My name is Ap Jutang, a rare and beautiful name (even if I say so myself), perhaps the rarest and most beautiful of all Khasi names, meaning 'keeper of the covenant'. And what is more, unlike many Khasi names, it is not a big tongue-twister. Even non-Khasis manage to pronounce it properly. I know this for sure, because many of my non-Khasi friends say it exactly as it should—/ap ju:taŋ/, that is how it should be said.

But I don't know if that's how I should begin. Perhaps I should first clarify that, when I speak of Khasis, I mean the Khasi people of Meghalaya in northeastern India. The mainlanders used to call us Khasia because Khasi sounds too much like khasi–sardi, cough-and-cold, and taking a cue from them, the British began calling us Cossia or Cassia. But we are 'Ki Khasi', the Khasis, scions of the Hynñiew Trep people, the seven sub-tribes. Among these sub-tribes are the Khynriams of Ri Khynriam, East Khasi Hills; the Pnars of Ri Pnar, Jaiñtia Hills; the Bhois of Ri Bhoi district; the Wars of the Ri War areas bordering Bangladesh; the Marams of Ri Maram, West Khasi Hills; the Lyngngams of Ri Lyngngam, West Khasi Hills; and the now-never-heard-of Dikos, whom many believe to be instead the still existing Nongtrais and Muliangs also of West Khasi Hills. Khasis also live in many parts of Assam and the Sylhet district of Bangladesh.

Now that's out of the way, I can return to my introduction. Khasi names are, as a rule, exotic to non-Khasi ears, more exotic still when mouthed by non-Khasi tongues. My friend is called Kynpham—among our more easily pronounceable names, but the best that many non-Khasis can do with it is 'Kingpam'. Or Kimpan, Kingpin, Fiang Fiang and so on. The worst distortion was by Douglas Smith, an Englishman who visited the Khasi Hills in 1995. Smith's friends used to call him Doug, but Khasis, because they could not manage that properly, called him, out of respect, 'Mr Dog'. But proving himself as bad as the Khasis, Mr Dog called Kynpham 'Flimflam'. No such embarrassment, however, has ever come my way. I am truly grateful to my mother for giving such careful thought to my name and what might happen to it.

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Khasi practice. If you are Ap Jutang, people will call you ‘Bah Ap’; and if you are Risa, they will call you ‘Kong Ri’, ‘elder sister Ri’, or ‘Miss Ri’ or ‘Ms Ri’. I suppose it’s a way of simultaneously expressing closeness and respect, or perhaps even a way of reducing one’s linguistic burden. Friends and my immediate family call me Ap, but all my relatives call me Bahduh since I am the youngest in the family. This is another odd Khasi practice: the persistent use of kinship terms. If you are the eldest son, relatives will call you Bahbah or Bahheh, which means ‘eldest brother’; if you are next to the eldest, they will call you either Bahdeng, ‘middle brother’, or Bahrit or Hep or Bahhep (signifying an indeterminate ‘younger brother’); if you are the youngest, they will call you Bahduh. The same thing goes for girls: the eldest are Kongkong or Kongheh, the middle ones are Kongdeng or Kongrit, and those at the end of the line are Duhduh. Sometimes, daughters between the first and the last will be called Kongnah or Konghep (signifying an indeterminate ‘younger sister’), or even Kongieit, ‘beloved sister’.

But there’s more. There’s Hephep, Heprit, Heplung, Hepieit and so on for sons (sometimes for daughters as well) and Theiheh, Theirit, Theilung, Theiieit and so on for daughters. We apply the same principle to uncles and aunts, so your eldest uncle may be a Mabah—sorry, Mabah is ‘granduncle’—a Maheh or a Marangbah; your middle uncle a Madeng or a Marit or a Makhynnah; your youngest uncle, a Maduh. In the same way, your eldest aunt may be a Meiheh or a Meirangbah or a Meisan; your middle aunt a Meideng or a Meirit or a Meikhynnah; your youngest aunt, a Meiduh.

