

Classic Poetry Series

**Ayyappa Paniker**  
**- poems -**

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# Ayyappa Paniker(12 September 1930 - 23 August 2006)

Dr. K. Ayyappa Paniker, sometimes spelt "Ayyappa Panicker" was an influential Malayalam poet, literary critic, and an academic and a scholar in modern and post-modern literary theories as well as ancient Indian aesthetics and literary traditions. He was one of the pioneers of modernism in Malayalam poetry, where his seminal works like Kurukshethram (1960), considered a turning point in Malayalam poetry, Ayyappapanikkarude Krithikal and Chintha and several essays were an important influence on the playwrights of his generation.

In an academic career which ran in consonance with his literary one, and spanned four decades, he taught in various colleges and universities before retiring as the Director, Institute of English, University of Kerala. He published over 25 works, translated several important work to Malayalam, including Guru Granth Sahib and a book in French; as a scholarly editor he produced numerous anthologies on Indian literature, he was the chief editor of the Sahitya Akademi's Indian Literary Encyclopaedia. Another important work by him Indian Narratology, published by IGNCA, was the first of its kind to study various forms of the art of narration, in Indian literature, starting with Vedic and oral literature to Buddhist and contemporary literature.

## **Early Life and Education**

Paniker (his preferred spelling) was born in Kavalam near Alappuzha to E. Naryanan Namboodiri, a Namboodiri Brahmin of Periyamana Illam, and M. Meenakshiamma. Fourth of the eight children, six of them girls, he grew up without any paternal affection, while his mother died when he was 12 years old, this early anguish and solitude deeply reflected in his poetry, which he started writing when he was in high school.

The Kavalam village, was also home to people like, [K. M. Panikkar](http://www.poemhunter.com/kavalam-madhava-panikkar/), historian and administrator, and playwright and poet, [Kavalam Narayana Panicker](http://www.poemhunter.com/kavalam-narayana-panicker/), his cousin. He published his first poem at the age of 16, published in the Mathrubhoomi Weekly. He did his Intermediate at Malabar Christian College, Kozhikode, and B.A. Honours in English Literature from the University College, Thiruvananthapuram in 1951, thereafter he received his Master's degree from the University of Kerala.

Paniker took his doctorate from Indiana University with a doctoral dissertation on the poetry of [Robert Lowell](http://www.poemhunter.com/robert-lowell/), supervised by Prof. Robert E. Gross, subsequently he did post-doctoral research in Yale and Harvard University (1981–82).

### **<b>Career</b>**

Paniker joined CMS College, Kottayam as a lecturer of English in 1951, after working there for a year, he joined the Mahatma Gandhi College, Thiruvananthapuram. He started teaching at the University College, in Thiruvananthapuram in 1952, and did so till 1965. At this point, he became a Professor at the Institute of English and Head of the department in University of Kerala (1965–74). In 1974, he became Reader in English, at the Institute of English under University of Kerala, a post he held till 1980, when became Dean of Faculty of Arts in the University of Kerala, he retired in 1990.

Through his long career he lectured in many national and international universities, including around 25 universities in US, where came across poets [James Dickey](http://www.poemhunter.com/james-dickey/), [John Hollander](http://www.poemhunter.com/john-hollander/), [Czeslaw Milosz](http://www.poemhunter.com/czeslaw-milosz/) and [Allen Ginsberg](http://www.poemhunter.com/allen-ginsberg/).

### **<b>Awards and Recognition</b>**

Paniker was a recipient of a number of honours including the Padma Shri, Kerala Sahitya Akademi award for poetry and criticism, Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award for poetry, 2005 Saraswati Samman for his collection of writings Ayyappa Panikerude Krithikal, Distinguished Teacher award, [Mahakavi Ulloor](http://www.poemhunter.com/ulloor-s-parameswara-iyer/) award for poetry, Kabir Samman, International man of the year (IBC, Cambridge, UK), Indira Gandhi memorial fellowship with lead to the book, Indian Narratology published by IGNCA, Gangadhar Meher National award for poetry, [Asan](http://www.poemhunter.com/kumaran-asan/) prize and Jana Sanskriti award (Abu Dhabi), [Vayalar](http://www.poemhunter.com/vayalar-ramavarma/) award, and [Vallathol](http://www.poemhunter.com/vallathol-narayana-menon/) award.

### **<b>Personal Life</b>**

He died in Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum) on 23 August 2006 at the age of 76 and was survived by his wife and two children. He was cremated the following day in his native village, Kavalam, in a plot he had set apart twelve years ago for the purpose, on the western side of his traditional family house, Olickal tharavad. The house finds reference in several of his works, especially in his poem 'Kavalam' in the anthology Pathumanippookkal.

### <b>Legacy</b>

Ayyapa Foundation was formed in 2006 in Thiruvananthapuram, to promote his work and Malayalam poetry. The January 2007 issue of journal Samyukta, was dedicated entirely to him, it contained 10 critical essays on him and his work, besides three collections of his verse in English translation, one of which, Poetry at Midnight published for the first time. It also contained a 36-page bibliography of his oeuvre. In September, 2009, Dr Sitakant Mahapatra delivered the 'Ayyappa Paniker commemorative speech 2009 at Thiruvananthapuram.

# A Glass

A glass for religious rituals  
A glass for philosophy  
A glass for the gods now dead  
A glass for the statues that never die  
A glass for the rising pillars looking for a roof  
A glass for the politicians of the Syntagma Square  
A glass for the never-ending processions  
A glass for Yanis Ritsos  
Waking up from jail memories  
A glass for Odysseus Elytis  
Lamenting for Helen

O the endless range of hills  
That turns on their back in nightmares  
Listening to battle drums for centuries  
How many centuries you had to smoulder  
In memory of Alexander who went  
To annex empires, brandishing his whip  
Apollo who plays on the strings  
Athena who teaches tantrums  
Artemis the family planner  
Aphrodite with Cupid totting his handgun  
They say the time of the gods is gone  
The newly elected gods have already arrived  
Export models.  
In the international conspiracy,  
Hellas, your turn also has come  
Today it is full moon in Piraes  
A full moon each  
In the sky, on the land, and in the sea  
On the blushing cheeks  
Of the wine-drunk bride of Greece  
The irreverent wind weaves a spectrum  
Today we forget legend and history  
Today we sink into the presence of the Present  
We have discovered each other  
Both of us are the ancients.



