Determination can rival steel, but when the day ends and reality hits, steel remains more determined. If only we had steel. Instead, we have hay for a roof, too much pickle in the kitchen, and even more determination that spills out of our pockets. Our village in Gujarat, with its newfound unsettling quietude, is too full of Sadness and Hope and the approaching sound of Death to carry any more of anything.

Up until seven months ago, I used to wake up to the sound of chickens unwilling to be caged and colours unwilling to fly forever away. Colours like the yellows of my mother’s saree, the whites of the clouds around our heads before they got sick and turned grey, the blues of the water that bless the land like a hand presenting pearls.¹ Until the dam wrested those pearls from right between our helpless fingers. All our blessed waters got contaminated from the reservoir heating up and forming algae of green and blue. Now, the blues of the water are clothed in red, black and a different shade of black.

Tara says Hope is just around that bend and that we need only the courage to see her. “Patience, Dhruv,” she says. “One day, it will blossom to Goodness.” Other times, she sounds like Worry; like Jagan.

On certain yesterdays, I would hear him tell my mother “He’s scared, but he’s strong, ma ji.”² But Jagan and my sister have never really been ones to notice the cracks on the wall; the bruises adorning Hope’s neck. I say that because I’ve seen her. I see her now crouching on the floor, her reedy body

¹ ‘Saree’ is a traditional garment worn by women in parts of South Asia.
² A respectful way of addressing an elderly lady in certain parts of India. Literally refers to “mother.”
She’s getting better than water. | Shiv Kumar

growing ever feebler, her head in her arms, with Death only a few feet away observing her with eyes that eat little Hopes like her for breakfast.

Yesterday, a thump and a groan too late, Mother and I found our neighbour, Ms Saavi, on the floor, her husband’s belt fastened around her neck. The belt that he’d forgotten that morning before leaving for work; work that forced him to keep the polluted waters trapped in the reservoir; to throttle Conscience and paralyse it. Ms Saavi had chosen to fall into the heart of Death when she was only just on the verge of it. Had Mother and I found her a second too late, she’d have already turned into a memory; already turned into our guilt. Desperation still has two fingers plunged into her. One impales her heart, the other her veins through which the doctors have been pumping her with glucose. I sit beside her bed now as Envy has a chokehold on my parched torso.

She wears a sweater as brown as the blood running cold in my veins. Her hair is poised on her shoulders, ready to give her the verve to fuel the flames of her namesake. Envy’s passionate fingers press my abdomen as she whispers Glucose is better than water. She’s getting better than water. Even as I push her away, I resist the urge but eventually end up coughing. Nothing comes out. Of course nothing comes out. I close my eyes and picture water. Envy takes that moment to dance in front of my vision and blur it. It swells and swells until it comes out. A single tear clears my vision and I stare at the wall in front of me. It has splotches of dirt and something that looks like Hurt. His flesh is bruised, his bones a presumption. I notice that it’s the fifth time in a row since I spotted him that he winces. The particular expression looks so much like a part of him, almost as if he were born with a wince. The irony does not pass me by.

Hurt is perched precariously on the wall, ready to kiss the ground the moment his fingers betray him. There is more Hurt than these walls can carry. More than we can carry. Ms Saavi stirs then and my eyes shift, wrenching me back from my stupor. I take her hand. All the villagers who had come to visit were now sitting in the lobby with headaches and the usual parched throats. As I find my hand in hers, I remember why I am here to begin with. Because Ms Saavi has been the first one to ever fill my pockets with something other than determination—love. Determination sounded magical and liberating when we began collecting it. “This is our home” became our motto. But, as winter rolled into spring and back to winter, all that determination tasted more poisonous than the water in our river. And all that poison has been burning our hearts till this moment and beyond.
I owe Ms Saavi the sanity of my heart for coating all that poison with enough love for that poison to die from a toothache. Memory steps aside to make way for reality and Ms Saavi’s eyes find mine and hold. There’s regret that she wishes to hide, and relief that I wish to find. I know she regrets the look on her husband a few hours ago more than inviting Death into her house for tea. Her husband looked ready to invite Death for lunch the next time. I squeeze her hand now and bring it to my face. Her fingers are bony and poke at my cheeks. Rather, what was left of my cheeks. When the world falls asleep and Pain stomps on Hope, my father cracks jokes that have seen better days.