Confused? Not to worry: we are too. In fact, Khasi militants, in their heyday between 1993 and 2001, realised the tactical value of these terms and took to calling each other Marangbah, Maheh, Marit and so on. The heads of the state police, many of whom were non-Khasis, were in a spin trying to sort out who was who.

With parents, it gets worse. We are truly teknonymous with them. Near relatives, for instance, would rather call my mother Mother of Ap than by her real name or even her pet name, Kongrit. The consequence of all this is that most names fall into desuetude. Take the following conversation, for instance:

‘Do you know what Hep did yesterday?’
‘Which Hep?’
‘U Hep, ma, who lives in Block 6?’
‘But which one? There are many Heps in Block 6!’
‘The one who drives a taxi.’
‘But there are many Heps who drive taxis! Which one?’
‘The bow-legged one.’
‘Oh, you mean U Hep Bracket! Why didn’t you say so?’
Or this:
‘What is the name of Bahbah?’
‘What Bahbah?’
‘Bahbah, mə, Meiduh’s son!’
‘Meiduh of Khliehshnong or Pdengshnong?’
A quick side note: ‘mə’ (pronounced /ma/ as in ‘huhi’) is a crude way of addressing close male acquaintances. So ‘Bahbah, mə’ would roughly correspond to ‘Bahbah, man’. The equivalent of this for women is ‘pha’. A more courteous way to address both men and women is ‘phi’, like the French ‘vous’. ‘U’ (pronounced /u/ not /ju:/) is also a masculine marker used before the name of a male. For a female, we use ‘ka’, but if we want to be nice, we use ‘I’ (pronounced /i:/ as in ‘we’) for both men and women. I’m sure I’ll be using a lot of these expressions, so you may as well be told about them now.

But to return to pet names: when newspapers publish obituary notices, they always mention the names of the dead with their pet names within brackets. So, for instance, Mr Pimpdoris Lyngdoh will be followed by ‘Bahhep Pimp’ within brackets. (More on names such as this a little later—in Chapter IV, to be precise.)

Sohra is my birthplace, where my ancestral home is, and though only tenants live in it now, two rooms have been left vacant so we can use them whenever we visit. I usually spend my winters there because it’s slightly warmer than here in Shillong. But that’s just something I used to say to myself; the truth is that I love everything about Sohra, for it was there, to use the words of Welsh writer John Owen of Morfa Nefyn about Anglesey, ‘that [I] was born and raised, it was there that [my] mother taught [me] to talk, it was there that the paths were which [I] had walked as a child’.

I’d like to tell you a few things about Sohra. I do believe that, in telling you about it, I will reveal myself, for everything that I am has been shaped and moulded by my hometown—not only by the customs and manners of Sohra’s people but also by the silent influence of the hills, rivers and woods that surround it and surround me still.

This book is not about Sohra or me. It is, as the title suggests, about the unique funeral traditions of the Khasis—especially the funeral nights that
are so full of tales and stimulating talk. I only introduced myself because I thought you might also want to know a little about me—the narrator—and my friends, the other characters, before you spend time with us.

So, to continue, the name Sohra is a strange one. Not many people know what it means, not even the people who live there. I do, though, because I know many things Khasi. I’m not bragging. That’s the last thing I’d like people to think of me. You could describe me as a practitioner of the community’s faith and customs, which, in turn, has made me a curious and interested seeker of all things Khasi—even though I’m not an enthusiastic believer when it comes to religion. And there lies the difference between many of my compatriots and me.

Sohra was founded by the people of Khatar Shnong, a province of twelve Ri War villages to the north and east of Sohra, and by those of Khathynriew Shnong, a province of sixteen Ri War villages to the south and west. Their villages were situated on precipitous jungled slopes or deep at the bottom of even more thickly jungled gorges. The only approach to them was in the form of uneven steps roughly cut into sheer cliff faces, which made it difficult for the villagers to meet, trade and barter daily. The two provinces, therefore, came together and created a central marketplace on a level field, which was in those days simply called Madan Umleng or Êewrim. Situated on a vast mountaintop tableland, it commanded a sweeping view of the villages below, those on the slopes and in the gorges. The market was held twice a week, on Êewbah, or big-market day, and on Êewpohâa, or small-market day. There was a gap of four days between the two and a gap of eight days between one big-market day and the next. The four-day gap is known as ka īa, or the half-week, and the eight-day gap is known as ka taîew, or the week. It is from this practice that Khasis evolved the eight-day week, which, incidentally, makes the Beatles’ *Eight Days a Week* not so charmingly far-fetched after all.

