

“A Street Pump in Anantapuram” and Five Other Poems by Mohammad Ismail

TRANSLATOR’S NOTE AND TEXT

These short Telugu poems have the pointed meditative quality typical of this maverick Muslim poet from the Godavari delta—a modernist, profoundly familiar with the modernist canon of the West, but with a sensibility informed by a Godavari-style nature-pantheism.¹

The latter can be described as an idiosyncratic strand of nondualism informed by the yogic and tantric teachings of Telugu- and Urdu-speaking mystics of the last three hundred years. Ismail’s ancestors came to Andhra—specifically, to Konasima—from Iran; they were learned Shi’a Muslims of wide-ranging taste (his grandfather, Shah Wazir al-Din, was a well-known Sanskrit scholar). Ismail (1928–2003) was educated in Madras and Kakinada, and for much of his life taught philosophy, from Plato to Shankara, at P.R. College, Kakinada, one of the primary intellectual sites in the Andhra world throughout the twentieth century.

REMBRANDT

On the cheeks, on the arms,
on the jewels on the neck,
on the finely woven hems—

how to capture on canvas
that shimmering
gold sheen?

First, summon the darkness.
Very thick darkness.
With a knife, cut into its skin

without mercy.
From those wounds
golden blood gushes

under the cheeks, under the arms,
under the jewels on the neck,
under the finely woven hems
and turns solid.

A STREET PUMP IN ANANTAPURAM

At sunset
you can hear women coming
carrying heavy pots
full of darkness.

When they go,
after emptying out the darkness,
they take back
pots full of water and,
floating on top,
droplets of evening.

DHANIYALA TIPPA

A white sheet of paper.

At its edge
a horizontal line
a vertical line—
a boat and its high sail.

River, below.
Sky, above.
Maybe.

LEFT BANK, PARIS

A man
sits on the bank of the Seine,
casting a rod.
Swimming in the depths of his eyes:
the hope to catch an amazing fish.

On the opposite bank
Notre Dame hopes to catch something
in the depths of the sky,
casting its high steeple.

On this bank,
 a street artist
 casts his brush
 into the depths of his paper
 and lies in wait.
 Hoping to catch
 some strange species?

LACE

When I was little
 and my mother was weaving lace
 I used to stare in wonder.

With needle and thread
 she created shapes in the air.

As if she were weaving my eyes
 into the lace.

Wherever I looked, beautiful shapes
 were floating before my eyes.

As if she had woven into the threads of lace
 all living beings.

I think that's when I learned
 how to write poems.

TWO DONKEYS IN ANANTAPURAM

A pair of donkeys
 standing for hours in meditation.

They never ever
 face each other.

One looks one way,
 the other, the other way.

"You look eastward.
 I'll face west.

Who can say from what direction
 wisdom will dawn?"

Suddenly
 one donkey brays,
 runs around himself
 once or twice
 and comes back to his place.

The second donkey never moves.
 Never asks what happened.
 He knows that wisdom dawns only
 in the east.

SPEAKING OF LANDSCAPES, REVOLUTIONARIES,
 AND DONKEYS: ISMAIL'S WORDS AND IMAGES

Afsar Mohammad (Near Reader)

This selection of Ismail's poems begins with a tribute to the seventeenth-century Dutch artist Rembrandt, famous for his distinctive palette of colors along with many experiments in portraits and landscapes. In this poem, Ismail focuses on a painting that fits well in life and reflects his worldview. What the Dutch artist did with paint, Ismail does with words: depicting nature and people in particular local spaces. When we pause as we read this poem, however, we come to see that Ismail's poetry is not only about local spaces. It is also about other life-worlds that coexist with these spaces and the conversation between the local and the global that takes place in our everyday experiences.

Ismail has published extensively in Telugu, and these six poems are representative of the range and depth of the central themes in his corpus. Ismail wrote during times of radical political movements and social activism between 1968 and 2003, and his is a voice that affirms individual freedom and subjectivity. Against the backdrop of most modern Telugu poetry that tended to demand political and social change, Ismail successfully created a space for private voices and interior perceptions. He thus heralded the coming of an era of poetry of personal experience, or *anubhavika kavitam*, to use his own Telugu term. Ismail was one of the few poets in Telugu who assertively defended his poetic vision in critical essays (sometimes taking part in extensive debates about it), and these essays provided a counternarrative to the political writings of the times.

