

Classic Poetry Series

**G. S. Sharat Chandra**  
**- poems -**

**Publication Date:**  
2012

**Publisher:**  
Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

## G. S. Sharat Chandra(1938 – 2000)

G.S. Sharat Chandra was an internationally acclaimed author of both poetry and fiction. Much of his work touches on the deep emotions of the Indian/American immigrant.

Indian-born Chandra received a law degree in India but came to the United States in the 1960s to become a writer. He received his Masters of Fine Arts from the Iowa Writers Workshop. For most of his career, Chandra taught at the University of Missouri-Kansas City as a professor of Creative Writing and English (1983–2000). His most famous work, *Family of Mirrors*, was a 1993 Pulitzer Prize nominee for poetry. Author of ten books, including translations from Sanskrit and English into the Indian language Kannada, a former Fulbright Fellow and recipient of an NEA Fellowship in Creative Writing, Chandra has given readings at the Library of Congress, Oxford, and McDaid's Pub in Dublin.

Chandra traveled the world extensively throughout his life and received international recognition for both his poetry and fiction. His works have appeared in many journals including *American Poetry Review*, *London Magazine*, *The Nation*, and *Partisan Review*.

Chandra was married to his wife, Jane for 38 years until he died of a brain aneurysm in 2000. He left three children.

**Work**

*April in Nanjangud*, Alan Ross Ltd., London Magazine Editions, 1971;  
*Once or Twice*, Hippopotamus Press, UK, 1974;  
*The Ghost of Meaning*, Lewis-Clark State College, Confluence Press, Idaho, 1976;  
*Heirloom*, Oxford University Press, 1982;  
*Family of Mirrors*, BkMk Press, 1993;  
*Immigrants of Loss*, Hippopotamus Press, 1993–94,  
*Sari of the Gods*, 1998.

Sharat was a gifted teacher of creative writing. He encouraged persistence, craft, and imagination. He did so with humor and compassion. As a teacher at the Mark Twain Writer's Workshop, he once read from a stack of rejection letters, which he claimed papered the walls of his writing study. With regard to the writerly imagination, and the importance of craft, he once said: "You can tell me anything, anything at all. Just make me believe!"



# Barbers Of Nanjangud

In Nanjangud  
there are five hair cutting salons  
named after the goddess of India  
with the picture of the goddess  
inset with circular photos  
of Gandhi, Nehru, Subhash. Bhowse,  
hovering over the curvature  
of the globe with India in the middle.

In one hand the goddess holds the national flag,  
with the other she blesses  
everyone who bows their heads  
for hair-cut, shampoo or blow-dry.

But business is slack,  
young men have taken to wearing their hair  
longer than women or modern saints,  
pilgrims are scarce,  
there's drought in the air.

The five barbers sit  
vacantly in their chairs.  
They're bald, wear no dentures,  
bet on horses in far away races  
after consulting the race guide,  
town tout, the astrologer,  
finally the goddess on the wall  
in whose moving smile  
they divine the well groomed horse  
that'll make up for their business loss.

G. S. Sharat Chandra

# Brother

Last night I arrived  
    a few minutes  
before the storm,  
on the lake the waves slow,  
a gray froth cresting.  
Again and again the computer voice said  
you were disconnected  
while the wind rattled  
the motel sign outside my room  
to gather  
its nightlong arctic howl,  
    like an orphan moaning in sleep  
for words in the ceaseless  
pelting of sleet,  
  
the night falling  
to hold a truce with the dark

    In the Botticellian stillness  
of a clear dawn I drove  
    by the backroads to your house,  
autumn leaves like a school of yellow tails  
hitting the windshield  
in a ceremony of bloodletting.

Your doorbell rang hollow,  
I peered through the glass door,  
for a moment I thought  
my reflection was you  
on the otherside,  
    staring back,  
holding hands to my face.

It was only the blurred hold of memory  
    escaping through a field of glass.

Under the juniper bush  
you planted when your wife died,  
I found the discarded sale sign,

and looked for a window  
where you'd prove me wrong  
signaling to say  
it was all a bad joke.

As I head back, I see the new  
owners, pale behind car windows  
driving to your house,

You're gone who knows where,  
sliced into small portions

in the aisles of dust and memory.

G. S. Sharat Chandra

# Love Song Of Rasheed The Mad Cap

Praise to thee great Allah,  
For carving my beloved  
Pure as the sand of Mecca,  
Rarer than the rose rarest.

But Allah,  
Why you make her princess  
Beyond reach of servant Rasheed?

The suitors are at the palace gate  
Hankering after my love-bird.  
Her father the Khaleef  
Hath proclaimed-  
Let eet bee  
Who touches the rose tree  
The one she marree.

How great you are Allah,  
The fat prince of Persia  
Fed on lard is passing  
Touching not the rose tree.

Hurray Bismillah,  
The Nawab of Nokredeet  
Has his eyes on the balcony  
His hands on the box he carree,  
He touches not the rose tree.