From establishing the market, it was but a tiny step to settlement: some people, rather than make the gruelling journey back and forth every market day, chose to build homes near the marketplace, earning their livelihood by providing services to the market-goers and traders. The settlement grew quickly in size, and soon it was the biggest, most flourishing community in the area. As is the custom with Khasis, the founding clans of the town became the *bakhraws*, that is, the nobles or the ruling clans. Among them (just to give you an idea of Khasi clan names) were the Nongrum, Khongwir, Shrieh, Myrboh, Tham, Nongtraw, Majaw, Umdor, Dohling, Mawdkhap, Sohkhia and Diengdoh clans. The Myrbohs and Sohkhias were later replaced by the
Kharngapkynta and Nongtariang clans. That said, I must also point out that clans considered as the Sohra nobility may be just ordinary clans elsewhere. And even in Sohra, they are nobles only in terms of administrative functions. In the social set-up, which is casteless and classless, they are neither above nor below any other clan.

Over time, the new settlement grew in influence, rapidly becoming the focal point for all the outlying villages, including the original twelve in the north-east and the sixteen in the south-west. In short, it became the capital of the surrounding territory.

At around this time, there was a fierce dispute between the people of Mawphu from the Khathynriew Shnong province and the people of Laitïam, in the south-east. The people of Laitïam were backed by two other villages, Ryngud and Sohbar. Both claimed ownership of a large tract of land bordering the heavily wooded River Umïong that extended up to another river called Risaw, north of Umïong. Soon, a protracted war broke out. The Mawphus killed the warrior leader of the Laitïams, called U Dei, near a place known as Nongsawlia; however, the Laitïams retaliated and killed the Mawphus’ warrior leader, called U Sohmen, not too far from where Dei had fallen. These places came to be known as Pomudei and Pomsohmen, that is, the hacking-of-Dei and the hacking-of-Sohmen. At this juncture, the founding clans of the new settlement of Sohra intervened. They talked to both parties about how futile and destructive the war had already been, and offered the idea of merging all their villages into a single hima, or state, comprising the provinces of Khatar Shnong, Khathynriew Shnong and Ki Lai Shnong—the three villages of Laitïam, Ryngud and Sohbar. The warring parties readily agreed, and a new state was born out of the war.

The founding clans now began to look for a syiem, a king, who would be wholly responsible for the day-to-day administration. But nobody wanted a king from one of the other clans. They did not want to grant that kind of power and prominence to one who was not their own. It was when they were sitting in an open dorbar (council), trying to find a ruler, that a gentlewoman of divine grace mysteriously appeared out of nowhere and declared in front of the founding clans that her children would be the kings of the new state. When asked for her name, she said, ‘Sohra’, and when asked for her purpose, she said, ‘My purpose is to teach grace and good manners to the people.’

From that time, the new settlement was known as Sohra (for the settlement itself), Hima Sohra (for the state of Sohra) and Ri Sohra (for the country of
Sohra). The names were given in honour of the mysterious woman, who, true to her word, tutored the people in the ways of civilised living and refined manners. It is for this reason that the community regards Sohra as the birthplace of Khasi etiquette and good conduct—‘ka akor Sohra’, a kind of savoir-vivre.

