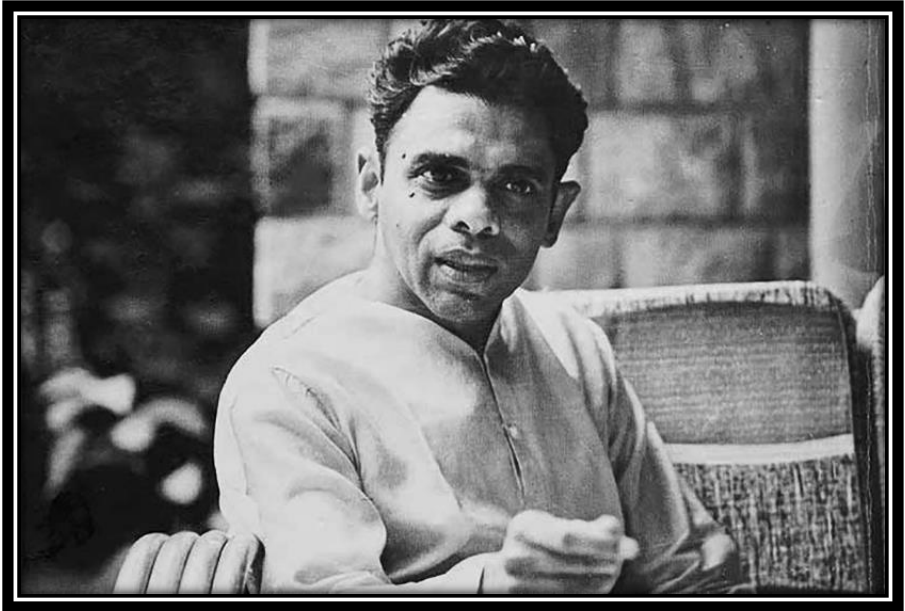


A. K. RAMANUJAN

SELECTED POETRY



The Striders (1966)

Hokkulalli Hinilla, No Lotus in the Navel (1969)

Relations (1971)

Selected Poems (1976)

Mattu Itara Padyagalu and Other Poems (1977)

Second Sight (1986)

The Collected Poems of A. K. Ramanujan (1995)

Uncollected Poems and Prose (2005)



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The Striders

Put away, put away this dream.
And search
for certain thin-
stemmed, bubble-eyed water bugs.
See them perch
on dry capillary legs
weightless
on the ripple skin
of a stream

No, not only prophets
walk on water. This bug sits
on a landslide of lights
and drowns eye-
deep
into its tiny strip
of sky.

Snakes

No, it does not happen
when I walk through the woods.
But, walking in museums of quartz
or the aisles of bookstacks,
looking at their geometry
without curves
and the layers of transparency
that make them opaque,
dwelling on the yellower vein
in the yellow amber
or touching a book that has gold
on its spine,
I think of snakes.

The twirls of their hisses
rise like the tiny dust-cones on slow-noon roads
winding through the farmers' feet.
Black lorgnettes are etched on their hoods,
ridiculous, alien, like some terrible aunt,
a crest among tiles and scales
that molt with the darkening half
of every moon.

A basketful of ritual cobras
comes into the tame little house,
their brown-wheat glisten ringed with ripples.
They lick the room with their bodies, curves
uncurling, writing a sibilant alphabet of panic
on my floor. Mother gives them milk
in saucers. She watches them suck
and bare the black-line design
etched on the brass of the saucer.
The snakeman wreathes their writhing
round his neck
for father's smiling
money. But I scream.

Sister ties her braids
with a knot of tassel.
But the weave of her knee-long braid has scales,
their gleaming held by a score of clean new pins.
I look till I see her hair again.

My night full of ghosts from a sadness
in a play, my left foot listens to my right footfall,
a clockwork clicking in the silence
within my walking.

The clickshod heel suddenly strikes
and slushes on a snake: I see him turn,
the green white of his belly
measured by bluish nodes, a water-bleached lotus-stalk
plucked by a landsman hand. Yet panic rushes
my body to my feet, my spasms wring
and drain his fear and mine. I leave him sealed,
a flat-head whiteness on a stain.

Now

frogs can hop upon this sausage rope,
flies in the sun will mob the look in his eyes,

and I can walk through the woods.

The Opposable Thumb

“One two three four five
five fingers to a hand”
said the blind boy counting,
but he found a sixth one
waiting like a cousin for a coin;
a budlike node complete with nail,
phalanx, and mole
under the usual casual opposable thumb.

“One two three four five
five fingerspans for a woman’s blouse,”
said the muslin-weaver spanning
but he found his span shorter by a thumb:
a puckered stump, sewn like a sausage head
by a barber, without a nail
phalanx or rice-grain line,
instead of the usual casual opposable thumb.

Said my granny, rolling her elephant leg
like a log in a ruined mill:
“One two three four five
five princes in a forest
each one different like the fingers on a hand,”
and we always looked to find on her paw
just one finger left of five: a real thumb,
no longer usual, casual, or opposable after her husband’s
knifing temper one sunday morning half a century ago.

Breaded Fish

Specially for me, she had some breaded
fish; even thrust a blunt-headed
smelt into my mouth;

and looked hurt when I could
neither sit nor eat, as a hood
of memory like a coil on a heath

opened in my eyes: a dark half-naked
length of woman, dead
on the beach in a yard of cloth,

dry, rolled by the ebb, breaded
by the grained indifference of sand. I headed
for the shore, my heart beating in my mouth.

Still Life

When she left me
after lunch, I read
for a while.
But I suddenly wanted
to look again
and I saw the half-eaten
sandwich,
bread,
lettuce and salami,
all carrying the shape
of her bite.

Looking for a Cousin on a Swing

When she was four or five
she sat on a village swing
and her cousin, six or seven,
sat himself against her;
with every lunge of the swing
she felt him
in the lunging pits
of her feeling;
and afterwards
we climbed a tree, she said,

not very tall, but full of leaves
like those of a figtree,

and we were very innocent
about it.