It is fitting that this selection of Ismail's poems begins with one about a painting of Rembrandt. Ismail often reflects on Imagist poets and Impressionist painters in his essays and poetry. He wrote numerous prefaces to collections by other poets from his generation, and most of these include stories about poets and painters. Ismail specifically celebrates the centrality of images in his poetry, and like Imagist poetry in Europe and North America, his preference is for sharp and clear language. When reading his poems—beginning with the earliest collections such as *The Tree of Death* and *Tree My Ideal* and going all the way up to the final ones such as *The Mysterious Rain of the Last Night*—we are drawn in again and again by his simple language and accessible metaphors. He steers away from the elaborate poetic tropes and complex styles of his contemporaries and chooses what he calls a “clean language.”

Two poems in the selection here are about a key moment in creativity—the first is about Rembrandt; the other “Left Bank, Paris.” Both poems are about a similar mood in front of a painting. In the first, Ismail explores the moment of origin in the imagination, the moment when Rembrandt struggled to paint the “shimmering gold sheen” of twilight. Those acquainted with the paintings of Rembrandt will recall noticing this gold sheen when viewing his works. Rembrandt’s use of color—the gold, the yellow, the black, and the different shades of gray—may capture the viewer’s immediate attention, but it is the gold sheen that holds it. Delving deeper into his own imagination, Ismail brings that visual experience of being held by the colors into his poem, painting with words, as it were, both the artist’s and the viewer’s state of mind:

how to capture on canvas
that shimmering
gold sheen?

For Rembrandt and Ismail, it’s a single aesthetic moment. Nevertheless, they both embark on separate journeys and arrive at different emotional destinations. Ismail as a poet is creating his own idiom that is capable of articulating the colorfulness and liveliness—the gold sheen—of ordinary life in south India as his home. Before setting out on his inner journey, Ismail begins a simultaneous conversation with both Rembrandt and the viewer. Then, Ismail imagines Rembrandt speaking to himself as well as to us: “First, summon the darkness. / Very thick darkness. / With a knife, cut into its skin / without mercy. / From those wounds / golden blood gushes . . .”

Ismail turns our attention to the identity of two key aspects of this painting: the moment of its creative inspiration and the moment of its reception. In effect, this strategy invites the reader to open her mind for a fresh encounter with the artwork. In his literary life, Ismail tries to follow a similar mode of connecting the same two moments, and he encourages his readers to come with him in his journey inward. For Ismail, a literary text is more like an image, and the term he uses for such writings is “open poems.”²² To draw us in, he uses a stylistic strategy that requires his readers to enter into a poem with a mind open to what is to come. Most of his poems begin with a precise description of an object or a specific scene that a reader can visualize in her mind.

This is also true of “Left Bank, Paris,” another poem in which similar dynamics of words and images are in play. Some might ask why a Telugu poet from south India seems fascinated by Paris, but Ismail’s concerns are elsewhere. The poem opens with a simple image:

A man
sits on the bank of the Seine,
casting a rod.

Both the Seine and the Left Bank represent key sites in our sense of Paris. As an imagined place, Paris represents bohemian possibility, promising happiness and fulfillment to artists and intellectuals. It's sometimes said that “Paris learned to think” on the Left Bank.³ During my conversations with Ismail, he mentioned this place as “a symbol of freedom and [the] intense individuality of an artist.” Reading this poem brings to mind Ismail's own place in the Telugu literary landscape as well. Like the artists and intellectuals who gathered on the Left Bank, Ismail too represented the possibility of alternatives in the Telugu literary sphere with his emphasis on freedom and the diversity of life.

The first two stanzas (“A man / sits on the bank . . .” and “On the opposite bank . . .”) are more indicative of the Telugu literary sphere in the late twentieth century than anything in the French capital. The third verse builds on this with an image of a street artist, although we now know that what he is writing about is the poet and his poem.

On this bank,
 a street artist
 casts his brush
 into the depths of his paper
 and lies in wait.
 Hoping to catch
 some strange species?

