Mr. Ram and the Breathing Lessons

Mr. Ram scrambles over the remains of concrete houses, follows a maze through the feet of overturned coconut trees, hurrying to give the Breathing Lessons. He believes he is walking all this way to do something else entirely, so he lumbers under the weight of a worn leather duffel bag; inside it he can hear the jostle and click of medicines and bandages bought with his own salary.

As he walks he pulls his kerchief to his face as the smell of raw sewage or something worse ripens beneath his nose. He tries not to look anywhere too closely for fear he will see something awful: a fallen half dead heifer or a child's spiny foot poking out of the rubble. It is the inverse of being a boy and searching for the faces of the gods in the pink masses of sunrise. Now it is mid morning and the sky is watery and blank.

He stops to rest for a moment where a wave of corrugated roofing which blocks the path; its bends and screeches under his weight. It used to be a fortunate person's roof– painted and metal; a roof like his own further inland. He takes off his spectacles and rubs his eyes.

This morning, sipping *chai*, he read in the paper that the cyclone responsible for the destruction in front of him was the worst to hit the region in over a century. Politicians named the aftermath "The Devastation." Bureaucrats busied themselves with orchestrating relief. Governmental and foreign aide workers slowly dotted the southern coast of India. As usual there weren't enough: too much rain and not enough people. But he can remember a time when there were too many people and not enough rain.

Mr. Ram tries to sit up and sip his breath as if it is the wine of the body of Christ, but the errant smoke of a nearby brush fire chokes him and he has to pull his kerchief to his face again. The square of silk belongs to his wife, Poornima. Once fine, it is now yellowed, and torn where it caught on a stray branch. It will no longer fit prettily into his wife's collection next to the vanity, above jars that smell of oleander. He mops his brow with the kerchief and sets off again.

Mr. Ram is walking toward the coast because of a woman named Shanti, whom he's never met before. Shanti grew up in seaside village of Ranish. She remembers

Ranish in the crude sketches of childhood. Before her eighth birthday she was taken to live in a textile shop, in town, to work off a family debt.

At The Devastation Shanti appeared home for the first time in nearly 20 years, glowing and ethereal in a red orange *saree* which was her stewardess uniform, her silken hair pulled into a braided crown. She went first to the local Ministry of Health on behalf of the women in the region.

"What aid is being sent there?" she queried to the tired looking man behind the desk.

"Ma'am, all that is possible, we are doing," he answered, his head bobbing back and forth, in appeasement, like skiff on a wave.

"You must arrange for my transit to Ranish," she insisted.

"Ma'am the roads are still impassible—not even cleared enough for a motorbike."

"The women are coming inland then?"

"The women are not coming inland, ma'am. There is no where for them to come. The women are at a small camp in the highlands, at the old post station. We have sent tarps, and there is some drinking water and blankets brought by Westerners."

"But they need more assistance, they have nothing left," Shanti persisted. "I know it for I saw it on the C. N. and N."

The man at the ministry told her that all the regular aid workers were busy in other hard hit areas along the coast. "Tommorrow, tomorrow," he repeated, shaking his head. But on her third visit in as many days he made Shanti an offer. The ministry would pay to print notices appealing to concerned citizens for help, if Shanti herself would distribute them.

Mr. Ram's wife, Poornima, had seen one of these notices at the market, along with the flood of bedraggled barefoot men who'd formerly lived along the coast. They made up a great migration in land and northwards. Poornima had also recounted the gossip about Shanti: how her hair was shiny and fine as corn silk, how she had spoken so eloquently on the surviving women's behalf.

"What else can we do but pray for them?" Mr. Ram had said.

Everyone has a teacher and Mr. Rams' foremost teacher was a man named Vishvatma. Vishvatma grew up south of Bombay in a community clustered on a cliff overlooking the sea.

When he met his teacher Mr. Ram was Ravi Ram, an awkward boy with crooked spectacles and uncommonly good diction, who dreamed of going to the university. He wanted to study the systems of the body; the bones and organs and fascia that made up men, like the anatomical drawings in the musty encyclopedia he cherished. His parents made their living with a small bookshop. They sold novels in English and German and French to ragged tourists paid with crisp foreign bills.

