

AWARD WINNING KANNADA POEMS

The Open Door

K. S. Narasimhaswamy

Translated by

Ramachandra Sharma

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THE OPEN DOOR

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The sculpture reproduced on the endpaper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From : Nagarjunkonda, 2nd century A.D.
Courtesy : National Museum, New Delhi

Sahitya Akademi Awardwinning Kannada Poetry

THE OPEN DOOR

K.S. NARASIMHASWAMY

Translated from the Kannada

By

RAMACHANDRA SHARMA



Sahitya Akademi

THE OPEN DOOR : English translation by B.C. Ramachandra Sharma of the award winning collection of poems in Kannada Tereda Bagilu by K.S. Narasimha Swamy. Sahitya Akademi, 2001, Rs. 50

ISBN : 81-260-0818-0

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First Published : 2001

Sahitya Akademi

Head Office:

Rabindra Bhavan, 35, 1

Sales : 'Swati', Mandir

Regional Offices:

Central College Campus,
Bangalore-560 001

Jeevan Tara Building, 4th
Harbour Road, Calcutta-700 053

172, Mumbai Marathi Grantha Sangrahalaya Marg, Dadar,
Mumbai-400 014

Chennai Office:

C.I.T. Campus, T.T.T.I. Post, Taramani, Chennai-600 113

Rs. 50

894.814 16
N 168 0

Typeset by Neethu Graphics, Bangalore
Printed at Liberty Enterprises, Bangalore



A Few Words

There are sixteen poems (including a bouquet of songs) in this collection. They have already been published in Sakshi, Prajavani, Mayura, Sadhane, Udayavani, Tushara and Kshitija. The bouquet of songs has been broadcast by All India Radio. I am grateful to the Editors of the various magazines and the Director of All India Radio.

My friends, Sri P. Lankesh, Sri G.S. Siddhalingiah and Sri Ka. Vem. Rajagopal have in the past discussed some of the poems here; Sri L.S. Seshagirirao, the well-known critic, has written a detailed preface; Sri S.R. Ramaswamy has helped me with his useful suggestions; Sri Balakrishna and Sri Kodandaram of Lipi Mudranalaya have given the book an attractive look. My thanks go to all these friends and to Sri Koodali Chidambaram who, on my request, transferred the publication rights to me.

I am grateful to my senior friend Prof. G. Venkatasubbaiah who offered full support from the stage of advancing funds to those of release and distribution and to Sri Soo. Subramanyam, Sri G.K. Gundurao and Srimathi H.S. Parvati, all lovers of poetry.

—K.S. Na.

K.S. Na.'s WORKS

COLLECTION OF POEMS:

Mysora Mallige	1942
Airavata	1945
Deepada Malli	1947
Ungura	1949
Iruvantige	1952
Shilalate	1958
Maneyinda Manege	1960
Tereda Bagilu	1976

IN PROSE :

Mariya Kallu	1942
Upavana	1958
Damayanti	1960
Vi.See.	1971

TRANSLATION (FROM ENGLISH):

Mohanamale (Gandhi's Sayings)	1956
Nanna Kanasina Bharata (Gandhiji)	1961
Prapanchanda Balyadalli (Verrier Elwin)	1965
Media (Euripides)	1966
Huckleberry Finnana Sahasagalu (Mark Twain)	1969
Subramanya Bharati (Prema Nandakumar)	1971
Mayashanka mattu itara Kathegalu (John Dorairaj)	1972
Raniya Gili mattu Rajana Manga (Harindranath Chattopadhyaya)	1972
Patraguccha (Jawaharlal's Bunch of Old Letters — in collaboration with Sri S R Ramaswamy)	1975

Preface

A few years ago, Sri K.S. Narasimhaswamy read his poem 'Tereda Bagilu' (The Open Door) at a poets' Meet. I remember my mind being possessed by that poem for two or three days after it. I cannot claim that all the details in it made their impact on me at the first reading. But it was a fact that my mind had crossed a border, hitherto unknown, and come back.

K.S.Na. came to be known as a poet of tenderness and joy with his collection 'Mysora Mallige.' It was evident that the desire to gather life's joy and beauty was there in each and every poem in it. Even in that collection, there were lines like

*Life is a path of sun and shade;
Death stalks like
a stealthy cat. Who knows
whose path ends where!*

and

*Don't move around the fragrant
ketaki grove my love,
it seems, it is an abode of snakes.*

In the collection 'Shilalate', the poet's eyes turned towards the vicissitudes and falsity in life and we also see irony making its entry for the first time into his poetry. In the poem, 'Gadiyaradangadiya Munde,' (In Front Of A Clock-Shop), we see him giving form to an

abstract concept through a network of symbols. He caught in his images the complexity of Time, the variety of forms in which man's life experiences it and the wonderment it brings to him. I feel that in 'The Open Door,' he stands on the edge of man's being and gives us the experience of the mystery beyond by slightly opening the door of life.

The first part creates the framework of an occasion for the experience in the poem, which is its theme. It establishes the rhythm of the spoken word. (The lines which come after such a rhythm has been established

*Like the three Sacred Fires,
like the three Tenses of Time,
like the merits of three generations personified.....*

stand out because of their difference in diction, repetition and rhythm). We should note how this section is full of details about coming and going (they take us to the words, 'I myself am an open door, you know, an all-weather port') and how from the very beginning, birth and death are clubbed together:

'When is the ceremony for naming your child?'
'The reason I ask is Father's anniversary
which falls again on Saturday next.'

and the last line of this section —

'drop the load on your head
and shed the skin!'

(We should note how in 'and shed the skin,' the process of one stage of life coming to an end yielding to another is suggested).

The indications of birth and death followed by a new state are to be found among the quotidian details of life:

*How did you manage to catch a bus
on a market day?*

*The paddy must have been threshed by now,
and so the cart should be free.*

*At last, the rain has stopped and there's a nip
in the air. Come inside. See if there's any coffee
left in the thermos flask....*

*There's still half an hour before the meal
from the hotel arrives.*

From this point onwards, the protagonist himself becomes aware of death — as if Death stretched its arms to touch him once on the shoulder and draw back, as if the door of life's borders opened a little — just a little:

*It was as if the sky fell on my head
even though I knew that I wasn't dead.
Still, I stole a peep into the mirror,
shook my legs, stretched my limbs,
got up, walked to the door
and hammered a nail on the threshold.*

He knows that it is not he that has died but has to make sure that he is still on this side of the border. The first gesture he makes — again concerning death — is to light a wick dipped in ghee for the dead one.

He, who first shakes his legs, stretches his limbs and looks in the mirror in order to relate to himself later makes an attempt to relate to the world out side—he talks to the Editor who is like the unseen God. 'I am still alive. Will you do me the favour of inserting a correction, Sir?' In answer the Editor says, 'Is that so? I'm sorry. Fine. We shall have it done tomorrow and tell the world that you are alive.' The response of the protagonist, who imagines that everyone would be as upset by the error as he himself, is: 'How detached! How consoling! Rama, Rama!'

