

Another Kind of Traveller

Words by Justine Hardy

When rain falls there is a particular quality to it, as though each drop has the capacity to catch our reflection for a moment. Perhaps it will be the first cold touch of it on the curve of your cheek, the back of your hand, your bare back, or foot.

This is the story of a traveller without borders, a raindrop, maybe even in the state of pre-drop, an idea, a wisp, that kind described as horses' tails or curly hooks, outriders of rain to come. There is an old weather proverb, the kind that you hear from someone with a face that seems to have lived for a thousand years, 'Mares' tails and mackerel scales make lofty ships to carry low sails', meaning that those sky threads may be a sign of rain to come.

Clearly, I know very little of meteorology, but this is to have a look at a wanderer that requires no passport, mask, visor or Covid test.

What might it have meant to any of us to know that our ability to move around freely would be pulled in, as walls pressing in around us, stopping us in our tracks? The raindrop, in whatever stage of its existence, and wherever it might be, may have shrugged, in as much as a raindrop does. Back comes that line from the glorious fell walker and Lake District writer, Alfred Wainwright, 'There is no such thing as bad weather, only unsuitable clothing.'

Those clothes that we wear, mentally and physically, are our protection or

indeed exposure to the rain. This traveller may arrive as the fat first drop of late coming and longed for rain on a rice farmer's hot salty back.

He is bent over the dry ground outside his village in Kashmir, this place of water, lakes, and orchards, set between some of the most arid corridors and peaks of the Himalayas. Aksai-Chin's Tibetan Plateau high altitude desert lies to the east, and the ragged Karakoram range of Pakistan to the west. The stream that runs beside the farmer's paddy fields has barely a thread of tired water. His footprints are baked into the mud where the water that fed his fields' irrigation channels once flowed.

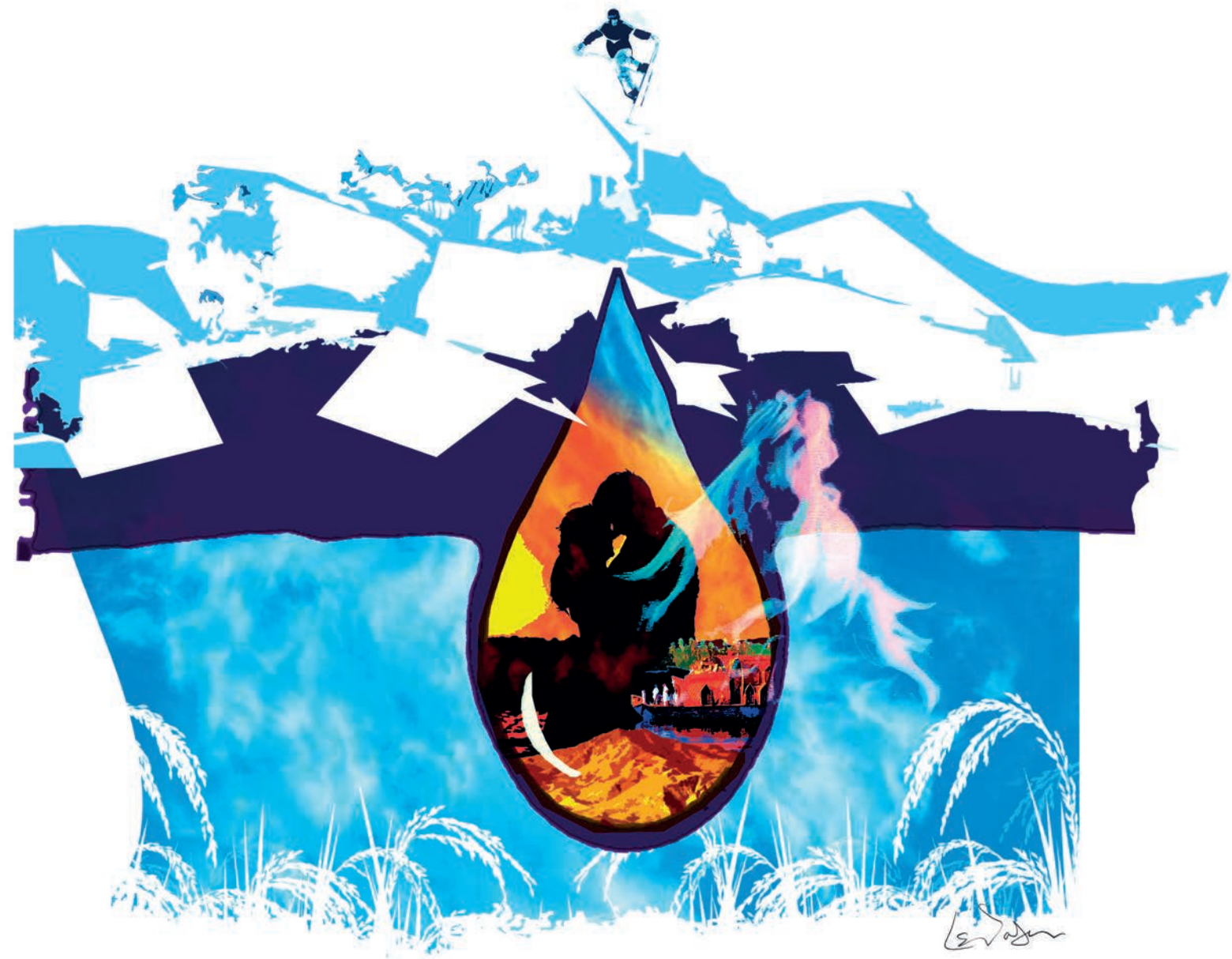
These are rice fields on a valley floor that was once part of an ocean bed that was flung up into the skies as part of the youngest, highest and wildest range in the world, when the Indian and Eurasian plates smashed into each other and the Ocean of Tethys learnt to fly.