Ravi Ram's village sat nestled below the cliffs, next to the ocean. This meant that each time he went to visit his teacher he hiked up steep switchback paths in the afternoon heat, then jogged back down to return home in the evening. Once, he stumbled in the darkness and twisted his ankle so that he had to spend the night under a nearby mango tree. At dawn an old man with a donkey happened by and assisted him. When he finally hobbled into the door of his family home, his mother chased him round with her straw broom before he could explain.

"I'm sorry, I just not myself anymore," she sighed when she saw that he was hopping in earnest. "I just worry so much since your father's fallen ill."

Ravi Ram's usually stoic father begun to complain of troubling symptoms in the springtime: weakness and dizziness and shortness of breath. Then fever finally forced him to stop working. For months he lay in bed at home, breathing in shallow pools. The doctor came, a boarish man with a big leather suitcase. He rifled though it, announcing there was little he could do. Ravi Ram did not believe him.

"Go up the mountain, go see Vishvatma," his mother told him when the doctor left.

Growing up, there were always stories of his teacher, Vishvatma, floating down from the cliffs to their lower villages like shedding blossoms, too delicate and rare to leave untouched.

"That boy hears the voice of God," the women would whisper.

"Yes, but, he's so busy listening— he won't even gather water from the family well."

Even as a young child Vishvatma would wander off into the woods for days. At 13 years old he disappeared entirely. An old man saw him stumbling northwards out of town at dusk.

Shame-faced, Vishvatma's father said 'good riddance.' He thought that his son had caught the trains to Bombay to beg and smoke hashish and live in the streets. His mother grieved for her only son, as if he were dead. She set a lamp and incense in his room, covered the furniture in his room in shrouds of white cotton and turned his framed pictures against the wall.

Vishvatma surprised everyone by returning almost three years later. He walked into town barefoot, just as he'd left. But his soft boyish features had become stark and mannish; his dense curls, matted and wild. The villagers could not help but notice how he stared into the distance. But when they tried to discern his point of focus, all they could see was the world:
the ocean,
or a spice bush,
or a sparrow on the line.
They found Vishvatma's view sublime, so they reached out to touch his sun kissed shoulders, reverently.

Vishvatma's father refused to accept his return, but his mother convinced him to let the boy stay in a lean-to at the edge of their property. She hoped she could convince him to bring the boy in before the rains came. Meanwhile Vishvatma attracted an assortment of visitors, commoners as well as wealthy people from in town. They would come to his lean-to, bring food and money just to sit with him. By the time the monsoons came, they had built him a hut where his lean-to had been.

It was in this hut that Ravi Ram first visited Vishvatma, as his father lay suffering in the village below. Although he did not say it, Ravi Ram hoped somehow that just being near Vishvatma, would cure the old man. If his father stayed ill, Ravi Ram would have to run the small bookstore himself, take care of his mother, stay in the small village.

Ravi Ram spent many nights visiting Vishvatma. Some nights were dry and cool; he would see boys playing in the arms of the Bogotá tree by the crossing, or shepherding goats round the trash heaps for snacks. Some nights were wet and stormy in late summer,

and whole village seemed slick, like it was poised to slide from its perch on the cliff. Young women wearing *sarees* would rush past in the rain, wet material clinging to the contour of their breasts and hips in a way that made him wet his own lips.

Always it was the same when he reached his teacher's hut: his stomach growling and his legs taut and tired. There would be others chanting reverently in the thick cloud of incense smoke. Vishvatma never addressed him directly, but still he made Ravi Ram feel welcome with a gesture or a resounding smile. And Vishvatma would always smear pigment, reverently, on Ravi Ram's forehead— where his third eye might be. Still his father slower got sicker.

Mostly he kept going because it was something to do, and it seemed to bring hope to his mother. Besides there was usually some reward for the walk. In Vishvatma's shadowy hut he could dream about the dripping wet girls and warm bread his mother would fry up for him at his return.

Shanti was almost eight years old when she went to live in town at the textile mill. Her father brought her. It was only time she remembered spending time alone with him. When they reached town they boarded a crowded city bus. Her father nudged her to the front where glamorous ladies peered out at metropolitan streets. The ladies were really just simple town girls who maybe went to the cinema once a month in the winter. The streets were dirty and crowded with desperate rickshaw drivers. But to Shanti they might as well have been in a Bollywood movie.

