

The Parable of the Step Well

Raqs Media Collective

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A thousand poems will tell you that a woman goes to the water's edge, to the threshold of a well, to the riverbank. She walks, reckless, under cover of night, in the stillness of the afternoon, in storm, in rain, in scorching heat, to wait for her lover. They even have a name for her - 'Abhisarika' - the one who wanders.

Waiting is the first act of desire.

Love is a kind of thirst. But is thirst a kind of unrequited love?

The hunter and the hunted, the lion and the lamb, go down to the waterhole. Thirst levels the playing field.

What comes first, the thirst for water, the presence of its absence, or the memory of its taste?

That taste is familiar even to a fetus, and it is the last desire of the dying. It is the tasteless secret of every flavor - cool, lukewarm, as hot as steam, or sharp and icy, on the tongue. Sometimes a quiver on the nerve endings of a tooth.

All living beings eat different kinds of food. But everything that lives slakes thirst with water.

From amoebae to birds to leopards to schoolchildren, from pigs to monkeys to flocks of birds to a woman waiting at the water's edge, all animals know the same tasteless taste. The taste of water.

Imagine thirst. And then you will know the taste of water. It's the memory of all memories.

Thirst - the arid absence of the humid. Negative moisture. A dryness of the body, and the soul.

No water. Not a drop. Not even a teardrop. Not a trickle. Not even a snowflake or a wisp of steam, or a bead of sweat, or even the sudden urge to pee, which is water asking for escape, a fugitive on the run from the flesh.

Before it is anything else, every life is a sack of water. An amniotic possibility. A spring. A source. A pool. A womb. A well. A step well.

That is why the word 'vessel' has two meanings; container, and boat.

Water on the inside, we are also, often, in water, on the outside.

Water bodies swimming in water bodies.

Coming up for air.

A well that stares at the sky is like an unblinking eye. A sliver of sky that bathes in its own reflection.

Sleeping beneath the earth , floating in the sky, descending like a gift, raining, raging like a storm, flowing, seeping, carving rock, oozing, freezing, boiling, scalding, crashing, drowning, rippling, quenching, quivering like a mirage of thirst on the horizon, water finds its level.

But In that time before life there was a time when there was none. Hot molten rock flowed, welled up like thirst, waiting for a rain of wet meteorites. Much of the earliest water on earth rained down, as ice, mixed up with rocks from deep space.

There is a molecular gas cloud in the Orion Nebula 1500 light years away that contains more than a million times the water held in the earth's oceans.

There is another cosmic object, a quasar 12 billion light years away from us in the Lynx constellation, that contains 140 trillion times the water held in the earth's oceans. This water was formed not long after the universe began, and it is still rippling. Still creating waves.

There is a lot of water out there. But we all know what it means to be parched.

As things heat up, the oceans will rise, the rivers and ponds and wells will dry. There will be floods. There will be thirst.

What does a step well preserve in the marking of its steps ? The memory of water?

What is the parable of the step well ? You can climb down to the source in lean times. Or it can fill and come up to where you stand in the wet season. Water finds its level.

But how do you calibrate your thirst? How do you measure that thing that has no measure?