

# thirteen



Poornima Laxmeshwar



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Household poems



Yavanika Press

# **Thirteen**

Cover and Interior photos: Sumathi S.

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*for Sabhya*

“There is a place. Like no place on Earth. A land full of wonder, mystery, and danger! Some say to survive it: You need to be as mad as a hatter.” — Lewis Carroll

# Contents

Things that come with a hole.....	1
Apple cinnamon fragrance pouch .....	3
The ladle that never tasted the soup.....	4
The lonely socket in the veranda .....	6
The secret pocket in the petticoat .....	8
Set of four cowries .....	9
The technicalities of a good poem.....	10
Undo my alternate existence .....	12
Starchy memories are the toughest to wash away .....	14-15
Of cures, fantasies, and phantoms.....	17
The comfort of life is repetition .....	18
Transmutation of memories .....	19
Appearances that refuse identity.....	21
Glossary.....	22-25





thirteen

## Things that come with a hole

It is about the eye, precisely. Amma picks fresh lemons for every new moon night and crisply advises me to place them under my pillow. Nightmares follow the citrus scent. Amma can unstitch not only tight blouses but also relationships. She says all it takes for a failure is a prick. The next best thing is a safety pin. *Why*, I ask. It keeps the gropes in crowded buses away. I disagree. The next best thing must ideally be a bottle opener. But Amma disagrees. *What about the thread getting stuck in the hole of the pin?* It costs you the entire *mallige maale*. She isn't convinced. *What about the thick Pattu sarees that can alter the face of the pin?* Amma is done oiling her tailoring machine. She narrates how she once discovered voodoo dolls with pins pricked all over the body in the backyard of the abandoned Khadigram. She then focuses on threading the needle. Appa's shirt lost a button while he was boarding the city bus. *But even buttons come with holes.*

She says a woman must know when to stop a conversation.



## **Apple cinnamon fragrance pouch**

Smells take me back to people. Like Amma always smells of turmeric, Appa of teakwood furniture, P of fresh weed, and him, beef. No, I haven't yet confessed that his odour repels me. It reminds me of slow meat cooking and the spices that run into my nostrils deeper than childhood memories. And so, every anniversary, I gift him cologne that contains sea-salt and the quiet secret of lemongrass. As for me, I smell of anti-depressants that blend like detergent in hard water.