And then a futile attempt to relate to another man. The protagonist runs to the post office and pleads with a man there:

*Please hold back whatever comes
for me till evening tomorrow! Let it lie here!
I will collect it later.*

He does not want the letters of condolence which suggest death to come into the house. Death has shaken him to the core of his being. (We should note the ambiguity of the words, 'Whatever comes for me till evening tomorrow!' They are words from the mouth of a confused man who had heard only a few hours ago about the death of his namesake under a lorry.) The newspaper office has its kind of detachment and the post office its own. ('looked in to see blows landing on cards and letters') On his way out, he stepped on a thorn and started bleeding — it was the thorn of the memory of his wife who was far away from even his mind. Once again, at the end of this section, the intensity of feeling comes down.

*It's good for me you didn't run into him
in the village, it's good for me
you came here not knowing anything.
Whatever happens is for our good.....*

What starts as the third section with very ordinary details of everyday life grows intense and rises to a resplendent image.

*Like the three Sacred Fires,
like the three Tenses of Time,
like the merits of three generations personified
came three hungry men clad in madi.*

Their arrival is the second accidental happening of the day. Their relationship with death is obvious. The 'three Sacred Fires' suggest, along with radiance, one's entire life until death when the last rites are performed with the holy fire which one had tended till the end.

The meaning of the three fires is clear. To those of past generations, offering *pinda* (a ball of meal) and *tarpana* (an oblation to the manes or gods) are parts of the ceremony of the anniversary of death. From this point onwards, the poem reverts to ordinary details. The three hungry men clad in *madi* are still there, standing. (It means that a kind of framework has been provided for this image by providing ordinary details both before and after.) Again the presence of death; the hungry ones look at the open door. (The protagonist has indicated the underlying unity by describing himself as an 'open door.') The hungry ones bless him and go away once their doubts are resolved.

*The sea became calm, the sky became calm
and calm the earth under my feet.*

(The lines remind us of the section on 'three fires' through their rhythm.) The visitors crossed the open door and 'there was *akshate* sprinkled all over the ground.' *Akshate* is not used on the occasion of an anniversary of death. Only grains of rice. This house has now *akshate*. This is not a house of death. The shadow of death has passed and good fortune is in.

The protagonist's peace of mind has filled the earth, sea and the sky.

If the poem, 'Gadiyaradangadiya Munde' (In front of A Clock-Shop) gives body to something abstract, 'Tereda Bagilu', (The Open Door) in a different way, gives body to a 'mystic' experience which is beyond the realm of senses.

Similar is 'The Closed Window,' which is both a canto and a dramatic monologue. Once again, there is a close relationship between death and life in the poem.

But the tone is not as solemn as that of 'Tereda Bagilu' (The Open Door). Nor is the experience as deep as in the other one. The closed window relates both to the dead man and the loud-mouthed wife of the neighbour. It is as if there is an attempt somewhat to peck at the form of death (The dead man has unfulfilled desires and so will come back according to the pall-bearers. According to the neighbour, the dead man's son-in-law too believes it to be true. The neighbour too believes that the dead man exists in some form. 'Make sure of this at least. Let no one dear to you ever touch the window,' he warns. But, what about the man who listens to all this? 'The dead man won't come back.' His statement changes a bit the very next moment: 'Even if he does, he isn't that small to come in through the window.') if the dead man has to come in at all, he will use the open door and not the window. The belief that the window is the only way in is ridiculed in a refined way. It is not only the form of death that is the theme of the poem, it seems to me, but also the nature of belief.

Here, an endless scope for a searching mind.

What shines is the star, what remains is the sky.

Any poem of K.S. Na. is a feast of images normally. This poem is an exception to that rule. The interesting thing is the number of people to whom it relates. The old man's life, it seems, went out through the window; the man who had it closed is the dead man's vulture-like son-in-law. (he swooped down like a vulture; vulture and death are a pair, aren't they?) The narrator is the neighbour. To sum up, it looks as if a ray of rational thinking has entered a chamber of beliefs.

The poem, 'Kumkuma Bhoomi' (The Vermilion Earth) develops through images. (We do not find it in

the latter half of the poem, though). The poem which starts with the image of the earth waiting enthusiastically to bear fruit moves towards the fulfillment which comes from the fusion of nature and man's effort. The vermilion earth smiles in the first stanza; a few drops of rain have fallen as well as the almanac — man's reckoning — had promised. Neither the palace nor the temple is of any avail if the vermilion earth's creativity is to materialise. 'Regal pomp in the deserted palace' — The essence of the palace is gone, but not the pomp. Sand rising to the temple spire? What can the sunken eyes hope to see? Whatever be the lot of the palace and the temple, the working man and the vermilion earth are the eternal truth. The wan one, heavy with child, becomes a symbol of the present carrying the future — an outcome of nature's acts of sensory experiencing and creation. Later, the poem gives us a picture of the Tree of Life full of blooms of human endeavour. ('Here they were, we are told, the ones who signed on stones.') and man's fight against nature, 'who hunted the bison,' 'whose full-grown nails dug up anthills', etc. The poem then moves towards knowledge and detachment and, again, returns to the theme of unity in the lives of man and nature.

*of earth and the snake-like let the red stitches in water
remember the pain born of anguish in the sky.
Sparkling among leaves, let the unfading eyes
set right our blundering steps.*

*Let trees with roots deep down the earth
survive and thrive flowering all the year round!*

The palace and temple which did not grow roots deep down the earth could achieve nothing. But the ones whose lives grew roots are in flower even today. They are the ones who are able to guide us towards life to-

morrow. If men can be like them, the unborn ones will live even after their death. The poem highlights the dignity of man who, unlike the palace and temple, stands shoulder to shoulder with the deathless vermilion earth.

'The Vermilion Earth', 'The Open Door', 'The Magnifying Glass' may be conceived as parts of an epic poem much like Ezra Pound's Cantos. Creation — the bond between light and darkness, between life and death, and between past and present — appears again and again as the theme in these poems. Intense experiences move along smooth rails of meditation without any rhetoric. (How K.S. Na.'s diction stays close to the rhythm of the spoken word but still retains the qualities of both compactness and picturesqueness may be seen in a line like, 'No one here walks with inverted heels.' The poem moves along exploiting the possibilities of meaning of the Kannada words, '*Kannadi* and *bhoota*' (Looking glass and Past/Ghost) and employs the parallel between memories that break through the fences of the mind and the cows that cross the thorny fence

*I know how you feel if what you love to forget
knocks on the door and mounts a raid.*

The protagonist has not understood the image in the mirror when the poem begins. He thinks that there is dirt on the mirror and has done everything he can to remove the film on it. He gets the meaning when he comes to the last stanza within the framework of the poem.

When we read poems like this, we are naturally interested in the process which creates them. The experience of creating a poem is not the same for all

poets. I am talking of 'creating' a poem and Nara simhaswamy has written about the time when a poem gets born. A poem is born when the right time arrives:

*When words take by hand an experience
deeply felt, when heat turns into light,
a poem.*

'Here I am, waiting in the open, for the right tidings to arrive'. (The word the poet uses, '*Vartamana*' means news and the present) The history and the range in terms of the word's meaning are still to be unveiled. The stars have been waiting since the beginning of time. The year is ending. But that is no reason for a hurried birth of a poem.