Now she looks for the swing
in cities with fifteen suburbs
and tries to be innocent
about it

not only on the crotch of a tree
that looked as if it would burst
under every leaf
into a brood of scarlet figs

if someone suddenly sneezed.

Self-Portrait

I resemble everyone
but myself, and sometimes see
in shop-windows
despite the well-known laws
of optics,
the portrait of a stranger,
date unknown,
often signed in a corner
by my father.

Anxiety

Not branchless as the fear tree,
it has naked roots and secret twigs.
Not geometric as the parabolas
of hope, it has loose ends
with a knot at the top
that's me.

Not wakeful in its white-snake
glassy ways like the eloping gaiety of waters,
it drowns, viscous and fibered as pitch.

Flames have only lungs. Water is all eyes.
The earth has bone for muscle. And the air
is a flock of invisible pigeons.

But anxiety
can find no metaphor to end it.

A River

In Madurai,¹
city of temples and poets,
who sang of cities and temples,

every summer
a river dries to a trickle
in the sand,
baring the sand ribs,
straw and women's hair
clogging the watergates
at the rusty bars
under the bridges with patches
of repair all over them
the wet stones glistening like sleepy
crocodiles, the dry ones
shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun

The poets only sang only of the floods.

He was there for a day
when they had the floods.
People everywhere talked
of the inches rising,
of the precise number of cobbled steps
run over by the water, rising
on the bathing places,
and the way it carried off three village houses,
one pregnant woman
and a couple of cows
named Gopi² and Brinda³ as usual.

¹ A city in the south-central Tamil Nadu state, southern India.

² Gopi (गोपी) is a Sanskrit word originating from the word *Gopala*, referring to a person in charge of a herd of cows.

³ Brinda (वृन्दā) is from the Sanskrit. It is the basil forest where Kṛṣṇa grazed his cattle.

The new poets still quoted
the old poets, but no one spoke
in verse
of the pregnant woman
drowned, with perhaps twins in her,
kicking at blank walls
even before birth.

He said:
the river has water enough
to be poetic
about only once a year
and then
it carries away
in the first half-hour
three village houses,
a couple of cows
named Gopi and Brinda
and one pregnant woman
expecting identical twins
with no moles on their bodies,
with different colored diapers
to tell them apart.

Still Another View of Grace

I burned and burned. But one day I turned
and caught that thought
by the screams of her hair and said: “Beware,
Do not follow a gentleman’s morals

with that absurd determined air.
Find a priest. Find any beast in the wind
for a husband. He will give a houseful
of legitimate sons. It is too late for sin,

even for treason. And I have no reason to know your kind.
Bred Brahmin⁴ among singers of shivering hymns
I shudder to the bone at hungers that roam the street
beyond the constable’s beat.” But there She stood

upon that dusty road on a night lit April mind
and gave me a look. Commandments crumbled
as in my father’s past. Her tumbled hair suddenly known
as silk in my hand. I shook a little

and took her behind the laws of my land.

⁴ The highest ranking of the four varnas, or social classes, in Hindu India.

Case History

What had he done
to crush glass in his fist
one middle-aged morning, known

only as morning by clocks without the sun?
At seven, his slingshot had not hit
the frosted childhood's streetlight:

he was no looting horseback Hun
out of his history books. On
evenings full of bats' wings

he had scarcely seen a sister raped by a dead father's sin
but only shaped by a mother's word. In
the swirl of his teens he had perhaps thrilled

to raisin-thefts and one kiss under the stairs. Once he ran
from a body-house without windows
looking for the wombs of faceless women

he never filled
with sons. But now he has glass in his fist
and several rows

of futures that could not reach any past.

Time and Time Again

Or listen to the clocktowers
of any old well-managed city
beating their gongs round the clock, each slightly
off the others' time, deeper or lighter
in its bronze, beating out a different
sequence each half-hour, out of the accidents
of alloy, a maker's shaking hand
in Switzerland, or the mutual distances
commemorating a donor's whim,
the perennial feuds and seasonal alliance
of Hindu, Christian, and Muslim —
cut off sometimes by a change of wind,
a change of mind, or a siren
between the pieces of a backstreet quarrel.
One day you look up and see one of them
eyeless, silent, a zigzag sky showing
through the knocked-out clockwork, after a riot,
a peace-march time bomb, or a precise act
Of nature in a night of lightnings.

Love Poem for a Wife, 1

Really what keeps us apart
at the end of years is unshared
childhood. You cannot, for instance,
meet my father. He is some years
dead. Neither can I meet yours:
he has lately lost his temper
and mellowed.

In the transverse midnight gossip
of cousins' reunions among
brandy fumes, cashews and the Absences
of grandparents, you suddenly grow
nostalgic for my past and I
envy you your village dog-ride
and the mythology

of the seven crazy aunts.
You begin to recognize me
as I pass from ghost to real
and back again in the albums
of family rumors, in brothers'
anecdotes of how noisily
father bathed,

slapping soap on his back;
find sources for a familiar
sheep-mouth look in a sepia wedding
picture of father in a turban,
mother standing on her bare
splayed feet, silver rings
on her second toes;
and reduce the entire career

of my recent unique self
to the compulsion of some high
sentence in His Smilesian⁵ diary.
And your father, gone irrevocably
in age, after changing every day
your youth's evenings,

he will acknowledge the wickedness
of no reminiscence: no, not
the burning end of the cigarette
in the balcony, pacing
to and fro as you came to the gate,
late, after what you thought
was an innocent

date with a nice Muslim friend
who only hinted at touches.
Only two weeks ago, in Chicago,
you and brother James started
one of your old drag-out fights
about where the bathroom was
in the backyard,

north or south of the well
next to the jackfruit tree
in your father's father's house
in Alleppey.⁶ Sister-in-law
and I were blank cut-outs
fitted to our respective
slots in a room

really nowhere as the two of you
got down to the floor to draw
blueprints of a house from memory
on everything, from newspapers
to the backs of envelopes
and road-maps of the United States
that happened

⁵ Samuel Smiles (1812 - 1904) was a Scottish author and government reformer. His masterpiece, *Self-Help* (1859), promoted thrift and claimed that poverty was caused largely by irresponsible habits, while also attacking materialism and *laissez-faire* government. It has been called "the bible of mid-Victorian liberalism" and raised Smiles to celebrity status almost overnight.

