

Ashok Mathur / DANCE ME PLAY

— a narrative outside the *mahabharata* —

Scribbling, narrating, telling and toning, edging out a story under guise of a poem, and still my rhythm slips away, tells itself, and this tale becomes another, other than mine. But my:

Fold under lips slender touching of lips of
thigh of calf, of slowly rolling under a purple
sunset melding bodies of a sigh of desire measured
whispers of lovetaking so a leg roll of hip pressed
in high and a quivered water flowing over her, breezing
breathing by and rendering forward a moment of regression
before the hip quicks and ankle knocks and the crack intake of air
sucked in placed back, gasped gap, and wheeze-snap of breath follow
hold forth now a heightened whisk, a quicker crack a shimmying
clack-*ca-tack*, a riveting clack-clack-clack and over and over and
another brevity of crackling energy into over her him and thigh
moistly rests and lips quiver stoply slowly, body heaving
of breaths up and down up and down up and
drifting now off into droning of breathing
and sighing and drumming

Arjuna placed his hand on the warm brow and felt his fingers slide over moist skin, felt his own heartbeat reflected from her pores. Beneath the restful gaze of his fingers she shuddered into sleep and he lifted his hand from her forehead tentatively, hovering above brown skin. He wanted to kiss her along black hairline, feel her heartbeat then with his own lips, but resisted and fell away from her, away from her bed, away from warmth and into the darkness that was giving way to a cold morning. He felt his body soften and as he moved away he swallowed and for just a moment could taste her again and would

have moved back if the conventions of the world would let him. But he held still, kept his body still and felt it dry in the cool air above the duvet, watched ripples and swatches of coloured memory play upon his temples. He waited for the moment to leave him and it did. He would have cried just then, if he had known how, because he knew he should cry when moments of separation arrived. But tears only bubbled near the surface and then subsided, sinking back into the cavity of his throat, stinging his tongue and tickling his larynx. His eyelash fluttered, encouraging him to close in, to lie and drift down, and he might have given in if the tremors in his chest were not so loud, so echoey, so cavernous.

“I couldn’t leave her for the world.”

Those were his words, just like that, just like he’d popped from a fairytale soap opera, just: “I couldn’t leave her for the world,” said Arjuna. He looked toward the driver’s seat where his friend Krishna sat. He looked at the round, happy-but-solemn face of his friend, and he conjured up a mental image of Krishna’s name: *Ka-rish-nha*. That’s how it sounded. A mental image of a sound. Bisyllabic shifting toward a Tri. Arjuna visualized the name scripted out: *Kṛṣṇa*. With the sub-dot on the *s*, making for a *sh*-sound, so the name came out like Kṛshna, not Chris-na. Nonetheless truncated, the *i* implied, forced between the sounds of *kr* and *sh*, a connective bridge. (But this is too much background for such a simple tale: forgive me. I’m a poet, and poets are always creating, even creating themselves, working themselves into their work. Egocentric some say. Essential I say.)

“I couldn’t leave her for the world,” Arjuna said again.

Kṛṣṇa nodded. He’d heard the first time. He made a gesture as if to clear his throat, then swallowed hard as he negotiated a turn between two large embankments. He spoke: “Maybe you have to leave her ... for the world.”

Arjuna digested this statement. Kṛṣṇa always did this to him. Always made his terse announcements sound so profound, made Arjuna feel like an idiot. It was up to Arjuna to ask his friend what he meant. But this time Arjuna waited. If he waited long enough, sometimes Kṛṣṇa would continue. They drove along, in silence as it were. They passed between two more embankments; one was dark and

rocky, the other light and smooth, but both appeared insurmountable to Arjuna. He looked at Kṛṣṇa. Kṛṣṇa nodded.

"Perhaps you have to leave her, *for* the world."

"You mean," said Arjuna, "leave her for the *sake* of the world, or leave her *to* the world?"

Kṛṣṇa braked to let a herd of dark creatures caterwaul across the road. He turned off the engine and rolled down the window. He reached through the window and grasped the door handle. Kṛṣṇa opened the door from the outside. Arjuna always wondered why his friend did this. Kṛṣṇa got out of the car and stood up so all that Arjuna could see through the driver's side door was Kṛṣṇa from the shins up and from mid-torso, about nipple-level, down.

