

## “Ten on the Wild Boar”

### TRANSLATOR’S NOTE AND TEXT

These selections from the earliest strata of Tamil poetry include relatively concise individual love poems, in what is called “the inner mode” or “inner landscape” (*akam*)—that is, the world of imagination and feeling, always correlated to the external environment with its flora and fauna. Within the four classical anthologies of *akam* poems, the *Collection of Five Hundred Poems* (*Aiñkuṛunūru*) has two distinctive features: first, each century of poems is attributed to a single poet and describes one of the five prototypical landscapes; second, the basic unit of composition is a decad of very short, haiku-like verses meant to be read as a whole. The decad translated here, “Ten on the Wild Boar,” is situated in the mountain region, where, according to the conventions of the inner mode, the young lovers have met, fallen in love, and consummated their love. However, this happy moment is very soon encumbered with the emotional complexities, loneliness, and frustration of any real love relationship.

“TEN ON THE WILD BOAR” (FROM THE COLLECTION  
OF FIVE HUNDRED POEMS)

A fierce boar who feeds on soft millet  
sleeps on the lower slopes littered  
with heavy stones in the land  
of that man. Is it because he’s afraid  
of what our father knows that he  
doesn’t come? (1, verse 261)

A fierce boar who feeds on tiny shoots of millet  
lives with his mate on the rocky slopes—  
there, in the land of that man.  
He wants me. His desire

will come back. But, my friend,  
 does he know  
 what would truly heal? (2)

A black touchstone, a boar  
 feeds on ripe golden millet  
 in the hills of that land.  
 He's come back, my friend—  
 and with him, my beauty  
 has come again. (3)

In the hills, gleaming with water,  
 of *your* land, a boar, tusks  
 curved like the crescent moon,  
 makes love to his mate, dark  
 as carissa fruits.<sup>1</sup> You'd better look hard  
 at the eyes, all too pale, of this woman  
 who has loved you. (4)

So he forgot—the man from the hills  
 where a boar with crooked tusks guards  
 young piglets, striped and tender,  
 after their mother was killed by a tiger.  
 He has left me behind—me and his  
 golden son. (5)

A boar with small eyes  
 and big rage  
 fights a big short-legged tiger  
 in your land. As for us,  
 we're embarrassed.  
 In the eyes of the woman you love:  
 frozen tears. (6)

A boar with small eyes  
 and big rage  
 eludes the bowmen on the rocky slopes  
 and grabs the growing rice  
 in the land of this man  
 who once cared for this girl,  
 her hair heavy with bees.  
 Now he speaks treacherous words, certain  
 she'll believe them. (7)

The striped piglet holding tight,  
 the mother dead, a boar

feeds with him on sparse millet  
 on the rich mountainside where hunters go  
 and sleeps on the high peak  
 in the fine land of that man.  
 What good will come  
 if he goes away, leaving us  
 behind? (8)

Reeds rooted up by a boar in the wasteland  
 are as close as you get  
 to paddy growing in a field  
 in the land of that man  
 who hasn't come. If he stays there,  
 taking his own time,  
 while you weep, girl,  
 with bangles on your wrists and oil  
 in your hair, I'm sure  
 to lose a friend.  
 Not only that, it's my own  
 stupid fault. (9)

On the slopes where boars  
 dig up roots, the forest folk  
 have harvested the young millet  
 and moved on. If she just looks  
 at that mountain, shorn of beauty,  
 lonely as lament, her eyes  
 fill with tears. And he noticed.  
 He's come, the one  
 we love. (10)

READING “TEN ON THE WILD BOAR”

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The *Collection of Five Hundred Poems* (Aṅkuraṅṅūru) is a garland of five hundred short compositions. Unlike other compilations of classical Tamil poetry, in which poems and poets have a somewhat autonomous existence, the *Collection of Five Hundred Poems* has a multitiered structure that destabilizes our notions of what constitutes a poem. At first glance, it presents itself as a single work of five hundred brief verses. It was composed by five male poets, each deliberating in a cycle of one hundred songs, on one of the five landscapes (*aiṅṅai*) of classical Tamil poetics. Each of the five sections, the work of a single poet, is itself a poem—his comprehensive exploration of a specific landscape (*ṅṅai*) and the particularity of love on which it comments. The poet further divides his hundred songs into smaller

sets of ten verses (*patikam*), held together by themes and tropes specific to that landscape. The titles of these subdivisions—“Ten on Spring,” “Ten on Monkeys,” “Ten on the Wild Boar,” and so on—alert us to the possibility that these tens can themselves function as self-contained poems, even while the *Collection of Five Hundred Poems*’ structure demands that we read them as parts of a whole. Finally, at the molecular level, every one of the five hundred verses is also a poem, where its meaning does not need to be linked to its position within the ever-widening cycles of tens and hundreds. The brilliance of the *Collection of Five Hundred Poems* resides in its deliberate challenge to how we understand a poem, and in its ability to take the principles implicit in other classical Tamil collections to their inevitable conclusion.

