

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

A green thumb and a lotus hand Christine Williams

We sit cross-legged and face-to-face sideways on the broad, antique marble steps of the ghat leading down to Lake Pushkar. The morning is misty, foggy. Smoky is what it is, from the villagers' woodfires.

'Please be comfortable, and we will have one ceremony. I am honourable priest and you are very lucky to be here in such temple to Lord Brahma. It is the one only Brahma temple in the whole of ...'

'... India.'

'... in the whole of the world! It is most sacred place ...'

'But Varanasi and the Ganges ...?'

'Yes, Varanasi, the Ganges river, these are sacred. But this is special only Brahma temple in the whole of the world.'¹

'Yes.'

'We must begin. I will be pouring water into your hand four times and you will pour again this water four times into my bowl. Show me now your right hand.'

I extend my open palm.

'So what is your good name?'

'Christiane Taylor.'

'Where are you coming from?'

'Australia.'

'Now we will pray for all that you need. Please take some pleasant water in your right hand and ...'

Without warning, my right earring given me by my youngest daughter falls from my earlobe into my lap.

'That's my daughter, Jessamina.'

The slightest look of puzzlement crosses the pundit-priest's mainly poker-faced expression. A young man, so many years my junior, he has a face at once soft-featured and strong, a benign quality the overriding impression made on me. There are no sharp edges to any of his facial traits. Across his forehead, a broad banner of white ash in three horizontal slashes adorned with a red central dot strikes into my vision, as his dark eyes directly and deeply engage my own.

'Will I put the earring back in?'

'Yes, please to go ahead.'

For once I don't fumble, and the earring slides back into the hole of my right lobe easily by touch.

¹ At least one other Brahma temple is located at Kumbakonam in Tamil Nadu.

‘Now we must begin.’

‘One, two, three, four,’ we count, as together we concentrate on the success of this initial phase of the ritual, the pouring of water into a small metal bowl.

The young pundit tells me to take some water in my right fingers and cleanse my ears, nose, mouth, eyes – plus my forehead, ‘for your good thoughts,’ he adds.

I begin with my earlobes, thinking of Jessamina’s health, and her presence here with me in the fall of my earring. After moistening all my five sense organs, I find I’m touching my crown *chakra*. But too soon, it seems. I haven’t followed the instructions exactly.

‘Now, again, more water, and wash your top of head and heart.’

So I repeat the brushing of water across my head’s crown with damp finger-tips, and burrow beneath my winter jacket to get as close as possible to my heart.

‘You see that I am honourable priest. I have one sacred thread,’ and the young man pulls the length of white string tied around his torso up to the collar of his shirt, so it frames his collarbone, to show his credentials and proof of integrity.

‘Not necessarily foolproof,’ is the thought my sceptical mind keeps to itself. For the first time, his eyes break contact with mine. Perhaps he has the power to read my thoughts, or maybe he’s just responding to the tears he sees arising.

My chest cavity is welling with emotion since my brief walk with another fine young man, a guide with a gentle manner, through the Brahma temple in the twenty minutes before being set down before this obviously innately powerful young priest. The emotion had been sparked first by an older priest exchanging my mix of roses and marigolds for a full complement of red roses; and then by the sight of a Siva lingam and a golden Ganesh figure at the very core of, the base within, the Brahma temple; and finally, by my double-sounding of the temple bell there, effected twice since I’d misunderstood the direction and pushed the whole bell instead of the heavy clapper at its centre.

I suppose, though, the emotion had been welling even longer. I hadn’t wanted to leave my family and come away alone on this three-month study trip to India, to lecture at a university in the south of the country and to research a book. I felt I was too old for the hardship and life lessons always so confronting in India. My husband (a variable concept, this, since we’ve been together nearly thirty years but have never married) ... my husband had told me he’d travel with me, but changed his mind immediately my study grant became a reality. He had every right, I supposed. So he’d opted for material comfort while I faced flagellation of my soul once again on this seventh trip to the subcontinent. I knew that, as always, I might expect both agony and ecstasy.

