not?”

“If you must, take him along yourself,” Somprasad said, and entered the house.

A raven settled on a dry twig of an orange tree beside the shed, crowed half a dozen times, and flew away. A black cat slinked out the door, paused briefly as it glimpsed Rameshwor, and disappeared behind the shed. The *rango* had started goring the feeder.

“You’ve started acting like a *neta*. You’ll regret it one day, Somprasad,” Rameshwor shouted. “Will you take out the *rango* or not?”

There was no response. He stared at the door until his legs started shaking, spat again, and went to unleash the *rango*.

*  

After Dahal’s resignation, Somprasad watched the development with a new fascination. It intrigued him that while all other parties focused on forming a new government, the Maoist party began to protest against the president, who’d reinstated the army chief Dahal had sacked. They accused the president of becoming a new king—with India’s illegitimate backing—by undermining the authority of an elected prime minister. And
they vowed to fight until “people’s supremacy” prevailed in the country. When a new prime minister was appointed, the Maoist party dubbed him an Indian puppet and promised to topple his government within a few months, if not weeks. Then began a routine of street protests, parliament boycotts, and exchange of invectives between the Maoists and the government.

In Noumuley, there were new rumors that Somprasad was becoming a Maoist to avoid paying his loans. Rameshwor called him a coward who was aligning himself with terrorists for such a dishonest purpose, instead of believing in himself and working hard. But when the Maoist leader insisted that he joined the Maoist protests, Somprasad said, like a child wanting more cajolery, “I’ve had enough of my own struggle, sir!”

The leader said in response that there was no fight as worthy as the fight for people’s sovereignty. “Unless we make the people sovereign, nothing is going to change. The rulers will always exploit the poor,” he said. “And this time, we are fighting against the root cause of all the chaos in this country—foreign interference. India must be taught a lesson. The Indian puppet must be removed from office.”

A fight against an Indian puppet. India. Delhi, where Somprasad had lost his kidney for half the amount he was promised—he’d fainted at hearing that the Indian agent earned many times more than he was paid for his kidney. With the pain resurfacing, it felt like he’d been cheated yesterday. Some faceless Indian agents had prospered on Somprasad Guragain’s kidney, leaving him crippled for the rest of his life. As he thought more, his anger mounted against the villager who had told him first about the possible kidney sale. Then it reached the Nepalese agent who’d come with the proposal; then it went further to the Indian agent whom he’d met on the Nepal-India border; then it
extended to the faceless doctor who’d operated on him; and then to the hospital; and then to Delhi; and then to India.

“Fuck India—trading on my body!” he thought. By the next morning, he’d decided to join the Maoists.

A few weeks later, Somprasad informed his wife that he was going to sell the *rango*.

“But he’s earning at least a few rupees!” she protested.

“That’s nothing. The party wants me to work full time!” Somprasad sounded like an age-old party worker.

“What party are you talking about?” his wife asked. “Will your party feed us and pay your kids’ school fees?”

“That’s a nonissue. The country is changing, you know? And we need to support the change. Can’t expect anything from this government.” Somprasad was adamant.

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about,” his wife said. “Do you mean to fight against Rameshwor and all the others?”

“They’re nothing. I’ll show them!” Somprasad announced.

As if she were waiting for *this* husband all those years, her eyes lit up. Her youth was restored to a face that earlier sagged with age. She said, “What in the world were you doing until now by keeping the hell of a *rango* if you could get rid of him?”

Amazed by the impact of his decision, Somprasad felt as if he’d gotten his lost potency back. He was a complete man now. His wife wouldn’t have to see him stimulating the *rango* anymore. He had found a better profession, a much better profession—he was fighting for the country. What a glorious reason for getting rid of a disgusting *rango*!
* 

Maoist protesters continued to flood the Kathmandu streets—in thousands almost every day—even months after the protests began. Outside the capital, the Maoists intensified their campaign to agitate people, preparing them for yet another revolt that the party might call for. Somprasad continued to accompany his leader to the adjoining villages, meeting with the people who might sympathize with the ex-rebels. He also started participating in party meetings in the district headquarters.

One day he encountered Rameshwor on the way home from a party meeting. His spirit, ignited by Maoist jargons, was high; he didn’t think of Rameshwor as someone worth speaking to. After all, his party was fighting against the reactionary forces that Rameshwor supported.