⁶ The administrative headquarters of Alappuzha District in the Indian State of Kerala.

to flap in the other room
in a midnight wind: you wagered heirlooms
and husband's earnings on what the Uncle in Kuwait
would say about the Bathroom
and the Well, and the dying,
by now dead,

tree next to it. Probably
only the Egyptians had it right:
their kings had sisters for queens
to continue the incests
of childhood into marriage.
Or we should do as well-meaning
Hindus did,

betroth us before birth,
forestalling separate horoscopes
and mothers' first periods,
and wed us in the oral cradle
and carry marriage back into
the namelessness of childhoods.

Love Poem for a Wife, 2

After a night of rage
that lasted days
quarrels in a forest,
waterfalls, exchanges, marriage,
exploration of bays
and places we had never known
we would never know,

my wife's always
changing syriac face,
chosen of all faces
a pouting difficult child's
changing in the chameleon
emerald
wilderness of Kerala
small cousin to tall

mythic men, rubberplant
and peppervine,
frocks with print patterns
copied locally
from the dotted
butterfly,
grandmother wearing white
day and night in a village

full of the color schemes
of kraits⁷ and gartersnakes
adolescent in Aden⁸ among stabbing
Arabs, betrayed and whipped
yet happy among ships
in harbor
and the evacuees,
the borrowed earth

⁷ Any of 12 species of highly venomous snakes belonging to the cobra family.

⁸ A port city and the temporary capital of Yemen, located by the eastern approach to the Red Sea (the Gulf of Aden).

under the borrowed trees;
taught dry and wet,
hot and cold
by the monsoon then,
by the siroccos now
on copper
dustcones, the crater
townships in the volcanoes

of Aden:

I dreamed one day
that face my own yet hers,
with my own nowhere
to be found; lost; cut
loose like my dragnet
past
I woke up and groped
turned on the realism

of the ceiling light
found half a mirror
in the mountain cabin
fallen behind the dresser
to look at my face now
and the face
of her sleep, still asleep
and very syriac on the bed

behind: happy for once
at such loss of face,
whole in the ambivalence
of being halfwoman half-
man contained in a common
body,
androgynous as a god
balancing stillness in the middle

of a duel to make it dance:
soon to be myself, a man
unhappy in the morning
to be himself again,
the past still there
a drying
net on the mountain,

in the morning, in the waking
my wife's face still fast
asleep, blessed as by
butterfly, snake, shiropo
and grandmother's other
children,
by my only love's only
insatiable envy.

The Hindoo: The Only Risk

Just to keep the heart's simple given beat
through a neighbor's striptease or a friend's suicide.
To keep one's hand away from the kitchen knife

through that returning weekly need
to maim oneself or carve up wife
and child. Always and everywhere, to eat

three square meals at regular hours; suppress
that itch to take a peek at the dead street-
dog before the scavengers come. Not to be caught

dead at sea, battle, riot, adultery or hate
nor between the rollers of a giant lathe. Yes,
to keep it cool when strangers' children hiss

as if they knew what none could know nor guess.
At the bottom of all this bottomless
enterprise to keep simple the heart's given beat,

the only risk is heartlessness.

Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House

Sometimes I think that nothing
that ever comes into this house
goes out. Things that come in everyday
to lose themselves among other things
lost long ago among
other things lost long ago;

lame wandering cows from nowhere
have been known to be tethered,
given a name, encouraged

to get pregnant in the broad daylight
of the street under the elders'
supervision, the girls hiding

behind windows with holes in them.

Unread library books
usually mature in two weeks
and begin to lay a row

of little eggs in the ledgers
for fines, as silverfish
in the old man's office room

breed dynasties among long legal words
in the succulence
of Victorian parchment.

Neighbors' dishes brought up
with the greasy sweets they made
all night the day before yesterday

for the wedding anniversary of a god,

never leave the house they enter,
like the servants, the phonographs,
the epilepsies in the blood,
sons-in-law who quite forget
their mothers, but stay to check
accounts or teach arithmetic to nieces,

or the women who come as wives
from houses open on one side
to rising suns, on another

to the setting, accustomed
to wait and to yield to monsoons
in the mountains' calendar

beating through the hanging banana leaves
And also anything that goes out
will come back, processed and often
with long bills attached,

like the hooped bales of cotton
shipped off to invisible Manchesters⁹
and brought back milled and folded

for a price, cloth for our days'
middle-class loins, and muslin
for our richer nights. Letters mailed

have a way of finding their way back
with many re-directions to wrong
addresses and red ink-marks

earned in Tiruvalla¹⁰ and Sialkot.¹¹
And ideas behave like rumors,
once casually mentioned somewhere
they come back to the door as prodigies

born to prodigal fathers, with eyes
that vaguely look like our own,
like what Uncle said the other day:

that every Plotinus¹² we read
is what some Alexander¹³ looted
between the malarial rivers.

⁹ A city in northwest England, noted for its unique position at the forefront of the Industrial Revolution. The mechanization of the cotton industry saw Manchester become one of the first cities to experience urbanization in the 19th century.

¹⁰ An industrialized city in Kerala, India.

¹¹ An industrialized city in Punjab, Pakistan.

¹² Plotinus, (205-270), ancient philosopher, the center of an influential circle of intellectuals and men of letters in 3rd-century Rome. Regarded as the founder of Neoplatonism.