A few days before this temple encounter, while I was staying at a breathtakingly-beautiful palace hotel in the middle of a mystical lake, my heavy heart had begun to swell, providing relief through a spontaneous release of tears. I’d indulged myself with an overnight stay in the 7-star hotel since it was my second visit to remote Udaipur, I could never expect to return, and it was just two days before my birthday. The tariff cost

hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of dollars. I blanched at the rashness of my decision (or seeming rashness – I'd suffered hours of agonising uncertainty before I took the financial plunge, hoping my husband would consider giving me some part of the sum as a birthday present).

Why me? Why am I so fortunate, I ask myself, in the midst of the palatial splendour? The quality of the experience is palpable, unable to be resisted. Not devoured greedily, but savoured. I find that all my senses are satiated, to a state even beyond saturation. The sight and sensation of being on a treasured island surrounded by a sun-sparkling expanse of water; of being in a realm of luxury of body and mind: to have my feet massaged by ripples of water on the lake's sun-gleamed surface; watching ducks take off in flight and pigeons wheeling as a body, past tessellated white walls set against the mid-blue heavens; inside the palace, to inhale the perfume of jasmine and tuber roses which wafts along marble corridors inlaid with floral designs; later, to capture the aesthetic of a flautist perched on a walled rooftop courtyard at sunset, keening his love to the darkening sky; at night in a lush garden, to behold a graceful dancer, spot-lit, her full skirt alive with shining peacock colours and, as she whirls, a huge voluptuous shadow cast on the white-washed wall behind her, imprinting on my mind.

I'm overcome by this beauty – and that it's for myself alone to relish. I feel blessed, ecstatic. This gratefulness releases my bonded heart as I try to distract myself by concentrating on cricket scores and menu prices.

That was days ago, but now, immersing myself in the Pushkar ghat ritual, my emotion has again begun to seep up from my heart valves and trickle out from between my eyelids. Sadness is not the cause. This is a second blessing.

'Now repeat after me: OM.'

I repeat the sacred sound, hoping to voice it as softly and lovingly as I have heard the pundit utter it, the 'O' a rounded 'A-U' sound, the 'M' reminiscent of the bond between mother and child, his lips so lightly and warmly extending the captured vibration.

We've begun a journey in song and action and I, so willing a partner, dance the steps carefully as he gently guides me along.

'Lord Brahma ...'

'Lord Brahma ...'

'... I give my praying ...'

'... I give my praying ...'

'... to ask your blessing ...'

'... to ask your blessing ...'.

My voice is hushed and croaking slightly and my tears gently flow as we proceed majestically through so many aspects in the nurturing of my being. A cool breeze stirs against my bare lower back so I use my left hand to tuck my jumper into my jeans. It's my only distraction from the intense concentration I apply to the ritual song. Through our

mutual focus, we encompass my body's good health and protection from harm both from behind and from the front, which seems somehow to be linked with the past and future. I, a figure who so often has her head in the clouds, hadn't ever really thought about being attacked from behind, but at least now that ground has been covered, I realise. So clever, really, to initiate a fear and immediately provide a service to alleviate it!

Coincidentally a gong sounds close beside and a little behind me, and an ancient *purohit*, his forehead also painted with an ashen sacred symbol, bends low as he negotiates the steps beneath me, this action emphasising the reassurance of safety given.

'So now you will have good blood, strong body, open heart, will live one hundred years. Take more water in your fingers, please. Do you have husband?'

'Yes,' I bark out, dispensing with any doubts I might have had about legal niceties.

'What is his good name?'

'Derek McDermott.' Does he notice that this is a different surname than mine, I'm wondering? But there's no pause or questioning.

'Repeat after me: Lord Brahma ...'

'Lord Brahma ...'

'... I give my praying ...'

'... I give my praying ...'

'... to ask your blessing ...'

'... to ask your blessing ...'

'... for Derek McDermott ...'

'... for Derek McDermott ...'

We're off again on a passage down the ages, on a road well-trodden over thousands of years. Derek's body and soul are given a thorough rejuvenation, and my tearfulness eases as I concentrate on the ritual. Our voices, in delayed unison, are increasing in volume and confidence. Next we move onto the subject of other dearly-loved ones.

'Do you have children?'

'Yes, two daughters – and two grandsons, so far.' Now that he has me including the past in my welfare, I'd better take out some insurance on the future, I'm thinking.

The young man frowns, and I realise he doesn't like the way my mind jumps ahead.

'But first the daughters, before the grandchildren. What are their good names?' his voice forceful, as is my response. I chime their names, 'Natalia and Jessamina,' the sounds skittering across the surface of the lake.

