

Tiger Mask Ritual

By Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

When you put on the mask the thunder starts.
Through the nostril's orange you can smell
the far hope of rain. Up in the Nilgiris,
glisten of eucalyptus, drip of pine, spiders tumbling
from their silver webs.

The mask is raw and red as bark against your facebones.
You finger the stripes ridged like weals
out of your childhood. A wind is rising
in the north, a scarlet light
like a fire in the sky.

When you look through the eyeholes it is like falling.
Night gauzes you in black. You are blind
as in the beginning of the world. Sniff. Seek the moon.
After a while you will know
that creased musky smell is rising
from your skin.

Once you locate the ears the drums begin.
Your fur stiffens. A roar from the distant left,
like monsoon water. You swivel your sightless head.
Under your sheathed paw
the ground shifts wet.

What is that small wild sound
sheltering in your skull
against the circle that always closes in
just before dawn?

Note

The poem refers to a ritual performed by some Rajasthani hill tribes to ensure
rain and a good harvest.

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