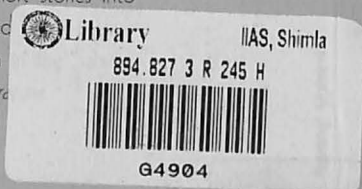


An old swineherd's single-minded search for his pregnant sow draws him into the depths of the jungle. Relying on his primeval instincts, as he fights off the predators that come in turn for the sow and her newly-born piglets, the old man seems symbolic of man himself, of his courage and unyielding spirit in facing the vicissitudes of life.

Kesava Reddy (1946) is a doctor of medicine and has for the past nineteen years treated leprosy at Dichpalli in the Nizamabad district in Andhra Pradesh. He has published five novels, of which this present work is the most widely translated, having moved into 14 Indian languages.

C.L.L. Jayaprada (1955) teaches English Literature in Andhra University, and is a translator, having rendered Australian, South African and West Indian short stories into Telugu. She has also published writing in English translation in the Akademi journal *Indian Literature*.



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He Conquered the Jungle



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HE CONQUERED THE JUNGLE

CATALOGUED

*Clouds hold the water drawn from the ocean,
but it is the clouds to which people look.*

– Jnaneshwar

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Kesava Reddy
HE CONQUERED THE JUNGLE
(Athadu Adavini Jayinchadu)

Translated from the Telugu original by
C. L. L. JAYAPRADA

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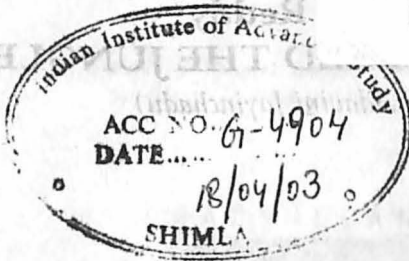
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ABOUT THIS SERIES

Our project of translations, a collaboration between writers, translators, sponsor and publisher has already released 24 novels including this one. The first eleven books were published in 1996 and another seven a year ago. By the end of the century we hope to finish our programme of 55 novels. Our goal is to try and paint a vivid and general picture of Indian life as revealed by serious post-Independence fiction in Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam, Gujarati, Oriya, Marathi, Punjabi, Urdu, Bengali and Hindi.

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Even within India most people do not know the anthropology, literature or history of a linguistic group other than their own. For them, we hope to unseal in English, at least a few works from languages which they may not have the time or ability to learn with the kind of missionary enthusiasm that some people expect everyone to have.

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if these translations help to widen the literary horizons of our readers even slightly, they would not have been published in vain.

This project has been made possible by the generosity of the MR. AR. Educational Society, Madras. Known to us, there has not so far been a similar programme of translations funded by the private sector.

MINI KRISHNAN
Project & Series Editor

ABOUT THE SPONSORS

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When Mrs MR. Omayal Achi and her son Mr MR. Arunachalam died in an air crash on 12 October 1976, the considerable fortune they left behind was converted into the MR. Omayal Achi MR. Arunachalam Trust by their heirs.

Mr A.M.M. Arunachalam is the Managing Trustee, and his three sisters the Founding Trustees of the Trust, the chief functions of which are education and health care in the rural areas of Tamil Nadu, India. The Omayal Achi College of Nursing, Tamil Nadu is also run by the Trust.

Later, a separate body was established called the MR. AR. Educational Society which set up the MR. Arunachalam Vocational Training Centre and the Selva Vinayakar Middle School, all in rural areas. The aims of the Society besides literacy, also include the promotion of Indian literature and scholarship.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Translating this novel was both an exciting and difficult experience for me. The initial elation on receiving Macmillan's offer to translate soon gave place to a feeling of bewilderment and even despair. How was I to render in an alien language, fettered to a foreign culture, the travails of an aging primitive man in his battle with the forces of nature and that too depicted with such great power in a dialect of the original Indian language? Is it possible to bring out the whole ethnic ambience in a foreign tongue? The innumerable references to native trees, plants, insects and animals did not make my job any easier. The task looked daunting indeed.

The book took its final shape because of the meticulous editing of several drafts by the untiring editor of Macmillans, Mini Krishnan and the relentless efforts of Dr. Ranga Rao, the language editor who went through draft after draft and cross-checked them with the original before sending them to me with valuable suggestions. I appreciate the sympathetic cooperation of the author for promptly clarifying all my doubts without actually ever interfering with the work. I received the same kind of charged enthusiasm and sympathy from Dr. J.L.N. Reddy, the Hindi translator of the novel, who answered all my questions.

I must also acknowledge my debt to my friend, Dr. Soumini for going through the first draft which was very rough and for offering suggestions as well as encouragement.

C.L.L. JAYAPRADA

INTRODUCTION

Literatures in all the major Indian languages may have developed independently but the shifts and transitions of literary sensibility, perception and idiom have been almost parallel in all the languages probably because the changing socio-political realities in all the linguistic regions have been almost the same. During the nationalist phase, for instance, all our literatures uniformly produced writings which were spurred by the struggle for independence. Similarly in the twenties when romanticism began to take root in the country, the movement came to be known by different names such as Chhayavad, Navodaya, Kalpanikata, Bhavakavita, etc. in various language literatures. Again when the radical idealism of Marxian thought tinged the artist's vision of socio-political experiences, noted writers in almost all languages responded alike. It is amazing to note how a host of writers in the fifties and sixties in Kannada (Adiga, Ananta Murthy), Telugu (Sri Sri, Ajanta), Malayalam (Paniker, Vijayan), Tamil (Ramaswamy, Ka Naa), Marathi (Dilip Chitre, Nemade), Gujarati (Thaker, Yasahchandra), Hindi (Agyey, Nirmal Verma), Assamese (Barua, Bhattacharyya), Bengali (Buddhadev Bose, Amiya Chakravarti), Oriya (Sitakant Mahapatra, Manoj Das), and so on began to explore language and reality from hitherto unexplored angles and ushered in modernism in Indian letters. It must, however, be noted that these writers distinguished themselves by employing highly individualistic styles and voices.

In recent times some of the broadly notable movements in Indian literatures are: a concern with the marginal man, a dialogue between the subaltern and the hegemonic, feminist revolt against a patriarchal social order and revival of folk forms. In the modern Telugu novel too these trends manifest themselves with as many variations in style and

representation as there are writers.

If one can speak of the great tradition in the Telugu novel the writers who at once come to mind are: Unnava Lakshminarayana, Viswanatha Satyanarayana, Chalam, Gopichand, Buchi Babu; to a later generation of writers of this tradition belong Ravi Sastry, Dasarathi Rangacharya, Alwaru Swamy, Kodavatiganti Kutumba Rao, Vaddera Chandidas, Naveen, Malati Chandur, Dwivedula Visalakshi, Volga, Ranganayakamma, and so on. This is by no means an exhaustive list and there might be several obvious omissions.

Kesava Reddy belongs to this group who make up the list of serious Telugu novelists and who bring this genre in Telugu abreast of the modern novel elsewhere. It is true that Kesava Reddy does not have the sweep, range and the epic proportions of some of the past masters of the Telugu novel. But his slender novels — more appropriately called novellas — numbering eight in all display a thematic depth, technical virtuosity and linguistic innovation that lend his works aesthetic appeal and an enduring value.

Kesava Reddy's personal background does not offer any clue to an understanding of his novels because they show a life so unlike his. He writes about outcasts, the downtrodden, about the least noticed and the most neglected members of society. He writes with compassion and understanding about their heroic battle for survival. Endowed with acute powers of observation and insight Kesava Reddy writes about the lowliest of the lowly. To be able to write with such understanding about people and things that do not form part of his personal experience calls for an extraordinary feat of imagination. Born in the village of Talupulapally of Chittoor District in Andhra Pradesh State on March 10, 1946 he went on to become a physician. For the last twenty years he has been working as a physician at the Victoria Hospital in Dichpally in the Nizamabad District of Andhra Pradesh.

One would imagine that since his novels focus on the lives of the lowly, they could be regarded as protest literature. However unlike most of the insurrectionary Dalit literature in Marathi, Gujarati or Kannada, his novels are not animated

with indignation or an ideology of grinding hatred. Nor do his works propose an ideal of a casteless or classless society, as many critics feel they do. Kesava Reddy appears to create in his novellas a naturalistic universe in which the indigent people fend for themselves with stoicism, courage and endurance. But caught in the overpowering social processes they fall to the ground. Many readers of his novels are led by their marked bias for the underprivileged classes to think that the author is influenced by the radical idealism of Marxist thought. But if he has any ideological commitment he steadfastly refuses, like many modernist writers, to push it to the fore in his writings. In fact it is this freedom from ideological aggression coupled with sincerity and authenticity that enhances the aesthetic appeal of his works.

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Kesava Reddy's fourth novel, *He Conquered the Jungle*, serialised in 1984 and published in book form in 1985, is unique among his works insofar as it takes man away from the maze of human relationships (which for long has been the staple diet of the novel in general), and shows him alone in his quest and struggle. The novel seems to underline the essential aloneness of man, his Sisyphean struggle, and his capacity to endure and overcome, given the kind of stoicism and courage that the protagonist of this book displays. In many ways he brings to mind Bunyan's Christian (in *Pilgrim's Progress*), Faulkner's Ike McCaslin (in *The Bear*), Melville's Ahab (in *Moby Dick*) and Hemingway's Santiago (in *The Old Man and the Sea*). To some this book has faint echoes of Shivarama Karanth's *Chomana Dudi* and Kumar Sahani's *Khayalgatha*. But to me this novel appears to play in a different key the same situation that Mirinal Sen's *Mrigaya* does. All these reactions to Kesava Reddy's novel merely add up to underline its resonant texture without, however, undermining its originality. It is therefore fitting that the National Book Trust choose this book for translation into 14 Indian languages. The Tamil and Hindi translations have already appeared and the reviews have been almost unanimous in acknowledging the book as a little classic — the word "little" being used here to refer to the novel's slender size of less than a hundred pages.

Like Joseph Conrad (*Heart of Darkness*) or Saul Bellow (*Henderson the Rain King*) or Arun Joshi (*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*) there are very few writers who have taken their protagonists into the impenetrable jungle on a lone search that, in the end, acquires a larger significance. Kesava Reddy is one of these few writers and in this novel, *He Conquered the Jungle*, he shows a swineherd, decapacitated by old age (he is 70), setting out alone on a desperate search for his sow, that in expectation of the event entered the jungle looking for a safe place to give birth. Neither his age nor the time of his search deters the old man from his determination to find the sow and her litter. He must seek them out and protect them from the wild animals of the forest. Armed with no more than a spear and a knife, the old man falls back on his huntsman's skills and unconquerable will.

In the forest, it is time for the wild animals to emerge from their lairs. After a long and arduous search he tracks the sow to a bush, and finds that she has just had ten young ones there. His eagerness to have a look at the piglets gets the better of him and draws attention to himself. As a result he is chased and attacked by the ferocious mother. Lacerations bleeding, the old man shins up a tree to save himself. Strangely enough, his wounds and pain are swiftly submerged by his ecstatic and excited mood; his euphoria lay in the sight of the ten beautiful piglets. He now decides to stand guard over the mother and her litter to protect them from wild animals. As the night progresses, a lone jackal first sneaks in but the mother tears it to pieces. Soon a pack of four jackals approach. The mother-pig kills one, the old man spears another from his perch on the tree, while the other two jackals run away with a piglet each. A little later a large pack of jackals are seen coming towards the bush. Now the old man quickly realises that the sow, being one against many, cannot protect her litter. He must come down from his perch to drive the jackals away, but for this he has first to kill the sow. He is reluctant to kill her but decides to do so in order to save the remaining eight piglets. He quickly spears the sow and succeeds in driving the jackals away. Eventually he makes a basket to carry home the

eight piglets. When weariness overtakes him he drops off, and wakes to find that vultures have pecked to death the already starving piglets. He feels utterly defeated.

This battle of the old man is punctuated by his reflections and remembrance of things past that add depth and richness to the novel, enlarging its significance. The rich suggestivity of the novel has naturally given rise to a variety of interpretations. To many readers the novel is simply a tale of endurance and of man's archetypal struggle. From this point of view, the novel seems to suggest that to survive is to have struggled. As if to underscore this view Kesava Reddy creates in the novel conditions of frontier existence. Nothing seems to accentuate this better than a man living on the edge. Paradoxically, Kesava Reddy does not have to go far, as did Hemingway, seeking these frontier conditions. To the millions of people in India who live below the poverty line, like the old man in the novel, making both ends meet is itself a heroic struggle and in most of his novels Kesava Reddy focuses on their lives. But it must be said to Kesava Reddy's credit that he never sentimentalises poverty nor does he explicitly draw our attention to it; for the struggle of his characters in this strata of society, poverty merely provides an unobtrusive setting. It is no coincidence that the old man in *He Conquered the Jungle* is invaded by thoughts of suicide in his moment of utter defeat and despair; that is, just when he is about to find the piglets dead in his basket, after a long desperate struggle to save them, he unwittingly recollects how, in the past, a shepherd in the jungle had hanged himself on discovering the death of his whole herd. If the old man did not end up like the shepherd it would only be because of a stoicism born of mature years. He survives although he is driven to desperation, and his survival is his triumph.

To many discerning readers, Kesava Reddy's novel *He Conquered* readily brings to mind Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. It is true that in both the novels the old men go too far out and have only their courage, determination and endurance to fall back on in their lone, heroic, unequal fights. Fighting with their backs to the wall, both display dignity.

Both are stoic and reflective. Both are losers in the end but enjoy moral victory for daring the impossible with extraordinary grit and tenacity.

But Santiago is like other Hemingway protagonists who seek and confront death either in the bullring, or in the big-game hunt, or in war. They seem to seek out death in order to live life with unusual intensity. However for Kesava Reddy's protagonist it is an inseparable part of his daily struggle for existence — the life lived by the humblest folks in India. It is significant that Kesava Reddy leaves his protagonist in *He Conquered* unnamed, referring to him throughout the novel in the third person. In most of his other novels too we come across similarly placed nameless men toiling to survive. This difference in Kesava Reddy's protagonists from Hemingway's, then, should become clear when they are viewed in the larger context of their oeuvre.

Yet another way of looking at this little Telugu classic is its affirmation of a primitive order of existence that civilised man has long since forgotten — a life in which instinct, intuition, acuteness of senses, self-preservation and so on are central and which if restored to civilised social life, would make life whole. Lawrence strove to convey this in all his works. Faulkner (in *The Bear*) also advocates this: the bear that suggests the spirit of the wilderness is invisible to the protagonist until he leaves behind the last traces of civilization. When the bear does appear it becomes a kind of epiphanic vision. Kesava Reddy's novel, *He Conquered* makes a thematic choice by finding a suitable objective correlative for the experience of living on the edge, on the frontier so to say, that cuts the individual free from the corruptions of civilization in order presumably to reassert a primitivist mode of "a natural" life of instinct, of blood, of elemental simplicity. Viewed in these terms, this novel cannot but recall the radical primitivism about which Norman O. Brown writes in *Life Against Death*. It is also possible to see in the old man's desperate battle against wolfish circumstances, man's existentialist struggle in an essentially naturalistic universe.