By now I've become single-minded enough to say 'prayer' when he says 'praying', but immediately regret this egotistically-independent self-expression, a reflection of my purist devotion to English-as-language-supreme, or imperialism in speech. Even so, our magnificent carriage of calling-out maintains its buoyancy, its

purposeful rhythm and its sedate and graceful manner of delivery, as determined by my guide's refined bearing.

Next come my beloved grand infants, Jack and James, their names offered in celebration to the Lord Brahma for safe-keeping here on earth.

'Now your parents. Are they living?'

'My mother is.'

'What is her good name?'

'Marjorie Taylor' – loud and clear, then emotion breaking through as I think of her great age and weakened state, now aged ninety-four and cosseted in a nursing home. Yet here she is, coming along with us in this glorious 'sounding ceremony'.

'Is your father dead?'

'Yes.'

'What is his good name?' Present tense, I observe. Presumably the result of poor grammar – or a belief in life everlasting.

'Hector Taylor,' and I become aware again, in this calling-out, that I carry my father's name, not my husband's. I'm sure we would pass over this minor bump on the high road without pause, except that my voice is cracking again as the pressure in my chest rises.

'Stop crying now,' I'm commanded.

'Yes.'

'You must not cry now because your father feels this. He tastes tears, and you do not want to upset him. He needs one big full belly of delicious food so he can pass into heaven now.'

I visualise my father's fulsome belly, and my tears, with their pathetic dribble, cease abruptly, from shock.

We repeat the routine as if my father is standing right there beside us. Once, a couple of tears push over the rim of one lower lid but I brush them away quickly in case either the young man or my father sees them and becomes distressed. The now-joyous carillon completed, 'that must be it', I think.

But no, there's a pageant of people still to come.

'You know I am honest priest. I did show you my sacred thread, yes?'

'I know.'

'Do you know how many temples are here, in one such holy place?'

'One thousand!' I'd learnt the figure the night before from a guide book.

'One thousand temples plus one hundred and fifty-two residences, all around our holy lake.'

I scan the edge of the lake which is flanked by poor-quality stone and concrete buildings with little boxy windows, bare of any vegetation, not a tree in sight, not a blade of grass, no lilies on the water's surface, not one lotus petal to be seen. No green fingers

at work here. Nor even green thumbs. I think of my garden back home, by contrast a veritable paradise.

Here, barrenness prevails, even though the lake was created from a fertile gesture, a toss of Brahma's hand, which sent a single lotus petal flying. As he flicked his wrist in irritation, the petal from the lotus held in his right hand fell to the ground and a watering-place sprang spontaneously from the earth, forever after to be called, 'Push-kar', or 'Flower-hand', in Sanskrit.

These days the place looks bare and neglected, the houses unpainted – hardly a nosegay for the Great God of Creation. Lord Brahma had two wives, a legend I've been told by the charming guide. The two volcanic peaks that surround the lake, Savitri and Gayatri, are named after them.

As the story goes, Brahma flew on his swan to Pushkar to perform a sacred ceremony, or holy sacrifice, at an especially auspicious time. His consort Savriti, daughter of the sun, kept him waiting, so, feeling irritated, Brahma married Gayatri after that one powerful flick of his lotussed wrist. Splendid Gayatri also had some relationship to the sun. She was either one of the seven horses of the sun, a hymn to the sun, or another name for Saraswati, the mother of rivers and lakes, and more significantly, mother of the Vedas, of all learning and eloquence. Maybe Brahma was simply singing a hymn for the sun to come out to bless his sacrifice and Gayatri, with knowledge, cleaved to him. All three – the sun, flowing water and knowledge – might seem very different, and separate, entities to most people these days, but the names Savitri, Saraswati and Gayatri are interchangeable in some ancient stories. What's in a name? What's in a wife? Brahma was the Great Creator and he had to get on about his business of creativity. Perhaps he had a lot of writing to catch up on. In any case Savitri was righteously jealous. She became so enraged by the conduct of her husband in taking a second wife, she punished him, declaring that this temple would be the only one in the world. The other Gods, Siva and Vishnu, might have as many temples as they liked, all over the place, but Brahma would be confined to one alone.