Marches Ahmed, prince of 7 palaces  
Missing the rose tree  
By an isle & 14 torches,  
O merciful father of horses.

& Zanab Tak-i-Wauk  
Takes his walk  
Right past the rose tree  
O lover of the love famished

With each suitor passing

Touching not the rose tree,  
My beloved blushes  
Hoping it will be mee,

Guide me then  
With hands of strategee,  
To the rose tree the rose tree.

G. S. Sharat Chandra



# Midlife

I want a vacation  
where the mind doesn't stray  
from the starry stratosphere  
of motel ceilings  
to remember it's become a whale  
dipping in & out of itself.

I want to bounce on the bed  
from the first kiss  
to the last hurrah,  
to collapse without pit stops  
back into the body  
without backing into memory.

I want my mouth  
not to watch my tongue,  
my tongue my words,  
my words my brain,  
the rage that was relevant  
only yesterday  
which now makes me say  
I'm glad I've lost it.

I want to dream  
of youth's cocky impieties,  
the inexact ways to your love's certainty,  
not this vision of oranges  
under the bed,  
the world waiting to see  
if I get to eat them free.

G. S. Sharat Chandra

# Morning Song

To turn the lamp on,  
let it capture the cunning back  
of the literary thief,

to open the window  
so the birds learn their words  
instead of muddling them with chirps,

to whistle to the deaf horse grazing  
in the windy backyard,  
see in its steamy nostrils  
the angelic clouds,

to stash the householder's concern  
for this world in a trash bag  
& applaud its disappearance  
as if in an act at a carnival

to forgive those more able  
to hold on to their daily pretensions  
even as they wake from dreams.

O life, that settles into recesses  
of sorrow in the company of others,

forgive this foolish human  
who chooses what he doesn't know  
of coming deceptions,

then dances with them  
in a garage full of leaves.

G. S. Sharat Chandra

# Muzmahil Treating The Sorcerers

(inspired from a 16th century Mughal school painting found in Maurice Dimand's, Indian Miniatures.)

It is the year 1575.

Dastan i-Amir Hamza rules India.

Persian & Hindu elements appear side by side.

One fat assed bird catcher walks east of the painting

With no bird or cage.

A goatherd and his mistress watch their goats

Lick the vanilla off the place wall.

An inscription says it's a sunday.

The trees are in full bloom.

The rocks are well fed.

Thus everything is serene

Except what appears to be the palace courtyard

Which, thanks to the painter, we see clearly.

There, things don't look so good.

Well dressed Persian & Hindu nobles

Are tearing each other to disarray.

Yet it is no orgy.

One hefty woman rolls on the floor punching her nose

Which barely squeaks,

A noble opens his mouth to let the devil spit,

Yet another stands firm as a table

While his midget companions ping-pong through his ears.

It is plain the royalty is in one heap of misery.

However, in the center of the painting

There sits a man with a huge beard, velvet jubba and muslin roomal,

He is without doubt, Muzmahil, the great hakim.

At present he is treating a sorcerous elbow

Twisting it like a rubber band.

The owner of the elbow lets out one helluva yell.

He is going to be O.K.

Next to him there waits the apprentice archery commander

Transfixed with red cushions,

His ass has been shot full of sorcerous arrows.

The legend says, Muzmahil will get to them.

By and by no doubt,

And by and by, Muzmahil will become  
Muzma, Hill & Sons,  
As sorcery continues through the centuries.

G. S. Sharat Chandra

# Peasants Waiting For Rain

At dusk  
they come back from their parched fields  
dragging their ancient plow.  
The untethered oxen dreaming  
nose deep in a mirror of water.

They sit under the banyan,  
arms bared against the sky,  
frowns grown accustomed to doubt.

On the mud wall of the village,  
the evening throws their turbaned shadows  
lean like the helmets of knights,  
slithering their heads into the roof.

The twilight swallows their stillness,  
leaves on the banyan top ripple,  
there's the sound of a stone skimming,  
a hawk dives into the empty courtyard,  
flutters awkwardly upwards  
into a whittled cumulus.

They doze, ears cocked only  
to sounds from above,  
the sudden charge of wild horses.

G. S. Sharat Chandra

# Shortchanged Lives

'You from India? Dreadfully poor place,  
I was there for three weeks,  
saw a dead boy on the street,'  
gasps Mrs. Gentry,  
sizing me with squinted eyes  
as if to give more lens might tempt me  
to dive into her yuppie life.

How can I tell her  
I've nursed the starved, the forsaken,

or those on a parched afternoon,  
that give up under a thin tree  
or the shade of a culvert,  
hallucinating a winged charpoy  
to whisk them to swarga,  
where gods line up  
with handfuls of bliss to make up  
for their battered mortality.