What “strange species” could he catch? And is the street artist doing something different from the fisherman (“casting a rod”) in the first stanza and Notre Dame (“casting its high steeple”) in the second? Ismail's poems often convey the down-to-earth beauty of nature and everyday life. Rather than looking for extraordinariness, Ismail unveils an ordinariness that most poets and artists do not try to capture, and if they do try, they often fail. When Ismail looks at even the most ordinary aspects of everyday life, they seem to turn for him into something “strange.” As a poet and person, Ismail brings his experience of strangeness back to his readers and tries to enable them to relive those moments in addition to similar moments of their own. Whereas these global images shimmer with their own local color, Ismail's poetry also explores another major aspect—he celebrates the concreteness, the lived reality, of local places filled with ordinary people, animals, and birds. In the process, he pokes fun at intellectuals who often drift off, away from the ordinariness of life.

From the Seine to the Godavari: The Everyday Cultures of Ordinary Life. David Shulman, in his introductory note to the translated poems, observes that Ismail's poems are “planted deeply in the Godavari landscape.” The great Godavari River is featured in many of Ismail's poems. Likewise, in conversations I had with him, Ismail always showed immense pride when speaking about the Godavari. Of

course, there is a history to this. Many Telugu poets and writers who grew up on its banks never tired of sharing their varied memories of life there.

For Ismail, the Godavari River is akin to the Seine: it represents both classical and modern Andhra in the same way that the Seine stands for Paris. This is a region with a long history: it was home to the beginnings of written literary traditions in Telugu, as well as the early phases of modern social reform movements in Andhra. The entire riverbank is dotted with sites where classical, medieval, and modern legacies come to mind and intermingle. However, the journey that Ismail takes us on is different. Ignoring the great memory sites of saints, warriors, and poets, he instead focuses on tiny, overlooked places and the often-invisible details of everyday life. He takes us, his readers, to this other side of the Godavari.

Again, Ismail's perception of this world is close to the way a painter looks at a landscape—watching it with the eye before the brush touches the canvas. For instance, the poem “Dhaniyala Tippa”:

A white sheet of paper.
 At its edge
 a horizontal line
 a vertical line—
 a boat and its high sail.
 River, below.
 Sky, above.
 Maybe.

The poem is about a tiny island in the Godavari, but it is not only a description. Ismail borrows images from a painter's actions to picture this island, allowing us to imagine the entire landscape. Trying to see things just as they are is one of the most striking aesthetic features of Ismail's poetry. Ismail is a participant observer and is extremely reflective about what he is trying to see in the landscape and what he wants us to take from it. He makes sure that his presence does not disturb the essential serenity of the scene. Having found the quiet beauty of the landscape in his mind, Ismail now invites people to its interiorities with his words. As he does so, he introduces us to the beings living there: children, women, and much more.

In his poems that are set further away from the river banks, Ismail touches on another distinctive theme of his: the urban life that is causing rural life to vanish, the encounters between city and village, and their conflicts. He often turns to the places that lie in between village and urban space to reveal everyday beauty. In the poem “A Street Pump in Anantapuram,” Ismail describes an evening scene when women come to fetch the water. Anantapuram is one of the towns where Ismail worked as a college lecturer. Here he draws a beautiful image from a scene of ordinary urban life.

At sunset
 you can hear women coming
 carrying heavy pots
 full of darkness.

When they go,
 after emptying out the darkness,
 they take back
 pots full of water and,
 floating on top,
 droplets of evening.

The poem does not seem to need much explanation or interpretation. Ismail uses the images to tell an entire story in a few words. The key lies in the way he imagines such an ordinary scene. This very concrete scene seems to manifest something more intangible and full of deeper meaning.

Donkeys in Search of Wisdom. The poem “Two Donkeys in Anantapuram” generated a heated debate. On the first reading, it may sound like a parable. Ismail uses a narrative mode in many of his poems, which gives some of them satirical undertones. Here, Ismail again utilizes a scene from ordinary life to make fun of the overly political tendencies of other Telugu writers. Ismail’s poem is straightforward: there are two donkeys who face east and west, anticipating the revelation of wisdom. Both donkeys have different dynamics in their search; one is restless, the other relaxed and confident about the inevitable result.

Suddenly
 one donkey brays,
 runs around himself
 once or twice
 and comes back to his place.

The second donkey never moves.
 never asks what happened.
 He knows that wisdom dawns
 in the east.

