

R. Parthasarathy · *India*

HOMECOMING

I  
My tongue in English chains,  
I return, after a generation, to you.  
I am at the end

of my dravidie tether,  
hunger for you unassuaged.  
I falter, stumble.

Speak a tired language  
wrenched from its sleep in the *Kural*,<sup>1</sup>  
teeth, palate, lips still new

to its agglutinative touch.  
Now, hooked on celluloid, you reel  
down plush corridors.

II  
To live in Tamil Nadu is to be conscious  
every day of impotence.  
There is one language, for instance;

the bull, Nammalavar<sup>2</sup> took by the horns,  
is today an unrecognizable carcass,  
quick with the fleas of Kodambakkam.

There is little you can do about it,  
except throw up your hands.  
How long can foreign poets

1. Tamil classic of the third or fourth century A.D. by Valluvar.  
2. Tamil bhaki poet who flourished about A.D. 900.

provide the staple of your lines?  
Turn inward. Scrape the bottom of your past.  
Ransack the cupboard

for skeletons of your Brahmin childhood  
(the nights with Father droning  
the *Four Thousand*<sup>3</sup> as sleep

pinched your thighs blue). You may then,  
perhaps, strike out a line for yourself  
from the iron of life's ordinariness.

### III

And so it eventually happened—  
a family reunion not heard of  
since grandfather died in '59—in March

this year. Cousins arrived in Tiruchchanur  
in overcrowded private buses,  
the dust of unlettered years

clouding instant recognition.  
Later, each one pulled,  
sitting cross-legged on the steps

of the choultry, familiar coconuts  
out of the fire  
of rice-and-pickle afternoons.

Sundari, who had squirrelled up and down  
forbidden tamarind trees in her long skirt  
every morning with me,

stood there, that day, forty years taller,  
her three daughters floating  
like safe planets near her.

3. Collection of Tamil hymns written between the fifth and ninth centuries A.D.

IV

I made myself an expert  
in farewells. An unexpected November  
shut the door in my face:

I crashed, a glasshouse  
hit by the stone of Father's death.  
At the burning ghat

relations stood like exclamation points.  
The fire stripped his unwary body  
of the last shred of family likeness.

I am my father now.  
The lines of my hands  
hold the fine compass of his going:

I shall follow. And after me,  
my unborn son, through the eye of this needle  
of forgetfulness.

V

You were born in this island:  
rains sprouted  
all over its large, arabic eye.

I see myself in you  
as you bend, daily, our world  
to yours. Chase the sun

from one window to the next  
till sleep ties knots  
in your limbs. Old,

I smart under your absence.  
The long years break out in a sweat  
down the spine of pillows.