

# Keeping the Story Straight

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PHOTOS BY ANUJ D. ADHIKARY

A quick online search for “climate refugee” will return thousands of competing, contrasting and confusing results. Are they really refugees? Are they environmental migrants instead? The term itself – climate refugee – is in vogue; it captures people’s imagination. Whether refugees or migrants, the idea that people are being forced to leave their homes due to a warming planet is equal parts devastating and exciting. Devastating because it means that climate change – something that is too large to comprehend for most – is happening here and now to living, breathing people. Exciting because it confirms that the stories we hear about climate change may be true. In many ways, to pinpoint “climate refugees” is a convenient way to prove climate change’s existence. It is tempting to put the burden of truth on the backs of those already dispossessed, given that most “climate refugees” are also among the world’s most marginalized groups.

Where do socio-economic dispossession and marginalization end and the physical realities of climate change begin? What’s in a definition? Who gets to define it? As the climate continues to change, who is in charge of telling its stories? The “refugees”? The people calling them refugees?

These questions were distracting me as I bounced along the rutted road from Beni to Jomsom in an overfilled bus. Water occasionally dripped down my neck from the busted plastic storage bins overhead, causing me to snap away from my thoughts. I had not seen the sky for days, only low-hanging clouds. Lurching from side to side, I could alternately see the raging Kali Gandaki River to my right and the overarching cliff walls of her valley to my left. I had overheard that this monsoon season was the worst in recent memory and was trying my best not to worry about landslides.

Instead, I tried to count the number of rain droplets on my window. Just a few minutes later, we stopped in a small village after being flagged down by its residents. The bus driver got out, and a man wearing rags jumped on, yelling indistinctly. He was trailed by a line of young boys playing drums and was carrying an armful of freshly cut stinging nettles. While the bus driver

argued with the locals outside, the man walked through the aisles, and someone joked that he might be cursing the bus.

A few minutes later, the driver boarded and told us that there was a fresh landslide just up the road. We would drive to the landslide and walk across to catch a waiting bus, a procedure I had undertaken several times before. However, I was no less unnerved; this landslide was still active.

A few folks began crossing the landslide. After grabbing my bag, my friend and I followed suit, sinking up to our calves in the fresh mud. I was taking note of the almost metallic nature of the mud – blackish silver, flecked with chipped rocks – when I saw a fist-sized rock tumble across the path in front of me. Less than a second later, a shower of rocks and mud slid down, blocking the path. My brain could barely catch up to the situation before I realized I was running away. I barely made it back to the bus-side of the slide. A man from our bus was missing, and a woman switching to our bus was buried. The path was blocked. It was still raining.

