



Three Poems from the Devi Series by Sampurna Chattarji

DEVI

Poems that inhabit the persona of the Goddess Durga, and speak in a voice that is questioning, irreverent, sensual, strong, grieving. This Durga rants, sings, laughs as she examines her own mythologies and the symbols that surround her. Is she goddess or human, is she ancient or very, very modern? Does she speak to herself, or to a woman who mirrors her? These poems spring from the space between divinity and humanity, the sacred and the profane, opposing binaries and seeking instead a vivid, visceral, personal experience of desire, destruction, and the “terrible and essential” truths of Her song.

WAIST

Raised in the Land of the Thunderbolt, I grew jagged, loved heights, devoured Norse myths, felt all the world's electricity seeking me out as I stood in the downdraft of the prayer flag and the gong. *Dorje-ling*. The word ling distracted me, pulled me away from cloud and sky and made me think thoughts too shameful to be shared on the plains. Things grew massive inside me. As my waist curved into my growing hips I felt Indra's hands at work. Light hands, hands of light, giving me a waist all tone and tremolo. How sweet it was to be a child of snow and air.

And now I am a woman, and he reappears. He, and the others need saving. Thrown out of heaven, homeless. Here's a thunderbolt, he says, and flings it into my hand. *Durjaya-ling*. Unconquerable phallus. But he is speaking. He is saying, Child of the Land of the Thunderbolt, you grew into this moment, you are ready. 'I am?' I ask, and stop because the weight of his gift is numbing my tongue, tingling my arm, labouring my unpractised muscles. This is where my bolt fell, girl, out of the blue. Not yesterday, aeons ago. Today I picked it up and gave it to you. And, before I can ask him, 'Do you mind putting your hands on my waist, just to see if they feel the way I imagined?' he leaves.

BREASTS

My skin sun, my breasts moon.
Chandra, you spoke in riddles.
The letters swam. I stared at them,
trying to extract meaning
like milk from a stone.
Gnomic, you wrote silver on gold.
The laws of the universe in my body.
Surya shining all day in my eighteen arms,
my muscled neck, my golden navel.
And only at the wolf-hour, the white-owl hour,
the cow-dust hour,
did I bare the light, the invisible fullness
that waited all day, veiled and certain
in its beauty, unmarred
by the fact of reflected glory.
Breath failed.
Each nipple was a sphinx under your mouth.

THUNDERBOLT

Try holding a bolt of thunder in your hand. Everything changes. The threat of lightning crackles through your sweaty, nervous flesh. Your heart turns into an irregular verb. Your mouth fills with the dust of all that is unknown and impending. That old affinity for electricity short-circuits towards fear. Impatience seizes you. Throw it away, let it fly, land somewhere else, break into someone's predawn nightmare, splice a word in two. Thunder. Bolt. A horse flees. Territories lie unclaimed. What power lies in a weapon this unstable? Afterwards, when you sit down to rest, empty-handed, the singe of it remains in your palm, hot, and strangely bloodless.