This embattled and beflowered place surprises some of those who come, though there are few visitors now, and that just does not need to be dwelt on. They do not expect to see paddy fields in a place that they may associate with the hedonism of Sixties swing, clouds of Afghan Black marijuana wafting through crewel-stitched hangings on the houseboats of the lakes. It is work that may have caused the embroiderer to lose their sight long before they should have because they went on with needle and thread as the twilight shrank to nothing.

Those same floating palaces may have connotations of a different kind of sensuality, an ageing man or woman returning to see the place where they were conceived in secret. It might have been a young officer on leave in the valley, tumbling into a love affair with a colonel's wife, a pretty girl, closer to his age than to her husband's. She was perhaps 'Summering' in Srinagar, the valley's capital, while malaria and dengue fever plagued those left in the plains below.

But then it may be a place where a Canadian 'powder monkey', a seeker of extreme skiing, can look wholly incongruous as he shoulders his neon-stickered snowboard amidst the grey, brown and black hybrid gown, both enveloping cloak and coat, the winter outer shell of the locals around him. Perhaps he climbs up into untouched snows that have already buried entire villages. Their roofs could just seem to be snow jumps to him, maybe even built by a keen local skier, the order of the houses somehow creating almost a slalom effect in the higgledy-piggledy of the village's layout. The skier cannot know that they are homes. The altitude has taken hold of most of his brain as he whips up into the air, suspended for a moment, up and above a buried village, just as that first fat drop reflected for a moment the world around before it hit the rice farmer's back.

We return to him, lifting his head from the dry soil, no thought of houseboats, snowboarding, or illicit affairs in other worlds. For him the snows, *sheen*, the



Kashmiri word, is for another time when the melt water fills his stream again and feeds the irrigation channels for his paddy fields.

Now he scans the clouds, the creases around his eyes deepening as he reads the sky with years of experience. He needs to know how iron the grey of the cloud is, and so whether this drop marks the start of a deluge, crashing down onto the dry land, falling too fast and hard to seep into the land in the gentle way that will nourish the soil. He knows too that it is only six years since the valley was subjected to devastating floods, created more by humans, by deforestation, and all the change that he has watched throughout

the steady seasonal cycle of his life, rather than being a natural disaster.

The great river burst its banks destroying whole crops, and so much more, flattening villages, whole sections of Srinagar drowned. Throughout the summer traditional family houses in the capital had their lace-filigreed Juliet balconies crushed and ripped away from their walls. These were old homes jammed together along alleys so narrow that neighbours can whisper their secrets to each other between wooden lattice work that almost kisses across the passageways.

And so, the farmer reaches out his hand, testing the next drop, licking it, warm

and salty from his palm, this traveller without passport, mask, visor or Covid test, because we have yet to have a lunatic Tweet telling us that the virus falls from the sky.

The farmer bends again, waiting for the rain. He knows he will never leave his fields, his village or his valley. He has met with a traveller who has thrown open the world to him, for a moment. He will breathe in the scent of the coming rain and this will be his journey.

Justine Hardy is a writer, trauma psychotherapist and the founder of *Healing Kashmir*

Illustration by Luke Walwyn