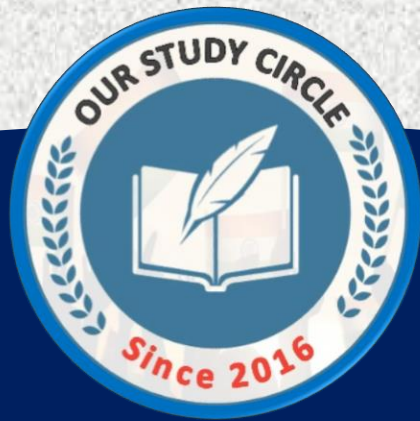


# UPSC IAS

**A Free Way to Become IAS**

An Initiative of OUR STUDY CIRCLE



**UPSC English Literature optional**

[www.ourstudycircle.in](http://www.ourstudycircle.in)



**A.K. Ramanujan Poems**

**Obituary**

Father, when he passed on,  
left dust  
on a table of papers,  
left debts and daughters,  
a bedwetting grandson  
named by the toss  
of a coin after him,

a house that leaned  
slowly through our growing  
years on a bent coconut  
tree in the yard.

Being the burning type,  
he burned properly  
at the cremation

as before, easily  
and at both ends,  
left his eye coins  
in the ashes that didn't  
look one bit different,  
several spinal discs, rough,  
some burned to coal, for sons

to pick gingerly  
and throw as the priest  
said, facing east  
where three rivers met  
near the railway station;  
no longstanding headstone  
with his full name and two dates

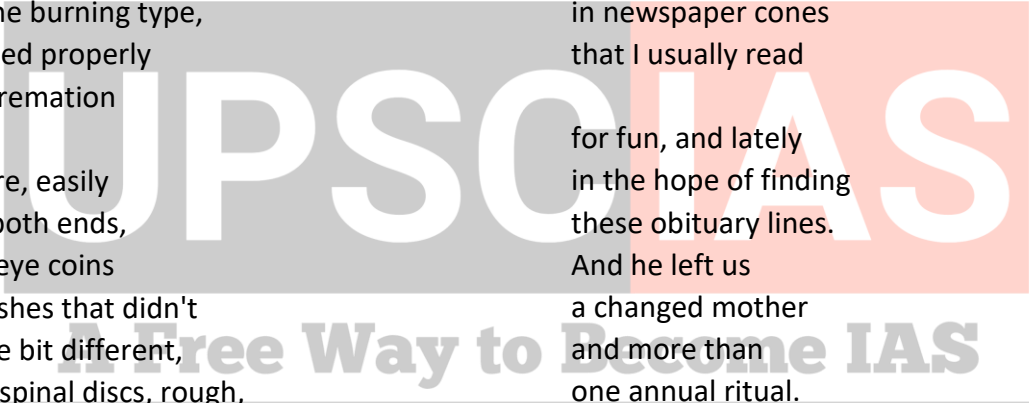
to holdin their parentheses  
everything he didn't quite  
manage to do himself,  
like his caesarian birth  
in a brahmin ghetto  
and his death by heart-

failure in the fruit market.

But someone told me  
he got two lines  
in an inside column  
of a Madras newspaper  
sold by the kilo  
exactly four weeks later  
to streethawkers

who sell it in turn  
to the small groceries  
where I buy salt,  
coriander,  
and jaggery  
in newspaper cones  
that I usually read

for fun, and lately  
in the hope of finding  
these obituary lines.  
And he left us  
a changed mother  
and more than  
one annual ritual.



An Initiative of OUR STUDY CIRCLE

**Of Mother, Among Other Things**

I smell upon this twisted backbone tree  
the silk and whitepetal of my mother's  
youth.  
From her earrings three diamonds

splash a handful of needles,  
and I see my mother run back  
from rain to the crying cradles.  
The rains tack and sew

with broken threads the rags



of the tree tasselled light.  
But her hands are a wet eagle's  
two black- pink crinkled feet,

one talon crippled in a garden-  
trap set for a mouse. Her saris  
do not cling: they hang, loose  
feather of a one time wing.

My cold parchment tongue licks bark  
in the mouth when I see her four  
still sensible fingers slowly flex  
to pick a grain of rice from the kitchen floor.

**Love Poem for a Wife, 1**

Really what keeps us apart  
at the end of years is unshared  
childhood. You cannot, for instance,  
meet my father. He is some years  
dead. Neither can I meet yours:  
he has lately lost his temper  
and mellowed.

