



FOSSIL

Siddharth Pandey

LOST ROCKS

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To the Himalayas

‘Trees, clouds, and rivers are enjoyable even by the careless; but the stone under his foot has for carelessness nothing in it but stumbling; no pleasure is languidly to be had out of it, nor food, nor good of any kind; nothing but symbolism of the hard heart and the unfatherly gift. And yet, do but give it some reverence and watchfulness, and there is bread of thought in it, more than in any other lowly feature of all the landscape.

For a stone, when it is examined, will be found a mountain in miniature. The fineness of Nature’s work is so great, that, into a single block, a foot or two in diameter, she can compress as many changes of form and structure, on a small scale, as she needs for her mountains on a large one; and, taking moss for forests, and grains of crystal for crags, the surface of a stone, in by far the plurality of instances, is more interesting than the surface of an ordinary hill; more fantastic in form and incomparably richer in colour.’

John Ruskin, *Modern Painters* (Part IV), 1856

'This Earth our mighty mother is; the stones
in her capacious body are her bones.'

Ovid, *The Metamorphoses* (Book I), 8 AD

‘But we are free after all. We are bound not by the laws of our nature but by the ways we can imagine ourselves breaking out of those laws without doing violence to our essential being. We are free to transcend ourselves. If we have the imagination for it.’

David Malouf, *An Imaginary Life*, 1978

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FOSSIL

INTRODUCTION

This book is the result of a happy Himalayan happenstance. I vividly remember that day in New Haven when, a little over a year ago, I first met the founders of The Lost Rocks Project during an academic seminar at Yale University. A number of us had gathered there to share our practices as scholars and artists. While I presented my work on Himalayan culture as a then visiting researcher in art history, Margaret Woodward and Justy Phillips shed light on their thrillingly imaginative, multipronged geological venture, *Lost Rocks (2017–21)*. Over the last decade, I had keenly taken to all things landscape as an academic pursuit, so it moved and enchanted me in equal measure to learn about this strangely sublime yet intimately conceived endeavour, that aimed to usher a new, creative consciousness around rocks, metals and metamorphosis, and also our relationship with them. At the end of the seminar we exchanged our excitement regarding our common areas of interest. But barring the one visit to Margaret and Justy's stimulating workshop afterwards, we didn't meet again. They soon left for their home in Tasmania and I for mine in India. We decided to stay in touch over social media.

Then, towards the end of the catastrophic 2020, I received a generous invitation by the artist-duo to contribute to the final seam of *Lost Rocks (2017–21)* book series, and I couldn't believe my luck. During

the entirety of that year, I had been keenly following its handsomely produced publications on Instagram, and would often immerse myself in their hypnotic excerpts and wide-ranging ideas. And now, I had my own contribution to make, that too on those oddest of rocks – fossils! Even though my hesitation occasionally punctured the confidence required to conceptualise a piece of this manner (I was neither a geologist nor a paleontologist nor a trained geographer), I said an enthusiastic “yes” within a few hours of receiving the invitation. This book – my first – turned out to be an explorative process of an idea of which I knew next to nothing in the beginning (or so I then believed), but over the course of the allotted two months, taught myself substantially.

What you hold in your hands is a deeply personal perspective on the evocative world of rocks, fossils, and the actors undergirding their making and growing. Having grown up in the Himalayas for the entirety of my childhood and adolescence, I couldn't help but select these mountains as my overarching setting to explore the topic. The world's youngest and highest range, the Himalayas mesmerise each and every visitor, and for those who reside here, they become an indelible part of their identity. Or rather, they *are* their identity. It is hard to imagine that these sturdy masses of

rocks and soil, forests and glaciers, meadows and lakes were once non-existent, and in whose place the mighty waters of the Tethys held their sway. The fossils found in the peaks and massifs of this great mountain range emanate from the marine life that thrived underneath, many millions of years ago.

But Himalayan fossils also belong to the countless deities that throng India's sacred geography. The Hindu god Shiva, his consort Sati, the 'Preserver' Vishnu, and many other holy immortals regularly appear in 'stone' forms across the country, and especially in the crescent diadem that constitutes the Himalayas, stretching from the subcontinent's north to the north-east. Almost always wedded to the depths and contours of the earth, these figures astonishingly define the lives of ordinary Indians in uncountable ways, and there is hardly a child who hasn't grown up listening to the boundless stories that circulate about these celestial folks in the form of folktales, legends, and myths.

Writing about myths and celebrating their connection to geology and theology in today's age is fraught with danger, given the current political climate of right-wing fascism, both in India and abroad, that leaves no stone unturned to appropriate mythology as history in dogmatic,

doctrinaire, and dictatorial terms. Much violence and bloodshed has surfaced only because someone has wanted to 'prove' that so and so god was born here, resided there. Hence, myths have understandably come to be despised by a considerable number of people as the sources of friction, oppression, and superstition. Their hope for a more equal, emancipated world doesn't accommodate mythology within the fold of rationality, the two deemed as polar and ethical opposites.