With this comic scene, Ismail shows that both donkeys ultimately fail in their quest for wisdom. In another satirical poem titled “The Song of a Woodpecker” (not in this selection), Ismail returns to this mode of parable and comic imagery. At the time Ismail was writing satirical poems of this sort, Marxist approaches to everyday life and politics were ubiquitous in Telugu public life and literature. As a critical thinker and innovative poet who believed in the idea of freedom and the autonomy of the literary domain, Ismail had little sympathy for the leftist literary movements that he believed were overly concerned with their political

mission. Ismail never tired of critiquing these poets and writers, and he often condemned the “political poetry” they produced. According to him, political poetry is “inane and repetitious.” Poems like “The Two Donkeys” and “The Song of the Woodpecker” were indeed satires chiding such literary propagandists and, more specifically, both probably were written to mock a particular conference that Marxist writers held in 1975, when Ismail lived in Anantapuram.

Appreciating Ismail’s Poems. For Ismail, a poem is a “crucible of emotion and intellect, striving to close the gap between words and experiences.”⁴ How does he find a way to close the gap between words and experiences? Although all poets write using words, images, and metaphors, each poet sees the beginning of a poem in her own way. The understanding of a poem’s source—before the words are inscribed on paper, before the artist’s brush touches the canvas—can reveal the poet’s philosophy of life. The poems translated in this chapter provide insight into the sources of Ismail’s poetry and throw light on what he tried to do with his words. More than once, Ismail celebrates the process of writing a poem within a poem. In such pieces, we get a good glimpse of his self-understanding.

In his poetry, Ismail aims to share some of the most personal kinds of experience, to give an authentic statement of what he sees and knows, what he suffers and loves, and the heightened moments of his life. He always begins, however, with an object or action of an everyday nature and uses it as the central image around which to organize his vision. This can be seen vividly in “Lace,” the last poem I will be discussing. In this poem, Ismail talks about his mother and the way she used to make lace. Making lace is not uncommon, but Ismail’s approach focuses our attention on the doubling movement of his mother’s mind and his own: his mother creates beautiful shapes with needle and thread, and her movements become interwoven with Ismail’s imagination in the form of another set of beautiful shapes and beings. Seeing in her movements something more than the making of lace, the poem tracks the poet’s journey from object to imagination to words, all the while weaving together the various experiences of his mother, himself, and so much more. Two stanzas stand out:

As if she were weaving my eyes
into the lace.

And:

As if she had woven into the threads of lace
all living beings.

Ismail shows here how a poem is prompted by an everyday experience, only to go further. Every poem is a world that weaves together objects and impressions, images and perceptions, and ultimately “all living beings.”

BETWEEN SKY AND ROAD: THE WANDERING
SCHOLAR, MODERNISM, AND THE POETRY OF ISMAIL

Gabriel Levin (Far Reader)

Barely a week into his sojourn in Rajahmundry, where he would reside for the next six months, David Shulman noted in his journal, “What does it mean to be ‘modern’ in Telugu?” This is a subject that continues to resurface in his *Spring, Heat, Rains: A South Indian Diary*, often in the context of its complement, tradition, which is treated throughout with a mixture of reverence and foreboding: “Must the past be slain,” the entry continues, “to make way for the new?”⁵ It is 2006, and Shulman has ostensibly arrived in Andhra Pradesh both to improve his spoken Telugu and to embark on a prolonged study of two classical texts, Peddana’s sixteenth-century Telugu *Story of Manu* and Shriharsha’s Sanskrit *Life of Naishadha*. But it is the diarist of the everyday minutiae of life that soon takes over: on the one hand, the sheer, physical intensity of the Godavari delta—its colors and odors, tastes and sounds—and on the other, the lively network of social relations, consisting in large part of writers, publishers, local historians, ethnographers, geographers, and Carnatic singers. In short, the *sanghalu*, or literary societies of Rajahmundry, Hyderabad, and beyond. It is the latter band—and in particular his enduring friendship with the great Telugu scholar, essayist, and literary maverick and gadfly Narayana Rao, as well as the new ties he will forge with such local writers as Patanjali Sastry and the poet Smile—that will keep alive the notion of the “modern” in Shulman’s mind.

