

Love

They find him in the end of course, snivelling in a ditch, filthy face streaked with tears. He had tried, and he pleaded to be given another chance. He wanted to be let through the gates of heaven, but they couldn't risk it, his face was known, his friend was known. The security forces would be looking for him. So they kill him and dump his body in the Mediterranean. It is found a week later, bloated, decomposed.

Transcendental love. The false filthy claim that it could be found in a woman; the ranks of magazines, the desperate prostitution of those on TV, the corrupt, debased worship of the body rather than God. When he realised how corruption moves its fingers all around him like a cage it became impossible not to withdraw from the wider world, from its blindness and sickness. And to be offered an escape from this... Given the chance to reach heaven he had to take it.

And what else could he do? He ran through the catalogue of wrongs. The assassinated men, the widowed women, the houses bulldozed on the Gaza strip, pictures of the dead in Ramallah. Limbs everywhere, the sticky mess of organs, dogs feeding off human remains. Someone has to fight.

He had been ready – life so simple when he knew it was heading only in a straight line, with a full stop at the end, nothing complicated or messy. He would be gone over to eternity, his part played and his reward delivered. So he was calm; it was easy; he walked into the bar with a clear mind knowing exactly what he had to do.

And the bomb didn't go off. He felt the hand of God withdraw. He must have done something wrong. He was cast down. Damned. He ran. What else could he do?

They look down at his dead body and wonder if his spirit floats above, watching regretfully. God is just; they put the thoughts away and move swiftly on. It wouldn't do to be caught out here so close to the curfew.

I'm drunk. I put on the DVD.

She dances in a hall of marble for wealthy merchants but her song, her voice, her body are not for them, they are for the idea of some other, unseen, who left a poem between her toes as he sat on a train watching her. "Do not let your feet touch the ground," he told her, and it is he she falls in love with, the shadow of him upon her sleeping body, the rich and infinitely dreamt promise.

She's a prostitute (it's an Urdu film; of course she's a prostitute, the profoundly transgressive nature of the vanished Mughals still glittering its temptations, love of a woman rivalling love of God – who can forget the Taj Mahal, the impiety of Jehangir's awesome monument to Mumtaz, the drunken emperor out of his mind through drink or war as much as he ever was through love?) and so denied the very emotions that she sings of, denied the possibility of the overwhelming and total love that destroys all boundaries. She must be of it, and yet free from it.

Her song is broken as she hears the whistle from the train, the promise of love and escape. The promise of honour, of being treated as an equal rather than as a thing. She is a transactional body yearning for life, not understanding that life is only lived in the yearning. It has no other truth.

To die ends it. Ends the screaming pain I have been feeling all these years, the wishing to join with you, to become you.

This love, like everything, has ended up hollow. What would it have come to, had it been achieved? A fat, fly-ridden existence, bored and anxious, jealous of my beautiful husband and the women that cluster around him, eager for his money, for the slice of eternity that is one night with him to remember forever.

Things that are not true must either be given up, or must be utterly consuming. I cannot give up loving you, even though you are not the thing I love. The thing I love departed at the moment of its conception, split itself from you, a djinni, a dream thing that possessed all my nights. The pain of its divorce from you ripples through me, tingles on my skin. The world has never been as it seemed then to have been; I have led my life deluded. I believed in love; I believed you could redeem me.

However much I wanted you, it was not you but always another. Skin like you, lips like you and eyes that burnt like yours burn, words murmured with your tongue and saying the phrases you whisper in my dreams, but it is not you. And without you life is worthless, because we all must have something.

I cannot bear this charade.

I have driven you from me. I have slept with any man but you. I have dressed for you, sung for you and twisted my body to music for you and only you. Yet I would not have you touch me. And soon, soon... Maddened by my refusals, haunted by the long nights and languid days of our past you will come to me. You will be announced and led into my room. I will have clothed myself in only the most beautiful of all those things you have given me, and in a room full of mirrors I will not turn but you will be everywhere; I shall hide my face, I shall not answer you. You will be forced – at last – to advance, and when I still do not turn or respond to your pleading voice you will be left with no choice.

I keen for the coldness of it. I keen to let go, then, in your arms at last, my warmth spilling out all over you.