So, what would it take to read a work like the *Collection of Five Hundred Poems* sensitively? The entire apparatus of Tamil poetics, a heady concoction of delicate suggestion and bold imagery, is no doubt important to imbibing the poems on their own terms. Yet, one can drink deeply, and even become intoxicated, absent such particularized knowledge. I frame my response to the “Ten on the Wild Boar” (*Kēlar-pattu*) by following the text’s by-the-numbers-organization—from five hundred to hundred to ten to one. Attention to the poem’s organizing principles is a demand to sensitivity, to how subtle alterations reshape poetic texture, feeling, and meaning. David Shulman’s translations draw our eye and ear to this startling feature of the *Collection of Five Hundred Poems* (exemplified in this decad), where repetition, iteration, and variation are used both to bind the verses together and to enable them to exist apart.

Just consider the decad’s first three verses, which juxtapose two elements—millet and the wild boar—and guide us to what is important in these verses. Both occur in the opening line, and again in two subsequent verses (2 and 3), with minor but significant alteration. “Ten on the Wild Boar” begins with a reference to the “soft millet.” The wild boar is introduced next—as hungry and fierce-eyed. In the following verse (2), the boar remains fierce-eyed and insatiable, but the millet has become something else; it is now “tiny shoots of millet.” In the third verse, the millet has ripened to gold, and the boar is now a glistening black touchstone. Through all these tiny alterations, one thing remains unchanged: the boar’s relationship to the millet, which exists only as a source to sate the boar’s hunger. The millet disappears for the next several verses, reappearing in the eighth verse, and tellingly again, in the tenth verse. Its absence only emphasizes the intimacy and interdependence of these two natural elements, which index cultivation and wildness respectively, and by extension, the heroine and hero.

Tamil poetics provides us with an edifice of resources to help us unpack this suggestive, evocative relationship between flora (millet) and fauna (boar) that ushers us into the “Ten on the Wild Boar.” Suggestion may be the arterial pulse of classical Tamil poetics, one that demands a sensitive reader, but attention to obvious rhetorical moves, such as the ones that open the “Ten on the Wild Boar,” is what

*makes* the sensitive reader. And through our reading, mediated through Shulman’s finely grained translation, much like the hero who learns to be sensitive, we too will form ourselves into readers of sympathy.

The defining conceit of the *Collection of Five Hundred Poems* is the principle of the “five landscapes,” each indexed to a specific stage of a love affair that begins in disruptive secret desire and ends in the ephemeral stability of marriage. The “Ten on the Wild Boar” upends this conventional order. It picks up the story *media-res*, in the agricultural tracts (*marutam*), where desire has already matured to love, and the exhilaration of new love has given way to the wounds of betrayal and infidelity. The poem begins in quarrel and disruption, but it ends auspiciously with the patient waiting characteristic of the pastoral lands, signified by the jasmine (*mullai*) and the principal characters reunited. As Martha Selby notes, “In the [*Collection of Five Hundred Poems*], the landscapes move from poems about fracture, jealousy, and infidelity and settle finally into verses describing and celebrating trusting domestic romance.”<sup>2</sup> Even as this decad traverses a familiar path, from separation to union, it defies adherence to narrative linearity. Instead, the first bloom of love, always secret and illicit, is itself hidden within the heart of the *Collection of Five Hundred Poems*, producing an effect of concentric yet intersecting circles of poetic force: everything radiates out and collapses into the untamed mountains of the landscape of *kurĩñci* and the wild love it signifies, which is seeded at the text’s very center. The *kurĩñci*-hundred—where the “Ten on the Wild Boar” is embedded—is the *Collection’s* womb, for it births the furtive love that radiates simultaneously and paradoxically in opposite directions, toward lonely waiting and happy union. This is one of the defining features of not just the *Collection of Five Hundred Poems*, but of all classical Tamil poems: the interplay of linearity and recurrence, where even when love bends toward marriage, it is always overlaid by the inexorable oscillations of separation and union.