"I mean," said a voice from above nipple-level outside the car, "leave her for the world. And leave the world for her. Let's go for a cigarette."

And so Arjuna got out of the car, opening the door from the inside, but Kṛṣṇa had already disappeared, another habit of his which was quite annoying. Arjuna thought he saw a speck ambling along in the distance, and having decided the speck's amble more or less resembled Kṛṣṇa's peculiar gait, rushed off after him (or it, as the case may be.) Now, I'm somewhat older than Arjuna, and considerably less nimble than Kṛṣṇa, so I got left behind. (So strange, being left behind by my progeny, my own story.) I amused myself for some time watching the dark creatures who were, by now, playing sloppily in the ditch. But poets like me get bored quite easily when there's nothing substantial to poeticize about, and dark creatures slithering amongst themselves makes for an imagistic haiku at best. Hardly the stuff of epic material. And it took me some time to realize that darkness had fallen and neither Kṛṣṇa nor Arjuna were coming back for a while. Feeling somewhat tired, I fashioned a hammock out of the spare tire, and slung it between an oak tree and another, younger tree whose name escapes me at this time. And I rested here, wondering when they would come back for me. And this wondering gave way to wishing, and before long it occurred to me (poets are long on images but short, sometimes, on memory) that I could will them back, or, perhaps preferably, dream them back. So I said to myself, Vyasa, old man, drift

yourself off into a possibility, and I did just that.

Dark turns into a rain turns into a blizzard of snow wet yet hard at the same time driving down and up through the ground stinging turns into flocks of strange birds their feathers fluttering crazily crashing deafeningly upon opaque eardrums turns into legions of armies staring and stilling one another on a drenched battlefield turns into war and blood silkscreened onto a blue-wisped sky turns into a hated haze that dissipates dissolves into horizon purple with morning sun and drums a wood slowly as a heartbeat and Arjuna sleeps fitfully beside his new love who was an old old love and he reaches out to her and turns into

Love. Is it known, he wondered, as he lay beside her shuddering in the damp morning light, through its presence or its absence? Is this a woman that lies before me, Arjuna thought to himself muddily, and he reflected upon the silvery shimmer that reflected upon her skin, bouncing mercury vapours off a dirt-wet street in through the open venetian blinds, to cozily coldly flat their rays on gypsum skin. A woman beside him sleeping and crying in her dreams, he knew, because she knew that he was always leaving her in his heart and never with her in his mind, and why was it so important that he be there in the first place if his presence always made her sad, she said, because it signified his already-formed intent of leaving? A woman who had taken him to her, who had possessed him in the way the moon possesses light, only hers to give away and that in perpetuity. Like the woman before her, or rather, beside her (not in space but in time) she knew that he would leave and almost willed it so, because if she could share that other woman's desire for Arjuna (or is it that "other" woman's desire?), then she could know his return even as he left. All these things he feels, but who is he? I wonder, who am I but a poet without an anchor, and is it this which feels? Or are these feelings from Arjuna, can he claim to know his lovers individually, let alone as two women who share a knowledge (of him of each other of herself) across miles and mountains? By his now-lover, the woman whose brow

is painted in expressions of fatigue and sorrow, perhaps at his departing, perhaps in memory at his arrival, perhaps because his presence isn't absent? She, who would have him inside her, so she once said, but his body held back and would come to her only by tongue and touch as hers would come to him; love as non-entry, non-entity. Can this be love?

She doesn't know. The shes don't know. They know Arjuna and, they say, the shes, they say they love Arjuna. And Arjuna says he loves her, the hers, the shes, the both of them, the all of them, and love remains as unnamed as the shes to Arjuna, the shes to each other, the shes to us. Arjuna wonders about love. He will have to ask his friend.

"I'll have to leave her." Arjuna said this straight-faced, staring straight ahead, deep down the prairie road that ended in a foothilled horizon. "I always have to leave her." He was talking about his second love (but second to none?), of leaving again and yet a departure of a different kind because it was a departure from a different woman. Arjuna didn't explain that to Kṛṣṇa. Kṛṣṇa knew.