But like the abusers baying for the non-conformists' blood for disbelieving their claims to mythical historicity, the other stance of completely rejecting the creative potential of myth is also fraught with profound problems. Throughout our world, myths hold the seeds of all stories, and storytelling is what essentially makes us human, sustaining us as humanity. The beauty of the mythical landscape of India lies in its inherent diversity, teeming with avatars and frequent contradictions, often because every region creates its own version of mythical stories even when it is aware of the supposed 'original' narrative. But with time, such originality itself becomes a myth, and it is only through the heinous attempts of people in power that mythology is squeezed of its vitality and forced to behave in a monochrome manner.

I for myself do not believe in an absolute god as the creator of our universe. I am deeply compelled by the extraordinary scientific discoveries that trace the beginnings of our planet and the world to momentous geological events, many marvellously documented and many still to be written about. But on the other hand, I am equally awed by the millions of Indian gods, goddesses and superheroes, as well as by the myths that enfold and enlarge them as intra- and inter-cultural inventions, regularly originating from the particularities of local terrains.

Simultaneously however, I am also aware of the discriminatory practices propagated in the name of some of these heroes. One such example is Manu who also enters the final part of this book. He is regarded as the 'Father of Mankind' in Hinduism, and an ancient law manual *Manusmriti* is popularly attributed to him and still used to justify wide-scale misogyny and casteism, codified as they are in its toxic life-precepts. But even cursory research shows that this document was not written by a fictitious man but by a host of critics (obviously!) over a long period of ancient history. Manu himself was perceived through multiple lenses in the earliest scriptures, sometimes as a singular fabled being and in others as a plurality.

The saga that I retell here and reconfigure through my imagination alludes to this mythical personality from my childhood stories, whose Sanskrit name gave the Hindi term 'maanav' to humanity, simply meaning 'human' – a word still in regular use.

Despite not believing in the 'One Creator,' I love the realm of rituals and prayers, for they connect us with each other as well as to the wider world, often through the means of myth. With a sensitive education and curious disposition, it is entirely possible to hold together all of these ostensibly 'false' and 'contradictory' facets within the depths of our minds as catalysts of imagination, well-being, and even change. Imagination by definition is protean and prolific, always subconsciously somersaulting and sieving one tale from another, even though they might bear several connections.

It is with this grounding that I have experimented with what follows. My attempts to narrate the incipience and inheritance of Himalayan rocks and fossils as a personal-cultural-fantastical journey have taken me back to my youth, where the seeds of my love for everything to do with landscape cultures were

first sown. I feel fortunate to present these words to you, and hope that you too get to experience the exquisite grandness of the geography that has made me, and which will outlive us all along with its fascinating fossils – the Himalayas.

Siddharth Pandey

Shimla Himalayas, March 2021.



I
IN PRAISE OF TOUCH

Accretion

My world is inconceivable without
the handiwork of my mother.
There is comfort in knowing that
the first sense to form and
the one to flourish the most
is touch.

Ma's hands inaugurated
the thrill of novelty,
the work of wonder,
and the possibility of aliveness.

Those fine-tuned, freewheeling
gestures shaped the palette of
existence in an accretion
of details.

*The true secret of happiness lies in
taking a genuine interest in all the
details of daily life.¹*

But the craft of being human is
not unlike the craft of
being earthly.

If Keats' words hold true –
that 'touch has a memory'² –

then that memory is
mimetically anchored,
dually shared:

Remembrances engraved in
the palm of the person,
impressions enshrined in
the peaks of the planet.

Here in the Himalayas,
the hands of Earth
are still at work –

Grating and grinding,
scraping and sifting,
pleating and plastering,
casting and climbing.

Resiliently rising
a centimeter annually,
replaying the synergies
of age-old rock-cuts –

Resisting too
the unassailability
of arresting solidity,
reviewing the regard
for persistent maturity.

And somewhere deep in
this ceaseless enactment
of grandeur and grit,
shimmers the starlight of shards
with the frequency of fullness.

A fossil is a fragment that delights in its unending completeness.

Incipience

I

There is a way in which my childhood
meets the youth of the Himalayas.

This is the way of haptic ingenuity
worming itself through the folds
of stones, the foliage of plants.

This is the way of ornamentation and
arrangement, of imagination and
alignment. This is the way of
my mother's rockery –

Mimicking the knolls and swells
of the surrounding valley,
writing the story that each
ingredient wished to tell
within a concert of textures.

*A rock pile ceases to be a rock pile the moment
a single man contemplates it, bearing within
him the image of a cathedral. ³*

So it was that many years ago, when
we lived on a storey without a
lawn or a garden, my mother

envisioned a handful of shingles
with a bucketful of mud and
an assortment of plants
into an orchestra of levels –

that continually grew with
my random walks by the
riverbed, the travels of
my father, the spirited
antics of my brother's
action-figures, traipsing
the turns of soil and slope
in a world of their own ...

All night long, those miniature-
men would remain outside,
soaking in the dewy chill,
planning an attack or a
rendezvous with their partners
peeping from the gaps of shoots
and the rock-writhing roots.

And under the cover of
a starry sky, swilling with
the vigour of the river nearby –
(itself empowered by the
edicts of the longest epic ⁴)
stood a deity-mountain
mirroring the rockery's

manifold energies:

Bijli Mahadev ⁵,

The Shiva of Lightning –
a version of the God of Destruction
fashioned out of annihilation
like a self-reflexive act.