Literary translation exerted a major influence on the English and American High Modernists. One has to think only of Ezra Pound’s translation of the Romance troubadour poets while tramping through Provence, and his reinvention of China in *Cathay*; T.S. Eliot’s forays into Sanskrit in *The Waste Land*; William Carlos Williams’s experiments from Spanish, French, Chinese, and the Greek of Theocritus; Marianne Moore’s versions of La Fontaine; Basil Bunting’s versions of Ferdowsi, Sa’di, and Hafez, completed while living in Persia; or, for that matter, Helen Waddell’s translations of the medieval Latin lyrics of hard-bitten, wandering scholars. The early Modernist poets were less engaged with translation as a literary exercise; rather, they were seeking out cultural, temporal, and geographical diversity in both the West and, increasingly, Asia as they endeavored to rejuvenate and radically innovate the means of their own production: the perception of difference became above all, in the words of the great French explorer and confabulator of Asia, Victor Segalen, “a personal point of departure.”⁶

Which brings us back to Rajahmundry, in the spring of 2006. *What does it mean to be “modern” in Telugu?* needs to be examined in the context of Shulman’s own peregrinations, scholarship, and translations from Tamil and Telugu, for have not the distinguishing features of Modernism in the West—cultural diversity,

polyglotism, and esotericism—been at the heart of Shulman’s own understanding of the imaginative reaches of classical South Asian thought? And yet Shulman has been equally clear-eyed about the fact that the transmission of the vast, oral literary tradition of south India may be gradually eroding under the banner of nationalism and modernity, at least as understood in India.

This dialectic is played out in Shulman’s diary in the running exchange—albeit imaginary, since one of its interlocutors isn’t physically present—between Shulman and Narayana Rao. Early on in his stay in Andhra, traveling on the train, Shulman reads an acerbic broadside by Narayana Rao in the *Telugu Weekly*: “The notion that poets should produce something useful for society has, unfortunately, taken root. It is truly a misfortune if a poet has the delusion that his poetry is meant to change society. The business of a poet is to write poetry.” Shulman reads on: “For a long time now, Telugu poetry has stopped being poetry. Telugu literature has departed from all the so-called literary societies, *sahitya sanghalu*; only the *sanghalu* are left behind.” This brings Shulman to muse:

Historically my role is to defend, to offer hope; each time I come back from Andhra, we argue over the current literary scene. I see promise, fragile seedlings of innovation, and I can wait; it can take a century or two for a great poet to germinate and ripen. The twentieth century produced two giants, Gurajada Appa Rao and Viswanatha Satyanarayana, and three or four near giants—is that not a respectable harvest, almost on a par with the golden ages of the past? Such thoughts fail to comfort him; he [Narayana Rao] sees mostly a scorched landscape, a withered discourse, benighted critics or pseudocritics, vast rhetorical effusions, anything but the real thing he knew so well as a young man in Eluru.⁷

To defend, to offer hope. The marked difference between the two friends and coeditors of more than one anthology of Telugu poetry in English may be one of temperament as much as it is of origins and perspective. Narayana Rao, the éminence grise of Telugu literary culture, and Shulman, the peripatetic Western scholar, translator, and ambassador-at-large, may in the end reflect two sides of the same coin: the insider combatant, with more than a few scores to settle, and the romantic outsider, at one remove from the fray. The pair may be at loggerheads on the state of the arts in south India, but they are in perfect agreement over at least one critical point: namely, that right up to modern times the poets of south India had worked out of and were steeped in a poetic tradition in which “the word of the *cāṭu* poet”—I quote from the jointly authored introduction to their anthology, *A Poem at the Right Moment*—“is never empty of effect; it changes, or indeed creates, a reality in conformity with the vision implicit in the poet’s speech.”⁸

This is an astonishing statement for a Western, secular reader to come up against, and is elaborated in Shulman’s more recent study, *Tamil: A Biography*. “Poetry was now [speaking of the premodern period, ca. 1500–1800], if anything, even more effective in working on the world: the grammatical pragmatics of the

post-Chola centuries were integrated into musical grammars of ‘auralization’ and shamanic magic aimed at generating divinity and concomitant forms of understanding in the listener’s mind. Tamil itself, one powerful and prestigious medium for such effects alongside its sister languages, was now a full-fledged deity, sometimes capricious, situated in the core of the speaker’s inner self.”⁹ For someone nourished on the Western canon, wherein the medium of poetry is perceived primarily as mimetic and expressive, and, at its most daring, visionary or oracular, the notion that poetry might not only reflect but *change* reality is as alluring as it is suspect.