A week ago, he said I look like one of the brushes of a broomstick. What was supposed to make us smile, did make us smile. But, only for about three seconds and maybe two more. What followed was a reality check so jarring that it made my knees buckle. I slumped to the ground where I made the acquaintance of my brother’s sewing kit, a piece of chapatti that had managed to sneak off the table and fall asleep on the cold floor, and Helplessness that twisted my ankle at an unexpected moment.³ I blink twice and realise Ms Saavi is still looking at me, through me, and I pull back my other hand that had gingerly begun kissing my leg brace.

She looks like she expects me to say something. Little does she know that words have curled up in the far corner of my brain and what remains are feelings I’m too tired to string together to form more words. After all, they are bound to follow the words piled up in that far corner. I’ve been telling myself that unless that pile breaks open my brain, I shall not tidy up that corner. Even if Ms Saavi’s hand squeezes mine back. Even if Jagan accepts more of my heart than he already has. The Fates have other plans it seems, because a mere second later, when the door opens and Jagan enters, my heart opens of its own accord and out whispers “Jagan.” His name sounds like relief on my tongue. There’s surprise there, too, but Relief lies on top of it and reduces Surprise to a fit of giggles. None of it makes it past my mouth though, because in this moment, all I wish to do is sob.

He takes one look at me and Worry sits on his nose. I leave Ms Saavi to get air. With Jagan around with his radiating aura, I know Pain has no chance of catching up with her. It’ll eventually rear its head, I know, but for now, Jagan will take care of it. Better than I ever can. I step outside the room and into the quiet of my mother, my brother and a few members of our village unfortunate enough to possess the courage to not flinch when Death is just inside the room. Ms Saavi’s husband has his back to every breath in

³ ‘Chapatti’ is a type of flatbread consumed in the Indian subcontinent.
the lobby. I think of approaching him but let him be as he drowns in a dry sadness. He is one of the best swimmers in our village. My eyes turn to my brother who has my mother in his arms as she lay slumped, even though her eyes shine with an intensity that could battle Death. Little does she know that Death can outsmart her without lifting a single carefully groomed finger. I don’t have the heart to tell her that Death is already closer than she chooses to believe, so I shake the remnants of Death’s intoxicating perfume from my head and am outside the hospital doors in a matter of seconds.

The city air outside smells of dirt, smoke from vehicles, and overall, like the colour brown. But I take in a lungful of it. As the good-for-nothing air enters my system, it gets settled beside my warring thoughts and dehydrated skin. My mind provides me with the option of either dwelling on Death’s unwelcome presence or of dwelling on Ms Saavi’s memories that overflow the seams of my mind. Before I can decide, the seams rip apart and all those memories of Ms Saavi pour out into every crevice of my body until even my blood feels outnumbered. A few more minutes pass and a hand finds mine. I don’t have to look to recognise the familiarity of the touch. But, I turn around nonetheless because I wish to trace his face with my thumb. Brown skin, brown hair, brown eyes, brown lips. Suddenly, I’m overwhelmed by the need to hold him. I don’t dare do it. The city knows why. Just our names spoken together summons Disgust with a frown on her face and a hand on her heart. Like her heart burns higher than ours. The new dam outdid itself, and it also undid us. There’s enough worry as it is without water around and if we add more to it, this time, it won’t just be Helplessness that would inflict physical pain. I can take the wrath of our people, the shattered plea in their eyes that they would mask with loud fury and sharp sticks poised in their hands. But, I will not bear any of it if it is aimed at Jagan.

More Worry and Hurt ravage my mind. They look me in the eyes and as they are about to pounce, Jagan tugs at my hand and leads us to a closet room inside the hospital. It is a space devoid of warmth; of cold; of anything. Then I’m reminded of Jagan’s hand in mine and Hope makes it something. He kisses me then. A gentle swipe of his lips against mine. My grip on him tightens.

As he pulls back, he says “Nothing in this world is beyond hope, Dhruv. We’ll get through this. It may take more than forever, but we’ll get through this.”

His words pierce a hole in my heart. There are many more holes there from all of his previous words. I nod and continue nodding, my smile turning to heady giggles until he takes my head and forces it to stop.
He laughs under his breath. A few moments pass in comfortable silence and we head back. As we reach the door to Ms Saavi’s room, we hear voices. They’re so potent, they drown out my thoughts, my pain, everything. Then I realise the reason for the potency.