Eons ago, He had decided to
take upon Himself the rage
of the skies' thunder to
alleviate the fear of the
mountain-folk thrown
asunder.

And so it was arranged between
Him and the Weather-God that
Shiva's summit-stone manifestation –
the Linga – would pulverise every
few years by the assault of those
heavenly bolts, only to be made
again with the hands of the hill-dwellers
in an endless cycle of sacrifice,
preservation, and succession.

Every day, when I returned from
school to home, I witnessed this
summit-shrine majestically
overlooking the diminutive
rockery from a distance,

exchanging the messages
of mud and stone across the
crisp currents of valley-winds,
meditating on the touch that
had sculpted them both.

II

Here in the Himalayas,
splitting and suturing have
always gone hand in hand.
This is the land that has
known the link between
creation and chaos long
before it came into being.

A hundred million years ago,
when India lurked in the south
as Greater India, it disbanded
from Gondwanaland to begin a
voyage of tenacity and
independence.

Riding on the already expanding
Tethyan Ocean, this drifting
landmass demonstrated the
proclivity for north-mindedness
from the moment of its
separation.

Onwards it sped, millimeter by millimeter, gobbling up the smaller islands with bursts of volcanic lava, until, fifty million years later, it met its challenger in the larger Eurasia.

Thus unfolded prehistory's longest touch, as rock met with rock, and a means was found to slowly tighten the clasp by thrusting India's oceanic crust under the skin of its newfound partner's grasp – *subduction*.

But the embrace wasn't finished yet, for the shocks spread through the mesa overhead. Crumpling and contorting, flailing and fighting, the margin evolved through the melted material over a series of shake-ups.

This is the way our land lifted up from liquid, and divided itself along four fits: Greater, Middle, and Lower, and a plateau-roof stretching like an inverse bower. ⁶

This is the land of knots and intersections, nubs and interjections. But seen from afar, there is a pattern to all this confusion, for here lies the contour of Shiva's crescent, crowning the subcontinent in a finial-firmament. ⁷

And in these pinnacles reside the seeds of all pride, the kernels of all might, the yardstick of all heights.

*In the space of a hundred ages of the Gods,
I could not describe to you the
glories of the Himalayas. ⁸*

But the thing about heights is that they cannot exist without depths. For it is in the pits that peaks are dreamed of, and it is in the foundations that fruits are fostered.

Here in the Himalayas, contradictions are the bedrock of continuity.

A fossil is a fusion of past's promise with future's present.



II
DEV BHOOMI
(LAND OF THE GODS)

Of bodies chang'd to various forms I sing:
Ye gods, from whom these miracles did spring.

Ovid, *The Metamorphoses* (Book I), 8 AD

Shaligram (Salagrama)

If the notion of preservation were to find a shape and form, it would be akin to a circle or circles, breathing through the deeds of devotion and design – like a nascent vase guarding the mud whirling out of a potter’s wheel – charting the alleyway of attention, the route of resuscitation.

For design holds the world together, preceding man’s work by millions of years, determining the glory of godliness. And what is godliness but illumination taking the shape of perfection, and what is perfection but halos birthing halos in a limitless sequence of circles spinning into spirals?

Circles and spirals: the most primordial of all profiles that constitute the pedigree of our universe through profuse repetitions traversing countries and continents, cataloguing mankind’s innate desire to persistently seek

precision and poetry,
equilibrium and infinity.

Look at the earth orbiting the sun and behold the galaxies charging through the cosmos – all churned by that one centre whose arms herald the winds of change via a whirlpool of rotations, always rounding and always looping, like the arcs defining Vishnu’s principal objects: the spherical mace to punish the criminal, the curving lotus to bless all with fragrance, the whizzing weapon-disc glowing like the sun, the conical conch to purify the present.

In these articles pirouette the Preserver’s⁹ DNA, His enlightening fey that cautions men and women from going astray. But even though these instruments of divine power exist in a world beyond our senses, far from our reach, a substance is found, here in the Himalayas, with the ancestry of the deep seas that weaves subtly the four symbols within a crucible of vortices; a rock bearing the imprints of a celestial ecstasy – *Shaligram*.

In its mutating jet-black form,
 the *Shaligram* remembers a life
 many eternities old, when Tethyan
 still ruled the mountain-floor
 adrift with a billion-trillion waves,
 continuously breaking in supreme
 abandon – the essence of water.