My preface has grown longer than I had intended. And so I will say a few words about a few poems, thank K.S. Na. and finish my task. He admires Masti's narrative poems. It is not surprising that we feel that we hear Masti's voice here and there. (The line, 'There seems to be a hidden truth in all this here,' is typical Masti.) 'The One Who Asked After My Welfare' is a poem that grows beautifully from a very ordinary thing. The protagonist has not even found out the name of the man who asks after his welfare gently. And so, when he sets out with a garland in hand to find him,

*He isn't there,
hasn't come. How can I ask about someone
I do not know? The market is full even without
the kindly soul who turned my mind to my welfare.*

Thus, an ordinary man ('held an umbrella over my head though no sun shone and searching his pockets for glasses not there,') grows into a powerful presence in the framework of the poem. Many poems in this collection are about ordinary experiences. 'The

Evening Of *Arathi*' doesn't merely suggest the birth of a baby, it also suggests the rebirth of a hurt soul. 'Suspicion' narrates an incident in a leisurely manner, keeping alive the interest till the end. It also gives us a picture of the narrator's nature. His delicate sense of humour shows itself in the last lines of the poem. 'His Birthday' (The fact that he has not even a name is significant) is the picture of the life of a lowly man, who flits about like the little waves of the sea which rise and fall on the shore, whose ledger is closed without his existence or exit ever having come to the notice of anyone. The compassionate tone is in low key but is present throughout the poem. ('Wearing his wife's glasses, he looked at the almanac he had asked her to bring'; 'he came out fully covered in smoke' on his birthday.) 'The Foster Son' is the autobiography of a man who comes to know the truth of his birth and leaves everyone in peace by calmly leaving the house and its riches. The poem has saved itself from excessive sentimentality.

'At The Railway Station' is another poem that I admire. Throughout the poem, a feeling that goes beyond words makes its presence felt through short lines and the use of few words dealing with ordinary details pertaining to travel. The occasion becomes clear from the question and answer. Not only does the situation become clear but also shows how the two results grow together as the poem moves.

*'Is there enough hot water, Meena,
for the child's powdered milk?'
'Hold the child up so I may bless
with a mark on the forehead, Meena.'*

Matching this is

*'Don't walk along with the window,
go, Amma, go.
Let me fold my hands from here,
Amma, bless me from where you are.'*

Descriptions come only in the fifth and the eighth stanzas. The rest seems to be conversation taken straight out of life. We have here two souls unveiling themselves for view without the use of language to bare themselves in a clear-cut situation. This poem is an example of an unusual use of language.

'In *Ashada*, gives us a gentle picture, laced with humour, of people who have no qualms in exhibiting their ignorance. The affection of people who ignore the folded hands of the poet and sing in the voice that God had given them makes him pray that Ashada will soon be over for him and others' — The words seem to spring from his lips.

In recent years K.S.Na. has given us quiet poems which embody subtle sensibilities in a language close in rhythm to the rhythm of the spoken word. The poet who accepted life joyfully has been experimenting and enabled us to experience different dimensions and levels of that life.

The poet's soul is one that opens its eyes wide and thrills when it encounters beauty. Narasimhaswamy's poetry has now stretched its arms towards experiences which are beyond the reach of prose, which are too delicate to be caught in man's words. He is giving us poems which touch the reader's sensibility somewhere, wake him up and eggs him on. He is writing now, keeping the life here against the backdrop of infinite time

and space, of a universe which includes both man and nature with his eyes fixed on the mysteries that are inherent in birth and death and in creation and failure.

When we note the measured pace and seriousness of the poem, 'The Open Door' and the way in which words in 'The Open Door' and 'The Magnifying Glass' suggest the theme and move towards becoming symbols, we realise how K.S. Na.'s richness of imagery which has been his forte from the beginning, is moving towards achieving fulfillment. Not all the poems in the collection are as complex as the ones mentioned above. But they hold a mirror to the many faces of life. Simplicity is no crime, is it?

Narasimhaswamy is senior to me both in literature and in experience. His friendship and courtesy towards me over the last few years have enriched my life. We spent many joyous days together when we toured Kerala some four years ago. I witnessed how the rhythm and music of his poems made an impact even on those who knew no Kannada. He has honoured me by asking for a preface to this collection. He has given me a chance to light a lamp in the temple of his poetry. I am grateful to him. Let the Ganga of his poetry keep the minds of readers green and let its electric power light the imagination of thousands of readers.

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L.S. SESHAGIRI RAO

Translator's Note

Here are my translations of the poems in 'Tereda Bagilu,' a collection of Sri K.S. Narasimhaswamy's Kannada poems, which won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1978.

Narasimhaswamy is a distinctive and inimitable voice in modern Kannada poetry. It was a pleasure translating his poems into English. I am grateful to the Sahitya Akademi for having asked me to do it.

I have read most of these translations to the poet. I hope it was not mere politeness which made him say that he liked them.

Padma, my partner in most of the translations I have done from Kannada into English, has helped me on this project too. Her comments and suggestions have been invaluable and I thank her heartily.

I am obliged to Sri M.V. Venkatesha Murthy who looked through the proofs and offered some very helpful suggestions.

May, 2001
Bangalore-41

RAMACHANDRA SHARMA

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A BOUQUET OF SONGS —

The Glory Of Seasons

The Vermilion Earth

Poems

The Vermilion Earth

What smiled on digging was the smooth vermilion earth
and at that has stopped the work with the hoe.
As the almanac had said, a few drops of rain fell as well
but the hands are full with running sweat.

The shadow of a horseman at the change of guards
and regal pomp in the deserted palace.
Sand rising up to the temple spire
and before the sunken eyes an empty street.

Under a canopy of worry that every seed sown
did not yield crop, a golden spark.
Ghosts of clichéd words though no seeds were sown —
Whose rhetoric will win the day?

Heavy with child, wan and sighing, tomorrow
rests its back on anything within reach.
One night's ecstasy and many months of pain,
but waves of light when the child arrives.

Is it a boy or a girl? Naming can wait till after birth.
This is no time for learnt words, cowardly words.
Let the child grow into a self of its own,
feeding on mother's milk, eyes aglow.

Here they were, we are told, the ones
who signed on stones and hunted the bison,
whose full-grown nails dug up anthills
and felled the eagles flying high.

Perfect beings whose lives were open,
radiant artists with daring hearts,
chests bared to falling rain and blowing wind —
At peace, the first-worshipped, the natural ones.

Planting a flag on every mountain peak,
raising the voice of the first ever morning,
they left home when evening strewed glowing
embers, never to return even after many a dawn.

Let the newborn grow up, strong like them!
Let a full-blooded song be heard! Let the red
of earth and the snake-like stitches in water
remember the pain born of anguish in the sky.

Sparkling among leaves, let the unfading eyes
set right our blundering steps.
Let trees with roots deep down the earth
survive and thrive flowering all the year round!

The Open Door

The evening arrived. So did you, as well.
How did you manage to catch a bus
on a market day? You shouldn't have come
so late in the night, you know. Tell me,
when is the ceremony for naming your child?
How is she? When is she coming back?
She will come back, I know. But when?
The paddy must have been threshed by now,
and so, the cart should be free....
But, there may be no bullocks, for all I know.
The reason I ask is Father's anniversary
which falls again on Saturday next. Forget the paddy,
let's have banana leaves at least. Nice, nice
that you are here. Is everyone well at home?

At last, the rain has stopped and there's a nip
in the air. Come inside. See if there's any coffee
left in the thermos flask. Look at you,
So many clothes! And a shawl on top!
My goodness! Are you a monkey or a bear?
Fold your star-spangled umbrella
and leave it in the corner.
Your slippers, they are safe here.
This old chair and this mat — Are they both
dirty? What is here is dirt
and what enters is dirt too.

