

Me at the Beginning of Life

Jhamak Ghimire

[Jhamak Ghimire was born with cerebral palsy in Dhankuta, Nepal, in 1980. She has published eight volumes of poetry, stories and essays and has a regular column in *Kantipur* newspaper. She can communicate only in writing, and to write she holds a pen between the toes of her left foot. Jhamak Ghimire was awarded the Madan Puraskar, Nepal's most prestigious literary prize, in 2011 for her collection of autobiographical essays, *Jivan: kanda ki phul?* There follows an English translation, by Michael Hutt, of the opening chapter of this book.]

I have understood now that life is a beautiful flower of creation. Whether my own life falls within my definition of life, well, I do not know. When my heart wept I survived, because inside the pain laughter was restless each moment. When I say that somehow or other I survived a burdensome life, few will believe me now. The truth is extremely bitter, the reality equally insipid. Many times while leafing through those pages of memory I myself have shed tears. Such unlucky lines of fate were inscribed for me when I fell to the ground from my mother's womb.

On the sixth day after my birth my mother bathed me and washed me and made me clean, and put me to sleep with an exercise book and a pen under my pillow. It was a folk belief that Fortune would write my line of fate on that night. Mother, you wanted Fortune to draw a good line of fate right across my brow. But that was just your belief. Yes, Fortune did not draw my line of *karma* well that night, nor did it write a good line of fate.

Time had filled my pockets with packages of ill fortune. I was a girl who had been robbed by fate, who had neither the sweetness nor the joy of life. So how could life be as I had imagined? In the end I had to live, and so I did. But I lived as if there was no difference between the life of an animal and the life of a human being. The only difference was that even though I lived an animal's life, I ate rice, that was all. A life without the invisible sympathies and sensations of the human heart, which has no hurt, no colour, no individuality: perhaps only a very few people get through this condition. A poet might want to write a beautiful poem about escaping

from this kind of life, some sensitive person might like this story. But at that time my life was such a burden that it hurt me, and it had become hard to endure the pain.

In everyone's eyes I was someone who had been cursed by the gods, because in this life I had received the fruit of sins from a former life. I had been born into a society whose culture said that people lived from one birth to another. So I was a thorn that pricked everyone's eyes. When they saw me those eyes did not fill with sympathy and that heart never melted with love. Who were very displeased with me, who were very angry. In the end, how right was it for them to be like this to a tender, innocent child? I had no option but to endure all of those things in silence. Inside my child heart, the question continually arose, 'How am I to blame for all of this?' I had no medium through which to express this, no language, no way of indicating through gestures, no power to utter it. I had life, and that was all, and the little breath that was tangled up with it. How suffocating was my life? There was no exit from it anywhere. If there had been any way out, a river of life would have flowed unceasingly along with time.

Blessed Nature! You gave birth to me to endure the cruel behaviour of human beings and you awoke the meaning of being me. When I was restless with suffering you became my mother and wiped the tears that seeped from my eyes. The mother who bore me also gave birth to me, even though it was to suffer pain, she fostered me for nine or ten months in her womb and gave birth to me. In this neither she nor I was at fault. It was the fault of fate. Is the definition of disability merely to be born with a bodily incapacity? If so, why do they not consider Homer incomplete? Why did the world never consider the Nikolai Otrovskys, the Helen Kellers incomplete? These people were weak in body, just like me. But they wrote history before they departed, they left us a different perspective, they set down the meaning of being human before they passed away.

But me? I was born in a world very different from theirs, born in a different geography. For this reason I lived a life that was so unequal and low grade that maybe only an animal could have lived such a life before. When I achieved awareness, the shoots of consciousness had begun to sprout in me, I think. But even achieving awareness became like a curse. I did not have a voice with which to speak, nor any strength in my legs to walk. Nor was there strength in my hands that I could fill a basket with *godavari*, *makhmali* and *sunakhari* flowers. No, I had nothing of this at all.

I was a helpless girl bereft of all these things, whose mind was filled with a longing to run on the hills, but whose feet did not have the strength to support her body. I longed to talk with others, but I had no voice! Because these desires were ones that would never be fulfilled, they fell upon me, wounded.

Yes, I was so robbed by fate that I was unable to even get up from my bed. My poor grandmother, whitehaired like the moon over the hill, might have picked me up and taken me on her lap. How she must have longed that her son's first offspring would call her 'grandmother' in its baby voice, that it would pull at the wrinkles on her face with its little hands. But grandmother, I could not fulfil your wishes. Your other grandchildren fulfilled them. All I did was hurt you when you carried me on your back, how you must have loved me, no?

At that time the economic condition of our home was not so good, to the extent that it was very hard to manage two meals a day, morning and evening. I have heard that mother and father often went hungry at mealtimes, but somehow or other they fed us children. Grandmother, even that was not enough for you, you fed me and made me greedy even though you went without food yourself. And on top of that, you took me to sleep with you and you gave me many different things to eat every time I woke up, all through the night. Aha, how good it tasted, the food you gave me!

Grandmother, if you had not wrapped me in a torn up petticoat and put me in a bamboo basket I might still have been peeing and soiling in my bed today, or I may have already arrived with you in the heaven that people imagine. I don't know. But because of you I touched the various colours of life and understood life from various angles, and experienced the beauty of life myself. Grandmother, you are not with me now, that is your misfortune. But you are still living all through my heart and mind.