The cycle of “Ten on the Wild Boar” (verses 261–70), located almost at the midpoint of the *kurĩñci*-hundred (that is, verses 61–70 out of 100) and just past the halfway point of the *Collection of Five Hundred Poems*, miniaturizes the collection’s long meditation on the endless experience of the loss and recuperation of love. For those who seek a narrative in the “Ten on the Wild Boar,” it is easy to find. The set unfolds iteratively, dwelling on particular phrases (as seen in the opening triad of the “Ten on the Wild Boar”) to develop a theme and a narrative arc that like the *Collection of Five Hundred Poems* itself begins in separation and ends in (ephemeral) union. In the very first verse, we are told that the hero has failed to arrive for an assignation, perhaps because their secret love—the domain of the landscape of wild love—has been discovered by her father. By the final verse (10), the hero has returned, brought back by the force of his lover’s tears. The narrative progress is indexed by the boar, which starts out snuffing millet (1) only to find itself eating roots in the end, while people reap the first harvest of millet (10). Like the millet that goes from tender shoot to golden grain by the cycle’s conclusion,

these ten verses offer us glimpses of the buds of early love, its gradual ripening, and its final maturation. This is the heroine's version of love. The hero has his story, too; it is a story of a reckless, perhaps even faithless man (i.e., the wild boar) learning something of himself, awakening to awareness.

The key to this decad rests in the boar's relationship to its environment, of which the opening trio of verses with their pointed but subtly altered repetition leave us in no doubt. Though a wild boar, the animal constantly finds itself connected to cultivation: the millet it feeds on (1–3, 8) and the carefully nurtured paddy that it steals (7, 9). In the opening verses, the boar *is* wild—it eats, sleeps, and mates—motivated only by these most primal impulses. Meanwhile, the heroine, delicate and tender, her love nourishing as millet, simply waits, hoping to domesticate all that wildness. Then, halfway through the decad, the poem changes to become a fight between the impulse to remain free, happily roaming the hills, and to surrender to the relentless gravitational pull of domesticity. In the fifth verse, the boar nurtures piglets orphaned by a tiger, in the sixth, it fights off a tiger, in the seventh, it evades archers who try to catch it for stealing rice, and in the eighth, despite its best efforts to go on its merry way, it is described comforting another orphaned hogling. These four verses (5–8), the most abstract in the decad, offer an important counterpoint to its opening triad. Here in the cycle's center, we confront the inherent instability of the natural world, and by extension, the instability of a stolen love that exists outside boundaries. It suggests that marriage, the public covenant of love, is what stabilizes desire. It tells a tale of a hero from the mountains who awakens the heroine to desire, but who must himself be awakened to love in all its forms.

If we only follow the trajectory of the boar, this is the story that emerges. However, every verse in the series of ten, like all classical Tamil poems, has a second, human part. These offer a very different narrative. It is the civilized counterpart to the boar's uninhibited urges. In these sections, the heroine simply waits, a passive, reactive figure. Her beauty returns temporarily when he comes back (3), but she is then reduced to tears (4, 5, 9) and gullibility (7). It is only in the tenth verse that the position reverses, with the hero's return in response to her quiet, silent tears. Despite this happy-for-now ending, the dominant theme of the decad is that neither public knowledge nor marriage is a reliable failsafe against betrayal, infidelity, or separation. Lest we miss the point, the fifth verse makes this explicit: the heroine tells us that the hero has left her and her son. In the context of classical Tamil poetry, the presence of the child signals to us that the verse describes a situation postmarriage. Marriage is an unusual topic for the *kuṟiñci* landscape with its ethos of spontaneous, stolen love, and its very presence in this decad, and placed at the center no less, tells us to be sensitive to what it might evoke.

These dense themes flourish in the compact, yet suggestive format of individual verses, which each follow a formula: the opening lines describe the boar—a proxy for the hero—and its relationship to the world it inhabits, while the concluding

lines center on the heroine, her fears, her loneliness, and her all-consuming love for him. One way to approach this dual architecture is to read the verses’ two parts along two parallel trajectories. If we follow the path of the boar, it is the hero’s story—a story of self-awakening and self-understanding. If we stay with the heroine—who significantly does not move—it is a tale of love as loss, and of the futility of domesticating something that is fundamentally wild—be it desire or the hero. Put the two parts together, and we get a series of verses that explore desire-love as it exists in the infinitesimal space between public and private, between union and separation, between loss and recovery.

