

Lesson 4

“24”

Jayanta Mahapatra

*“Victim Number 569, Leela, aged 5, daughter of Dayaram
of Chola Kenchi, Bhopal. Died of gas poisoning on
3rd December 1984.”*

-India Today

Cover Photograph, 31st Dec. 1984

i

The eyes are deep and hard in Leela's sockets.
And the face looks peaceful in death.
That's what they say, the onlookers.
What would Leela have said
had she grown up to her father's age? 5

But her face,
it seems to grow best in death.
Her father Dayaram of Chola Kenchi
would never believe me, his half-waking mind
trying fruitlessly to drain the seas of his reality. 10

Soon he will burn Leela out of himself.
Soon her eyes will soften, turn glutinous and fume.
Perhaps something crueller
will happen even here along with the fish
rising gracefully from the river in wispy nets 15

ii

In another nightmare I dream of Leela's eyes
filling with pain, like sails filling with wind.
Or perhaps it was only the utter certainty
of her look, a steel that resolved
the stillness of the world's make-believe. 20

This utter certainty of the horizon,
which belongs to untroubled distance
or to whoever comes across it.