# Beyond Death

THIS strange morning  
the spread-out feather  
is charred and falls  
while the earth groans!

The factory blazes  
in the whirl of gas  
that kills in a single breath  
Death flames all around  
and the headless bird  
wings in circles  
Foul is this water  
foul is this air  
foul indeed my mind  
this earth and heaven  
On the sprig flickers  
the dripping leaf  
in burnt flowers  
the smell of corpse  
Tragedy submerges  
the poet and the poem  
while the earth groans

Before the bubble bursts  
man raises one hand  
and for ever sinks  
while the earth groans  
The leader at the square  
strangles the mike  
aloud he shouts;  
` `Give me the power!"  
The deluge invades  
the very dais  
while the earth groans;  
` `The son of man,  
my last-born,  
has he brought  
but the curse of death?"  
Never again will these cells

wake up alive  
never will these genes  
be born again

The four directions  
now stand aghast  
and wait for the white night  
while the earth groans.

Over there:

Hunger roasts  
a hundred twigs  
that curl and fall  
the dark continent  
starves and dies  
the developing ones  
swallow poison

Over here;

burning citizens  
draw back from hell  
the clouded sky cracks  
and the legacy of pain  
spills over generations  
while the earth groans  
The sun grows pale  
unable to bear this heat  
the sea collapses  
and the waves mumble  
as the earth groans

Wierd shapes will  
wander this earth,  
curse the paternal seed  
forgiving none

The water in cupped hands  
the air just breathed in  
the very universe  
is under a curse

Gargoyles will arise  
unable to tell  
where father mother  
sister died  
or lie buried  
Cries of lamentation

viscous on the earth,  
will clot to silence  
Knowing that a time will come  
when one may not even cry  
the earth now groans  
Here the sons  
cut off heads  
here the daughters  
scorch the foetus  
Has the time come  
to finish off the race  
has man had enough of it?  
The earth does groan  
and with it every sun  
every planet, every star  
the celestial nebula  
the milky highway  
the wails of the earth  
echo far away  
(A planet out there  
halts on its rounds  
to watch the earth!)

But no one is here  
no son of man  
to listen or care  
when the earth groans

There they hang  
the powers that be  
heads downwards  
fluttering like bats  
beckoning darkness  
singing the praise of power  
Adding capital to interest  
adding interest to capital  
flying skull and bones  
disfiguring science  
brandishing statistics  
to vindicate untruth

They swim in these tears  
they fatten up on this blood  
sowing and reaping death  
they challenge man's destiny.

Unless that challenge is met  
this earth will go barren  
so she groans till we listen  
O for a million hands  
a million million hands  
to wipe off her tears  
The hands of those  
not vain about  
the light of the day  
nor insulting to  
the dark of the night  
The hands of those  
that honour the past  
of those that look  
forward to the future  
These hands  
should rise  
and wave aloft  
These throats  
should open  
and sing aloud!

Ayyappa Paniker

# Bhagavathykunjamma's Bharatanatyam

It was the end of Kaikottikali\*  
and the beginning of Bharatanatyam for Bhagavathykunjamma.

Legs close, yet apart, must be bent.  
Not that way, this way, not this way, that way...  
The feet must only be this far.  
The hair this way, the face that way  
the mudras must be this way, see? .

Kunjamma found it tough to master.  
Whatever she did, turned out to be Kaikottikali.  
She was told  
She was shown  
The body was arched  
The steps were numbered  
The mridangam \*\* was played  
Kunjamma stuck to Kaikottikali.

Finally, Nethyamma herself came.  
In nice, new linen  
Tried to teach dance  
In clap-dance style.  
New steps  
New gestures  
Arms swirling  
Feet twirling  
Porridge everytime.

With blessings on the forehead  
Bhagavathikunjamma learnt Bharatanatyam.  
Then for a long period,  
She presented Bharatanatyam  
trained a lot of them.  
That's how Bharatanatyam Bhagavathiamma  
became famous.  
Are you listening? .

\*a kind of folk, clap-dance popular in Kerala, usually played by pairs in a group.  
\*\*a percussion instrument.

Ayyappa Paniker

# Epitaph

Here lies the body of Mister Paniker  
who at the end of his panicking days  
agreed to lie still for a while.  
It's not known what happened to his soul  
if indeed he ever had one.  
He wasn't quite unlike any of us while he lived;  
his flesh to tell the truth often revolted  
and upset his delicate sensibility.  
Space he could never control to his liking;  
his sense of time you know wasn't strong either.  
He had of course in his wallet many a theory;  
the things he could touch however  
told him a different story.  
All his life he was patiently  
learning how not to live at all.  
Who knows perhaps  
given another chance  
he might do a better job of it than before.  
And you who pass by  
do not stop here for long  
but move on quietly to the nearest graveyard  
that may be waiting for you.

Ayyappa Paniker

# Every Dog Has His Night

The drawing room in his house is filled with animals.  
Animals cast in bronze, steel and brass.  
Trained to remain quiet, they  
turned to quite a noisy racket last night.

It was the turn of the dogs yesterday.

One's bark sparks off the rest.

Restless, on hearing that, the foxes begin to howl.  
The brass lion rose up to roar.  
Roar's the word in the textbook;  
tried, but having caught a cold, forsook  
returned to the cave itself.

When the singers were settled after the symphony  
I too dozed, but  
couldn't bark.

So that's all for now, isn't it enough.

Ayyappa Paniker

# Father And Mother Do Not Speak To Me

Father and mother do not speak to me  
What about the younger brother?  
He minds his own affairs  
Let the next birth be in India  
I should like to believe in rebirth, but...  
Don't you go to the stadium and the tagora?  
There are enough of American tourists there.  
Their cameras are twinkling all the time.  
They must have forgotten to take their eyes.  
Why are you so sad today?  
You saw Aravindan's 'Pokkuvayil,' didn't you?  
Good to learn that there are such people here and there.  
Do you know these extremists?  
It seems they are more imaginative.  
Why so lonely in Athens where twenty-five lacs live?  
Maybe, because there are so many.  
Athens, Athens, you too drink foreign wine?  
Everything is business, Sir?  
Who are you?  
Athena or Aphrodite  
Hera or Artemis  
Zues' Ganymede  
Or a shepherd girl  
In the villages that still survive?