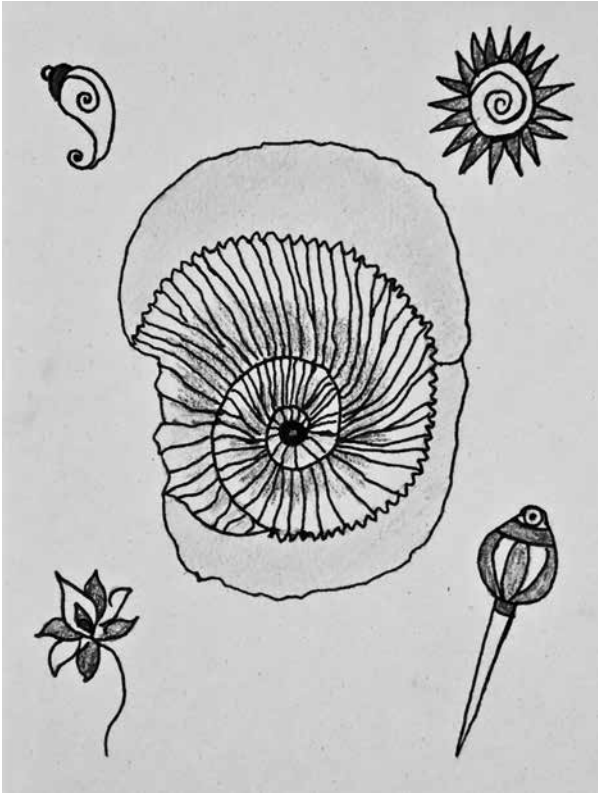
For before concretising into
 these swirling masses of
 Vishnu's wisdom, *Shaligrams*
 dwelled as molluscs swinging
 through the deep blues, protected
 by their rounded shells like coils
 of the Great Snake on which
 Vishnu rests in the colossal
 ocean, and dreams our world
 into existence.¹⁰

So even back then, the helices
 and the convolutes, the twists
 and the twirls bridged the gap
 between biology and theology.
 And when the Himalayas finally
 rose through enormous eras of
 efforts and eruptions, these
 ammonites retained their curling
 dispositions, honouring their
 proudest protrusions.

As soil and dirt and wind and
 sunshine worked their way
 into the pits of these spirals,
 the ensuing firmness of the once
 hollowed shells came to acquire
 the traces of the four signs and
 their twenty-four permutations,
 endowing the water-born rocks
 with hallowed functions –
 their pious abstractions.

Today when you walk the
 Himalayan valleys of Spiti or
 Nepal, you will come across
 the memories of a marine-life
 embossed and engraved with
 minute lobes and saddles, bulges
 and indentations, all within the
 perfected contours of these
 little ammonites, silently revealing
 that everything you touch with
 the tap of your feet is a tendril
 of Vishnu, an ocean in retreat.

A fossil is a fold of energy welding man to his Maker.



Shakti

A tale is told of a slighted daughter, whose sacrifice led to a terrifying slaughter. Her name was Sati, the offspring of Prajapati, who silenced her wishes to marry a mendicant, wallowing in his vanity, unrepentant.

Little did he believe that the vagrant wasn't a common man but the God of Gods, the supreme *Mahadev*¹¹ – the greatest meditator and yoga's originator, the divine dancer spinning worlds out of his colossal whirls.

But Sati knew that behind the snakes and the deer skin, the holy beads and the ashy film, lay the body of a soul that was itself the Universal Soul – Shiva, the eternal light and the undying flame, who could make time itself tame.

Relinquishing her nobility and the accoutrements of aristocracy, she meditated deeply upon her beloved's image, eventually winning His attention and affection, and entering the divine bond of conjugal perfection.

Learning of this defiance shattered the Prajapati's forbearance, and sowed the seeds of revenge in an orchestration of humiliation. He hence hosted a lavish communal ceremony, where gods aplenty would sit around a fire so holy, and bless the palatial atmosphere – unbeknownst of Sati's ire.

For the invitation didn't extend to Shiva or His spouse, who was mortified by her father's erasure of her husband's true nature. Resolving to be recognised as the wife of the superlative deity, Sati arrived at the grand ritual and requested Prajapati to do the needful.

But such was his pride and such his arrogance, that instead of welcoming her sans all pretense, he seethed with anger and turned sinister. Thus began his infamous tirade against Shiva, abusing Him for His uncivilised aura.

Unable to stop and unable to contain her conceited father's slanderous refrain, Sati decided to step into the fire, and save her marital dignity by embracing the pyre. And so died a child in front of her parent, puncturing his pride with that dark descent.

When Shiva's followers revealed this tragedy to their God Almighty, devastation drenched the Deity of Destruction, who succumbed to the dreadful desire of wide-scale obliteration. Many were mutilated and many were killed, but Mahadev massacred without any guilt.

Appearing at the ceremony, He took hold of Sati's half-charred body, and drew it away from that scene of disdain. Off He went wrenching in pain, and curvetted through the universe, emblazing it with a curse. For His *Tandava*¹² heralded the finishing of all creations, from humans, flora, fauna to mountains, deserts and oceans.

Trembling at this prospect of irreversible darkness, the demi-gods approached Vishnu's benign caress. For if Shiva was the Destroyer, then the four-armed was the Preserver, and only He could play the role of the Saviour.

But Mahadev's embrace was so tight that try as you might the singed being wouldn't budge from her lover's touch. And as long as this would sustain, the world could only feign a rhythm in vain, drain as it did of all its brilliance and much of its cadence.

Vishnu accordingly conjured a solution unheard, and sent forth His Chakra to cleave the wife of Shiva. The radiant disc shined amidst the galactic fire and ably curtailed the monumental mire. Fifty-one pieces of Sati's figure flew across ether, eventually landing in the south of Asia – its hallowed bower.