But though the woman was accepted as divine, or at least as an agent of divine intervention, nobody thought of asking her what her name meant. It was only much later that people realised that she had chosen a name to reflect the most typical feature of the Sohra landscape. Since it is the wettest place on earth (I am sticking to this assertion because, although Mawsynram, the other East Khasi Hills village, has recorded higher precipitation now and then, the matter is far from settled—rain being a notoriously whimsical thing) and has a gently sloping tableland overlooking the plains of Bangladesh, Sohra has no topsoil. All of its topsoil has been washed away, either to the fertile and heavily forested gorges at the foot of the tableland, known as Ri War (where the War people live in their bountiful jungle farms), or to the plains of Sylhet, which are transformed every summer by the pelting rain of Sohra into a gigantic inland ocean. It follows then that Sohra is a place where nothing grows. And that is the meaning of Sohra: fruitless. In a way, the name completely justifies the description of the place as the wettest desert on earth.

There is another version too about the founding of Sohra, but this, I believe, is the authentic version. I may tell you the other one later.

And yet, to say that Sohra is a wet desert is not the whole truth either, for it is encircled by law kynangs (sacred forests), law adong (prohibited forests), law shnong (community forests) and law kur (clan forests), which grow in ravines, low-lying valleys, hill slopes and catchment areas within the tableland itself. I will tell you more about them, or at least about our sacred forests, by and by.

Or perhaps I will only speak of them if there is a suitable occasion. What’s the point in talking about anything if you cannot make it enjoyable? That’s what I always say and that’s something I keep in mind during my lectures. Oh yes, I do a lot of lecturing, though that’s not my primary job. In fact, I do not have a job. I’ve just resigned from my position as a university lecturer to become a full-time writer. My mother calls me a fool, and when she shouts at me in anger and bitterness, I am often reminded of the plight of a friend, a poor Nepali farmer, who writes poetry in Khasi. His wife, a termagant Bhoi peasant, harangues him daily: ‘You lazy good-for-nothing! Can you dig
potatoes with poetry; can you buy dried fish with it?’ This woman always raises my hackles: it is as if she were indicting me too, you know? Otherwise, I love women. Many women have inspired me. I do not know if I could write at all without their inspiration. That I am not married already is because I find it more exciting to live in this state of perpetual possibilities. If you do not understand what I mean, consider this poem:

...[that] electric sparkle,
that silent laughter in their eyes,
inviting, daring, mocking …
Those eyes that lifted to him unexpectedly,
the opening of petals, the parting of dawn,
the day that begins with a new zest—
eyes …
haven't we known those eyes
that danced naughtily seeing your eyes?
Weavers of romances and dark fantasies!
Each one had been such a possibility,
a love, a joy, a celebration …

It is precisely like that with me. Every nice woman I meet is a hope, a promise and an inspiration. But that is not the whole truth. Should the opportunity arise, I’ll tell you more about my love life and my beloved Saia.

Anyway, this is what I do nowadays; my mother may not think much of me, but who knows, I may yet make it big, my books may yet become textbooks—the hope of every Khasi writer, since Khasis do not read books except in school—and I may yet earn a lot of money. Not from writing, of course. There’s no money in writing books unless you become a bestselling author, and there’s no hope of that if you write in Khasi. My mother knows it too, which is why she calls me a fool. What I mean to say is that I have a little side-business in real estate: that may flourish in time. But I am not ambitious that way. I do not desire riches. I am happily well-off from the income I get from my two houses here in the city. (Most Khasis fondly call Shillong a city, although a fierce debate still rages as to whether it is a town or a city.) No, I am not ambitious in that way at all. My hope is simply this: that my name should make itself heard like the sound of the wind and the rain blowing and pouring according to the season. It is in that hope that I have started writing in English, for whatever you may say about this language, cannibalistic or not, it is still the key to a wider world.
The lecturing I do is mainly due to my reputation as an authority on Khasi culture. I am invited to deliver talks by this or that organisation, but primarily by units of Seng Khasi. This organisation describes itself as the custodian of *Niam Khasi*, the indigenous Khasi religion, and of Khasi culture. It organises many *seng pyni*, or instructive gatherings, for the benefit of the faithful. I am often called to these gatherings as a resource person. That does not mean I am a religious fanatic. No Khasi–Khasi ever is, since his religion recognises the same God, not only for every human being, but also for every creature on earth.