Ayyappa Paniker

# Gallnut

Bite me not and beat me not, O hurt me not so hard,  
I'll gulp this gallnut of yours, O mummy,  
I'll gulp this gallnut of yours.

I won't say it's bitter, I won't say it's sour,  
I'll gulp this gallnut, dear mummy,  
I'll hold this lit~~ phial for you.

When the kitchen is silent, and the bedroom quiet,  
Then, you hag, your gallnut brew  
Becomes a stain on my tongue,  
A mole on my nose  
A curse in my mouth.

My hands have grown long, my feet are swollen  
My ears shrivelled, my eyes dimmed, my cheeks blown.

Beat me not and hit me not, O kick me not in the crotch.  
I'll gulp this gall nut, and when all the other ones -  
The green gall nut,

The white gall nut,  
The red gall nut  
Form a brew that goes down my throat, O mummy,  
Bite me not and beat me not, O hurt me not so hard,  
I'll gulp this gallnut of yours.

But when at last I'm filled with this gall,  
I'll put a little noose around your neck, O mummy dear,  
And when you are floored, piggy you, and look  
this way and that,  
Don't you ever come outdoors at all, -  
Or then I'll snatch away your rings and your bells.

Ayyappa Paniker

# Hey Gagarin

Hey Gagarin, devourer of Space,  
I come, a wayfarer, get off my tracks!  
Yield today  
to my moral concerns,  
to my poetic fancy,  
to my creative urge.  
Before you measure out  
all these expenses  
so neglected and underdeveloped,  
where man's speculations  
had all these years  
let the lord of creation graze,  
all these heavenly worlds,  
all these abysses,  
before this moonbeam vanishes,  
before my eyes close here,  
hey Gagarin, devourer of Space,  
I come, a wayfarer; get off my tracks!

Receive my greetings,  
receive my congratulations,  
but keep away from my arrow range,  
my free thoughts surge forward,  
breaking all fetters,  
So get off my tracks!

Today the sun and the moon and the stars,  
the impressions of evening, night and dawn,  
my desires and hopes, this dear earth,  
the perpetual movement at the movable and the immovable,  
this beautiful infection of love,  
the horizon, a witness to the rising and setting sun,  
this broken beam of light dissolving in it;  
these have all surrendered to your merciful dispensation!

Today the scientific mind  
juggles with satellites,  
and you have emerged as the leader  
of the yakshas, kinnaras, devas and demons,

all of them highfliers,  
turning east and west into meaningless terms,  
bringing under measure what is deep and what is broad.

My friends and foes,  
my master and servant,  
my wakefulness, my sleep,  
time that seemed to go slow for my sake;  
these were upset when you flew;  
but the creative spirit in me  
hopes to share your immortality  
on the rockbed of dreams.

Fellow-poets that stare in stupor!  
Grow new wings to catch up with Science  
across the recesses of outer space.  
The pioneers have unfurled their flags on the heights;  
break you your idols, and bless yourselves.  
Nothing is empty any more, nothing is outside of us;  
the whole universe is filled with subtle sensations.  
Where is our telescope, where our thermometer?  
Brandish the torch, fulfil the urge to create,  
cut off the barriers of time and space,  
keep the spirit ablaze that will burn up  
every trace of death-dealing darkness!

Ayyappa Paniker

# Hoogly

Stop writing about rivers!  
Rivers bring in flood waters  
and drown the towns.  
The long-awaited rains  
swell into seas.  
Hooghly is no river;  
she is an ocean,  
the end of all time,  
floating huts,  
writhing beasts,  
dogs that don't bark,  
cats that have lost their appetite,  
virgins who no longer blush,  
mothers not worried about kids,  
labourers that dream of long legs,  
refugees that wake not from their pavement sleep,  
beggars praising the philanthropists of heaven.  
Hooghly is the ultimate truth,  
the embrace of darkness.

Sing no more about rivers!  
They cleanse sewers with fresh water;  
they dispel the dirt of the ages;  
they wash the tired roads with Gangajal,  
and give them a new life;  
they gather the tears of the grieving man  
to raise the salinity of the sea;  
intertwining thoughts that refuse to flow,  
they line up the crowds in long marches,  
and make them reverberate as a single slogan.

High tide in the Hooghly,  
verbal tirade in the A.I.R.,  
deluge of pictures in the T.V.,  
the glory of Ganga where the snows of sin melt,  
the splendour of Bengal where sinners dissolve,  
the tremulous voice of Rabindranath, poet of all seasons,  
Calcutta, the city of cities -  
Hooghly enfolds everything.

The night of miracles has come.  
Dharmtala Street turns into Lenin Sarani;  
history takes a deep breath in Satranj ke khilari;  
the Victoria Memorial pales in the eyes of Vivekananda;  
the National Library pays homage to Vallathol.  
Above the branches of the trees that break and fall,  
above the rainclouds that startle and crash;  
above the howl of the turbulent hurricane,  
flames the Rebel of Kazi Nazrul Islam.

Under the frozen streets,  
within the sobbing bubbles,  
in the wing-wispers of the birds that have crashed  
through the cold and lost their way,  
Banalata Sen roams about seeking Jibanananda.

Nightmares that have moved into the city involuntarily  
from villages exhausted and haunted by the irregularities  
of the weather  
hungers squeezing the breasts withheld from bones,  
the present munching groundnut on Chowrangee Street,  
the invisible city swaying behind the visible one,  
the river digging up the city's roots for their scent,  
the bridge of marrowless bones across the river,  
the rails pointing their fingers towards Howra, the houri  
of the city,  
the bustle weary of itself at last in the search for silence;  
Naresh, Naresh!  
a father who has reached the other world calls  
from the other half of the homeland now split,  
and the feathered leadership of religious rift  
that turned the land of gold into a sheet of lead echoes,  
Naresh, Naresh!  
The snake-waves of the Hooghly, the wave-snakes  
of the Padma  
hiss and shout; Girish, Mahesh, Suresh...  
the tale of a hardship that has filtered down  
in the shadow of the sword-wielding Kali,  
the holy dip in the gurgling, bursting sewage canal,  
the peace quest of Santiniketan, now washed  
by the flood;

Calm down, Hooghly, calm down!  
You are only a river,  
just a water channel,  
a plough-cut furrow.