You haven't heard my words, have you?
Is it my fault that my house is right on the edge
of the street? Is it wrong that the door is open?
I myself am an open door, you know,
an all-weather port. You did the right thing,
coming here, my good man!
That makes two of us, if nothing else.
There's still half an hour before the meal
from the hotel arrives... And so,
let me tell you a story while we wait.
No, not a story, but just an account
of what I saw in front of the open door,
what I did since morning...
Listen.

What a thing to say!
'Is the mind a fig to peel off and display?'
Who asked you to open your soul
and put it on show? You may have to wait
for death to come before you can do it.
But it is in our hands to take off the shirt
and so, drop the load on your head
and shed the skin!

I wasn't fully awake this morning
when the newspaper boy arrived
and brought the news.
An accident was reported on the third page
in which my namesake on this street
had been run over by a lorry and died.
(Don't say that the news is nothing but prose.
Remember, people may die even in prose.)
He was not much in the news when alive,
but everyone came to know of his death.
It was as if the sky fell on my head

even though I knew that I wasn't dead.
Still, I stole a peep into the mirror,
shook my legs, stretched my limbs,
got up, walked to the door
and hammered a nail on the threshold.
I looked at my clenched fist
wanting to wash off the stain on my name
from someone else's death.
Wrapping myself in a dhoti,
I rushed to have a bath even as it was time
for the tap to go dry. Having had a Ganga-dip
in the little water that remained, I lighted a wick
dipped in ghee for the dead one,
offered God some stolen flowers and prayed.
A gecko on the wall glared at me
but I didn't wait for it to tell my future.

Rushing for life, I barged into the neighbour's.
I rang the newspaper and asked for the Editor.
'Go ahead, he is there,' stammered the girl.
'Salutations to you, Good Sir, not one,
but two—one surely for you and the other
for the world to which you sent my name.
You aren't at fault in this, it's true,
but there is a problem with the news, Good Sir.

I call upon the Sun and the Moon to bear witness —
(There's no need anymore to call the Moon)

I swear with only the Sun as my witness
that I am still alive. Will you do me the favour
of inserting a correction, Sir?

'Is that so? I'm sorry. Fine. We shall have it done
tomorrow and tell the world that you are alive.'
How detached! How consoling! Rama, Rama!

Instead of a knife, child, a dagger.
Dead scared remembering the letters
of condolence, draped in black saree
and wearing flowers of tears,
I ran straight to the post office and looked in
to see blows landing on cards and letters.
When an innocent postman came out,
I stopped him, told him of my plight
and said, 'Please hold back whatever comes
for me till evening tomorrow. Let it lie here!
I will collect them later. Do me this favour.
All of us— my wife, our children and I—
will be grateful to you.' I don't know
what happened to him.
'You must be out of your mind,' he said
and hit the road, shaking his head.

On my way back, stepping on a thorn,
I started bleeding and remembered her.
She had been away for a month to the day.
Neither paddy nor she had come.
They are all the same, these wives
who have parental homes...
Let her come back when she will,
I told myself. But, do understand
what follows in the context of today.
I sent Subbu off by the first bus in the morning
even as a crow cawed. They will be here
latest by late night, I hope.
Having done whatever I could,
here I am waiting in front of the open door...
'Saptamam daiva chintanam.'

It's good for me you didn't run into him
in the village, it's good for me
you came here not knowing anything.
Whatever happens is for our good.

Where were we?

The sun was burning hot when I reached home.

Though I had lost my head, I still had
one that ached and a gnawing hunger
besides. And, thanks to the breeze,
wafts of food spiced with asafoetida
from the house next door.

Do you know who came to the door
when it was too late even for the hotel meal?

Like the three Sacred Fires,
like the three Tenses of Time,
like the merits of three generations personified,
came three hungry men clad in *madi*.*

The door was open, remember,
and they came straight into the house.

It being the weekly day off for the maid,
there was no *rangoli** in front of the door
perhaps misleading them here!

Or, it might have been the fact
that roads in the city have been spruced up
with saplings planted on either side,
and flowers grown on traffic islands
and fixed dentures on old gaping drains
making the city an unfamiliar place.

madi : Clean clothes worn on holy or religious occasions.

rangoli : Ornamental lines and patterns.

Having peeled off the skin of the earth,
they have laid some water pipes
and left after tying a piece of red rag.
No wonder that one loses one's way.
They took a wrong turn perhaps
and came here to the wrong house.
These were my thoughts
while they too had their doubts:
'Where have we come, where are we bound?'
Toeing the mat, they looked at the clock.
The deer was famished and so was the tiger.
I stopped them as they turned
towards the open door.
When a little time had been spent
exchanging the usual courtesies,
what was hidden in the well till then surfaced.
The number of the house they wanted
was eleven, the same as mine,
but it was on a different street, the one behind!
I pointed out the window on that house
from where I stood, recounted my lineage
touching my ears and fell on their feet.
'May you live a hundred years!'
Chanting the sacred words of mantras,
they left giving their blessings,
the unexpected guests
who were like the three Sacred Fires,
like the three Tenses of Time.

Fifty years gone
and fifty still remaining.
Not bad, I felt, considering my state

and got on to my feet.

The sea became calm, the sky became calm

and calm the earth under my feet.

There was *akshate**

sprinkled all over the ground

as I watched them pass through the open door.

Shantih, Shantih, Shantih.

The Closed Window

I didn't know before there was a window in the wall
you are now looking at. It was later that I saw
the frame plastered with red soil
and the dust of years on the cracked pane.

The window had been closed when I moved
into the house. Do you know what the neighbour
said when I asked? 'The man who built it
lived here then. A good man, strong of build.

One day he died where he sat, suddenly,
quietly. It is no lie that he died
under an evil star. Some think that his life
went out through that window there.

His son-in-law swooped down, like a vulture,
with his barren wife as soon as he got the wire.
He too cried a little, set up a procession
and came here straight after lighting the pyre.

He stood facing the only window in the room
where the man had died. (He had heard
the pall-bearers say the old man with desires
unfulfilled would come back through the window.)

So he plastered it, nailed it, kicked it,
messed it up and left for home thundering.
The door of that room remained the same
but the front door was left open to let the house.

Did you have to move in here with kids in tow?
Rotten luck but it's your own choice. Be it so,
but make sure of this at least. Let no one
dear to you ever touch that window.'

I smiled as I listened to the hen-pecked man,
his words in one ear and out the other.
It was this man that I suspected,
not the one who had died.

The dead man has no place here if he comes back,
we are already eleven counting the cradle.
The dead man won't come back. Even if he does,
he isn't that small to come in through the window.

This is a house, not a shop. She can feed us only
if I venture out every day and work.
One door is enough for our coming and going.
No need for the window which is closed.

There are other windows if need be. Can open them
for sparrows to come in and go, for slogans
from the street, for welcoming the seasons
and for small deals the door doesn't know about.

Not content with what comes through the door,
we want some more through the window!
There seems to be a hidden truth in all this here.
Through the closed window, even now, I hear

The incessant chatter from the neighbour's wife.
You are looking at the closed window
and asking who closed the window and why.
But I do not have any satisfactory reply.

Here, an endless scope for a searching mind.
What shines is the star, what remains is the sky.

Suspicion

Why are you so upset because someone said something? There was no talk of you at all.
No ear-lobes, but you looked for an ear-ring —
Your suspicion makes no sense at all!

