1997

Poems

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Abstract
TO AVANTISUNDARI, TRAPPED, RED ANTS, SOMETIMES
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TO AVANTISUNDARI

(9th century poet, learned wife of scholar-dramatist Rajshekhar, she wrote poetry in Prakrit as Sanskrit was used by the upper class men for religious and courtly purposes.)

Quill rather than pestle
Lured you, Avantisundari.
Was Rajshekhar your muse
Or you his?
Your Prakrit lines reverberate
Through time, alas Sanskrit!

Glorious, timeless fragments
Survive like desert flowers
No simoon can dry.
Your footsteps unseen
Provoke, tantalize.

Till a sister ten centuries young
Continues what you, incomparable Avantisundari,
Began.

TRAPPED

‘Don’t’ is a wrought-iron gate
That I cannot open;
Within my mother holds me in a fierce embrace
For I am carrion to the slit-eyed hyenas.

‘Don’t’ is my lodestar,
My passport, my credit card, my social security.
Because I don’t,
I am so charming, simple, full of grace.

La Belle Dame Sans Merci?
Harridan, hag, witch, Circe, Medusa,
Medea, Helen, Cleopatra, Ophelia,
Kali, Durga, Draupadi, Menaka –
I have them all in me –
Yet I am lost and trapped
Myths and masks suffocate
I long for air and life.
Am I so formidable *mon semblable, mon frère*?

‘Don’t’, ‘Don’t’ jangles the gate
As I shake its bars,
The inscrutable without

Cloistered, claustrophobic
I cohabit with ‘Don’t’
For I cannot say
‘I won’t.’

RED ANTS

So perfect and awesome
Under my magnifying glass,
Such an infinitesimal speck
Otherwise; what will and instinct
Propels the silent files
Of red power
Up the window frame
Or along the kitchen table.

Friendship with the red ant
Is absurd; stinging body contact
Urges anger and violence.
With cruel fingers I crush
An adventurer on my arm.
Power and pride fill me
As I stamp and rub a procession
Out of life.

Ants are without names
Fancy or functional, unlike us.
They know what they want
We do not.
They are always together
We stand alone.
Miners with no headlamps
We falter and fall.
Trained in a rare academy,
Disciplined mobile queues,
Each red speck
Marching, as if remote-controlled.
Till one red ant wanders off,
Jonathan Livingstone Ant steals up my arm,
My neck and bites my eye
For seeing him so small.

SOMETIMES

Sometimes I grow this way:
Taller than every tree
My face in the clouds
Blue sky as blue sea
I feel so green yet grown.

Sometimes I creep this way:
My belly grazing ground
My nose and mouth dirt-filled
Eyes blinded by what I saw
I feel so weak and run down.

Sometimes I die this way:
A little every time
My heart stops a moment
As in swishing silk I walk past
A sleeping pavement boy.