Khasi–Khasi is a playful name we give to a Khasi who, like me, adheres to the indigenous faith. (I, of course, adhere only in name. I am more interested in my people as a race and in their cultural wisdom. In fact, though I know a great deal about the Khasi religion, I am not even remotely religious. I quarrel a lot with God. But that does not really mean anything, does it? I mean, being irreligious and quarrelling with God is surely not the same as being wicked, is it?) In the same manner, a Khasi convert is called Khasi-Presbyterian, Khasi-Catholic, Khasi-Hindu or Khasi-Muslim, though there are not too many in the last two categories.

The British, whom we call *phareng* (from ‘feringhee’) or *ki dohlieh* (white meat) or *ki sahep Bilat* (the sahibs of Britain), came to Sohra in 1828 when David Scott (the Governor-General’s Agent to the Northeast Frontier of Bengal) built his house on the plateau, having obtained permission from the king in exchange for land in the plains of Sylhet. After the Anglo–Khasi War (or the Khasi War of Freedom, as we would rather call it) came to an end in 1833, the saheps established Sohra as the first capital of the Khasi–Jaintia Hills, and then as the capital of the united province of Assam. But when they first arrived, they found it hard to pronounce the name of the place and called it Cherra, and later, Cherrapunjee. As with everything British in India, this mispronunciation quickly and effectively tossed the rightful name into local and partisan usage.

In the 1990s, I found myself in Delhi for the first time. It was also the first time I came face to face with the naked truth about how the rest of India treats its citizens from the hills of the Northeast. During that trip, I suffered from a deep sense of alienation. People thought I was from Japan or China or Korea, and at the hotel where I stayed, the rude fellow at the desk actually asked
for my passport. I was just too different. I didn't look like the rest of them; I didn't speak like them; I didn't act like them. Had they known me, they would have learnt that I didn’t eat like them.

Nobody knew about our state (carved out of Assam in 1972) or about the beautiful city of Shillong where I lived. When I told people that I came from Meghalaya, they asked me, ‘Where's that?’ And when I told them of Shillong, they responded, ‘Ceylon? You’re from Ceylon?’ To make things worse, the Hindi they spoke was almost incomprehensible to me since I knew only the bazaar Hindi of Shillong. It was in sheer frustration, therefore, that I replied to a rickshaw wallah: ‘I’m from Cherrapunjee. Do you know Cherrapunjee?’

To my utter surprise, he replied, ‘Wahan to bahut zyada barish hai.’ (‘They have a lot of rain over there.’)

I was so moved that I took hold of that mama, that uncle, and embraced him like a brother. Cherrapunjee had saved the day for me, and I said to myself, ‘So, they do know about us after all. Thank you, Sohra.’

After that, of course, I used the name of Cherrapunjee everywhere. Regardless of its origin, it brought me lots of smiles.

I love everything about Sohra, including things that many of my friends find extremely unpleasant. And as it is the birthplace of education in the hills, I am also very proud of it. Formal Western education in Northeast India originated in Sohra, where the first schools were established by the Welsh Methodist missionaries a little after 1842. Since then, Sohra has produced many great (relatively speaking, obviously) writers and scholars. Among them were the pioneering writers who broke the missionaries’ monopoly over cultural and literary matters towards the end of the nineteenth century. Sohra remains a significant centre of learning even now and continues to draw inspiration from its famous sons, such as Rabon Singh Kharsuka, the first Khasi to ever write a book, and Soso Tham, the Khasi bard.

But most of all, I love the pure, wild rain of Sohra, which has baptised me over and over in its holy waters, linking my soul forever with its cloud-tending wind and its cherubic mists floating among, and hanging from, verdant summer trees in sanctified woods. As the rain of Chile was to Neruda, the rain of Sohra is to me ‘an unforgettable presence’. I never tire of reading poems and writings on the Sohra rain:

This is the famed rain,
making a fool of sorry umbrellas!
Zooming in like swarms of fighter planes!
Bouncing back metres high to the sky!
Now it sprints with the wind!
Now it turns waltzing round!
Now it’s a million whips
for the gale to lash at pretty legs!
And now, it’s a violent downpour
to whitewash the ditches and the roads
till at last, the fog comes cloaking all.