What happened was something else. I was there.
The preamble was the same: the fence pushed aside,
the wall raised, rain in February this year
and what there was to do for the coming elections

and so on. Then the Joisa — it was his turn —
gave us his report. You don't know it. Listen
to what I say. Imagine he is talking now:
It was last Saturday night and I was deep

in sleep. She came very close to me and said,
'Get up, there is some noise in the backyard.'
"Who can be there at this hour? A bandicoot,
I'm sure," I said. Patting her back, I sent her away.

Got up in the morning and checked the backyard.
A feast for the eyes! Not a single fruit left
in the sweet banana bunch but peeled skin
heaped on the stone wall around the well!

Not cutting the bunch as it would hurt the plant
even though it had taken a golden hue,
not getting up but pulling up the blanket
over the head when she poked me awake

and talked of the noise, were my mistakes.
And so, he has punished me, the one who ate
what he could and took away the rest.
What he had kindly left behind was no rubbish —

can burn it to make *akshata*.* The pain at the end
was that he had left behind a single slipper
on the thorny aubergine in his haste to flee.
Even that is gone — the termite hasn't my tolerance!

This is all that happened. There's nothing to forgive.
I shall forget it. The thief must have forgotten it
by now. "I thought I saw him walk along this street
in a new pair of slippers." He ended his tale.

That was all. No name came up. You weren't
in town, that day, were you? You are right,
my eyes aren't sharp as before. It's only now
that I see the new pair of slippers on your feet!

akshata : A paste of which a sectarian mark is worn on the forehead.

The Third Suggestion

When the suit about property which went
to court was settled, I got full rights
over the house in the old village.

Though I have no interest in the affair,
let my lawyer uncle cum my father-in-law
get full credit for winning the case!

Bundling the mattress, I patted my wife's back.
Didn't have to wait long for the bus. Pushing
and dozing, I reached the place at noon.

What I saw wasn't like what the letter said.
Was it my eyes, I wondered.
As I kept gazing, my glasses perspired.

In short, how could I tell my wife that an idiot
had been found to pay the property tax
on the house? Sick with worry,

I folded my hands and bade farewell to the door;
it was my good luck, I caught a lorry!
Though I had no worry at all

about letting or selling the house or living there,
I couldn't sleep thinking of the repairs.
Some said that I would find a way

if only I had pride. That's the only thing
I have! What I lack are two things —
Cash and experience.

How could I raise funds? No hope of a loan
when there was still the old one I had taken
to go to the court. Let me see if and when I win

a lakh or half in lottery. Let me now come
straight to my experience! I asked all the people
on my street! There was no unanimity at all!

'It is cheaper to buy a new house than repair
the old one,' one advised. Another said,
'The new house is no match even to a pillar

in the old one'. 'Forget repairing
the old house or building a new one.
Go on living as a tenant,' was the third advice.

*On The Evening Of Arathi**

Having taken vows in the name of many Gods,
they took timely care of her with home-made drew.
To the end of her saree was tied the *akshate*
the best among the local Brahmins had given.

The bustle of *arathi* from this evening — the saree,
a matching blouse, the shine of the gold bangle,
chakkuli,* flowers, fruits, the beetle leaf, perfume,
and rituals. Sitting in the heat of lamps

was difficult for the pregnant one. With all that,
her mother's memory too. Two elderly *muttaides**
got up, smiled as they put *kumkuma** on her forehead
and sang. A silver rupee fell on the platter.

Ash from the incense stick dropped on the aunt
sitting against the wall. The buck-toothed one
hollered saying it was the sparks. Before she spoilt
the feast, they gave her the *bagina** and sent her away.

-
- Arathi : The ceremony of waving a platter with a burning
lamp round an idol or a person's face.
chakkuli : A crunchy snack
muttaide : A married lady whose husband is alive
kumkuma : Vermilion
bagina : Gift

Then the *hase** was empty and the men came in.
Wiping her face, she went into her room
and changed her saree in the light of a dull lamp.
Why did the pregnant one at that moment

remember that these very people who moved
around busily at the time of her wedding called her
a 'barren one' later in haste? She had pretended
that she did not know they had gone to bring home

another girl and had come back empty-handed
from a distant place. Her acting had paid off
and hence this care. Of what avail is being peevish
and impetuous? There is a time for everything.

Her time will also come an hour or two
after she has suffered the pain, as rice separates
from gruel and when by her side a new life
stirs and brings a smile which covers her cheeks.

hase : A raised seat, usually ornamented.

The Magnifying Glass

I stood gazing at the mirror and sighed
not making any sense of what I saw.
'For me this is a dust-covered board.
Clearer than this mirror is the wall,' I thought.

Wondering whether I could remove
that cataract on the eye of the glass,
I rubbed it hard with a cloth. The image
didn't budge. It was, when defeated, I washed

my hands that you arrived. Are you saying
that what was unclear already has now become
complex? Looking at the set unmoving face
of the clock, searching for today in an old

almanac, fearing the framed elder's gaze,
caressing the infant's head in the cradle
and crossing the fallen fences that divide
the tenses, are you wondering what the mail

has brought for me in the morning?
Suddenly I remembered the diary lost
in the fallen fence a decade ago.
I am furious with them for their shoddy work.

Don't spread rumours that it is the devil's
handiwork. This house has had its *shanti*^{*}
performed before you were born and no one here
walks with inverted heels. I am here, aren't I?

Go ahead and touch me to make sure.
Not that I don't know your predicament.
What can you do? Despite the fence you erect,
the stone door you shut and the thorns

you place, the street-cow unfailingly strays
into your backyard, I know— It's the taste
of the greens and the banana leaf, you see.
Let me not go on about the fences.

I know how you feel if what you love to forget
knocks on the door and mounts a raid.
I told you of the morning mail, didn't I?
I kept it on the window before the mirror

and forgot all about it. Do you see
what fills the mirror now?
Nothing more than that one thing—
the image of the envelope!

shanti : A propitiatory rite to avert evil.

The Foster Son

You know that I don't take after my mother.
'His father didn't look like this one,'
she is known to have said, though I don't
remember. When I think of whom I resemble,

I hear someone whispering from our chairs
and beds. However deep I dug to find out
why it was so, I hadn't been able to reach
the roots. After the rains a week ago,

a ship, long since sunk, had come floating
in a moment's dream: And in it, a child,
dead but a prototype of the mother here.
It was clear from a photograph taken

when I was a child that I was unlike that one.
Does it mean that I am an imported one here,
in this house for which I slaved, won praise
and was about to announce that I would marry

the girl she chose, believing her to be my mother?
That was when you, her long-lost cousins — Where
were you all? — came by cart from a distant place.
You didn't come, but swooped down, to claim



the house knowing that she had built a storey.
Am I in your way? Forgive me. It was only yesterday
that I heard one of you sitting on the pyol letting out
the secret of my birth after pocketing a half-smoked

beedi: "Twenty years ago, this woman, the owner
of this house was pregnant a seventh time,
having lost all her children. A difficult birth it was
and she lost her consciousness as soon as

she went into labour. Again a still birth.
If she were to know, there would be another death,
feared the husband. Prostrating before the midwife
behind the curtain, he begged her to do something

and save them. No one knows what transpired
then... When she came to, the mother looked around
and felt the infant. It's only now that I learnt it,"
said the man lighting the beedi stub again.

