

## The Music Contest from Tiruttakkatevar's Tamil *Chivakan's Gem*

### TRANSLATOR'S NOTE AND TEXT

Tiruttakkatevar's tenth-century *Chivakan's Gem* is one of the great Tamil narrative poems. Its hero, Chivakan, known from classical Jain sources in Prakrit, slowly finds his way to liberation via a seemingly endless chain of love affairs. Indeed, this massive tenth-century work is known in Tamil as the "book of weddings," since it tells of the many relationships and marriages of its hero, Chivakan. The present passage describes the bridegroom's contest for the hand of the celestial singer Kantaruvatattai, whose father has sent her to a port city in order to find a husband: whoever succeeds in defeating her at music and song will marry her. Chivakan, a highly accomplished musician, surpasses her by singing a set of three verses in the persona of the beloved's girlfriend, in a somewhat modernized version of the old Sangam style of love poetry. In this older corpus, the companion of the heroine often speaks on her behalf to the distant hero and describes her friend's lonely plight. In this passage, the author of *Chivakan's Gem* follows this convention, but when the bride-to-be replies, she acknowledges her defeat by replying with three verses of her own, in which the beloved speaks in her own voice. These are poems of desperate longing that go beyond the classical template.

THE MUSICAL COMPETITION FROM *CHIVAKAN'S GEM* BY  
TIRUTTAKKATEVAR (722–37)

Famous for his perfection  
in making music, Chivakan lifted his veena  
with its freshly painted golden gourd, its elegant frets  
of coral, its ivory tuning pegs studded with diamonds,  
and flooded the sea-circled world with the tremulous sound

of its strings, fluid as the draught of immortal life,  
sweet as fine honey. (722)

Sound fused into sound as he played, a garland  
of flowers falling from his hair, his fingers coaxing out  
the song. No one could say if he was singing  
or plucking the strings. Gods and people of this world  
fell unconscious, birds and animals became faint,  
trees and stones turned to water, absorbed  
in the opening phrases.<sup>1</sup> (723)

“Need I say  
that when lightning roars in the rain,  
a little snake shivers in fear?  
Need I say  
that she, breasts chafing  
under strings of gold, is sick  
with lightning and with rain? (724)

Need I say  
that when rain pours from clouds  
in the sky, a waterfall rumbles  
on the hill?  
Need I say  
that when she, lovely as shadow,  
sees the waterfall rumbling  
on the hill, her heart  
breaks apart? (725)

Need I say  
that when it rains, jasmine blossoms  
in the forest like stars in the sky?  
Need I say  
that she grieves, her hair flowing  
with honey, when she sees the forest  
in flower?” (726)

His fingers flew along the strings  
with infinite precision as he sang,  
holding fast to the rhythm, and hearing  
this brilliant performance, the gods  
cast away their veenas, the professional musicians  
in heaven could think no more, and all who live  
on earth were bewitched by wonder

that penetrated the hearts of even  
hard-core Yogis. (727)

His veena was graced by a garland, a little rumpled  
by black bees that haunted its flowers and by streaks  
of ivory, and as the prince played its polished strings,  
his fine-pitched voice became one with their resonant tones  
to the astonishment and dismay of the Kinnara singers  
in the skies. (728)

He sang. The very gods were dumbfounded.  
Fierce Vidyadhara sorcerers could only praise him.  
In our world, people were happy. Birds  
forgot their bodies, forgot their own songs.  
The God of Love was put to shame. All the kings  
on earth, hearing the melody, stood still  
as painted portraits. (729)

"Like a hawk and its shadow, the song  
and the veena's notes have come together  
as a rich feast in this Chivakan's playing."  
So she thought, knowing she was  
going to lose to him. Still, lovely  
as a young peahen, her eyes sharp as spears  
tapering like leaves at the tip, she took up  
her veena and, taking her seat, began to play. (730)

She sang as she played, her long hair cascading  
down her back, her earrings and gold palm-leaf jewels  
flashing on her ears, her charming brow stained  
with sweat, her neck turned slightly toward the left.  
She was beautiful beyond compare, her song  
plaintive and sweet. (731)

"Pallid with love are my breasts, covered with jewels  
crafted like leaves, and my brow, a bent bow.  
The waterfall on the hill gleams like a sword.  
Tell me, my sweet-spoken friend: how can *he*  
fail to see? (732)