Poets and story-tellers have gone to protect the roots  
of the villages;  
the villagers in their turn have sought refuge in the towns,  
And the ministers go on their rounds  
to frighten the Hooghly into obedience.  
` ` Five hundred are dead,  
six hundred are nowhere to be seen..."

Every season has its own melody.  
Hiren Mukherji whispered to Jyoti Basu;  
` ` Socialism seems to be closing in on us."  
Siddharta Shankar Ray reminded P.C. Sen;  
` ` Haven't I said this earlier? "

There's nothing that they haven't said earlier;  
Hooghly laughed,  
Hooghly who is unwilling to flow under the bridge,  
Howrah swinging and clinking in her chains,  
the ulcer stench scattering wide from partitioned power.

Once upon a time there was a river valley civilisation here.  
Floods were cheaper then.  
In those days there came a wayfarer, a wastrel,  
from the land of two monsoons,  
but no record of his whispers to history has survived.

A river  
and a city  
gobbled up each other.  
What you've seen is its memorial,  
What you've heard.

Ayyappa Paniker

# Horse Play

Four gallant horses  
galloped forth.

One was white, one was black,  
one was red, one was brown.

One had four legs,  
one had three,  
one had two,  
and the fourth had one leg.

The one-legged horse  
said to the others :  
the time for dance has come,  
sweet friends,  
let's dance on a single hoof !

All of them liked the idea,  
and the dance began.  
The four-legged horse fainted outright,  
the three-legged horse slipped and fell,  
the two-legged horse limped to a fall :  
only the one-legged one  
danced on and on.

Ayyappa Paniker

# Isn'T That Shameful For Us?

Everyday  
at night  
in the kitchen  
a little food  
must be kept.

Suppose,  
the thief was to come  
if he's hungry  
doesn't find food  
He  
might get angry  
and cross  
and get away  
without thieving a thing.

Isn't that shameful for us?.

Ayyappa Paniker

# Net

The squares at least  
don't remain squares  
and taut  
linking loops  
Threadbare  
wet-looking  
ropes  
Knotted  
trapped and trembling  
lie in thirst  
The sea at large  
lusting  
to drink in measures  
Through the loops  
drainscapes  
the sea  
Sardines, anchovies and seer  
From the infinite  
indefinite  
water bodies  
To the freedom attained  
through assured bondage  
of a definite ending  
For  
the fishes  
in waiting  
the  
net's  
a mirror  
through which  
they swim  
to another world.

Ayyappa Paniker

# Passage To America

I.

On the day of the feast  
death had its celebration  
the teevees and the movies  
told us the same story  
death in the morning death in the evening  
death in the cellar death in the alley  
death on the highway the boy returning from the rally  
death in the cornfield the girl going to the grocer's  
death in the valley and high on the mountain  
death from pollution and great disillusion  
death in the mind in the womb in the cradle  
death from belief and its comic relief  
the winds from the north and the winds from the south  
sowed the seeds of death and waited for the harvest  
death was riding nightmares  
on the streets of civilization  
someone had coughed in the women's room  
and kleenex caught her vaginal sneeze  
while history knocked at the door  
and waited in the winter outside  
the computer counted the errors  
and discounted others  
a woman had died but it was a mistake  
someone wanted to undo it  
learned it was too late  
and walked to the seashore  
and watched the tidal waves  
death was riding the receding waves  
death was roaring in the generation gap  
and lying in history's lap  
was sucking on its sap  
on the day of the feast  
death had its celebration  
knocked out of sleep by the casualty list  
someone was still groping in daylight  
but it's christmas and new year  
time to stop worrying over those that are dead  
time to start thinking of living yet

while the sun is still hot and the day not done  
perhaps a mistake to suppose it so  
it's easy enough to suppose it so  
and it's easy enough to die in these circumstances  
but think of the horror and the glory of having to live

II.

My sitar  
my guitar  
from east or west  
i do not care  
whatever i dare  
is for the best  
fingers of the left  
tripping on nipples  
fingers of the right  
strumming the ripples  
around the lotus bud  
as we set on the bed  
each petal quakes  
as the raga awakes  
raises in dizzy spirals  
towers and gyres  
steeple and spires  
domes and minarets  
pagodas pyramids  
fabled hoofs  
trot on gabled roofs  
as the tala quickens  
we rocket to the heavens  
to gather the starlust  
and then we fall  
falter and fall  
like flakes of feathered snow  
sprinkled with stardust  
o my guitar  
o my sitar

III.

Having learnt  
in a short lifetime  
that chalk doesn't write on chalk

he turned  
to look  
for sunflowers  
in beds  
of roses

IV.

Twice-punctured silver belle  
suspended in the cerulean  
her sea of tranquility  
disturbed by hymen penetration  
her darkness filmed and douched  
unable to recover her cherry nights  
fears yet longs for  
the next assault  
in sweet dread of periodic stress  
her bashful beams dreaming downward  
for a metallic man-thrust

V.

The poet chews the afternoon like his moustache  
he drones on about a new civilization  
his mystic beard points to the seed of time  
his tongue trips on the syllables of a sutra  
my girl she sleeps  
and slides on to my shoulder  
her breasts rise and fall  
where the words of the poet rebound  
her dark green shirt exudes the smell of sweat  
her golden hair the sinuous oily flesh of hair  
curves creeps and curls into my veins  
words wary sliders reveal their mystery  
my girl she stirs turns around  
her bellybutton shows a foetus face  
a snake tongue smacks her swollen lips  
the soft hairs on her upper lip  
now moist and alive  
a dog walks in and lies down at my feet  
he listens to the poet  
reading chanting enchanting  
like a dream called off in the middle  
the poet pauses poised for breath between the mantras  
the tangled thighs of minutes

the dog gets up stretches himself walks away  
wagging his tail in total agreement  
soft nervous fingers touch me from the side  
they keep me from the poet  
a dog is dignified by his tail  
i wish i had one

VI.

Time to say farewell  
Pale faces  
after a nightlong wake  
do not need to kiss  
Before another nightfall  
sometime during the day  
we have to say farewell  
How shall we part then  
Write an autograph  
and put a period after it  
Take a long walk  
and sigh in the wind  
Recite a few verses  
and smile at the end  
Perhaps a last smutty story  
to leave a scratch on the memory  
Look how the spring sun  
Struggles with the rain!