"We will see you again at next monsoon season," her father told her. "Work hard and do as you are told."

The first days living away from home were terrifying for Shanti. She made her bed in the corner of a dingy dormitory, crowded with twelve other girls. Mostly their stares were blank and distant. One of the older girls made a point to glower and mock Shanti for perfect skin, the color of *roti* bread, and her silky hair which she learned quickly to hide beneath a rag. Twelve girls pressed their faces against one window to watch the rains come.

Her work was explained by the man who managed the girls and the factory. His face was yellow and pockmarked like durian fruit. He grabbed her narrow wrist and roughly showed her how to shuttle the lengths of wool across the tapestries.

At first Shanti dreamed each night of her mother, her baby brother in swaddling, the last words her father had said. In time her dreams became thin and murky as the *dhal* she ate every evening. When the monsoons came, signaling a full year away from her family, Shanti's father did not return for her. The monsoons came the next year and one of the other girls died of fever in her bed. There was a rumor of Leprosy and several girls grew desperate, cut their hair, ran away to live as boys at the railroad stations.

"They will die of starvation or else become prostitutes," the durian faced man warned. Then he began to shuttle the girls, one by one, to his bed.

Shanti did not how long it would be before he chose her. She was not sure she could bear a third season in the factory. She missed the sea of her childhood, but could not remember it clearly. All she could see was her life in the three feet of cloth always in front of her. She knew that the man with the dour face, the cloth itself that she wove each day, would never be satisfied. So she tried to work at it like someone else might sweep their walk under a weeping ashoka tree, with that same futility and meditation. She tried and she failed and she succeeded until one day, something miraculous happened.

Mr. Ram pushes himself up from his perch and makes his way back to the path toward the jagged coastline. His legs tremble as he ascends and he thinks of his walks up the cliffs as a boy. Then he could scramble up any tree like a monkey, but now he can feel the beginning of arthritis in his shoulder where the duffel hangs. God's way of preparing us for heaven, Mr. Ram tells himself.

The sun warms a grey mass of clouds above him, making a murky soup of the sky, spiced with the rumble of distant thunder. Behind it, he hears another sound: a high whining of a motor bike of some sort. The sound draws closer, winding up the same path he has taken, until it is just behind him. He wonders who is foolish or desperate enough to drive this way. Who else would bother to set out uncompensated towards this tragedy?

Behind him the engine of a motorbike sputters to silence. Mr. Ram turns back and sees that the driver is a young boy with a tattered shirt and a face smudged with mud. The motorbike must belong to an older brother or uncle, or quite possibly be loot from The Devastation. One man's loss is another man's gain, Mr. Ram mutters, like the coast, for example− finally free of those piteous houses of Ranish funneling their stinking waste into its waves.

The boy struggles against the weight of the motorbike, his bare feet stretching to reach the muddy ground. He is trying to turn back at the metal roof blocking the road, throwing up mud and rocks and he pivots. But he has already delivered someone to this place.

Bright as garland of marigolds, there is Shanti, in her glowing *saree*, looking very much like a bride to Mr. Ram. Looking like his wife, Poornima, 20 years earlier, on their wedding day. When they married, Mr. Ram barely knew his fiancée, but was mesmerized by the gentle tilt of her shoulders, her coal black eyes. That was before Poornima had her vanity table, her potions and scarves to guard against old age. Sometimes Mr. Ram wonders how their marriage would be different if they had been able to have children. Would they feel more vulnerable or better guarded against their mortality?

Shanti regards Mr. Ram, too, with his white dress shirt, leather sandals, and yellowing coconut husk hair. Mr. Ram looks like a professor to her, successful, with a golden cross sparkling around his neck. His goldenness makes her feel insecure somehow. Even the gold bangles that thread up her arm like a dowry do not protect from her lack of family.

"You are walking toward Ranish?" Mr. Ram calls as she approaches. He is surprised by a feeling of warmth rising in his creaky old chest, like the boy who watched the girls rushing home in the rain.

"I am Shanti," she offers, simply. Then she smiles and Mr. Ram catches a glimpse of her teeth, white as fresh goat's milk, against her light brown skin. She covers her mouth modestly with the fan of her fingers.

"I'm Mr. Ram," he said, in front of her now. "We will walk together."