Much like the rest of the *Collection of Five Hundred Poems*, the “Ten on the Wild Boar” presents a picture of love that is uncomfortable. In “Ten on the Wild Boar,” love emerges as savage, capricious, and disruptive, as both nourishment and illness; it is such love that needs to be both tamed and contained. The wild boar and the millet function not only as surrogates for the hero and the heroine, respectively, but as metaphors for the twinned sides of love. Equally, the *decad* offers a commentary on what happens when a private, secret affair becomes a matter of public knowledge. The answer comes to us in the cycle’s two framing verses and with the two male figures who dominate the heroine’s little world. In the first verse, the speaker (who could be either the heroine or her friend) speculates that the hero stays away because of the father. The word used, *entai*, can be taken to mean either *my/your* father or *our* father—Shulman has chosen to emphasize the latter in his translation. There is no such ambiguity in the *decad*’s final verse, which ends with the phrase: “the one *we* love.” The hero who begins the *decad* owned only by the land to which he belongs is now possessed not just by the heroine and her love, but by all (“we”). As the two verses of the piglets imply, this new possession means not just the care of the heroine and their child (a duty he will fail, as the fifth verse foreshadows), but of her kin. Like the boar, he too is no longer just of the land. And she, a millet perhaps growing untended on the mountain slopes to be rooted out by a foraging boar, is now to be carefully nurtured, harvested, and nourished. Their love, first unbound by desire and lust, and now circumscribed by kinship, is in the final analysis, a thing to be shared. Then, the cycle starts again in some future-past—with him the father and another girl with frozen tears awaiting her lover’s return.

It is certainly possible to read the “Ten on the Wild Boar” as a cohesive whole, bound not just by the motif of the boar, but by the many themes on which it touches, some of which I have explored. Nevertheless, this cohesion is not total. There are fissures as the hero and heroine part (1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 9), reunite (3, 10), marry (5), and elope (8). The poem does not simply take us from separation (1) to union (10), as the *decad*’s framing would suggest, or of a love that transforms easily from private to public. Certainly, we can read this *decad* as a poetry of interruption, one that understands that the shadow of separation always looms over union, just as the promise of union gilds the starkest of separations. Nevertheless, I would

suggest that these breaks within the “Ten on the Wild Boar” are deliberate, drawing our attention to the artificiality of the *Collection of Five Hundred Poems*’ structure, and pointing us to the possibility of a single verse to carry within it the whole of love.

Let us take as an example the eighth verse in this decad. In the first half, the boar cares for an orphaned piglet as they feed on millet. In the second half, the speaker wonders if the hero can be trusted—will he leave us behind? The verse is rich with possibility, even without the cumulative power that gathers around the boar or the millet. Taken on its own terms as an autonomous entity, the poem is not about the domestication of desire, about a private love that has become public. Instead, it is a quintessential *kuriñci* poem, about a dangerous, secret, stolen love. Their love therefore still remains theirs alone. Yet it also anticipates that separation always borders union—there is nothing to hold the hero, and the heroine and her friend know that he *will* leave: “What good will come / if he goes away, leaving us / behind?” Here is a verse that condenses the curious circular spatial-temporality of the five-landscape scheme into its compact structure and stands as a poem in its own right.

In the *Collection of Five Hundred Poems*, each set of hundred and each cycle of ten within it is a crucible of individual virtuosic poetic ability. Simultaneously, each plays its part through an exponential intertextuality to unfold a story that begins with quarrel in the fields, where the *marutam* flower blossoms, and ends with hilly lands of longing, marked by the jasmine (*mullai*). The *Collection of Five Hundred Poems* approaches this poetic experiment not in mixing landscapes and moods, but in enforcing boundaries, by giving us one hundred verses on each of the landscapes. Yet, it defies, in small ways as we have seen in the “Ten on the Wild Boar,” those very boundaries. The fifth verse of the “Ten on the Wild Boar” nods in this direction, even if it does not violate the grammar of the landscapes; all the flora and fauna are as they should be (hills, boars, piglets, tigers), except the content is not (marriage).

The five landscapes form the bedrock of Tamil classical love poetry that begins in illicit love (*kuriñci*) and ends with the domestication of that love through the public institution of marriage (*marutam*). Thus, part of the trick of reading classical Tamil poetry is having the ability to decipher the clues within a poem—the time of day, the flora and fauna—to determine the particularity of love of which it tries to speak. Seen in this way, poems are self-contained things, hermetically sealed, each its own universe, concerned with commenting on a stage of love—waiting, more waiting, separation, infidelity—and inaccessible to those who cannot speak this special language. Yet, each is also ever echoing both the past and present of love, for a poem about love, private life, and intimacy (*akam*) also participates in an intricate web of storytelling, each landscape building on the other—waiting making way for elopement making way for infidelity making way for the quiet stasis of marital contentment. Poems that breach the boundaries of landscape (called

*tiṇai mayakkam*) suggest that the ancient Tamil poets were not only well aware of this ouroboric character of the poetry they created but actively sought to push the boundaries of what constituted a poem. The *Collection of Five Hundred Poems* may well be the terminal point of these experiments, with its embrace of the improvisational possibilities presented by a bounded landscape and a bounded poem, and the “Ten on the Wild Boar” the pinnacle of that achievement.