¹³ Alexander the Great (356 BCE-323 BCE), king of Macedonia who overthrew the Persian empire, extended his empire into India, and created the Hellenistic world of territorial kingdoms.

A beggar once came with a violin
to croak out a prostitute song
that our voiceless cook sang
all the time in our backyard.

Nothing stays out: daughters
get married to short-lived idiots;
sons who run away come back

in grand children who recite Sanskrit
to approving old men, or bring
betel nuts for visiting uncles

who keep them gaping with
anecdotes of unseen fathers,
or to bring Ganges water
in a copper pot
for the last of the dying
ancestors' rattle in the throat.

And though many times from everywhere,
recently only twice:
once in nineteen-forty-three
from as far as the Sahara,

half -gnawed by desert foxes,
and lately from somewhere
in the north, a nephew with stripes

on his shoulder was called
an incident on the border
and was brought back in plane

and train and military truck
even before the telegrams reached,
on a perfectly good

Chatty afternoon

Obituary

Father, when he passed on,
left dust
on a table of papers,
left debts and daughters,
a bedwetting grandson
named by the toss
of a coin after him,

a house that leaned
slowly through our growing
years on a bent coconut
tree in the yard.
Being the burning type,
he burned properly
at the cremation

as before, easily
and at both ends,
left his eye coins
in the ashes that didn't
look one bit different,
several spinal discs, rough,
some burned to coal, for sons

to pick gingerly
and throw as the priest
said, facing east
where three rivers met
near the railway station;
no longstanding headstone
with his full name and two dates

to hold in their parentheses
everything he didn't quite
manage to do himself,
like his caesarian birth
in a brahmin ghetto
and his death by heart-
failure in the fruit market.

But someone told me
he got two lines
in an inside column
of a Madras¹⁴ newspaper
sold by the kilo
exactly four weeks later
to streethawkers

who sell it in turn
to the small groceries
where I buy salt,
coriander,
and jaggery
in newspaper cones
that I usually read

for fun, and lately
in the hope of finding
these obituary lines.
And he left us
a changed mother
and more than
one annual ritual.

¹⁴ Capital city of the Tamil Nadu state, southern India. Now known as Chennai.

Prayers to Lord Murugan¹⁵

1

Lord of new arrivals
lovers and rivals:
arrive
at once with cockfight and banner—
dance till on this and the next three
hills

women's hands and the garlands
on the chests of men will turn like
chariot wheels

O where are the cockscombs and where
the beaks glinting with new knives
at crossroads

when will orange banners burn
among blue trumpet flowers and the shade
of trees

waiting for lightnings?

2

Twelve etched arrowheads
for eyes and six unforeseen
faces, and you were not
embarrassed.

Unlike other gods
you find work
for every face,
and made
eyes at only one
woman. And your arms
are like faces with proper
names.

¹⁵ Chief deity of the ancient Tamils of South India, His favorite weapon was the trident or spear, and his banner carried the emblem of a wild fowl. He is later connected with Kartikeya, the North Indian God of War and Victory, and Commander of the Gods. In this form he is the son of Parvati and Shiva, brother of Ganesha.

3

Lord of green
growing things, give us
a hand

in our fight
with the fruit fly.
Tell us,

will the red flower ever
come to the branches
of the blueprint

city?

4

Lord of great changes and small
cells: exchange our painted grey
pottery

for iron copper the leap of stone horses
our yellow grass and lily seed
for rams!

flesh and scarlet rice for the carnivals
on rivers O dawn of nightmare virgins
bring us

your white-haired witches who wear
three colors even in sleep.

5

Lord of the spoor¹⁶ of the tigress,
outside our town hyenas
and civet cats live
on the kills of leopards
and tigers

¹⁶ The track or scent of an animal.

too weak to finish what's begun.
Rajahs¹⁷ stand in photographs
over ninefoot silken tigresses
that sycophants have shot.
Sleeping under country fans

hearts are worm cans
turning over continually
for the great shadows
of fish in the open
waters.

We eat legends and leavings,
remember the ivory, the apes,
the peacocks we sent in the Bible
to Solomon,¹⁸ the medicines for smallpox,
the similes

for muslin: wavering snakeskins,
a cloud of steam
Ever-rehearsing astronauts,
we purify and return
our urine
to the circling body
and burn our feces
for fuel to reach the moon
through the sky behind
the navel.

6

Master of red bloodstains,
our blood is brown;
our collars white.

Other lives and sixty-
four rumored arts¹⁹
tingle,

¹⁷ An Indian king or prince.

¹⁸ In I Kings 10, Solomon receives peacocks from Tharshish, an Indian port city.

¹⁹ In ancient India and in Hinduism in general, there were 64 performing and fine arts that one should attempt to master in order to be considered cultured.

pins and needles
at amputees' fingertips
in phantom muscle

7

Lord of the twelve right hands
why are we your mirror men
with the two left hands

capable only of casting
reflections? Lord
of faces,

find us the face
we lost early
this morning.

8

Lord of headlines,
help us read
the small print.

Lord of the sixth sense,
give us back
our five senses.

Lord of solutions,
teach us to dissolve
and not to drown.

9

Deliver us O presence
from proxies
and absences

from sanskrit and the mythologies
of night and the several
roundtable mornings

of London and return
the future to what
it was.

10

Lord, return us.
Brings us back
to a litter

of six new pigs in a slum
and a sudden quarter
of harvest

Lord of the last-born
give us
birth.

11

Lord of lost travelers,
find us. Hunt us
down.

Lord of answers,
cure us at once
of prayers.