Some objections to Kesava Reddy's *He Conquered* relate to

the innumerable reflections of the old man, found to be too deep, articulate and improbable for his station. Those who insist on strict verisimilitude fail to see that modern art generally tends to subvert the illusion that art traditionally created. Besides, Kesava Reddy's Rodin-like thinker in this novel is an old man who has aged with earthy commonsense, with a long and varied life behind him; the novel everywhere makes it clear and leaves us in no doubt about his powers of acute observation and about his capacity for analysing and correlating experiences. This is a part of the equipment of an expert huntsman and our old man in Kesava Reddy's novel is one such. If the language in which his reflections are articulated do not ring true, it is explained, as does Puranam Subramany Sarma, as the language of the third person narrator. It is a different matter if some of these reflections take on a larger meaning than is intended by the old man.

Kesava Reddy is a Telugu writer to be watched. He is still young and the Telugu novel might well take a significant turn in his hands.

The old man lay sleeping like an ancient boulder. The evening sunlight fell on his feet through the open doorway. His feet were as broad as winnowing trays and rough as rocks, cracked all over. Some of the cracks had tiny pebbles stuck in them. He made a pillow of his elbow as he lay sleeping though he hardly ever slept at such an odd time.

He had been slightly indisposed since he had risen that morning and felt a little feverish. His joints ached. That was why he had stayed in his hut all day. Poor man! Old age combined with ill health to upset his routine badly.

There were two pigsties close to the hut he was sleeping in. In one of them the sukka sow¹ lay cosily with her newborn piglets. She stretched her limbs, rested her head on the ground and lay with half-closed eyes in a bliss of her own. The piglets were butting and rugging at the teats, suckling rather hard. Whenever they pushed too hard the sow groaned softly. The pride, pleasure and satisfaction that she had borne twelve piglets were clear in her half-closed eyes.

I

The other sty was empty. The old man's grandson had taken those pigs out to graze. Because he was ill that day, the old man had left the chore to the boy.

The old man woke up and stretched his limbs and neck. His movements were like those of a python uncoiling, about to set out somewhere. He stood up tightening his loincloth. While rising to his feet, he placed his palms for support first on the ground and then on his knees. As he stood erect, his knees, back and joints creaked audibly. He was an exceptionally tall man, his hands reaching to his knees.

He stepped out of his hut and stood still. The sow in the sty saw him and grunted. Her little ones were suckling noisily.

The old man noticed that the pigs that had been taken out

to graze had not returned. The sun lay on the western hill. He thought, "It's surprising that the pigs haven't returned," and wondered at the cause of delay. Misgivings and apprehensions rose in his mind like smoke. His conjectures grew and began to upset him. His pigs were everything to him. They were his sole wealth.

His mind churned. "The sun is almost home. It will be dark after a while. The pigs haven't come back yet."

He trudged towards his backyard, his body heavy with sleep, and heart with anxiety and apprehension. There was a mortar trough in the backyard, half-filled with water. Some of the moss that had grown at its bottom was floating on the surface.

A frog on the surface sighted him, and nosediving into the water with a splash disappeared in the green moss. The old man dipped both his hands into the trough and began splashing water on his neck and face.

He rarely bathed as he didn't like to very much. He was not particular about being tidy. He only believed in being robust. That some people bathed twice a day he considered, a fact of Kalimaya².

He poured water into his mouth, gargled, spat and stood up. The water trickled in rivulets down his back and chest. Because his body had been racked by hot winds all day, the cool water dribbling over him was soothing and he did not wipe it off.

The splashing somewhat released him a bit from his torpor. He came to the front of his hut again wiping his hands on his thighs. The sun struck the western hills and the rays slanted. He shaded his eyes with his hand and looked towards the dirt track which cut through the groundnut fields and took a turn at a distance between the hills before disappearing. Neither man nor beast stirred on it.

What had happened to his pigs? What had happened to the boy? As he mused he grew agitated, sucking his teeth and wringing his hands. He paced about restlessly. His eyes and mind wandered everywhere.

"Perhaps the pigs got out of control and into trouble. Or

was the boy himself in danger?" thought the old man. "I should find out for myself," he decided. But where should he go? In which direction? For a while he was perplexed.

His anxiety increased by the minute. "If I set off I'll find the way somehow. I'll also know what to do," he thought and walked into the hut.

Whether or not the door was open, the hut was always bright. There was only half a roof left. Through the big cracks fissured in the wall sunlight penetrated the hut. From one of those cracks a garden lizard watching the old man's movements kept nodding its head. A small toddy pot hung on the wall.

The old man held the pot in both hands and raised it to his lips. As he drank, its flavour spread in his mouth, went down his gullet and settled in his stomach. In one draught he emptied the pot and returned it to the wall. He wiped his lips and smacked his tongue against his palate.

He told himself, "I am going in search of the pigs now. If they are in danger, I have to rescue them mustering courage and strength. If only I could gulp another pot of toddy." He was sorry there was no second pot of toddy in the hut.

3

He started making preparations. He tied his headcloth and tucked the knife into his waist string. He pulled out his spear from the eaves. "I don't know in what condition I'll find the pigs and the boy. Let me go armed," he told himself.

He left the hut and set off westwards on the mud track. Swinging the spear he held, he strode towards the setting sun as if to conquer it. He could feel the toddy in his guts warming and rising through his being.

Two

The sun sank behind the western hill. It was the day before the full moon. Bidding adieu to her brother the sun, the moon strode high in the sky to the height of a palm tree.

When the old man walked, his bent knees and hunched back were noticeable. Even so, his stoop was dignified. He marched like an elephant in the streets of a royal city or a dark, threatening cloud in the sky.

The sunrays that pierced the sky from the back of the western hill were shrinking gradually. The wind was cooling gradually. In the east the moon had not yet brightened and the shadows it cast were hazy and sparse like the moustache of an adolescent boy.

The old man trod on his own long shadow as he walked. Faster than him, faster than his shadow, travelled his anxious mind.

4 He owned twenty pigs. Two of them were sukka sows, a special breed. One of them was at present in the yard suckling her young. She had had them four days ago. That had been the greatest day of his life. He had come bounding over a distance of a koss¹ to the yard. He pirouetted around the yard for a while. The boy did the same but after a while his youthful legs hurt and grew weary. He put his fingers in his mouth and ran around the yard whistling. Morning and evening they brought pots of toddy and drank their fill. The boy, unable to hold his drink, vomitted. The old man poured a bucket of water over his head and gave him another pot of toddy. They forgot everything in their horseplay, the old man became a young boy and the boy became an old man. They took turns singing and didn't allow anyone in the lane to sleep that night.

By daybreak the old man's throat was sore and he could not speak at all. He had to convey his meaning through facial expressions and gestures. All his joints ached. For some relief he had to stamp on the roasted branches of the milk-hedge and put a plaster of tamarind leaves on his joints. It was three days since the pig had had her piglets. The little ones lost the natural dampness of their skins and had begun to stir. His swelling subsided but his joints still hurt. His throat stopped burning but his voice was still hoarse.

The second sukka sow of the old man was ready to deliver at any moment. The boy took her along with the others for

grazing. "She might have given birth at the place where she was grazing," the thought flashed through the old man's mind.

Unaware he stopped on the track. He looked at the moon in the eastern sky and began to think. Both his sukka sows had gone into heat at the same time. He didn't know how it was announced but the news reached all the pigs in the village. They lifted up their snouts and tails and went round his yard bellowing loudly. All the male pigs indifferent even to hunger and sleep sought to mate with his sows. But the old man did not want his sows to mate with any pigs other than those of the special breed. Cudgel in hand, he drove away all the mongrel pigs. Finally he had his way and his sows mated with sukka pigs. So he expected both the sows to have their piglets on the same day. But it did not turn out that way. The first one delivered four days before the full moon day. The second one after another day or two.

"Doubtless she's had her piglets where she grazed. Perhaps the boy didn't know what to do, became confused and that is the reason for the delay."

The old man resumed his brisk walk. "I should not have left that full-term sow loose. Should have kept her in the yard and fed her. I couldn't because I was ill with pain in the joints. The boy is neither old enough nor experienced enough," the old man reflected, his head buzzing.

The sukka sow was known for her recalcitrance and ferocity. She could be like a demon for a week after birthing. She would allow neither friend nor foe to approach. She would gore to death anyone who came close to her. She would not allow even a fly to rest on her little ones. She was so alert that she would raise her head to watch even an ant if it stirred anywhere. The sight of any animal set off a marked aggression in her. The sow would look upon any animal as an enemy about to pounce on her offspring. She would on her own attack the enemy prompted by her inherent obstinacy, there being no question of turning back until the enemy fled or lost its life in the fight.

The old man was marching along on the track rapidly. He called out to his grandson, "Ori Gopalo!" every now and

again. There was no reply. Because he was recovering from a swollen throat, his shouts — like an adolescent rooster or a jackal with a fish-bone lodged in its throat — were not audible even to himself.

T H P E E

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After walking for a while the old man could see the pigs pacing towards him. As they romped towards him they looked like black boulders rolling down. He did not wait for them on the track. He strode up and met them half way. The pigs stopped in their tracks as if they recognized their master. They stretched their necks, waved their snouts and made grunting sounds. Frisking their tails they stomped around him and butted each other in the sides with their snouts.

But the eyes of the old man were looking for the sukka sow. She was not in the herd. His eyes fell on the boy after two or three searching glances at the herd.

The boy had been crying for a long time. Tearstains marked his dusty cheeks. His eyes were red. He stood sobbing and rubbing his reddened eyes.

“Where is the sow?” the old man asked the boy. He knew the disappearance of the sow was the reason for the boy’s tears.

The boy held the small rough towel tied at his waist with one hand and rubbing his eyes with the other said, “She’s been missing since this evening.”

The old man knotted his brows and expressed his surprise and annoyance, “How is that?”

“I have searched everywhere and haven’t been able to find her since evening. I was hoping she would have reached home to have her piglets.”

“I was at home all the while. She did not come home. I grew tired waiting and set out.” After a while he said, “How did you know that she was in labour? Did you see any discharge?”

"I didn't see any signs. She lay in a pandanus bush, groaned for a while and came out. You have been telling me that she would have piglets by the full moon day or so."

The old man muttered to himself, "May my words catch fire!" He chided the boy, "Why did you take out the sow which was full-blown and about to have piglets? Instead of keeping an eye on her when you took her out where were you roaming about?"

The boy stood sobbing for a while. From his left shoulder hung a catapult. On his right shoulder was a cloth sling. The birds he had brought down were in that sling, their ash coloured feathers and red legs protruding from it.

The old man told himself, "I was quite unreasonable in scolding the boy. He must have roamed about, catapult in hand, intent on aiming pebbles at the heads of birds."

"Why are you crying now useless fellow? Drive these swine carefully into the yard. I'll go in search of the sow." He took four steps, turned back and asked, "Where did you last see the sow? Where did you take the herd?"

"I saw her last at the barakala ditch. Didn't see her afterwards." 7

"All right. Now go off and feed the pigs and pen them in carefully. I'll see to the sow." And the old man resumed his stride.

He accelerated his pace which reflected the turmoil in his mind. Swinging the spear in his hand, he marched on as if he intended to squash his shadow under his feet. His mind was travelling faster and was dragging him along. Steadily his steps acquired a still quicker pace. On the mud track each step fell with a thud.

FOUR

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After some time he reached the barakala ditch. For the most part the ditch was dry but near the bank there was a little water.

The pigs must have wallowed in the ditch to their heart's content. The muddied water could be seen in the moonlight. The old man yelled "Huch! Huch!" while walking on the bank. The ground he was walking on was wet because the cattle and pigs dripping with water had clambered to the bank after rolling in the ditch. He probed through the shrubs around the bank. He stepped into the bushes and searched for the sow.

Again the old man came to the edge of the water. He bent forward and began searching for traces of hoof marks on the wet ground. He could see the medley of tracks made by several animals. He could see the marks made by the hooves of cattle worn out by ploughing and also those made by the shoes of young cattle. He could also see the hazy marks made by sheep and pigs. Joining all these were crisscross lines made by earthworms and leeches.

He stood erect and sighed deeply as he found the surroundings of the ditch quiet in the moonlight.

8 A sukka sow would behave strangely as soon as she sensed that she was going into labour. She would go in search of a secluded place and was known to travel for miles sometimes. She would ultimately reach a thick bush or cave and would have her piglets.

The old man stood at the edge of the ditch and looked around. None of the shrubs was large enough to shelter her. "She must have left the place at dusk and gone away," he thought.

"Where did she go from there?"

If she had set out towards the east she would have walked on the mud track and reached home. He knew the track well. But it had not happened that way. He knew she had not gone eastwards.

To the north of the ditch, there flowed a small river. The full-blown sow would not have swum across it.

In the south lay a vast meadow adjacent to the ditch with only grass and vampali¹ trees. There were no bushes that were even knee-high. A sow in search of seclusion would not have gone in that direction.

The jungle that started at the pond, spread westwards. The stream that filled the ditch in the rainy season flowed from the jungle. The jungle was black, mysterious and far flung.

He mused, "The sow must have got into the jungle through the west." He asked himself whether there was any basis for his assumption. "No other basis. As soon as her labour starts a sow travels for miles searching for a suitable bush or cave. That is the basis," he told himself.

The moon was creeping up the sky. The night thickened. The old man did not feel like wasting time. He left the ditch and walked westwards in the direction of the jungle.

FIVE

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There were no clear tracks in the jungle for him to follow. He was treading on boulders and sharp stones, climbing hillocks and clambering down into shallow valleys while moving on. He walked on grass pushing aside the plants.

9

He walked on the trail left by jungle beasts ceaselessly on the move. The track was hazy. After a while it disappeared like magic into the bushes. He did not regret it. He thought, "These tracks start nowhere and end nowhere. It is entirely wasteful to walk on them."

He progressed towards the eye of the jungle, searching through caves and shrubs, yelling, "Huch! Huch!"

The toddy he drank began to show. He could feel his body warming up and his step bouncing. He felt that the moon was laughing, the trees dancing, the wind carrying a sweet fragrance towards him. He told himself, "The palm toddy in my belly is simmering and steaming up." Even in such a state of intoxication his deep anxiety about the sow did not diminish.

He again found a trail made by wild beasts and thought, "The tracks are as confused as the hazy dreams of my sleep" and followed the track. There were spoor of different animals on the tracks. He went forward treading on them.

The old man skirted a shrub as big as his shack, wandered under the thickly foliated trees, impenetrable even to moonrays, and marched on, crossing deep gorges and mounting boulders as big as islands.

