

Dreaming of Cézanne

[Extract from a Work-in-Progress]

1. The Skulls*

The three gods
I worship

are dead.
They stare

from the backs
of their heads,

through
the hollows

of their eyes —
their vision

leaking from
every fissure

and crack on
the cranium.

The bone-skin
of these skulls

shines like
the breast sheen

of a new-born
fish,

each plate
like scales

restoring memory
and genealogy–

secrets
only fossils

keep alive.
Skulls on wood,

on carpet,
on drapery–

studies encrypted
like

an unwrapped
pyramid of bones,

mummies waiting
to be embalmed

in oil and graphite–
as I sprinkle

water and colour
on the shrine

of my night gods.

* Based on Cézanne's series *The Skulls*, oil on
canvas/graphite and watercolour on paper, 1890-1906.

2. The Cardplayers*

The deal was done and stamped
on the brown rough leather

of the parchment. The wooden
table's crooked legs hardly held

its own weight,
let alone the gravity of

smoke, spirit and connivance.
We held our fists close

to each other as if in mistrust –
stiff cards in hand

like little rectangular blades
to cut and bleed our lives away.

The future like the present
was dark and unlit, swirling

unsteadily in tobacco stench
permanently embedded

in the wood of the walls,
the furniture, our clothes

and our hearts. But at least
this was a gamble,

a zone of unsure light,
an unpredictability

to hold onto amid all the grey,
brown and blue,

cold, deep blue, and more blue.

* Based on Cézanne's *Cardplayers*, oil on
canvas, 47.5 × 57 cm, 1893-96.

3. Jacket on a Chair*

You carelessly tossed
the jacket on a chair.
The assembly of cloth

collapsed in slow motion
into a heap of cotton–
cotton freshly picked

from the fields–
like flesh
without a spine.

The chair's wooden
frame provided a brief
skeleton,

but it wasn't enough
to renew the coat's
shape, the body's

prior strength,
or the muscle

to hold its own.

When one peels off
one's outer skin,
it is difficult

to hide
the true nature of
blood.

Wood, wool, stitches,
and joints—
an epitaph

of a cardplayer's
shuffle,
and the history

of my dark faith.

* Based on Cézanne's *Jacket on a Chair*, graphite and
watercolour on paper, 47.5 × 30.5 cm, 1890-92.

SUDEEP SEN