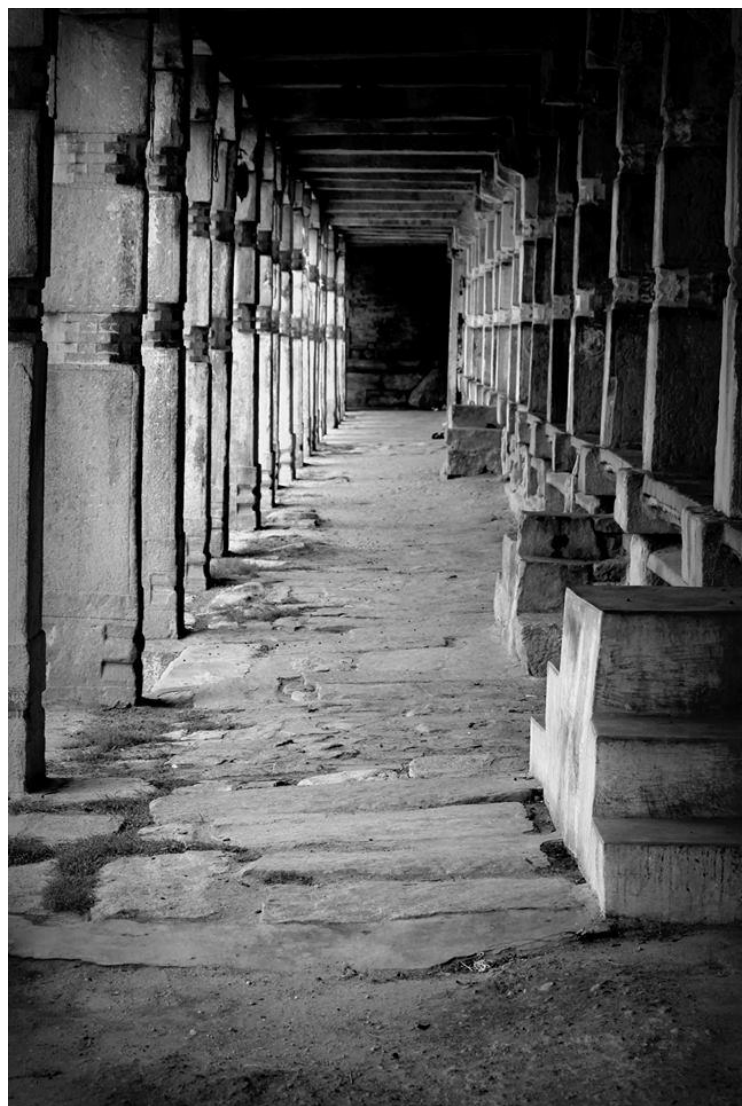
## The ladle that never tasted the soup

Amma had a keen eye for spotting the useless. She would bargain until the useless was also reduced to cheap. Her storeroom was a museum of worthlessness. Plastic bottle lids, threads that came along with a parcel of *idlis* and *vadas*, discarded photos of gods she once believed in, her mother's bronze *kaddai*, her father's Gandhi cap, my first bib, gift wraps, her recipe book which had *sambhar* powder recipes from all possible aunts, and two *ghungroos*. Her father disliked the idea of her taking *Kathak* classes. So, she bit the dream between her sharp teeth just like she could separate a garland in two. Do dreams burn holes on the sleeves of age and gnaw at every dawn? Do they, Amma?



## **The lonely socket in the veranda**

Appa worked with hydroelectric projects. No, it wasn't magical, generating electricity out of water. It was the sheer act of chopping down rows and columns of trees until they could cleanup to dig tunnels in the earth to fit the turbines, and then load cement to erect a dam, sink hamlets — unsettle grief — to light up a better world. Electricity was at the disposal of switches that flickered in the roundness of a socket, a universe that cost a dime. So, Appa bought bulbs and bulbs that gave up on life with voltage fluctuations, mostly, and then they were abandoned. At times, they were the emptiness that Appa felt at his job.





## The secret pocket in the petticoat

Ajji wore her nine yards meticulously. Her concern was to show not too much of her strong legs that knew the weight of the distance between one abortion and another. But it was gold that she dreamt of, more than bearing a baby boy. The big *nathani* was reserved for festivals. Every time she wore it, the weight of the emerald and gold pulled her nose down but her pride swelled like her womb did almost every year until the doctor warned her about fragile bones going hollow. “16 times,” she said. I no longer liked the analogy of sweet sixteen. The last time I saw her, Ajji lied still with her toothless mouth open, dressed in a worn out nighty and a shawl. The *nathani*'s fate was undecided. Either it would adorn the village deity *Mahamaya*'s face or melt as easily as our ancestral history.

## Set of four cowries

Under the shade of the old *peepul* tree, you draw a square with boxes that behave, stay within boundaries like good girls of our Brahmin family. I choose four pieces of a broken glass bangle as my set to play with. I have to reach the centre. But isn't that the goal of every game? Getting to the core to ask the futile question: *Now what?* So, I choose a different game. I flick the money cowries as high as I can. I catch them with the vigour that life possesses while holding the nerves on my neck until I go

B

L

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E

When I think I am done trying all the cowries, love comes crawling like an attention-seeking infant.

## The technicalities of a good poem

She was on a different axis—patterned questions, repetitive replies, nodding at something, affirming once in a while. Her world that knew only fragrances, flowers, and chirps, or maybe that’s what we assumed. But her smile was unique, a sinusoidal mismatch of innocence.

We avoided her. We, a bunch of not-so-colonial cousins seated under the shade of the mango trees, playing, screaming, and secretly gossiping about her, avoiding the sharp ears of our elders. We called her what everyone in the family whispered in the lowest possible tones like those monthly chronic pains. “Mad” was the word. Like an act of defiance, we repeated it, feeling brave as though we had conquered a piece of sky.

Her name, you ask? Kavitha—a poem that could bind the curls of music so strikingly that it touched the stones where our hearts were supposed to be.

Kavitha, with her now grey hair and same set of questions, is so easy to spot in her bright green printed *langa* and a plain red blouse. Only the prints and the colours keep changing like her understanding of good touch and bad touch.