If he looked up he could see patches of the sky above the trees, but not the western hill hiding the sun and the eastern hill which hurled the moon into the sky. The trees, the bushes, the hillocks stood watching him seriously. He could hear the ceaseless noises of the jungle. He knew the creatures making those noises even if they were not visible to the eye. But there were also sounds beyond his knowledge. Neither he nor his ancestors could grasp how these sounds originated in the jungle and what they meant. "The jungle is dark and strange, full of secrets beyond human experience and thinking," reflected the old man.

10 He mused again, "But my experience is not poor." Once there had been a drought in the region. The cattle had starved and lain dead in herds. A young landlord in the region gave a herd of cattle to him and asked him to take them to the Sugali forest which was about fifty miles away and asked him not to return until the rains. Grazing the cattle, protecting them from wild beasts, he had lived for two years in the jungle, every day of which was spent in hair-raising adventures. Under the trees which had stood witness to many generations, under the shrubs woven together by climbers with no beginning or end, in the darkest caves where a cry echoed for three hours, he lived, accosting tigers, making friends with deer and wild fowl and hunting rabbits and porcupines. Recalling those experiences he reflected, "The jungle is incomprehensible. Perhaps it doesn't know its own mysteries."

The moon shone brightly in the cool breeze, its light seeming to drizzle on the grass, the trees, the hollows and the hills. Nature, exhausted in the sun of the Vaisakha¹ month during the day, recovered by drinking in the moonlight.

The jungle noises gradually subsided. One by one its creatures were slipping into the lap of the Goddess of Sleep.

The old man trod on the grass and plants woken by the touch of the moon's rays.

He came across a cave formed by two adjacent boulders leaning against one another. He stood in front of the cave, cupped his palms around his mouth and hooted "Huch! Huch!" Because the moon was high in the sky, the cave received no light at all. At the opening of the cave stood two poison-nut trees like guards on watch. He put his spear down, bent forward and searched the cave. Because of the first showers that had fallen a week before, the grass had grown luxuriantly all over the place. The old man did not find any clues. He took two small stones and flung them into the cave. He stood beside the mouth of the cave and waited. He told himself, "I should be cautious. If the sow is in there and senses my presence she will attack like a tigress. She might grip a leg or arm and crunch it off. She might even kill me. She is a brute and cannot distinguish between enemies and well-wishers." He could not hear anything in the cave. He walked close to the mouth of the cave, stood at the poison-nut trees for a while, breathed hard, shook his head and turned his back. Suddenly he heard a noise at his back. He sprang to his feet, clutched his spear and turned back quickly. Four or five bats flew out of the cave and away. His grip on the spear loosened. He placed his left hand on his heart and thought, "Took it for the sow. My heart shook with fright."

II

He resumed walking. The jungle stretched ahead appearing to cover the earth until the horizon. The shrubs, caves, trees, hollows and boulders, each looked different and higher than the other. He moved on restlessly like an ant dropped on a heated boulder or the hungry fire-fly at dusk. Sometimes he suspected that he walked on the same track again. "I don't know in what corner and what condition I'll find my sow. Any danger might befall her in this jungle, a place of miracles, a scene of violence and where the instinct to live is far stronger than sentiments of the heart," reflected the old man.

His legs ached. The euphoria induced by the toddy was gradually diminishing. "I may not get back my sow swallowed by this jungle of many mysterious happenings," the old man thought. From the corner of his heart despair lifted its head like a baby snake just waking from its multi-coiled sleep.

A year ago, in exactly the same circumstances the old man's neighbour, a Yerukala¹ man had lost his pig. He had spent three whole days and nights searching for the pig all over the jungle. After six months the farmers who entered the forest to collect firewood realized how the pig had disappeared. They found its white, shining bones in a thick shrub. They also saw a little bell hung around the pig's neck among the bones. Some of them thought that the pig had fallen prey to a bear or a wild fox. Others thought that the Chenchus² must have killed the pig and made a feast of it.

"But I am not a useless fellow like that Yerukala man," thought the old man. "I lived in the Sugali forest for two years. I can understand the language of the animals more easily than that of the customers who come to buy my pigs. I can easily read the signs that lie in the movement of boughs and the rustling of leaves," he mused while walking among the trees.

He remembered an evening in the Sugali forest when he had been a cattleherd. Those were the days when people had been waiting for the first showers. The cowherds told each other stories late into the night and slept in the shack while the cattle were tied to posts in the open.

In the middle of the night, the rain began. With it came hailstones that fell with such a thud on the roof of the shack, that it woke the cattleherds who rushed out into the pitch dark. They could feel the terror created by the wind, rain and thunder. The wind was blowing fiercely from the east. Driven

by the wind, the raindrops and hail fell at a slant. In the dark they could dimly see the cattle straining at their tethers tormented by the ceaseless fall of hail.

The men at once untied the creatures and drove them to a shelter under the trees. The old man found a broken leash at one of the posts. He counted the cattle herded under a tree and found one of the beasts missing. As soon as the hailstorm started a male buffalo had snapped its tether and bolted. They decided to set out immediately to retrieve it. They argued among themselves for a while about which direction to take. They knew the region very well. Towards the east lay a vast meadow with nothing in it except grass and pebbles. In the other three directions there stretched woods of mighty soaring trees.

The old man advised his companions that they should go eastwards and search for the buffalo but they did not agree. They heckled him saying his suggestion lacked any sense, arguing that even a beast seeking shelter would run towards trees rather than a meadow. He did not like to waste time arguing with them and so the old man set out all alone in the eastern direction. Holding a thick palm frond like an umbrella against the hailstones, he began to run.

13

His friends observed that the meadow lay towards the east but they did not notice that both the wind and the slanting rain came from that same direction. If it started to rain suddenly, the buffaloes, caught in the dark, would run in the direction from which the raindrops slanted and the wind blew. Their behaviour would be as natural as that of fish swimming against the current. Frightened by the darkness, rain, thunder and lightning they would dip their heads, stretch their necks forward and run as if possessed. They might run ceaselessly until they dropped dead out of sheer fatigue or met their end by falling into the deep gorge that lay beyond.

That day he had run for three hours in the downpour before sighting the buffalo. In a flash of lightning he saw it running at a distance, tail in the air and muzzle bent forward almost touching the ground. He remembered that some four miles ahead the land gave way to a sheer drop. He ran faster

than the beast to catch up with it. He found it impossible to grapple bare-handed with the half-crazed animal. It had been running, its hooves throwing up rain water, panting and foaming at the mouth. He ran along with it for a while and at a critical point kicked it hard on the knee of its front leg. At that the animal's leg buckled and it fell heavily. Immediately he pounced on it, gripped its leash and brought it under control.

The old man walked, reminiscing about this incident that had occurred forty years ago.

"Why do I remember the event?" he asked himself. He had not made a conscious effort to recall it. The thought had occurred involuntarily. But now it had a good effect on him causing him to draw confidence from his experience, strength and strategies. The despair in his heart disappeared.

"I'll go over the experience in my mind again. I'll try to visualize all the details including the most trivial ones," he told himself.

SEVEN

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Shouting "Huch! Huch!" he walked across balasa¹ bushes and kasara² creepers. The thorns of the balasa did not hurt his soles grown as hard as stone. Nor did the kasara leaves cause irritation as they would have normally.

He saw wild liquorice shrubs behind the balasa bushes on which the pods lay open, their red seeds glistening in the moonlight. The old man flung stones into the bush from afar. The shrub swayed in the wind and he went up to it and beat it with his spear. There was a shower of red seeds with black spots. Two rabbits leapt out of the bush and hopped away. The old man stared at them until they were out of sight and thought, "A pair. Poor things, seemed to be at love-play."

He heard the cry of a quail from another shrub. It sat brooding over its eggs continuously crying, "thurr." "I need

not search in that shrub. My sow is not there. If she were, the quail would not have lain there and called aloud so fearlessly," he thought.

He could hear a hissing from another shrub of bonthajemudu³. In the shrub a snake rubbing its head against a stone was trying to slough off its skin. The old man resumed his walk after standing by the bush listening to the hissing for a while. He walked thinking about the snake, which was twisting and turning in the bush, while it tried to shed its skin, hissing so hard that the dust rose in the air.

He saw a mongoose beside the path, picking up seeds from the grass. As soon as the old man saw it he blessed it mentally, "A hundred years to you," and called, "even if you eat these grains all through the night, you'll not fill your belly. There is a snake struggling in the bonthajemudu bush. Cut up its body and head and eat that." The mongoose did not follow his words. It craned its neck, twitching its whiskers, stared at him for a while but turned back suddenly and disappeared into the hollow of a tree.

He was walking on flat ground where the grass grew thinly and the shrubs were scanty.

"I too feel hungry," thought the old man. The toddy had evaporated completely. He could hear his belly rumbling.

"I should have killed one of the rabbits that jumped out of the wild liquorice shrub and eaten it," thought the old man. For some time he blamed himself for not having done that. "But then I was not hungry. And the rabbits were a pair. It's a great sin to separate a couple," he explained to himself.

"Even now, nothing is lost. Plenty of rabbits in this jungle. I have a spear in my hand — a brain full of ideas. I needn't regret anything," he reflected. He bent forward and started searching in the moonlight for rabbit spoor. He could see innumerable hoofprints in the sparse growth of grass. After a few minutes he identified the spoor of a rabbit. He bent forward and followed the trail. A few steps later the paw prints criss-crossed for two baras⁴ and then disappeared without a trace. "The shrub in which the rabbit hid must be somewhere close by." And the old man stood erect.

Usually a rabbit would approach its habitat walking deliberately in a zigzag way to mislead its predators. The old man thought, "Neither the rabbit nor its grandfather can mislead me."

There stood a small date-palm bush close at hand. The old man drew the knife from his waist string. Cutting and carrying the acacia and the balasa bushes, he built a waist-high hedge around the date palm-bush on three sides.

"No creature on earth can run faster than a rabbit. By the time your spittle dries on the ground the rabbit can circle the forest twice. But if it comes across a small thorny hedge it won't move a step forward. It will sit still licking its knees," reflected the old man.

He finished hedging the date-palm bush on three sides and stood on the fourth. In his right hand he held the spear ready and hooted loudly "Ha, Ha, Ho, Ho," to terrify the rabbit in the bush. Since no creature came out of the bush, he raised his voice further and created a terrifying noise by clapping his mouth against his hand. The rabbit leapt out of the bush in terror, saw the hedge on three sides and started running towards the fourth. Suddenly the old man's spear pierced its heart. Shrieking, it fell four baras away, writhing and tossing in pain.

16

Thinking, "You rose from your bed on your left flank today⁵," he walked towards the writhing creature. It stopped tossing about. The blood that oozed from its body glistened in the moonlight. The spear in its body still stood erect. He placed the spear on his shoulder with the rabbit hanging at the end of it like a bundle, and walked forward.

He placed the rabbit under a silk-cotton tree. Cotton pods lay scattered on the ground. Fleecy cotton showed in some of the half-open pods. He opened a pod, took out some cotton and squeezed it between his strong palms. He struck two sharp stones against each other, made a fire and lit the cotton. He picked up a few dry twigs, made a big fire and tossed the rabbit into the fire. He maintained the fire by feeding it with twigs and squatting by it he roasted the rabbit. Its fur was singed quickly and its flesh oozed fat as it burned, giving

off an appetizing smell. When it was well-cooked, he took it out of the fire and flung it aside. He later cut it into lumps with his knife, untied his headcloth, spread it on the ground and put the pieces on it.

He spotted an orange tree at a distance. The fruit from its branches swung in the air. Getting up, the old man flung stones at the tree to drop the fruit. He cut the oranges into halves, squeezed the juice onto the pieces of meat and rolled them in the ashes before eating them.

Gradually the fire died down. In the intermittent breeze were visible live ash-coloured coals.

He tore at the meat, flinging the bones aside.

After a while his hunger subsided as the fire had. A handful of pieces of meat and bits of orange were still left on the length of cloth and he tied them into a bundle. He stood up and wiped his palms on his hairy thighs. He hung the bundle at the end of his spear which he held on his shoulder and moved on.

He felt like lying down under a tree picking his teeth. "It is not the right time... when shall I see my sow again? I cannot rest until then ... I have revived my strength after a hearty meal ... I may feel hungry again after some time ... as the night advances I might feel sleepy ... or something else might obstruct the fulfilment of my duty," he thought.

EIGHT

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He strode along rapidly, turning in all directions and hooting "Huch! Huch!" He searched in shrubs and caves, hurrying like Bhimasena¹ rushing to rescue Draupadi² from Keechaka's³ hands.

"This is not something I can achieve by rushing nor is it a headload I can get rid of easily. I have faced many such hardships before. I retrieved that buffalo from the Sugali forest on a dark stormy night. And this very night I shall find my

sow before the sun breaks in the east. All it needs is a bit of luck and God's grace," he reflected.

The moon stood fixed in midsky, showering light on the earth below. The old man looked up at the sky. A small bird dashed across the moon flapping its delicate wings. Light welled forth from the moon like youth, sorrow and knowledge, drenching the forest with grace and brightness.

The old man, out in the open, looked over the radiant forest. "The jungle silently offers its prayers to the Lord. He knows about my sow and sees this jungle as easily as I see the lines in my palm. He will watch over my sow," thought the old man.

A black cloud was slowly drifting towards the moon. When it encountered the moon, it split into two halves and both floated off on either side of the light. The moon ceaselessly sprinkled its cool light on the earth.

18 "If the Lord wills it, He can make the whereabouts of my sow known to me. But I am an idiot. An unlettered one. The Lord does not have secret consultations with people like me. He reveals himself and gives boons to those who do *tapas*⁴ standing upside down, resting their palms on needles, until anthills grow around them."

He stood soaking up the ambrosia-like moonlight. Because the moon lay in midsky, the old man's shadow fell on the sand foreshortened. He could see the hoofprints of different animals on the sand. He took a few steps looking at them. Suddenly he stopped, knelt and began scrutinizing the marks on the sand. "Are they the prints of a pig? Or those of a deer?" He looked thoughtfully at the ground. Like a man trying to raise the wick of a dim lantern, he raised his head once and looked at the moon.

He moved about on all fours examining the ground. The frown of concentration on his face was that of a man threading a needle or a veterinary doctor easing the passage of a calf only partially out of the womb. He blinked, held his breath and searched with intense concentration. Down on all fours he anxiously followed the hoof marks. His knees burned after some time. He stood up. But he still bent close to the

ground while walking for fear that his blurred vision would cause him to miss the footprints.

He walked like a rooster chasing a slithering baby snake, to peck and kill it at the right moment.

His back ached because of continuous slouching. He used his spear like a walking stick and putting most of his weight on it moved along on three legs as it were.