Kṛṣṇa adjusted the rearview mirror and pulled into the middle lane. He slowed down. A large moving-truck roared past on his right, thundering its disdain or approval with an air horn. At the same time, an oil tanker rumbled by on his left, spraying bits of grit and gravel back onto the windshield. Arjuna winced. Kṛṣṇa smiled.

"I know," said Kṛṣṇa.

"But why?" Arjuna asked, intentionally leaving the question ambiguous.

"Not too far from here," Kṛṣṇa said, "I came upon a rancher's pond. There were women bathing in the water, beautiful women, ranch-hands all of them. I could tell by the cut and wear of their clothes, which they'd left upon the bank, that they were cowgirls."

Arjuna nodded. Kṛṣṇa's stories were often obscure but they usually came clear. Usually.

"I stole their clothes. And I hid in the bushes. When they came out of the water into the prairie sun, they couldn't find their clothes. Finally, they saw me laughing in the bushes. Some of them were angry. Some of them laughed themselves. But they all forgave me my playful indiscretion. One of them, her name was Gopi, fell in love with me

and I fell in love with her. We danced until dusk, and then Gopi insisted I wear her clothes and she wear mine. So we exchanged garments, and as I pulled her kerchief tight around my neck, she pulled me up to her — she was several inches taller than me — and her eyes gazed down upon me and I could feel her breath upon my lips, between my teeth. I became dizzy and reached out to her, with my hands and voice. I asked her to make love to me. She laughed and said we were already lovers; we had loved in the past; we were past lovers; and past love. And that we would love again and that we never would. And then my body went soft and I woke up in the middle of a cool night but my skin was warm and damp.”

“Were you still wearing her clothes?”

“No. Yes. I wore no clothes. I wore her body.”

“Did that love stay? Do you still love each other?”

“To both questions: no. Wonderful, isn’t it?”

Arjuna stared at Kṛṣṇa for a long time, a very long time. Kṛṣṇa’s face was dark as they drove past the first of the sloping foothills. If Arjuna stared hard enough he could see the blueness of Kṛṣṇa’s veins pumping blood past his temples. Arjuna loved Kṛṣṇa although neither man knew of love. Or they both knew of love which was a dream, always. Of life which was a dream, always.

There are some concepts that are difficult to explain, some that are impossible. Even poets like myself get all tongue-tied when it comes to the intricacies of matters like love, dreams, war, and play. Funny, isn’t it, how love dreams war play are really bottomless subjects. Find me a poet who doesn’t write about them, and I’ll find you a poet who isn’t. That’s what I say. But find me a poet who *understands* them, ah, well that’s another kettle of wax. Find me a poet, hah, find me anyone, woman man or innocent child, mother brother or sister-in-law, lawyer shaman or ascetic, anyone who really *knows* these words and I, Vyasa, will lay my poet’s sceptre at the feet of such a guru. Maybe Kṛṣṇa knows, who is loved by so many. Maybe Arjuna knows, who loves two women who love him back (but do they love each other? there’s the rub). Maybe scribbling elephants know, furious recorders in and out of time, good lord untusk me now. Maybe I know, maybe Vyasa isn’t the quaint old fool after all, but maybe I just don’t know

that I know, or don't know it yet, and maybe the poet's creations will give him light in the end. Or maybe the women know, as women know, as know women knowing women:

See Saw touch my touch liv for her
and her giv for lov lip on lip wetted hair lightly
bristle for dewed scent of her over her sliding
fingertouch tremor for enteringly lazy reminder of
shes energized into dozes of hers under hers for their
softening vees and for swimming in lov of desire and
zephyring higher and higher and upper and upper and over and
of her and up her and in her desire resisting a
zenith of azure and purple desisting now sinking
now sliding now over now under now
of her now on herno hers fall together

Arjuna is ... not here. *Va-va*, he the absent lover, but if not him then whom? Put this thought in your trunk and smoke it, *Sri-sahib*. He plays dreams (of love of war) away from here unpresent. In place are Padi and Drau, replacing Arjuna, women who in loving him must love without him. And loving becomes a closed circle, so unloved Arjuna is now unpictured at present. And in his stead, or as they would have it, not instead but in presence, these two, Drau and Padi, love. Only two? no, three, with one un-there-d, but conventions interfere again and displace five-in-legend with two on three, or one apiece. And publicly propertying themselves, these two, women, to each other.