“Hey, Somprasad, don’t you see me?” Rameshwor asked when Somprasad was about to pass him.

“What on earth am I supposed to do?” Somprasad replied, still maintaining his spirit.

“Can’t you even speak? What are you expecting to gain by crusading for Maoists?”

“Nothing! But they love the country,” Somprasad said, as if only he knew what it meant to love a country.

“Who doesn’t love his country?” Rameshwor asked. “They are still terrorists, you know. They still behave like they did when they were in the jungle. Can’t you see what their YCL is doing?”

“But they love the poor; I know them,” Somprasad said, as if only he knew what it meant to love the poor.

“What the hell do you know?”
Somprasad said nothing.

“You are a dupe! You don’t know where you are going. Youth Force is considering action against you. Be careful!” Rameshwor warned him.

“Don’t they know that I have the YCL behind me?”

This was a different Somprasad. Rameshwor asked, “Do you know what nonsense you are talking?”

“It’s not nonsense.” Somprasad smirked in triumph. He recalled what a leader had said in the meeting a few hours before: Thinking about the country is a greater virtue than worrying about your own petty interests. “Who doesn’t think about himself?” the leader had asked, and added, “Look where the country is heading. The president doesn’t care about the constitution; the country is run by foreign agents. How can we remain silent at such a critical moment? We will fight until the peasants of this country become their own masters.”

“Becoming a Maoist, huh? You’ll regret it one day, Somprasad. I repeat, you will regret it!” Rameshwor said.

Somprasad then insisted that everyone needed to fight for the sake of the country. Even Rameshwor. Long gone were the days of the reactionaries; the people were rising up.

“Don’t vomit the rhetoric of your motherfucking leaders in front of me,” said Rameshwor.

“You’ll see soon, the country needs the Maoists!” Somprasad declared.

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Somprasad’s enthusiasm didn’t wane, although even a year after the Maoists started their
protest there was no sign that the prime minister would resign and the Maoists would prove their worth. Instead, he became more combative when all other political parties formed a stronger alliance to defy the Maoists and, in retaliation, the Maoists announced a so-called historic demonstration in Kathmandu on May Day and an indefinite strike the following day if the prime minister didn’t step down on May 1. Somprasad thought he was so close to salvation.

Right after the announcement, Somprasad Guragain dismissed his creditor’s concern that he might be trying to evade his loan by working for the Maoists. He said he was rising above those petty concerns and fighting for the country. Rameshwor opposed how he called paying his loans *petty concerns*, but Somprasad would not listen to him. In the spirit of a staunch party activist, he let his old friend know one more time that the days of traditional powerbrokers were gone. He also used some recently learned party jargon that Rameshwor wouldn’t care to understand.

Rameshwor said, strolling in his yard, “Look, Somprasad, there’s still time. Stop talking nonsense. If you don’t, the villagers may decide to exclude you from every social event.”

“That’s nothing!” Somprasad said. “The poor have always been excluded. What else is left for them?” He took a short pause and continued, “Rather, I suggest that you also support the people’s revolt against the puppet government. The Nepalese people are set to overthrow this regime from the streets, and a new age is about to begin in the country.”

“A puppet government? *You* have become their puppet. Why can’t your fucking Prachanda, the murderer, show a majority in his favor and become prime minister?”

“Who the hell did you call a murderer?” Somprasad stepped onto the yard. “Say it
one more time and I’ll show you what!”

“You threaten me? I keep lending you money, and I don’t even press you to pay me back, and you threaten me?” Rameshwor was passionate. Then, as if he’d just recalled something, he changed his tone, “I was sad to hear that you’ve sold your kidney. But you never told me you were in such a crisis!”

That set off Somprasad. “Who the fucking hell has sold his kidney? Want to be my savior, huh?” he burst. “My savior? You boast the wealth your father amassed by exploiting the poor? Don’t I know you? Don’t I know you?”

“Will you leave at once or not, you ungrateful ass? Dare not step onto my yard again. And don’t ever think I’ll discharge you from the debt you owe me. Become a hell of a Maoist or whatever.”