"I firmly believe that these are the footprints of my sow," he told himself, "Perhaps I am mooning about it. Man can confuse an unpleasant possibility with an illusion and a pleasant delusion with a possibility," looking at it again.

The tracks led to a thick shrub of fever-nut. The old man drew the knife from his waist string and strode forward cutting away the branches and creepers in his way. Like the moon bursting out of dark clouds, he forced his way out of the shrub.

"I am not under the sway of either illusions or delusions. Doubtless these are the hoof-marks of my sow which is of a special breed. If it were a deer it would not have entered a shrub of fever-nut. It would have jumped over the shrub or skirted it," he thought while following the hoofprints.

He bent forward and began walking along a stream. That stream in its course led him to a ditch.

NINE

The ditch, only half-filled with water, was a natural one. Reeds swept around it, their blossoms shimmering in the moonlight. The hoofprints went by knee-high reeds and led towards the water.

"The sow must have come here to drink water. Poor thing! How thirsty she must have been!" the old man told himself.

He could see the tracks of the sow entering the water but not of its emergence. The images of the moon and the clouds lay reflected on the surface of the water. He could see the reed

blossoms floating about. Searching anxiously, the old man at last found a coconut shell bobbing in the water. He immediately flung his knife and spear aside, leapt into the ditch and swam towards the coconut shell.

He himself had tied that shell around the neck of the sow. The sow with its full belly was a feast to the eyes and had drawn full-throated praise from his neighbours. He had therefore tied the shell on it to ward off the evil eye.

The small pool heaved, disturbed by the old man's strokes. The ripples reached the edge, chasing one another.

The old man gripped the coconut shell and swam back to the bank. The sow must be in danger. There couldn't possibly be crocodiles in such a small ditch. He pictured some robbers killing the pig, eating it and then throwing the coconut shell and bones into the ditch. The longer he thought about it, the more his heart burned in anger.

His spear and knife lay uselessly among the snails on the edge of the water. He dragged his feet and crouched by his weapons in despair. Just then, a leaf in the palmyra tree close by made a sound. He looked up. The leaf continued to dance making a ticking sound like the tail of a myna calling to his mate. "The breeze has died away. Why does the leaf beat? Perhaps it is warning me to shun meaningless thoughts," the old man pondered.

As he stared at the palm leaf, the shell slipped from his hand and fell to the ground. His eyes fell on the thread tied to the shell. His eyes widened and he observed the thread for the first time. "It is a cotton thread. The thread I tied around the sow's neck was woven of hair," he flung it back into the water. "Then what happened to the pig that slipped into the ditch?" He asked himself.

"What a fool I am! As soon as I saw the coconut shell I lost heart and stopped my quest," thinking which he set about looking for hoofprints of the pig around the ditch. He walked along the edge of the ditch crunching the snails under his feet.

After walking a while, the old man's face became radiant as if all the moonlight had collected on it. He saw the footprints of the sow. She had come out of the water and set out

in a northeasterly direction. He could see the hoofprints but not the marks made by water dripping off her body. "The damp ground became dry and that means she must have left the ditch a good while ago," he thought. There were no other marks made by earthworms or insects crawling across the hoofprints. "So she didn't really leave the ditch a long time ago."

He swiftly retraced his steps to the ditch, tucked his knife into his waist string, clutched his spear and resumed his tracking. He came across a meadow after a while. Grass stretched before him in all directions. He stood there perplexed.

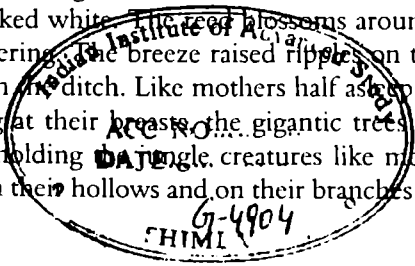
The wind blew fiercely as if it had woken up. The fronds of an arecanut tree close at hand were rubbing against each other producing a screeching sound. The dry leaves fell on the grass and scattered.

TEN

21

After some time he thought of an alternative. He approached the arecanut tree and placed his spear and knife beneath it. He hung the meat bundle on an overhanging branch, tightened his loincloth and began climbing the tree. He collected his strength, ravaged by age, and crawled up the tree. He climbed dextrously, now relaxing and now holding his breath, tightening and loosening his muscles.

He was gasping by the time he reached the top branch, his body covered by a thin film of perspiration. He stood on a branch and raked the forest with his eyes. It looked beautiful in the moonlight. The sand in the stream he had crossed earlier looked white. The tree blossoms around the ditch were shimmering. The breeze raised ripples on the surface of the water in the ditch. Like mothers half asleep with their babies tugging at their breasts, the gigantic trees in the jungle lay asleep holding **DA JUNG** creatures like monkeys, birds and bears in their hollows and on their branches. The bastard teak



trees had shed all their leaves and wearing a garment of scarlet flowers, stood erect like soldiers injured in battle. A few miles away a mountain was aflame. The fire had started at the foot of the hill and was spreading upwards.

The old man stood on the arcanut branches watching the jungle closely. Like an eagle perched on a tamarind tree at the centre of a village watches for chicks and frogs, he watched the jungle.

Gradually the wind grew fierce. It carried various sounds with it. It brought a familiar sound to the alert ears of the old man. That was the sound of a babbler. He thought, "Its cry was from somewhere in the northeast."

The babbler was a secker. As every unusual happening in the jungle came to its notice, it would promptly hurry to the spot and set up an unending commotion, not resting until the strange event was known all over the jungle. It would announce the presence of a lost domestic animal. Sometimes it evinced limitless curiosity. A babbler was known to have gone round the traps laid for rabbits and foxes and lost its life getting entangled in one of them.

22

The old man listened attentively and analysed the sound waves floating from the northeast. "That's the babbler. My sow has laid its piglets somewhere in the northeast. The bird saw it and started its racket," the old man concluded.

He scanned the northeast quarter of the jungle. The valley, full of boulders, stretched far and wide. At the bottom of the valley flowed a thin stream. The bamboo bushes across the valley grew wildly. On the edge of the valley where he stood, the tindra¹ bushes grew thickly. In some places the sunkrenu² trees stood erect.

Gradually he began to hear the cry of the babbler clearly. "The babbler must have perched on the tindra bush or the sunkrenu tree. Now I must act swiftly," and he began climbing down the tree. All his attention was on the tindra bush beside the valley. He wanted to reach the ground faster than an arcanut severed from its stem. But he was himself like a ripe fruit ready to sever itself from the stem and drop.

He could no longer hear the bird call as clearly as he did when he was on the tree. Listening attentively he kept moving. Occasionally the wind blew in his direction and brought with it the bird call. Accordingly the pace and rhythm of his breathing changed.

He reached the valley of boulders. The sunkrenu trees with their yellow blossoms looked beautiful in the moonlight. The tundra bushes with their thick creepers and wide leaves appeared terrifying. As he plodded his way through the trees and bushes, the birdcalls grew louder and louder. His eyes moved the sunkrenu branches and turned over the leaves of the tundra. He turned his eyes into ears and ears into eyes looking for the sow.

After he had walked for some time he spotted the babbler. He sat down abruptly and crawled behind a boulder. He did not frighten the bird. He began peering hard from where he sat concealed. Sitting on a tundra bush, the black babbler kept crying, turning its head from side to side and twitching its tail with a ticking sound. The bird, the size of a mere closed fist, cried tirelessly like a machine to let the world know about the strange happenings it had witnessed. "No sign of its voice becoming feeble nor its body tiring. Its body is less than the size of my fist. What is the source of its energy? Perhaps its body generates energy as it cries," he thought.

"Oai babbler fellow! Stop yelling. Here I am. You have fulfilled your duty. Keep quiet now," shouted the old man. But the bird did not keep quiet. Flicking its tail, it went on crying.

The old man chuckled to himself. "I am a fool to think the babbler cries for me. It cries to help neither an old man nor a sow but for some purpose of its own."

"But what purpose does it have now?" he asked himself. "Perhaps it is in the nature of its existence. It was born with a fist-sized body, a forked tail, less than a foot in length and the beak the size of a curved gourd seed. It must be crying itself hoarse to justify its earthly existence," he reflected.

The old man stayed behind the boulder and peeped out occasionally. The bird perched on a climber amidst the leaves on the tundra bush and continued calling "giku-giku."

The wind blew across the tundra bush towards the old man from the northeast. He who had been using only his eyes and ears so far, began using his faculty of smell too. He paid close attention to the breeze blowing towards him across the shrub. After a while a certain odour reached him. "The smell of afterbirth. The sow has laid the piglets in the shrub." At once he felt like dashing up to the piglets in the tundra bush. "In the circumstances the sow could turn into a demon and literally tear me to pieces. If I step out of the cover of this boulder, the babbler will start a commotion. On that signal the sow will leap out and attack me," thought the old man.

24

Bristling with impatience, he peeped from the cover of the boulder. The tundra bush was just ten baras away from the boulder.

"I wish to be rid of this babbler. But it won't leave the shrub. It will hoot till it becomes a mere skeleton," he told himself.

"I cannot bear to wait until then. I must see my sow and the young ones immediately," and he earnestly wished, "I hope at least the God of wind changes his direction."

After some time the old man's wish was fulfilled. The wind shifted to a southwesterly direction.

He tightened his loincloth, held his knife and spear and came silently out of the cover of the boulder, moving like a cat. He crawled on all fours towards the tundra bush, breathing softly. He took care not to touch the dry leaves on the ground and did not allow his loincloth to rustle in the wind. He held his spear so that it would not accidentally strike a hard rock. Silently, like a fish under water, slowly like a snake that had gulped a large frog, he crept towards the bush.

The tindra bush was still three baras away. Meanwhile the God of wind frowned upon him. The wind changed direction abruptly and started blowing towards the northeast. The old man stood still and started thinking about his next move when the babbler rose suddenly into the air, crying at double its pitch. In the next instant the sow appeared outside the shrub. She squealed fiercely and rushed towards him with the speed of an arrow.

The old man did not realise what was happening to him. His body and mind froze in fear. He felt that the trees on the ground were floating in the air and the clouds in the sky were falling down. The sow felled him and began goring him all over with her tusks. Because his nerves were numb with fear, he did not feel the pain. He was rolling on the ground, crushing the green grass and dry sunkrenu leaves. The sow tore the muscles on his legs, thighs and shoulders with her sharp tusks. She was trying to crush his bones in the grip of her strong jaws. The beast fought with all its strength in a determined bid to pulverize the rolling, leaping man, struggling on the ground.

25

After enduring the torture for some time, he escaped as miraculously as he had slipped out of his mother's womb. He dashed up the sunkrenu tree and sat on a branch. The sow pursued him up to the trunk of the tree and circled the tree, head up and roaring terribly. As she pounded around the tree like an ox in the oil mill, the grass around the tree was trampled into a track.

TWELVE

The old man sitting on the branch thought, "How did I escape? How did I get the strength and idea to do it?" He looked down and yelled, "Qai-Sukkilam! ... Go and lie down beside your piglets. Don't tire yourself by running around the tree."

The sow lifted up her snout and continued circling the tree.

"I don't like the sow leaving her young ones unprotected to pursue me. What should I do to send her into the shrub quickly? Shall I raise my voice and shower a volley of abuse? Shall I point the spear at her and threaten to gouge out her eyes?" he asked himself. "All these are useless ideas. The more commotion I create, the more suspicious she gets! She will leave the piglets and keep circumambulating the sunkrenu tree all through the night," he told himself. He thought for a while, "I'll curl up and lie on the branch like a white caboose fish that lies underwater in the afternoon heat without a sound or movement," he thought. He laid his spear on the next branch, drew up his arms and legs and lay on the branch and thought. "If I want I can control even my breathing."

His trick worked. The sow went round the tree for some time, lifted up her head for the last time, shook her tusks, roared, stamped her forefeet on the ground and retreated into the tundra bush.

When the sound of the sow's steps faded, he slowly lifted up his head, saw her entering the shrub, and gave a sigh of relief.

Then he noticed something he had not realised before. For a long time his whole body had been shaking, setting atremble even the branch he now sat on.

The leaves and flowers on the branch too were quivering.

"I'm in a panic. When did this shivering begin?" he wondered. "I can't recall. It might have started when the sow straddled my chest and gripped my neck," he thought.

The old man was still shivering. He found it impossible to bring his body under control. As fear sank into his bones, he felt a surge of self-pity. He yearned for someone who could pat his back and say a few words of comfort. He looked up. The blue expanse of the sky arched over his head. The moon poured light ceaselessly over the world without irritation or rest. Innumerable stars twinkled in the sky. The clouds in varying sizes and shapes wandered about restlessly. Under his feet the earth, like the sky above, stretched endlessly. The trees, hills, rivers and valleys lay numb as if unaware of each other's existence.

The old man asked himself, "Has this really happened? Have I really seen my sow? Or is it a dream?" He scanned the ground under the tree. He could see trampled dry leaves and green grass where he had fought with the pig and rolled on the ground. The knife that had slipped from his waist lay at a distance from the sunkrenu tree. The pig's tracks around the tree were visible.

His body was still trembling slightly. Lacerated flesh hung from his legs and thighs. Blood trickled and fell on the sunkrenu leaves with a faint tapping sound. He brushed the grains of sand that stuck to his wounds with his trembling hands. Gradually the bleeding subsided. "How long can these wounds trouble me? If the scabs form, the bleeding will stop," he told himself.

The bleeding from the wounds slowed down but did not stop altogether. "It will take a long time for the scabs to form on these wounds. These are no ordinary wounds. My thighs have been lacerated. My legs crushed. No living being has inflicted so much pain on me before," he thought.

"But I haven't showered such love on any other either. I rolled and writhed in pain on the ground when the sow struck me but could use neither the knife I carried nor the spear in my hand," he thought.

His nerves, benumbed by fear, gradually came to life. His wounds throbbed painfully. "Though I've lost a lot of blood I'm not in shock. Anyone else in my place would have succumbed by now. When I saw my sow I felt as if I were riding an elephant. Even if all the soldiers of Lord Yama were to come down now, they would not be able to kill me," he thought.

"But I have not yet set my eyes on the piglets," thinking which the old man got excited. He moved slowly edgeways on the branch and strained to look through the tindra climbers woven in a thick screen around the bush. The sow lay resting her head on the ground and the piglets clung to her, suckling her hard.

He let out an expletive, "Ori, — your mother! As radiant as new moons you are!" he cried. He shuddered like a devotee face to face with an epiphany or a miser in front of a

treasure. He started to count the piglets, hurriedly stopping halfway to feast his eyes on their sensuous beauty, his eyes fluttering restlessly as they moved back and forth over the soft ball-like piglets, over the half-closed eyes of the sow and her swollen teats. His heart heaved like an overflowing tank, about to burst its banks, roaring. He made some incoherent noises involuntarily.