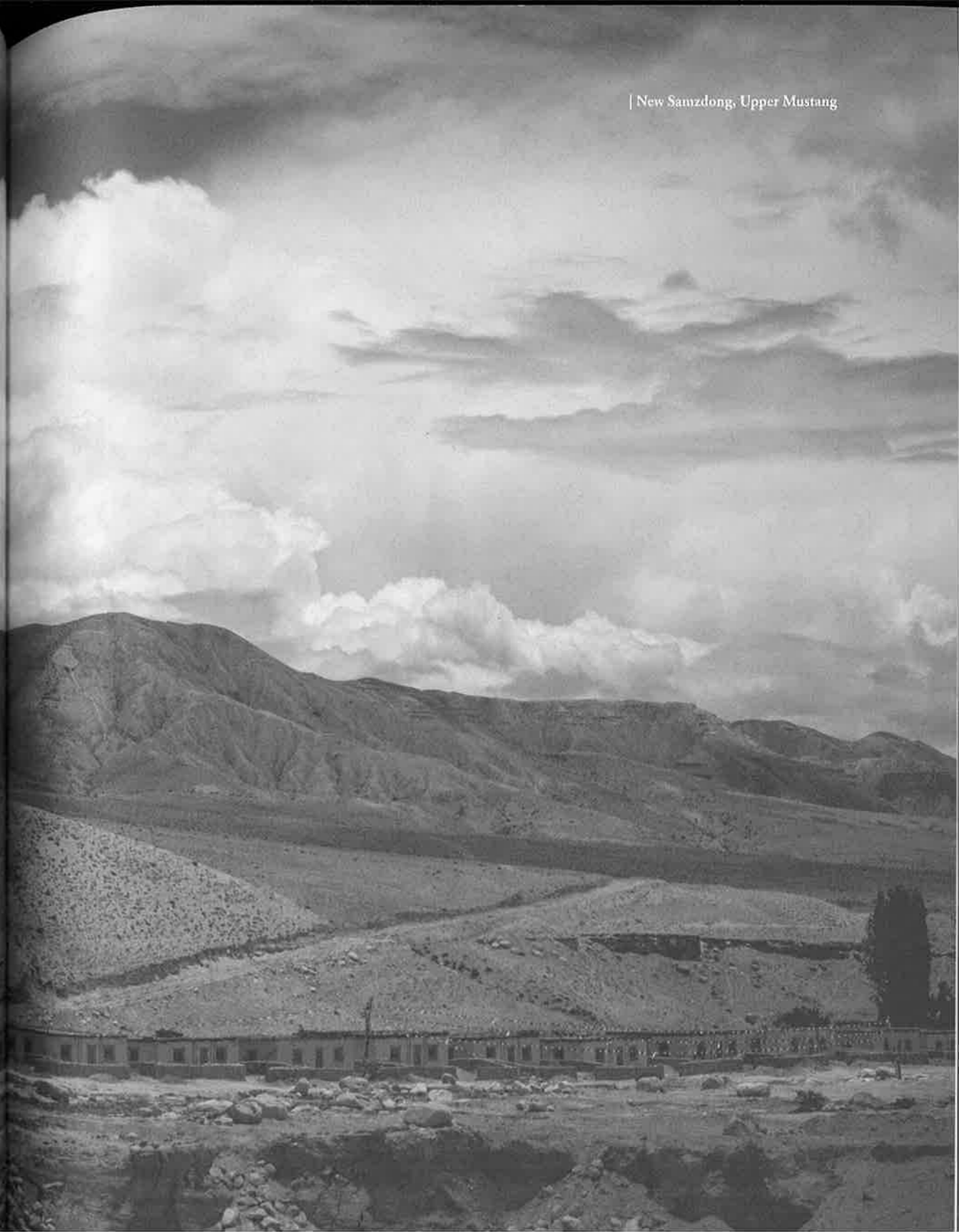
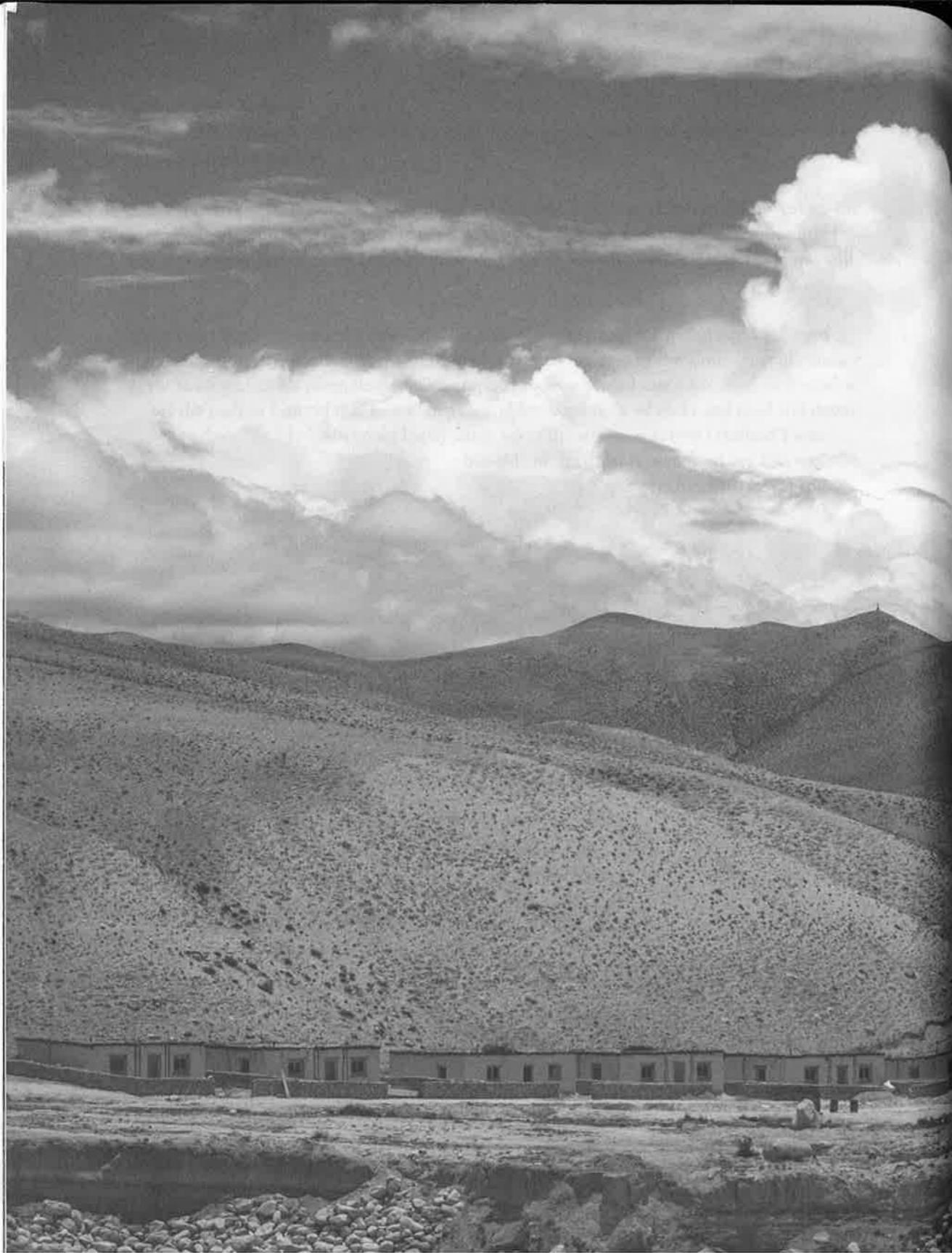
The rest of the day blurred together. My friend and I were able to walk along the other side of the river. We searched for another friend in the next town, Ghasa, only to be told that she had been injured and was being taken to Jomsom in a local jeep. We began walking and were picked up by the last bus heading north.

