Hoshang Merchant: Poems for Vivan (English)

Introduced by Ruth Vanita

Hoshang Merchant, born in 1947, teaches English at the University of Hyderabad. Writers' Workshop, Calcutta, has published ten books of poems by him. In the biographical note attached to Hotel Golkonda (1991), a cycle of poems written for a young waiter whom he befriended, he describes himself as "still searching for the ideal friend." In Yusuf in Memphis (1991), he evokes many traditions of homoerotic writing, including those of Greek love, modernist English poetry and the Persian-Urdu ghazal. Flower to Flame, from which the poems here are taken, was published by Rupa & Co. in 1992. Merchant is the editor of Yaraana: Gay Writing from India (Delhi: Penguin, 1999), a collection of contemporary writings on gay male experience.

I
Vivan!
A voice on the soundtrack
of the Sher-Gil family
A soft voice a woman's voice
A voice I have often heard
calling Hosh!
Vivan and I are brothers
under the skin
The lights go up
our eyes meet And the voices
are drowned

The boat has run aground
I must push it
The stern fathers look
from the colonnaded portico
across the lawn furniture
to the servants’ quarters
Where the sons are at play
with the Pandus
or a quintal of hay
Or makers of beams
10 ft. across
There there be the hewers
of wood
And the milkers of cows
and of men
in cages in cities
at burning ghats
at Buchenwald

Eli Eli lama sabbakthani? Where
Liberty to lead a people?
Arms? Give me the feel of arms:
I shyly withdraw my palm from his palm . . .

IV
I forget dinner I sleep
through the muezzin's dawn call to prayer
Morning: Vivan!
[Even the mafiosi are benign this morning!]

If I were to paint him
I'd touch upon his feet
with the manicured left toe-nail

Then I'd concentrate
on his grip
of the first time
[This last time
I gave him the slip]
The black bushy brows
The graying hair
Do I detect some colour there?

Then I'd look at his broad back
concealed in flowing robes
and how the pyjamas fall
in folds at the foot

His carpenter and milkmen
His mowers and haulers
have big feet and hands
The forest fire has a long tongue

The boys he beds (or doesn't)
have broad backs