“One, two,” he counted the piglets and, “Ten, ten sons of bitches are born,” he said and laughed grotesquely. The branch he sat on quivered, “Ten fellows, Sukki’s sons are born! You Sukki’s sons. Why are you groping at the teats? What are you doing there?” shouting thus he slid into a coarse song.

Oh you fellows! Sons of your mothers

Oai what are you doing there?

Here is the girl, Poliga’s daughter

Saw her first menstrual blood ...

Whenever the old man was overcome with joy, he sang bawdy songs. He stressed clearly the bawdy words in the song while singing.

“.....”

Here is a boy, Sariga’s eldest

has built for her a hut²”.

He did not bother about the rhythm or time of the song. Nor did he care about its meaning. He turned his joy into waves of sound that poured forth. His joy brimmed over like boiling water escaping as steam.

The moon hid behind the clouds as if embarrassed at a bawdy song. The wind carried his song across the jungle. All the trees listened, tossing their heads. The water in the stream rippled as if to share his joy.

He went on singing until his voice grew hoarse.

He used to work wonders when he got drunk on sour toddy boiled in the sun. He could uproot a boulder large enough to seat ten people at a time. He could push a heavy cart more strongly than a pair of oxen. In this state he would call conservative women “sister-in-law” or “cousin” and pick up fights with them. He would work his way up the huge hillocks easily and climb down the other side. He would

stumble on the wayside gravel, fall and go back to his shack injured all over. If somebody cared to pour a pot of cold water over his head, he would lie unmoving on the floor and sleep like a log.

But the ecstasy he now felt he had never experienced before nor could anything else in the world give it to him. "That's why I have survived. Otherwise after being mauled so severely by the sow, after losing so much blood, wouldn't I have died of shock?" thought the old man.

The moon was still behind the clouds. The old man looked at it through the sunkrenu branches and thought, "You don't have to come out now. Here are ten moons in the tindra bush! Who cares if you come out or don't."

The moon shot through the clouds. "Come on ... come and see. In the tindra bush there are ten moons like you, in fact more beautiful," thought the old man.

THIRTEEN

The babbler was circling the air over the tindra shrub, crying. "Ori — your mother? I forgot you altogether. If it hadn't been for your good deed in showing me the way, I would not have seen the sow. I'd have wandered in the jungle all night. I won't forget your help in this life. When you need my help, I'll return yours two-fold," thought the old man.

The babbler began crying "Gikuk! Gikuk!" flying in circles between the tindra shrub and the sunkrenu tree. It created a tumult by shooting into the air, diving down, somersaulting and circling. It rested neither its voice nor its wings even for an instant.

"How can I help this babbler?" the old man began thinking. "I can snare it and take it home. I can take care of it by keeping it in a cage. I can give it water in a hollowed mango seed and feed it grains and white ants through the bars of the cage," he planned.

"But how will the babbler benefit by it? It has a better home in the hollows of trees than the cage I will weave for it. It will get purer water here than what I can give it. Food is plentiful in the jungle. Even if I think of every possible way, there is no real help I can render the babbler," he thought.

"It is really unfortunate. I can do little for the bird which has been my friend and companion. The only way I can help it is by letting it go free without killing it. The greatest service man can do to a bird or beast is to leave it free. The relationship between them is such," he told himself like a man who chewed a bitter nut.

"It is a mistake to take it that way. Haven't I been protecting the sow? Now I sit on this tree in the jungle for her protection," he thought like a man trying to spit out the bitter nut.

30 "You haven't come here solely for that purpose. Does the sow need your protection? She can fight as valiantly as Bhimasena, breaking even big boulders with her snout. But now she needs me. Now she is just recovering from the birth of ten delicate piglets and is quite weak and vulnerable. In this jungle there are many nasty and mean creatures, and I have to protect her and her young ones from them," thinking thus he justified his coming.

The sow still lay in the same posture. The piglets were tugging at her teats. "Sleep peacefully. I'll protect you and your young ones as the eyelid does the eyes or the nail the finger. Have no fear. Don't wonder how this old fellow can protect you! I might not have the muscles and tusks you have. But you aren't as shrewd as I am. Your body isn't as flexible as mine. Moreover I have a spear with me," he thought.

The babbler stopped crying, swooped down and sat on the grass. It pecked at the white ants crawling in rows in the moonlight, scattering them as they hid under the grass and the gravel. After some time the babbler filled its belly and sat rubbing its beak against a boulder nearby. Then it flew ponderously into the air, fluttering its wings. The old man looked at the bird flying away and thought, "It's going to drink water."

"Where shall I keep the sow and piglets when I take them

home tomorrow?" he thought. "It is not possible to keep the sow in the existing pigsty along with the other pigs. I must build another pigsty. But that is not as easy as talking about it. I need bricks and red clay. I have to cut the palmyra fronds and press them under slabs of stone, then cut and collect aloe boughs, let them rot in water and take out the jute. It'll take twenty days to ready the pigsty. Should the sow and piglets suffer until then?" he fell to thinking seriously.

After pondering for a while, he hit upon a way. "Why should they suffer in the rain? I'll take them straight to my shack where they will stay as long as necessary. Until then the boy and I will sleep under the sigara¹ tree that stands before the shack. We can manage anywhere," he mused.

The scattered white ants were walking in a row again. They moved forward, climbing up and down the grains of sand and getting under the blades of grass.

The babbler returned after slaking its thirst. It came crying like a cow going back to its newborn calf. It went straight to the tindra shrub, perched on it and hooted.

The old man thought, "This babbler is singing a lullaby to the piglets." The moon shed its milky light. The breeze was cool. "It is for the benefit of the piglets. The reason I sit on the tree with the spear at my side is also for the sake of the piglets," he thought.

"I was so very happy this morning. I felt as if someone had sweetened my mouth with sugar and filled my belly with milk. I don't remember whose face I first saw when I woke up this morning," he thought.

He tried to remember whose face he had seen that morning on waking up. He bit his lower lip and scratching the back of his head thought hard. His memory failed him.

"I must have seen the boy's face. No, no. That was only when the sun was high in the sky." The boy had gone to the next village to see a folk-play. Sleepy and tired, he had come home late, dragging his feet, eyes reddened and face haggard when the sun was high in the sky.

"In that case whose face did I see?" the old man asked himself again. His shack was away from the village. There was

no question of any of the villagers rising in the morning to visit him. He was not important in any sense of the term. He was not close to anyone. Nor was he a key figure in anything.

The old man who stood thinking, suddenly tapped his forehead with his fingers. "How foolish of me. The first thing I saw this morning was the sow. I am like a shepherd who puts his sheep on his shoulder and looks for it all over the jungle," he thought.

The first and last things he saw every day were pigs. From dusk to daybreak he dreamt about pigs.

Once again he thought, "It is as if sugar was poured into my mouth and milk into my belly." He felt proud as if there was a crown on his head and ornaments on his upper arms.

FOURTEEN

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32

The night was half done. The bilibitri¹ flowers bloomed, spreading their fragrance through the air. Coiled like snails in the green moss, they were slowly opening their red and white petals. The meadows looked resplendent, studded with colourful flowers.

"I should be careful from now onwards. It is the time when wild beasts start prowl. Moreover, this is the month of Chitri²," he told himself.

Summer was the breeding time of foxes and wolves. The vixens ready to whelp would not come out of their caves. The foxes would hunt for double the amount of food because they had to support both themselves and their vixens. In foraging for food they ventured almost anywhere. They would also turn quite base and nasty. "It is only the harshness of time that controls the creatures," thought the old man.

His legs and thighs, severely mauled began to throb with pain where the scabs had formed on the wounds and the bleeding had stopped. He gritted his teeth against the pain as he moved by pushing the branches aside. He felt the wounds

on his thighs with his fingers. The clotted blood stuck to his fingers. Suddenly its odour struck him. He had never smelt human blood before, either his or that of any other person. He knew the scent of the blood of innumerable animals. Wiping his hands on the branches, he thought, "There is no difference between the blood of man and animals. No difference that man can detect."

Like a pot boiling under its lid, the wounds throbbed and sent shooting pains under the scabs. "I wish the scabs had not formed so soon. But if they hadn't, the bleeding would not have stopped. By now I would have died of shock. God has arranged protection against every eventuality. He gives boons to some people in the form of suffering," he thought.

"What about my sleep tonight?" he asked himself. "The most irrelevant question this night is my sleep. I am in a battlefield now. I should be alert to accost the enemy at any time," thinking thus he stretched his arm to rest the spear on the next branch. The moment he moved slightly, the pain shot up in his thighs as if someone had cut them with a knife. He gritted his teeth and pulled back his arm. "How can I sleep with so many wounds on my body? Unless I drink a potful of toddy I cannot forget the pain and go to sleep," he thought.

"I have not come here in order to sleep. If I had wanted to fill my belly up to the throat with toddy, stretch my legs and sleep, I could have stayed in my shack and slept. I came here to guard the sow. I should think of her safety. She might fall asleep," thinking thus the old man looked into the tindra bush.

The sow stretched her neck, rested her snout on the ground and closed her eyes. Some piglets were still suckling. The rest were frisking between her legs. All the satisfaction and happiness in the world was personified in her form. "When joy makes a noise in her heart like wind in the month of Avadi³, how can she sleep? May her happiness and mine remain undisturbed," he thought.

Keeping awake during the night was nothing new to him. When folk-plays based on Bhima's life were staged, he would keep awake all night to watch them. However distant might

be the villages in which the plays were being performed, he would walk over to watch them. He had memorized the songs sung by Bhima in various episodes. There were many other things in which he got completely involved. Like the dark clouds drifting solemnly in the sky, the thunderbolts that came rumbling to crack the boulders, the mountains that stood, mysterious and mighty like ancestral gods blessing and watching him from above. He used to watch both affectionately and even with reverence the strong lines of the sow's body and the forceful way she pounced on her enemy.

In the cool moonlight the bilibitri flowers spread their fragrance and grace. "It is past midnight, will the enemy really strike?" he asked himself. "There are numerous caves and bushes in this jungle in which live jackals, wolves and tigers. They will set out prowling and blood-thirsty, armed with sharp fangs and mighty paws. They hunt and tear to pieces the weak and the helpless. With that blood and flesh they support their mates and offspring," he thought.

34 The babbler sat on the tindra shrub and continued to call out. "It never gets tired of crying but I get bored listening to it," thought the old man turning his face away.

When he turned his face, he saw a jackal in the valley of boulders.

"Aa! Here comes the jackal fellow!" he cried out.

In the valley the jackal stood between the two boulders. It lifted up its muzzle trying to smell the air. After a while it caught an odour and set out as if it had come to a quick decision. It leapt dextrously over the stream flowing across the valley. The old man lost sight of it for some time while it climbed down into the valley. After making it to the bank, it again sniffed the air, cautiously stepping towards the tindra bush.

"Ori — your mother! Son of a miser! Coming immediately after riches are buried!" he abused it silently. He watched its movements carefully. "No one surpasses the jackal in cunning. While smelling the air it can sense what is happening two hundred miles away ... the great strategist," he thought.

He knew all about the jackal's tricks. He knew the way it could push its tail into crab holes to force the crabs out, the

way it could steal sugar cane and groundnuts by fooling the farmers guarding the fields and the way it would shrink its body into the size of a mortar to burrow into the furrows.

“Lord Brahma³ wrote on its forehead that it should live by cunning,” he thought.

Walking amid the bilibitri trees the jackal headed towards the tindra shrub. The closer to the shrub, the slower its steps.

“Come on! Come son of a miser. Don’t know where you were born and where you grew up. But it is written⁵ that you will die at the tindra shrub,” thinking thus the old man balanced the spear in his hand. The jackal fixed its eyes on the tindra shrub and was approaching it steadily and soundlessly. Bending its body like an arrow, flexing its muscles, it was ready to leap into the shrub. Saying “Think of God you son of a miser!” the old man aimed at its heart and was about to hurl his spear. Suddenly the sow leapt out of the bush like lightning and landed on the back of the jackal digging her tusks into the jackal’s flanks. The jackal collapsed at the knee, and fell to the ground. The sow slashed her terrible tusks round the jackal’s neck and severed it. The jackal tossed on the ground, blood gushing from its body on all sides. Like a warrior, the pig ripped and mauled the creature with her tusks.

35

The old man, perched on the tree yelled, “That’s it Sukkilam ... !” and laughed loudly and proudly.

The sow looked around the dead jackal growling for a while. She stood at its head licking the blood on her snout. She glared at the jackal intensely and cruelly to see if it was stirring, then turned back and went into the tindra shrub.

The old man on the tree continued to laugh with utter abandon. He was neither conscious that he should stop laughing nor did he feel the need to stop. He was not beyond feeling joy and suffering. He never knew how to contain his sorrow when he was defeated and his happiness when he succeeded. He was not a pessimist to think laughter ended in as much misery. There was no other man in the jungle to remind him that this joy was momentary or to blacken his face in envy. Moreover, he was in no mood to think about omens, sastras⁶, pros and cons.

He laughed until the muscles in his belly hurt more than his wounded thighs. While controlling his laughter, he placed his spear again on the branch close by.

Once the old man's loud, crude laughter stopped, the babbler's calls became audible once again as stones in a pond become visible after the level of water recedes.

The old man looked around thinking, "Where are you babbler!" The bird was not in sight. But its cries continued rending the air.

The babbler must have seen the terror created by the sow and hidden somewhere, afraid. "However, frightened he is, even if his tongue is cut off, he won't stop crying. He'll hoot until I leave the jungle with my sow. He is born that way," thought the old man.

The carcass of the jackal lay beside the tindra shrub. The intestines which were ripped out lay strewn on the grass. The blood at its severed neck had risen, foaming. The bubbles in the blood burst as the breeze touched them.

36 The sow that had created so much terror, lay quietly in the tindra shrub. As the piglets stamped all over her and tugged at her teats, she rested her head on the ground and lay with half-closed eyes. Now and then she licked her snout. "Though she appears calm, her heart must be boiling. She is blazing like Lord Narasimha⁷ after killing the asura. But she doesn't let her anger or any other passion come into the open. She is deep and profound like the sea, the earth, the mountain and the cloud. Her beauty and grace lie in her depth," thought the old man.

The flanks of the sow quivered. The old man believed he saw tears in her eyes and despair in her face. "The sow must be regretting the violence she indulged in. But what she performed was not a kill but a yagnam⁸."

The sow fluttered her ears.

"If the crab-eating miser tried to plunder you, how could you stand by silently? If you hadn't cut the jackal's throat and ripped him up I would have wrung my own neck and died. If you had submitted meekly to that fellow the clouds, the mountains, the lightning and even the great Bhimasena would

have all lost face," he said to himself.

He recalled how the sow had bolted out of the shrub like a mined boulder exploding, leapt on the jackal with lightning speed and torn him apart with her tusks as the thunderbolt did the earth.