Elements of Composition

Composed as I am, like others,
of elements on certain well-known lists,
father's seed and mother's egg

gathering earth, air, fire, mostly
water, into a mulberry mass,
molding calcium,

carbon, even gold, magnesium and such,
into a chattering self tangled
in love and work,

scary dreams, capable of eyes that can see,
only by moving constantly,
the constancy of things

like Stonehenge or cherry trees;

add uncle's eleven fingers
making shadow-plays of rajas
and cats, hissing,

becoming fingers again, the look
of panic on sister's face
an hour before

her wedding, a dated newspaper map,
of a place one has never seen, maybe
no longer there

after the riots, downtown Nairobi,²⁰
that a friend carried in his passport
as others would

a woman's picture in their wallets;

add the lepers of Madurai,²¹
male, female, married,
with children,

²⁰ The capital city of Kenya.

²¹ Leprosy is a relatively incommunicable disease, yet for the past 2,000 years lepers have been separated, isolated, and ostracized from greater society. Even today, though patients at the Mission Leprosy Hospital in Manamadurai aren't forced to live within the compound, the stigma they face outside it, and rejection from their families and community hold many of the patients within the hospital as effectively as bars.

lion faces, crabs for claws,
clotted on their shadows
under the stone-eyed

goddesses of dance, mere pillars,
moving as nothing on earth
can move —

I pass through them
as they pass through me
taking and leaving

affections, seeds, skeletons,

millennia of fossil records
of insects that do not last
a day,

body-prints of mayflies,
a legend half-heard
in a train

of the half-man searching
for an ever-fleeing
other half

through Muharram tigers,²²
hyacinths in crocodile waters,
and the sweet

twisted lives of epileptic saints,

and even as I add
I lose, decompose,
into my elements

into other names and forms,
past, and passing, tenses
without time,

caterpillar on a leaf, eating,
being eaten.

²² Muharram is both the Islamic New Year and the first month of the year. Painting children as tigers during the Muharram festival is an Islamic tradition.

Ecology

The day after the first rain,
for years, I would come home
in a rage,

for I could see from a mile away
our three Red Champak trees
had done it again,

had burst into flower and given Mother
her first blinding migraine
of the season

with their street-long heavy-hung
yellowpollen fog of a fragrance
no wind could sift,

no door could shut out from our black-
pillared house whose walls had ears
and eyes

scales, smells, bone-creaks, nightly
visiting voices, and were porous
like us,

but Mother, flashing her temper
like her mother's twisted silver,
grand children's knickers

wet as the cold pack on her head,
would not let us cut down
a flowering tree

almost as old as she, seeded,
she said, by a passing bird's
providential droppings

to give her gods and her daughters
and daughters' daughters basketfuls
of annual flowers

and for one line of cousins
a dower of migraines in season.

In the Zoo

a tour with comments

And these,
these are scavenger birds,

fit emblems

*for a city like Calcutta
or Madras,
crammed to the top of its gates
with whelping people and yapping dogs.*

They are known generally
as adjutant storks

yes, they have a long-legged dignity

that's slightly vulgar.

Adjutant storks come in three shades,
a faded black,

like Madras lawyers, a grey,

a dirty white,

like grandmother's maggoty curds.

They are rather noisy and heavy
in their take-off
and flap themselves into air

like father

*into the rain, his baggy umbrellas with three ribs
broken by his sons in a fencing match, and three
by last year's winds.*

But once air-borne

this furry spider-legged auntie

of a bird,

it circles

on motionless wings

filling the sky's transparency

*with slow, sleepy, perfect circles
like father's Magic Carpet story
that rowdy day when the rainstorm leaked
through the roof
and mother was ill
and he had to mop
the kitchen of our pattering feet.*

Astronomer

Sky-man in a manhole
with astronomy for dream,
astrology for nightmare;

fat man full of proverbs,
the language of lean years,
living in square after

almanac square
prefiguring the day
of windfall and landslide

through a calculus
of good hours,
clutching at the tear

in his birthday shirt
as at a hole
in his mildewed horoscope,

squinting at the parallax
of black planets,
his Tiger, his Hare

moving in Sanskrit zodiacs,
forever troubled
by the fractions, the kidneys

in his Tamil flesh,
his body the Great Bear
dipping for the honey,

the woman-smell
in the small curly hair
down there.

Death and the Good Citizen

I know, you told me,
 your nightsoil and all
your city's, goes still
 warm every morning
in a government
 lorry, drippy (you said)
but punctual, by special
arrangement to the municipal
 gardens to make the grass
grow tall for the cows
 in the village, the rhino
in the zoo: and the oranges
 plump and glow, till
they are a preternatural
 orange.

Good animal, yet perfect
 citizen, you, you are
biodegradable. you do
 return to nature: you will
your body to the nearest
 hospital, changing death into small
change and spare parts;
 dismantling, not de-
composing like the rest
 of us. Eyes in an eye-bank
to blink some day for a stranger's
 brain, wait like mummy wheat
in the singular company
 of single eyes, pickled,
absolute.

Hearts,
 with your kind of temper,
 may even take. make connection
with alien veins, and continue
 your struggle to be nationalized.
beat ,and learn to miss a beat,
 in a foreign body.

Snakes and Ladders

Losing every time I win, climbing
ladders, falling to the bottom with snakes,
I make scenes:

in my anger, I smash all transparent
things, crystal, glass panes, one-way mirrors,
and my glasses,

blinding myself, I hit my head on white
walls, shut myself up in the bathroom,
toying with razors,

till I see blood on my thumb, when I
black out, a child again in a glass booth
elevator, plummeting

to the earth five floors a second
taking my sky, turning cloud and San Francisco
down to the ground,

where, sick to my stomach, I wake
wide open, hugging the white toilet bowl,
my cool porcelain sister.

On the Death of a Poem

Images consult
one
another,

a conscience-
stricken
jury,

and come
slowly
to a sentence.

Highway Stripper

Once as I was traveling
on a highway
to Mexico
behind a battered once-blue
Mustang
with a dusty rear window,
the wind really sang
for me
when suddenly out of the side
of the speeding car
in front of me
a woman's hand
with a wrist watch on it
threw away
a series of whirling objects
on to the hurtling road:

a straw
hat,
a white shoe fit
to be a fetish,
then another,
a heavy pleated skirt
and a fluttery
slip, faded pink,
frayed lace- edge
and all
(I even heard it swish),
a leg-of-mutton blouse
Just as fluttery.