It is because of this multifariousness and its divergent nature that Khasis have so many names for the rain: Slap (rain), lapbah (heavy rain), lapsan (immense rain), lap-theh-kting (pouring-from-bamboo-tube rain), lap-lai-miet (three-night rain), lap-hynriew-miet (six-night rain), lap-khyndai-miet (nine-night rain), lapphria (hail rain), lap-eriong (dark-wind rain/black storm), u kyllang (stormy rain), lapegwong (smelly rain, because it continues for many days, causing clothes to stink), lapraw (light rain), lap-boi-ksi (louse-swarming rain, because it looks like lice and nits when it settles on hair and clothes), lap-niup-niup (soft, flaky rain, very light drizzle), lapshiliang (partial rain), laplynnong (rain confined to certain locales), lapkynriang (slanting rain), lapmymsaw (rain of danger, which has both literal and metaphorical meanings) and lap-bam-briew (human-devouring rain, because it does not stop until some human has fallen victim to a rain-triggered disaster).

If you read the statistical handbooks, you will know that Sohra gets an average of more than 12,000 mm of rain per year, and often as much as 450 mm in a single day. On 19 August 2015, for instance, it shattered a ten-year-old record when it received as much rain as 471.7 mm in twenty-four hours. However, the 1964 record of 853 mm within the same period, which also made Sohra the wettest place on earth, still stands. The highest recorded total annual rainfall was 24,555 mm in 1974. And, typically, all this rain falls within a period of six months, from April to September, although it can continue right up to October and even into the first two weeks of November. But again, this is hardly the complete picture. The fact is, we often get the first rain of the year as early as January or February. This early rain, however, is intermittent and does not become fierce and big and heavy and incessant till about April. From this you can easily see how silly the claim is that the rain in India is born in Kerala. While Kerala gets its first rain in June, we get it in January or February.
The rain, coming from the hills and driving with fury through the land, used to scare people out of their wits. Those with tin roofs used to spend sleepless nights intoning mantras and saying, ‘Mab Blei, mab Blei’ (‘God forgive, God forgive’). There was no saying when the rain would suddenly switch to the terrible Sohra erïong, the dark tempest. When the erïong came, corrugated sheets flapped like wings, making deafening sounds the whole night through—sometimes they flew right off. Forests spun around and swung violently from side to side in a mad rhythm; trees collapsed; hills growled; overhanging rocks tumbled down precipices as the rain poured into roaring waterfalls to wreak even greater havoc in the plains of River Surma in Bangladesh. This is the kind of rain that poets have described as the season of continuous darkness, when:

The sun too is not there that rises or sets;
    Only now and then would it peep from the cloud that is dense,
    At the sea frothing white and the gleeful waterfalls.

Many of my friends do not share my enthusiasm for a Sohra that is all water, wind, cloud, darkness and terrorising tempests. Why, they wonder, would I experience a hiraeth, a heartrending longing, for such a land? And why should I take so much pride in the relentless rain? Had it not—according to well-known Welsh writer Nigel Jenkins, author of Through the Green Doors: Travels Among the Khasis—dismayed even the ‘web-footed Welsh’ missionaries and driven ‘many a demented Company wallah to suicide’? But how will people who fear to get their feet wet understand that we used to jump for joy when it rained, that with cries of ‘Yahoo!’ we would tear off our clothes and rush out with bars of soap to bathe naked in the downpour? And bathing we would sing:

*Ther, ther lapbah lapsan,*  
*Ban dup pait ka maw ka dieng,*  
*Ban dup tat u kba u khaw,*  
*Ther, ther lapbah lapsan.*

(Strike, strike big rain, great rain,  
That the stone the wood would break,  
That the rice the grain would be cheap  
Strike, strike big rain, great rain.)