VII.

It's as if i suddenly meet you on the way  
when i go for my usual walk in the evening  
the earth that begins at your feet  
seems to end at mine  
the air you breathe out  
enters into my lungs  
and the light that escapes from your eyes  
focuses on mine  
america  
i see your map  
like the palm of a hand stretched out on my lap  
mississippi traces your lifeline to the south  
while the great lakes draw circles  
along the st lawrence headline

but where is your heartline  
on the mount of jupiter  
new england cocks its eyes at europe  
your venus is still in heat  
in the far south of florida  
and the mount of moon  
shimmers on the california beach  
but america  
where has vanished your heartline  
has some test explosion  
sucked it underground  
i remember river phalgun  
that goes dry in summer defying our prayers  
where once the buddha got enlightenment  
and learned to take the earth for a begging bowl  
but here the fission and the fusion  
your scientists envision  
offer your palmist nothing but confusion  
sailing back from mescaline to marijuana  
someone said  
there never was such a line  
in this ancient newborn land  
where we grow corn and PL 480  
and make cover tv sets in plenty  
till our chests are nearly empty  
and brains spout tons of TNT  
it's christmas again  
the shape of a heart neatly pinned to a cross  
that stands on a hill we have set up with skill

(Translated by the author, with the help of J.O. Perry, Dakshinamoorthy, K. Satchidanandan, and Esther Y. Smith.)

Ayyappa Paniker

# Sappho's Dirge

Looking at the Pleiades  
Poetess Sappho sheds tears  
Do the Pleiades ever know  
That a friend here is waiting for them  
Magic and marvel fill the green isles  
That throb like the rosary of the sea  
The spark, the dream, and the sea-speak:  
Surging and surfing over the waves of Time  
Fighting and fighting, the men are in ruins  
Still they are beating the war-drums again  
Divorced and distempered the women in huts  
Are distressed without enough drinking water  
They shout there is no place at home  
For those who do not return to work at home  
We shall never clear their debts  
We stand only for ourselves hereafter

Watching the Pleiades  
Sappho sings her tears  
To listen to the dirge of long waiting  
The Pleiades come down

Ayyappa Paniker

# Song Of Myself

Because I remain quiet at home,  
the earth still goes on its rounds;

because I snore lying in my bed,  
the solar systems shine;

because I chew and munch and spit,  
Time is on the move;

because I care for the girl I married,  
birth and life and death do merge.

If I'm not there, 0 people, no action is there,  
neither flower nor honey nor bee;

the peacocks, the clouds, the gardens:  
my kindness makes them glow.

Bow to me, and sing my glory,  
and fall at my feet;

for those who go about praising me,  
even hell is heaven for ever!

Ayyappa Paniker

# Sunflower Face

What grief is melting in your thoughtful eyes,  
You with the face of the Sun? What song of sorrow  
Is wafting in your tremulous lips? But perhaps  
This song and grief are not yours, in fact—maybe,  
I am passing on to you the fire in my chest, although  
They suit you too so well—this lament of my boat  
Crashing in the sea at your wharf—I did so sway  
The billows that it might not enter your ears--  
When a solar system stops its momentum on its own,  
When the dry Ganga of the Milky Way burns up  
Like a sandy channel and writhes for water,  
O Sunflower Face, will you come and open your ears  
Like a whirlwind that tears away the roots of my vowels  
And consonants, which keep flowing like a mere song?  
Till now I haven't drawn even a little painting for you,  
Nor have I composed a simple light song for you--  
And yet you have guarded the western gateway of kindness,  
And guarded this sea-wharf, where my corpse is floating,  
As well as the pain I have cherished like under-water fire

O Sunflower Face, words of curse are indeed on the tip  
Of my tongue, sharp words seething with hellish torture,  
I shall not sprinkle these singeing words on anybody's head,  
Lest they should boomerang some day or other, and so  
Thinking, I remain dumb even now, as always.

Look! These sea waves sometimes in the morning lie  
Without motion, their vast expanse seems like a bed-sheet,  
The folds will not move, they may beckon as if to tempt  
Us to lie on them, hearing the call we may take a close look,  
And if our eyes are O.K, in that stillness we shall learn  
The thirst of the sea, the depth of the sea, the orgasmic spell  
Of the sea, the cruelty of the sea, the hypnotic electric measure  
Of the sea. The sea's measure is the glory of the strong goddess  
Who saved the threefold powers that lay crying and crawling  
In the primordial waters of primal energy at the time of Creation.  
As we invoke and awaken that Sea-mother, giving her life,  
Installing her figure drawn on the floor, as it were,  
What is it that you whisper into my ears, strange!

That this is the truth, that this alone is truth, do you  
Whisper into my ears? Touching my cheek, you  
Pour into my ears this electric charm—the spell  
Of the wounds of love and affection and sweetness,  
That assumes a form and pulsates here on the floor.

Sunflower Face, I am not just drawing your picture  
In colours--but merely trying to mark a figure  
In my home courtyard with the fresh powder of  
This lengthening moonlight, just for nothing at all--  
Only trying to draw a new world, just like that--  
Seeking colours, singing the colours. Accept this,  
O Sunflower Face!

Surajmukhi, the top of your head, your forehead,  
Your eyebrows, your eyelids that close and open  
The temples of your eyeballs, letting out a glow,  
Your eyelashes that bend down along with them,  
Your cheeks, bulging underneath, full of blood,  
Your nostrils that keep humming the scent of birds,  
Your lips blossoming below, your teeth in between,  
With a little sheen, O Sunflower Face, as I inhale  
The magnificence of your face, I can hear  
The petals of your opening flower bud,  
The gentle smile that breaks into an awareness,  
And the rays of light that radiate from it, far and wide.

Is it the early soft vernal season of the rustling bosoms  
Is it the hard winter of the rubbing hands and palms  
Or is it the summer when toes begin to tinkle:  
Tell me, Surajmukhi, how do the pictures drawn by  
Your Sun turn into such strange, unexpected visions?  
The thoughts that arise from your honeyed navel—  
The cryptic magic formulas, the aphorisms, axioms,  
How do they become the enveloping black hole enclosed  
Within the very structure of this overarching universe?  
Is it the fertile autumnal splendour of your cool thighs  
Or the arrival of rains recalled by the roots of your arms  
Or the full spring that puts out tender shoots from head to foot  
Or the cycle of six seasons, stirring the mind and the body alike?