And as I stepped
on the gas
and my car lunged
into the fifty feet
between me
and them,
a rather ordinary,
used, and off-white bra
for smallish
breasts whirled off
the window
and struck
a farmer's barbed wire
with yellow-green wheat grass
beyond
and spread-eagled on it,
pinned
by the blowing wind.

Then before I knew,
bright red panties
laced with white
hit
my windshield
and I flinched,
I swerved,
but then
it was gone,
swept aside
before I straightened up —
fortunately, no one else
on the road:
excited, curious
to see the stripper
on the highway,
maybe with an urgent
lover's one free hand
(or were there more?)
on her breast
or thigh,

I stepped again
on the gas, frustrated by their
dusty rear window
at fifty feet
I passed them
at seventy.

In that absolute
second,
that glimpse and afterimage
in this hell
of voyeurs, I saw
only one at the wheel:
a man,
about forty.

A spectacled profile
looking only
at the road
beyond the nose of his Mustang,
with a football
radio on.

again and again
I looked in my rearview
mirror
as I steadied my pace

against the circling trees,
but there was only
a man:

had he stripped
not only hat
and blouse, shoes
and panties
and bra,
had he shed maybe
even the woman
he was wearing,

or was it me
molting, shedding
vestiges,
old investments,
rushing forever
towards a perfect
coupling
with naked nothing
in a world
without places.

Pleasure

A naked Jaina monk²³
ravaged by spring
fever, the vigor

of long celibacy
lusting now as never before
for the reek and sight

of mango bud, now tight, now

loosening into petal,
stamen, and butterfly,
his several mouths

thirsting for breast,
buttock, smells of finger,
long hair, short hair,

the wet places never dry,

skin roused even by
whips, self touching self,
all philosophy slimed

by its own saliva,
cool Ganges turning
sensual on him

smear'd by his own private

untouchable Jaina
body with honey
thick and slow as pitch

and stood continent
at last on an anthill
of red fire ants, crying
his old formulaic cry;

²³ Jain ascetics are detached from social and worldly activities; all activities are aimed at self-purification for self-realization. They do not have a home or possessions, choosing austerity and avoiding services such as telephones and electricity. They engage in meditation, seeking knowledge and acquiring self-discipline.

at every twinge,
“Pleasure, pleasure,
Great Pleasure!” —

no longer a formula
in the million mouths
of pleasure-in-pain

as the ants climb, tattooing

him, limb by limb
and cover his body,
once naked, once even intangible.

Extended Family

Yet like grandfather
I bathe before the village crow

the dry chlorine water
my only Ganges

the naked Chicago bulb
a cousin of the Vedic sun²⁴

slap soap on my back
like father

and think
in proverbs

like me
I wipe myself dry

with an unwashed
Sears turkish towel

like mother
I hear faint morning song

(though here it sounds
Japanese)

and three clear strings
next door

through kitchen
clatter

like my little daughter
I play shy

hand over crotch
my body not yet full

²⁴ In Vedic Astrology, the sun is the life-giver and also the father figure. It give will power and endows people with the ability to lead, to rule the world and make a mark. It is supposed to fill the soul with energy, confidence, courage and ironclad will.

of thoughts novels
and children

I hold my peepee
like my little son

play garden hose
in and out
the bathtub

like my grandson
I look up

unborn
at myself

like my great
great-grandson

I am not yet
may never be

my future
dependent

on several
people

yet
to come

Molting

Molting has first to find a thorn at a suitable height to pin and fix the growing numbness in the tail. Then it can begin to slough and move out of that loose end, whole though flayed alive.

That's how you see now and then a dry skin or two hanging, and you may be sickened for a minute by a thin old snake vacillating and pale on a black thorn, working out a new body on a fence you just defiled.

Lord of snakes and eagles, and everything in between, cover my son with an hour's shade and be the thorn at a suitable height in his hour of change.

Chicago Zen

i

Now tidy your house,
dust especially your living room
and do not forget to name
all your children.

ii

Watch your step. Sight may strike you
blind in unexpected places.

The traffic light turns orange
on 57th and Dorchester,²⁵ and you stumble,
you fall into a vision of forest fires,
enter a frothing Himalayan river,
rapid, silent.

On the 14th floor,
Lake Michigan crawls and crawls
in the window. Your thumbnail
cracks a lobster louse on the windowpane
from your daughter's hair
and you drown, eyes open,
towards the Indies, the antipodes.²⁶
And you, always so perfectly sane.

iii

Now you know what you always knew:
the country cannot be reached
by jet. Nor by boat on jungle river,
hashish behind the Monkey-temple,
nor moonshot to the Cratered Sea
of Tranquility, slim circus girls

²⁵ This is an intersection in a residential area near the University of Chicago. There is no traffic light at this intersection.

²⁶ In geography, the antipode of any spot on Earth is the point on Earth's surface diametrically opposite to it. In North America, this is generally considered to be Australia and New Zealand.

on a tightrope between tree and tree
with white parasols, or the one
and only blue guitar.

Nor by any
other means of transport,
migrating with a clean valid passport,
no, not even by transmigrating
without any passport at all,
but only by answering ordinary
black telephones, questions
walls and small children ask,
and answering all calls of nature.

iv

Watch your step, watch it, I say,
especially at the first high
threshold,

and the sudden low
one near the end
of the flight
of stairs,

and watch
for the last
step that's never there.

The Black Hen

It must come as leaves
to a tree
or not at all

yet it comes sometimes
as the black hen
with the red round eye

on the embroidery
stitch by stitch
dropped and found again

and when it's all there
the black hen stares
with its round red eye

and you're afraid.