I knew who I was then. This is not my home
and I am not born into its wealth. Let me say it
myself and leave. Not out of fear, believe me.
There will be peace for one and all

if I were to depart the same way I came in.
Let there be no further search
into my lineage, now that this woman
here knows the secret of my birth.

She cried a lot when she came to know
but let me go when I stood my ground.
Isn't this then a celebration of my freedom?
Anyway you have come, my closest kin.

As this is a house with enough property,
you will look after her very well, I know.
You will also help her forget me
very soon, I am sure.

Isn't it time that I left? Let me leave
thanking you all for your help, and cross
the bridge as the sun goes down, seeking
the threshold of the house of my birth.

The One Who Asked After My Welfare

Every day of the week, he has met me,
held an umbrella over my head though no sun
shone and searching his pockets for glasses
not there and asked gently after my welfare.

Never once telling me who he was,
(I was at fault too: I never asked.)
he has told me many things and I have
stood like a pillar listening to him.

My concern is not about what he told me,
but about his question regarding my welfare.
After all, there's nothing wrong with his asking,
though twice a week would have been enough.

(Why does he ask every time he sees me?)
I grew suspicious by the weekend.
The ones at home will make no sense of it
and I can't talk to my friends about it.

The entire *Ashada** this year has been like this.
Whatever I touch turns into a thorn.
No relief unless I see him and so, garland
in hand, I have set out on getting up

seeking him in every shop. He isn't there,
hasn't come. How can I ask about someone
I do not know? The market is full even without
the kindly soul who turned my mind to my welfare.

Ashada : a month in our calendar year.

At The Railway Station

'Where are you, Meena?'

Right here, Amma.

'Cradle, case and the mattress?'

All here, Amma.

'It seems you have forgotten something.'

Forget? How could I, Amma?

'You look as if you are recalling something.'

Do I? That's the way I look.

'Is there enough hot water, Meena,
for the child's powdered milk?'

Enough and more, Amma—

(Some in my eyes too.)

'Hold the child up so I may bless
with a mark on the forehead, meena.

What's this? The child's body is hot
just as you are about to leave.'

The body of the train is shivering
frightened by the light,
the ringing bell, the whistle
and the waving flag.

Don't walk along with the window,
go, Amma, go.

Let me fold my hands from here,
Amma, bless me from where you are.

The cry of the engine is heard
all along the rails:

'Where are you, Meena,
where are you?'

In the writhing smoke and the sparks
the giant wheels roll:

Here I am, Amma,
right here.

'Shut the window, Meena,
the spark will blow in.'

I have shut the window, Amma,
so that no spark comes in.

The Evening Song

After having flaunted around on horse-back for thirty
years and been called a 'king' in three districts,
I have now retired and come home smiling —
Why are you standing outside the house like this?

A watchman for this room when yesterday
all the government stuff was taken away?
Come, sit here on the chair from your wedding day
and leave the letter you have come to give.

Yesterday's garland — Poor thing, it has faded.
The fruits may rot, give them away soon.
I don't deserve this gift of a walking stick —
Take it to produce *savige*.

Don't be shy. Say something or sing, if you can.
It's only now that I see what a beauty you are.
Love comes to every one in youth, but I say thanks,
as it has come to us by the second post.

Let them who said, 'This king is mad about horses,
has no thoughts for home,' come and see

what my home will be like from tomorrow.
After all, what did the poor horse do?

Only once did it throw me off its back
on to the fence. You haven't heard of it, I know,
as I spoke only of my victories. Come close
and listen: When I found the next day

a newly-married couple and proud, riding
a bicycle helter-skelter, in front of my court
(the boy lost to the world in the girl's embrace),
I was furious and called the police.

I am now sorry for that day's impetuous act.
Forgive me, please. What bothers you now?
It is a handsome pension that I shall get —
Enough for us and our son.

A gem of a boy, let him come home from across
the seas with laurels. Your brother's daughter
is there waiting. We shall have them married —
Let them go to Ooty in a new car like children

of a royal house. I certainly won't stop them.
Before I knew words had rolled off like pearls;
Ooty sparkling among the Nilgiri hills! We too
had processions at weddings in those days,

but just around here. Not as far as Ooty. Take us,
for instance — It was later that I had a position.
That was when you came too. A horse as well
and then a car till we had to sell it at half its price.

Why didn't the thought of Ooty strike us then?
Or now, when free? It was only yesterday that I thought
of the place. When I picked up the phone at once
and asked the travel pundits in confidence,

they said they would find out and write to me.
What you brought in now as something
that tumbled out of the second mail may be
their letter. Should have opened and read it first.

Give it to me: "It's the season for races in Ooty.
Everyone is going. No vehicle can be arranged
for you. Take the night bus with its many eyes."
Did you hear it? I shall reply to it saying,

"It is unthinkable that I, who rode on horses
for thirty years and called a king in three districts,
take my wife to Ooty by bus." Let's go there
when our daughter-in-law steps in with good luck

in her foot and a new car comes into the house,
opens its door and calls us — For such a thing
to happen, the boy should come back first.
Let's wait for him who is now beyond the seas.

His Birthday

Before he could pick up the second book
after having read one, when his wife
herself came and said, 'It's your birthday
today,' and when he was assailed with doubts,

how could the morning sun shine? Wanting
then his glasses, he switched on the light.
When the bulb cried saying the river was dry,
he wiped its tears with his handkerchief.

Wearing his wife's glasses, he looked at
the almanac he had asked her to bring.
'You are right,' he said and sighing,
accepted her good wishes for the day.

He opened all the windows. Not bad,
he thought looking at himself in the mirror.
The next door girl's smile flashed over the fence
was not for him, he told the wall.

Thinking it was his creditors, he felt scared
to open the door when it shook at that moment.
Relieved when he knew it was the milkman,
(His wife was busy) he brought in the milk.

He marched out of the house with a bag to the market. No bus stopped for him and he walked the way. A victim to inflation, he had no money left but the bag wasn't full.

On his way back, there was applause in the pandal and buntings all along. Elated, he went to buy a lottery ticket but felt deflated when he saw the black flag.

Castor oil waited for him in the smoke inside as the sound of bangles called. Yawning, he said, 'Check if the tank is full of water,' thereby curbing her eagerness.

She should have read the newspaper and known that it was the day for cleaning and the taps would be dry. Boiling water in the cauldron, but little cold water at the bottom of the tank.

No water but the water meter was running. 'Thanks,' he said and replaced the lid. No way out he knew and so ran with the pot like a shuttle between the well and the tank.

'Come, it's late and the tank is full.' He looked at her as she said it and went inside. As the water flowed till it reached the garden he came out fully covered in smoke.

He too has children and grandchildren and they have been his concern since morning. What are their plans? They shouldn't come now, there will be problems all along the rails.

Relatives are here in their bungalows
and cars. Far apart. It is different with friends —
An invitation will do. But this poor soul
has no time to ask them to come.

No gifts, no givers. The clothes he wore
are white and he is happy. Simple cooking
of two dishes for one on diet. With them,
the day's special, *payasa*^{*}, made with jaggery.

He is at peace thinking that you can't have
a simpler birthday than this.
There are many whose birthday it is today —
He is just a name on the list.

payasa : A sweet dish

At The Birth Of A Poem

Eyes which can't be opened ask from behind
the bamboo blind, 'Is the poem born?'
'Is anything lost if we wait for a day more?'
was all that I said from the corner of my lips.

