

JAGIRO

Five days, day after day,
Jagiro at the ration shop
Hoped for five litres of kerosene...
Now, in the long, long queue
She stands, bowed, bent,
As if that strength
Pitted lifelong against this wild wolf of a world
Is at last spent.

Her glance does not measure the queue
Her smoke-filled eyes see
A stove burning,
A rice vessel bubbling...

The older one shrieks
"Again, that wretched boiled rice?
Today, I'll have dal with rice
Or else I'm not going to school."
"You with your daily complaints", says Jagiro,
"You'll jolly well eat what's cooked in the house—
Oh yes, I'll make spiced rice for you, fine sir,
Fry your dal in butter!
Why don't you ever say a word to your father,
Why do you have to keep tearing at me?"

Jagiro looks around,
Hiding her face, wipes her eyes.
'Tearing' is no mere word to Jagiro
— The felt truth of her story,
Deepest wound of her life,
Inflicted by all, wolf and rabbit
And in her heart hidden —
Hidden from even the hut's ragged walls.

Yes, even now it's not her sorrows she's thinking of
Her smoke-filled eyes see
A stove burning,
A rice vessel bubbling...

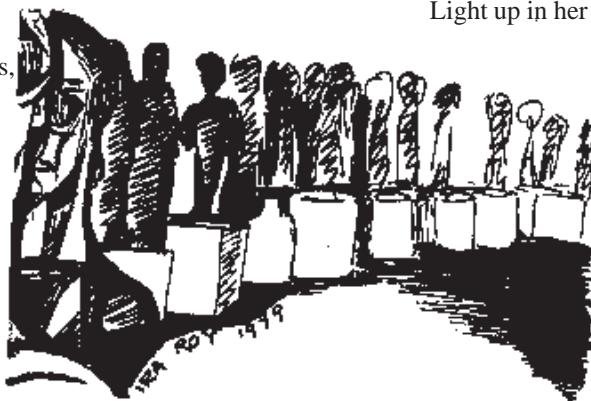
And the child's father simmers,
Grates out curses:

"That old cat somewhere
Searching for scraps —
Whore — must be busy mucking around,
Casting eyes at some devil
Today, I'll muck *her* up,
Break every bone in her body,
Tear out her flesh and devour it..."

A shudder ignites her body
The stove flares up, dies down
It too is growing old
All its parts worn out,
But still she keeps lighting it,
Cooking for a wolf and four rabbits
And the wolf keeps growling,
Scaring the rabbits,
Tearing out her flesh,
Devouring it...

The queue slides on, tin by tin
But Jagiro stands still,
Today she will not return home,
Today she will not light the stove—

Sudden stir in the crowd
A little girl crying
Someone has stolen her tin,
Beaten up her brother—
And he's disappeared.
Jagiro picks up the little girl,
Holds her close, strokes her cheeks
"Listen, small Jagiro, your sorrows are small,
Big Jagiro's sorrows are big, very big."
The child's eyes begin to shine through her tears
As Jagiro's strong hands
Push the tin forward in line
And all at once, many stoves
Light up in her eyes.



Kumar Vikal
Translated from Hindi