My mind had been racing since the landslide. Extreme weather. Wetter, longer monsoons. More landslides. Climate change. Climate refugees. The landscape swirled outside my bus window. In a matter of minutes, the dense, almost suffocating, greenery of the Kali Gandaki Valley gave way to a wider, drier valley. Further up, Nepal's "first climate refugees" were being resettled due to water shortages. In the next few days, I would meet them. For now, I was happy to be on dry ground.

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A month before my trip to Upper Mustang, I had watched a short film documenting the last resident of the community of Dhe. This community – also Nepal's alleged first climate refugees – was being resettled along the banks of one of the Kali Gandaki's tributaries. I had also read articles discussing another community, Samzdong, which is further north, beyond the walled city of Lo Manthang. News of these communities initially piqued my attention because the US had recently resettled its "first" climate refugees south of New Orleans. I was drawn to them because of the potential stories. Stories about people being moved because of their experiences with a warming planet – in my mind – would make it more real for others. With this goal, I had set out with a friend to find Samzdong.









We were able to get a few hours of rest that night in Jomsom. The previous day, the bus from Beni had taken longer than expected due to landslides. Similarly, the bus from Pokhara to Beni had taken longer than expected due to rain. We needed a good night's sleep. After waking up, we gathered our things and walked to the bus station to catch the first bus north.