One night, when he was 17, Ravi Ram heard for the first and only time a strange high wind keening. It wailed through the stray fronds of palm trees and swooped down to cool the black sand beneath his feet. It heralded a time when the rains would not come for many seasons, and the land and the people would ache for it.

The night before he had lain awake listening to his sick father's labored breathing, long inhalations that seemed wanting even as they resolved themselves. So that, Ravi Ram found himself breathing along with his father as if to assist him. It was just like when he was a boy, struggling to learn to swim in the ocean. Along the shore his father watched winding his own arms around in sympathy.

By daybreak his father's rasps were masked by the sounds of the village: wet clothes drumming against metal washbasins; rubber thongs flapping against stone pathways. Ravi Ram rushed off on his bicycle to the open the bookstore without looking at his father. His mother would come to relieve him so that he could go to class.

Then after school he went straight back to the bookstore; locked the front door once his mother was out of sight; opened one book and then another. He was hoping to some distraction, some other life to inhabit in those pages, where he would not have to hear that shallow breathing again.

The temperature was cool and pleasant as Ravi Ram left the bookshop. It was evening, and outside, that strange wind came up suddenly to greet him. It whined in his ear, beckoned him home. He set out on his bike with the urgency he had belayed since sunrise.

But on his ride home, every rickshaw seemed to cross him; every bramble grabbed and scratched his arms; every revolution of his narrow tires burrowed into the black sandy path that lead to his father. As he reached his family hut, the strange keening wind dwindled to silence. Suddenly the night seemed plain and black as ink.

Walking in, Ravi Ram became aware of a new sound growing: the soft whimpering of his mother, prostrate over the body of the man he most loved. She was chanting *Aum Nama Sivaya.* She had managed to shove the bed across the room so that the body now faced southwards. He knew then that his father was already dead.

Shanti was ten years old, her body arched over the loom, the day the pair of women came in. She thought they were sisters because they shared the same pink sun scorched skin. They were from America, the other girls whispered. Talking to them, the man with the durian face tried unsuccessfully to sweeten his smile into a plum.

These women came again, every day for a week, interviewing everybody. They would like to sponsor her, they explained, through an interpreter. No, they would not send Shanti home to her mother. They would send her to a charitable boarding school in Kerala− the only school in a hundred miles to accept girls like them. What kind of girls were they, Shanti wanted to ask.

There were papers to be signed and photos in triplets. There was a bus ride, a rush of passing views, then the new school. In its office the head mistress handed Shanti a crisp new uniform, a bar of soap that she was told to keep safe, the key to a small room she would share with one other student. From a brimming back garden she could walk out and see the ocean again− a stretch of water which seemed a brighter blue that the beach at Ranish.

The teachers were the most beautiful woman Shanti had ever seen, because of their kindness. They wore brightly patterned *salwar kameezes* and silver bangles on their arms. They entrusted Shanti with a lined notebook with her name written out in script. They taught her to speak and read and write in English and Malayalam. After class, she shuttled her pencil across the paper, relentlessly, until words and sentences and poems poured out, until she was the brightest girl in her class— and still she was not satisfied.

Once a year the American women would come and visit the school, so Shanti wrote them long letters about her life. She sent them her marks as if they were parents. After her graduation, they became her benefactors. These women made phone calls, helped her to get a job as a stewardess flying out of New Delhi. She spent hours on her feet in the narrow aisles of the plane, serving sanitized sweet *lassis*, congealed under plastic, to business men and fat rich ladies off for holiday. She'd offer, with her small smile, little paper shields to cover their eyes.

Then came news of The Devastation, awakening Shanti, as if from a long dream where her life was getting better. At the airport newspaper lay open, TV's were set forever to the news. At night, like fever, she had nightmares of fetid water rushing out of

gutters, spotty electricity going to blackness, myriad of girls no different from her drowning in slavery. Awake, Shanti could not bear to imagine the naked coast of her childhood. They said whole communities had been sucked out in the waves.

After his father's death, Ravi Ram and his mother made all the preparations. They washed the body, cleaned the house, burned incense in every room. Streamers of thick, pungent smoke watered their eyes, burned their throats and their nostrils. Ravi Ram was thankful that his uncle came to help build the funeral pyre.

