

*A Window in Rajasthan*

*Beyond a honeycombed grille  
I see the myriad dream world.  
I lift my eyes and reach for the delicate wash of a new dawn  
And thread it through the eye of a needle  
My fingers quick to weave,  
In and out, distinct against liminal shades  
Precise, strong, familiar*

*Outside the ground steams  
As the new sun warms the night's cold earth  
Strips of bleached colour, like tiny white scars,  
Appear against the sky  
And carts rumble along uneven tracks,  
Etched wounds into soil,  
Circling an endless distance*

*I slip in and out in freedom, at will  
I dart like a silvered fish as the scales on  
My back shiver and catch the light.  
I talk, laugh with the other women  
As we bake bread, grind spice or dye cloths.  
I laugh loudest, I pull them round and we dance, sing  
Blocks of brilliant colour against pale fine-grained sand*

*Our feet pump the earth  
Finger-tips turned towards the sky  
As if holding an insect's tiny, fragile wing.  
Then I am back in my honeycomb-cell.  
Silence replaces rivulets of sound  
Yet the dogs roam wild, in dust-trodden tracks  
And scavenge for what they can find*

*The diamond light picks me up once more  
And I am back in the tantric dance  
With bells on encircled toes,  
Drinking deep from the ancient Ghoomar Well.  
The sun climbs towards midday  
Dragging the weight of the universe behind it  
And we fall in and reach towards its blinding sett*

*Each grain of sand holds an ancient history.  
Vedic, Indo-Aryan, Mauryan, Moghul.  
My people.  
A bundle of contradictions held  
Together by strong yet invisible threads  
Captured in fragments as multiple, paned windows  
By which I see out of each day; and know*

*Sometimes I am wife, servant, acolyte,  
A highly decorated courtesan.  
Tribal vermilion-turmeric stripes  
Bold against my smooth, unwrinkled forehead  
Stippled senses refract through tired orbs  
As the afternoon sunlight drips like molten wax  
To pierce the eye's stem*

*Illusion plays, paralyses the mind  
Outside it is too hot to work, to dance  
It's time to lie down, to succumb to sleep  
We all slumber, beast and human alike.  
Silence is full of sound, as cracks  
Split earthenware pots and paint peels  
Away from crumbling, ancient edifices*

*Everything moves at half speed  
As day slips into late afternoon.  
Stifled in my stiff silks, stale,  
Acrid-smelling from sweat  
My limbs stunned, awkward, move as though  
Governed by someone else as I look through  
The glassed-apertures with bleary, sleep-caked eye*

*I stretch out my hand to touch Mount Abu  
Now bruised, damsoned, and Lake Nakki, dug out  
By the gods, with their nails, the Temple of  
Adhor Devi, a crack in a rock, split  
Like brittle cane dedicated to Durga  
Who kills the demon Mahishasura  
With her eight-sworded, flailing, swift-cut limbs*

*I break the skin on the back of my hand  
As I caress the range of Aravalli.  
I thirst in the Thar desert, and my tongue  
Swells thick in my mouth.  
And I see the planted fields of sugarcane,  
Oilseeds, cotton, tobacco  
Swathed in night's creeping twilight skies*

*Caught in a series of after-images  
I fly over the rich salt deposits  
And copper mines of Sambhar, Khetri and  
Dariba. I pass old forts, other palaces  
Now neglected, overrun with weeds, with  
Their broken plough-shafts, rejects from an  
Ancient world that found it could not change*

*I dip into the lakes of Udaipur  
Skim the desert fort of Jaisalmer.  
I touch the seven strands of Ajmer, Bikaner  
Bhratapur, Jodphur, Jaipur, Udaipur, Kota  
Shot with intense pin-pricks as the stars gaze.  
They belong to different thresholds  
Which are crossed and re-crossed each day*

*My body is washed in rose-petal water.  
Oil rubbed into my temples, I am  
Dressed in the finest cool silks  
Decorated with precious stones, fine lac bracelets  
Gokhrus and Baju Bandh circle my arms  
Tussi and Adah garland my neck,  
Pjaebs and Rakhdi adorn my ankles and head*

*I lie down.  
And press deep into my powdered right palm:  
Now I am ready.  
I will be carried away before sunrise  
United in sleep with my tribe, my people, and  
In that lacuna, that threshold between  
Night and day, I will wait to be born again*

*Pauline Flannery 2020*