



The Shower

K.Saddanathan

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Translation of
Tamil Short Stories



Published by
Jeevanathy

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(A Collection of Translated Short Stories)

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First Edition 2020 July

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21 Saddanathar Veethy,

Nallur, Jaffna

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Cover Designed by K.Bharaneetharan

Printed at : Baranee Printers, Nelliady

Price : 350.00

Pages: 88

Isbn :978-955-0958-43-6



Jeevanathy Publication : 157

Dedicated to
My relatives
and
Friends

Acknowledgment

S.Pathmanathan(So. Pa.)

A.J.Canagaratne

K.S.Sivakumaran

K.Bharaneetharan

Jeevanathy

Baranee Printers

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Translator's Note

Saddanathan's contribution to Sri Lankan Tamil Writing is substantial. Some critics see him as an extension of Ku.Pa.Ra. Still others trace an affinity between him and Janakiraman. Be that as it may, Saddanathan is essentially a Jaffnaman. His stories are Jaffna based. His native Velanai and particularly his hamlet Thāvādi provide him with the idyllic setting for his stories into which the *flora*, the birds and insects blend beautifully. It is amazing that the islands off the Jaffna peninsula which are considered as unproductive could be endowed with so much natural beauty especially during the rainy season.

Although Saddanathan's stories deal with a variety of themes from love to extra-marital affairs, the caste-based social hierarchy is at the centre. The first cracks are visible in *Transformation* which is one of Saddanathan's best stories. Muththan who dared to buy a plot of land amidst the dwellings of the high caste vellalas is manhandled. They are restrained by the man's sister who eventually becomes the mistress of one of the tormentors. Her son becomes the 'new man' who is finally accepted by his high caste aunt.

Temptation treats an extra-marital affair artistically. It is unimaginable in the conservative Velanai society. The problem is seen through the eyes of the wayward man's wife, his son, his friends and peers. Finally everybody accepts it as a passing phase in the man's life.

Children figure prominently in quite a number of stories. Ragu's exploration of his neighbourhood and his school is quite interesting. The barbet, the sunbird, the lapwing and the velvet

mite dominate *The shower*.

The bud is the story of Raji, a precocious child. At school, she is unable to write the letter 'ji' in her name. She is punished by the teacher. She refuses to go to school. The parents find another school. There, a kind and loving teacher teaches her to write the letter 'ji'. Such a simple story but its psychological dimension enriches it.

Saddanathan steers clear of the turbulent politics of his times. He is neither Left, nor Right or Centre. There is no streak of the liberation struggle and the accompanying violence. *Their sorrow* is an exception. A father visits the army camp to find what happened to his missing son. They draw a blank. Walking back home, the father smells some rotting carcass. Going into the bush he finds his son's body with gunshot wounds, rotting. He wails aloud. To save the agony of his wife, he burns the remains then and there. This is as far as Saddanathan can go.

Translation fosters understanding and goodwill between cultures and nations. In a country where people have been conditioned to think on ethnic lines, respect for the views and beliefs of others is the only way to go forward.

Years ago the late A.J.Canagatatne had translated five short stories of Saddanathan. K.S.Sivakumaran had translated one. The author was keen to bring out a collection. I have now added five stories to make the collection handy.

I hope the non Tamil reader will find it interesting.

S.Pathmanathan (Sopa)
(spathma149@gmail.com)

Their Anguish

That news gave him a little hope.

"Those brutes, it seems, will release the young boys whom they have taken into custody, when they pull out of here... they have set up camp at Allaipiddy at the Saiva school and the alumanium factory..."

It was Tharmar who had broken the news.

"Who could have told Tharmar this...? Could the news be correct...?"

Mukathar was restive.

Not only Tharmar, even Sivathar too had come to the front thinnai, bearing the same news.

Almost the entire village had gathered on the thinnai; Kodduthoddathu Sivakolunthu, Visalatchchi, Kathirithamby; Navaladipulathu Chellappa, Kanthiah, Arumai, Arumai's wife Thavam; Mondiththarai Navam, Nadarasa, Pasupathy; Nochchi kattu Gunam, Gunam's wife Mathy; Solavaththai Sellar, Shanmugam. There were so many people that the thinnai was full. Some were seated in the compound.

Tharani and Kamalam too had come from Thavady; Tharani's friend, Vathany was also there.

Pavalam was lying on Kamalam's lap; Tharani was fanning Pavalam. Kamalam looked at Pavalam and asked:

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"Machchal what's troubling you...? Shall I make some tea for you ...? Can you starve like this without any food or drink from yesterday...? Nothing will happen to thamby Thayalan, he'll be alright... no danger to his life... the God we worship will bring the child back..."

Pavalam sobbed and her sobbing in the inner hall could be heard even in the front thinnai. Her sobs, drenched in grief, submerged the entire surroundings.

Mukathar couldn't bear it. Agitated, he rose and went inside.

"Pillai Pavalam, Tharmar has brought some news... good news. It looks as if we go to Allaipiddy we can bring thamby back... the army, it seems, is releasing those it had detained."

Pavalam sat up; she gathered her dishevelled hair and knotted it.

The constant sobbing had swollen her face and there were dark pouches under her eyes.

Seeing Mukathar and hearing him speak made her grief vanish. Stretching out both hands in his direction, she clasped his hands and said:

"Go and bring my child, appa... Pattavemban will come along with you... In the April New Year, we'll offer the deity pongal and padayal in thamby's name.

Tharani, who was in the kitchen, brought tea in two tumblers. Vathani accompanied Tharani, clasping her shoulders.

Pavalam had swallowed just one mouthful of tea, when she started hiccuping; Kamalam lightly tapped her on the crown of her head to relieve her.

"My treasure whom I bore after so much penance is perhaps starving... those accursed fellows... Do they give , mí rasan anything to eat, Kamalam?"

Kamalam broke down and began crying.

Mukathar, after accepting the tea from Tharani's hand, affectionately stroked her head.

To Tharani, whose eyes began to brim with tears, everything seemed an illusion, a dream dispelled.

It happened last Friday, when Thayalan, who had returned from the Vairavar Kovil entered his room, he saw Tharani there studying something.

When he said, "Take the Viputhi prasatham amma," she lifted her head and looked at him.

For a moment, her glance transfixed him but he soon regained his composure.

She took some holy ash held in his hand, and smeared it on her forehead.

"Santhanam?"

"Thaya, please apply it..." He hadn't expected that, he dipped his forefinger in the sandal wood paste and gently : brushing away her curly locks, made a pottu mark on her forehead.

"Thanks;" Tharani said, glancing at him with a smile.

How many meanings interwoven in that smile! Mukathar who had come there quite accidentally, appreciatively watched and relished this vivacious scene.

He understood everything.

The earlier decision that Tharani was to be given in marriage to Thayalan, was confirmed now in his mind.

The moment she saw his shadow, Tharani left the room and went to Pavalam maami.

When he recalled these green, pleasant memories,

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Mukathar's mind grew heavy; stifling a sob with the fold of his shawl, he came out.

When they saw him, those who had come to express their sympathy, bade him farewell, one by one. Some ladies entered the inner hall and after uttering some words of consolation to Pavalam, took their leave...

Just a minute, thamby... Mukathar said and Sivarasa stayed back.

"Is Sivarasa accompanying you..." Good... he knows Sinhalese too... that'll come in useful to talk to them... it's not good if too many people go... put the whole burden on God and go..." Tharmar said in a hoarse voice.

Having lit camphor, Mukathar prostrated himself before Pattavemban; his body trembled and his heart melted, 'Son' he wailed.

'Seventeen years ago, just like this my heart melted as I worshipped Vairavar. With Pavalam accompanying me and carrying Thayalan on my shoulder; we came and watched Thambu Vaathiyar starting the 'edu' for Thayalan. It's all as if it's happening now, the education which he began with Omkaram continued uninterrupted and made him a medical student.

'It is Thambu Vaathiyar, who has an auspicious hand, who started the 'edu' for that girl Tharani too. She too has grown up, studied and passed the Advanced Level. She is sure to get admission to the Medical Faculty. If these fledgelings can finish their education and settle down in life, we can close our eyes in peace.'

These memories frightened him.

He slowed down his mind's pace, and walked faster,

In the east lay the expanse of Uyarapulam. He and Sivarasa

stepped into the narrow footpath which like the parting of the hair, ran through the palmyrah grove. A moisture laden wind had settled on everything. There wasn't even a rustle among the palmyra trees. A pecking sound, high up on the palmyra tree came from the east. Was Palan tapping the spathe? There was no time for him to stop and make sure. It could be a single woodpecker testing the sharpness of its bill. When they got onto the Mankunban Road, the Christian school could be seen in the west. He looked at the majestic tamarind tree in front of the school with outstretched boughs. This tree had seen three generations; why were its northward pointing boughs split, drooping and charred?' 'Yesterday when the forces advanced either bombs or shells had damaged these boughs,' he thought.

His father Kandappu, he and why, even his son Thayalan had tasted the sour fruits of that tamarind tree; he knew that definitely. Which child's stone could have failed to hit it?

For a moment his mind savours the past.

To the south of the tamarind tree, where the office of the Asst. Govt Agent had stood, there were only rubble and shattered asbestos sheets.

Only the Maternity Home had escaped damage and stood unscarred. It had escaped damage perhaps because it was a little distance away from the road.

The front portion of the Zonal Education Office had been damaged and rain water filled the entire hall; thoroughly soaked files floated in the stagnant rain water.

Mukathar walked on, not taking any interest in these scenes. When both of them reached Thalipulam, they encountered Mylar coming from the opposite direction.

"Arumugam...!" His voice sounded heavy.

"Mylvaganam do you know the story... about my... my son," he sobbed.

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Mylar, who come close to Mukathar, looked at his face with sympathy and said:

"Put the burden on that Paramporul... He who is present everywhere, sees everything... why did this boy who was in Jaffna come here in a hurry...?"

"Viyalan is hostile to thamby... It's the attamaththu Viyalam... added to that Sani... too is not favourable..

"Don't worry Arumugam... call upon God and everything will turnout alright. I am going to your house... I want to see Pavalam... that girl must be in a state of shock..."

They parted.

"We'll go to Chettypulam and worship Aiyandar too."

"Mm..." said Sivarasa, bored.

At the seashore junction, Sivarasa lit a beedi at Siththar's 'boutique.

Saliva moistened Mukathar's tongue. 'Shall I chew some 'betel!, he thought. The next moment he thought of his son and what could have befallen him and suppressed his desire.

When they stepped onto the by-lane branching eastwards from the junction, the seashore and the Aiyandar Kovil could be seen.

In the lane, they saw Sinniah coming with a loop of small thirali strung together in his hand.

"Sinniah...!"

"Aiya thamby is very fond of small thirali and vilai fish... and young ones at that..."

"So you also know... who told you...? I am going to... bring thamby..."

"Aiyandar áppu will protect him."

Sinniah shrank to a side to allow them to pass.

The Aiyandar Kovil was locked, What could Muthu Iyer do? He had to look after three temples. Moreover not only did he have to lead a family life with his dharmapathini Jegatha, but also maintain friendly relations with a 'Sudra' named Kali. Poor man, he couldn't perform his priestly duties at the appointed time.

Mukathar stood in the outer piráharam and worshipped Aiyandar.

Walking along the seashore they neared the crematorium, the Saatimatha Kovil could be seen. There was a bustle of people. Thinking that these were people displaced from Karampon, Naranthanai and Sinnamadhu, he walked on, Sivarasa followed him without any set purpose in mind.

'should we go along Allaipiddy Veethy to the Saiva school or should we go past the Allaipiddy junction to the Aluminium factory.'

Mukathar was rather confused.

'Let's make inquiries and find out at the Mosque', he was thinking when he saw Vaithí coming from the opposite direction, as if to intercept him.

"They had arrested Vinasi's son Sivalogan. He has come... either they released him or he escaped somehow... what about thamby Thayalan...?"

"He hasn't come, Vaithi. That's why we want to go to Allaipiddy and see for ourselves."

"They are distributing dried rations at the Aluminium factory, it seems. You can speak to them only there. Are we free to go wherever we like?"

Vaithi's explanation sounded right to Mukathar.

"They give dried rations only at 3 p.m... I too will join you", Vaithi added.

As soon as he said this, he parted from them.

The queue began from the abandoned swimming pool, lying to the west of the Allaipiddy junction. Mostly elderly people, women folk, and small children were to be seen in the queue. There were no youths to be seen at all. Their absence was perhaps due to fear.

Mukathar thought to himself, 'why are they all eagerly running after the little rice, flour and masoor dhal doled out by the army. Chee how pathetic that we are stretching out our hands to receive these meagre rations from the very same people who are destroying us'.

In the queue, next to Vaithi stood Sivarasa and behind him Mukathar. In Vaithi's hands were two small empty fertilizer bags, Sivarasa was cursing himself often for his folly in not bringing fertilizer bags. This irritated Mukathar.

As they watched dark clouds covered the sky. It began to drizzle and there was a slight blowing. The cold needle-pricked the body; symbols of their endless, long-drawn out travail.