Having culled the experience, the right words
not having come, I stood waiting.
I dreamt of strong lines, past all rhetoric,
moving along in a natural flow.

When words take by hand an experience
deeply felt, when heat turns into light,
a poem. Here I am, waiting in the open,
for the right tidings to arrive.

I didn't know before that there's a price tag
on every word in such a shop as this...
Every word has a history of its own,
but I didn't go down to reach its root.

Waiting is not a problem. Stars have waited
like this since the beginning of time.
I have to do a hundred and one things
here even as a poem is born.

Unmindful of my problems, Paridhavi*
is rushing headlong to its wintry end.
Can I give a desired shape to this formless
feeling and see it off before a new day dawns?

Paridhavi : 42nd year in our cycle of 60 years.

A Love Letter

Knowing or not knowing that you are away,
relatives have come to visit us from many states.
Tears and fights in the attic to which water
doesn't rise and the humiliation of my not
having got back the clothes you gave
the washerman. The garden of poetic imagination
has vanished with the pen I got as a present
at my wedding. And your decision, a minute
before leaving, that I should pay the tailor
for having brought your blouse, wrong-sized, stitched
for someone else. In such a changed state,
(In the letter you sent yesterday you forgot to stamp),
you ask, 'How is your health?' You should ask, shouldn't you?
I sent you away so that you could ask.

Am I the price of goods in the market
to soar because my better half caught
the midnight train in such tearing hurry?
Or an airplane to land with a snag?
I have remained the same as I was
before we got married less than a year ago.
How nice the cold water to drink and bathe in

now that you aren't here in summer!
Lunch and refreshment — as usual
in Krishnamandira where no *gopis** are to be found!

And then there is my job — from eleven
till half past five, taking into account the travel
both ways. It is evening after the horses in the clock
have run away, when the ones that came
in the morning roll down the staircase like pearls
and disappear, when the queue at the stand
where the bus doesn't stop lengthens.
It is then that problems begin.

What is there for me to do at home if I go early?
Evenings are the hardest in life. Each one
has to find a solution which suits his taste.
You know that I love acting and watching plays —
I had gone to watch one last evening and its theme
was interesting enough. I could hear the screams
of bottles in the side wings when the curtain
came down in the interval between acts.

When the curtain went up again,
golden light, set to music seemingly sweet,
hit the lotus heart of the dark stage like a meteor.
Broken chairs and pandemonium as the Princess
threw her handkerchief at the spectators. The name
of the play itself was 'The Breaking of Chairs!'
Not able to stay till the end, I came home
to find my body feeling warm because it is summer.

gopis : Krishna's female companions in his boyhood and youth.

I lay down but couldn't go to sleep, my Princess.
It may be snowing in Kashmir but it's enough
here if the ashes of kama* were to get cold.

Don't say the letter is boring and throw it
into the fire. Read it when no one is around
and you will know what it's all about.
The postman's job is just to deliver it.
Take good care of your health. Don't hurry back.
And there is no need for you to reply
tomorrow itself either. It is customary
to kiss a letter— I leave it to your sweet will!
Do this much now: I have enclosed
a handkerchief for you with this.
Please accept it with all my love and gratitude
without reading much into the act.

kama : desire, love, lust. Also the God of Love

In Ashada *

It is not that all visitors to the house are like this.
There is no rule saying that you should stop them,
find out why they have come and then
enter into conversation with them. I did not know

the ones who called yesterday. It did not
turn out to be the courtesy call I thought it was.
They had a lot to say. By evening, not knowing
that a poem which appeared in a weekly

decades ago was mine, they praised another poet
living on the same street. When it turned dark,
I got up and send them off with thanks.
Came in, lay down but could not sleep.

And in the morning it was the turn of these ones.
They had come looking for a bridegroom
(forgetting the nubile girls in this house).
Having heard the preamble, she said from inside

the house, 'We should not be speaking of this
in *Ashada*.' The visitors agreed. Before saying
'We will be back,' they put my name on an old song
sung at weddings by the bride's folk and sang it

in the voice that God had given them even when
I folded my hands and said that it was not mine.
I have come home now, not stopping anywhere,
having stayed with them till they caught the bus.

I am still here where I was before the evening
yesterday, wishing that *Ashada* will be over
soon for me and others and willing to wait
for a few days more for *Shravana** to arrive.

Shravana : A month of our year which follows *Ashada*.

A Bouquet Of Songs-

The Glory Of Seasons

Foreword

Time past, time present and time ahead — all are time.
There are six seasons in a year, the boy is saying.
For each season, its own form, tune, feeling and beat —
Varying depths in the water of a stream.

The wheel of time turns and the wind roars as it rolls.
Anklets jingle and steps cast shadows all along the road.
Half joy, half sorrow and face open to the sky and a child
holding the end of the mother's saree all along the road.

Life gets more complex and there is joy in winning
even as, like a wheel, the year turns all along the road.
The year, a poem of six seasons and six pages
has changing tunes and changing beats all along the road.

The hill stands watching and the flowing stream sings
as a bird calls sweetly from behind a leaf all along the road.
A thousand hued blooms, gold in the heart of the
evening cloud
and a sparkling gem in the eye of the star all along the road.

Spring

Cool scented air blew around
and the singing of bees began.
Like a river the colours of flowers flowed —
*Chaitra, Vaishaka** — it is now the Spring.

As the tender fingers of gentle Spring opened the eyes
of the bud to make it bloom, and as the garden,
newly sprouted, laughed in scents of varying flames
under the cover of the morning sunshine,

as the mango, dressed in green and cool
on the eyes and shining barely a month ago,
is now clad in red and angry, blazing
like the fire of separation from the beloved,

as the koel perches on the tree top and sings,
mixing pain and pleasure,
as cool breeze, gentle like an infant's breath,
wipes tears from the eyes of the hungry and poor,

I stand entranced in the shade and listen,
my love, to your song of the birth of a new year
and mimic, on the flute fashioned from a wild bamboo,
the buzz of the bee as it circles the flower.

O, my tender Spring, love springing from the heart
of the earth, you are the door of shoots the new year
opens. O, joy of being when it is neither biting cold
nor burning hot, my love, my lovely one!

Summer

The beauty of the rich Spring has faded.
The burning sun has opened the door of sighs
and along the street moves hot air.
*Jyeshtha, Ashada**— Summer is here.

In the hot air the mid-day Summer sun breathes,
the tired rose is bare on the bush.
The tank is dry, now mire, and confused
the fish as the speechless sky watches from above.

All around, the cattle look up for feed as a bed
of dry grass spreads in the vacuous air.
No head nods even if the koel and parrot sing —
Dust from the cart rises to the boulder's head.

A dry stream, and beyond, oil-mill turns,
the whip above holding the life of the aged ox.
The mid-summer day is the sun's sword edge
and all night is woven a saree of empty dreams.

Life goes on bearing the burning sun.
From even under the sound of Veena strings
you can hear the drum. Words of pity everywhere —
Go stand under a leafless tree if there is one.

The Rains

Water filled in the eyes of the sky
and rain knocked on every door.
As the dream of the ploughed land takes shape;
*Shravana, Bhadrapada**— it is the season of rains.