In the transverse midnight gossip  
of cousins' reunions among  
brandy fumes, cashews and the Absences  
of grandparents, you suddenly grow  
nostalgic for my past and I  
envy you your village dog-ride  
and the mythology  
of the sever crazy aunts.  
You begin to recognize me  
as I pass from ghost to real  
and back again in the albums  
of family rumours, in brothers'  
anecdotes of how noisily  
father bathed,  
slapping soap on his back;  
find sources for a familiar  
sheep-mouth look in a sepia wedding  
picture of father in a turban,

mother standing on her bare  
splayed feet, silver rings  
on her second toes;  
and reduce the entire career  
of my recent unique self  
to the compulsion of some high  
sentence in His Smilesian diary.  
And your father, gone irrevocably  
in age, after changing every day  
your youth's evenings,  
he will acknowledge the wickedness  
of no reminiscence: no, not  
the burning end of the cigarette  
in the balcony, pacing  
to and fro as you came to the gate  
late, after what you thought  
was an innocent  
date with a nice Muslim friend  
who only hinted at touches.  
Only two weeks ago, in Chicago,  
you and your brother James started  
one of you old drag-out fights  
about where the bathroom was  
in the backyard,  
north or south of the well  
next to the jackfruit tree  
in your father's father's house  
in Alleppey. Sister-in-law  
and I were blank cut-outs  
fitted to our respective  
slots in a room  
really nowhere as the two of you  
got down to the floor to draw  
blueprints of a house from memory  
of everything, from newspapers  
to the backs of envelopes  
and road-maps of the United States  
that happened  
to flap in the other room  
in a midnight wind: you wagered heirlooms  
and husband's earnings on what the Uncle



in Kuwait  
 would say about the Bathroom  
 and the Well, and the dying,  
 by now dead,  
 tree next to it. Probably  
 only the Egyptians had it right:  
 their kings had sisters for queens  
 to continue the incests  
 of childhood into marriage.  
 or we should do as well-meaning  
 Hindus did.  
 betroth us before birth  
 forestalling separate horoscopes  
 and mother's first periods,  
 and wed us in the oral cradle  
 and carry marriage back into  
 the namelessness of childhoods.

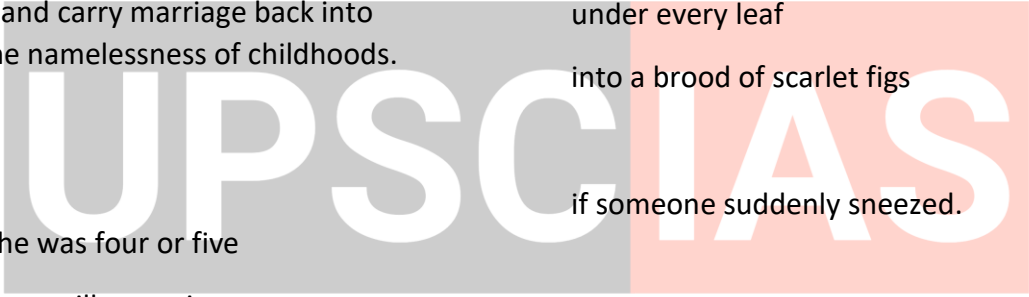
and we were very innocent  
 about it.

Now she looks for the swing  
 in cities with fifteen suburbs  
 and tries to be innocent  
 about it

not only on the crotch of a tree  
 that looked as if it would burst  
 under every leaf  
 into a brood of scarlet figs  
 if someone suddenly sneezed.

When she was four or five  
 she sat on a village swing  
 and her cousin, six or seven,  
 sat himself against her;  
 with every lunge of the swing  
 she felt him  
 in the lunging pits  
 of her feeling;  
 and afterwards  
 we climbed a tree, she said,  
 not very tall, but full of leaves  
 like those of a fig tree,

**A River**  
 In Madurai,  
 city of temples and poets,  
 who sang of cities and temples,  
 every summer  
 a river dries to a trickle  
 in the sand,  
 baring the sand ribs,  
 straw and women's hair  
 clogging the watergates  
 at the rusty bars  
 under the bridges with patches



A Free Way to Become IAS

An Initiative of OUR STUDY CIRCLE





of repair all over them  
the wet stones glistening like sleepy  
crocodiles, the dry ones  
shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun

The poets only sang of the floods.

He was there for a day  
when they had the floods.

People everywhere talked  
of the inches rising,  
of the precise number of cobbled steps  
run over by the water, rising

on the bathing places,  
and the way it carried off three village  
houses,

one pregnant woman  
and a couple of cows  
named Gopi and Brinda as usual.