The allure may have been what drew so many of the early Moderns in the West, in the wake of World War I, to what they homogenized as “Eastern thought,” “African shamanism,” and the general exploration of the unconscious through dreams and automatic writing as practiced by the French Surrealists. One had at one end of the spectrum the self-referential, ironic vision of Auden’s “For poetry makes nothing happen; it survives in the valley of its making,” and at the other, Rilke’s call for transformation: “You must change your life.”¹⁰ Shulman, perfectly aware of the challenges posed in the West and the East by modernity—fragmentation, cultural relativism, destabilizing notions of the self and reality—lands squarely on the side of Rilke’s call for the reintegration of the self in poetic speech, or as Narayana Rao and Shulman will have it, in the continued survival of “the metaphysics of language”; poetry may no longer have claims on changing outer reality but it can still effect *the core of the speaker’s inner self*. Herein lies the juncture between the old and the new, tradition and innovation. *Spring, Heat, Rains* is above all a record of Shulman’s own vagabonding endeavors to find in Telugu poetry and song, in its ancient temples, and in his own daily, chance encounters, the elusive, essential core, the vital perception of difference—to come back to Segalen—in which we recover some unacknowledged part of ourselves.

One such encounter will be with the poetry of Mohammad Ismail, a major poet of the Godavari delta, who died in 2003, not long before Shulman’s sojourn in the region, and who was still very much in the hearts and minds of the company of poets and writers Shulman had befriended in and around Rajahmundry. One day in late June of that year, Smile, one of these writers, recited a poem by Ismail after Shulman returned his bicycle, which he had borrowed to ride around town. The ride down Nehru Road is in itself important in the context of the poem he is about to receive as a gift, for Shulman’s own observations border on the epiphanic: “The colors have changed again: green and dark blue (clouds), dark-red waterlogged earth, soaked brown thatch, pastel facades, red rooster feathers, mud-black buffaloes, white afternoon sun—no more gold. Relief.”¹¹ Shulman records a transliteration of the poem in his journal as well as his own English version:

Am I taking it
or is it taking me?

Don't know.
Like my poetry.

Between sky and road
wheels revolve.
Mostly in the sky.
Only a finger's breadth
touches the earth.
Like my poetry.

Kites soaked
in evening tones
float down to rest.
After we reach our nest,
a wheel on the ground,
another floating into dreams,
It sleeps.
Like my poetry.¹²

The poem is a typical Ismail specimen, as I would soon discover in reading the handful of Ismail poems translated in this chapter. Such poems are composed of short, clear, declarative sentences. They are deceptively simple in their presentation and crystalize around a central, resonating image: in our case a bicycle, whose wheel revolves between sky and earth, dreams and reality, which in turn is compared in the refrain to the act of writing poetry. The poem comes as a poignant tailpiece to Shulman's bike ride with its own luminous glimpses of the twists and turns ("Am I taking it / or is it taking me?") of his surroundings.

Ismail came into his own as a poet in the fifties and sixties, soon after the establishment of the Republic of India. These were heady times in Andhra Pradesh as the literary community sought to establish the parameters of its own national identity in relation to, and not infrequently at odds with, the old religious and cultural hierarchies. Neo-Marxist theories, Surrealist manifestoes, and progressive, antipundit tracts were the order of the day. Ismail, descending from a family of Sanskrit and Telugu scholars on his mother's side, while his paternal grandfather, whose ancestors came from Iran, was a scholar and poet of Arabic, Persian, and Urdu—the sort of polyglotism dear to Shulman's heart—generally shunned the more strident sort of politically engaged poetry coming out of Hyderabad and Chennai in the sixties and seventies, and developed in its stead, while lecturing on logic and philosophy in Kakinada, an inward-turning poetry soaked in the local colors and sensations of the Godavari delta.

A STREET PUMP IN ANANTAPURAM

At sunset
you can hear women coming

carrying heavy pots
full of darkness.