He looked approvingly at the sow and said, "I would like to reward you. What do you want?" The pig lay quietly, thumping the ground with her tail. "But there is nothing you lack. You have ten young ones as beautiful as the moon. No other on this earth has received such a bountiful boon," he thought.

He did not turn his eyes from the sow. "I wish to be swallowed up in you. I want to sit by your side and caress your body. But you won't allow me to approach. You are an idiot, an ignorant creature who can't tell your own and others apart. But you are also a warrior. You can leap like lightning and tear asunder like a thunderbolt," he thought.

He sighed deeply, "Because I could not reward you, I could not caress you, let me sing a song for you," he looked towards the sky trying to remember a song. He could not recall any. "Oh! No one ever wrote a song about you. People have written about peacocks and swans. But nobody bothered to write about you. I am not clever enough to weave one naturally on my own," he mused.

In the tindra shrub, the sow sat with a haggard face like a sulking housewife.

"Doesn't matter. There are innumerable songs about Bhimasena. Poems and stories too. I'll sing those. If I sing about Bhimasena it is the same as singing about you," he thought.

He set the spear on the next branch, cleared his throat and taking a deep breath started singing a song from a folk-play:

*Come on Bhima
to hack the blind man's
children with an axe
Come on! Get up Bhima.*

He continued to sing until his throat became dry and painful like his injured thighs and like the muscles of his belly

after he had laughed. Singing the refrain for his own song, repeating the lines, he felt ecstatic.

He touched his throat and thought, "My throat has become dry. Wish I could get a draught of water. Had I wings instead of shoulders, I would have flown like the babbler and drunk the ditch water."

Both his feet had grown numb from sitting on the branch in the same posture for a long time.

The bapana¹⁰ ants were crawling over the branch. "Even Lord Brahma doesn't know where these ants are during the day. They are seen everywhere in the night," thought the old man.

The bapana ants were crawling over his feet, legs and thighs. Each one was busy running hastily as if it were on a king's errand. The old man watched them in the moonlight falling through the leaves.

"These bapana ants know neither how to bite nor how to sting. I don't know how they survive," he thought. As they crawled on his body, he felt as if a loved one were embracing him.

After a while he stood up, and holding a branch above his head, peed.

FIFTEEN

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He found it difficult to sit crouched on the thin branch. How long could he do so? Should he stay like this till daylight?

"But what else is life without hardship? What can a man achieve in the world without labour and without pain? It is easy to drink a bellyful of toddy and roll beneath date palms. It is easy to eat up to the nose and sleep in the corner of a loft. It is easy to leave the sow and the piglets to the wild beasts and go back to my shack. Is there any difference between those who don't recognize their responsibilities and the boulders in the valley?" mused the old man.

As he shifted uncomfortably on the branch he yawned. He reproached himself, "Chi! What a shame to feel sleepy and tired when there is a lot of work ahead." He told himself, "But yawning is something physical. I am really tired physically."

"I have one foot in the grave already. It is not for people like me to suffer so many wounds and loss of blood," he thought, looking at his thighs. "But only my body is tired. My spirit is intact. There is also no need to lose courage. There lies the carcass of the enemy with its innards torn out. The sow with her piglets is safe in the tindra bush," he thought.

Meanwhile the wind abruptly changed direction. It blew strongly through the trees and the branches grated against each other, screeching. The branch the old man sat on moved up and down, and to and fro. The ripe sunkrenu leaves disentangled silently from the stems and fell to the ground even more silently.

The wind irritated the old man. He turned his head and looked in the direction of the wind. He could see four jackals in the valley. In an instant he felt his whole body freezing in fear.

Like their companion earlier, these jackals too stood between the boulders in the valley. They all faced northeast and stood in an identical posture. They lifted their snouts towards the sky, sniffed the wind for a while and then bent their heads. Like a hunter who sweeps aside a spider-web in his path, they wiped their muzzles with their forepaws and raised their heads to sniff the wind. They beat their bushy tails on the ground as if their search had yielded fruit. Later they all set out from the place as one body, heart and soul.

"How did the jackals know that the sow had littered in the tindra shrub?" thought the old man. They must have picked up the smell of new birth. Nothing can beat the sense of smell these wild beasts possess. They can sense the arrival of enemies, the existence of food, female animals on heat, and everything else through their power to scent. Moreover, the babbler continued to cry as if to announce the strange thing he'd discovered," he thought.

The babbler, which had disappeared, made its appearance

on the tundra bush and was crying. The old man found its black form and sharp voice repulsive. "You are making it dangerous for me fellow! Perhaps you don't know that you are harming me by betraying my presence," he thought.

Meanwhile the four jackals made their appearance on the rim of the valley. His hand tightened on the spear involuntarily just as the pupil of the eye would shrink at a sudden and blinding light.

The jackals were moving towards the tundra shrub, their red tongues lolling, their tails erect. As they closed in on the bush, their anxiety and pace increased.

They stopped on seeing the dead jackal beside the tundra shrub. They drew back the forelegs they had raised to step forward. They pulled in their tongues and curled their tails. They stood silently for a while and then slowly moved towards the carcass, examining it keenly. The neck was severed. The stomach ripped open, intestines in disarray. The body was peppered with wounds.

Scrutiny over, the jackals looked at one another's faces. 40 Then they spoke among themselves, snuffling.

The old man stood poised, spear in hand but did not use it. He thought, "Once I use the spear, I'll be vulnerable. I don't want to lose it unnecessarily. Moreover, there doesn't seem to be a need to use it. The jackals will not move forward after seeing the blood-spattered carcass of their brother. Their hearts would have turned to water. They will curl their tails between their legs and flee." He observed the movement of the jackals keenly.

The four animals left the place heading in different directions. But they turned back at a distance and started closing in upon the tundra bush from the east, west, north and south.

"Is there a strategy the jackal doesn't know?" wondered the old man. "They know that they'll not overcome the pig if all of them attack from the same quarter. They think if they close in from all directions they could beat the pig easily," thinking which the old man positioned his spear.

The jackals moved towards the tundra bush at the pace of a snake that had eaten a frog, and as steadily as the Rahu¹

about to gulp down the moon.

As they came within four baras of the bush, the sow was startled out of sleep as if troubled by a nightmare. One by one the jackals came into her sight. She spun around in the bush like a bull in the ring.

The old man held the spear high above his shoulder and aimed it. "The tactics of these jackals shall not win here. The sow can pounce on them like a thunderbolt and destroy them. Moreover I have a spear in hand which has ripped open the heads of many beasts," he thought.

Meanwhile the sow pounced on the jackal that came from the east. She stood firmly on all fours and lammed hard at the belly of the jackal with her snout. The jackal rose into the air screeching and fell to the ground. As it lay sprawled on its back struggling to get to its feet, the sow stood on it, ripped the entrails of the jackal with her terrible tusks and pulled them out with her snout to drop them on the grass. She set about crunching up the legs, shoulders, neck and muzzle of the jackal.

Meanwhile the jackal that came from the west lifted its tail, opened its mouth wide as if struck by palsy and was about to jump on the tindra bush. The old man aimed his spear and hurled it at the animal. It sped through the air, struck the jackal between the eyes, and pierced right through its head. The jackal flew into the air to the height of two baras, fell back to earth and breathed its last waving its legs in the air.

Simultaneously the jackals that came from the north and the south leapt into the bush like thieves slinking into a village from which there had been an exodus. They picked up a piglet each and started running away. As soon as he saw the jackals making off with the piglets the old man cried out in pain like a pregnant woman hit by a rice-pounder on the belly. He knelt on the branch as if the arrows of a hunter had struck him in the knees. His whole body began to quiver with pain as if hurt by poisonous thorns. Anguish gripped him like frost on a sunless morning.

He raised his face on which pain was writ large and looked up. The sow was pushing her young ones close together with

her blood-stained snout. On her back an oblong wound showed and blood from it was trickling down her shoulder and leg.

The old man took a quick count of the piglets. They were only eight. "I lost two little ones," he thought. His voice was choked and the sound muffled. "I am an unlucky wretch, lost two piglets," he muttered standing on the branch. He stood erect and looked in the direction in which the jackals had made off with the piglets.

The moonlight spread across the sky like flour on the floor. The air was no longer brisk but moved sluggishly. The jungle lay silent and the sound of jackals fell away. He could see the thick bushes and open-mouthed caves. "The mean wretches! They must be hiding somewhere in the bushes. May those jackals, the bushes and the caves that shelter them be destroyed," he wished earnestly.

Suddenly he was enraged. A picture of the piglets dangling from the mouth of the running jackals flashed through his mind. He imagined the fate of the piglets in the bushes and the caves ...

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While trying to push those ugly thoughts from his mind, he struggled for breath like a wild animal. The corners of his eyes filled. He slouched exhausted, on the branch, as the evening sun did on the eastern hill.

"If I had got down from the tree and stood at the bush, spear in hand, this disaster would not have occurred. But the pig would not have allowed me to get down. In this same brutish quality lies her beauty and majesty. As long as the quality called brutishness prevails in nature, it clings to the sow. No. Not that. As long as the sow lives, she cherishes brutishness," thought the old man.

He thought, "How strange that both the misery and happiness of a civilized man depend on a beast. Life is full of strange contradictions."

The babbler perched on the spear that pinned the head of the dead jackal to the ground and stood erect. It cried ceaselessly in the same pitch and volume. Now and then it dipped its head to look at the eyes of the jackal which were like bro-

ken glass. Perhaps it had never gone so close to a carcass. It set up a frightful cry.

"I don't know whether this babbler is here to help me or to destroy me. Should it call continuously just because it's seen something strange? Perhaps it doesn't have a nest. If it has, perhaps it is bare of a mate and young ones. Perhaps no creature bothers whether or not it goes home. But I won't tolerate this fellow making a din beside the bush my sow is resting in," thought the old man.

The babbler was rending the air. It droned on annoyingly with the determination and devotion of one performing a tapas.

"It may bring on the attack of the jackals with its harangue," thought the old man and as the thought struck him, his heart flamed with anger. His eyes, so far covered by a film of tears, reddened. "It won't. If it's necessary, I'll burn the whole jungle," thinking which he drew the knife from his waist, aimed it at the babbler and hurled it. The throw flung the bird some distance away where it lay fluttering its wings on the grass. Its cries were replaced by the sound of its fluttering wings which pierced the silence. It scattered sand as it tried to rise into the air flapping its wings, stumbled twice, fell forward, wings stretched backwards, and died.

Gritting his teeth, the old man sat on the branch and glared at it vengefully.

Silence hung over the place after the babbler's death. The wind fell and even the leaves were still. Black clouds moved silently across the moon. The bilibitri flowers as numerous as the stars and glowworms were spreading their fragrance in the air.

SIXTEEN

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As the night ended the old man's heart grew heavy. He found the surroundings repulsive. Three jackals lay dead. One had its

belly ripped open and its entrails lay scattered. Another's neck was slit, exposing its flesh. Lodged erect in another's head was the spear. At a little distance from these, the babbler lay on its face its wings stretched back.

With revenge in his eyes he stared at the carcasses of the jackals, which personified evil. But his heart stirred at the sight of the babbler. "It didn't have a fraction of the jackals' selfishness. There was no evil motive in his cry. No thought of betrayal. There was nothing in that fellow other than innocence. But sometimes an innocent creature can do more harm unintentionally than an evil one," he thought.

"Whatever it is, I didn't do a good thing in killing the babbler, who was worthy of my love and regard," he criticized himself.

"The innocent babbler and the recalcitrant sow are both obstacles in the achievement of my goal. It is really a strange predicament. The very sow I am struggling to save is ready to pulp me at the slightest chance. I can rend or rack my brains by thinking about the contradiction in this," thought the old man.

44

He repeated to himself, "Life is full of strange contradictions."

More anguished than he, the sow hid her sorrow and lay quietly in the shrub. Her tail flicked away the flies swarming the open-wound on her back. He thought, "May those wretched flies not settle on the open-wound to annoy her. Jungle flies are terrible. They cover the boils of oxen and annoy them so much that the maddened animals run through the jungle."

The blood on the sow's snout had dried. But the wound on her back glistened in the fading moonlight. "The wound may fester. If only I could wash it with salt water and apply a poultice of the purple galega leaves, it would heal without a mark. But I am in a wretched condition myself unable to get down from this tree," he thought stirring impatiently on the branch.

"That's what I should do tomorrow morning as soon as I reach home. I should send the boy to get the leaves of the

purple galega. Until I dress that wound, I shouldn't think of another chore," he decided.

"I am thinking only of her physical injuries. What about the blow to her heart. It's not a minor thing to lose two young ones in the first litter. Her heart must be like a wound. If only I could sit beside her, say a few comforting words and caress her back. What can I say? If my own mind were tranquil I could console her," he told himself.

The wind, so far oppressively still, rose reluctantly. The leaves on the trees began stirring slowly.

"Perhaps the two piglets killed this morning wished for a short life at birth. Why not consider those two unborn? I shall imagine that only eight young were born and I'll say so in the village tomorrow. The villagers will believe me. So will the boy," he thought.

The intoxicating fragrance of bilibitri flowers floating in the gentle air touched him.

"I can make the whole world believe this falsehood. But the sow knows the truth. My spear knows it. My conscience knows it," he told himself.

Suddenly the cool breeze felt hot and the fragrance of the flowers repelled him.

"So neither the sow nor I can forget this morning's tragedy immediately. But time can make one forget all misfortunes. As easily as the flow of water obliterates a track in the dry sand at the bottom of a stream, as easily as the sun dries the dung water sprinkled at the threshold in the mornings, time makes one forget misfortunes," he thought.

As the moon inclined towards the west, the shadow of the tindra leaves fell on the sow. He could not make out whether the wound on her back was still bleeding. The sow's body lay half in darkness and half in moonlight. Some piglets were feeding. Others were groping around their mother like blind creatures.

"What would the sow's thoughts be? Is she grieving over the lost piglets? Is she praying for the safety of the other eight? How wonderful if she could unburden her sorrows and listen to my miseries!" he thought.

There was no sign of the bapana ants. "I can't see a single one. Where are they? Must have gone in search of food. Just as I killed and made a meal of the rabbit, as the jackals killed and ate the piglets, these ants must have gone to kill and eat some creature. Perhaps they are all at the eyeballs of the dead jackals. Finally even the gentlest creatures like the bapana ants live by violence," he thought.

Suddenly a surge of hatred at his grotesque surroundings rose in him. He hawked and spat on the carcasses of the jackals. The milky moonlight did not cool him. The breeze laden with mixed fragrances did not please him. The violent and predatory atmosphere assaulted his senses making him reel. "Only pitiless beasts with sharp nails and tusks can survive in this jungle," he thought as he cleared his throat again and stopped short of spitting on the carcasses of the jackals. "Who has not indulged in violence here? Didn't I kill the rabbit at the first pang of hunger?" he thought. He stooped from his perch to spit from under the branch and thought, "I too am merely a part of nature."