“Sold my kidney, huh? I’ll show you who sold whose kidney. I’ll show you…!”

Somprasad left, sputtering.

The April sun rose high. Hot summer birds wept in the mountain north of Noumuley. Somprasad kicked granite stones like a child returning lazily from school, plucked newly sprouting leaves and ground them with his fingers, and thought that there was no way of getting the kidney back. What would happen if the remaining kidney failed? How would his wife and children survive? They couldn’t even keep a rango.

He consoled himself by thinking that the country was changing. There were still some leaders who understood the generations-long suffering of the people. He was not alone in his struggle now, Maoist leaders had told him. He refused to feel the pain the wound gave him. It was no time for whining.

Somprasad spent that afternoon meeting with the people who might join him by
going to Kathmandu for May Day demonstrations and the strikes that might follow. He met with Sukman Sarki and said it was a good opportunity to visit Kathmandu free of cost; he met with Chitra Bahadur Damai and claimed that the Maoists would fight a final war for dalits’ rights; he met with Shanti Shrestha and promised that his party would find her missing daughter once a new government was formed under Maoist leadership; he met with Gorey Bahadur Tamang and insisted that a new government was necessary to ensure the rights of underprivileged people in the new constitution. A “final push”—that was what was required. And the people were prepared to give it. After that the Nepalese people would never have to worry about strikes, closures, or demonstrations, which they were tired of. What was required was just one “final push.”

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A TATA bus carrying protestors to Kathmandu for the “final push” halted at the village bus stop. Red flags and protest banners festooned the bus and made it look like no less than part of a wedding procession, and the jubilation of the rooftop passengers added to that festivity.

As soon as Somprasad clambered to the top of the bus to join his comrades, who were picked up from various villages farther than Noumuley, and his leader who welcomed him, he scanned a crowd of onlookers—including Rameshwor—at the nearby teashop. Somprasad seemed to be saying, You want to see, don’t you? Look. Look as much as you want. You’ll see very soon what will happen. Then he turned to a group of young boys and adjusted their headbands that demanded the government’s resignation. As soon as he was done with it, he glanced at the teashop and pretended to talk about something important with an elderly fellow beside him.
Before the bus departed, the leader knelt among his comrades on the roof and made a speech. He said the new revolution would sweep away all the unwanted elements from the country. They’d better be aware of the time, the leader warned, and the jubilant crowd applauded.

Somprasad looked at the skeptics in the teashop with a sense of victory over them, as if he were going to Kathmandu to fight the onlookers, and he truly believed that Maoist victory wasn’t too far away. Wouldn’t the prime minister be forced to resign if half a million people took to the streets of Kathmandu? If he resigned, the Maoist party would take hold of the government without bloodshed. If he didn’t, the party would transform the peaceful demonstration into a revolt. The protestors would swarm into the prime minister’s office, thrash the puppet prime minister, and declare their victory. The poor would then rule over the country. The king had already been ousted, and now it was the parties that hindered the country’s progress, Somprasad mused.

The bus stopped at a boarding school turned Maoist camp on the outskirts of Kathmandu. Before they got off, its passengers shouted slogans with a new spirit. They repeated they would establish the rule of the poor in Nepal, and they called for the workers of the world to unite. When the slogans abated, one teenager sitting on the roof shouted out, “Puppet PM, gone are your days!” The squad reveled in power. What a huge task the poor villagers had been entrusted with!

Somprasad was too thrilled to speak a word. He only chortled at the unknown faces that were receiving the protestors at the temporary Maoist camp. As he followed them into the school, he had a feeling that the mass had already taken control of the country. Capturing the school—a school that only a few filthy-rich could afford—was symbolic.
On the morning of May 1, the Maoist leader—the man Somprasad believed to be his savior—instructed his cadres at Shanti Batika School: “Comrades, we have instructions from above that we’ll demonstrate peacefully. No violent actions; we’ll sing and dance.”

“Sing and dance? Can we topple the government by singing and dancing?” asked one.

“Yes, comrade, we can. We’ll also chant slogans, but peacefully. Thank you, comrade.”

Somprasad reproached him. “But we are here to overthrow the government, no?”

“Yes, of course, comrade. But our leaders are still in dialogue with the government. If the prime minister resigns peacefully, why confront? That’s the party line. Thank you, comrade.”