After waiting for a few hours for passengers, we finally got on a bus to Kagbeni, where I needed to show my travel permit for Upper Mustang. However, we only travelled a few kilometres to a bridge that had been washed out by flooding. We crossed the river on foot and caught another jeep to the next town, Chuksang, where we had to cross another river on foot due to flooding. At this point, there were nearly 15 other travellers with us, a combination of workers, parents and children, monks, and a couple on holiday. From the riverbed, we hiked up a steep incline to Chele, where we eventually caught another jeep. Three to a seat, we climbed in elevation, switchback after switchback. The driver was young, and the radio was blaring Western rock songs. Without warning, the jeep stopped. There were two fresh landslides to cross on foot.

We gathered next to another jeep on the other side of the landslides only to find that it needed repairs. It was also smaller than the previous jeep. I decided to walk a few kilometres, at least past the most treacherous parts of the road, and was eventually picked up again. I settled into my seat for the rest of the way to Lo Manthang, which lies at 3,840 metres above sea level. We arrived an hour or so after dark.

The next day we decided to acclimatize and rest. After stocking up on water, candy bars, and a few packs of Chinese military biscuits (dense in calories), we set out to find Samzdong. Despite the rain shadow that contributes to the region's desert-like surroundings, Upper Mustang can be surprisingly cloudy during the monsoon season. But this day was cloudless. The blue sky extended like a dome over our heads to the horizon where it was interrupted by the intense white, tans, browns and reds of the jagged Himalayas. Barley and mustard fields exploded in impossible hues of pink and yellow, while ice-blue glacial water trickled through dendritic irrigation channels. There were a few people tending the fields, their brightly coloured clothing adding another surreal dimension to the already uncanny landscape.

We were walking past the small village of Ninyul, making sure to stay to the clockwise side of one of Upper Mustang's longest mani walls. Tablets and stones painted with ochre were nested alongside sun-dried ram horns and prayer flags. A large group of women were walking along the other side, waving warmly. Little did we know at the time that we were passing by the suspension bridge that was supposed to lead us across the correct mountain pass and eventually to Samzdong. We kept walking.

An hour or so later, we noticed a strange string of newly built houses across the river. It reminded me eerily of American suburban developments, the kind you see satirized in angsty 1980s Hollywood films. Each newly painted white house was attached to a small parcel of land, complete with what appeared to be the outlines of gardens. This village stood in stark contrast to the other villages in Upper Mustang, which were less linear and often combinations

of old and new buildings interspersed by green fields and livestock pens. They were also visibly much older. As we surveyed the village, we noticed a crumbling fort behind us, making the newness of the village across the river even more outlandish. Later we would learn that this village was meant to be "New Samzdong".

It was while looking at New Samzdong that we noticed we might have taken the wrong road. After confirming our mistake on the map, we began walking back down only to be stopped by a man and a monk riding a motorcycle. A few minutes later, a parade of motorcycles – dozens of them, each one precariously decorated with ribbons and thanikas – passed by. We learned that a famous Lama was traveling north to Choser, a village that was devastated by a glacial lake outburst flood a few decades earlier, to offer a special puja. The Lama's party was carried in a jeep caravan that was situated between the motorcycles and dozens more men riding horses. The horses also wore ribbons in their manes and bells around their necks. The cacophony of the Lama's caravan swelled like a balloon around us, then disappeared as quickly as it appeared. New Samzdong, with its straight lines and uniformity, stood like an obscure mirage as dust clouds settled in the parade's wake.

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Hours later, after a few more wrong turns, we were winding our way up an old goat trail to the Samzdong pass. The sun was white hot. For the first time since leaving Lo Manthang, we were completely surrounded by desert sands. No fields, villages or mani walls. Many people compare desert landscapes to "Mars" or "another planet", but this felt more like an alternate reality... or at least another timeframe. Because of my research on climate change, I could not help but think of the scorched-earth narrative espoused by many climate doomsdayers. It was eerily quiet. Even the blowing wind was quiet.