Crushing rose petals against my skin. Rose water in the fountains, running through the walkways and into the tanks. I dress; I remember how I used to dress, heart burning for you, dreaming that you could take me away and we could be happy. I always wished that I could live like the women of the villages, gossip by the well, carry the water back to our home, our children, the future carrying on like the past had before it.

Everything so simple, like fantasies always are.

This dress, the fragments of mirror woven into the fabric, only ever worn for you. From the first time I saw you, you were the only one I ever danced for. When you weren't there I would dance so the fame of me would spread, so you would hear of me, so you couldn't escape. I would sing songs that were meant to trick men into thinking I was theirs alone, that the lights upon the road faded and died at the sight of them, that what I gave, I gave to them freely and not just so that I could eat, and others around me eat too, jewels scattered about our beds, gold on our fingers and our toes. But for you, I meant it, for you it truly could have been free if indeed love had been love like it is in songs, in dreams.

The maid combs out my hair, scenting it, oiling it. I cannot be myself, barefoot, skirted, filthy-handed as I pull a plough through a field. I must always be something else: I have dressed other girls, seen them dance as I hide behind my pallu and shake the tambourine, I have seen the thing they become, strange and beautiful, not themselves, and that's what you fell in love with, that's what you want me to be, all of the time. You don't want the practice in an old dress, Aunt and Grandmother beating out the music, you don't want the endless hours getting ready, making this doll that faces you, you don't want menstrual blood, children, tears and age. You watched me as I pretended at eternity and I wanted you as you watched, wanting only that of me.

I'm ready. Face painted over my own, shape drawn over my own, the glitter and shine of silks and metals that will still be here long after I've gone. It is not me I look at, the impossible thing staring back. It's gone on too long. I sit, surrounded by a constellation of images shining back and wait.

The maid announces you. I turn my back; you walk into the room and call my name. Not my name, *her* name. Pakeezah. Pure of heart. A lie. I see you exploded into a thousand fragments everywhere and I wait for you to advance.

I'm drunk. I watch the dance three times, mesmerised by the camerawork, the effortless glide through the classical beauty of the palace, lingering on the dancers. The hand claps, girls in pink to either side of the red-clad form of Meena Kumari, her face swollen, disintegrating through alcoholism and self-loathing, needing a life that would match her roles, her delicate and painfully longing poetry. Needing drama, needing life to be satisfying, needing it to provide for her. I listen to the half understood Urdu lyrics, not translated by the subtitles.

It holds me. The perfect artistic expression; everything that life isn't. Everything I've always wanted to write. The great lie about beauty, truth and purity.

Two weeks ago I watched them line up the bodies on the pavement of Tavistock Square. Bits of limbs stained the asphalt pink and the entrance to the BMA was spattered with blood.

The exquisite Urdu culture fostered by Akhbar was based on the brutal slaying of millions. For his pleasure he used to build mountains of the heads of those he had

killed. The reason there are no Buddhists in India is because the Mughals had them all killed. They were pacifists; they didn't resist. They were slaughtered in their stupas.

In my head I've replayed I don't know how many times the slice of film, taken at Falluja, of an A10 screaming down over the city, gun blazing, ripping out houses and roadway indiscriminately. I've seen the pictures too – the ones passed round Student Union societies, youth clubs, bookshops and mosques. Ripped apart women, chunks of torsos, anonymous crumpled heaps in a shattered building. How do you react to such pain, such a colossal, degrading, sickening outrage?

His bomb did not go off. He found himself reclaimed by the corrupt, decaying, sick corpulence of the world. He had wanted to make a difference. He had wanted everything to be beautiful.

They found him snivelling in a ditch and killed him. The ones who told him he would go to heaven.

Meena Kumari mouths the words sung by Lata Mangeshkar, dressed as a Mughal prostitute and dancing as the cameras roll, on a film set somewhere in the Bombay of 1971. She died of liver failure, shortly after the film was released; the film, initially panned, would always be remembered for it. On its own, life is not enough, and on its own, art is not enough. When the two mix (which they inevitably do) we get the great dirty lies, the only things that can move us. I leave the DVD running and fall asleep in front of the television.

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