

Vinita Agrawal

The Silent Fair

A month before the festival,
the villagers dry the Timru bark,
its leaves, its fruits,
hand-pound it to a fine powder,
bundle it in muslin or goat-skin.
Prepare poison.

On the day of the Mela,
the young and old troop down to the river,
beating drums, blowing pipes
dancing, singing,
anticipating what they're about to catch.

The river Aglar
is meniscus in the monsoons,
fed by sloping rivulets
and converging streams.
Mahseer, carps, eels
frolic in its swollen waters.

The Timru powder
is emptied into the creek.
The saponin stuns the fish in seconds.
Shoals of stupefied, intoxicated marine life
float to the surface like rubber ducks.

They're grabbed griffon-like
by the bare talons of the village folk,
by crude nets and makeshift traps.
Juveniles, fingerlings, smolt...

Amphibians, tadpoles,
butterflies, grasshoppers, spiders,
ECOPOETIKON

have also ingested the toxins.
They're wiped off from existence
like dust on glass.
Bio diversity, blanched to a white sheet.

The fattest catch
is laid at the Devi's feet at a nearby temple
as 'Pure Offering'.
When did a fish ever dirty a river?

The ceremonial feasting
goes on well into the night.
A silence goes on well into the future.
The river quiet. Winds still. Stars frozen.
A riverine eco-system gasping at the gills.

Notes to poem:

Timru: Genus : *Zanthoxylum americanum*, Family Rutaceae, (prickly ash), contains ichthyotoxic properties

Devi: Goddess

Mela: Fair

In a festival celebrated in Uttarakhand, India, toxins extracted from the Timru tree are used to stun fish which then float on surface and are captured easily by hands, traps and nets.

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