Ms Saavi lays still in her bed, too still, as a nurse covers her with a white sheet. I’m frozen. A second passes. Then another. Then the stench of Death slams into my mind with a force that tilts me off my axis. I wrench my eyes away from the bedsheets and look at Death.

She looks darker than before, a smirk pasted on her face. I can tell she’s proud of her work here. She looks more lively, much more beautiful, her muscled arms crossed over her chest. Of course she looks like the sun shone on her a few minutes extra today. Her lunch was the woman who had been looking up to Hope—poor Hope who lay motionless on the ground, her eyes an empty void with the shadow of Death swimming in its depths. Too much, way too much. I shake uncontrollably and squeeze my eyes shut.

"Three, two, no, five, four, three, two, one...." My eyes open to Sadness floating in the air. I gasp as I notice Sadness being bent backwards, for Death holds her down by the hair. Death does not let even Sadness squeeze our hands in sympathy. I remove the sheet sleeping on Ms Saavi. She still looks the way she did a few mournful moments ago. Miserable. If looks could cut glass, hers would cut paper. It is as if her heart let go as she was reaching for Hope.

For the first time since I realised water could also betray us, I touch the bed, I seize the sheet, I give up on Hope. Not that there is much to give up on considering how Hope just floated into nothingness a few seconds ago. My fist grips the sheet harder as I watch Death haul Ms Saavi up onto her shoulders, give me a curt nod, and then leave, with me hanging between my lost Hope and the encroaching Sadness.

I look at the faces around me, forgetting to register their expressions. All I see are slates devoid of anything that would tug the mouth sideways or the eyes upwards. Or perhaps my own mind is devoid of space to process all the emotions butting heads in this room that is being choked with the suffocating essence of Sadness. Jagan holds me in an embrace so tight, Torment leaps out of me in a fit of anger and wraps itself around me. My mind takes that as cue to let go and so it does. And so do I. Triple pinpricks of tears pierce my face one after the other. The first has already slid down my right cheek and is chasing my sweat, effectively shoving me further down into the river of sadness that now coats all our feet. The second falls into the ever-increasing river where it decides to curl around and be forgotten to the
world. The third follows the second into the abyss and dies, unable to endure its brothers’ and sisters’ cries of pain.

I look into Jagan’s eyes and stare him down, needing him to let me go. He frowns because he knows my regret of running away would run back to me and bite me in the neck. Right this moment as the white sheet on Ms Saavi glowers at me with its intensity, I could not care less about regrets, sadness, the people in the room, Jagan’s concerned gaze, any of it. All I know is that my feet are ablaze with the need to move, so I push Jagan away and run out of the room. The only sounds reaching my ears are the pounding of my head and Jagan’s faint voice as he calls out my name in broken helplessness. Rather, the ghost of Helplessness. Ms Saavi’s body and our desiccated throats know Death took it with herself. Now, I run and stop and run and run and stop at the banks of our sick river. My breath is still trying to catch up with me as I get closer to the face of the water. I touch it and it feels weak and red on my palm. Or perhaps the red on my palm is only the blood from the cuts I’ve been clutching. I decide it doesn’t matter because so much doesn’t matter anymore. With Ms Saavi gone, I only have one pocketful of love left to last me a lifetime. I was going to ask her for more, but then she decided she wanted to have a look at Death’s pretty face. Jagan and my family are still stuck up on hoarding determination till it reaches our roof and smothers us all, but until then, love is something they cannot afford to take, let alone give.

I sit down on the grass and the blades match the cracks on my heels. Once upon a time, I would have painted them with cream. Now, though, the grass paints them in green and they look more fitting cracked, immediately reminding me of the cracks concealed under the warmth of my blood. I feel numb, forgetting why I chased after my heart that led me to this river. Desperation, perhaps. My contemplation is proven right as I feel Desperation’s strong embrace on my thigh. He looks... concerned. He looks like Jagan. I did not notice him chasing after me as I was chasing my heart. He studies me for a moment and I know he realises that my frown and unshed tears aren’t going to go away till at least the moon wakes up. So he puts his head on my shoulder. We stay there as Desperation once again makes me collect more Hope and wonder if Ms Saavi has finally gotten a cup of water.