Prayer flags snapping violently in the wind marked the top of the pass. Behind us, we could see the expanse of the Kali Gandaki Valley. Crumbling forts and chortens dotted the tops of rolling mountains. The adjacent valley descended in front of us to the canyons of the Samzdong River. The whites and tans behind us gave way to deep reds and purples. The mountains looked more like claws or teeth. After casting rocks onto the pass's stone piles for safe travels, we began the steep descent into the valley.

With each step we took, it felt like we were moving further into another world. My imagination was in overdrive, forming stories in my head about the landscape. The feeling that I was seeing an alternate or future reality intensified when we looked up and saw ancient cave dwellings looming just above our heads. They were so close we had nearly missed them. Rendering the scene more dreamlike, black birds circled overhead. We continued to descend the narrow trail, switching back and forth beneath caves. It seemed like the further we descended the more otherworldly the landscape became.

The trail ended at a mani wall and continued along the river. Having heard that Samzdong was being resettled due to water shortages, I walked to the edge of the canyon to get a glimpse of the river. Aside from a few darker-coloured rocks – I assumed that meant they were wet at some point – the riverbed was dry. Not even a trickle. Cracked mud with crevices that could swallow a large animal buttressed the river. Bone dry.

Though we were in the valley, we still had some distance to travel before finding the village. We followed a wide, flat gully sandwiched between the canyon's edge and mountains. In the midst of the expanse stood a lone structure. A few hundred metres out, it looked like an impossibly red boulder. My initial thought was that it might have been a meteorite. However, as we neared the structure, we noticed a hole – a doorway – that pierced the structure. It resembled a keyhole from afar. Upon closer inspection, we found that it was the ruins of an old stupa, crumbling into the sand. The red paint around its base was still vibrant. Who had built this? How old was it? Had the river always been this dry? Questions without answers continued to fuel my imagination as we made our way further into the valley.

After we crossed a ravine full of grazing Tibetan gazelle, the valley narrowed. To the right of the riverbed stood a massive wall of mountains. Their colours were shifting from reds to purples and bluish-blacks. To the left of the riverbed stood what appeared to be a solid wall. The trail hugged the wall, and I began to notice small divots and cracks. Occasionally, there were sections that looked almost as if they were manmade. Stones organized in lines. Clusters of what looked like bricks. After some time I noticed chunks of some sort of plaster. My mind could hardly conceive that at least some parts of this massive structure were purposely built. It must have been the size of two Titanics, tall and long. At this point, after the caves and stupa, my imagination was running wild. How long had this been here? Who lived here? What was the purpose of this structure? Would there not have been water here at some point?

At the end of the structure, the trail continued along the riverbed. I was surprised to find the ground somewhat muddy. The thin trickle of water had also expanded the width of the riverbed, resulting in dozens of capillary-like streams. We followed the stream to a bend and saw the edge of what must have been a field. After hours of walking, the hyper-green field seemed like a mirage in contrast to the surrounding peaks. We had found Samzdong. My friend and I realized that through the excitement we had hardly had any food or water and were suddenly famished. We took a short break to collect our thoughts and replenish our energy. How would the village respond to us? Would they speak Nepali? We decided that we would mention the name of a Lama who had suggested we visit their village as a conversation starter. Excited and a bit overwhelmed, and filled with Chinese military biscuits, we made our way to the village.

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Prior to my trip, my perception of Samzdong had been based solely on articles and first-hand accounts about the village. I had imagined a dry, barren landscape with a few scrappy fields. I had imagined there being hardly any livestock or greenery. The otherworldly landscape leading to the village had only supported my imagined understanding of the village. When we reached the bend in the river, my ideas immediately began to change. The small portion of the field we had seen previously extended beyond sight. There were a few horses grazing lazily on green grass beside the riverbed. What we thought was a scarecrow turned out to be an old man walking slowly through the field. We asked him if we had arrived in Samzdong, and he replied in Tibetan that Samzdong was further up the river, past the fields.