Or this song:
Ah, ah, ah, ba la ther u lap Sohra!
Syngit ki jaiñ ngi pynjyndong,
Shong kali kulai tom tom.
(Ah, ah, ah, that the rain of Sohra is pelting!
We tighten our clothes and make them short,
We ride on horse-drawn carriages.)

We had never seen horse-drawn carriages of course, for the British who
drove them were long gone, but we sang about them all the same.

Sometimes, we dashed naked to the playground near our house, where
rainwater gathered in deep pools among the tall grasses, to roll on the ground
and engage in fierce fights of kynshait um, water-splashing. This is one of the
most enjoyable games I have ever played, one with no losers and, thus, no
hard feelings. When we were tired of the game, we used to take out our knups,
which are carapace-like rain shields made from bamboo and leaves, and get
into the fast-running water, to create waterfalls with split bamboo poles and
large leaves. Or we would float our paper boats among the pools and play
with the tadpoles that were spawning everywhere. Our parents never chided
us since the water was always clean (there is no mud in Sohra, only sand and
pebbles), and the rains were considered therapeutic. Even now, it is said, ‘U
slap Sohra u long dawai’, the Sohra rain is medicine. I do not know if this is a
fact, but our frolicking never made us ill.

Rain time in Sohra was also story time. Mother used to say, ‘The perfect
time to tell a tale is a rainy night.’ And so, she would choose one of those
dark pre-monsoon nights during the black month of April to tell us about
all the famous places in Sohra, behind every one of which is a tragic tale.
As blinding flashes of lightning and ear-splitting crashes of thunder tore
the dark sky asunder, as the wind shrieked with mad fury, lashing the
houses with rain and hail, she told us about Likai and how her horrible fate
had endowed the waterfall with its unhappy name, Kshaid Noh Ka Likai
(the plunge of Ka Likai Falls). It was also in this way that I learnt about
Kshaid Daiñthlen (Daiñthlen Falls), where Thlen, the legendary man-
eating serpent, was killed. And about Ramhah, the giant who terrorised
the people of Sohra so cruelly that they were forced to kill him by feeding
him jadoh, a local delicacy, mixed with powdered iron filings. I learnt,
too, about Kshaid Noh Sngithiang (the plunge of Ka Sngithiang Falls) and
Sngithiang, who committed suicide because her parents did not approve of
the man who loved her. And Ka Lyngknot U Ïar, the stool of Ïar, the man
who married an infant-eating nymph and was killed by his brother-in-law for protesting against her inhuman habit. I learnt about U Suidtynjang, the deformed demon who abducts people and puts them on ledges in the middle of a precipice if they cannot scratch his sore-covered body without pause. If it had not been for the rain, I doubt if Mother would have had the time or the inclination to tell us all those stories.

It is the fog which is a real nuisance, not the rain. After each violent downpour, it creeps out of crevices and chasms, cloaking everything, so that all of Sohra seems to be wiping itself dry with an immense white towel after being drenched by the rain. It is thus also known as *lyoh khyndew*, land-cloud, creeping and crawling over the earth and spreading across the sky:

land-clouds seeping
through tall trees—
a will-o’-the-wisp.

It seeps into homes through chinks and cracks in doors and windows, making everything wet and damp and stinking. It fills spider webs with minuscule diamonds, clings to people’s hair and eyebrows and seeks to lay claim to everything:

monsoon mist—
my sister’s eyebrows
dotted with crystals.

The fog is a blinding white gloom, and when it floats up from the ravines, you can see nothing. Cars on the road, with their lights glowing eerily, crawl like caterpillars, following a thin black thread and blaring their horns at regular intervals:

wind, rain and fog—
my car crawls
to a Cherra welcome.

Sometimes it is so dense that you can barely see your hand in front of your face. On the streets, you bump into people; you watch their ghostly silhouettes and listen to their voices as if they were disembodied souls:

foggy afternoon:
my sister nearby,
a bodiless soul.