Exactly at 3 o'clock the queue began to move unhurriedly, It moved sluggishly like a python slowly digesting its prey. Sometimes it did not move at all.

Round about 4 o'clock, the queue neared the Aluminium factory. The building stood roofless; only the bomb-scarred walls were left standing. The dried rations were being distributed from a tent erected in front of the building. Vaithi received his rations and moved. Sivarasa didn't know what to do. On the spur of the moment, he took off his shirt and received the rice in that; then taking the shawl from Mukathar's shoulder, he received the flour in it. After a moments hesitation, he bundled up the dhal in his Verti.

"Periyavar, in what are you going to receive your rations?" asked the tall one who was measuring out the rations, in a smattering of Tamil.

Mukathar told him about why he had come, Sivarasa too said something in Sinhalese. When he heard that the tall ones impassive face darkened.

"We don't know anything about that... stand there... when the loku Mahathaya comes, we'll talk about it".

Somewhat consoled, Mukathar withdrew and stood in the Shadow of the factory wall. Sivarasa joined him and sat down.

After a long wait, the call came for Mukathar.

He went inside. The officer talked in English. Mukathar only half understood what he said.

Mukathar referred to his son and mentioned the name.

The officer's assistant said, "We don't arrest people... we only catch the Tigers... We'll inquire and then release them... You go...".

All his expectation shattered, mukathar looked pathetically at him.

"Aiya, you go... your son will come..." he repeated loudly, in an intimidating tone.

Heart-broken, Mukathar silently came outside.

Somehow, at that moment, the memory of Pavalam and Tharani too came to mind and agitated him. It seemed to him that Tharani's tear filled eyes were following him and looking fixedly at him.

Sivarasa walked supporting a thoroughly, broken Mukathar.

Mukathar felt intuitively that there was something harrowing awaiting him. He felt that all the energy in his body had suddenly drained away, leaving his body a mere husk.

They passed the Karuppachchi Amman Kovil and went through Mankumban. Behind and in front of them a bustle of people. When they stepped on to the footpath that intersected

Satty they noticed that in the wood filled with dense thickets of eachcham, quite unusually there was a large number of crows flocking there, along with a couple of dogs.

A putrid smell assailed them.

"Perhaps there's a cow lying dead there", said Sivarasa...

Something told Mukathar that it wasn't so. With a sudden burst of energy, he parted the eachcham thickets and went in. There was something black... he went closer. In a green striped sarong... his senses shrivelled, his body. Trembled and broke out into a death sweat. He felt as if he, was going to faint.

"Sivarasa... my child ... my child..."

Sivarasa entered the thicket. He looked at the swollen body, from which matter was oozing. He couldn't make sense of anything.

Mukathar went still closer to the body and looked at the left wrist; round it was the sacred thread tied by Pillaiyar Kovil Mani Iyer, after incantation. Trembling, he looked at the right shoulder: there was the birth-mark which Pavalam had joyously pointed out to Mukathar when the child was born.

He waited out.

The passers-by gathered in numbers.

Sivarasa 'told Mukathar: "It looks as if we touch the body, the flesh will come away. Anyway, let's take it home".

"No Rasa. Let not. Pavalan see her child in this gruesome state. That girl Tharani too can't bear it. Here itself I'll set fire to my thurai and cremate him".

Sivarasa turned the body over so that the face could be seen. He had been shot in the head; the flowing blood had congealed and become dark. The moment he saw it, Mukathar began crying again.

All those who had gathered there shared his grief. They

heaped forest wood, the boughs of Poovarasu tree and the branches of the Othiya trees. They tore off the dried eachcham spathes and kindled the fire. Without any of the customary rites or ceremonies, Mukathar set fire to the body of his dearly beloved son. Tongues of fire licked Thayalan's body.. .

Those who were there looked intently at the burning corpse,

"This war has trampled and ground us into the dust... if youths are sighted, they grap them and take them away... or they shoot them. . . for this... for this..."

Gunshots could be heard in the distance.

'The boys seem to be shooting at the army... The gunshots seem to come from Allaipiddy', the people gathered there started talking among themselves.

The western sky reddened and the Periya Veli seemed drenched in a river of blood. The sun which appeared like a blood red ball of fire went down the horizon and disappeared.

Supported by Sivarasa, Mukathar began walking. The bundle of rice and flour in Sivarasa's hands seemed a heavy burden to him.

Translated by: A.J . Canagaratne.

GLOSSARY:

1. Thinnai: Raised platform at the entrance of a house for the purpose of resting.
2. Machchal: Daughter of a paternal aunt.
3. Thamby: A term of endearment. . .
4. Pillai: A term of endearment in Jaffna to refer to young women.
5. Pongal and Padayal: Ceremonial offerings of cooked rice and vegetables to a deity.

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6. Pattávemban; À local deity.
7. Edu: Dried Palmyra leaves used to formally initiate children into the art of writing.
8. Dharmapathini:- Wife, devoted and chaste.
9. Omkaram: Refers to the mystic Syllable 'Aum'.
10. Eachcham: A tree bearing black edible berries.
11. Viyalan: The planet Jupiter.
12. Attamaththu Viyalan: Jupiter in the 8th House.
13. Sani: The planet Saturn.
14. Praharam: Paved way outside the Sanctum Sanctorum
15. Periyavar: Respected elderly person.
16. Periyaveli: Vast expanse.
17. Poovarasu; Othiya: Common trees found in Jaffna.

Note: Among Hindus it is customary for the eldest son to set fire to his father's pyre, but here the father sets fire to his son's corpse.

The Ramble

Keeping his head on his mother's lap, resting his body on the cement floor, Madhu reclined like an adult and was reading aloud his Grade II Tamil book to his mother.

His mother knows that, after lunch, he needs such comfort and such readings.

Stroking his head, she was absorbed in the contents of what her son was reading. It was then that the voice rang out:

“*Māmā!*”

The book was pushed aside. *Amma* went outside to speak to *māmā*.¹

He came down the steps to the courtyard. *Māmā* asked him: “Madhu! Will you come with me to the *Māriamman* temple? Tomorrow is car festival”.

Māmā had never been so patient or polite towards him. Such speech was incredible, he thought. He faced him diffidently.

Māma's hair was dark and dense. Though past forty; not a single white hair. He was bare-bodied. His moustache covered his lips. Whenever he spoke his front teeth showed through the dense growth.

It seemed to him *māmā* should have canine teeth similar to those of his Caesar. He had tattooed his chest. A big lion on his

¹ Maternal uncle

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neck, a chain with a gold rimmed tiger tooth pendant. To him, *māmā* looked like a lion itself.

While *māmā* was taking leave, he asked him “Are Sri and Daya *machal*² coming to the temple?”

“Yes, everyone!”

“How about *māmi*?”³

“She won't!”

“And *amma*?”

“No... only the four of us”

He looked at *amma*. She must have sensed his curiosity. She cast a questioning glance at him.

“I must see Sri and Daya *machal*!”

“It's too hot... Take care!” She stood watching him leave.

At *māmā*'s home, only Sri was there. Daya *machāl* was away. Sri was feeding the young rabbits. Forgetting his mission he too fed the rabbits.

“We are going to Māriamman temple... tomorrow!”

“To the car-festival? Really?”

Sri couldn't believe it.

“You, I, Daya *machāl* and *māmā*”

“*Appa* won't come.... He won't!”

“No, he will come.... He promised to take us!”

Madhu was crestfallen that Sri didn't trust him. Now he was eager to share the good news with Daya. Leaving Sri to attend to the rabbits, he went in search of Daya.

On his way, by the lane at the Grinding mill Seemāl *āchi*

² Cross- cousin

³ aunt

greeted him.

“Where to, our lord?”

“To Māriamman temple tomorrow. For the *ther*”.⁴ He held her by her knees.

Āchi smothered him with her betel-stained lips.

Madhu felt like going round the village and broadcasting the news.

“Must go first to Rāji *akka*'s place. *Daya machāḷ* will be there.

But contrary to his expectations, *Daya* was not there. Neither Rāji, nor *Ketha*. *Peththa* lay coiled in her bed.

Peththa is bed-ridden. Poor vision. Partially deaf.

Should I tell *Peththa*?” he pondered.

He shook her. “*Peththa*”,

“*Madhu*'s voice must have appeared to come from some deep well. Startled, she stared at him with open eyes.

She couldn't see anything. It was hazy.

“Who is it, son? I can't see anything. I can't hear anything”. So saying she got up and sat on her bed.

“Can't tell her anything. She won't understand. She's a deaf viper!” *Madhu* was bored. Remembering *Rathi akka*,⁵ she went to her house.

Rathi akka was busy sewing. It was obvious that she was pleased to see him. “Oh, it's our *Madhuvan*! What a surprise!” She beamed.

He narrated what he had memorized and rehearsed all this time.

Akka got up and walked into the bed room, He knew

4 The car festival, the most important festival in a Hindu temple. The deity is taken round the outer precincts.

5 Older sister / first cousin

instinctively that she was going to give him money.

Rathi came back, kept a five-rupee coin in his palm, embraced him and kissed him.

'Rathi akka knows how to kiss tenderly' he thought.

Narrowing his eyes he took leave smiling. As he approached the mill, he was reminded of aunty. But he was scared to cross the road.

Could be knocked by a bus or car.

"Who could it be standing under the bo-tree? Suthan *siththappa*?⁶ Where's he going smartly dressed? Madhu now wanted to tell *siththappa* the news. He ran towards him. A bus rushed behind him roaring. Scared, he stood by the side of the drain. The bus passed him and pulled up alongside *siththappa*.

He boarded the bus.

Madhu was disappointed.

To get over the frustration and fatigue, he felt like crossing the road and visiting Yoga auntie.

Auntie's door was closed. Not a stir. He climbed the steps and sat down on the bench in the veranda.

Thavam uncle has not returned from school, it appears. But where could have auntie gone?

There was a noise from within the room behind the hall. Madhu became alert. He got down and walked towards the room.

He peeped through the window. Yoga auntie and Thavam *māmā* were in bed. Auntie was like a fair skinned cochineal insect, her saree awry. Uncle was naked, his hairy body dark.

"Chi, uncle and auntie are shameless"

Madhu pursed his lips. Unable to look at them again, he slowly withdrew from there.

6 Paternal uncle

Madhu was able to meet Daya at Indhu *siththi*'s⁷ house.

When Madhu disclosed the news to her, her eye-lids fluttered like butterflies.

From *siththi*'s house both of them went out looking for Sri.

Sri was still by the rabbit pen. Seeing them he joined them. The three of them sat on the cold cement floor.

"I can wear skirt and blouse for the occasion" said Daya.

"I shall wear *verti*" said Sri.

"You're a little brat.... You want to wear *verti*.... It will be fun if you walk awkwardly in your *verti*.... Better wear shorts!"

With Daya's considered judgment his *verti* dreams shrank

They can't disobey Daya. She is a Grade six student and to her Sri and Madhu are small children. Her pronouncements are gospel.

Daya continued : "Better to go before seven in the morning... the deity will arrive at the *ther* by eight. Should be there while the *ther* goes on its rounds. Must see the deity being taken in the green attire to the *vasantha mandapam* for the *abishekam*.⁸

"Shouldn't we go round the shops?" Sri asked eagerly.

"Otherwise! One full round along the outer precincts. Must buy plastic bangles, anklets and sticking *pottu*!"

"I want a pistol" Madhu expressed his wish.

Sri said "I want sweets of various colours, fluffy sweets lollipop and if there is a balance, a trumpet and a whistle"

"Ok Sri, bring your till box!" ordered Daya. They broke it open and counted the coins. Nine rupees and twenty two cents.

⁷ Maternal aunt

⁸ An elaborate ritual performed within the temple

Madhu handed over to Daya the five rupee Rathi *akka* had given him.

Daya added six rupees of her savings. The three of them took turns to count the money Twenty rupees and twenty two cents.

Madhu was bored. He took leave of Daya and Sri and walked home.

As they passed the Mahavidyalayam and turned eastward, the amman temple was visible. It looked spectacular with the milling crowd.

“What a maddening crowd!”, *māmā* grumbled. In front of the amman temple, on the western slope, there was a small temple.

“What temple is this small, beautiful?” he asked *māmā*.

“Stop jabbering!”

Māmā's threat dampened his enthusiasm. He was dumbfounded. It was Daya who responded.

“Vairavar temple... Amman comes to this temple for the Vēddai thiruvizha!”

Madhu, whose eyes were moist, glanced at her gratefully. His heart now appeared lightened.

Next to the Vairavar temple was the *theertha kerniṅ*. *Māmā* and Daya descended the steps and washed their feet. *Māmā* forbade Sri and Madhu from going to the *kerni*. Daya brought water in her cupped hands and sprinkled it on their feet.

The beginning itself irritated Madhu. Bitterness seemed to roll upwards from his stomach.

The *ther* stood majestically in the outer precincts of the

9 A rectangular well to which the deity is taken for water cutting

temple. Overwhelmed by the sight, he dragged Daya towards the *ther*.