Hearing this story I'm thinking that this legendary squabble somewhat diminishes the boast of the temple's unique standing. What's going on here? I don't really understand the symbolism or import of this story, or what it means in my life. Two wives, three names – I've had two husbands, neither legalised. Is there a third, a consort of learning, who is waiting in the wings, ready to confine me to a temple of knowledge? Alone and far from home, I'm confused.

But the young priest intones on ...

'One hundred and fifty two residences ...'

I was born in 1952, I'm thinking. Everything's about me here and now, during this session, isn't it? $1+5+2=8$ or $1+9+5+2=17=8$, I'm calculating fast.

'...and you can see they're poor, very poor. Every visitor pays what they can. People from all over the world ...'

Earlier, the guide had spent great energy pointing out the silver coins embedded in the temple's marble stones, and its tiles engraved with visitors' names, one even from Spain, to impress on me the temple's value.

'Some people so rich pay thousands of lakhs, some pay less. You see five fingers on one hand ...'

Well now, that was an old trick my father loved to play on children. How many fingers on your hand, he'd ask? No, not five, just four and one thumb! But, after all, that's just splitting hairs – or fingers away from thumbs – and it's mean-spirited of me to think it in this situation, I know.

'I don't understand about the hand and fingers,' I say. 'Tell me again?'

So now I'm getting the message, and can only sit and admire this proud young man's lecturing of me on the sinfulness and greed of the First World, without using postcolonial terminology, instead turning to the language of barter.

'Little people pay one thousand rupees – or less,' he says, first tapping his little pinkie's nail, then tapping the ring finger, then the next, right along to his strong, brown, domineering thumb.

And the richest man can't pass through the eye of a needle, or some such, I'm remembering.

'So what will you pay for donation? All people here must be fed. You must see them, very poor.'

'Do I pay you here?' I'm wondering at this sudden mercantile turn of events in the midst of our prayerful outpourings.

'You make promise here and payment there,' he says, pointing to the top of the ghat steps, 'at one temple office,' which looks more like a wire cage with a table out front.

'OK, two thousand rupees.' I've been doing a quick calculation based on several factors: what I think I have handy; how rich I feel; my admiration for this young man's technique, as well as his power and certainty in his profession; and finally, my glowing heart which has been cleansed by the shedding and then stemming of my tears. I too feel powerful, made fresh and new and strong by the priest's tender protection.

'Is that all you pay?'

'Yes.' Silence – and then I concede an explanation. 'It's a long way to come here, you know.'

He nods. 'Does your heart feel light?'

I turn my gaze away from his face this time, to mentally weigh my heart. I allow my thoughts to float about there in its secret, sacred chambers, checking the quality of their buoyancy and lightness.

'Yes.'

'So now we come to donation paid to me for one ceremony. I have no wife, no children, I live for Brahma, I give blessings. How much will you give?'

‘One thousand rupees,’ I say promptly.

A slight reaction passes behind his eyes but I can’t tell if it’s disappointment or satisfaction. Most likely it’s a slight excitement. Surely this is a grand sum. He couldn’t expect the same amount as I’m giving to all the anonymous poor people in Pushkar that he’s evoked. Conjecture is useless, however, and these thoughts are momentary. His demeanour has been even and calm, a true invocation of goodness throughout, and although I’m a little surprised that the financial phase of the ceremony has been incorporated into the ceremony itself, I’m not unhappy that he’s pushed me to dispense my worldly gains more widely and deeply than I otherwise would, unprompted.

‘And does your heart feel light?’ A repetition of the enquiry, and this time I realise it’s the original version of the perennial question that comes at the end of any sale by barter throughout the East, the satisfying conclusion for all parties: ‘Are you happy?’

I make another mental check inside my chest, more quickly this time, as I’m feeling confident about the *avoirdupois*.

‘Yes. Do I pay it up there too?’

‘To me, here, is good.’

I’m hoping that I have enough cash in my wallet, otherwise it’s such a *rigmarole* to open the money folder I carry at the bottom of my voluminous bag. I take my wallet from the bag, which has been resting in my lap, between us, throughout the ceremony, and, remarkably, I find a few hundred and then exactly three one-thousand rupee notes. I pass one to him and he gives me a smile and nod. There’s no hint of obsequiousness in his expression, for which I’m grateful. Not a touch of either charm nor malice. A smile for a job well done and a soul saved, two minds at ease, and my body rested from nervous strain.