Foundlings in the Yukon

In the Yukon the other day
miners found the skeleton
of a lemming
curled around some seeds
in a burrow:
sealed off by a landslide
in Pleistocene times.

Six grains were whole,
unbroken: picked and planted
ten thousand
years after their time,
they took root
within forty-eight hours
and sprouted
a candelabra of eight small leaves.

A modern Alaskan lupine,
I'm told, waits three years to come
to flower, but these
upstarts drank up sun
and unfurled early
with the crocuses of March
as if long deep
burial had made them hasty

for birth and season, for names,
genes, for passing on:
like the kick
and shift of an intrauterine
memory, like
this morning's dream of being
born in an eagle's
nest with speckled eggs and the screech

of nestlings, like a pent-up
centenarian's sudden burst
of lust, or maybe
just elegies in Duino²⁷ unbound
from the dark,
these new aborigines biding
their time
for the miner's night light

to bring them their dawn,
these infants compact with age,
older than the oldest
things alive, having skipped
a million falls
and the registry of tree rings,
suddenly younger
by an accident of flowering

than all their timely descendants

²⁷ A seaside resort on the northern Adriatic coast. Rainer Maria Rilke, a Bohemian-Austrian poet and novelist, wrote *The Duino Elegies* while staying at the Duino Castle. These poems are intensely religious and mystical, weighing beauty and existential suffering. They employ a rich symbolism of angels and salvation, but not in keeping with typical Christian interpretations. They're considered to be Rilke's most important work.

Sonnet

Time moves in and out of me
a stream of sound, a breeze,
An electric current that seeks
the ground, liquids that transpire

through my veins, stems and leaves
toward the skies to make fog and mist
around the trees. Mornings brown
into evenings before I turn around

in the day. Postage stamps, words
of unwritten letters complete with commas,
misplaced leases and passports, excuses
and blame swirl through the night

and take me far away from home
as time moves in and out of me.

In March

In March I travelled
not by train or bus or plane
but through the bloodstream
warm as the ocean current
that took Aztecs to Mexico.

Fever showed me alligators
sleeping on the island mounds,
rows of sharp teeth
peeping from irregular mouth lines
that a small special bird

was allowed to pick
after every meal.
Red-hot fish, the white heat
Of whales, blips and signals
Of cool silver dolphins

swam all around me
in that gulf stream
circling my continents
through the stillness of icebergs
and sleepless oceans.

I never knew that my Amazon
flows savage and treacherous
through my Africas,
undersea forests and peopled seas
lash nightly on shores

that flicker morning noon
and night as fever cools
healing my third degree
burns with oils mentholated
according to family recipes.

[How Can One Write About Bosnia]

How can one write about Bosnia,
Biafra, Bangladesh, just to take
Only the atrocities that begin with B,

alphabetize cruelties,
eating persimmons and sleeping safe
in the arms of a lover, a wet moon

in the mullioned window? How file away
the friend just dead of ovarian cancer;
a young breast cigarette-burned by a jealous

husband; where shall I put the old man who peers
through office windows looking for a yes
that'll negate all no's, or Bosnia mothers

who lift their babies to strangers
squabbling for a foothold in lorries fleeing
to the borders where only death waits

gun and milk in hand, irony in his narrowed eyes
holding in one thought Bosnia, cancer,
persimmons, widows, serial killers,

and you and me in our precarious safety?

Pain

Pains in my ankle flicker, nerve ends
glower and dim like cigarette ends
in a chain-smoker's mouth night and day.

Doctors X-ray the foot, front face and back,
left profile and right as if for a police
file, unearth shadow fossils of neanderthals
buried in this contemporary foot;
they draw three test tubes of blood as I turn
my face away, and label my essences
with a misspelled name; put my body whole
into a white tunnel with no light
at the end, inject a green Day-Glo liquid
to take pictures in dots of purple
and sickly pink on a computer screen.
Men and women of different races
and sizes in white smocks look at the dots
and shake their heads.

The pain in the ankle glowers on, a red-hot
Coal pressed now and then against a nerve
nobody can find.

O god of knowledge, busy wizard
of diagnosis, father of needles, dials,
and test tubes, send your old companion here,
that mother of mothers, goddess though of ignorance,
send her soon so she can kiss away my pain
as she has always done.

The Twin-Lobed Brahmin

Amit Chaudhuri

By the time the Mysore-born poet A. K. Ramanujan died in 1993 in his 63rd year, he was already a paradigmatic figure in Indian writing in English, and an Indian literary and cultural studies in general. A professor of linguistics at the University of Chicago, he was a theorist who cherished the concrete and the sensuous, a cosmopolitan intellectual who also did the most, besides Robert Lowell, to bring the family into the world of poetry written in English. Moreover, as the note on the jacket of his *Collected Poems* puts it, “his pioneering translations of ancient Tamil poetry into modern English permanently altered perceptions of the Indian literary map in the West,” because, before him, “ancient Indian literature was thought to be mainly Sanskritic.” Yet to translate from the vernacular was not only an act of cultural retrieval for Ramanujan, but also one of self-nourishment, demonstrating that the creative life of the modern Indian English poet or writer arises from his or her multilingual consciousness, and depends upon traffic, or commerce, between the official and the vernacular tongues.

Pondering in an essay on the nuances of the question, “Is there an Indian way of thinking?” Ramanujan once wrote: The problem was posed for me personally at the age of 20 in the image of my father. My father’s clothes represented his inner life very well. He was a south Indian brahmin gentleman. He wore neat white turbans, a Sri Vaishnava caste mark (in his earlier pictures, a diamond earring), yet wore Tootal ties, Kromentz buttons and collar studs, and donned English serge jackets over his muslin dhotis which he wore draped in traditional brahmin style. He was a mathematician, an astronomer. But he was also a Sanskrit scholar, an expert astrologer who had just been converted by Russell to the “scientific attitude.” I (and my generation) was troubled by his holding together in one brain both astronomy and astrology; I looked for consistency in him, a consistency he didn’t seem to care about, or even think about. When I asked him what the discovery of Pluto and Neptune did to his archaic nine-planet astrology, he said, “You make the necessary corrections, that’s all.” Or, in answer to how he could read the *Gita* religiously, having bathed and painted on his forehead the red and white feet of Vishnu, and later talk appreciatively about Bertrand Russell and even Ingersoll, he said, “The *Gita* is part of one’s hygiene. Besides, don’t you know, the brain has two lobes?”