The *ther* was decorated with red and white cloth and flags. The small bells jingled as the wind blew. The horses in the front were poised for a gallop. Everything mesmerized Madhu.

He wanted to go round the *ther* and take a closer look.

“You're inquisitive! The deity has not ascended the *ther*!”

Again, *māmā*'s threat and injunction! Madhu and Daya didn't like it. They longed to touch the steps of the *gopura* threshold, smile at the familiar faces; crack jokes and happily enter the temple.

When they came to the southern precincts, Sri stood as if rooted. He pinched Daya and signalled with his eyes, at the sweet shops.

“Can attend to it while leaving... follow me quietly!” Daya followed her father, dragging both of them.

Māmā entered the temple through the Southern entrance. He took the three of them to the *vāhanasālai*¹⁰ in the south east, left to the Pillayār shrine and bade them sit in a corner. “Sit here children. “I'll be back after performing the *archana*”

“Are we to sit here in the company of these *vāhanams*?” Daya pondered wistfully.

Madhu sobbed. He was choked. “Come soon, *māmā*!” he moaned.

Māma walked away nonchalantly. Sri appeared the least affected. He walked between the *vāhanams* feeling them and counting them. “There are eight!” he reported.

Madhu gazed and gazed at the *kārāmpasu*. The body of a cow. Head of a beautiful human female. Thick lips, jewellery round the neck, ankle and on the nose.

¹⁰ The store for the various wooden statues used in the procession.

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Madhu was reminded of Yoga aunty : “This cow is as beautiful as aunty”

His wandering mind now became calm. Again he thought of *māmā*.

“When I grow up as a mature man... must knock him flat... sit on his chest... strangle him till he suffocates...”

His wounded heart became revengeful. Must punish him somehow. He got up and walked up to the *kārāmpasu*, undid his zip and urinated on it.

This was his way of defiance. “What's this? Its sinful” Daya censured him. “When you feel like peeing, what else to do?”

She was shocked at Madhu's impudence. She fell silent.

When *māmā* returned, Sri was fast asleep on Daya's lap. Madhu stood up and told him. “I must see *amman*, *vasantha mandapam*, *kodi maram* and the deity coming on its rounds!”

Māmā must have sensed a revolt in his demeanor. He gave him a knock on his head and snapped : “You talk like an adult. Want to mingle with the crowd, eh? Shut up and follow me. “The deity will now ascend the *ther* Can have look and go home!”

Daya felt like talking back but controlled herself. *Māmā* kept a packet of gram in each child's hand.

When *māmā* was not looking, Madhu threw away his packet in disgust.

Daya was aghast, seeing it.

“What has happened to Madhu today?... He is a rowdy in the making”, she grumbled.

They couldn't buy anything for the money they had brought. “Won't we have a chance at all to buy things?” the trio brooded.

They didn't dare ask *māmā*.

The main entrance was like a symphony. The *mallāri*¹¹ flowing from the *nagaswaram* sent the devotees into raptures.

“Swamy is coming out. Come soon! *Māmā* nudged them.

Instead of taking them close to the entrance, he showed the swamy to the children from a distance.

Daya raised her arms in supplication. “The swamy is gorgeous, Madhu” she said enthusiastically. Madhu tried to hop and get a glimpse of the deity. He could only see the heads and backs of devotees.

Māmā lifted up Sri and showed him the deity. Madhu felt very sad. He was about to burst into sobs.

“Look. That's the *ther*. The swami will come this way riding the *ther*. We have seen the *ther* and the swamy... Let's go home!” Unable to disobey *māmā*, they followed him.

Plastic bangles, anklets, sticking *pottu*, pistol, whistle, colour sweets, lollipops all dissolved like a dream.

“Next year, I must come to the temple with *amma!*” Madhu resolved.

He looked at Daya machal The *pitchi* flowers she wore on her hair was now wan. Her eyes were brimming with tears.

Sri wiped his sister's tears. Madhu held her hands tenderly.

Māmā was walking ahead taking long strides. Behind him, the tender children, unable to keep pace trudged exhausted and worn out.

Translated by S.Pathmanathan

11 A composition played as the deity is brought out of the temple.

Temptation

“Come home once, son!” was the gist of *amma's* letter. In the upright rounded handwriting, he saw *amma* herself. Typical of her. Always excited allowing emotion to get the better of her. It was evident in her letter.

After graduation, he was working as a teacher in a town school. He used to go home during week-ends. This time he is going a bit earlier.

When he got down at Arasady, *Amma* saw him and walked up to Putharan medu. Sister Tharshini and brother Ravi were with her.

Getting closer to him, *amma* sobbed. She must have been crying. Her eyelids were swollen and reddish. Her face was wan.

Amma walked embracing him tenderly. He looked at his sister. Her face too was rigid. Having finished her training she was hoping to get appointed as a teacher. He knows *māmā* is trying to fix up a job for her at a Hindu Board school.

Ravi volunteered to carry his bag. It was too heavy for him.

When they reached the *thalaivāsal* he was the one to speak. “Why did you write to me?”

“Why do you want to hush it up? Anna should know it. Speak up!” He was surprised at Tharshini's irritation. It was unusual on her part to explode like that.

"Your father forgets that he has a daughter of marriageable age. The mischief he makes is beyond words!"

Sensing the embarrassing situation, Tharshini got up and went inside.

"Yes *amma*, what is it?"

"Somu's daughter, Sukirtham, widow of Sathasivam, lives all alone. She's pretty hot stuff. Why should this man have anything to do with her?"

Amma couldn't say anything more. She burst out crying.

He understood everything.

After tragedy struck the family - Sathasivam was bitten by a viper - she leads a lonely life. She has property, both inherited and dowried for superintending which he had sought *āiya's* assistance and in due course...

He couldn't just believe it.

Amma narrated the shameless affair in all its details.

"After Sathasivam's untimely death he started visiting her to give her a helping hand. I don't know what medication or magic she used, he has fallen head over heels. She may be vivacious but that doesn't give him license to go astray. Shouldn't he think twice before tarnishing his image? How can a man resist when a woman is coquettish? A week ago they were exposed.

"It was late night. I heard a commotion near the fowl coop. I woke up. Your father's bed was vacant. Tense, I came out. He was returning through Sukirtham's *padalai*. When I confronted him, he stammered saying he had gone to have a look at the tobacco that was being smoked. I just couldn't believe it. I couldn't wail or weep over this disgrace. I was shattered and frozen." I know, *amma* is not the one to keep quiet. Temperamentally, she has been one who would make a mountain out of a molehill.

He didn't believe her.

"I first went to his close friend Ramalingam. He listened to the outpourings of my bruised heart. Instead of advising his friend, he started advising me!" Don't spill the beans, pillai! It appears you are hell-bent on ruining his reputation. Listen, after Ravi, your last one was born, has he made advances to you? Or did you respond as a wife? In wedded life, there should adjustments. You're like a heifer that is frigid. You and your crazy notions!"

"The old codger is talking rubbish. Shamelessly I have to say these things to my own son!"

Amma's face turned crimson. She couldn't speak further. She got up wiping her face.

To him what Ramalingam told *amma* was not rubbish at all. In the light of his utterance he gained certain insights into their relationship.

"How old would they have been when Ravi was born? *Amma* 33 and *āiya* 36. *Āiya's* willing soul would have burned with furies of passion? How could have he tamed the violent waters of passion? He leaned towards Sukirtham aunty. No wonder, he was captivated by her youth and stunning beauty. Poor *amma*, born and bred in a village, she might have inherited conservative notions of conjugal life, and led a reserved, withdrawn life."

He was confused.

Will *amma* come out of this? The volcano of her heart needs to cool down.

Āiya is the son of a poet. He himself is a poet and a worshipper of Art. Friends flocked to him because of his personality.

'Such a scandal would tarnish his image. Can *āiya* regain his honour after this?'

In spite of *āiya's* slip, he harboured no malice towards him.

In fact he himself was surprised that he sympathized with him.

After a bath and breakfast , he first thought of meeting Ramalingam māmā. On second thoughts he decided to proceed to Añja where father is likely to be in his farm.

As he walked through Putharan, the mild scent of ripe sesame flowers filled his lungs.

He saw Thurai approaching.

“Cannot walk holding our heads high. Is your father a child? Isn't he the one to whom the whole village turns for advice and guidance?”

Without engaging in a conversation with him, he walked straight.

Nagappa who was hoeing his soil, almost waylaid him saying, “Shouldn't one be careful in moving with women and children? I don't know, son, who to trust and who not to!”

There was a streak of sarcasm in Thirunavu's facial expression. Ramalingam māmā was coming up the slope of the palmyra grove.

“*Thambi*, I have advised your father. He will not err hereafter. Go, go and tell your mother Pākkiyam not to go round spreading rumours”

His words soothed him.

Was *amma* the root cause of the rumours!. Not likely. You may be able to cover the mouth of the rice-pot but you can't cover the mouths of the community.

With a heavy heart, he climbed the slope. In the north-east corner of their land, stood the *murunga* in full bloom. He plucked some flowers and smelled them.

In the southern plot was *āiya*, pruning tobacco plants. Seeing him, he came up.

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“*Thambi*, when did you arrive?”

“Just now, *āiya!*”

His warm smile revealed his small tobacco-stained canine teeth. As his unostentatious smile relaxed the tense atmosphere, he looked at his face, fascinated.

“Your crazy mother would have narrated her woes for hours on end! It was just a ripple in my life. Might have been God's design or a bond coming down from previous births. I don't visit Sukirtham now. Sivalingam, Muhathar's son helps her.

Is *āiya* trying to justify his extra-marital affair? Was his a tone of regret or anger at those who blocked his attempt to find emotional fulfillment? True his affair with Sukirtham was destined to be short lived.

Whatever it might have been, it now appeared to him that *āiya* had extricated himself from the mess. That is enough.

He felt sorry for Sukirtham aunty. Widowed in her youth, she was perhaps unable, like other young widows, to suppress her amours. In fact he, admired her refusal to conform to the norms of an orthodox society. At the same time, he felt sorry that she had been drawn into the vortex of a controversy.

He held *āiya's* hands affectionately.

Āiya's was obviously moved. His eyes filled with tears.

He had never seen his father cry.

Translated by S.Pathmanathan

The Transformation

When I got down from the bus he came up to me smiling. An amiable smile. Couldn't recognize him. His face was familiar. His lush hair touched his shoulders. He was wearing a tight fitting shirt and bells sweeping the ground. Although moustache was just appearing, there was a feminine grace in him.

As he walked past me. I felt like greeting him and touching him but he went on. My mind followed him. I turned into Aladi lane.

It was the rainy season. The lane was flooded. Wading through the flood, wetting the *verti's* end was pleasant. My mind became light and spread its wings ecstatically.

At the gate, the flood was ankle deep. The flood from the paddy field was oozing through the southern kitchen wall.

Amma was pounding something in the mortar under the eaves. Seeing me she came running and kissed my forehead.

"What a surprise! You've come on leave ...?"

"Yes on leave. It's one week now. Thought of seeing you and *āiya*".

"You've brought your wife?"

"She's not well"

"Why? Anything in the offing?"

"No", I smile

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Amma's eyes are moist.

It's four years since I married. No issue so far. That worries her.

"*Āiya* is returning from the farm. He asked for *rasam*.." *Amma* continued pounding the spices in the mortar.

"Oh, is it *thambi*?..When did you come?"

"Just now, *āiya*!"

His lips part as he smiles revealing the tobacco stained canine teeth.

How is he able to smile without any fuss tenderly touching my heart!"

Āiya is worn out but not aged.

He kept the mammy in the courtyard and walked to the well. It was then I asked *amma*.

"Who's that boy, hair hippy-like, wearing long ill-fitting jeans? He appears an outsider..."

"You must have seen him....?"

"Seen whom, *amma*?"

He's Muththan's nephew staying with this uncle.

"So, he is *Vallipillai's* son!"

It becomes clear who he is. How can I forget those memories? Though it happened fifteen to twenty years ago, everything is treasured in the annals of my youth. I looked at *amma*. Her face had become dark, her mind intently concentrated on something. Perhaps, she too is absorbed in past memories.

When *Kasipillai* uncle, *Sivam*, the shop keeper at the junction and *Vinasiyar* stormed into our house, boiling with rage, *amma* asked them:

“*Annai*, what happened?”

“You ask what happened. We're ruined; thangachi. Who did Rasaiyan think Kasi is? Rascal!. Beggar! You know there is a two lachcham highland east of my plot. Did he say a word that he was going to sell it? Ok, leave me out. Shouldn't he have mentioned it to Sivam or Vināsi? Couldn't he find someone other than Nagamuththan's grandson? That nalavan is a schemer. How dare he intrude into Thāvādi- right in the heart of vellāla inhabitants?”

“Who are you talking about? Muththan, you say? He lost both his parents during his childhood. He lived at Anaikōddai with his grandfather. The old man too passed away. Having grown up, he must have thought of making a living here!”

When āiya who had just come in, said these words, Vinasiyar interrupted. May be. That's no reason he should plant himself right in our midst! His relatives reside at Ilanthayadi. Let him go there and settle down!”