"Your body's still warm," says Padi, curled up on the corner of the single mattress.

"Uh-huh. A high metabolism. You feeling cool?"

"Hm. A bit. Not bad."

Drau sits up in bed and looks at the fetal form beside her. She genuflects. She frowns, guttering a pattern on her dark forehead, and finally asks more than states: "I suppose you'll always be leaving too?"

Padi's still body seems to tighten, or maybe it's just those mercury vapours mingling with dawn upon her exposed, untanned shoulder. "I wonder if always is the same as never."

"You sound like him."

Padi giggles and turns to face Drau. "Maybe I am him. In disguise."

Drau leans over and kisses a patch of purply-lit hair: "You can't be. Cuz I am."

Now Padi frowns. "Do you love him less or more than me? Do you think?"

"Do you mean do I love you more than I love *him*, or do I love him more than *you* love him?"

"Yes."

"Yes."

"To which question?"

Drau bites her lower lip and grins. "You figure it out."

I'm sitting in the back seat, neither behind Kṛṣṇa nor behind Arjuna, but sort of in between so I can see out the front. I'm trying to write down what Kṛṣṇa's saying but he's speaking too softly, the radio's too loud, and my hearing's not what it used to be. Plus my hand's beginning to cramp. I give up on the scribing and try to remember everything instead. Maybe someday I'll have someone write it down for me. Like an elephant, I'll have to be, never forgetting.

Kṛṣṇa says: "... universe ... of illusion or *maya* which isn't illusion exactly but ... experience of the veil ... of which *kama* or love is a part ... call it *dharma*, not quite duty but more like ... fight when you must and love when you love ..."

He goes on and I'm not sure I'd understand even if I could hear every word. Arjuna questions him, and I can hear him better because his voice is deeper and he's aware I'm trying to listen: "But if I know *kama* is part of an illusory world, why love? Or why do anything?"

"*Dharma*." That's all Kṛṣṇa says.

"Because we must?" Arjuna looks for confirmation. So do I. This is Kṛṣṇa's story, after all, and I'm responsible for getting it right. Almost imperceptibly, Kṛṣṇa nods. I think. Arjuna presses for more: "But if I fail to love, to fight, to do *dharma*, what becomes of me? Of my *dharma*? Why should I go on? If I refuse ..."

Kṛṣṇa's hands tighten on the steering wheel. Both Arjuna and I look ahead. Coming toward us on the narrow highway are two vehicles. A logging truck is trying to pass a flatbed carrying a bungalow. I

reflect: raw resources and eventual product, both hurtling toward us. We're going to hit one or the other. Then Kṛṣṇa relaxes. He begins to speak. I can hear every word clearly, like his voicebox is attached to my brain.

"*Dharma* is *dharma*. What you do is what you do. *Kama* is part of *dharma* and all is part of *maya*: the illusion that is — oh, but this is all too serious. Re-read Rao for all this either-or metaphysicism. Real/unreal, it's all rather like commercials on television: one unreality to another." The trucks are filling the windshield now. Kṛṣṇa accelerates. Casually, he flips the visor down and points to the hand-painted script, white on black, that now obscures my vision of the trucks. No, not exactly. I can still see the massive grilles bearing down on us. But the visor cuts off the house, cuts off the logs.

Kṛṣṇa points to the lettering.

"Play," he says, as if that explains it all. "*Lila*. Cosmic play. As the child plays and forgets, plays and forgets. Play, as the light across a face, streamers in delight. Ha. Not doing *lila*, but being *lila*. Swirling and twirling because twirling and swirling. No other. The dance that makes you sweat but, love, you don't stop."

"But death," Arjuna adds with a hopeful tone:

Kṛṣṇa smiles: He says: "But Kṛṣṇa," enunciating carefully the *kr* shifting into the subdotted *s* including the subtle short implicit *i* and ending with the exhaled *a*. "And Vyasa. But Draupadi."

But Arjuna, but Vyasa, but trumpeting tricksters on a Himalayan quest:

Kṛṣṇa flips up the visor. The trucks are gone. The road is gone. I look around me and the car is gone. I cannot see Arjuna or anything. I hear Kṛṣṇa's voice: "But *maya*."