Somprasad remained silent. He believed that the leaders knew what was good for the country. “We won’t leave the streets without overthrowing the puppet government,” the leaders had reassured them.

Prachanda, the Maoist leader, declared in front of tens of thousands of followers that afternoon that the people would not return home empty-handed. They would oust the puppet prime minister, open the door for the formation of a Maoist government, and return to their villages with a lion’s heart. There would be no concession. The Nepalese people had already decided that.

The mass applauded Prachanda as if he’d pronounced a magic spell. After the clapping receded, Somprasad stood up and shouted out, “Comrade Prachanda!”

“Jindabad,” the mass complemented him.
Somprasad shouted slogans all the way back to the boarding school. By then, he’d nearly lost his voice.

“Comrade, the strike hasn’t started yet, but your voice is already down!” a young boy teased him.

“It’ll be fine; a few cumin seeds and a glass of hot water will do miracles,” Somprasad whispered. After dinner, he spent half an hour chewing raw cumin seeds and drinking hot water to ready his throat for the next day’s protests.

Obviously, the prime minister hadn’t resigned, and the May Day demonstrations had been transformed into protest rallies against the government. On the following morning, the first day of the so-called “final push” that would also include a general strike throughout the country, the leader reminded his followers, “Comrades, we have instructions from above that the protests will be peaceful.”

It was generally accepted, but one asked, “But comrade, what if they dare open their shops?”

“They won’t. They’ve seen our mass yesterday. Thank you, comrade.”

Somprasad put a few cumin seeds into his mouth, chewed them, and swallowed the bitter juice, his eyes half closed.

The demonstrations that afternoon reassured Somprasad that the country was going to change. People waving red flags overflowed the Kathmandu streets. No business opened, no vehicle moved; schools and colleges closed for an indefinite period. The country seemed to be under Maoist siege.

The following day, there were rumors that some ministers had started driving to their offices at four in the morning, and the prime minister had stopped stepping out at all. It
multiplied the protestors’ hope that the prime minister would step down any moment now.

On the third day of the strike, Somprasad heard on the radio that the people staging demonstrations in Kathmandu were not people, but Maoist cadres. On the fourth day, he heard that the real people planned a mass meeting in the capital to demand peace and security. But none of it deterred him from shouting slogans against the puppet government.

By the fifth day, he could hardly whisper; cumin seeds had ceased to help his throat. He struggled to ask the camp leader on the sixth day, “Comrade, when will we go for full action?”

“Full action”—he’d recently learned the term that was supposed to be the last stage of the “final push.”

“Look, comrade, our leaders are still in dialogue. Anything may happen anytime. Thank you, comrade,” the leader replied.

Somprasad considered chewing more cumin seeds, but the thought of the bitter juice and its relative ineffectiveness discouraged him. Instead, he went to the bathroom, lifted his shirt panel, and observed the scar. It looked scary. And it gave him a lot of pain, as it usually did when he had the time for it. He was often surprised that when he didn’t have other things to do, the scar troubled him a lot, but when he was busy, it hardly mattered. That morning he concluded that the pain was always there. It was only a matter of how honest he could be with himself, his body, and his suffering. He knew, however, that it was no time for whining—he released the shirt panel and joined the protest.

But as soon as the Maoist demonstrations began, the other mass of people, the real
people, eclipsed them. The \textit{real} people were clad in white instead of red, and they said they wanted peace and security. It was their right to live without fear, they claimed, and they demanded government protection against any threat so that they could run their businesses as usual. Their meeting had begun as a peace rally, but it turned into a protest march against the Maoists.

When Somprasad heard them shouting slogans against the Maoists, he had a sense that his party would now go for the “full action,” whatever it meant. Now was the moment when the Maoist party would show its real strength and defeat the reactionary forces that hindered progress. He tightened his fist and flung it into the air. “Down with Reactionaries!” The competing slogans of the opposing rallies epitomized the chaos of a lawless city, where no one was happy with each other. It seemed as if they wanted to eliminate all others and claim the city for themselves. The protestors came face to face like angry matadors waiting for the right moment to attack angry bulls. Both parties were matadors and bulls simultaneously—tens of thousands of red matadors and tens of thousands of white matadors; tens of thousands of red bulls and tens of thousands of white bulls. For a short moment, they were stalled by their own slogans, and then Somprasad saw a placard thrown onto the street. As if thousands of bulls had been released into the ring, the protestors pounced on opposing forces, the slogans replaced by shouts: \textit{hit them, kill them, tear them down}. The Exhibition Road in the heart of Kathmandu became a battleground of the people who claimed themselves to be the real, authentic people of the Republic of Nepal.