“I'm preparing to lay the foundation for a house by the road side in Putharan. Now my house will be in his backyard.

Understanding Māmā's discomfort, Sivathar said: “Listen Kasi, if he resides in our midst, how can our women, go about freely?”

“Is that your concern?. Okay, you do whatever you like. He may go to the Police. You can no longer trample them. Those days are gone!” said āiya. He has always been balanced. I have never seen him lose his balance. To *māmā*, āiya's advice must have sounded crazy, shaking with rage, he rushed to Āladi followed by Vināsiyar and Sivathār. *Amma* followed *māmā*, I followed her. The whole village followed but āiya didn't. To āiya, *māmā*'s action would have seemed rash.

Having reached the Āladi land, *māmā* bellowed :

“Who's there? Come out! Can low caste beggars set their

foot in the Thāvādi soil?" A young man responded to *māmā*'s challenge. He had a muscular body. He looked them in the face. His stare seemed to say: "What can you do if I reside here?"

"Look at his face. What insolence! Bloody cur!"

"*Māmā* rushed towards Muththan and kicked him in his flank. He didn't expect it and was about to fall down. However, he recovered and addressed *māmā*: "Respected sir, don't behave like this. We are human beings, landless. In sheer desperation, I bought this plot..."

"Is it so? Bought it for cash? And you want to take possession?"

Māmā was still abusive. He kicked Muththan again.

Further, Sivam, Vinasi and *māmā* took turns to beat him.

I was surprised at Muththan's composure. In fact he was strong enough to tackle the three of them alone. It appeared that his hands were tied by some unseen shackles. In fact he was accustomed to servitude imposed on his tribe for generations.

"Was it this empathy that distanced *āiya* from the whole affair?"

But *amma*? She was one who was proud of proclaiming that she was the granddaughter of physician Sithamparam, the *ve||a|a* of Thāvādi! Unlike the others who had gathered there she stood transfixed. They indulged in some rash talk.

"Low caste dogs... How dare they settle down in our midst?"

Burn down his hut! Kill him... if we let this pass, we will be finished!"

"Now he has come to live here.... Later, he might want to marry someone here!"

Such talk had created an atmosphere of mass hysteria. Frenzied by it, *māmā* seized a mamoty and rushed towards

Muththan.

Instantly she came from somewhere she held *māmā*'s hand firmly.

Everyone's eyes turned towards her. She was beautiful. Her complexion like that of ripe *chevvaḷai*. Her slim body appeared fragile. She was like a flower after a shower. Her youth was at the spill level.

She captivated one and all.

Her glance, for a moment paused on me. And when it fixed on *māmā*, he was like a devotee in the hallowed presence of amman. His grip on the mamoty loosened. She helped the fallen Muththan to his feet and took him into the hut. Everyone watched her leaving. I looked at her and the people there swayed by passion.

Her memory was deeply imprinted in my mind.

She was Vallipiḷai, Muththan's younger sister. I gathered this later from *amma*. The attempt by the high caste *māmā* and his goons failed because of Vallipiḷai. After that incident, *māmā* didn't try to drive Muththan away. It was very strange. What made *māmā* to change his inborn nature? Was it Vallipiḷai or her beauty?

From the day he was beaten up Muththan was bedridden. There was a crack in his joint. He was dependent on Vallipiḷai. No blood relative came to their help. For some reason. They might have left their relatives and moved in here. Muththan's medical expenses drained the little money they had. One day Vallipiḷai - of all people - called on us!

I looked at her eagerly. She looked leaner than before. However, I was struck by her alluring beauty.

Her memories got hushed up with other secrets. "*Thambi*,

you look surprised!". Is *āiya* not in?"

Call it affection or love her voice was overflowing with it. I understood what she was trying to communicate and when I tried to respond, *āiya* came there, asking "Who's there, *thambi*?"

Vallipillai responded: "It's me *āiya*! I pin my hopes on you! My brother has been bed-ridden for three months. We have run though all our savings.

"Bed ridden. Your responsibility... What could I do pillai?"

She hadn't expected those words from *āiya*. Her eyes brimmed with tears.

Please give me some chores like weeding.

Is this the Vallipillai I saw that day? How suppliant she is!

"Ok Valli, you start!"

That day itself she started work. Beat up and spread dung at *anja*, weeded the onion beds. She took upon herself the pounding of paddy or flour for *amma*.

One day I asked her : "Why are you killing your-self like this, Valli? Your brother is sick won't your relatives help you?"

"Help? My foot!" she sobbed. I sensed that she was smarting from some past hurt. I didn't ask her anything further.

Having lost both their parents at a very young age for some reason, they didn't want to be under obligation to any relative.

A week later, after pounding flour, Valli was going home with a lunch packet *amma* had given her. I was at the well watching her. Then I saw something I least expected. *Māmā* was at the fence staring at Valli. His gaze meant many things to me.

"Is *māmā* in love with Valli?"

Was Valli intruding into my very self? I felt guilty of being jealous, typical male jealousy! What else could I do? The following day Valli weeded *Māmā*'s farm. I wasn't surprised. I could

understand *māmā*. He is now changed.

Not only in the farm? Valli became *māmi's aide* at home too. Not only for *māmi*. For *māmā* too.

The wedded life of *māmā* and *māmi* has not been smooth sailing. They were never happy throughout their fifteen year married life. Though economically stable they had no issues. It was a great shortcoming. *Māmā* put the blame on the gods. *Māmi* consulted a native physician whose opinion was that the failing was on the male side. The fact that *māmā* was incapable of fathering a child had made *māmi* a witch. She looked lost and irritable. For the most trivial reason, she would torment him. Hearing her gibes, the neighbours would say “Kasi's wife is at it again. When will her libido subside?”

I have overheard *māmi* narrating her woes to *amma*. I can't quarrel with this sterile man. Before I married him, I was proposed to Maniam the Colombo trader... Not wanting in anything. A fertile family. His last child was born in April last”.

Her words laden with a sense of tragedy were pathetic.

She derived great satisfaction in singing the praise of Maniam. Who knows, she might have had an infatuation for him from her youth. Is she deriving a pleasure in reliving her dreams of the past?

“Committing adultery mentally!”

Amma would be embarrassed by her talk. She would say. Drop it *machcha!*. You don't know what to say and what not to say!”

“Shall I speak about your brother?... What is there to say about a sterile man?... By the way, has there been sterility in your families before?”

Amma could not stomach it any longer. “Shut up, mad

woman!" *amma* would şnub her? and move away.

Māmi would then leave launching a tirade against all *māmā*'s relatives.

This rift, in its full dimensions, had permeated their conjugal life. Did this rift give *māmā* the audacity to bypass his notion of caste and fall head over heels in love with her? Or was this the real *māmā* bereft of all outward falsities, the adorer of Vałli's charm?

Yes, *māmā* was infatuated. He might have presumed that he is not likely to meet any resistance. Poor Vałli, she thought that this affair was a type of strength. It was necessary for her peaceful life and that of her brother. To see the very man who brought his goons to drive them away from the village coming round begging her for her love gave her immense satisfaction.

And *māmā*'s plight!

Was *māmi*'s assertion true? Was he sterile? The question gnawed his heart, little by little. He was sure of his virility but there was a need to prove it. Perhaps he wanted to take revenge on his wife. He shed all his cherished falsities and tried to be honest.

And the result?

It was Chitrapowrnami. Full moon day. The whole village was gathered at Vembadi for the *Pongal* and the *vairavar madai*.¹² Pots, fruits and sweetmeats around the margosa and *bō* trees. The offering will be followed by the reading of Chitraputra story. *Māmā* was adept at reading *puranās*.

Whatever his engagements were he would come for the reading. But that day he didn't turn up. *Amma* told me. *Thambi rasa!*.... Run up an fetch *māmā*. Tell him we're ready."

¹² The Grand offering to Vairavar, the guardian diety.

When I arrived at *māmā*'s house, I saw *māmi* as pathrakālī¹³ incarnate. Vallipillai was under the eaves crying. *Māmā* was walking up and down restlessly. Seeing me *māmi* burst out.

“Do you know what your *māmā* is up to? Shameless fellow.... What has he found in this dirty *naḷati* to be enamored? I caught them red-handed. Hearing the temple bell, I woke up. He was not there. I thought he had gone to the temple... I heard a stir in the cowshed ... I peeped in. He was with this bitch.... How could I tell you all that?”

Without her telling me, I understood everything. Don't know what *māmi* thought. She seized Valli by her hair and dragged her. *Māmā* freed Valli, saying. “Don't hurt her. She is pregnant!”

“What? By you?”

“Yes, by me. By this sterile man!”

“This was too much for *māmi*. Her husband who she thought was sterile, had got Valli pregnant! Unbelievable! She asked him again.

“What? Pregnant by you?”

“Yes, by me!”

She became mad, She knocked her head against the wall and fell unconscious.

Taking her in his arms, he glanced at Valli.

Valli paused for a moment and looked at us alternately. Eyes brimming with tears, she walked away.

My heart became heavy with her grief. After this episode, *māmi* lived on for six to seven months. Disappointment, grief and *māmā*'s revenge had laid her up.

Māmi died at dawn on a rainy day.

Māmā sobbed like a child. 'Not that he loved *māmi* less'!

13. A form of goddess Kal which will engage itself in a frenzied dance.

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thought.

Vallipillai, who left the village that day never came back. It was said that she went to Vanni. I don't know to what extent it was true.

Muththan was around. Valli didn't visit him either.

"Won't she come at all? So what? Her son has come with hippy hair style and ill-fitting jeans!"

What is the matter, *thambi*? You're lost in thoughts. Do a change and wash yourself. Have some *pittu* with fried eggs.

When I came back after a wash, he was in the courtyard chatting with *āiya*. He greeted me and asked : " *Aththan*, how are you? Are you still at the Income Tax?"

I was speechless for a moment. I have been in the dark about him. But he's well-informed about me-about us!"

Hearing our conversation, *amma* came out of the kitchen. She looked at him somewhat, puzzled.

"Your brother's son!" said *āiya*.

Amma, confused that she was, couldn't collect herself and say "Come in!"

Āiya took him inside. We followed. His eyes rested on the photograph hanging on the wall. It was my sister Ranji's photo. She died young. His eyes turned moist.

"Had Ranji not died, she would be of his age or perhaps one or two years younger." *Amma* is moved.

"*Māmi*, I'm reminded of my younger sister. This is exactly like hers! That's why....." He wipes his eyes.

"What! You have a sister!", the three of us exclaimed simultaneously.

"Why not? *Appu* used to visit us often. It was because of

his help that I was able to study and come up in life. He had deposited Rs 10,000/- for *amma* in the bank. He didn't betray *amma!*"

"What are you doing now, *rāsa?*"

"Has *amma* changed? Thāvādi woman. Granddaughter of physician Chithamparam. How could she change herself so easily?"

"I sat my A-levels. The results have just come. One B and 3C^s. Hope to follow Medicine.

"You will, certainly!" *Aiya* echoed.

"*Thambi*, have some *pittu* with fried eggs!" *Amma* entreated him.

No *māmi*. I already had breakfast. I'll have some tea!"

I was surprised that he addressed *amma* as "*māmi*" a hundred times.

"Did Muththan ask you to visit us?" asked *amma* while serving tea.

"No, I came on my own. I don't know whether he would like it or not *māmi*, Why should I get permission from him to visit you?"

"*Māmi*, today I'm leaving for Vavuniya. Before leaving I thought I should see you all and speak to you. That's all"

When he got up to go, *amma* went up to him and kissed his forehead.

"*Amma* is really transformed!"

"When you come next time, bring your sister along, *rāsa!*"

"Certainly, *māmi!*"

He stepped into the lane. As we watched him leave, our eyes brimmed with tears.

Translated by S.Pathmanathan

Vimala

No sooner did she receive the urgent telegram she decided to leave for her village. There was no time even to rush to her flat. She proceeded from the office to the Fort railway station in time to catch the noon train to Jaffna.

Siva- her assistant-had wanted to join her as her escort. But then it dawned on them that both were expected to attend a staff conference in the Ministry of Labour in two days time. Now that she is going at least he will have to be present.

Siva too had something to look into in Jaffna. That was why he was keen on joining her. Now he could only come to the station to see her off.

The air-conditioned bogey had no vacant seats and she had to be content with a second-class seat. It was uncomfortable alright, but does one look into discomfort at a time like this... It was an urgent telegram, after all!

Why this mighty hurry anyway. Her father, who had sent the telegram, was always in a hurry.

After a lapse of almost eight months she was going to her village. To return, to be engulfed in the anxieties of her home, to sink into despair... it was much better to be in Colombo, to be cut off, free, alienated.

Even here the friendship she had fostered with Siva, the intelligence of that young man had given to her life a certain

fulness. To have similar tastes and ideas is not a usual thing. She had a liking for Ray's films. As for him it was not merely Ray he would go on enumerating the giants of the film world. She would listen fascinated.

