

CONSTANCY IV

So we pretend. We pretend – and pray.
bruised bluish-green today rising,
roots, refuse to move away.
with the stars, its legions
in disarray. Then pray
we should ever stay.
the image or fugue:
safeguard clasp
lest shadows
expunge
you

Pretend this day before the battle –
sprawling over rooftops – will grow
Pretend tomorrow decamped
– deities, myths and men –
now is the only place
And here the instant
amulet to seek
lest distance
lest silence
betray
me:

sever
us
fallen
pine cones
an anklet hillocks
of yesterday's ash grubby
infant sunbeams skipping past
the door rice-and-ochre peahens
sprinkled just before cavalcading
black ants on baked red walls squelched
pugmarks over insect tracks from daughter and dog
the unstrung lyre a wizened yak's head for luck
by the hearth sledgehammer spear and quivering
bow in the alcove behind the soft rain of a child's
feet his cracked wooden bowl an unwashed smelly ragdoll
two copper vessels for guests or gods a glinting nose-
ring sweeping the floor nuggets of damp earth
on the threshold a brother's atonal song chattering
tiles on the rooftop the crackle and splutter of charcoal cloud
burst of saffron blossoms outdoors quilted blue whales and owls
crossing sandstone skies a pageant of neem leaves in
neighbours' courtyards winter mulching ox-bow lakes down
the hillside dust on the lintel dust in their eyes dust
in all our thoughts fissures in a mother's voice at prayer a
niece airlifted on your haunch fingers glissading on a pewter plate
a pitcherful of sundown for father's friends their curlicued tales
rising from narghile stems the scent of cinnamon and tea you drink
off my lips a mole on a cheekbone to dot desire your hands
on the hollows and ridges the sunken blue runnels that landscape my
back the midnight hymn in commingled breaths this double-
helix of dreaming selves your shadow on mine and more and more

to walk with you to the battlefield
to stand by as mirror and shield
or to plant on sundered skies
when war leaches your eyes
of colour and light.

JEREMIAD FOR THE DEBRIS OF STARS

a curse
a curse a curse
on you

a
curse
on you

a curse on
all of you
gods demons sovereigns
oceans planets mountains moon
fire earth on all you
gaping
stars

a curse on creatures a curse on all that rises
of the night of day that gleams that shades
on trees on this air that razes that invades
a curse on all that
remains

For he breathes no more
aravan breathes no more no
more hears nor speaks no
more sings with the breeze no
more do his feet anchor the
earth no more do his cheeks
kiss the sun's roving fingers no
more does he taste the sandal the
musk of these breasts no more
does he savour nectar in the hollow
of a neck no no more no more will
his skin warm my skin shoulder to
instep no more will his hands map
the journey of filaments from navel to
pudental cleft no more can he rest his
head between my legs no more his mouth no
more his manhood no more pulse no more
thought no more aravan

a
curse
on you

for he is no more aravan is no
more no more he is no more
than thirty-two slivers of flesh for
kali's tongue offering for pandava
victory no more than gashes
on a head a chest a belly nose
temple the point the sacred point
between eyebrows twin sets ripped
of earlobes lips knuckles elbows
wrists shoulders knees insteps
then ten neatly-sliced toes yes thirty-
two slivers of flesh that imbrue
the earth with geysers of unending
unfading ritual red while the rest the
rest will be fed to agni's hungry craw his
blazing crimson craw nape of neck and
clavicle ribcage breastbone gizzard spine
and sinew gullet and tongue and teeth
his burnished gaze his voice the river ripple
of his voice his smile his smile his smile the
colour of summer noon

a curse
a curse a curse
on you

a curse on night on last night
heedless violet-skinned night
that sped towards dawn
flashing toe-rings and anklets
night that ended my heart
ended most of my life

a curse on kali a curse on
all heaven a curse on any god
that clamours offerings any
god that trades in blood and
breath for blessings a curse
on them all of them gods that
revel in bloody mayhem in
sacrifice a hundred curses

a curse on hastinapur a curse
on this feckless land on all its
kings on the ancient house
of kuru with its parricidal
kin a curse on bheeshma for
his dreadful vow on vyaasa
who kept bharata's line alive
a curse on dhritarashtra on
dead pandu on gandhari
and kunti and their many
murderous thoughtless good
deeds a curse

a curse a bigger a viler a direr curse
on those five pandava brothers
bastards all yuddhishtira the
pious eldest who sends his
children to die for a paltry
throne powerful bheem
who watched all this
injustice reign and
killed only his
cousins

the same curse dark and vile and dire
on duryodhana the cause of this
war on dushasana the next in
line evil disrober of women
and all ninety-eight siblings
jealous bitter blood to be
spilled on kurukshetra's
sacred earth sacred
only to brahmins
or the living

then arjuna oh
the bright peerless arjuna
precious to the gods arjuna
who fights behind krishna's shield
arjuna who let his son his firstborn
aravan take his place at kali's
altar bleating he is helpless
at every amoral turn

and a curse on you
ulupi mighty queen grieving mother
a curse on you for not keeping him
safe for not keeping aravan away
what use is free will if it fetters
breath if it smothers pulse so why
must mothers permit sons to follow
noxious fathers but what curse
could be worse than aching womb
than empty heart what curse of
mine could ever be worse ulupi