When they go,
after emptying out the darkness,
they take back
pots full of water and,
floating on top,
droplets of evening.

Note the immediate appeal to the sense of hearing, made more acute as evening sets in and one’s surroundings are drained of color and the world of solid boundaries becomes less distinct. So the “double agency” of inward and outward reality is quietly instantiated at the very onset of the poem. I cannot speak of the original in Telugu, sealed as it is within the felicities of its own aural world. But Shulman himself writes in his diary of the Borgesian notion in which the original may be considered “unfaithful to the translation.”¹³ Although the notion is fully explored in Walter Benjamin’s seminal essay “The Task of the Translator,” the literatures of south India, if I am not mistaken, are the very embodiment of such a notion. Major Sanskrit epics, such as the *Ramayana*, rather than being frozen in time, are transplanted over centuries as independent works of art in Telugu and Tamil, Kannada, and Malayalam. These are not translations but re-creations, or as Benjamin would have it, afterlives.

Ismail, to return to “A Street Pump in Anantapuram,” isn’t content to simply record the coming and going of the woman at dusk. His imagination seizes the moment only as the darkness of the empty vessels, filled to the brim on the women’s return journey, sparkles with “droplets of evening,” an image that is attentive to the surface effects of fading light on water even as it silently probes deeper and evokes in the reader’s mind the unspoken, ominous braiding of light and dark forces, presence and absence. Surely Ismail is drawing on a common pool of imagery, which extends to the Telugu *cāṭu* tradition and further back, partaking of the Upanishad’s ellipses, but his imagistic verse is indebted as well to Chinese poetry and to Japanese haiku—the latter of which he translated into Telugu—and to Western contemporaries writing in French, Spanish, and English. Of the last, William Carlos Williams, whom Ismail translated into Telugu, comes to mind as a comrade-in-arms in the modernistic battle to rejuvenate the act of perception, addressing directly, plainly, the “thing itself” within the boundaries of a sharply particularized reality, even as both are equally alert to the dark side of the mirror reflecting that reality.

In a like manner, Shulman’s taking to Ismail’s poetry might be seen as another instance of shared sensibilities. Answering Shulman’s question—“What does it mean to be ‘modern’ in Telugu?”—requires embracing the double vision of East and West in a Telugu poet’s verse and an American-Israeli wandering scholar’s

quest. Not surprisingly, two poems Shulman renders into English were written by Ismail in—or inspired by—the West: “Left Bank, Paris,” and “Rembrandt.” The latter meditates, once again, on the dialectic between surface and depth in a painter whose portraits testify to the dawning of isolate consciousness (“The human was no longer self-evident,” writes John Berger of Rembrandt, “it had to be found in the darkness”).¹⁴ Men and women, old and young, indigent and affluent, emerge from the penumbra to fix us with their gaze, a brume of light and dark strokes calling into question the very notion of the self-materialized on canvas:

On the cheeks, on the arms
 on the jewels on the neck,
 on the finely woven hems—
 how to capture on canvas
 that shimmering
 gold sheen?
 First, summon the darkness.
 Very thick darkness.
 With a knife, cut into its skin
 without mercy.
 From those wounds
 gold blood gushes
 under the cheeks, under the arms,
 under the jewels on the neck,
 under the finely woven hems
 and turns solid.

But one cannot leave Ismail without returning to his own locality where a man “bestirs himself to become awake,” as Williams would have it, in a poem that speaks once again of the origins of the creative act, and in its unitary vision draws on Nagarjuna’s philosophy, a major influence on Ismail.¹⁵ Shulman too is drawn to Nagarjuna’s writing and devotes a long passage—only days before coming upon Ismail’s poetry—to “the Advaitic temptation,” though coming from the West, he cannot help resisting, even as he acknowledges it, the longing in everyone for a “singular, godly aliveness hidden within us.”¹⁶ For Ismail, however, such inner aliveness is the *rasa*, the liquid essence released in the perception of beauty:

LACE

When I was little
 and my mother was weaving lace
 I used to stare in wonder.
 With needle and thread
 she created shapes in the air.
 As if she were weaving my eyes
 into the lace.

Wherever I looked, beautiful shapes
were floating before my eyes.

As if she had woven into the threads of lace
all living beings.

I think that's when I learned
how to write poems.