Is it not so, when the figure is lit up by the sprinkling of powders

Of different colours, isn't it? Are they not the fulsome bosoms  
Of motherhood, aren't they? Are they not the sacred weapons  
Carried in her sixty-four hands, aren't they? Are they not the stars,  
Inexhaustible in enumeration, taking the shape of truth in her breasts?  
Are they not sprouts of adolescent hopes thrilled at every touch?  
Are they not the desires arising from the flow of fresh fragrance?  
Clearing the yard of loose sand, making a circle, smearing it  
With cow dung, decking it up as holy ground, the hand of joy  
Picks up the bowl of powders, and sprinkling them on the ground  
Draws something, writes something; is it not the swing and sway  
Of strings of waves blossoming among the stream of colors,  
Isn't it? The bloody points of spears are aimed at some and  
Whirr fast, and blow the conch, with vigour and straight upward,  
Aren't they? Hearing it, unable to bear it, do they not seek shelter,  
Don't they? There comes the Kolam, enlivened rage, there comes  
An awakened world, a resurrected time, there comes, there comes  
Interiorized in wrath, beaming forth a tender smile, singing of colours,  
Wiping off the colours, entering the grove to put on grace,  
There comes the Sunflower Face!

Ayyappa Paniker

# The Cockroach

When the cockroach ate the cat,  
The rat sat gloomy and sad:  
Who will eat me now, alas!  
Is Fate too like the cockroach?

Leaping on its sixth leg,  
Came the cockroach, and said:  
Rat, you need not cry;  
I shall eat you too, my dear.  
But if, before that, you can  
Take a little bit of cat's meat  
You will taste better;  
And I will like it very much.

When the rat ate the cat's tail,  
The rat's tail was in the cockroach mouth.  
Is the rationalist, watching in gloom  
The cockroach tail, a man?  
Is that man a rationalist?

Ayyappa Paniker

# The Dawns Pause, Playing On The Santoori

The dawns pause, playing on the santoori:  
Tell us your tale, O tragic bride of Greece!  
The Sol that wakes up from the Aegean Sea  
Climbs over the peaks of Mount Olympus.  
Like an aeon has passed by the night  
That blended long grief and entertainment.

Scoop out at once a cake of cheese from the moon  
That has reached the hill-top and will soon fade away.  
The tourist who comes tomorrow should see  
The dark patch left by your scooping out.  
The disciples of Pythagoras will come and weigh  
And tell us the exact weights and measures.  
What is of value to us is whatever is left  
After the 'counting' of all that are countable.

What sights have we seen that fail to catch the eye?  
What songs heard that the ear cannot catch?  
What unmeasured distances have we traversed?  
What sins gone through, not encountered in Eden?  
What pains unknown before have we taken on?  
We have conceded, let them be whatever they are.  
Now that we have learned that life is not meant  
To be spent on reflections over past sorrows,  
Please, go on playing nonstop on the santoori,  
Until the dawn arrives that brings joy,  
Until Zorba sings on the shores of twilight..

Ayyappa Paniker

# The Elections

White on black is dirt  
The whitewash leaves a patch  
Washing linen is nuisance  
Don't be upset, O leader!

Is there gold in the hiding place  
Is there a place for playing kids  
Do you remember waiting for  
The autumnal moon and sandal paste

Is it trout that's caught in the net  
Is it salmon outside the net  
Don't you need anything in hand  
To wager when you cast the net

It is election time, election time  
O come, do come, dear voters  
The power that once upon a time  
You appropriated among yourselves  
We want you to transfer to us  
So we ask for your votes  
If you give us your votes  
Democracy will triumph here!

Ayyappa Paniker

# The Family Saga

I

How unpleasant are those names, and yet  
their bitter strength is splendid, splendid  
too the human love that lighted the seven wicks  
every nightfall. Wasn't it they that reared them all?  
Laachi had planted the pomegranate of desire  
in the south-eastern corner where it grew splendid;  
and Uppali had a mantara in the north-east side.  
Thus they grew, the pomegranate and the mantara,  
fresh creepers always winding up the branches,  
and fresh flowers blossoming on the creepers.  
Flowers, even while withering in the dusk  
or going off to eternity, guarded their pollen,  
and were disinclined to sever connections. They  
turned into fruit and ripened and grew sweet;  
thus grew the pomegranate and the mantara  
as the dusk turned into darkness, darkness into day,  
day into darkness again, and again came the day -  
seven wicks into five, five into three, and then one,  
and again one into three into five into seven.  
Black clouds fostered and fondled by summer  
shed their tears, the shores of the lagoons  
swayed, while there stood the brave one,  
his mind unperturbed by the thunder-storm,  
his feet unswerving in the wild roaring billows,  
his hands unwearied; the brave one stood there  
invoking with magic chants the lord of grains,  
who would shower plenty on the virgin land,  
rousing her and filling her with grain and gold.  
His orders became dams and dykes, his thoughts  
manifested as a thousand farmhands; with brushwood  
and brambles they erected the dykes, the lagoons  
drew back and yielded the fertile land, saying,  
as the sea once said to a Rama long ago:  
O Kesava, may your hands be fruitful, be fruitful;  
Immortal thoughts are indeed the glory of the earth;  
make you this earth rich with grain and fruit!  
O Kesava, may your hands be fruitful!

## II

The month of the Virgin passed, and the dewy sweetness of Libra arrived, as earthen dykes arose, and lifting the watery skirt, the lagoon told the farmhand Kunjan: Go now, and whisper into your master's ears, and tell him, the land is ready to receive the seed; the sowing must be done with a full harvest in view. The Pleiades festival of lights, and the Betelgeuse festival of song and dance passed by; rich manure flowed down from the hills; hundreds of workers in country-boats; the spell of monsoon brought the season of replanting the seedlings. No one seems to have noticed how in two days' time the seeds had sprouted, how two and three and four leaves unfurled, how the flowers got fertilised and turned yellowish. While the eyes kept a busy watch, the emeralds of Capricorn arrived, promising pots of plenty; the sprouted seeds blossomed and ripened to harvest. The measuring baskets overflowed; half-filled bellies got overfilled; the festival of harvest sang of fullness at the new year!

