

Ven Begamudré / THE LIGHTNESS WHICH IS OUR WORLD, SEEN FROM AFAR

One

1: Ondu

She remembers how he railed
as a householder. His obsession
with rain, his need for it
to purge their previous life, promise
an end to rebirth. In the compound she stalks
are ninety-nine images he crafted of summer:
unglazed, even unfired,
pieces of some greater whole that holds
his longing for what summer could have been.
She dreams he will return in her lifetime
to finish them.

2: Eradu

There is a glimmer of dew; still every mouth is dry. He watches parakeets
circling without rest. Hopes if he must be reborn, he will return as a partridge
fed on moonbeams. Cobras stifle in the dust. If he had a child he would not want
it to hear parakeets without songs.

3: Muru

Vultures alight on the banyans.
They are heavy with flesh.

There is no rain
in a land where crocodiles weep.

This is what she hates. So much thirst
and how blue the sky.

4: Nalku

Even as a woman denying her loneliness
thinks of summer as a season for desertion,
thus couplets are composed of unlikely lines
and so much sadness emerges: the princess
hoping for a true prince who will not scorn her
for her flaws or learning or wit. He is merely
a dream, this long-lost mate, as if
the thought We remember is all she needs
to recapture their previous life. It is
never enough. She knows this.

5: Aidu

Shadows lengthen by a stroke, his need not hers. He thinks of the Adivasi, those
original tribes. How the girls sleep together, unripe yet welcoming nightly
visits of boys. The boy pretending to abduct the girl. The dowry to appease her
clan. How simple their desires: shamans interpreting intentions of everyday
gods; no need for clothing, coyness, shame; bands of cloth barely meeting in the
back. He sighs, holding himself tight, a lone cloud refusing to weep.

6: Aru

Pausing near an evergreen banyan,
she eyes tourists at the temple
well after nightfall performing pujas
at the end of a picnic. All these prayers
for the boredom to end. She likes
to watch the Brahmins, their circling
disk of flame, the neon lights.
What she likes best is to hover
when worshippers leave the sanctum
for the muddle in the courtyard;
how they reclaim sandals
they know by feel, ayahs
shepherding children, parents
frowning at a hand-cranked carousel
creaking through the night. She listens
while novices close the inner gates
to guard the sleeping god. Inside
the Brahmins fatten on sugar and ghee,
making the best of this age
before the white horse comes,
Kalki with his sword blazing
like the comet of doom.

7: Elu

Hunger yet nothing will grow except doubt and envy. Where do all the songs go?
What he craves is flight, an end to gravity, everyone becoming lighter. Hunger
much as the Adivasi know scrabbling for roots while that other hunger wanes, the
hunger for flesh. All their doubts like why? and how? In this case, the phrase
much as easing his pangs. Hunger and doubt and envy, the day growing hot.

8: Entu

She is chanting the end of Ramayana,
not the first end, not the one children
are told: when Rama takes Sita back
home, the long road north lit by lamps.
It is the second end she likes: when Sita
stands accused of seducing her abductor.

It is a tale for autumn nights
told in the breeze: the endless
quest for that perfect love.

How comforting it would be,
she thinks, if there were only one end:
no question of Rama's faith
or questioning of Sita; no need for tears
from listeners or lovers. Yet the version
she prefers, her Ut-Ramayana,
is so much more like life.

9: Ombaththu

He reaches out and touches scales. Each night the cobra seems more tame. He
ponders the skin shrinking and splitting, shedding and drying with such ease.
Beneath the slackened hood, an emerald. He will harvest it without killing his
lone visitor, condemning himself to death from its mates. First the bites, then
his fleeting breath. Their justice too swift, his execution slow. He could never
do it, he thinks. He plucks a scale from the hood, sucks at the root where it is
moist, the blood green, and savours it. Is this how she saw him, resenting her
need? He urges the cobra towards him. He thinks: When it leaves to rejoin its
kind, I will warn it of the sun.

10: Haththu

Her Ut-Ramayana is ambiguous.
The first end led naturally to rain.
Not the warm rains of winter here.
A rain that plunges in relief
on summer afternoons,
a rain that leaves its mark.
The second end, as perverse as life,
leads instead to grief. She
recites the paradox to herself,
envying the poet his foresight:

The presence of doubt
is the nature of love.

Often she wishes Rama failed in his rescue;
let Sita save herself. Yet Ramaraj
could not have begun, the perfect reign
of an imperfect king, that once or ever.

11: Hannondu

Allow me to intrude. This is not some local diversion, didactic entertainment with an easy plot. We are what the Goddess dreams, able to direct her inventions as easily as we command the sun. Consider the footprints on a river bank after the Goddess crosses the river. We call it a sign but it is only she, walking in her sleep. Another way of being, which we envy. The question to be answered: Yet why are we here? The Goddess chuckling in her sleep when we seem so real.

Two

12: Hanneradu

The beggars have discovered her home.
A legless man propels himself at ease
on a wheeled board followed by a woman
cursing God for their lack of sons,
though she has no tongue. A girl without ears
dangles earrings on either side of her face;

swears she would never disfigure the child in her,
not above the neck. Every well is dry.
The icebox, as elsewhere, is locked.

Their hostess is in a dark room
clutching a statue: a goddess of erotic love.
She must emerge to greet the intruders
and feed them but for once she is not angry
with this image of summer, unfinished
like so much he began. She tells herself
he was not to blame and cups the breasts.
They are glazed and firm.

13: Hadimuru

He lies with his face to the old moon and tunes his ears to their whispering, the hooded hiss of the guardians. He will creep with them to the edge of their realm. He prays the night will not be too dark. He prays the many portals will be lit by the brilliance hoarded within. Inside he will discard his loincloth, shed his fears. Squirm his way down through their halls: here, in the labyrinths they rule. And yet he will not touch the stones. He will keep only the thrill of resisting temptation, prizing this above the emeralds, rubies and diamonds of night.