As clouds gathered and slapped their thighs,
it is lightning with a clap of thunder.
The tiny infant, cheeks trembling,
clutches its mother's saree's end.

As clouds ran trampling over the heads of distant hills
And desire strummed the strings of a fierce instrument,
a raging fight of a flock of clouds with sharp horns ensued
and their heavy udders reached down to the roofs.

Wind packed with rain drops rushed into the ears.
The tall palm was humbled and the grove bent down
to the earth. Kicking up the dust, the wind wandered
everywhere and the pouring rain washed the earth.

Cool was the street lamp like a mirror
washed clean as it shone,
recalling the radiance of the first morning
when the earth was born.

Autumn

The night blinded the eye like a mirror
as the eyes of the stars glistened
and cool was the smile of the full moon.
Aashvayuja, Karthika — it is Autumn.

Autumn, the queen of seasons, wears stars-beads in her hair
and an apparel of sapphire blue. An admirer of poets, she is
the Goddess in the heart of a flowerless garden as it
meditates,
a benign forest deity who sprinkled turmeric on the
green leaf's edge.

In the star-dust of the endless blue of the cloudless sky
she casts a side glance as she spreads cool moonlight
on the peaceful edges of the dustless flowerless fields
and the quiet elegance of eyes brimming with joy.

'I'll wash your eyes and line them with black to take
away the gloom.
Come in now and see the lovely life I have for you.'
Singing, the golden Autumn, the beauty among seasons.
Came along
lanes and streets playing upon the swinging yellow
ears of corn.

Aashvayuja, Karthika : Months of our year.

Winter

Margashira, Pushya— It is *Hemanta** now
and the day dawns on the frosty street.

*Magha, Phalgun**— Here is *Shishira**
and the body shivers even under a blanket.

O, winds of cold Winter,
don't make our lives shudder.
Don't open your red eyes in anger,
eager to wage a war.

O, cold winds of Winter,
don't fix the sharp arrow on the bow.
In your haste to win everything,
don't sing the song of death.

Foggy veils of winter
you deceive our eyes.
Shaking plants and trees
you put their essence to test.

The eyes are sad watching
the waterless sights of Winter.
Standing in the freezing cold,
one fears to look around.

Margashira, Pushya, Magha, Phalgun : Months of our year.

Hemanta, Shishira : Seasons of the year.

Dull-looking, the moon wanders
around in the winter's white sky above,
Settling down in a warm corner,
he tells us an endless tale.

Afterword

As gentle Spring says goodbye,
Summer says it has arrived.
As the burning heat of Summer dies,
the season of rains rushes in.

After the rains comes Winter
stepping in on its white feet.
*Hemantha** and behind it *Shishira**—
Time plays on the Veena strings.

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Therword

As words change, they grow
different, and a new word
is the better part of a new
the reason of things is

After the word comes, when
it is in its right place,
it is the best of all things,
it is the best of all things,
it is the best of all things

—

APPENDIX

About Some Of The Poems Here

The success that Narasimhaswamy achieves in the poem, *Tereda Bagilu*, (*The Open Door*) in forcing the Kannada idiom to give expression to his private world is truly amazing. At the start of the poem, the poet is thinking of his wife who has gone to her parents. Such loneliness as his would have been, in the previous era, an occasion for expressions of the pain of separation and thrilling romantic imagination. Here, it sets the middle-aged poet into a solemn mood and enhances his feeling of loneliness. The day's paper carries the news of the death of his namesake living on the same street. When the poet rings the Editor, he says he would insert the necessary correction. His tone is one of unconcern. The poet's helplessness increases. His mind tries to perform some rites which would cleanse his mind of the pollution of death. It is the time when taps run dry. He is not at peace though he has a bath with the little Ganga water that is there in the house. Meanwhile, three uninvited men arrive like 'The three Sacred Fires, like the three Tenses of Time' under the

impression that it was the poet who had died. The act of death is reenacted when they are informed of the truth. Though everything seems to return to normal, the consciousness of death sinks deeper into the soul. In addition to a living man's death turning out to a kind of drama, the poem becomes a medium for the poet to look at death a third time in a purely subjective fashion. Instead of an extremely subjective experience achieving universality by its intensity, it impresses us by becoming the experience of every man by its humour, ritualistic observance and absurdity. This poem which shows death's tragedy, fun and absurdity, all at the same time, may also be viewed as the poet's attempt to look at love, separation and loneliness in their extreme form. Another curious factor: Our attention is focussed on the theme instead of the poet's style and imagery.

P. Lankesh

In his preface to *'Akshara Hosa Kavya'*

The rhythmic structure of poems like 'The Open Door,' 'The Closed Window' and the 'Magnifying Glass' is worth studying. The poems use a diction which does not stray too far away from prose but use the conversational structure, the crisp rhythm of sentence typical of Kannada and the slow gait and variety of prose. (One may look at the first lines of the poem, 'The Open Door.') The diction succeeds in reaching the reader straight

away without either the words or rhythm becoming heavy. It thus becomes the right vehicle to convey the solemnity of death which reaches out its arm all through life and the nature of man who carries on without ever being seemingly conscious of its presence. What appear on first sight to be the details of a polite conversation of a man, who has sent his wife to her parents in the village, has with a visitor from there grow along with the poem to be a serious meditation on death which plays games with life and is inseparable from it. The poem develops without allowing one to talk separately of its rhythm, figurative speech, image and symbol. The rhythm of the poem is a mark of the poet's unique achievement.

G.S. Siddhalingiah

In '*Chandana*'

The experience narrated in the poem, 'The Man Who Asked After My Welfare' itself becomes an image because of the expanse of its significance. The poem shines in an amazing manner from among K.S.Na.'s recent experiments by its sheer lack of any ornamentation. Its simplicity adds a new dimension to our concept of poetry.

The poem grows from being a mere question into a living entity, thereby becoming a part of the reader's inner self. The effect of the poem is in making both the

ordinary and the unique ones among us to reach our hidden selves. A certain force which is beyond the reach of everyone's consciousness asks him after his welfare. It is natural that confusion follows when such an inquiry ends. It is possible that it is this force which some call the divine element or the good in them. It may be the feeling of benediction or the force of thought. The poem has the power to invoke any of these forms of the force in the reader and hence its uniqueness.

Ka. Vem. Rajagopal

In '*Chandana*'





Kikkeri Subbarao Narasimhaswamy (b.1915) popularly known as K.S.Na. is a poet and prose writer of eminence in Kannada. Although Narasimhaswamy is famous as the poet of youthful and tender love by his remarkable *Mysore Mallige* ('Jasmine of Mysore' which has seen more than 25 editions). He has revealed an extraordinary progression in his vision and artistry, in his ability to draw on fresh and varied experiences. His talent for painting vivid images is evident in *Tereda Bagilu* (The Open Door).

Tereda Bagilu finds the poet, once again, brooding on the theme of death. The protagonist 'experiences' the confrontation with death. The irony and humour, the dramatic twists and turns, are all there. He was given Sahitya Akademi award for his *Tereda Bagilu* in 1977 and the Fellowship the highest literary honour of Sahitya Akademi in 1999.

Ramachandra Sharma (b.1925) an eminent poet and short story writer in modern Kannada literature and also a well-known translator. His *Saptapa* collection of poems won him the Sahitya Akademi award in 1998.



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ISBN: 81-260-0818-0

Rs. 50/-

Cover Design : U.T. Suresh