Then he distributes onto a metal plate some of the flowers I’ve brought, points out the rice grains again, and a splash of turmeric. I see the colours orange, yellow, pink and red set against white – the variety, the plenty represented in one small dish, as he transfers a portion to the small bowl of water.

From the plate he takes a yellow and red thread and carefully ties it around my left wrist, telling me seriously that when it breaks I must leave it either in water or a tree. I frown, thinking this action may determine my place of death, yet asking instead how long the thread will last before breaking, which is a silly question, I know – and he simply repeats the instruction.

Passing the plate to me, he says I must make a praying, a wish sent to Lord Brahma, that will occur as I throw the *melee* of colour, the produce and flowers into the water of the lake.

‘Please, do not throw special plate,’ he advises.

I look at the water to judge the distance and then chuck the plate’s contents swiftly and neatly – wishing, wishing, wishing.

Next, the small bowl's contents must also be thrown down into the lake, so the waste is not left with him. I must throw it away; I must throw for him. This is just a little trickier to execute since the bowl is filled with water and I want it all to reach that great shining expanse, the sun-drenched lake, not to spill onto the steps between us and its edge. I hoick the bowl's waste and not one drop spills before hitting the water's surface.

'Oh, so strong,' he declares. A mutual admiration society, it seems ...

Up we stand together and he accompanies me to the office desk set against a wire security fence where an old male official (who else?) takes the two one-thousand rupee notes and insists that I fill out a receipt for myself. The young priest points out where I am to write the date, my signature, then the figure in digits and again in words.

'Write please, "T" "O" "U" "T" "H" "U" ...'.

'What am I writing?' I ask, and then it twigs. I add an 'O' before the last 'U' and finish writing 'thousand', neglecting to correct the word 'two'.

I wonder at the power of this young fellow to have me misspell my own language.

As I leave I see families of grey monkeys huddled together to keep warm on this chilly north Indian winter's day. Like statues carved from a single lump of rock, they merge as one, still and calm.

I pay the guide and find I have just the right amount left in my wallet for a tip for the driver. God-given economics.

The ritual has done me a power of good: believing myself linked to heaven and earth, expressing beneficence, the strength of my mind and heart unleashed. I marvel that this restorative celebration occurred on my 56th birthday, the eighth multiple of a seven-year cycle.

*My father who art now in heaven
hallowed be thy name
thy kingdom has come
thy will also done
on earth as it is in heaven.*

* * * * *

It takes a little while, but soon my family-working life begins to undergo a major shift in balance, its interrelationships expanding and contracting in response to unforeseen demands and generosities. I feel I've been launched on a tiny coracle to navigate the ocean wide. Yet I feel safer than I've ever felt before. No dangerous riptides or storms ahead, behind, above or below. I'm reminded of Leonard Cohen's description of what it's like if you can escape the limited thinking of 'love as object'. Only then, love

broadcasts in front of you and in back of you, to the right of you, to the left of you, above you and beneath you, and you're in the centre of a forcefield that includes everything that has no inside and no outside, that doesn't look at anything, nor does it need to be looked at. It's like the taste of honey when you're very young.

* * * * *

A few weeks later a couple I meet while waiting by a carousal for baggage reckon they were ripped off in Pushkar by a conman who duped them into agreeing to a temple ceremony. They felt put upon, they say, calling him an enforcer, a fix-it wallah for a panjandrum, terms I thought had long ago died the death of so many colonialists. How is it that white skin can bloat the ego and blind the senses enough to have you think you're eligible to trespass on a culture without paying a due?

Panjandrum indeed! Jessamina tells me in a phone call that her pain from arthritis has lessened. She's learned to train her mind to better handle stress, rather than be wedded to the fickleness of others' judgements of her. 'Oh, and by the way, Mum, I've been growing some petunias on my balcony and they've just burst into flower – a brilliant red,' she tells me. And she wants to know if I've been wearing her heart-shaped earrings.

So what have I gained, along with an adeptness in applying fashion jewellery? Nothing less than a godsend: the power of a clear shining mind, open to receive new blessings and see old blessings in a new light, with restored faith in love's divinity. As articulated by an honourable youthful soothsayer of an ancient world wisdom, who's taught me to navigate generously every thought, word and action in ritual. Even the flick of a wrist.