Somprasad caught a glimpse of Rameshwor, whose eyes matched those of an angry bull, and instantly he fell on the ground. An iron rod had hit his elbow as he raised his
fist.

Somprasad was taken to a nearby hospital, and the demonstrations ended soon afterward. Had the police not interfered, the media reported, there would have been a large number of casualties.

As soon as Somprasad returned to the boarding school with a bandaged hand, he was told that the strike was over. The Maoist party had called off the indefinite strike, citing that the puppet government had hatched conspiracies to instigate people against people. The protesters were free to leave at any moment. The camp leader also informed his cadres that the following day there would be a historic mass meeting in the open theatre of Kathmandu.

“For what?” Somprasad whispered, and examined his bandaged hand. He’d never felt as much distanced from a human soul as he felt from the leader speaking in front of him today.

Protest and “final push” were no longer on his mind; he was not a politician after all. On his mind were Rameshwor, that combative Rameshwor he’d never seen before, and the crowd of onlookers at the village teashop.

Somprasad saw himself hurled back into his village by an invisible force. As soon as he touched the earth, he imagined, a gigantic rango gored a massive fallen tree and started chasing him. Somprasad had no option but to fight back. He had to tame the rango and live with him; he had to know the beast’s temperament and act in his rhythms.

When he came to his senses, he wished that he were born with three kidneys so that he could sell one more and go home with money enough to free himself from the bonds of never-ending struggles. He would live with any pain it gave; it would be fine as long
as he could endure it.

At four the following morning, Somprasad woke up to his fellow protestors’ exchanges on the party decision and their future plans. One said that the fight was over for him; another said the protest was a rehearsal for the real takeover of the state sometime in the near future. Yet another said he was fed up with the way the leaders acted—they’d already become victims to the reactionary forces from within and outside the country. Gathering his clothes singlehandedly, Somprasad thought again that he didn’t understand politics, and left. A couple of preteen boys were hollering at potential passengers at the nearby bus stop for a commission of a few rupees from the bus drivers that the boys would perhaps spend on cigarettes.

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A week after they’d called off the strike, the Maoists still insisted on the prime minister’s resignation. The prime minister and the parties that backed him, on the other hand, demanded that the Maoists retract all protest threats if they wanted to be heard. The country was exactly where it had been before the Maoists called for the strike and Somprasad shouted slogans, chewing raw cumin seeds.

It didn’t concern him anymore, though. He stayed home, taking care of his hand, contemplating his fate.

One late morning, Rameshwor came by, complaining that the yard looked like that of an abandoned house. Somprasad’s wife spread a straw mat on the veranda for them, and the two sat beside each other exactly like two little kids sulking over a broken toy, as they say, for quite a while. Somprasad thought that at the most Rameshwor might ask him to clear his loan. If he did, he might be forced to sell his remaining land. That was all. He
prepared himself for the worst.

“What are you going to do now, Somprasad?” Rameshwor asked.

Somprasad continued to meditate.

“It seems your revolution is over,” Rameshwor went on, a little skittishly.

It didn’t provoke Somprasad. Instead, he looked very calm. He ordered his kids—playing on the dusty road nearby—to keep their voices low, and replied, “I’ll perhaps keep a _rango_ again. Would your bank give me a loan to buy one?”

“You never cease to intrigue me,” Rameshwor said, preparing to leave. “See me tomorrow in my office.”

Somprasad’s eyes followed Rameshwor until his one-time friend disappeared behind a house at the corner.

Somprasad would perhaps get a loan; he would perhaps buy a _rango_ and again go around the village, stimulating him to mate with the villagers’ buffalos. One hundred and fifty rupees a buffalo. Not bad. But he felt bad for his wife—she still disliked the idea of keeping a _rango._
VITA

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