Thus hummed the Earth with the energy of purity, welcoming the smithereens in pockets of sublimity. Wherever the fragments alighted, there a temple ignited, for here the Female Force felt the land of yore. And out of these meets and out of these greets emerged the Seats of Power – the blessed *Shakti Peeths*.¹³

Here in the Himalayas, Sati's tongue and clothes became the flames of Jwala Mukhi, her left breast the stone of Brajeshwari Devi, her feet the anchorage of Chintpurni, her throat, anklet, and temple the power of Amarnath and Muktinath, and her fine-looking eyes – Nanda Devi's dais.¹⁴

A fossil is a fire that refuses to become residue.

Shiva

Not all victories culminate with a sense of satisfaction or the pleasure of pride.

(But mountains have a way of turning even this tide.)

Although the five Pandava brothers had won the Great War of India – the Mahabharata¹⁵ – by crushing their hundred Kaurava cousins in a combat of stealth, a spectacle of supremacy, and although these Pandavas embodied the reigns of righteousness, the glory of goodness, guilt followed them all around, for they had killed their kin, an act not different from sin.

And so after winning through such wretched losing, the five inseparables like the hand's fingers ventured forth to Shiva's City, the holy conurbation of Varanasi, to seek the Mahadev's forgiveness and lessen their state of soreness.

But the God of Gods was angry
 still at what the five had achieved
 through their fierce will. Sickened
 by their slaying and blood-baying,
 notwithstanding their reasoning
 as the virtuous side's positioning,
 Shiva fled His own settlement and
 went to rest in a hidden snow-bed.

Crestfallen with their deity's
 pricking absence, the five
 eventually learned of His
 Himalayan presence, and
 travelled to the north from
 His plain-based hearth.

There too, the Lord evaded
 their advances, for He was
 steeled against their pleas
 to let their pain cease.

But thinking that the Pandavas
 might just uncover His hiding
 spot (for they too were gods of
 sorts ¹⁶), Shiva decided upon a
 whim to turn into animal-skin –
 the robust and hefty 'Nandi bull,'
 once His steed and now His breed. ¹⁷
 In this creaturely vehicle, He sought

the brothers' debacle, trusting that
 they wouldn't recognise Him in
 that beastly disguise.

(How wrong though He was
 about this altered pause, for
 soon enough a five-part puzzle
 would muzzle the Pandavas'
 existential tussle, springing out
 of the same bull having failed to
 resist a mammoth brother's pull).

In those glacial environs and
 icy caverns, just when the brothers
 had lost all hope of penance and
 pardon, Bhim the second eldest
 – physically the fiercest – discerned
 through his clever vision the deity
 behind the dusky burden.

In the last attempt to avert His
 blessing from the brothers' imploring,
 Shiva the Bull darted into a crevasse,
 seeking the shielding of an earthly mass.

But as He sprinted into those
 sunken gaps, the desperate Bhim
 managed to clasp the tip of the tail,
 chafing the massive mammal's trail.

So even when that godly animal
rocketed through the ground's bowels,
the subterranean realm couldn't mask
His unsmooth task, and only partially
succeeded in covering the large limbs.

Cracks conjured at five points,
revealing Shiva's exposed joints.
This was the land's way of precluding
even the God of Gods from going afield,
and of letting the kin-killers know
that redemption was possible in
this land of eternal snow.

And hence it happened that here
in the Himalayas, the famous five
found their heavenly hive, and
adulated those elevated holy bits.
Like his consort Sati, Shiva too
found a new existence through
corporeal fragments, the difference
being His in-between switching
to a creaturely life's calling.

Once the Pandavas had sat
around these stony icons to gain
salvation through meditation,
their seats and the animal's signs
transformed into sites of
deep devotion.

Millennia later, when the world
has been through many ages,
this five-fold feature draws
numerous folks and sages, and
glistens with an aura gloriously
its own: A view so vast soaked
in a pristine snow-bath, this
being our blessed Kedarnath. ¹⁸

A fossil is a feat of forgiveness echoing across time.

Striations

Were it not for the pathways between two points, however circuitous, however blurred, our world would have remained an amorphous space, devoid of character, deprived of keenness. Reality and its other endure because of striations relating everything to everything, surfacing the inside, inlaying the outside.

Epochs before the first cartographer took up his compass and divider to measure the planet through his web of lines, and eras prior to the maiden architect exercising his incisive artistry, our planet had already begun to organise itself through the principles of linearity, materialising time with the rudiments of rocks.

In the highest of peaks, here in the Himalayas, when the strongest sun occasionally washes away the snow-sheets, you witness the intercalated rows of stones and organisms¹⁹ pushing upwards and outwards with the ghosts of an ocean – like mastheads proclaiming the advent of self-assured kingdoms.

And when you cut through the frozen corals unearthed in their lofty valleys, there too you discover streaks marking their inner nature, albeit of a different stature. For these are rings rather than rows, each a proof of a day lived in the growing coral's trajectory. Once the circular bands exhaust the excursion of a year, the coral cultivates a concentrated circle around the three-sixty-five girdles, and re-launches another cycle of expanding wheels.

