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

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-
ing 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.
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
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 pudendal 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 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 throng

me like a shroud though my flesh scalds and the soil stings with cold

Memory seeps through torn veins I begin to unbelong

: 269 : 
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 unwilled clay both legs further rolled

further away dragged beneath his general’s chariot wheels a blear

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