After some time, we finally found the village centre. It was nearly four in the afternoon when we arrived, and the village appeared to be relatively quiet. Aside from wisps of chimney smoke, and a few people meandering around in front of their homes, the village seemed like a landscape portrait. A ribbon of green grass separated much of the village from the riverbed. The village itself was mostly composed of the typical white one and two-storey homes common to the rest of Upper Mustang. However, it was nestled against a wall of old caves. On top of the caves stood the ruins of an older Samzdong. The barren landscape I had imagined was instead a living, breathing village.

We cautiously entered the village, being mindful of its residents. The hair stood up on our necks when we heard a dog barking nearby. Then, another dog much closer began barking. It was clear from their tone that we were not welcome. We darted to the nearest person – an older woman – and began asking about the dogs. She hardly spoke Nepali and explained in Tibetan to not worry. We walked a bit further, running into another dog. In a panic, we ran to the next person we saw and, after seeing that we were out of breath, she graciously invited us into her home.

We entered through the dark and smoky kitchen, crouching to not hit our heads. We passed by an older man smoking and drinking on a stool near the dung-fire stove. He was shrouded in smoke, making it difficult to make out his appearance, but I noticed him wave and returned the gesture before stepping into their living space. There were two giddy young girls inside, each one wearing a fuzzy sweater embroidered with cartoon characters. They were smiling and giggling with their hands behind the backs near what appeared to a clump of blankets. Our host walked in with two glasses of water and uncovered a small face in the blankets. Her newest daughter was only 10 days old.

Having finally caught my breath, I took note of the room. Light poured in from the chimney flue. Giant laminated posters of Lhasa and His Holiness the Dalai Lama were plastered on the walls next to dusty thangkhas. A small altar was set up in the corner of the room. Thin smoke from the oil lamps trailed up the white walls, which were blackened by years of daily devotion. The infant was swaddled only a few feet from the altar with her head facing the lamps.

After a short exchange, my friend convinced our host to let us stay the night. When asked why

the village was so quiet, she explained that nearly all the men, save for those too old to travel easily, were accompanying the visiting Lama to Choser. Many of the women would travel to Choser the following day, which meant we only had the evening and early morning to ask around about their status as “climate refugees”. We finished our water and walked hesitantly (hoping to avoid dogs) to where many women had gathered by a village water tap.

There, women were washing and braiding their hair in preparation for their upcoming journey. Many of them were taking a break from carrying large baskets of barley and mustard greens. Children played with makeshift wheels. The water tap was running continuously.

We ventured near the group, chatting quietly. We were cautious, not wanting to disturb the women who were trying to relax after a long day. Finally a member of the group reached out and began speaking in Nepali. After a few tense moments, smiles returned and we were welcomed into their group. My friend was able to take some photographs. Eventually we began asking about their alleged water shortage and the terms of their resettlement.

The young lady explained to us in Nepali that they did have water issues, but that there was still generally enough water to sustain their livelihoods. This statement did not entirely undermine much of what I had been told about their refugee status, but it complicated the narrative in the articles and interviews I had already conducted about the region. Because of shifting water resources, the woman told me, their fields had moved further downstream and away from their homes, making them more difficult to manage. Specifically, Tibetan gazelles were migrating into the valley due to the lack of water in the highlands, and were eating their crops. Because Samzdong is located within the jurisdiction of the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP), they were unable to cull the gazelle populations. Aside from their fields, they had enough water for their homes and day-to-day chores. These realities were confirmed by the older women sitting around the tap.

Perplexed, we dug a bit deeper into their narrative. If water shortages were not as severe as purported – if life in Samzdong could reasonably continue as is – why was there a New Samzdong in the adjacent valley? The young lady explained that many of the younger generation want to move to the new Samzdong because it opens up more opportunities for trade and commerce. The new village is generally more accessible via roads to larger towns like Lo Manthang and Jomson. While the younger generation wants to move, the older generation plans on staying behind in the old village, keeping up the fields and managing the remaining livestock and buildings. In effect, there would just be two different Samzdongs rather than an “old” and “new” village.