14: Hadinalku

All of us hunger alone. Beggars
wander, letting no one hold them back
with promises. No water to be had,
yet so much time for thirst.

The goddesses of dawn and dusk
are sisters. She mouths this and reaches
down in her shadows, aching to be full.
She feels nothing at her fingertips
but heat, resenting her need,
his restlessness, while beggars cackle
and a wheeled board creaks, the passing
shapes a reminder of life beyond the shades.

15: Hadinaidu

Cobras in these thick summer months shrivel within their loosening skins.
Shrivel and coil themselves on the hoard that galls them, drives them from cool
halls into a sun blinding them to their duty. The cobras, the hooded ones.

16: Hadinaru

Dancing in her still dark room
she welcomes a four-armed god:
he so dazzling she closes her eyes
to his touch; she so ready she mounts him

before he warns her of the outcome:
ruining her for mere men.

17: Hadinelu

The man creeps again to their haunts. Trailing his loincloth, he enters to
squeeze himself through mazes to this: a ransom left for his taking, light into
light. He tells himself to relish his conquest. Soon. If there is any vestige
approaching lust it is for these gems knotted in the cloth. He crawls back to
the hut, his skin rasping through dust like scales.

18: Hadinentu

Her cries fade, ebbing like the light
from her impossible lover's face.

If she lies perfectly still in his arms
she can hear a keening while the hooded ones writhe.

19: Haththombaththu

Let us be frank: for the man to creep at night in search of wealth is just
another error in judgement, as a lion makes who leaves cover to be
confronted by
his trackers. To surrender to the surprise of life: now this is stoicism, the
kind we Hindus are thought to have perfected. Even you cannot hope to resist it.
Satyagraha. Soul force. No surprise the Mahatma lives. No surprise you still
mistake what he did for the passiveness of a sea on calm days while under the
surface waters churn: the peace of doves the one thing a sea cannot attain, as
dust cannot know it is even in the eyes of a lion a cause for tears.

Three

20: Ippaththu

She lies with her god on a mat, starlight
piercing the shutters to dapple his arms,
two cradling her, two crossed upon his breast
rising and falling with his breath. The god dreams
creation, the cries of children in the sun,
food their only thought. And shade.
The image she tries to forget is of a man
moulding a child out of clay.

The arms release her when she rises
to open the shutters. She says, Love
is for dreamers. This is what the god read
in thoughts she could not speak:
children in a monsoon playing with toys,
the rain sweeping away the stars
and the rootless seeds.

21: Ippathondu

What the god finds on earth is what Manu forgot in the flood: the tracks he left
filling into themselves, generations to come chafing at rebirth. The full load,
the seeds rooted once more, pujas that are prayers of Why? The god cares
nothing
for this. He has come down in lust and learned sorrow. He is finding the
footprints on the river bank are not even his. How touching his surprise, his
arms thrashing in the heat. It is a wonderful irony, his consort waiting and he
knowing he has been found out. If he were a man he could say: She meant
nothing
to me.

22: Ippaththeradu

Then there is the man who does not want to die rich. When it finally rains he
will leave with nothing more than the clothes on his pilgrim back. This is how
he wants to be remembered. This is the tale they will tell when the sun no
longer raves. He is planning to head farther south. He will leave only if
everything else survives this drought in which even the young have no will.

23: Ippaththamuru

Clouds appear with a rising sun,
lacy black in the dawn: the grieving clouds.

How many lives. How many ages.
Vultures wake to circle the compound.

24: Ippaththanalku

There is little strength to breathe left in the elephant plodding through the mud. It is as grey as the rain. If you could read the embroidered script on its cap you might see, Come to the Circus, an invitation the man fears. The chance to laugh without guilt. He longs for it the way he longs for all those old verses by Tagore, rivers teeming with golden fish, prayers for the ease of innocent days.

25: Ippaththaidu

She sees the elephant looming through rain
breaking figures in the compound. Lumbering
from bench to kiln while pondering the number
ninety-nine as though their maker must repent.
This is wishful thinking: an animal
hoping for completion with only memory
to goad it. No wonder she pictures vultures
rising from the banyans, laughing, expecting
only fragments to greet their return.

26: Ippaththaru

Darkness surrounds him in his hut. He lies with his limbs exposed to the hooded ones. They take back the gems he holds, slithering across his thighs, hissing at each other, then at the lone visitor who glides away and coils into itself well beyond their reach. This is how Manu must have felt on the mountain, he thinks, water everywhere beneath his boat, the bitterness of triumph, clutching the many seeds he saved, returning them to soil and silt and stones. These last the preserve of the guardians.

27: Ippaththelu

The flesh left on branches is a horror
she ignores while she gathers the fragments
and cradles them. Rain plucks the trees clean.
How she yearns for night, the four-armed god
returning with his emerald-coloured seed
and still it sprouts and withers and dies.
She is not ready, she thinks, to bear a child
for a god, one so dazzling she cannot face him
when he enters. Yet even riding him she thinks
of a man with two hands moulding a child
to which he gives his mouth, her eyes. This
is what poisoned their love: thirst because someone
has to light their pyre. Hunger because nothing will do
except their own flesh and blood.

28: Ippaththentu

It is a vestige of the rains he absently moulds: wet clay malleable as an infant
learning to sing. He could change it into anything he wants. He could even make
a child in his own image, bring it to life with fire. He cradles the form in the
sun on his hands, hardening while the moisture returns to the earth and air. He
tells himself some things were never meant to be. Not in this life, perhaps not
ever.

