**Mud in the Earth**

Caroline Mahala

There is a distinct sound made by a bird from this part of the world that fills me with dread when I hear it. It signals the coming of summer and monsoon rains, and it reminds me of my arrival a year ago. I was dropped off by Jeep when the corn was still high, and the stream was just a dirt path. I heard the call of that bird, saw thunderclouds rising over the hill, and felt a lump form in the back of my throat. For three months, the people tramp through mud and afternoons of torturous, stale heat bracketed by outbursts of rain. This place is known for its frenzied monsoon season, but I didn’t expect it to be so *loud*. Frogs are mating in every puddle and the insects are deafening. I can barely hear people planting rice in the terraces below. Their bodies are bent in perfect right angles as they move backwards through the mud, letting their full weight sink to the bottom and hold them in place. You’d think such solid figures wouldn’t know how to step lightly or would forget how to turn their angles into curves, but I’ve been to enough melas[[1]](#footnote-1) to know that isn’t true. I’ve seen grandmothers outshine granddaughters, their crooked backs straightening and their feet sputtering against the ground as if the drumbeat had summoned a miraculous reversal of time.

I’ve spent too many days watching clouds from the front porch and musing about the inspirations of life here. Didi[[2]](#footnote-2) sometimes joins me on the bench and we muse together.

“What are you thinking?” she asks.

I want to know what she dreams about at night. She’s used to me asking obnoxious questions and smiles knowingly at this one.

She shrugs, “Cutting grass, feeding the goats, cooking rice… like that.”

Frustrated by her answer, I stumble through my next sentence. She laughs wildly as I try to explain why people dream about getting lost or their teeth falling out. Dreams are not for replaying our day-to-day lives; they create a flood zone for the most chaotic pieces of our subconscious to drain into.

Didi says my mind is playing tricks on me, and I figure she’s probably right. I hardly recognize myself after a year in this place.

“Time to sleep.”

I’ve outfitted my room with a large desk, a small bed, and a broken TV that I use as a shelf and coat rack. I tied my bug net into a canopy with some ribbon and hung it over the bed. At night, I like to ease into my plastic lawn chair with a joint and watch illegally downloaded cooking shows or deleted scenes from sitcoms. Blue light flickers from the screen, occasionally capturing smoke as it circles around the room.

I fidget in bed, trying to find a single cool spot despite the heat. It weighs on me like a set of flannel pajamas, though I’m naked. I close my eyes and will myself to sleep amidst Didi’s snoring, the sounds of mice, and sweat gathering between my thighs.

After chastising Didi for having work dreams, I find myself in the middle of the dhaan[[3]](#footnote-3), with my pants rolled up to my knees, clutching a fistful of seedlings. I can hear the bird calling from some high perch. The abundance of growth throughout the valley is overwhelming—these hills are just walls of shapeless green that block my view of the mountains and make leaving seem impossible. They begin to pulse and I’m trying to determine if it’s heat waves or dehydration messing with my vision when, suddenly, the ground I’m standing on fragments and breaks away. The massive pile of earth careens towards the river and I’m falling deep below the surface, completely immobilized and thoughtless except for an instinctive will to survive. Mud fills my ears and nostrils—I can taste it in my mouth. It’s as if no true bottom ever existed and I’m drowning in an infinite, swirling core of mud. I feel it begin to slow and then settle, and I throw my arms out for anything to grab onto, like a tree trunk or boulder. I’m kicking and climbing towards the surface, but each movement is met with greater resistance. The mud is stiffening around me and I realize, with horror, exactly what’s happening. It’s drying, encasing everything it took in its path like a fruit cake made of debris and goat carcasses, and I need to get out before I’m fossilized. Light shoots through cracks forming at the surface and I reach for an opening, but I’m not long enough. A primordial wail that I don’t recognize as coming from my own body erupts from my throat as I thrash frantically. My lungs ache, desperate for air, and I understand that I’m on the verge of dying. I think about heads of lettuce and cauliflower sprouting in winter gardens, and about Didi’s daughters growing into women. I think about having my own daughters, and the look on my mother’s face as I waved goodbye. These thoughts are interrupted, however, by a pain in my hips and shoulders that feels like someone is pinching and pulling at the skin. I shudder violently and something gives way. New sets of hands and feet appear in my periphery. My limbs have somehow multiplied and sit on my body like bowed, upward-facing petals, shifting my center of gravity and allowing me to crawl through the cracks. I pry open the earth and emerge, one limb at a time, like the most unlikely plant in a drought. The neon fluorescence of the hills is once again assaulting my eyes and I’m overcome with gratitude. *Thank you*, I think, and then again, *THANK YOU*, as I take my first gasp of air.

1. Festivals [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kinship term for ‘older sister’ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rice terraces [↑](#footnote-ref-3)