Lines are accordingly the ways through which these rocks mark earth's rotation, and there are far-older corals indexing longer years with added circles.

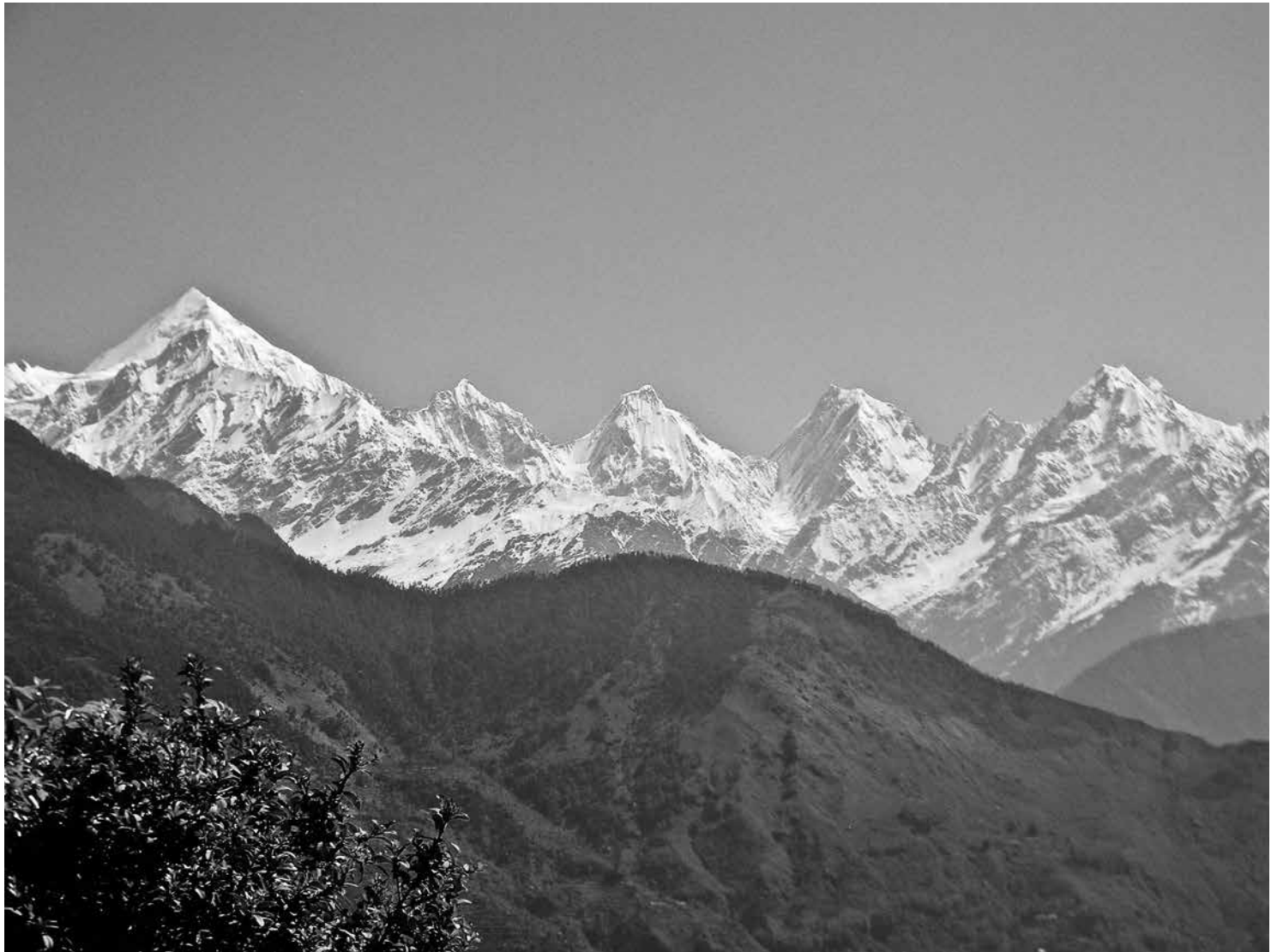
But between the rows and the rings also lie other imprints, one of them being the whorls of holy feet. So whether it is Shimla's highest Jhaku hill, where the monkey-god Hanuman rested for a jiffy in His flight from the northern nib to the southern bit²⁰, or whether they are the Bhutanese monasteries, where the Second Buddha Padmasambhava

stepped in to bless as Guru Rinpoche,
 the stony ground melts away in
 seamless shapes to cast the
 touch of hallowed grace.

Not all traces though are fully
 tactile, for there is a mythical
 line running through Kailasha's
 symmetrical pyramid,²¹ that secretly
 swivels our universe as an axis
 since many an eternity.

And then there are the outlines
 kissing the oceanic azure skies, that
 often take the shape of a story or a
 godly body. In Uttarakhand, you
 have the revered 'Panchachuli,'
 the five cooking-hearths of the
 Pandava brothers poking inversely
 amidst six sweeping points.
 And in West Bengal, you climb
 the Sandakphu pinnacle crowning
 the ridge of Singalila to witness the
 calm of the 'Sleeping Buddha,'
 traceable amongst the
 world's tallest summits.²²

*A fossil is a flight of linearity moulding matter into its
 mystical meaning.*





FOSSIL

III
LINEAGES

Cairn

Here in the Himalayas,
crossings yield the matter
for memorialisation.