In his few spare moments at the bookstore, Ravi Ram tried to get lost in his reading, but the words blurred on the page before him. At home he tried to hide his growing panic. His mother, newly fragile, needed him now. "You will stay with me," she would whimper, barely conceding that he still had to go to school or even open the store. She said he was all she had left, that she wanted him to stay in her sights. But one night he went out despite all of his mother's appeals.

Every time Ravi Ram had visited Vishvatma he had come home with the smudge of religion marked on his forehead in crimson pigment. But not once had he directly sought out Vishvatma's counsel; not once had he let the mark burn into his skull- until the night he went after his father's passing. Ravi Ram nearly sprinted up the paths switching up, arriving at Vishvatma's hut at dusk, panting and nauseated.

"I can't take it, I don't know what I will do," seventeen year old Ravi Ram yelled, bursting in. He was not yet a pharmacist, not yet a Christian, just a boy bereft with his father's passing; a young man who could see the opportunities of his life dissipating like a shallow puddle in the sun. Desperately, Ravi Ram pushed past a group of worshippers. Someone offered to eject him. But Vishvatma, just a boy himself, but with matted dense hair and compassionate eyes drew Ravi Ram closer. Then he dismissed everyone else in the hut with a wave of his hand. So it was just the two of them in the cloud of neem oil and hibiscus.

Ravi Ram expected Vishvatma to transform him with moody chants like he'd heard drifting from the ashrams in the city but instead Vishvatma just looked at him.

“Let’s sit together,” Vishvatma said gently. Then instead of talking, Vishvatma listened.

Ravi Ram did not know there was an ocean inside him, but salty words poured out along with his tears. He talked about his love for his father, the responsibility for his mother, his bicycle tires digging deeper into the sandy path of the village where he was born, his lust for the girls in their wet *sarees* and the keening of the wind. He talked about his ambition to get an education and become a doctor; to marry a beautiful women and dole out the neat white pills in a crisp white lab coat. He said he wanted to help people, like his father, from suffering so much.

Vishvatma listened, and nodded, and this in itself was a balm, like and siphoned poison from a cobra bite.

”What should I do,” Ravi Ram cried, grabbing Vishvatma’s hands in his own, wringing the two together so that they became indistinguishable from one another.

For a long time Vishvatma didn’t say anything, then finally he spoke. He said he would show Ravi Ram how to sit and smile at his sorrow and breathe in and out like a gentle but powerful wind.

He told me Ram, that this was the best place to start.

Mr. Ram and Shanti amble down the pathway, making small talk and picking through the debris. It is slow walking. Several times they stop and climb over things. Once they pass a man coming up the road, wild eyed, and dressed in rags. When they try to stop him, assist him, they find that the man is in shock. He will not answer their queries so they walk onwards in opposite directions. Mr. Ram offers his arm, politely, to help Shanti cross a bridge of sagging plywood.

At one point, the clouds crack open and it is a bright summer day. The sky seems to be laughing at our tragedy, Mr. Ram thinks, and he remembers the sensation of his narrow bike tires sinking into the black sand.

Shanti is in awe of Mr. Ram, and at the same time feels uncomfortable walking alone with him. She has never been alone with a man. Even on the big buses in Delhi, she sits in on one side, with the women only.

“And so you grew up here,” Mr. Ram asks. He is full of questions for her. He picks at her past like it is a plate of the most humble but delicious curries. “London, Paris, New York. Now tell me about all the glamorous travel. I am just a simple pharmacist, in a simple town, you know.”

Mr. Ram is flirting with her, but she doesn’t quite know it yet. She doesn’t have the heart to tell him that she just spends her time abroad in sterile hotel rooms, trying to catch up on sleep. It’s hard to get to know people, impossible to make up time, she’s learned. But she senses he doesn’t want to hear this. So instead she tells him about the time she and a group of stewardess’ splurged and took a taxi from Charles de Gaulle into the city, and wondered along the bridges over the Seine on a lovely spring evening.

And she looks off in the distance, trying to find the words to describe the quality of light, Mr. Ram does something unthinkable, something that he’s never done before. He has mistaken his wistfulness for lust, Shanti’s admiration for interest. He leans in toward her, with the burning world all around them, his eyes closing as if for a kiss.