46

His mind filled with impatience. "If only the day would break soon," and he looked hopefully towards the east where the sky had not brightened. It looked crumpled. Like a cow afflicted by a pustule or a bird whose wings were sodden.

"By the morning, the sow will calm down and be more controllable. I shall make a basket out of the bamboo strips and the tindra creepers, and carry the piglets in it out of the jungle followed by the sow. In the meanwhile may no other disaster strike us," he prayed.

"I shall always remember the tindra bush and the sunkrenu tree having developed an affinity for them in a short time. The intensity of a relationship is certainly more important than its longevity," thought the old man.

"After some time I might come back to the jungle and visit this same place. By then the pools of blood would have disappeared. The tindra shrub would have withered and collapsed. The skulls and bones of the jackals would lie half-buried in the grass."

He still thought vengefully about the fate that awaited the

carcasses of the jackals. "By the time the sun goes up four yards in the sky tomorrow, this place will be full of vultures. The flesh, left by the sated vultures will be preyed on by white ants. In their skulls will rest scorpions and snakes."

The four jackals lay like bundles of evil. The head of the jackal that lay towards the east of the tundra bush bore the erect spear. It had died snarling and its staring eyes glistened in the moonlight. It gave the impression that it was ready to pounce on one at any moment.

"How will it rise again? The spear struck it between the eyes and pierced the back of its head," he thought.

"If I take back these three skulls, and keep them in my shack, they will be mementos of my experiences of this night. They will be symbols of the ferocity of the sow and my might. But it is also a terrible night. Like sleep filled with nightmares. I don't actually want to remember the night in which I lost two piglets. It's not wise to repeatedly recall the misfortunes of the past. One should forget them as quickly as possible. More importantly, I must grow wiser from the experience. What lessons have I learned from this disaster?" he questioned himself.

47

"My mistake is so clear. I let loose the sow which was about to have piglets. I could have kept it in the yard and fed it," he thought.

His error troubled his conscience like the piercing rays of the sun.

"I was not well this morning. I lacked the energy to get up, go out and advise the boy when I heard the wicker gate of the yard and the pigs being let out by the boy," he justified himself.

"I must put an end to these thoughts." Thinking which he sighed deeply and scratched his head with both hands.

The thoughts swarmed his brain like moss reassembling in a tank of water on being parted by a pebble flung into it.

"I cannot put an end to these thoughts. My mistakes this morning are not one or two but many. When I set out, I could have brought at least a catapult with me. However powerful a spear, it can be used only once. If I had kept a heap of

pebbles by my side and had a catapult with me, I could have smashed the eyeballs of all the jackals as they approached. I would not have lost a single piglet."

It was a long time since he had used a catapult. In his younger days he could fell a squirrel however high it was on a tree, and a bird, however fast it was flying, as if they were fixed targets.

He remembered his grandson. "He is skilled at using a catapult. It is I who taught him to take aim," he thought proudly. "When he becomes a little more muscular I should teach him the use of a spear. Unless one has muscular shoulders and arms, one cannot hurl a spear," he thought.

The night slipped by. A long while ago the moon had begun its descent from mid-sky. As the clouds crossed the moon one by one, their shadows crept silently over the jungle.

SEVENTEEN

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As the night passed, the old man was overwhelmed by despair. "It is not a good omen. Despair is not the quality of an achiever," he thought. "My surroundings are evil. If I open my eyes, I can see creatures killed violently lying about. In every jungle bush and cave there lurk greed and wickedness. The air is rent by the dance of death," he thought.

To stiffen his weakened will, he pushed back his thoughts from the present to the past.

He had never submitted to anyone whatever the circumstances. Disaster had once struck his village when he was an adolescent. A military battalion had camped across the road, close to the village. The villagers couldn't tell why the soldiers were living in tents. People used to say that a world war was going on in some far off place and that the soldiers were going there to take part in it. All the soldiers were tall and dark as pitch. Their lips were so thick they looked bee-stung. The hair on their heads was short and frizzy.

Their arrival created a tumult in the village. Shod in heavy boots, dressed in thick uniforms and steel helmets, they used to march around, their rifles on their shoulders. The villagers, in mortal fear of them, would not even cross the road. Nor would they step into the streets after dark.

Gradually the soldiers began tormenting the villagers. They used to break into houses in broad daylight and take away grain, chicken and goats. If the villagers protested, they were beaten black and blue.

The old man's hut (then a young man) was on the fringe of the village. One morning two soldiers came to his shack and demanded two pigs. He had just had his morning meal — the previous night's leftover rice — and was about to take his pigs out to graze. He refused them quite bluntly. They made menacing sounds, took out their rifles and loaded them threateningly. He drew a deep breath and filled his lungs. He looked once at the shining tiger-claw (an ornament) that lay on his hairy chest. He glanced at the talisman on his muscular upper arm and then at the soldiers and thought, "Should I surrender to these spineless fellows who fight for wages?" He leapt into air from where he stood aiming for their chests with his legs. They fell backward dropping their guns. He hurled the guns over a wall four times the height of a man. Meanwhile they both got to their feet and pounced on him. He fought ferociously. The place resounded with their pounding, boxing, groaning and yelling. By the time the fight was over, the thigh of one and the knee of the other were sprained. Both soldiers dragged themselves away, across the road and towards their tents.

The old man sat on the sunkrenu tree. Going over the details of the tactics he had used to humble the soldiers, he slowly regained his spirits. He was as content as a well-suckled infant who lies back cooing with pleasure. "I should be spirited and courageous. Midnight is long behind us. From now until the morning star appears, wild beasts will be on the prowl," he thought.

"Just because I killed the pigeon it doesn't mean I have destroyed all the enemies. I should be ready for a fierce battle,"

thinking which he raised his arms, flung his neck backwards and stretched. He felt exultant and wanted to fight. His right fist opened and closed involuntarily. His fingers seemed to be searching for something. Then he was reminded of his spear.

It was lodged in the head of the fox that lay beside the tindra bush. "I should not be unarmed," thought the old man, crawling sideways towards the trunk of the tree. He sat in its fork. He recalled the tusks of the sow. He looked at his thighs. "My dexterity lies in retrieving the spear while simultaneously evading the tusks of the sow," and he looked into the tindra bush.

The sow lay still and silent, resting her snout on the ground. The blood from the wound on her back clotted. The breeze blew mildly from the tindra bush.

The old man sat in the fork of the tree and thought, "As soon as the wind drops, I'll get down, pick up my spear and climb the tree before the wind rises again."

50 The branches of the tree were moving slowly. The fluff from the silk cotton pods was floating like cotton balls. The old man sat watching the branches of the tree and the floating silk cotton.

Suddenly the wind fell. The branches of the tree became still. The fluff of the silk cotton began to settle lazily. The old man jumped down from the branch skilfully without making a noise. Not wasting a minute he leapt, pulled the spear out of the jackal's head and with the speed of lightning climbed back, spear in hand.

"The god of wind was kind to me. Otherwise, I would not have ventured down. Even if I had, I would not have escaped from the tusks of the sow," he thought.

The puffs of silk cotton were floating down to the ground one by one.

After he retrieved his spear, he felt his preparations for battle were complete. The spear had come his way almost thirty years ago when it was almost a foot longer. Ceaselessly used and sharpened continuously, it shrank in size. He never left his shack without his spear. It was a part of his body.

He laid the spear horizontally in his lap and waited.

“Perhaps all these preparations are unnecessary. The wild beasts might not attack the tindra bush after all. The rest of the night might pass peacefully,” he thought. He contradicted himself immediately. “That’s impossible. No creature ever lived without fear of an enemy in any yuga¹.”

EIGHTEEN

From a bush behind the sunkrenu tree, a crow-pheasant was crying “gu – gu – gu.” It had eaten grasshoppers and couldn’t digest them.

Suddenly the wind started to blow fiercely as if heralding the arrival of demons. Balls of silk cotton floated and swirled in the breeze. Branches rubbed against each other, screeching. Amidst all this noise, the old man heard the whining of jackals from far off.

He trembled. He turned back as if a lash had fallen on his back. He could see innumerable black caves like piles of sins as far as sight would go. But he couldn’t see any jackals.

Gradually their howling reached a crescendo, like waves in the sea chasing one another, the howls forming a continuous relay of sound. For a while they howled singly and then began howling together in one voice. The old man thought the poison in their minds had turned into sound waves in order to scorch the whole jungle.

The soles of his feet perspired. His mouth turned dry. “Not one or two, the jackals were advancing in tens and twenties. Perhaps they are about fifty,” the old man thought.

Gradually the howling neared. He looked anxiously in the direction of the sound. The jackals now filled the valley. They climbed the bank of the valley fearlessly and were advancing towards the tindra bush.

“They might be more than fifty,” he thought but did not feel like wasting his time counting them. The fingers of his right hand tightened on the spear.

A cloud, the size of a huge mountain, stood across the moon. The wind blew hard as if to drive it away. The stars twinkled trying to chase the darkness, formed by the shadow of the cloud across the moon.

The jackals encircled the tundra bush. The circle gradually tightened.

"I may not escape defeat," he thought, "I cannot possibly kill them with the single spear I have. How I wish I had a catapult instead of the spear." He told himself, "Don't admit irrelevant thoughts. Don't think of a catapult that is not in your hand. Don't think of the boy who is not beside you."

The jackals closed in on the tundra bush. On getting their scent and hearing their movement, the sow stood up in the bush. It grew bewildered, caught between the urge to pounce on the enemy and the inability to leave the piglets unprotected.

Suddenly a thought flashed into the old man's mind like lightning on the horizon. It spread through his mind like the lightning which rips the sky into streams accompanied by a terrible thunderbolt. His whole body shook as if he had been pierced by a poisonous thorn. Perspiration streamed down his temples.

He lifted the spear with his right hand. His right shoulder quivered. He slapped his right shoulder with his left hand. "Now a terrible incident is going to take place in front of my eyes. I cannot be a mere witness like Ilavanta¹ in Kurukshetra. There should not be any omission or delay in acting. My life shapes forcefully this very minute." Again he slapped his right shoulder with his left palm. Gritting his teeth, with all his might he hurled the spear at the sow.

The spear shot through the air, struck the sow in the left flank and ripped out through the right flank. Yelling out as if to confound the jungle itself, she leapt out of the bush and started rolling on the green grass.

The very instant the spear pierced the sow's body, the old man leapt down from the tree and roared terrifyingly facing the jackals. Bending down he lifted up two stones. He saw the jackals making off in different directions. As they ran with

their tails tucked between their legs, the dust rose behind them like a cloud. The pressure of their speeding feet on the gravel and the resultant friction struck sparks as they ran. When he looked at the jackals his eyes filled with disgust and hatred since they had run for their lives like cowards. As they disappeared, the stones dropped from his hands.

He approached the sow with bent back and knees. She lay there quiet as a black boulder. The spear that had lodged in her was still there. Her flanks and forelegs were drenched in blood.

The old man gripped the spear, pressed the snout of the pig under his left foot and grunting loudly pulled out the spear in one move. As the clotted blood slid along the spear point, he held it high across the moon and shouted in a choked voice, "I killed the sow with my own hands. It is my own doing." Then he drove the spear into the ground vengefully and laying his hands on it muttered, "There was no other way. No other way to save the piglets."

The moon came out from behind the clouds. The breeze resumed its eerie sound as if in accompaniment to the dance of demons.

The old man left the spear and walked into the tindra bush. The eight piglets were frisking charmingly. He knelt down and took two young ones in both hands. He looked at them fondly and smiled, his face creasing into deeper wrinkles.

"How do I rear them?" he asked himself. "There is another sow of the same breed in my sty. She has just had piglets. I'll take these and set them down with that sow," he thought.

A doubt stirred. "Sows might not allow another's piglets to approach. Did anyone hear of a sukka sow suckling another's piglets?"

"Anything is possible. I have done many things, others never saw or heard of," he told himself.

He glanced at the sow from where he sat. "I have reared her myself and killed her with my own hands. I'll never forget her. After her death, she will appear in my dreams every day," he thought.

The wind died suddenly. The dry leaves floating in the air

came swirling to the ground. The trees which had bent their heads so far stood erect. "

"The battle is over," thought the old man as he got up. Some black birds flew in the sky crying "gi - gi - gi." "Even the kabodi² birds were setting out for their nests. The morning star will soon appear in the sky. I must reach my shack before daybreak," he thought.

The piglets were squealing and crawling and groping like old men who had lost their staves. The old man looked at their quivering flanks and thought, "It was a mistake on my part to think that the battle was over. Before daybreak I must reach these piglets to the sow in the sty and see that they are suckled. Without milk these tiny creatures cannot survive long. I ought to take them to the shack before dawn. Killing the babbler and the sow to save the piglets was one thing; to take the piglets to the safety of the shack before daybreak entirely another. So it is foolish to think that the battle is over. Now my only enemy is my own weariness."

54

He picked up his knife lying in the grass and walked to the bamboo bushes across the valley. He cut two bamboo poles and placing them on his shoulder, dragged them to the sunkrenu tree. He cut the poles into strips and started weaving a basket with them and the tindra creepers.

"The boy would be waiting for me in the hut," thought the old man. "He must have kept vigil through the night waiting for me anxiously without even touching food and water. As I was searching for the sow, as I was keeping guard on the sunkrenu tree and as I go back carrying the sow in the basket, he will be seated in front of the shack, waiting for me. He would have prayed to a thousand gods for my safety and for the safety of my pigs. How will he react to the death of the sow and to the sight of my mangled thighs? He might roll on the ground weeping. Or hide his head in my lap and weep silently?"

He finished weaving the basket and got up. He lifted the sow and put her in the basket. He spread the leaves of the ganuga³ thickly on her and placed each piglet on the bed of leaves gently. He tried to lift the basket and put it on his head.

However much he tried, he could not lift the basket from the ground. He tightened his loincloth, rubbed his palms against each other, took a deep breath and tried again. The basket on the ground didn't stir even an inch. He gave up trying, sat beside the basket and looked sadly at his defeated arms. "I have long since reached the evening of life," he thought. He looked around from where he sat and thought "If only someone would help me lift the basket and place it on my head." But he couldn't spot anything other than carcasses, trees, the valley and boulders.

He did not waste time waiting for the help he longed for ... wasting time was something he wouldn't dare do even in a dream.

"I never thought the basket could be so heavy ... all the contradictions in the world seem to be in it. It has a creature who lived for many years and has just died. And also the creatures who are just born and are going to live for many years," he thought.

"Are they really going to live long?" he questioned himself. "How unfortunate it is that the lives of eight creatures rely on my draining strength!"

55

"To save the piglets I lost my sow. Now I shall leave the carcass of the sow for the sake of the piglets," thinking which he got up. "No man is altogether fortunate. No man is successful in everything he attempts. Life is a balance of conquests and defeats. Like the tears that reduce the burden of sorrow, the consciousness of the balance gives comfort in defeat," he thought as he dragged the carcass of the sow out of the basket and dropped it on the grass. He gently set the piglets on the ganuga leaves at the bottom of the basket.