As those long weeks and
months of climbing up
from the plains and dales
sublimate into an
enlargement of spirit,
time begins to feel
differently.

In every breath and every step
you take to reach the higher
ranges of these godly
abodes, you chisel an
interior terrain,
like tunnels furrowing
a field of clouds,
smooth and serene.

This is the terrain of an active
presence, vast and wondrous,
brimming with the brilliance
of the sprawling snows, poised,
despite the voluptuous winds.
It is a territory teeming

with the triggers of the
earth-sky.

*To inhabit the open is not
to be stranded on the outer surface
of the earth but to be caught in
the transformations of
the weather-world.* ²³

These are the transformations
that erase the distinctions
between the
inside and outside,
depth and surface,
life and afterlife,
deadness and aliveness.

For when you finally arrive
at those high mountain passes –
portals into a million-billion worlds,
where every pause is pregnant
with infinite possibilities of going
here, there, everywhere;
where geography dalliances
with mythology and geology
romances cosmology; where
directionality assumes momentous
proportions and singularities
morph into stimulating abstractions –

there births a need to rest
oneself and review the course
taken so far, and also the
tracks yet to be trugged.

And in this brief duration of
repose springs the aspiration to
anchor oneself by associating with
the traces of the past, and
linking with the lineages of
the future.

Out of these myriad thoughts
and countless contemplations
ascends a humble tower with
rough ingredients, but
lapidary precision:
cairn –

A pylon of man's memories, a
pillar to god's grace, firm with
the handiwork of travellers
destined never to meet,
but full of future's welcoming
warmth, its abiding wish for
constant additions.

A cairn is an endless manuscript
of multiple journeys, where

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artefacts mingle with desires,
and offerings shade into yearnings;
where Vishnu's shaligrams steady
Shiva's tridents, and textiles'
ductility drives mantras' constancy;
so that in spite of being an
admixture of heterogeneity,
a patchwork of uncanny variety,
a cairn remains a figure of balance,
a prayer to calmness, a symbol
of sacred beauty.

*A fossil is a fruit of togetherness guiding the pathways
of individuality.*



Himalayacetus subathuensis

A common belief:

Anyone who visits the
Himalayas once leaves a
part of her soul in their
variegated geography,
so that the massifs never
cease to call her back
and make her seek that
fragment over (and drop
another), against the
sense of all closure.

That belief morphs into
a burning desire for those
who acquire longevity in
the cedars' embrace, for
they know furthermore
that it isn't only life that
must be cherished amidst
these mountains' age-old
grace; dying too holds the
greatest allure, here in the
Himalayan pure.

This is the way by which
these mountains become
the expression of home,

the receptacle of humanity,
 for this is the route that
 embeddedness takes across
 time and space – a conduit
 emanating from the essentials
 of snow and ice,
 schist and granite;
 a power gushing from a
 point in the beginning when
 no human walked these
 non-existent valleys, and
 whales swam in their
 now forgotten fluids.

This is the channel that leads
 us back to Manu's ship. Manu,
 the Father of Mankind, a king
 famed for his benevolence divine.
 Once, when he was performing
 the morning prayers on the banks
 of a river, he found a tiny fish
 in his cupped hands, muttering
 with a quiver: "Please save me,
 O Sire of Sires! A larger
 fish has become my mire!"

The squeaking little creature
 hoped for a secure future. The
 moved monarch brought it to

his opulent palace, and placed
 it in a water-pot devoid of all
 menace. Checking on the fish
 the very next morning, Manu
 was surprised to see it mutating
 into the size of the vessel, and
 transferred it to a cauldron of metal.

The new container also grew
 small on the subsequent day,
 for the fish bloated further
 without any delay.

A pool was now sought to
 serve its increasing lot. And
 so it happened that its freedom
 and protection evolved into
 the king's singular veneration.
 For he could sense it well that
 this mushrooming creature
 belied its ordinary features,
 and was possibly something
 else – perhaps the divine
 Maker Himself.

How true was this thought!
 For when the whale-fish was
 brought to the ocean's fortifications
 (as all other spaces had exhausted

their diverse dimensions), Vishnu emerged from its figure shining iridescently, half-submerged.

Said He: "Thank you, O King of Kings, for respecting my magnifying limbs, and for giving me shelter from my former welter. Just as you have saved me, I will save you too, for the Great Flood is bound to erupt and render this universe entirely disrupt. Build a large boat and bring a paired-sample of all species within its wooden reaches. Collect some grain-seeds and think of all your good deeds, for when I will land you ashore, you will need them much as the new life's core."

So did Manu as he was bid, and fitted this wondrous world's microcosm within his bounteous boat's bosom. And the Flood arrived indisputably, swelling with gigantic tides. But our Indian Noah straddled them far and wide, intently praying for Vishnu's ride.