The new poets still quoted  
the old poets, but no one spoke  
in verse

of the pregnant woman  
drowned, with perhaps twins in her,  
kicking at blank walls  
even before birth.

He said:  
the river has water enough  
to be poetic

about only once a year  
and then

it carries away  
in the first half-hour  
three village houses,

a couple of cows  
named Gopi and Brinda  
and one pregnant woman

expecting identical twins  
with no moles on their bodies,  
with different coloured diapers  
to tell them apart.

### Small Scale Reflections On A Great House

Sometimes I think that nothing  
that ever comes into this house  
goes out. Things that come in everyday  
to lose themselves among other things  
lost long ago among  
other things lost long ago;

lame wandering cows from nowhere  
have been known to be tethered,  
given a name, encouraged

to get pregnant in the broad daylight  
of the street under the elders'  
supervision, the girls hiding

behind windows with holes in them.



A Free Way to become IAS

An Initiative of OUR STUDY CIRCLE



Unread library books  
usually mature in two weeks  
and begin to lay a row

of little eggs in the ledgers  
for fines, as silverfish  
in the old man's office room

breed dynasties among long legal words  
in the succulence  
of Victorian parchment.

Neighbours' dishes brought up  
with the greasy sweets they made  
all night the day before yesterday

for the wedding anniversary of a god,

never leave the house they enter,  
like the servants, the phonographs,  
the epilepsies in the blood,  
sons-in-law who quite forget  
their mothers, but stay to check  
accounts or teach arithmetic to nieces,

or the women who come as wives  
from houses open on one side  
to rising suns, on another

to the setting, accustomed  
to wait and to yield to monsoons  
in the mountains' calendar

beating through the hanging banana leaves  
And also anything that goes out  
will come back, processed and often  
with long bills attached,

like the hooped bales of cotton  
shipped off to invisible Manchesters  
and brought back milled and folded

for a price, cloth for our days'  
middle-class loins, and muslin  
for our richer nights. Letters mailed

have a way of finding their way back  
with many re-directions to wrong  
addresses and red ink-marks

earned in Tiruvalla and Sialkot.  
And ideas behave like rumours,  
once casually mentioned somewhere  
they come back to the door as prodigies

born to prodigal fathers, with eyes  
that vaguely look like our own,  
like what Uncle said the other day:

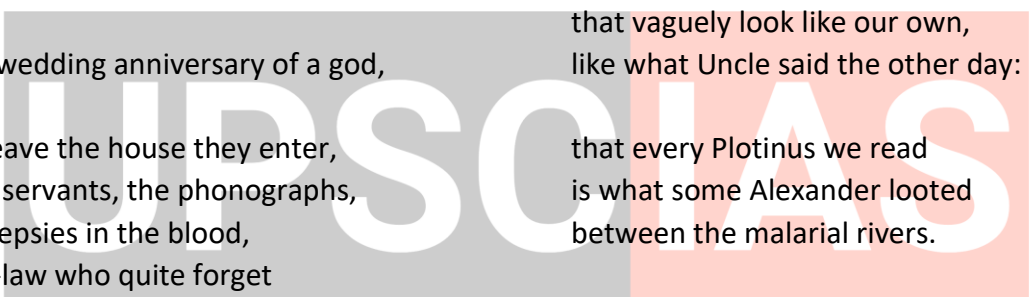
that every Plotinus we read  
is what some Alexander looted  
between the malarial rivers.

A beggar once came with a violin  
to croak out a prostitute song  
that our voiceless cook sang  
all the time in our backyard.

Nothing stays out: daughters  
get married to short-lived idiots;  
sons who run away come back

in grand children who recite Sanskrit  
to approving old men, or bring  
betel nuts for visiting uncles

who keep them gaping with  
anecdotes of unseen fathers,  
or to bring Ganges water  
in a copper pot  
for the last of the dying



A Free Way to Become IAS

An Initiative of OUR STUDY CIRCLE





ancestors' rattle in the throat.

And though many times from everywhere,  
recently only twice:  
once in nineteen-forty-three  
from as far as the Sahara,

half -gnawed by desert foxes,  
and lately from somewhere  
in the north, a nephew with stripes

on his shoulder was called  
an incident on the border  
and was brought back in plane

and train and military truck  
even before the telegrams reached,  
on a perfectly good

Chatty afternoon (1971)



## A Free Way to Become IAS

An Initiative of OUR STUDY CIRCLE