After he left Vishvatma’s hut, Ravi Ram returned to his mother. He finished the year of school and closed down the store every night. He changed the water in the vessel that marked his father’s passing. His life had all the same difficulties and sorrows, but when he felt that sea rising in his belly, he would breathe a small lightness in his lungs. This allowed him float at least. This allowed him to do small things like comfort his mother, until she seemed to have a small space in her lungs too. Meanwhile a great drought spread across the country, and fruit withered on the vine. Everywhere there is suffering, Ravi Ram thought.

After acknowledging the first anniversary of his father’s death, his mother surprised him.

“I need you to support me,” she said, “but you need to go to the university. This is the thing that your father would want. This is the thing that we have worked for. We will sell the store when the rains come.” And in time, the rains came again and dusty children danced in the street and Ravi Ram and his mother sold the bookstore to a wealthy

German couple. Then Ravi and his mother moved in with her brother's family in Bombay.

It took several more years of working for his uncle before Ravi Ram could afford to go the university. His mother died of typhoid before his graduation day. He took a semester off to mourn her properly. His aunt felt sorry for him, and admired the grace he demonstrated. She was a Christian but respected the way he followed the rites. She helped him turn the pictures on the wall in her room, and told him God loved him.

Ravi Ram married late and by then his seriousness had become an asset. He had grown into it. His Aunt presented him to Poormina's family as a more cultured boy, a Christian boy; if not a doctor, a pharmacist at least.

A sound startles Shanti and she turns from Mr. Ram's advances. It is the thump of tablas drums, no– it is coconuts falling from an overturned tree. It is also the patter of footsteps running up the path behind them. The same shabby boy without his motorbike has caught up with them.

"Ma'am, I am leaving the motorbike behind," he calls, galloping up to Shanti's elbow. "Without pretty women, it is no fun to drive it. I escort you whole way. No problem, no problem!" Shanti smiles, the boy smiles, and even Mr. Ram smiles too, nervously; milky smiles all around.

"But, little boy, it is dangerous here. Maybe you should make your way home now," Mr. Ram says. Although he is relieved to be distracted him from his unseemly advance on Shanti, the boy's presence only reminds him of his embarrassment now. "Town is safer," he adds, regretting his tone, even as the words spill from his mouth.

"The vendors they say, go away now from town," the boy says shyly. "I am from the coast. The waves took my family, they are all lost."

"I know how you feel," Shanti says in the local dialect that the boy speaks. He turns his small dark face up at her like a crescent moon.

"I will hold your bag, sir," the boy offers—and Mr. Ram offers it guiltily. He hands over his leather bag of medicines and rubs his shoulder. The threesome walks in

silence for a while, then the boy runs ahead, the medicine bag jostling wildly on his shoulder.

"About before," Mr. Ram says, stopping. "I am sorry for…my foolishness."

"We are all foolish sometimes," Shanti says shyly.

"But there is something else," he continues. "I must tell you, my wife Poornima- we have been married many years—"

"Nothing has happened," Shanti cuts him off. She wants him to stop.

"No, you don't understand. My wife she is the one who told me about the notices. They were your notices, right? And I was not going to come. I was going to leave it to someone else. But Poornima wanted me come, so I am here. She wants me to be a good person, I mean."

Shanti bows her head, but doesn't say anything.

Then the boy doubles back to them excitedly. "There are people up ahead," he calls. Standing silently, they can almost hear the voices.

As they turn the bend, Mr. Ram and Shanti see the old post office site, reduced to its foundations. It is retrofitted with a makeshift canvas roof like a giant tent. This is the place they have been walking towards all morning.

A group of women have already gathered. Eight or so stand in the shelter and another group outside at the edge of the wreckage with glowering eyes. There is also a pair of Australian aide workers, a man and a woman. Despite their matching shirts, they look like part of The Devastation, too. They sit on their haunches next to their wall of wool blankets, wet with the previous night's rain. The man walks over to Mr. Ram, asks if they are doctors.

The women in this region are mostly Hindu, but today they seemed naked of religion. Their clothes are worn and sun ripened against their lean bodies. Some have mud smeared along their brows like a funeral veil. The group does not so much speak as emit a low moaning, like a hive of bees. They wring their hands together and turn in a complex dance where no one advanced and nothing joyful was accomplished. Mr. Ram stands before them, befuddled, listened as individual voices emerged.

