

Rati Saxena

I, In Udaipur

(Originally written in Hindi)

1.
By that tree, that temple –
Thick with gods, drums and bells.
Longing for an offering, a cow waits –
Fly-flicker tail.

And beside this, that dancing Lake.
The Lake that was –
The Lake that will be –
The Lake that froze in my heart –
The Lake that melted drop by drop by drop
And immersed me.

And I was a tree by this Lake, and when the cattle
rubbed and rubbed their backs on my bark,
erased, I fell into the Lake.
Then the swimming in my dreams.

And I was the flotsam on the Lake
some kid picked up and tossed;
back I veered (again), out I was flung (again),
and thus flung, again, again, to return
each time nearer.

I am in that lake, and I am the Lake.
In this life.
I, in Udaipur.

2.
And then I may have been a fruit on the tree by the Lake.
Plop! as I fell, a parrot dived low to catch me.
Then how, oh with what relish, he chewed me.
I remember ... that rough beak, that consoling tongue.

And I may have been a bell that fell
from the anklet of the Lake-Palace dancer.
Some anklet tinkles in me today like
The taste of a teardrop tinkling on my tongue.
Someone in me, ever thirsty to step out of the veil.

3.

At the shore of this Lake
in some middle-class family,
a fourth daughter, born.

No applause –
No drumbeat –
Only the shadow of a silence.

A storm brewed on the Lake
And went out to sea.

A fourth daughter has no heart.
There's no one she calls her own.
A fourth daughter
Is like the Udaipur Lake, eyes always dancing
Is the anklet of the Lake Palace dancer, tinkle-laughing without a reason.

Today by the Lake
this fourth daughter muses
over her past lives.

4.

A woman, have I
nothing to offer
my ancestors?

Not a daughter
but a sour berry?
Not on a stem
but on a prickly bush?

Not a daughter

Not the sweet Lake of Udaipur

But

Brackish backwater