Weary of overwhelming the women while they were relaxing, we dialled back our questions and enjoyed the scene. A warm breeze brought the scent of fresh-cut barley to us. Dung-fired stoves were being ignited to cook suppers. Goats and horses milled about in the distance. The tap poured like a small waterfall.

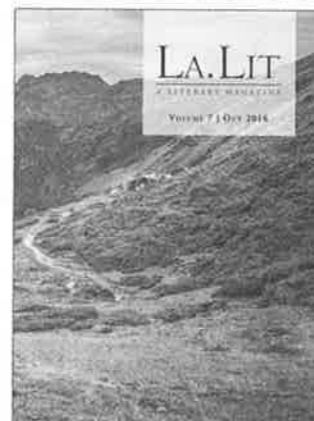
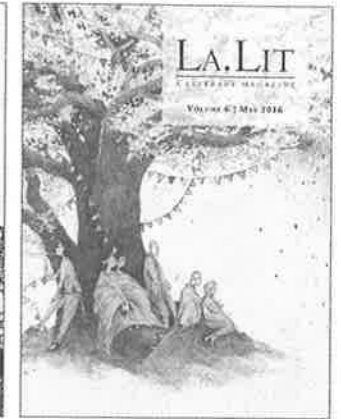
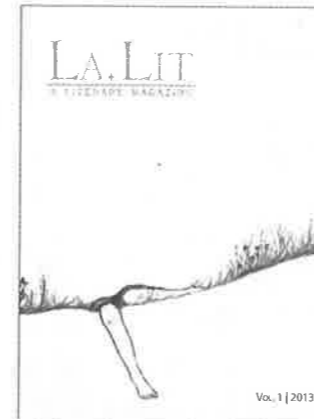
Later that evening, after bowls of *chhyāng* and an expertly prepared dal-bhat meal, we were able to chat with our host, who finally sat down. The ancient old man from the kitchen earlier sat with us, drinking homemade *raksi*. One of the young girls from earlier had fallen asleep on my shoulder after looking through pictures on my friend's camera. Cool air drifted in through the flue. It was while we were all relaxing, enjoying each other's quiet company, that our host explained that much of the village would be moving to the new village later in autumn. When asked about their move, she mentioned that she – along with many others – was excited to move into her new home. Her explanation lacked the urgency one might expect from a “climate refugee”.

When I heard the word “refugee” my mind automatically turned to events like the Syrian crisis, where people willingly risk their lives to escape danger. When I thought of climate refugees – especially when I thought of the stories I had previously heard of Samzdong – I imagined a group of people with packed bags, ready to vacate their barren village. But that was not the case. Instead, our host calmly explained that the new village looked nice. It was more convenient. She would also be going back and forth from her new house to the old one from time to time. Refugees, in my understanding, are unable to freely go back and forth to their old homes. In fact, it is their inability to remain where they are from that defines their experience as refugees.

So, what was the correct story? What does it truly mean to be a climate refugee? As a researcher, I am not necessarily interested in debunking anyone's story. Rather, I am interested in people's experience. Climate change in Samzdong is less of an impending threat; there's enough water for now. That is not to say water is freely available. The water shortage is a real issue. However, it is not the only problem. Climate change is not – and hardly ever is – one issue. Rather, it dovetails with and exacerbates other changes. People are moving. Life is changing. Climate change is only one part of a much larger story for the people of Samzdong. As usual, the story is much more complicated.

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Later that evening, I lay down on a mattress graciously unrolled for me. We were sleeping in the family altar room upstairs. After turning off the solar-powered lights, I watched the shadows from the altar's oil lamps dance across the ceiling. I listened to the goats rummaging in their pens next door. I felt the cool air from the flue drift across my face, soothing my sunburn. I tried to listen to the trickle of the river, but all I could hear was the old man snoring downstairs.



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