## Undo my alternate existence

Ammamma ground her betel nut every noon after a short nap. She wore a thin, pure white saree with no prints. I always thought she was a pile of bones, laid one on top of the other, glued by pale skin. She walked slowly as though each step took her closer to death. She covered her head with hair sprouting like rebellions in a colony of fascists. Most of the times she scratched her scalp cursing the world for no definite reason.

She carried her own water from the well. When she lifted the pleats and tucked it on the side, I could see the red patches on her wrinkled skin that seemed like flowers blooming in spring, so full of life, so full of hope. I counted them as they stared me in the eye like folksongs passed down, generation after generation. But mistakes repeat out of futility, out of existence.

Ammamma always narrated stories only from the *Ramayana* because she trusted Rama. She liked the fact that he was a one-man-woman.

She also once told me that her favourite colour was *gulabi*.



## Starchy memories are the toughest to wash away

On pleasant January mornings, Kaku wakes us up to help her with the *sabudana sandige*. She prepares it as winter trails away with the heaviness of Ajja breathing in measures. The plastic sheet is laid with four stones at every corner, indicating that it is always easy to control things that don't really matter. Suddenly, the air is filled with the pungent odour of green chillies, (overused) to add some life to the otherwise ordinariness of *sabudana*, reminding me of Kaka's life—four daughters in a house full of chores. I scoop a spoon full of the mixture, a transparent jelly with Bolshevik objectives, unheeding. I carefully place it on spots marked by Kaku that appear like hatched plans of sureness.

*How can you make salad without cucumber?* I ask. *Everything is independent*; she answers with a distant look, stirring the mix with an unnecessary vigour. She holds her *mangalsutra* and utters something to display her annoyance at the koel's singing – *kooooooooo, kooooooooo*. This reminds me of Timmy Tiptoes who resembles Kaka with his tummy extending a welcome before his words. Kaka, living his days dreaming of a career in theatre, stuck in his Public Works Department (PWD) job, and Kaku working as a teacher in the government school by the pond where the buffaloes rest after grazing for miles. Or was Kaka Chippy Hackee caught in a wrong marriage?

*These need three days*, she declares. Three days for them to go stiff as corpses and then suddenly spring to life at the touch of hot oil like blossoming lotuses at dawn. Such is the vagueness of existence. Kaku plans her *kumbalakayi sandige* while my mind stays transfixed on Peter Rabbit.





## Of cures, fantasies, and phantoms

The intention of the tree is to become memory. While cleaning the *pooja* room, Amma had thrown away the small silver idol of the snake god at the roots of the *peepul* tree. She later told me that she dreamt of snakes all night. I could only think of the big teak tree towering over the large black snake god idol that stood on the tiny road leading us to Appa's office. We walked through patches of Bermuda grass, fighting the dragonflies, collecting cobbler's legs (is that the name of a flower?). We would visit the temple at least once a year where the festival obligated us to pour milk on the idols and eat sweets at home. Amma advised Pammu and me, *pray to the snake god to keep you away from all skin diseases*. I gave up reasoning that very year when I discovered the first tiny white patch on my skin, sure of the purpose of its arrival amidst the mundane. At the break of dawn, Amma made me wash the steps of the temple for one whole month. She asked science, politely, to fuck off.

## The comfort of life is repetition

*Riyaaz* is as necessary as routine, says Maushi. Every day she cleaned the *tanpura*. It was as if the monsoons had gotten rid of the heaviness of a lover's heartache. While *Mian ki Malhar* captivated the boundaries of a harmonious downpour, she drowned in it without any resistance. On many such evenings, the rebellion that clouded her mind poured like raindrops without too much of a pitter-patter. Now in a red synthetic saree, she looks at her black Titan wrist watch thrice as she lectures me about how thunder feels like a howl of failure. Time slips by as easily as her desire to exist. The day she swallowed those tablets never to catch another rain, I knew that death, too, could be as vain as a life plan.