a curse
a curse a curse
on us

on you krishna lord of fourteen worlds a curse a curse
the vilest of all curses on you on you for these gods these
demons sovereigns oceans planets mountains moons
for this fire this earth this heaven for all these gaping stars
a curse on you the foulest of curses krishna for spinning
this loathsome universe into light for this war that razes
countless men and beasts hope and goodness a war that
parches land and sea and sky the war that you willed into
being a curse on your dharma that changes shape and colour
and size to suit the wearer your mutant bootless justice and
your lethal cosmic song a curse a curse a curse on you for this
deadly master plan to ensure pandava victory the ruse to spare
your cherished arjuna a curse on you for contriving aravan's death and
a million curses I hurl at you krishna for transmuting into maiden
into mohini into me a curse for proffering this choiceless coupling
this heady grief a million curses for your power o god that creates god that
destroys god that forgets as gods so easily do

a curse on me a curse on me for I live while aravan lies unmoving reduced
to thirty-two slivers of flesh to geysers of unfading ritual red for while I
breathe he can no more dream for I speak while his tongue is a mere blaze
of flame for while I walk his legs are firewood on a pyre while I taste air he
is just a name while I dance he is dead sacrifice a curse a curse on
my breast-cloth his fingers can no more undo on my bracelets
that will never mark his skin on my eyes for they behold aravan no more
only carcass and bone a curse on this gaze whose lust can stir him no
more on nails that will never graze his spine again hands that
will not wind around his neck fingers that need never entangle
his a curse on my breasts for they will blossom in his palms
no more on my lost laughter that will not caress his lips again
a curse a curse on this womb that never will bear his
seed and watch it grow and one last vicious curse on
my transient woman's soul that will forget aravan after
this morning when it becomes male once more for
krishna will not spare me a morsel of memory not
the comfort of mourning nor the covenant of a
married name

a curse
a curse a curse
on me

PAWN TALK:
BENEATH THE MUSIC

There is no Kurukshetra Father
No stair nor skyway to heaven no winged
chariots for warriors No heaven either
No gentle north Father no west nor east
exists No no south lined by Khandava
lush Khandava razed of blade and beast
an aeon ago with Arjuna's bow stringed
in royal greed No centre Father no silken
periphery with maiden rivers that ringed
a sacred strand sculpted by the hand of Shiva
No Shiva Father no devas even just endless
oceans of flesh the sky a maw spewing lava
and pitch juddering drowning earth below a broken
collar-bone of moon above and eyes eyes eyes
everywhere thousands riven stricken

lost and smashed and open blind and bloodless
 Eyes Father that need no ballads nor bards
 to multiply eyes that offer no more redress
 crushed pearls on the chaplet of wise men's lies
 eyes that swear I will soon be one of their kind
 eyes that meld into rubble and mulch while trust dies
 Trust and hope and fraternity wretched shards
 of humanity all dead Father seeking that battlefield
 where war was sacrament where no chieftains charred
 soldiers with winged astras and no kings shattered minds
 and lungs with toxins Bheeshma Father the first
 to break his own vajra-bond swiftly consigned
 the rules of dharma yuddha to myth and flame and congealed
 the breath of tens of thousands mounts-musicians-messengers-men
 Vaishya-Shudra-Mahar-Shanar-Kshatriya When it came to carnage he repealed
 caste and station quaffed them all though the lowest were dispersed
 foremost of course to Yama's land followed by the Eight
 Virtues Yes Satya-Daya-Daan-Suchi-Kshama-and-more all submersed

this time by Yuddhishtira For Father it is true even
the noblest of kings do sin I saw the great Pandava skive
a sarathi in his seat and slash his horses a fit of sullen
rage when he could not rout the man's master Late now too late
Father much too late to retreat-protest-berate this was never
my battle and I will die for others' vows and dreams for yet another potentate
and so do a few hundred thousand men chests ablaze a naïve
untimely unremembered bloom of Ashoka flowers To die
forgotten is to die twice oblivion the final demise we won't survive
No meridians no memorials just distance and the dead to sever
then swallow the horizon gorge the sun it won't be long
now Father before daylight leaves my eyes I hear night whisper
travelling northward from the chest what she thinks a lullaby
travelling through spine sinew and nerve into lung and tongue and skin
Sludge covers my eyes Father or is that the hue of a chagrined sky
Soon there'll be no variance between soil and skin both throug
me like a shroud though my flesh scalds and the soil stings with cold
Memory seeps through torn veins I begin to unbelong

from this self from you from the men who were mine like kin
I used to know Father used to know all my peers
their voices their names Shibi there the eye of a javelin
caught his smote him burst the iris spurting dark gold
on eager earth I used to know his name too the one fallen beside
me an arm crushed to unwilling clay both legs further rolled
further away dragged beneath his general's chariot wheels a blur
in claret the arc of betrayal on hard ground and him there
with an arrow twined through the ribcage next to the heart as near
nearer than a lover's beat Satya Jaya Jeeva the names collide
names and tones and functions padati sarathi sainik rathi remember
them for me Father The dead all look the same no tones no pride
no traits no whims no gait to call our own save this one ware
For we cannot clamour till we are claimed the names remain
our sole archives burn our spears our lances our shields but swear
you will chant the names of the faceless dead like a prayer Father
And await the day when you no more need righteous warfare nor heroes
No deadly belief no divine stairs no hereafter no Kurukshetra either