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Homecoming

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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*,¹
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, Nammalavar² 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*³ 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.