## III

The tale of a family with promises yet to be fulfilled lengthens in many ways, Recall now the splendour that crossed the seas, the country and the city made fragrant by a full moon in spring, the light-hearted jokes and little acts of goodness; recall the royal houses, the ministerial abodes, paved with courage of diplomacy or simple cleverness, the leadership of universities, the life at the embassies; recall also another figure, a figure that is cut up like shadows into fragments in broken dream or sleep, like a pledge unredeemed, like a sobbing whisper, like a wisp of moist memory that makes you restless, like the scent of a flower moaning through the breeze: O Kesava, did your hands disappear into an autumnal night of the dark moon? On the pomegranate, the eight-petalled flower blossomed abruptly, fell off its stalk into grief.

How many springs have come and gone, and yet'  
they do return with fresh flowers;  
how many flowers wither away, and yet  
the gardens return to life; recall the mother  
who rocked you in her lap and told stories  
to entertain you and sang lullabies,  
and fed you on the elixir of her breasts.  
Recall again the promises, old times  
that were brought home for confinement,  
with the future yet to be born, families  
that came together only to part, candle flames  
that burn in the blaze of parting; the tale  
of a family with many a pledge unredeemed yet  
lengthens in many ways, many ways...

#### IV

Time is spacious indeed, my love,  
let us give up the weeping habit.  
From what great depths emerge  
even our gentlest smiles!  
Don't we see, as we sit together  
on the seashore, don't we see  
the moon disc slowly unfold  
and turn into the purple of  
mango leaves and then into white,  
tickling the sea into wakefulness,  
and a thousand peacocks dance  
with spread wings over the billows  
rising from the depths? Don't we see  
the innocence in the eyes of  
guideless children disappear  
as they get up and stretch  
their hands and legs and emerge  
into a shyness that petitions love  
through a lotus leaf, and burst into  
a Shakuntala, her accusing finger  
pointed at the king, and then at the end  
dissolve into a serenity, entrusting  
the son with the father under the Kashyapa  
shade. Bereaved are we all, separated  
for long are the earth and heaven,  
melting and rolling under the heat

of a grief, caused by an old separation;  
melting and rolling and flowing are  
these stringed stars and rivers and evenings -  
all are bereaved and in isolation for ever,  
in the heart of the jungle the granite rocks  
melt, and in their springs there drip  
the nights that rock the ocean; they too  
are bereaved. Once during the night  
I walked among the underworlds,  
and there I saw, seated at a table,  
one recording the history of man;  
birth, birth = death, the birth of death,  
and death meant the death of birth.  
He too was slowly dying ...  
So shall we end this lamentation.  
Spacious indeed is Time, and my beloved,  
this weeping habit we have to give up.

V

Tales that please must be told;  
That's what human life is for,  
If the poet's tongue matches in length  
the ears of those that listen,  
it will not bore; the tellers and  
hearers will be of one string.  
The tale of the bud on the temple tree,  
rocked to sleep by the beatings  
of bats' wings is not exactly a new one.  
The clock with its eyes on the midday sun  
striking eight, which startled  
the village girl, is an absurd tale.  
At the crossroads the hussy spits out  
her betel roll, stretching her tongue:  
unable to retell her tale of abuse,  
the puranas have remained eighteen till now,  
There is hunchback Janaki in the neighbourhood;  
her hump was straightened by Kittan, but  
it was Raman's name that was dragged into it;  
his manners do not reveal it, though,  
Where that hunchback neighbour is gone  
is not quite known, nor do we know  
how she got her bow-style ear-rings,

Raman perhaps knows it, but how can  
we ask him, for he too is eager  
to find out who really bit off his earlobes.  
Many such tales fester in my village,  
but they won't be very pleasing to you;  
they will fill your ears with discomfort.

Once I was walking on the bank of backwaters,  
my eyes ploughing the rice-fields, and I saw  
and heard around endless tragedies, with a few  
light comedies thrown in, all turning into  
farces and riddles. The eyes were drawn in,  
the ears rolled up; lengthening nights  
stretched themselves over the rivers.

` ` Sweet rose, fold yourself; you are not  
meant to bloom in this sultry daylight;  
your scent and honey shouldn't be wasted  
on this dry sand"; whose lament is that?  
How did this song come to be heard  
here on this earth where river sand  
is spread over thick layers of mud?  
The elders stand - tall palm trees of old  
with wrinkled leaves and broken ribs;  
their long penance has come to an end.  
Time-fostered beetles and insects and vermin  
have taken their place to gnaw at the leaf  
and spine and trunk and roots and all.  
Over the mud flows the river,  
over the river flows darkness,  
above the darkness are the blue heavens;  
all is dark, all; but there is light  
even in this darkness; dark is itself light;  
to assert that is the task of man.  
As a child I had one great sorrow;  
it was that my village had no hill in it;  
but now that sorrow is gone, for I see  
hills of wickedness all around,  
I see the social man is the source  
of all power, and not the individual,  
I see the bridge across the river of sin  
built by the Panchayat. Gone is my grief;  
holy and divine is the glory of man!

VI

Sing to the glory of man, O  
sing to the glory of man!  
To the neighbourhood girl  
whose belly is empty  
he gives a full belly;  
sing to the glory of man, O  
sing to the glory of man!  
Picking up the songbird  
shot down in game,  
the woodsman comes singing  
of anger and grief and compassion.  
Sing to the glory of man, O  
sing to the glory of man  
who pierces that woodsman  
with another arrow.  
Liberty, equality,  
co-operation, fraternity;  
truths are indeed of many kinds;  
so sing to the glory of man, O  
sing to the glory of man,  
who roasts and fries  
a generous spirit  
and serves it for dinner.

Ayyappa Paniker

# The Prophetess

While men keep going to Delphi  
To learn about the hidden future,  
I should have been a hill  
By the roadside covered with snow.

On the branch of a tree where leaves  
Wither in the heat of the burning Troy,  
I should have been a bird  
With the spring crushed in the parched throat.

By the side of the master sage  
Who drank from the cup filled with hemlock,  
I should have been a night  
Cursed by his disciples filled with grief.  
I should have been the fate  
Endorsed by the master who welcomed the grief.