G. S. Sharat Chandra

# Sraddha

A Hindu ceremony where crow  
believed to be ancestors are fed  
My brothers and sisters are calling  
our ancestors from their hideout  
in heaven where  
they wait dead or denied,  
mortally reminiscing  
on the good food they ate,  
until they grow wings  
to sneak back as ravens.  
It must be the smell itself  
that gives them directions  
to homes of relatives  
who're cooking the burden.  
A fat one eats only rice,  
another pecks on pickles,  
one grumbles about the cook,  
another perches praising a niece  
whose recipes came from a book.  
A foreign dead asks for knives,  
another circles the house  
cawing directions  
to a flock of frenetic wives.  
Fed by the scriptures,  
my ancestors  
still remain unimpressed:  
a burly beak declares flatly  
my wife's curry is a sorry mess.  
The last one to leave is a lecher,  
sighs at my wife's sumptuous look,  
signals he'll be back later,  
for favors off the hook.

G. S. Sharat Chandra

# Stillness

The hours,  
sullen goats grazing on emptiness  
drift mutely to the other side of day.  
The sun has cast his mid-day net  
but doesn't move  
to pull in the catch  
a chameleon,  
two stink bugs stiff after love,  
a towhee dozing over the patch of impatiens.  
Stillness is making its point,  
knowing this  
the wind plays dead.

G. S. Sharat Chandra



# The Absent

Bells do not ring  
when our names are called,

we are the no people  
who were once the yes people,  
we are China in the back closet,  
wash left in the rain  
with the wind moving our sex.

Our words are awkward  
between forks and knives,  
between shadows  
on the dinner plates,  
we're stones fluttering  
in your intimate eyes.

Yet you've given us  
a place at your table,  
it's a tight place  
between crowded chairs,  
naked we do not know  
if you have us here  
to keep yourselves separate.

G. S. Sharat Chandra

# Valley Of The Crows, India

At the sudden edge  
where the hill gapes into the valley,  
a gnarled mimosa leans  
away from the sky  
to shade a heap of pebbles,  
a raven sits cleaning its beak,  
its eyes ancient as guilt.  
Without much sympathy  
boyish waiters tell the story:  
a paltry priest, his orthodox wife,  
and lonely daughter  
took care of the temple nearby.  
It was a worthless living  
between bosoms of crippled gods.  
There was famine,  
pilgrims went elsewhere  
where gods flourished  
under influential care.  
The daughter grew like a lush vine  
through the crevices of poverty,  
a rich man took her,  
ashamed, the mother led  
the pregnant girl to the valley,  
jumped together arms spread,  
it was windless,  
no one heard a cry or prayer.  
When the crows were done,  
no one could find the scattered bones,  
the priest went deranged,  
rang the temple bells for days  
as if to ask the ravens.  
The hill is now a tourist resort  
where week-end revellers  
sit drinking cold beer,  
listening to the past held  
in the gyrating postures  
of waiters who are also guides  
to the temple kept intact  
with its tragedies.

I among them,  
and the raven which slaps  
its groomed wings in memory.  
Exile  
We have everything  
telephones, TV, schedules for readings,  
addresses, invitations,  
but we circle our chairs,  
ask aimless questions  
who was the angel at the airport  
singing names on the intercom  
as if she were calling us?  
Why are we shouting  
our names into mirrors,  
awake in a dream  
where sirens draw near?  
Women sit close  
all evening under lamps  
to read what we wrote  
lost in their country.  
Our hands are empty,  
our words roam in the city.  
Even our rooms are shaped  
like boats  
to make us buoyant,  
yet we drift without docks,  
our heads are numbers  
bobbing on the streets,  
in between the lights,  
words are raindrops on our fists.  
You can throw anything into the sea,  
the sea opens,  
the sea zips itself back.  
In the strange buildings,  
hosted by linguists  
we seek walls to hold us steady,  
let our ghosts converse.

G. S. Sharat Chandra

# Waking At Fifty

Show me a man who sleeps to be miserable,  
I'll show you myself  
the story isn't easy,  
grown into my own soliloquy  
I've become a face beside a face  
waiting for the ferry.  
I tell myself it's all right,  
all faces become one  
in their fall after fifty:  
others gone ahead will offer tea  
between wakefulness  
and a good deal of forgetting.  
I wake up to a bed half empty.  
My lover of last night  
has become mother downstairs  
in a conspiracy of children  
who think birthdays are fun  
for someone who seems undone.  
Down the stairs I pretend not to remember  
the lantern that flashed red  
by the gates of my clear dream,  
Charon's hooded whistle,  
the silent boat rocking alone,  
all hands blossoming into waves,  
for those love gathered downstairs  
are giggling with ribbons,  
ask if I slept well,  
do I remember it's May?  
My daughters give me candy bars,  
my son shaving brush, face mask,  
my wife, hair growing treatment  
gifts that a middle aged man  
must truly need  
sweetness, clear conscience,  
the pardonable chance  
to believe in miracles.

G. S. Sharat Chandra