Amidst those leaping waves and their shattering chase materialised a whale of a fish, the grandest sea-creature steadily sublime, now no longer a tiny miniature. Calm and composed in this turbulent prose, it drove the ship upon its hip and moored it to safety, finally gesturing Manu to inaugurate the dawn of a fruitful new humanity.

As eras passed and men and women thrived, we forgot about that gigantic might – the foundation of our pride. Vishnu of course reappeared in several new avatars ²⁴, but since the oceans always stayed afresh (I believed), His whale-fish form couldn't have veered too far ...

When, towards the end of the last millennium, geologists discovered the jaws of a pre-historic wonder in the deepness of my beloved Shimla Hills stratum, it transpired that they defined the mouth of the earliest archaeocete, the mother of all whales and

FOSSIL

the commencement of our genesis:

Himalayacetus subathuensis. ²⁵

This is the creature that had
known long before Time had
forward-flown that soil and
syllables were married through
mystery, and that 'language is
fossil poetry.' ²⁶ Hence it was that
when its remains finally emerged
in those hilly terrains, the holotype
resolutely reserved a riddle,
choosing but a middle to
divulge its being through partial
means: the den of sound and
the trace of teeth, that conferred
Manu and his line with
life-sustaining genes.

A fossil is a fulcrum keeping the world afloat.



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CODA

“Praying”

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch
a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway
into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

A poem by Mary Oliver,
from her 2007 collection, *Thirst*.

‘For all our mockery of the earth we have come from, it covers us, we creep back to it, to its thickness on our limbs, its grit in our mouths.’

David Malouf, *An Imaginary Life*, 1978



What is a fossil?

A fossil is a fulcrum keeping the world afloat.

A fossil is a fruit of togetherness guiding the pathways of individuality.

A fossil is a flight of linearity moulding matter into its mystical meaning.

A fossil is a feat of forgiveness echoing across time.

A fossil is a fire that refuses to become residue.

A fossil is a fold of energy welding man to his Maker.

A fossil is a fusion of past's promise with future's present.

A fossil is a fragment that delights in its unending completeness.

NOTES

- 1 A famous saying by the polymath William Morris, first articulated in his 1887 essay 'The Aims of Art.'
- 2 A phrase from the early 19th century poem "What can I do to drive away" by John Keats.
- 3 From Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's 1943 children's classic, *The Little Prince*.
- 4 This was the river Beas, named after Vyas, the writer of the world's longest epic, *The Mahabharata*.
- 5 Bijli is 'thunder' or 'lightning' in Hindi, and 'Mahadev' is a portmanteau of 'maha' (great) and 'dev' (god).
- 6 The three Himalayan divisions and the Tibetan Plateau, also called 'The Roof of the World.'
- 7 In popular iconography, Shiva adorns the crescent moon upon his matted hair as a special ornament.
- 8 An epithet attributed to the ancient Hindu scriptures, the *Puranas*.
- 9 'The Preserver' being Vishnu, one of the most revered deities of the Hindu pantheon.
- 10 This is also the Celestial Snake called 'Ananta', meaning 'infinite' and 'eternal'.
- 11 Shiva has various forms, including the earlier alluded Bijli Mahadev.
- 12 A generic name for the divine dance of Hindu gods.
- 13 'Shakti' is Hindi for power and 'peeth' for 'bench' or 'seat'.
- 14 These being some of the earthly manifestations of Sati's pieces, now places of pilgrimage in the Himalayas.
- 15 The war that gave the epic its name.
- 16 Although the Pandavas called themselves the sons of Pandu, it was actually out of the union of demi-gods and the Pandavas' mothers that they came into existence.
- 17 Nandi bull is popularly believed to be Shiva's vehicle.
- 18 A town of immense religious significance in the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand, where (and around which) the five fragments are still revered.
- 19 The most famous being the 'Yellow Band' on the face of Mt. Everest.
- 20 The episode is from *The Ramayana*, another important Hindu epic along with *The Mahabharata*, where Hanuman flies to the Himalayas to search for a medicinal herb to cure his master Lord Rama's younger brother, Lakshmana. During the final battle between Rama and Ravana (the epic's primary antagonist) in what is today's Sri Lanka, Lakshmana had fallen unconscious and could only be saved with the help of a Himalayan herb. Since Hanuman couldn't find the specific plant, he uprooted the entire mountain on which it was reputed to grow and flew with it down the subcontinent.
- 21 Said to be the cosmic axis, Kailasha is sacred to four religions: Bon, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism.
- 22 These constitute the Kanchenjunga Range where the Buddha lies in eternal sleep.
- 23 From Tim Ingold's article 'Earth, Sky, Wind, and Weather' in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute and Historical Perspectives* (2007), Volume 13.
- 24 Vishnu appeared in ten avatars, famously as *The Mahabharata's* Krishna and *The Ramayana's* Rama. His fish-form was the first of all.
- 25 Discovered in 1998. Only the jawbone (complete with the teeth) was found.
- 26 From Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1844 essay, 'The Poet'.

ILLUSTRATIONS

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by Siddharth Pandey.

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COLOPHON

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Here in the Himalayas,
the hands of Earth
are still at work —

Grating and grinding,
scraping and sifting,
pleating and plastering,
casting and climbing.

FOSSIL

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