As the centuries gallop by in a chain,  
Their hoofs beating hard,  
I should have been the cross  
Carried by Poulouse to Corinth.

As the end of the era collapses and falls  
Somewhere on the Byzantine highway,  
I should have been a palm-leaf note  
Wrapped up in a dirty rag.

Ayyappa Paniker

# The Twilight Hour Keeps Playing On The Santoori

The twilight hour keeps playing on the santoori,  
O honey bride of Greece, tell me now your tale of love!

Olive branches sway and swing in the breeze  
That reaches here, blowing across the Mediterranean,  
And the breeze that tastes the green of the sprigs  
May still have one more tale of love to tell,  
And the sea is on the look out for waves of ears  
To listen to the love tale of the honey bride of Greece.

Speak to us about your fancies born in the days  
That faced the ups and downs in the love affairs  
Of the earth's adolescence, long before we began  
To measure the duration of time and distance.

Tell us the tale of how the wick of envy was kindled  
Since the day you were wedded to the lord of Sparta,  
You who were born as the daughter of Leda whom  
The god of gods once ravished in the guise of a swan

Recount to us the old tales of illusory Helen,  
Whom witless Paris carried off and heaped praises on.  
Although the apple that he gave to Aphrodite  
Grew into a war that lasted full ten years,

Dig up here, where the islands of grapes,  
That pour forth wine afresh into the households  
Where five thousand years bow down in homage,  
Ripen again and in their epics and legends as well,  
The islands, the islands, the islands of freedom  
And goodness, the poets and the birds celebrate.

The twilight hour keeps playing on the santoori:  
Tell us your tale of love, O honey bride of Greece!

Ayyappa Paniker

# The Vision Of The Seasons

The winter is humming something:  
Is it for nothing?  
Does she say that spring will never  
Come again?  
Do the summer hills put on a bark  
With withered grass?  
Do they dream that when the rains come,  
They bring sheer joy?  
Is the autumn or the glow of transition:  
A memory slip?  
Will everything at the end turn into  
The corpse of a late winter?

Ayyappa Paniker

# Theft

Just because I have stolen a few things  
why should you call me a thief?

But you have stolen our clothes!  
If i have stolen your clothes, your clothes,  
it was only to protect your sense of shame,  
it was only to protect your sense of shame.

You have stolen our chicken too!

If I have stolen "our chicken," as you say,  
it was only to fry it and eat it,  
it was only to fry it and eat it.

Then what about our cow you stole?  
What about our cow you stole?

The cow, you mean?  
Well, if I have stolen your cow, your cow,  
it was, it was for me to drink its milk.

My doctor, please note, hasn't said no  
to fried chicken or cow's milk.

Whenever one steals something good, something good,  
you people raise a clamour for nothing  
and dub him a thief, a thief!

It is the fault of your laws,  
it is the fault of your laws.  
Change you then your laws, I say,  
lest your laws should change you!

Ayyappa Paniker

# Uncle Indan

One day Uncle Indan wiped the dirt  
off his right foot with the left foot  
then off the left foot with the right foot  
then off the right foot with the left foot  
then off the left foot with the right foot  
off the right with the left  
off the left with the right  
off the ...

Ayyappa Paniker

# Upon My Walls

Look at the picture my hands have drawn on my walls:  
why do you stare? Look carefully, you fool!  
Nerves that stretch from the navel and the eyes  
thirst and burn in the brain;  
copper dreams blossoming on the dead volcano  
blaze and flow around;  
tears unfrozen, ears unstopped,  
the veins keep glowing; is it creation or destruction?  
'Look at the picture my hands have drawn on my walls;  
why do you stare? Look carefully, you fool!

Ayyappa Paniker

# Whatever Happened?

What happened?

To the land of Oedipus tragedy is nothing new.

Do the gods of the Olympus still thirst for war?

Do they try to hypnotize

The cattle-rearing youth

By displaying the neutron bomb?

Remember the time before Alexander's

Expedition of triumph?

Remember too the cursed centuries

That followed?

Will Agamemnon ever come back?

Kill him if he does.

Will Clytemnestra be a party

To the murderous act?

Kill her outright, if she is.

She screams, the sister

Of the son who killed his mother

Who had killed her father-

That scream reverberates over the sea

And on the hill.

When the night shrieks,

The tongue splits.

When the murder cry is heard

It splits the ear.

O Hellas that seeks to be reborn,

Hellas that had once left her husband for good,

And, having had enough of it,

Now returns from her lover.

To blind Homer

You are still the beloved daughter.

Penelope welcoming Odysseus

Who had sailed home in the gentle wind.

The dog still remembering his master.

Where have they all vanished?

Ayyappa Paniker

# White Clouds

White clouds may never rain!  
They only float across the sky lazily!  
Dark clouds rain giving wetness to the ground  
Thunder thrills the earth.  
Lightning lights up the sky  
The sea greets dark clouds with folded arms.  
When those pure white balls of cotton  
skim across the blue sky  
Its a lovely sight we see!  
Makes you stand and stare.  
Where else would you find such beauty in whiteness?

Ayyappa Paniker

# Zorba Sings

Zorba is singing

He dances  
He drinks wine  
He sings again  
Plays on the santoori  
With his hand on the shoulder of the twilight hour  
Zorba sings

He drinks wine  
He sings again  
Inhaling the scent  
Of the night's breast  
He drinks  
Zorba is dancing

Smear'd all over  
With the fresh hue of the dawn  
Zorba drinks  
He frisks and pranks  
With the different wines  
Of the different isles  
Zorba sings  
Plays on the santoori  
Athens is singing  
Sparta is singing  
Lesbos is singing  
Delphi too is singing  
All the islands  
Are dancing  
The Mediterranean  
Is drinking wine  
Climbing over the waves  
The little breeze swims  
Zorba is singing

No colour of virtue  
No stain of sin  
Zorba sings

Gone are the Turks  
Gone are the Romans  
Gone are the Persians  
Gone are the Germans  
Who will come next  
Is not known  
Whoever comes  
We shall drive him out  
We shall keep  
To the path of truth  
Crying so, possessed,  
Zorba sings

When it grows dark  
He plays on the santoori  
He dances  
He drinks wine

Zorba is singing

Ayyappa Paniker