"My papa," one young woman whimpers

”My dear Ramah,” another offers in a low, thin moan.

“My baby boy,” a third wails sourly.

Shanti stands frozen. She had told herself she wanted to help the women of Ranish, but standing before them, but realizes the truth. She had expected something for her own self if she reached this place: her childhood to be restored, her mother to rush forward, miraculously unharmed, and claim her as a gift. But now that she has arrived, she realizes that these things will not happen today. It is more likely that her family moved on years ago or were washed out into the waves. Shanti’s anger, bright as her *saree*, shakes her.

“These women are in total shock,” Mr. Ram whispers, not noticing the shadow over Shanti’s face. The boy hands over the medicine bag and Mr. Ram peruses it, futilely. Even the boy looks at the women, then peers into the bag with big skeptical eyes.

“What are you here for?” The Australian man asks again.

“I am only a pharmacist,” Mr. Ram explains.

Shanti suddenly wishes she had not hung the notices. She wishes she was not standing here, in her glowing red *saree* beneath these women’s stares. She wants to rip it off and join the women naked, and chant with them, *Aum Nama Sivaya,* so that they will know that she is one of them, that she is mourning too. She is weeping as she pulls her corn silk hair beneath a scarf and wrings her hands.

The Austrian man dabs at his brow with a bright new kerchief, “Have you heard if more help is coming? We were told there’d be new supplies today.”

“Hold on. Wait a moment,” Mr. Ram says, holding out his palm.

The swarm of women buzzes around the site at the old post office, stirred now by his arrival, along with weeping Shanti and the orphaned boy. He surveys the scene.

“What will we do?” the women cry.

“God has abandoned us,” one woman offers.

“No god is dead,” says another.

Whether or not God is dead Mr. Ram can not say in the face such loss and suffering. But he knows for a fact that the world is not over. He knows this because of his life inland, the neat white pills lining pharmacy shelves, and Poornima’s perfect glass bottles by the slightly warped vanity mirror. He knows because of the nightly new on the

C N and N –replete with images of people all over the world carrying on like any other day: eating their curry, their sushi, their pizza pie, planning large wars, and negotiating small peaces. This tragedy is only a 15 minute segment after news of cricket matches.

But standing among these women, with a view of the coast, where there use to be coconut stands, and weaving looms, and huts huddled together, and the sound of kids laughing, he himself can barely believe that the world is the same. These women have been meagerly spared, and still they remain crowded among the dead. They are surely dying, just like everyone.

“You have medicine, something to cure us,” they beg.

“Maybe I can collect a list ailments, immediate needs from the women,” Shanti rasps. Mr. Ram takes a moment to look at her. Her eyes are glazed and staring her voice raked over in rocks and debris. If not a daughter, then maybe a nurse at least, Shanti whispers to herself.

Then Mr. Ram realizes what he must do:

He is purposeful now as he draws the women together. The aide workers help, along with Shanti, still wild eyed, and boy, too. Shanti extends her hand to the boy without looking at him, and he accepts it hungrily. She is wondering what it would mean to him to have a mother. She squeezes his tiny hand, like a mooring.

The women draw near and Mr. Ram does not try to quiet them. He encourages them to tell him more. Their troubles wash out of them in waves, crash on him in his clean white shirt. He is not frightened when they wail and beat their chest and fall to their knees cry and beg for him to fix something. Finally they exhaust themselves. They quiet and in the silence that follows he can hear birds calling sorrowfully in the distance.

He invites the everyone to sit with him on the wool blankets, beaded with water from the previous day’s rain.

“You must be are able to sit and smile—” he begins to tell them without presumption.

“But we are lost,” the women interrupt.

“You must have somewhere to start.” Mr. Ram counsels. And saying this he feels again the sting of his loss of his parents, the ache of falling in love with wife on their

wedding day, the embers of regret for the children he will never have. Still he continues with a sense of meditation and futility and joy, too, shining in his eyes.

"Now I will do my best to show you what someone once taught me at the moment of my greatest sorrow," he says.

The women know sorrow, so they quiet, they listen.

Mr. Ram begins, with Shanti and the boy flanking him like family.

He begins with a breath like the wind.