This time he was able to lift the basket without much trouble. He balanced it on his knees and took a deep breath. As the veins in his temples swelled, he pushed the basket up from the knee to the shoulder and finally shifted it onto his head. He stretched out an arm, took his spear and knife and set off, walking eastwards.

The piglets started squealing as if they were disturbed. "Not much longer now. See if I don't take you home before you close and open your eyes once," he said as he strode along.

He walked, treading on his shadow cast by the moon inclined in the western sky, with the guidance of the distant hills and stars.

The ceaseless movement of the piglets on the ganuga leaves in the basket on his head was as soothing to him as the sound of raindrops.

The old man felt the return journey was faster than his travel into the jungle. He no longer needed to search the caves. Nor beat the bushes with his spear. Nor hoot "Huch! Huch!" Now he only needed to walk along the track.

After walking for some time he felt he was taking too long. Leaving the track he started walking across the meadows and deeps towards the east.

He strode rapidly watching the sky and listening to the sound of the piglets stirring.

Gradually the night passed, the moon went down behind the western hills. After a while the dawn broke and the sky in the east reddened.

The old man stopped abruptly as if someone had slapped him on his back. He hadn't noticed but for a long while he had not heard the piglets stirring. As soon as he realized it, his body shook from top to toe. He put the basket down with trembling hands. All the eight piglets lay still. Their shrunken sides were heaving feebly. Their eyeballs stirred under closed eyelids as fine as onion skin.

The old man was petrified looking at the shadow of death creeping across the basket. "I am playing with the lives of these piglets. They won't survive long without milk. I am about to

allow them to slip from my hands," he thought. With trembling hands he lifted the basket onto his head and resumed walking.

As he strode on, the scabs on his shoulders and thighs cracked open one by one and the wounds began to bleed. Drops of blood slid to the ground. The old man was rapidly being overtaken by weakness.

"My determination knows no defeat. It will conquer all weakness. I'll take the piglets alive to my shack. That's my resolve," he thought.

There crept through him the feeling that he was carrying not the piglets, but the goddess of death in his basket, and that she was consuming his physical strength and morale.

His head reeled and drowsiness was overtaking him. Without his volition, his feet came to a stop. His sight darkened. He could see blue circles in the dark. He heard the voice of the boy ... it sounded like a breeze blowing over the branches of a poplar-leaved fig¹ tree and the water flowing over a sloping boulder.

After some time he got over his drowsiness and the darkness was dispelled. The boy was nowhere around. "I've never had such an experience. I've never been so helpless before," he thought and resumed his journey.

In the east, the sunrays were breaking up the darkness. Because the wind was low, the trees stood still and dumb. The boulders which had drunk in the cool light of moon were getting ready to face the sun's passion.

The old man's legs wobbled. His body was trembling. His pace slowed. "But I should not stop my journey. Now every minute is as precious as a century. Never before have the half-hours in my life assumed this much meaning," he thought.

His bewilderment and helplessness increased by the minute. Smashing his robust determination, his legs stopped at a pool. "I'll rest for a while. I may recover my energy," he thought as he lowered the basket. His throat and tongue were parched. Leaving the basket, he staggered towards the water in the pool. Greedily he drank handfuls of water as if he was piling up handfuls of valuable precious stones. The water, as

tranquil as a mirror so far, was disturbed and the stars on its surface flew this way and that erratically. After quenching his thirst he lay on the edge of the pool on snailshells.

The waves in the pool subsided as he lay in weakness born of defeat and defeat born of helplessness. The images of stars became still and shone again.

He was reminded of cock-fights and a rooster which had run backwards dripping blood. He remembered the gamblers, who, having bet on the rooster, yelled and cheered it while slapping their thighs. He also remembered the tribals beating their drum to rouse a bull-calf in cattle races.

"Now no one can cheer me. No one can make me resolute. I am exhausted physically and mentally. Now no one can inspire me to achieve my goal," he thought.

He could see the topmost branches of trees, the stars, and the overcast sky, lying on his back on the snailshells at the edge of the pool.

An incident that had occurred when he was a cattleherd in the Sugali forest flashed through his mind suddenly.

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There were three other herdsmen in the forest along with him. It had taken months for their cattle to get used to their life in the jungle. Just as they got accustomed to the rainy season, summer would set in. As they got used to the summer, winter would begin.

After a while a Golla² fellow joined them with a herd of cattle. There were eight cows, ten oxen and some calves in his herd, altogether about twenty animals. These animals were his only livelihood. He had no land. Because of a drought in his place, he had come to the jungle, driving his cattle where he was overjoyed to see green meadows and gurgling streams.

But his cattle, used to the village, did not adjust easily to jungle life. If a crow-pheasant crowed loudly in the bamboo bushes, they would stand still, cocking their ears. If the water-fowls fluttered their wings in the reeds, they raised their tails and ran for their lives.

One day the shepherd grazed the cattle to their fill and brought them back by dusk. He tied them to their posts and slept with the other herdsmen in the shack. In the middle of

the night, the noise of the cattle straining at their tethers woke them up abruptly. They heard the cattle snapping their leashes. The shepherd stepped out quickly and looked around. Not a single beast of his was in sight. He could only see the half-broken tethers at the posts. The cattle belonging to other shepherds lay calmly chewing the cud. They all decided that the shepherd's cattle must have made off, terrified on seeing forms in the dark and hearing strange sounds because they were unfamiliar with jungle life. They each set off in a different direction in search of the lost cattle. As the sun was rising, they returned empty-handed. But the Golla fellow did not return. They looked for the shepherd and his cattle all through the jungle for two whole days and nights. On the morning of the third day, they saw flocks of vultures flying in the sky about four miles away. Frightened, they ran up expecting to see a disaster.

The vultures were flying over a terrible gorge. At the bottom of the gorge lay the carcasses of the shepherd's cattle. All along the sides of the gorge were marks made by the horns and hoofs of the cattle as they had fallen over.

They all got down into the gorge and approached the dead cattle. They spotted the shepherd and their hearts sank. He had used his upper cloth to hang himself from a poison-nut tree.

The old man vividly recalled this incident of almost forty years ago. "Why should I remember that horrifying thing now?" he thought feeling as if he were caught in some vicious circle. "I don't know whether I remember the Golla fellow because I have become so weak or whether my strength is ebbing because of my memories of the shepherd."

He closed his eyes as if to erase the horrifying memory of the shepherd dangling from the poison-nut tree. Before his closed eyes there appeared the form of the boy. He was jubilant like a fish surfacing and frisking on the water. The boy leapt on to the bank and ran, his body dripping and glistening in the sun after swimming in the lake.

The old man opened his eyes after a while. No trace of the boy anywhere. The jungle lay still and pregnant with mystery.

He thought, "What strange emotions! I'm losing my grip on my mind, not merely over my body." "

Far away at the back of the hills, the sun rose. The red rays of the sun struck the clouds in the sky. "Daylight is engendered by the sun and moonlight by the moon. From where does darkness take its birth?" he wondered. "Perhaps darkness is beyond birth and death. It may be eternal. How horrifying that the light related to the divine is transient whereas darkness which is demoniac is abiding," he thought.

Slowly his eyes closed again. Gradually he slipped into a state which was neither sleep nor dream.

The sunrays that patted the clouds came down to touch the mount of the hill, the topmost branches of the trees and quickly slipped further down. The glow-worms, tired of flying all through the night, and the grasshoppers, just waking, clung to the branches of trees and clumps of grass and were still.

The morning light slid down further and gently touched the meadows and the valleys. On the surface of the water in the pool, the sunlight shimmered. The old man, lying on the edge of the water, woke up touched by the rays of the sun.

He lay with closed eyes but felt he heard a sound close by. He opened his eyes and sat up.

Like the very personification of death sat four vultures on the rim of the basket. Their sharp beaks were soaked in blood.

The body of the old man burned in anger. He stretched out his hand, took the spear and hurled it at the vultures. The spear missed its aim and lodged deep in the earth. One by one the vultures rose heavily into the air fluttering their wings. When they rose, the basket tilted and turned upside down. The old man reached it swiftly, turned up the basket and pushed the leaves aside. Underneath the ganuga leaves, in place of the piglets, lay eight lumps of flesh.

He stood erect. There were tears in his eyes. As he batted his eyelids, the tears slipped onto his cheeks and disappeared into his wrinkles. The jungle looked hazy to him through the film of tears. He wiped the tears with the back of his hand. Four vultures sat on a branch close by, rubbing their

bloodsoaked beaks against the branches. He felt like smashing their hearts with his spear.

"But now I am not even fit to hurl a spear. I ought to use a spear for support," he thought.

As self-pity engulfed him he squatted on the ground. He laid his palms on his knees and rested his forehead on his palms.

"The battle is finished. I am utterly defeated," he thought.

TWENTY

The sun was two arms high in the sky.

The old man plodded up to the shack, using the spear in his right hand as a staff, and holding the knife in his left hand. The pigs recognised his steps and began squealing.

The boy lay sleeping on the ground between the shack and the pigsty. The palm-leaf mat, curled into a bundle, lay by his side. He had probably waited for the old man through the night and slipped into sleep.

At the threshold the old man let the knife and spear fall at his feet and entered the shack. He collapsed on the earthen floor as his spine and knees creaked. His body turned and clung to the floor face down, as naturally as the chick runs to the protection of its mother's wings, on seeing the shadow of a flying eagle and as naturally as a snail draws its body into its shell at the touch of grains of sand raised by the traveller's footsteps.

He was the very picture of inertia. "Did I fight so much only to be seized by torpor?" the question touched each cell in his body. "In the same way, creation whose primary aspects are movement and growth ultimately fuses into a vacuum, life which experiences the greatest vicissitudes probably cannot escape the spell of torpor," he thought.

He felt as if parts of his body had disintegrated and were lying lifeless everywhere. But his mind was smouldering like

a pyre. "How strange? The body that has a form and shape lies still but the mind that is without form and shape flutters like a butterfly in the meadow," he wondered.

"But I must put an end to these thoughts and rest my exhausted mind. There are many things I have to do later because this is not the last day of my life. I have suffered the greatest misfortunes today and endured countless blows of ill luck. Even then, it is not the last day of my life," he thought.

Slowly his mind also grew still and slipped into sleep.

TWENTY-ONE

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On the gravel road beside the shack, a bullock cart moved. The boy woke and sat up, disturbed by the screeching of wheels. Without stretching his limbs, without screwing up his eyes, he looked around bewildered as if someone had tapped him awake.

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He saw the knife and spear at the threshold of the shack, came swiftly to his feet and ran to the place.

The old man slept clinging to the earth, breathing with his mouth open slightly. His sides rose and fell gently. Waist downwards, his thighs and legs were soaked in blood. In some places the lacerated flesh hung loose.

The boy silently crossed the threshold and stepped in. As tears welled in his eyes, he sat at the feet of the old man.

ONE

1. sukka sow the Telugu word used is "Sukka Pandi." "Pandi" means pig. "Sukka" is a reference to the special breed of ferocious pigs.
2. Kalimaya "Maya" means illusion. "Kali" is short for Kali-yuga which according to Hindu cosmology is the most degraded of the four cycles of time. So Kalimaya is characteristic of modern times when people pursue the vanities of life.

TWO

1. koss a distance of two miles.

FOUR

1. vampali purple galega, a small wild shrub with deep pink flowers and leaves resembling that of the indigo plant.

FIVE

1. Vaisakha April-May.

SIX

1. Yerukala name of a tribe that lives by poaching and hunting.
2. Chenchus a hill tribe, aboriginals.

SEVEN

1. balasa the thorny caray.
2. kasara a thick creeper that grows in forests and on waste lands.
3. bonthaje-
mudu a large medicinal cactus.
4. baras a fathom, the length of two arms extended.
5. You rose
... today supposed to be inauspicious.

EIGHT

1. Bhimasena : in the *Mahabharata*, one of the Pandava brothers, known for his remarkable physical strength.
2. Draupadi wife of the Pandavas.
3. Keechaka a villain who tries to seduce Draupadi.
4. tapas meditation, austerity, penance and self-mortification.

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TEN

1. tindra a certain medicinal plant.
2. sunkrenu the tiger bean tree, a large tree with whiteflowers.

TWELVE

1. Sukkilam Sukka Pandi is affectionately called Sukkilam by the old man.
2. Here ... hut : There is a custom among the local folk to isolate a girl who has attained puberty for fifteen days in a newly built hut. The boy who is to marry her, later remodels this hut into a home.

THIRTEEN

1. sigara the acacia tree. Its nuts and leaves are used as a detergent.

FOURTEEN

1. bilibitri a variety of flower, that blooms at midnight.
2. Chitri Telugu equivalent of March-April.
3. Avadi Telugu equivalent of August.
4. Lord
 Brahma the creator in the Hindu trinity.
5. written the Hindu belief that every creature's destiny is decided at or even before its birth.
6. sastras a science, art, law or a system or a code of ordinances.
7. Narasimha : the fourth incarnation of Lord Vishnu, half-man (nara) half-lion (simha) to kill a demon king.
8. yagnam an offering, a ritual or a sacrifice.
9. blind man Dhritrashtra in the *Mahabharata* is a blind king. The song is highly rhythmic in Telugu with repeated sound sequences.
10. bapana the word "bapana cheema" in Telugu means a large red ant found on trees. "Bapana" is also a popular, derogatory, corrupt form of the word "Brahmin."

FIFTEEN

1. Rahu the ascending node of the moon.

SEVENTEEN

1. yuga an age of the world or long period of time. According to Hindu cosmology, all time is divided into four ages named the Krita, Treta, Dvapara and Kali ages.

EIGHTEEN

1. Ilavanta in the *Mahabharata*, Ilavanta is the mighty son of Bhima, who lost his legs on the first day of war at Kurukshetra. By Krishna's boon, he lives until the last day of the battle and watches the battle sitting on a platform, specially built for him. This is a legend popular in Chittoordistrict.
2. kabodi fruit-bats hunt at night and roost by day in trees and caves. They sleep through the day on tree-tops hanging upside down from the branches. They do not like light and so are called "kabodi" which means blind in Telugu.
3. ganuga *Pongamia glabra*; a tree which grows on the banks of rivers, mountains and in coastal villages. Its leaves are eaten by cattle and also have a medicinal value.

NINETEEN

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1. poplar-leaved fig : ragi in Telugu which means copper. The fibre made from its tender branches is copper in shade and is used in weaving strong ropes by farmers. Its leaves are thick and crisp.
2. Golla a herdsman, a shepherd, a watchman. Name of a particular caste that lives by growing sheep and cattle.

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Subarnalata
- Gujarati* : **Henceforth**
Rear Verandah
Crumpled Letter
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Gendethimma
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