## Transmutation of memories

Ajja read *Devi parayanam* for hours, almost until noon. He sat on the deer skin mat; of course, he was purely vegetarian (minus onions, minus garlic). He would finish reciting the verses and then open the books that invoked the blessings of the goddess. Maybe that's why more than half the house was filled with women of all ages and sizes—a blessing gone wrong I presume. He used only his own bronze plate, bowl, and tumbler and wouldn't allow anyone else to use them. When he fell from the bed and hurt his head, he knew death had walked in with the odour of low-budget phenyl. While cremating him, Doddappa took out Ajja's *pavithra* finger ring. He then sold it for a fair price and got a *Navaratna* ring made for himself. He gave away everything else including Ajja's spectacles, white clothes, long line of homeopathy medicines and books that preached their dosage. Ajja loved *sbrikband* and *vada*. Every year on his *shraadh*, they were prepared and relished in the name of love and respect.



## Appearances that refuse identity

*Gorayya* was too old now, and his costume was as heavy as people's expectations—the ones who visited him whenever there were religious ceremonies that required his blessings. An *upanayana*, a christening, a marriage, and they would invite him. *Gorayya*, clad in his usual dhoti and kurta, topped with the patched long coat with white, black, green, and red geometrical patterns, stood out distinctly from the rest of them. He always carried the *chinchhi*, a sling bag with two pockets. One was filled with *bhandaar* and the other with the few coins and notes that were donated to him for his service. He entered the house with a wide chest, feeling important, to perform a religious task that made him respected in an otherwise thankless world. He sang *aarathi* songs on *Yellamma* in a low tone and always ate his food seated in a corner. Beyond that he didn't matter. He was as fatherless as a nameless wildflower.

## Glossary

*aarathi* – A Hindu ritual in which lights made from camphor soaked wicks are offered to one or more deities two or three times daily. It is also the name for the devotional song that is sung during this ritual.

*Ajja* – Grandfather

*Ajji* – Grandmother

*Amma* – Mother

*Ammamma* – Great grandmother

*Appa* – Father

*bhandaar* – Turmeric powder that is offered to gods.

*cowries* – A marine mollusc which has a glossy, brightly patterned domed shell with a long, narrow opening.

*Devi parayanam* – A series of Sanskrit verses written for Hindu goddesses.

*Doddappa* – Paternal uncle

*ghungroos* – Anklets with small bells, usually worn in Indian classical dance forms.

*Gorayya* – A certain sect of followers of the goddess Yellamma, who are invited to partake in a few rituals and bless the household.

*gulabi* – Pink

*idlis* – A type of savoury rice cake that is popular as a breakfast item, originating from the Indian subcontinent.

*kadai* – Wok

*Kaka* – Paternal uncle

*Kaku* – Paternal aunt

*Kathak* – A form of Indian classical dance.

*Khadigram* – A place that sells khadi clothes.

*Kumbalakayi* – Pumpkin

*langa* – A skirt like garment worn with a blouse.

*Mahamaya* – One of the Indian goddesses

*mallige maale* – Jasmine garland

*mangalsutra* – A necklace worn by married women.

*Maushi* – Maternal aunt

*Mian ki Malhar* – An old raga in Indian classical music, associated with the atmosphere of torrential rains.

*nathani* – A nose ring.



*Navaratna* – Of nine stones that symbolise the nine planets.

*nine yards* – A type of saree.

*Pattu* – Traditional name for silk in South India. It also refers to the Kanchipuram silk sarees that are renowned for their heavy work, often having a contrasting border.

*pavithra* – Sacred

*peepul* – Sacred fig tree.

*pooja* – Hindu ritual

*Ramayana* – The epic written by Valmiki.

*riyaaṣ* – Practice

*sabudana* – Tapioca Sago

*sambhar* – A lentil-based vegetable stew popular in south India.

*sandige* – A fried snack.

*shraadb* – Death anniversary

*shrikhand* – An Indian sweet dish made from strained yogurt.

*tanpura* – A large four-stringed lute used in Indian classical music as a drone accompaniment.

*upanayana* – A Hindu ritual of initiation, restricted to the three upper social classes, that marks the male child's entrance upon

the life of a student and his acceptance as a full member of his religious community.

*vadas* – An Indian savoury dish made from ground pulses that are deep fried.

*Yellamma*– An Indian goddess.



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Poornima Laxmeshwar's *Thirteen*, presented here as "household poems," tell interesting, stand-alone stories and work like distilled snapshots or vignettes. Written from both an insider's perspective and as an outsider looking in, these poems are paeans to ordinary people who, nonetheless, lead extraordinary lives. In their quaint poignancy, Laxmeshwar weaves a narrative that is the quintessence of rural southern India.



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