

HERE

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For my mother, Dana  
and  
My daughter, Aurora

Death to the avant garde!  
– Derek Walcott

Life achingly said, *Do something!*  
I didn't dare.  
– Frederick Seidel





## HERE

Brahma sat on a lotus throne of sandalwood in a room at the end of a long hall and through a doorway set three steps beyond the end of the universe.

Indra entered. “You are to blame. It’s your fault. All of it.”

“Alas,” said Brahma. “It is my loss that I ever created any of you.”

“Ravana, the ten-headed Raksha king has wantonly slain my people,” said Indra. “And you arranged that no one in heaven can kill Ravana. You set him over us all. He asked and you granted. Why? Just tell me why you grant boons to demons?”

“Oh, Indra, it was just an elusive impulse.”

*Ramayana of Valmiki*



# I

The *mise en scène* is a pastoral; a plain rolling slowly across an island's torso, its river's curves corseted by spines of cane, marshland cut into squares by crooked fosses, and jagged fractals dissolving the grass skin, sprouting factory smoke stacks, then cilia of mud and asphalt, the fragile veins joining the clutches of huts, the overseer's white villa to glints of glass and nickel, and the sheen of neon and streetlights. Above the throb of machines, the factories' exhalations, float the ragged wefts of Bhojpuri prayers, coated with films of incense, and the occasional sob of lust for the Bharat of the Bollywood dream.

\*

It is a kohl-ringed love, the golden eyes set in almond orbits, cut with a primal symmetry males are born to recognize – eyes that could hold history, and apes, in thrall standing at the factory gate on the fortnights when labourers were paid. He took her home to lamp-lit rooms and pall-draped mirrors. The lights in her eyes brightened him more than the warm rum – the peasant's cure for the blotted-out starlit wife, the wound of a young son, and a wordless pain he fingered mutely, and which he showed to me – with fluorescent dreams of an electric life flickering through the grief. Today, the skein of dreams and the golden eyes still binds our three.

\*

I cannot imagine my father a young man:  
the one in pictures my daughter finds and points to  
saying, “Daddy” – she cannot understand  
how I was happier then, as she anoints  
the sepia with a lavish little hand –  
giggling at the grinning toff in pencil ties,  
Sinatra’s sharp-edged swagger, and eyes that spanned  
the start of our forebears’ deep-rooted enterprise  
to its fruit he could only dream. But the snapshot  
could not see the boy who had lost his mother,  
who lived in the petticoats of remorseful aunts,  
who wished, before he died, that he’d had a brother,  
someone to trust, and protect him from the taunts  
of golden eyes that ransomed love and comfort.

\*

The Brahman girls of the ’60s dressed like Jackie  
Kennedy, and smiled like Norma-Jean;  
the boys wore Brando and smiled matter-of-factly;  
my mother said the clothes and smiles were a dream,  
masks of the island Brahmans’ Maya of Cabots  
and Lodges; outside the illusion were morphine,  
the nail-spiked clubs for labour unions, and garrotes  
for heretics and dissenters from the divine,  
who frothed at thought, like marriage, being controlled.  
My father was not a Brahman, or Lodge, they said  
when he came round, as Cary Grant with dreamy  
eyes, but he was bright, and would get ahead.  
She saw the dream, the desperate fleck of gold,  
and understood, and the Cabot accepted the Sweeney.