I quote this passage at length not only because of its intrinsic readability, but also because of the way it embodies some of the most characteristic features of Ramanujan’s poetry. First, there is the exploration of an idea, not through metaphor or analogy, but through an “image” of a member of Ramanujan’s family, in this case his father. Fathers and other members of the family recur through Ramanujan’s poetry—his second, and best, volume of verse is called *Relations*—and are inseparable from the world of poetry and myth: “Father, uncles, seven / folklore brothers,” while another poem judiciously records “anecdotes of how noisily / father bathed, // slapping soap on his back.” Ramanujan’s relations were not just subject matter for him — his sense of the family was bound up inextricably with an implicit theory, explored through his poetry and other writings, of culture, language, memory, folklore, and the connection of these with poetry itself. Thus, in the superb “Love Poem for a Wife, 1,” the poet recites memories of his own family, records his (Keralite Syrian Christian) wife’s memories of hers, and, deciding that the early memories of respective childhoods is one thing that man and wife can never completely

communicate to each other, moves towards a meditation on culture(s), memory, and language itself:

Probably

only the Egyptians had it right:
their kings had sisters for queens
to continue the incests
of childhood into marriage.
Or we should do as well-meaning
Hindus did,

betroth us before birth,
forestalling separate horoscopes
and mothers' first periods,
and wed us in the oral cradle
and carry marriage back into
the namelessness of childhoods.

What is most remarkable, however, about the passage quoted from the essay is its humorous but wondering acknowledgement of the doubleness of the colonial personality, its capacity to accommodate seemingly incompatible cultures and ways of thinking in one experimental space. This sense of doubleness not only determined Ramanujan's lifelong enthusiasms as an academic and translator, but also substantially constituted the subject matter of his poetry; the poetry can be seen as a continual exploration of the mutations brought about by the mingling of cultures alien to each other; it is itself an example of one such mutation. Ramanujan's father's explanation of his peculiar ability to accommodate cultural contraries—"Besides, don't you know, the brain has two lobes?"—runs through Ramanujan's aesthetics and is echoed by this statement of the poet:

English and my disciplines (linguistics, anthropology) give me my "outer" forms – linguistic, metrical, logical and other such ways of shaping experience, and my first thirty years in India, my frequent visits and field trips, my personal and professional preoccupations with Kannada, Tamil, the classics and folklore give me my substance, my "inner" forms, images, symbols. They are continuous with each other, and I no longer can tell what comes from where.

One notices that cultures that were in separate compartments, or "lobes," for the elder Ramanujan, are already related to each other in a more fluid way in the son; it is as if the colonial, with its mutually exclusive but proximate spaces for English and Indian cultures, has changed into the postcolonial, where the meeting points between the two are more diffuse, the intermingling more complex, even more confusing: "I no longer can tell what comes from where."

This complex, confusing intermingling gives Ramanujan's verse its peculiar beauty, and its ability to be exact and unfamiliar at the same time. This dual sensibility, and the constant realignment in the sense of identity that it entails, is what animates these loveliest of lines from "Love Poem for a Wife, 2"; "my wife's always / changing syriac face, / chosen of all faces" here, the gentle but striking disjunction between "always," with its connotations of permanence, the familial, the culture given at birth, and "changing," denoting hybridity and process (mirrored again in the

phrase “syriac face,” where the exotic, the “syriac,” meets the familiar, the wife’s face), leads to an estrangement of perception, brought about by the play of contraries, that recalls Ramanujan’s statement: “I no longer can tell what comes from where.” The fact that identity and perception, self and other, what is native and what is foreign, are, for the bilingual postcolonial poet, constantly shifting categories, always open to redefinition, is referred to obliquely in the course of the same poem:

I dreamed one day
that my face my own yet hers,
with my own nowhere
to be found; lost; cut
loose like my dragnet
past.

Ramanujan’s concern with the give and take and the shifting boundaries between two cultural worlds continued to the end, as is evident from the later poems, presented to the reader for the first time in the *Collected Poems*. The book itself is a Ramanujanesque affair, compiled and edited by a group of people who happen not only to be scholars but also family and friends. The later poems are a sort of commentary on how the creative process, at least for Ramanujan, continued to be a matter of accommodating and expressing doubleness, cultural hybridity and inversion; the title of his third book of poems, *Second Sight*, the last published in his lifetime, is itself a pun on that doubleness of multiplicity of perception. The last poems are full of images of inversion—such as trees with their roots in the sky—which, while being metaphysical, surely have cultural resonances apposite to his work. Even Ramanujan’s fascination with the androgynous Tamil god, half male, half female, can be seen to be a part of his fascination with hybrid shapes and forms. In “One More on a Deathless Theme,” the question of identity comes up again:

This body I sometimes call me,
sometimes mine, as if
I’m someone else
owning and informing
this body

In “Mythologies 2,” written a year before his death, we find, “Adjust my single eye, rainbow bubble, / so I too may see all things double,” and in “Contraries,” he speaks of the man for whom “truths are lies / when, living by contraries, / his roots are topsyturvy trees.” The way in which “roots” – a word that has specific, and poignant, cultural resonances – are inverted, so that they branch out and take on their own shapes, is what is disclosed to us through Ramanujan’s poetic oeuvre.

Chaudhuri, Amit. “The Twin-Lobed Brahmin.” *The Times Higher Education*, 1 March 1996, www.timeshighereducation.com/books/the-twin-lobed-brahmin/163480.article