If the conversation drifted into literature or art then he would really be in his own element. He could speak with equal authority on painting, fiction and modern poetry. It was he who had introduced Henry James, Joyce and Gorky to her. She now loved to read Gorky.

Their relationship was a result of common tastes. Beyond that it was difficult to be certain. As far as she was concerned he was a mere boy. Hardly twenty two. She often marvelled at the maturity he revealed at this age.

Siva was not really conscious that she was thirty. The oval face, the wide eyes, the compassion that seems to seep through them. The hair seemed to flow in waves to her ankles. Tall and slim she was beautiful. He could never dispel her image from his mind.

He once asked her.

"Vimala, with all your beauty why do you remain single?"

"Ah, marriage. You think looks alone will secure that."

With a mirthless laugh she stood gazing at something. Her eyes glistened.

After that he never broached the topic, for fear of causing her pain.

There was no one to receive her at the Jaffna railway station. True, she had not sent a message but couldn't someone have come on the off-chance that she might arrive.

She got into a taxi and reached home.

The silence that engulfed her home was broken occasionally by the moaning sounds of her mother. As she entered

the house, her younger sister Ranji rushed up and embraced her.

"Mother, sister has arrived."

Vimala looked at Ranji. Her eyes were swollen. She had been crying.

Father was not around. She crossed the hall and entered a room.

"Ranji, get me a dressing gown... I am coming straight from the office."

She hastily removed the saree, tossed it away and reached for the dressing gown.

In a corner, Susi, Rani and Sakti - her three other sisters lay fast asleep, their legs flung carelessly over each other.

These three were born after Indhu - another sister.

"Ranji, why are the children heaped like this?. Can't there be some kind of order?"

"What kind of order is here sister? Everything is in a mess."

"What did you say?"

Father was heard spitting noisily outside.

"Father has returned. He went to uncle's place."

By the time Vimala changed and came to the verandah, her parents, Saras and Indhu were already there.

Saras was born before Indhu.

Only her second sister Chithra was not around.

"Where has Chithra gone?" Vimala asked.

"Chithra...?" Mother broke down. It was pathetic to watch her whole frame shake with her sobs.

Father now spoke.

"That wretch has run away with that Indian servant Velauthan who was working at Thillai's place."

He too broke down.

She could hardly believe her ears. How could she possibly believe this. She raised her face and looked directly at Indhu and Saras.

They got up and went into the house. It was at this time that they heard the gate being closed.

"Who is it?" Father called out.

"It's me."

Uncle and his son Shanmugam entered.

Ranji went in and brought a chair for the uncle. He sat down wearily and said :

"Look here... this has made us hang our heads in shame. I too have daughters. Your other uncle and his brother Pasupati have two daughters each. As for your father, all his off-springs are daughters. Now is it possible to give them in marriage? That girl has brought shame on all of us. I never thought she would run away with an Indian. Our family is after all nothing to be sneezed at. You have to only mention that we are from Thavadi and who will refuse a proposal! They will fall over each other to give their sons. This mad, girl has rushed things. Look here, you are thirty. Aren't you still waiting? What will happen will happen? For that does one do something abominable like this? What are you going to do about this. You can't ignore it, can you? We can make an entry but Shanmugam says that since she is a major the police is powerless. Maybe he is right. We can't drag all this muck to the police station."

"No we can't go to the police. I think we ought to make a trip to Periyakamam. It's only a mile away from Kilinochchi. That's where Velauthan's parents live."

"Is that so? Then first thing in the morning go there. If she is there drag, her back. This must be done with the utmost secrecy. No one knows this in the village. Either we bring her back

before the village gets scent of it or we have to hide our faces."

Having said this the two of them stepped down from the verandah and moved away.

"Vimala, how many days leave have you applied for?" Father asked.

"I can't stay long father. I must leave tomorrow. There is a meeting with the Minister on the day after."

Tomorrow? Without seeing this to an end?"

"What can we do about it? She has made her decision." Having flung these words Vimala addressed Ranji. "Get a lantern, bring some soap and come with me to the well."

As the sister drew water and gave it to her she poured it on her head.

"What's this sister... You pour water on your head at this time?"

"I wanted to throw up this whole family. I can't. Can't I at least throw some water on my head."

Ranji stood aghast. Her vision blurred as her tears rolled down.

Ranji, don't cry. This is why I prefer to be in Colombo. I can't shoulder this burden anymore. To take what I need from my salary, send you all the rest and to remain in Colombo is far more staisfying. Is it enough if they simply bear children? Is there no obligation to give them in marriage? If they don't do it, then Chithra is not to be blamed. Even I will do it. They brag about their prestige. They are of reputed Vellala caste, aren't they? People will fall over each other to give their sons! Only thing is no one has done it. What's my age, and what's yours? What's the age of our eldest cousin? Are we not becoming old maids? She spoke with bitterness.

Ranji was taken aback. She had never seen her sister like

this. She was one who would shrug off any thing. But now...

Ranji made her sit and poured the water on her head. Won't this water cool that smouldering heat? She yearned to know.

Vimala's fit of anger subsided and she asked, "What's wrong with mother, Ranji. She doesn't look too well?"

"Yes sister, the baby is due this month."

"What? Have they still not exhausted their lust? Chithra is young. What's the harm if she runs away? I'll go to Kilinochchi tomorrow, tell her what she did is perfectly right, and proceed to Colombo."

"Kandasamy, the astrologer said that it will be a boy this time."

"I see. A boy to seek the dowry for his eight sisters, eh?"

"Sister, please, try not to shout."

"Why, why shouldn't I shout?"

"She is hysterical alright" Ranji muttered.

Vimala changed, went into a room, shut the door and fastened the bolt.

Ranji banged on the door twice. There was no reply. "Poor sister, she didn't even have something to drink."

Ranji walked away gently and lay down by the side of her mother.

She woke up with a start

"Ranji... Ranji." she heard the whisper and gently slipped out of the house.

Shanmugan was partly hidden in the shadow of a tree.

She buried her face in his chest and sobbed. He embraced her with tenderness.

"Shall we go into the garden."

"No... please". She feigned reluctance.

Shanmugan and Vimala boarded the Mullaitivu bus.

"She is only scared of Vimala. Let her go with Shanmugam."

This was the considered opinion of the elders. The bus stopped at Kilinochchi and both of them alighted.

"Shall we hire a car," Shanmugam asked.

"No, its only a mile, let's walk." She said.

They walked along a rutted lane.

"Incidentally, there is something I want to tell you... in fact I want you to be the first one to know it." said Shenmugam.

His face appeared a little flushed. She looked at him in astonishment.

"You know, Vimala, I like Ranji a lot. She too likes me It is for you to break this matter to Father."

"Is it love?"

"No, no it is nothing like that. I simply like her. Also, she is almost like a liability to your family."

"Then me?"

"....."

"Why don't you speak?"

"Look Vimala. You are educated and you are now an Assistant Commissioner. You have nothing to worry about. We will all be happy if you find a husband. And Ranji insists that nothing is possible until you settle down."

"Oh, so you want to wait until I get married. You know, I am going to get a brother very soon. He will earn and find a dowry for me. After that I can get married. Would you all like to wait until then? Maybe it is not beyond Ranji."

"Ah, what! is aunty pregnant? At this age? Don't talk rubbish."

"This is true. You are going to get a tiny cousin soon. You will need a bestman won't you?" she laughed. A mirthless laugh.

They walked in silence until they reached a hut. An old man was seated outside in the mild sunlight smoking a cigar. Shanmugam went up to him.

"Isn't this Velauthan's house? Is he in?"

"Daughter: someone's looking for Velauthan. Come here for a minute."

An oldish somewhat frail figure emerged from the hut. It must have been Velauthan's mother. She was followed by a small girl.

Fifteen, maybe sixteen years of age. She looked like the mother goddess, like a beautifully chisselled statue.

"Oh, how beautiful when they are young." Vimala was full of admiration.

"Is Velauthan around?"

"No, he is at Velani. For two weeks, he has not even come to see this poor girl."

"This one?"

"Yes, his wife. My brother's daughter.

That girl's eyes grew moist and she seemed to tremble as she asked.

"Is he not there?"

It is not that sister. We came here on some other business. We came looking for him because we thought he might escort us." Vimale answered.

"Can we help in any way?" asked Velauthan's mother. They walked towards Kilinochchi town.

Siva was at the station. She didn't expect this.

"I might come tomorrow. In any case you come and see."

Did these careless parting words have so much effect?

As she alighted from the train he asked,

"What was the telegram all about?"

"Oh that! Mother's going to give birth to a boy child. That's why father sent a telegram."

"What! How can you be sure that it will be a boy?"

"Surely, isn't a boy needed to find downy for eight girls?"

"Oh, I see, I suppose you are right."

He laughed, she too joined.

She felt as if her heart was light.

They emerged from the station and got into a taxi.

"Bambalapitiya... Pepin lane..." he said to the driver.

It was very unusual the way he too got into the rear seat and sat close to her.

She was surprised.

"Have you been drinking? I get the smell."

"No..." He laughed uncomfortably.

"Vimala, there is something I want to talk about. I felt I couldn't do it without a drink."

"Don't be silly."

"Oh, I forget, there were two private letters for you."

He pulled out two letters and handed them over to her.

One Was from a friend. The other was from Chithra. She tore open the envelope and read the letter in the dim glow of the hood light.

"Sister, I am doing this boldly. You know him. He is Kunam - Saravanai master's son. He is working in the Sugar Corporation. Velauthan escorted me to his place. Without his help I couldn't have escaped from that hell. In a few days we hope to have a civil marriage. Try to come if you can. I'll let you know. I don't want anybody's blessings. But I want you to bless me sister."

A short letter, but clear enough.

"This is Kunam ... Father and mother will be sad because he is of low caste. What nonsense. Who is bothered about caste anyway. It is all the same. He has a job. Is that not sufficient? I know him as a boy. I wonder what he is like now. Where did Chithra, find him. Oh, they were classmates. So, from that time... Chithra has guts alright."

She sighed with relief.

"What is it Vimala."

"....."

"Vimala, shall I get a dinner parcel for you?"

"No, buy a broiler instead. You stay on for dinner."

"Okay, as you please."

He stopped the taxi close to Sharaz, went in and returned with a broiler and two bottles.

"What's in the bottles?"

"Stout."

"So you are a stout drinker? For a moment I was scared."

"I prefer this. But even this is done occasionally."

The taxi turned into Pepin Lane and came to a stop near the third house on the left. It was an upstairs house and Vimala had the entire upstairs for herself.

The hall was tastefully furnished. There were two rooms, a Kitchen and attached bathroom.

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"Siva, take some rest, I will have a quick bath and then cook something for you."

"Is the cooking only for today?"

She looked at him with inquiring eyes.

"Vimala dear, ... I... I want you."

As he struggled for words he moved closer to her.

"Siva, don't be sentimental. Did you drink today to tell me this."

"Yes."

She looked directly at the figure that was moving towards her with so much desire. Her eyes grew moist.

"Vimala, don't be sentimental."

She abandoned herself completely as she embraced him and kissed him repeatedly on eyes, cheeks and lips.

"Please Siva, stay with me tonight."

"No, no, had we better not to wait?"

"So..."

Both of them laughed. It was a laugh that expressed the fulness of complete release from tension.

Translated by C.Kanaganayakam

Satisfaction

It was at the Nallur Music Hall that I first met him. I was listening to an enraptured rendition of Carnatic music in 'Thodi' raga when I noticed the little boy sitting at my side in a leaning posture, seeming to be me trying to understand the serene atmosphere around him. Softly, without disturbing the enchantment of those sitting around, he asked me, endearingly, 'Do you want some kadalai?' I had no desire at all at that stage for gram, but I looked at him in the dim light. He was small and slim, with what seemed very thin legs and hands. Looking more closely I noticed dry shrunken cheeks, but still his eyes were large and shining with a lively light.

He had in his hands a longish bag made of Ola leaves. He took out a packet of gram from inside and extended it to me. I told him Thambi (little brother), I did not want any. Unaccountably, I felt bad about rejecting his wares, but I had an upset stomach and also it didn't seem right to be munching kadalai in that atmosphere.

He must have been disappointed with my reply, but he smiled and turned away and came round to the woman seated on my other side. Softly, this time with out a smile, he asked, 'Hot, hot roasted kachchan - do you want any?'

But she just ignored the packet of peanuts he held out. And as he moved around I saw that no one bought either gram or peanuts from him. This was not quite the place for him, I thought.

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Even though he was now at some distance, I could still see in my mind the small inquiring face, and the large eyes, and I suddenly felt heavy at heart and saddened, as though bruised.

This was an age when parents were constantly nagged by children wanting kadalai, ice cream, coloured candies, dodol and other preserved sweets, lollipops, chocolates and the like. But here was a small boy, not quite an adolescent, behaving responsibly. Why was he doing this? Perhaps he has some difficulties at home, or is harassed, sent out with his wares in an act of cleverness like carrying palmyra fruit on a little bird's top. Is he a boy who has lost his father, or is his father without a sense of responsibility, roaming around grazing like the temple bull or maybe drunk? Maybe his mother and his siblings depend on him for their own existence.

