

Shanta Acharya

Painter of Gods

I

It takes five days for the spirit of the gods
to descend, for the readiness of the canvas –

from soaking the tamarind seeds in water,
grinding it to a thick pulp in a mortar,

stirring the paste on a gentle fire
until left with a residue, the glue

to stick two layers of cloth, cotton or tussar,
before buffing it with the fine powder

of the soft clay stone from the Nilgiri mountains
that lends the piece its unique colour.

Once dried in the sun it is cut and polished
with a semi-precious stone,

then with a smooth pebble or piece of wood.
I've followed this ritual since my childhood.

First one must bathe and pray in the temple,
be pure of body, mind and soul.

The highest good is in lending our lives
to the mystery and majesty of God's purpose.

Imagine the universe when it was nothing,
awaiting the imprint of the divine imagination.

What would it be like if we could live each moment
as a masterpiece in the throes of creation?

II

Father taught me all about colour –

conch shells for white, lamp soot for black,
yellow from the hartala stone, vermilion from cinnabar,

green a gift from the leaves of the neem tree,
blue from indigo and the khandaneela stone.

We made paintbrushes with keya root –
the finer brushes with carved wooden handles

have mouse hair. A dozen long hairs at the centre
give it a needle-point edge when dipped in paint.

Tracing our ancestors back to the eighth century,
when the painting of patta-chitras¹ as souvenirs

for pilgrims turned into a profession,
and the craft was passed down generations,

father instilled in me a hunger for perfection –
a work of art being the true worship of the divine.

He saw me as the village's first female master-painter.
My parents wished for a son, which family doesn't?

When mother died giving birth to one,
he never took another woman, called me his treasure and son.

It is my turn to keep the tradition alive –
what does it matter if I am a woman?

Notes

1. *Patta-chitra* is a unique form of painting in Orissa, India. *Patta* refers to the canvas used in such paintings (*chitra*). The Puri *patta-chitras* were traditionally devoted to the depiction of the Trinity – Lord Jagannath with his brother Balabhadra and sister, Subhadra. Puri is considered among the four most sacred places in India. Today, *patta-chitras* include various deities in the Hindu pantheon.

Meeting Shiva and Parvati (In The British Museum)

Meandering like a river
among the exhibits I encounter
Shiva and Parvati engrossed in each other,
holding the universe between their eyes.

Startled to find an offering of flowers,
nestling at their feet where
Nandi, Shiva's bull, and Parvati's lion
gaze bashfully at each other,
this statue from Orissa, the place of my birth
carved between AD 1100-1300
on gleaming black schist demands my attention.

I am in the presence of God
conceived as a couple, male and female,
on the point of becoming One.

Over two centuries have elapsed
since the divine pair –
dressed lavishly in decorated loin cloths,
their naked bodies adorned with ornaments
earrings, necklaces, headdresses, anklets –

were taken from their home in an ornate temple,
perhaps in Bhubaneswar, the abode of gods,
where worshippers thronged for a darshan
offering gifts and prayers,
holding conversations with gods that began in
the temple and were carried on every day, everywhere.

Here the gods sit silently contemplating the world
and each other, oblivious of a broken-hearted believer.
Have you forgotten your daughter, how long must I suffer
alone buffeted by life's crosswinds before I find shelter?

Hunger

The gecko's progress across the ceiling,
its scaly limbs defying gravity,
eyes fixed on its prize hypnotised,
is matched by the speckled moth's nervous
fluttering against the fluorescent bar light.

I too watch, mesmerised, waiting for a taxi
to take me to the Siddhi Vinayak Temple.

The wild life programme on TV
hones in on a cheetah chasing a gazelle,
the cheetah swiftly walks away with its kill.

A neighbour's dog barks drunkenly
as I walk past the entrance to a consumptive car.

Dark, sunken, hungry eyes peer at me
behind the closed, tinted window screens
each time the car stops at traffic lights –
long enough for mother and child to gesture
for alms, palms rising in salaam.

When I hand out ten rupees, my car is
mobbed with a hundred hungry eyes.

Across the road a life-sized poster sells dreams.
An actor gazes enchanted into the eyes
of his beloved, lips barely touching.

Near the temple an emaciated devotee
crawls across the tarmac penitent for his sins –
a caterpillar crossing from leaf to leaf,
declaring eternal hunger for His love and mercy.

I join the evening queue for darshan,
my hands laden with flowers, earthen lamp, offerings.

It is Divine hunger, this Creation...
I overhear a conversation about Darwin and evolution,
dark matter, origin of the universe, religion,
Einstein, Hadron Collider and the Magician,
the meaning of life, Higgs Boson,
in answer to the question: What is maya, illusion?