I thought of my childhood, my mother sending me neatly to school, and making me study each evening, and the empathy towards him opened its floodgates. I felt I should buy something, and was about to call him when someone else without any hesitation or bargaining bought four packets of one or the other of his wares.

He took the packets deftly out of the long Ola leaf bag and quickly counted the coins held out to him and put them in his pocket. Moved now away from my melancholy, my heart lighter and almost joyful, I could concentrate again on the music.

Ramanathan's singing filled me. He was still singing the Thodi raga with its nuances. I felt like floating in the wind, engrossed in enchantment.

I happened to meet him again the next Saturday evening at West Street. This time he had balloons of different colours. It is now the selling of balloons, I thought. What had he been doing in the meantime? He came near me and asked. 'Buy a balloon?'

I gave him a five rupee coin and he gave me a balloon and balance of two rupees. 'Keep it,' I said. "Give me a rupee.' He said, and I obliged, not sure why. He gave me one more balloon. He's straightforward, I thought.

His behaviour showed clearly that it was not begging but a profession that he practised.

Two more boys, in clean shirts and clean shorts, came running up and bought a few balloons. He blew the balloons and tied them expertly and efficiently.

Standing by his side I asked him, "Thambi, where do you study?'

'Senguntha.'

'What class?'

'Year Seven.' He would have been about twelve, though he looked smaller. 'Must be brilliant in class?'

He smiled. I melted in the smile and asked him why, with the studies he should be doing at this age, he was roaming about.

His eyes dimmed. The lips trembled, and his nostrils seemed to twitch and broaden. Seeing this I felt that somehow I had wounded his feelings, and I started to move away.

He came closer. "My father died four years ago, when a shell fell on him at Sivapragasam Street.'

Sharing his sorrow, I took his right hand into mine and asked him, 'How come you came to Senguntha from Sivapragasm Street?'

"We are now living in Senguntha - me and my mother and my younger sister. My sister also studies. She is truly brilliant.'

I pondered. For the three burning stomachs there had to be something to eat, to fill them even half way.

Then he also had a burden, to study. Could he handle all this? His posture showed that he could.

I bought three more balloons from him.

"Why, do you have five children?' His voice revealed surprise. Perhaps he thought I was too young to have so many.

"Yes.' I smiled. I didn't want to share with him the fact that I don't have children. In any case there were plenty of children to give these balloons to. My neighbourhood is full of children of the right age for balloons, with quaint smiles, like Kausi, Chowmi, Thilak, Duwari, Vipul - all of them came to mind,

I looked at him. He had moved away, calling out his balloons energetically. Without disturbing him further, moving away, I found myself contented. I walked home full of emotion.

Translated by K.S.Sivakumaran

The Bud

Getting down from the car, she came sobbing. Sobs that could melt a parent's heart. She used to come hopping, her feet hardly touching the ground. But today she walked completely exhausted, dragging her school bag. Now her sobs slowed down though not fully abated. She came up to me, hugged me and looked into my face. Sorrow was stamped in her eyes. Her tears glistened.

When I asked her "What's the matter, dear?" she broke down and started crying.

Devi who was busy inside, came out asking

"What's it, Rāji?"

"I don't want the name Rāji, *amma!*" she pleaded, facing her mother.

"What's it, Selvam?" asked Devi, hugging the child. Her voice broke.

The child showed the back of her left hand above the wrist.

On the silky skin was a red line. I had a look at her palm. A scar there too. The evidence of caning.

"Who could think of caning this tender child? Cane? Or a stick? Or a twig? To the extent of leaving a scar! Monstrous".

My eyes are moist.

"Who's this teacher? Shrew. Has she no children? Look,

she has skinned the child?"

"Is there such a teacher during present times? She couldn't have done this purposely. Maybe, she might have lost control of herself. Or, are there streaks of sadism in the depths of her heart?"

My mind goes to Sellamma teacher who taught me at the Mission school. Somewhat heavily built. Gold rimmed spectacles. Eyes that would speak stroking your heart. A smile that would render speech redundant. Never in undue hurry. Devotion.

"Why isn't my child blessed with a teacher like Miss Sellamma?"

My mind melted wistfully.

"Why did the teacher punish you, Rāji?"

The child detached herself from her mother's hold came running to me and, with her slender fingers, pressed my lips saying

"No, not that name, *appa*! Never!

Her voice was heavy with emotion

Embracing her I asked "Why dear? Tell me what happened".

"Teacher scolded me. It seems I don't know anything. Dud. Only clay within my head!"

"Did she? Why dear?"

"She asked me to write down my name. I must have made a mistake. She beat me saying. Write the Sanskrit 'ji'. *Appa* what is Sanskrit?"

"If the child can't write that letter, she should teach her how to write. Not pounce on her like a hawk!" blurted out Devi and carried the child inside.

I peeped in. Devi was applying oil on Rāji's sore hand. "Mix

a little turmeric powder” I said and went upstairs.

I was absorbed in Sunthara Ramasamy's short story collection when Rāji asked me,

“Shall I come up, *appa*?”

Not waiting for my response, she came running upstairs.

“Mind your steps, *thangachi*. You might stumble!” I was surprised that Devi who calls her 'Rāji' a hundred times was avoiding the name.

“Does that mean that the name Rāji has become taboo in our home? By what name should I call my child hereafter?”

“How to eradicate the phobia that has taken root in the depths of her heart?”

“*Kunchu*, have you eaten?”

“Of course!” she said and came running. Climbed my lap and settled down.

“What are you reading, *appa*? Little Red Riding Hood? Snow-white and the Seven Dwarfs? Or what?”

She is under the impression that all what I read are her story books.

“You're sleepy. Would you like to go to bed?” After lunch, she used to have a nap.

“No, *appa*, Switch the T.V on!”

“There is nothing worthwhile on T.V?”

“No, Switch it on!” she insisted

There was nothing on T.V

She climbed the chair and sat on the table.

“What's this book, *appa*? The cover is glossy”.

“Read the title yourself!”

“Pa..!|a..m . *Pa||am*. What's *Pa||am*?”

“*Pallam is Pallam*”

She was not satisfied with my reply. She got up and stretched her limbs.

“Come dear, lie down!”

She climbed her bed and within minutes was fast asleep.

Rāji woke up by 6 pm. I closed my book and looked at her.

“Sicha, *appa!*” she smiled shyly, embarrassed.

“Come, come. You're now six. Still...?”

“Not yet six *appa*. I'm five plus. She corrected me.

“How old are you, *appa?*”

“Forty five”

“And amma?”

“She's thirty seven”

“And Ragu *siththappa?*”

“Forty two”

“And *siththi?*”

“Thirty five”

“Viji *akka*”

“I don't know!”

“And Kutti *akka*”

“I don't know. Enough, enough!

I wiped her clean and called Devi who came upstairs and took the child.

Soon Rāji's voice rang loud and clear in our neighbour's house.

“Viji *akka*, Kutti *akka*, Ratna *akka*, Mani *akka*, Mahes *akka*, Ananthan *anna*, Jeya *anna*” she hailed irrespective of age - but

following conventions of sex.

Those addressed were swept off their feet. How true is the aphorism that children are incarnations of God! Without a proper understanding of her role, that teacher parades, a piece of chalk in her hand! On top of it, she claims to have had a special training in the teaching of kindergarten children!

My heart beat fast.

Devi called me for dinner. It should be eight o'clock. I thought, as I came downstairs Rāji was on her mother's lap, eating.

“What do we have for dinner?” I asked.

“String hoppers and sothi with chicken!!”

As I was having dinner. She ensconced herself on the dining table and was satisfied only after being fed four mouthfuls by me.

After dinner, I went upstairs to watch Dharmasena Pathiraja's teledrama on T.V. Although language was a problem, I liked the serial. The photography and some frames gave the viewer the feeling of watching cinema. Pathiraja is a very good artiste.

Minutes after the commencement of the serial, Rāji came upstairs. After a minute or two, losing her patience she tugged at my scarf and gently kissed my cheek.

“What's it, dear?”

“Switch off the T.V and come, *appa!*”

I just couldn't ignore her invitation. She wanted me to help her with her lesson. Whatever work I had, I should put it aside and sit with her. Those moments were hers only hers. The lessons started on her bed. Rāji propped herself up with pillows at her elbows and reclined majestically like a little princess

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Her English books and a Tamil book were kept open on the bed. She had spread them herself without my help and started reading.

She would follow a system: go through the page on the right and then turn over and go to the left. She won't permit me to upset her system. Must allow her to go her way.

After finishing English reading, she ran through the Tamil alphabet in no time. The numerals, multiplication table and Maths were avoided because it was too much for her. But she knew the colours and tastes.

Half way through the lesson Devi brought milk. Taking a sip, Rāji commanded. "Tell me a story!" I narrated "The hare and the tortoise". She wanted to know what the hare would look like. She asked me to draw a picture which I did.

"The hare's ears are too small. Draw them bigger" she said. I made the ears bigger.

"Draw a camel!"

"Ok!"

"It's back is not neat", she criticized

"Elephant, cat, hen, car and cart" she ordered I drew all those.

"That would do" she said stretching herself

"Baby is feeling sleepy", I announced. Devi came up and carried her on her shoulders. End of day.

Knowing fully well that the name 'Rāji' had affected the child very much, I was annoyed to hear my wife parroting the very name.

"Devi, the child should forget what happened at school. So, don't mention that name!"

My wife put on a long face. I had to tell myself. "I have two

children”.

Rāji was in front of the dressing table. My wife was combing her hair.

We heard the drone of an aircraft. My wife was agitated. “Maybe a heli or a bomber”. She said.

“It should be pronounced 'Bomer'. *Amma* doesn't know” she said sarcastically and climbed down the steps to visit our neighbour.

Dumbfounded, Devi asked: “*Kunchu*, you're not going to school? Cutting classes today?”

Rāji's eyes brimmed with tears.

“Not to that school. I don't want that teacher *amma*”!

“Ok. Go and play. We'll find some other school tomorrow” said I and watched her leaving.

While in office, I had the feeling that Rāji was in front of me and behind me. Why am I so preoccupied with Rāji?” I asked myself.

My mind went back to the event. “*Appa*. I don't want that name!” and the sobs that followed. Some load weighed down my heart. I took half a day's leave and went home. Rāji was asleep. I gazed at her. My wife approached me. “Let's find some other school for Rāji!” she said. It was heartening to hear Devi echoing my thoughts.

My plan was to admit Rāji to a new school on my way to office.

Rāji was on the pillion of my scooter. As I was riding along Temple Road, Rāji said “Faster, *appa*!”. I complied.

“Not fast enough!” she commented. I accelerated further.

“No *appa*, Don't over speed. I'm scared” she said. Turning her face in my direction she asked: Would you teach me to ride a bike, a scooter and then a car?”

“Why not dear? You're my dearest, aren't you?”

“How about helicopter, bomber, Avro?”

“You can pilot all. My daughter will be a Jhansi Rani!”

“She looked at me with satisfaction and smiled.

We reached the school. She got down. I took her into the Principal's room. She patted Rāji gently on the check. Rāji responded with a warm smile. With her permission we entered the kindergarten class.

The Grade 1 teacher reminded me of Ms Sellamma of my times. Well built. Not gold-framed but silver-framed specs. When she smiled, her row of white teeth shone bright.

She welcomed Rāji affectionately. Rāji detached herself from us and mingled with her peers.

I gave the teacher an update of what happened at the previous school. “She is under your care now” I said leaving.

“What's your name?”

.....

“This cute girl has no name!”

“Is it Lalitha, Rani, Chandra or Viji?”

“Her name is Rāji!” The teacher gave the answer. My daughter looked alternatively at the teacher and me. Then she called '*appa*' sobbing and rushed to me. The teacher intercepted and tenderly dried the tears that had just appeared.

“This small kid is really smart!” She remarked lifting her up in her arms.

“You may leave, Sir. Please call at 11.30 when we wind up and take her home.

'Again I have to obtain half a-days leave' I thought as I started my scooter.

Eyes brimming with tears, she stood watching me.

I went to school ahead of time. I could see Rāji mingling with her peers.

I waited till the bell rang. I could see Rāji was absorbed in her studies oblivious to my presence.

When the bell rang, the children came out jubilantly. Rāji had a word with the teacher before coming out. The teacher followed.

"Your daughter is very clever. She can comprehend things easily" she said.

"Really? I'm so happy" I said taking leave. Rāji, got on the pillion. She was unusually quiet.

"Why are you silent, dear? Are you planning to besiege some fortress? I teased her.

"Don't disturb me, *appa!*"

I was wondering what the little princess was thinking about.

Even before I could pull up, she jumped down from the carrier and dashed inside calling "ammoi!"

On hearing her call. Devi came out.

"*Appa*, you too join!" she ordered. She asked both of us to be seated, opened her school bag pulled out an exercise book. Then quite leisurely, she wrote her name Rāji.

"What's this dear?"

"My teacher taught me to write!"

She narrowed her eyes and smiled. I looked at Devi. Her eyes were moist. At that moment I was reminded of my primary teacher Ms. Sellamma.

Translated by S.Pathmanathan

Equipoise

Whatever the precautions one took, however careful one was, the mistake recurs. He noticed it only when he tried to lock his bicycle.

The cycle's lock was missing.

It was a very old cycle, a Raleigh which had been bought in 1972 for Rs.140/=.

There was no guarantee that an old cycle wouldn't be stolen. The fear that the cycle would be stolen had made him devise a lock for the cycle- a one and a half foot long chain, a red-coloured rubber hose of the same length and an old padlock.

Though that lock had been devised for the cycle, his wife used it at home to serve several purposes: to lock the fowl-run at night, or to lock the front gate if the padlock usually used for the purpose had been misplaced.

He remembered she had taken it last night to lock the fowl-run.

Cursing his wife inwardly, he was wondering what to do when a thought suddenly struck him.

'If the bike can be left in a neighbouring house, it'll be safe'

Wheeling the bicycle, he came to the main road, It looked as if there was no house which would satisfy his fancy. He hesitated for a short while and then peeped into that small house with a single gate. There was no one in sight. Without thinking any

further, he wheeled his bicycle inside.

Just then that little girl - she may have been nine or ten - came out. She was dark and her limbs were spindly. Her face, however, was chubby and vivacious. Her eyes were large and perpetually smiling. She looked at him affectionately.

He took a liking for her at very first sight. She was wearing a cotton dress with faded red dots. Her sweet glance seemed to ask what he wanted.

"There's no lock for the cycle... that's why ... can I leave it here and go?... I have to go for a funeral nearby..."

The young princess merely nodded assent.

"Where are the grown-ups?"

"Amma has gone to the kade".

Did she mean her mother or the mistress of the house when she referred to amma, he wondered.

He was a bit confused. He couldn't pluck up the courage to ask. He parked the cycle along the eastern wall, taking care that the seat did not rub against the cement, and went out.

At the funeral house, Paranthaman's colleagues on the teaching staff and his students - both boys and girls - outnumbered the kith and kin.

The thought of his tragic death troubled him. "How cruel that death should come to him at thirty one. There was a growing intimacy between him and Eeaswari... they were to have been married in a couple of months why had all these hopes been shattered?"

'His enthusiasm, his dedication to work, his ability to teach according to the capacities of his pupils... all these had been made meaningless by a single bullet...'

Many were of the opinion that he had been killed in the crossfire. But some whispered. 'No, no he had some links, that's

why...'

'Whatever the cause, his death had been inevitable, the cause of grief'.

Just inside the entrance, he lay stretched in a coffin. When he looked at him, he felt as if someone had struck him hard on the chest and the face. The cruelty of his death assailed him as a fellow human being. Troubled in mind, he came out and sat on the verandah after viewing the corpse.

Within a few minutes of his coming out the funeral procession began.

When he was debating within himself whether to go to the crematorium or not, it was Pasupathy who almost dragged him to the crematorium.

'Are the smell of blood and the stench of corpses to be the fate of this soil? How long is such an abnormal life going to last?'

Though it was afternoon, he could hear somewhere in the distance the poopala raga wafted over the radio.

"How absurd...! Why is everything so topsy turvy...? When will life regain its order and harmony...? Will everything become a distant dream...?"

As the funeral procession got on to the main road, he remembered his bicycle. His glance strayed to the small house. The cycle was exactly where he had left it.

He felt ashamed that he should have thought of his bicycle in the midst of such grief.

The crematorium lay in a vast expanse where the blue sky, the dark sea and the earth met and embraced one another.

When the tongues of flame licked at Paranthaman's body, he shivered slightly and his eyes became moist. All his feelings seemed to have become frozen. He looked at Pasupathy who was talking animatedly with someone.

'Why is it that nothing seems to have touched Pasupathy?'

As they left the crematorium, it began to rain. He sought shelter in Pasupathy's umbrella.

"It's a passing cloud, machchan. It'll cease soon". "This life, its meaning... are they all passing clouds?"

He was surprised by his philosophical probing into the nature of life and death.

Pasupathy chattered away, without showing any sign of fatigue. He couldn't be like that. His mind was like a bird with a broken wing. It felt at ease without all this flutter.

When the rain ceased, patches of blue sky could be glimpsed in the east. How soon the sky had cleared up. He felt the pressures on his mind easing.

As they came to the main road, he took leave of Pasupathy.

He remembered his bicycle.

'Would the tyres be deflated...? That girl... her brother may have tampered with the valve tube.

He felt as if he had emerged from a dream and once again stepped into the normal world.

The sense of weariness had not left him though. A surprise was awaiting him when he reached the house where he had left his cycle.

The cycle had been taken and carefully left under the 'sunshade' to prevent its getting wet.

'Whose handiwork was this?... Could that child have moved it...it would have been difficult for her... supposing she had got hurt if it fell on her when she tried to take it ... or would she have bruised herself trying to wheel it...?'

As he took the cycle, she came running out, wiping her wet hand on her frock.

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"It was raining ... That's why...

"What if it rained, child? Why did you take all this trouble?",

Trouble...? for me...?

Her lips parted as she smiled.

His broken heart made whole again, he looked at her with affection.

She seemed to him life's meaning, the bearer of life's continuing flame.

Gratitude gushed up in him; he patted her head fondly and took leave of her.

He opened the gate; when he tried to take the cycle out, it struck against the gate.

"Be careful when you take it out... the pedal will strike"

He looked back. She stood there, her face dimpled with smiles.

Only after he had come out, it struck him that he had forgotten to find out the child's name.

'Everything comes to you belatedly...' He recalled his wife's oft repeated utterance.

'If I come again to Colombogam, I must make it a point to look up this child and find out her name' He made a mental note of this.

He felt his mind was spreading out its wings in elation. The mental worry caused by Paranthaman's death seemed to ease gradually, Everything appeared beautiful to him.

The grace of the girl who cycled past him in the opposite direction, the maturity manifested in the face of a small boy who was carrying a load too heavy for him, the gaiety of the school boys in uniform riding abreast, their hands on each other's

shoulders, the beauty of an unknown girl glimpsed-God alone knows-when in the bus that turned at Bastian's Junction, all these filled him with delight.

It was as if he was experiencing all the marvels and beauties of the world.

Forgetting himself, he trod on the cycle pedal, humming a sarukesi raga. The cycle seemed to gather unusual speed. He felt as if he was floating on air.

Translated by: A. J Canagaratne

The Strike

For two days he had been unable to do anything. He seemed to have lost his balance; his agitation prevented him from concentrating on anything. He had the feeling that his inner wholeness had slipped out of him. Today he had gone to work and come back. Could he go tomorrow? He felt frightened.

After his return from work today, he had confined himself to the house, without even washing his face. In one way, this provided him some security.

This sudden withdrawal surprised and embarrassed him

It was only the day before yesterday they had taken this decision on behalf of their union. The Parent Union too had instructed them to participate in the general strike.

A section of the Railway workers had already struck work. They had received information that following this example, government clerical servants and other trade unions too had gone on strike.

After all this, could they keep quiet? They called a committee meeting to discuss the situation. Only eight members had turned up for the committee meeting. He too had taken part in the meeting in his capacity as Secretary of the organization.

At the meetings all had behaved very circumspectly, without betraying their hand. However one or two voices had raised a feeble protest.

“Why can't we go on strike after drawing this month's salary?”

“I'm on extension. I can't strike”

“Why not postpone a decision on this matter?”

“If the job goes, it's gone forever... Are these chaps going to give it back to us?”

“Siva, Theva, Thiagu, Kannan, Dias - only they will go on strike”

At the end of the meeting, without any firm decision being taken, they had talked with one another and dispersed.

That July 22nd was a convenient day was the only thing imprinted on their memory.

When he awoke, it was past 5 p.m. He wanted to remain inside the house as far as possible. He thought it dangerous even to go out.

He knew that if he went out the very first person he encountered would drag him into a discussion about the strike.

The way they talked as if he had nothing else but the strike as a talking point irritated and bored him.

After washing his face at the well, he began drinking the cup of tea given by his younger sister.

“Does Indu like *anna* going on strike?” he asked her.

“What is this, *anna*? What's there to mope for in this?”

She took the empty tumbler and went inside.

It seemed as if there was no one with whom he could discuss this frankly and intimately.

In the morning his father's mocking look had grieved him. Now the younger sister had dismissed him in a few words.

Mother seemed somewhat upset. But her anxiety lacked insight and understanding.

Just then he remembered Chandra. He felt he should see her.

He had met Chandra only six months earlier. He had gone to the Kachcheri to see about a registration in the Land Registry office. When he was returning his mission unaccomplished, it was Chandra who had come to his help.

He was completely surprised when she was able to finish the matter in ten minutes.

The mere thought that he had wasted four days trying to accomplish this completely embarrassed him.

It was his nature to be withdrawn, not to take the initiative in anything. Her bustling active nature appealed to him.

He looked shyly at Chandra.

“How is Indu?” she asked him.

“Do you know Indu?”

“I know Indu. I know Indus's *anna* too”

He smiled

She smiled too.

They met each other frequently without sullyng the innocence of that smile. They talked and smiled fondly.

Once she invited him to her house, Though he was slightly reluctant at first, he accepted her invitation and spent an evening with her.

When he went in search of her, she was alone in the house, writing something. She came out and invited him to her room.

The room was orderly; it seemed to him this was her study. The walls were colour washed in a very light blue colour. There was a sofa near the window. Maybe to relax and lie down on while reading.

Her table was ranged along the eastern wall. Above the beautiful table lamp, there was a picture of the turbaned Bharathi

on the wall. On the left of the room, were too almirahs full of book.

He was happy to note she was a reader. He himself was a voracious reader.

The manuscripts lying on the table indicated that not only was she a reader but a writer too.

“What is this all this writing about trade union matters? Do you participate in this too?”

“Why not” she said smilingly and handing him a book lying on the table. She went inside saying “Here, read this, I'll be back in a minute”.

When she came out with a cup of coffee in her hands, she noticed he was engrossed in the book.

Latin American writings are not available here. Can I give it back after finishing it?

“Books can't be lent”.

“Even to me?”

“What's so special about you?”

His face darkened as he closed the book and silently placed it on the table.

“What's this touch-me-not nature?” she thought to herself as she took the book, placed it in his hands and said “Give it back after you finish it”.

The smile lurking in her lips must have touched him. He straightened up and looked at her intensely.

'This girl with the silken glance is somewhat dark. Her body is slim and supple. She looks as if she has been sculpted. I seem to remember seeing someone like her somewhere?'

When he realized whom she reminded him of, he was enraptured: the *amman* statue in the local temple.

“Finished”

“What?”

“I asked whether you have finished looking”

“At what?”

“At this girl. What is there to be fascinated by in this inky blackness? Enough of looking. Say something”.

“Looking is enough”.

“What's all this silly sentimentality?”

Her lips quivered. With his fingers he firmly pressed her lips.

She liked his moderation and balance which saw to it that he did not overstep the limits even under the pressure of passion.

That day's meeting not only helped them to develop a fondness for each other but also enabled them to understand each other and exchange views on many matters.

Common interests and tastes brought them closer to each other. However there was also something in him which made him seem withdrawn and turned inward, she noticed. This did not seem an insurmountable barrier to her, caught as she was in the toils of love. She thought that living with him and time would set matters right.

They talked for a long time and parted reluctantly that day.

Putting on his shirt, he set out to meet Chandra.

As he stepped on the road, Sivarasa appeared before him, with a slight smile.

“*Machan*, don't forget the 22nd ... Otherwise we'll be labeled blacklegs.”

He felt like breaking the crooked tooth Sivarasa displayed when he smiled and depositing it in his hand.

Sivarasa seems to be going somewhere in a hurry? He was thankful Sivarasa didn't delve any further into the matter of the strike.

“Hm... how can one run a trade union with weaklings like this... It's better to give up all this mad work and mind one's business. Was it to get trapped like this that he had stopped everyone he met on the way and lectured on Socialism to them?”

With a heavy heart, he turned into the mill lane. There was a Vairavar Kovil on the lane's eastward turn. He approached the kovil, touched the *soolam* and worshipped it.

His tongue was dry; something seemed to form in the throat and his eyes became moist.

He circumambulated the withered margosa tree and the *soolam* thrice. He made a vow that in *chithirai* he would perform a *pongal*.

How many vows he had made to this Vairavar. The vow he had made when he had touched the *arichchuvadi* with tiny fingers and asked for the boon of learning, the vow made when *amma* had fallen seriously ill and was fighting for her life, the vows made when he had passed the exam, got a job, fallen in love with Chandra....

Why all these vows and *pongals*?. He felt ashamed when he recalled all these.

When, with reassured walk, he turned at the culvert, he could see Chandra's house.

Chandra was at home. Her sympathetic and cordial welcome gave him strength. He felt he had come to the right place. Though he was eager to unburden his mind, he hesitated not knowing where to begin.

It was Chandra who spoke first.

“Aren't you on strike tomorrow?”

Not wishing to answer her direct, he came close to her and holding her hands in his said. "It's better to forget all this madness and go to work instead."

She felt something inside her snap and bleed.

"Such a bundle of contradictions" she thought as her face darkened and set hard.

"Aren't you ashamed to talk like this?" she asked sharply.

"Can I betray my helplessness to a person like her who acts so decisively?" he thought as he looked at her in fear over a small matter like this?

"Is this a small matter?"

"For girlish people, it's a big matter. Go well in time to school tomorrow. Go and sign the attendance register".

Her words unsettled him utterly. It seemed to him that Chandra who had been so close to him had gone far, far away from him, that he had been swept to a side. He began to sweat from the top of his head to the tip of his toes. He came out fearing even to look at her and take his leave. He didn't feel like returning home; he went where his legs took him. Walking wasn't difficult for him; it eased him. He walked a long distance, without taking notice of anything. He thought the sound of the sea came from Cheddipulam. A mosque could be seen in the distance. Leaping tongues of flame. The smell of a human body being burnt. He realized he was standing near the madam of the crematorium. He looked hard at the burning corpse without any sense of fear. In the midst of the tongues of fire leaping from the pyre was Chandra. Her burning corpse seemed to smile mockingly at him. Startled he left the crematorium. He walked fast up to the *matha* kovil; then fearing to take the short cut through Chatti, he began to walk along the road.

He thought his senses had become dulled after he parted from Chandra.

When he reached home, it was past ten p.m.

“Chandra's nature is to view and do everything as a matter of course... Her parents are depending on her. On her earning... But why am I unable to do something which she can?... *appa's* business, his wholesale rice business is unable to fortify me and give me courage. Is this lack of courage a weak manifestation of my Instinct for self preservation as Chandra says...? Will her oft repeated statement 'You'll get this Chandra only if you get rid of this middle class mentality' come true?

He felt frightened. He felt as if he should tear his hair. Tears came to his eyes. Biting his lips, he got up, opened the window and looked out. The unobscured moon shone clearly

“Will Chandra be sleeping now? Not likely. She might be reading something”.

He was troubled by the feeling that something which had been very close to him had dissolved and flowed away.

He came out of his room. His mother was sleeping on the bare cement floor of the hall. '*Poor amma*' he thought as he went back to bed.

When he went to the school in the morning, he found the Principal had come before him. After signing the attendance register, he went to the Chemistry Lab and secluded himself there. He decided that as far as possible he would hold classes in the lab.

Pandithar, Thanagarasa, Sambu, S.K.V.S.Shan all seemed to peep at him and smile derisively as they went past.

Only Vanitha sympathetically came into the lab, remarked 'You haven't gone on strike? That's good' and left.

“Why can't Chandra be like this Vanitha?” he thought for a moment.

He had wanted to see Chandra before he came to school in the morning. But he had changed his mind. It seemed absurd to him to continue to talk to Chandra on this matter. It appeared to him that she was bent on damaging his ego, whatever the topic of conversation.

“Wasn't it my mistake to talk of love to a clever, resourceful girl like her?” He wondered now and then.

It surprised him that his mind was dissolving in memories about her.

As soon as school ended, he hurriedly caught the bus, not wishing to meet even his colleagues.

He had taken just a few steps after alighting from the bus, when opposite he saw Chandra. He hadn't expected to see her; he froze. She pretended not to see him or notice his feelings. Walking fast, she passed him. He watched her walking away. At that moment, the thought of Vanitha came to his mind sympathy exuding from her wide eyes was always consoling.

When he reached home, Indu came running and said 'Chandra came *anna*.'

He was unable to say anything. He looked up at his sister. Her eyes were moist.

“Chandra is on strike. Why don't you go on strike at least tomorrow?”

“Go on strike? For whose sake? Vanitha?”

“What is it, for Vanitha?”

“No, no. I asked whether it was for Chandra's sake?”.

Indu left on looking at him understandingly.

At that moment he thought Vanitha's eyes were more beautiful than Chandra's.

Translated by : A.J. Canagaratne

The Shower

He was sleeping on the western *thinnai* with *amma*. He woke up when the rain descended wetting him. It was the first shower and the soil exuded an enticing smell which coalesced with the fragrance of the *pichi* blossoms. He inhaled lungful of the amalgam and stepped on to the veranda.

The shower wasn't heavy but it continued. The slant shower wetted his face. He wiped his face and stood under the eaves. He cupped his palms and collected the rain water cascading down the roof. He tasted it and was puzzled to find it saline. Was it because dirt was dissolved in the rain water. He spat it out.

No sign of the drizzle stopping. He walked through the courtyard past the lime tree up to the well. He peeped into the well. There was a little water in the *kundu*.¹⁴

"Why is there no water at the bottom? The rain is not enough, perhaps. He consoled himself.

In the cowshed the spotted cow lay chewing the cud. When he approached, it got up and urinated. Then it defecated. He watched, in amusement, its anus opening and contracting.

Approaching the cow with a smile, he fondled its udders. Its touch was agreeable. He pressed an udder and pulled it. Milk sprayed on his face. He tasted a little from the corner of his mouth.

The tethered calf tugged at the coir. Poor thing! 'Shall I unleash it? *Amma* will punish me', He thought.

14. a small trough at the bottom of the well.

He walked past the *seemal*¹⁵ and, through the gate, reached the front field. Rain water was foaming in a corner. He tried to splash it. Not enough!

He went to the well. Washed his face along with *amma*. *Amma* offered flowers to the Sun and prayed. He too prayed. In the eastern horizon, the sun appeared like a huge tomato. He couldn't take off his eyes from the scenery.

"What inquisitiveness!" *Amma* asked as she wiped his wet face with her saree's end.

"The rain has stopped!" he moaned regretfully clinging to *amma*.

"No son! It will rain heavily. The rainy season has started."

Wearing *viboothi*¹⁶ on her forehead, *amma* walked to the cowshed, *chembu*¹⁷ in hand. He took his Grade Seven reader and started reading aloud. It was the Kirisāmbal story. He read it again and again till his mind imbibed it.

It was the last leg of September. The monthly assessment was on. Unconcerned he was looking at the rain.

"Ragu, don't wander!" Hearing Kanagasabai master's voice, he shuddered.

"Write down the answers, rāsa!"

Having been exhilarated by the address 'rāsa', he understood the questions and wrote down the answers quickly and kept his exercise book on the teacher's table. The teacher thumbed through the pages and smiled satisfactorily. He was happy. He stood up and raised his right index finger.

"What? Urinals?... It's drizzling!"

"I've a cap, sir!" Mumbling he ran out.

If it rains, he forgets everything. Like a ghost held captive by the enchanter, he became restless. In his previous birth could he have been a *rain bird*? His body language in watching the drizzle and feeling it is exactly like the elation of the bird.

Although he had a cap, he walked to the toilet in the

15. a Corridor of two fences leading to the house

16. holy ash

17. a small container

southern corner of the premises enjoying the drizzle falling on him like flowers. After relieving himself, he ran three rounds in the space between the southern and northern boundary walls. Was he practising for the forthcoming Sports meet? No. it was his pretext to get wet in the shower.

He was a bit tired, He walked towards his classroom. "Too much fun today!" he told himself. His joyous mood was evident from his springy walk.

He looked down as if he had discovered a treasure on the wet grass. He was excited. He sat delicately lest his shorts might be soiled. His eyes opened wide in wonder at the sight of the wonderful insect. It was half the size of a tamarind seed. It moved like a tiny velvety thing. Two black dots for eyes. Legs like red lines. Lifting it tenderly he entered the classroom, hiding his treasure in his folded palm.

Once back at his seat, he tore a leaf from his exercise book, folded it into an envelope, lodged the insect into it and passed it to his neighbour Ravi.

"Look, how gorgeous it is!"

The insect went round the class. Finally, it reached the hands of his cousin, Mathi. He admired the ecstatic expression in her eyes.

Mathi came to him and returned the treasure.

"What sort of insect is this?" she asked.

"I don't know!"

"Have you finished your exercises?" Kanagar asked. He came and stood by him." There was a hush in the class. Ragu are you up to some mischief?

He was silent. The master took the envelope from his hand. When he looked into it, his joy knew no bounds. Enthusiastically he cried "This is *thampala poochi* ...¹⁸ Poor thing!" He stepped out and released it.

"*Thampala poochi*?"

"Yes. "*thampala*" means betel juice. It's an interesting story. One day Lord Siva and his consort Pārvati were alone. She

18. Valvet mite

prepared a chew of betel for him. He enjoyed it and spat the juice to a side. The spittle, was transformed into a beautiful *thampala poochi*”

“These insects are crawling all over the place. Does that mean Lord Siva has been spitting everywhere?”

Ragu wondered whether his unguarded statement was blasphemous.

The classroom was quiet. The students looked at the teacher in disbelief.

“It's all a question of faith!”

Ragu's body thrilled and shivered thinking of the *thampala poochi*. He felt he was in the presence of Siva and Sakthi... and a large number of *thampala poochis* crawling around him. On top of it, Mathi was holding his right hand.....

The school bell rang. Waking up from his reverie, Ragu ran to the playground, gathered some insects scattered there and lodged them safe in his bag.

“Must show all this to *amma*”

Restless, he started walking briskly towards home.

He woke up to the sharp, ferocious cry of the unknown bird. It was followed by the melody of the cuckoo. The crows joined the cacophony a little later. The cries of *kukkurupān*,¹⁹ *honey bee*²⁰ and the *crested kilathi*²¹ were also heard.

“Is this mynah?”

“Mmm” *amma* responded and continued

“Even the parrot starts with a krr...krr and ends up with a guttural cry”

“Yes, *amma*!”

“What's this bird? ... Could it be *vālātti*?”

“No, it's *ātkātti*”

“And this?”

“You don't know even this, *amma*? It's the black bird!”

All of a sudden like rain falling on tin roof, all the birds cried

19. barbet

20. sunbird

21. lap wing

in unison. The cries merged into a *jalatharanga*.

All the sound subsided. Ragu came out. It was drizzling.

“November showers won't cease” said *amma*

“Are we in for heavy rains?” asked Ragu, looking at the north-east sky. The dark clouds that had gathered above Sundaram *māmā*'s palmyra grove were descending quickly. A sudden blowing swept over the fields in the north. The pregnant paddy stalks tossed their heads gracefully. As the rain moved from the fields to the courtyard, Ragu danced with joy. His body shivered under the slant showers. He liked the cold climate and the shiver.

The showers that started on Saturday continued throughout Sunday. It looked as if the sky had cracked and was coming down in torrents. Monday morning brightened with a warm breeze.

Ragu longed to go round to see the floods. “Can take Mathi out. No, she won't come. I'll go alone.

The feel of wet ground under his feet sent sensations into his body.

The flood from *Kunchi*'s land was flowing past his courtyard. And in the flood he could see little fish like *ariyal*, *kachchal māṅkan* and *sallai*. He could hold them in his cupped hands.

Āiya was not to be seen. *Amma* was busy at the cowshed.

He pushed the *padalai*²² and came out. What a sight! The Thāvādi valley was a jungle of flood! It was spilling over the bunds. He walked in the direction of *māmā*'s house and through the lane reached the road. The flood water roared through the culvert into the Navakai kulam. The fields were submerged in water. The vidane's home-garden might be sunk any moment.

He walked on the *Navakai* bund eastwards. There was a stir in the *erukku*.²³ He could see something like a silver wire.

“What! A snake? He shuddered. It raised its hood. A

22. A wicket-gate

23. Calotropis bush

82 • The Shower

cobra? Excited, he slipped and fell into the flood. He collected himself and cried out “Padda Vembā,²⁴ save me!” He came up to the road and stepped into the mill lane. Añja thoddam was visible. Āiya was there. He was building a trellis for seedlings. He gave him the slip and came up to the Añjā kulam. Water had reached the brim of the bund.

He was eager to see Moonthāi kulam, Āravayal, Silundā and if possible, Kanna madai. Not now. Shall see while returning from school.

Walking on the bund his foot slipped on a gravel. As he fell, he cried out “āiya!” His cry echoed in all the directions. He went down and came up once. Again he felt he was going down to the very bottom.

The cool breeze roused him. He could feel that his head was resting on āiya's shoulders. His touch gave him a feeling of security.

On hearing the voice of āiya who was walking on *Kunchi's* paddy field bund, *amma* rushed to them followed by his beloved Mathi.

Translated by S.Pathmanathan

24. The dead margosa is the abode of god.



Saddanathan's contribution to Sri Lankan Tamil Writing is substantial. Some critics see him as an extension of Ku.Pa.Ra. Still others trace an affinity between him and Janakiraman. Be that as it may, Saddanathan is essentially a Jaffnaman. His stories are Jaffna based. His native Velanai and particularly his hamlet Thāvādi provide him with the idyllic setting for his stories into which the flora, the birds and insects blend beautifully. It is amazing that the islands off the Jaffna peninsula which are considered as unproductive could be endowed with so much natural beauty especially during the rainy season.

- S.Pathmanathan