Pallid with love are my forehead, brilliant  
as the crescent moon, my eyes limned with mascara  
that are always ready to do battle, and my all-too-heavy  
breasts. On the high mountain  
the waterfall that gleams like a sword

flashes like lightning. Tell me now,  
my friend with eyes like spears smeared  
with poison: how can *he* fail to see? (733)

Pallid and bright are my perfect breasts,  
my delicate, dancing arms, my forehead  
like the crescent moon. The waterfall  
teeming with precious stones flashes  
high on the mountain. Now tell me,  
my friend, your words sweet  
as sugarcane: how can *he*  
fail to see?" (734)

But her voice quivered, and her gentle fingers  
couldn't move up and down the smooth strings,  
so the sung melody and the sounds of the veena  
never became one. The song fell, far from heaven.  
She couldn't think. She sat there,  
defeated. (735)

She let the jeweled veena slip from her hands.  
Wounded, trembling, and very embarrassed,  
this wide-eyed queen among women slowly  
and truly lifted up the nuptial garland of gold  
as if straining to lift a mountain, to adorn the prince  
standing before her, his anklets  
engraved with flowers. (736)

Her anklets were ringing softly, and her belt  
was shimmering like lightning as she walked,  
just a little hesitant, but with a grace that would put  
even a graceful goose to shame. Then  
she tossed the garland on her lord as if to say  
to all of us who live in this world that being selfless  
is its own reward. (737)

#### LOVE IN DEFEAT

*Talia Ariav (Near Reader)*

The musical competition between Chivakan and the divine female musician Kantaruvatattai is above all a nontrivial contemplation on love.<sup>2</sup> Love, it seems, is at its most beautiful, and at its most intense, in its asymmetries and moments of loss. More specifically, Kantaruvatattai's defeat, evident to her even before she enters the competition, is a unique take on the Tamil tradition of *akam*. *Akam*, often

translated as “love,” is the theme and title of a major corpus in the canonical collection of classical Tamil poetry (Sangam). As such, *akam* stands for a highly codified poetical language of love in various modes and contexts, classified and debated in the authoritative Tamil grammar and its commentaries. As I demonstrate here, this excerpt from *Chivakan's Gem*, which postdates the classical Sangam corpus by several centuries at least, relies on the *akam* tradition and alters it from within.

One striking feature of the dissonant chord with which the excerpt ends is that it is achieved via the concrete possibility of harmony. Chivakan's performance, in which his song and veena are invisibly connected (like a hawk and its shadow, in the eyes of Kantaruvatattai), is a prelude to, and somehow essential to, her defeat, in which her song and the veena never become one. Chivakan's sound is fluid and sweet, as all beautiful or good things are expected to be in the Tamil world. Quite appropriately, it “flooded the sea-circled world” (722). The solid state of the world as we know it—and of south India in particular—is surrounded by seas, and it can potentially be flooded at any given moment with intense beauty or emotion. It is not by chance that the word for “world” in the Tamil is *akam*: the very word used more commonly for love or in-ness. Chivakan's sounds have the capacity to make the world, which is also the inner state of his listeners and/or of Kantaruvatattai, liquid. This choice of word also suggests that Chivakan's sound literally floods, with its own liquids, the classical world of the *akam* tradition. As we shall see, this is a rather apt description of what Chivakan is doing in his song.

*Chivakan's Gem* is an early and influential Tamil poetical work of vast dimensions, featuring lexical and syntactical experimentation in the novel *viruttam* prosodic pattern. However, the embedded sung stanzas within this excerpt, of three to four verses each, are markedly different in register, meter, and texture from their surroundings, as the translation distinctly shows. Even knowing little about the classical *akam* corpus and its grammar of love, it is possible to identify its intertextual echoes in these songs. First, the most expected figures of an *akam* poem—namely, a hero, a beloved heroine, and the heroine's girlfriend—are present. The commentators suggest that Chivakan assumes the friend's voice when he sings, and in Kantaruvatattai's song this triad is made explicit. Moreover, their songs use loaded vocabulary and imagery from the *akam* tradition, such as rain, hill, waterfall, and jasmine. Such elements, when used in an *akam* poem, correspond with the inner state of the heroine, as they evoke one or more of the five landscapes of love. When using such descriptors, which function as an economical yet richly suggestive mechanism, each classical *akam* poem enfolds a specific and condensed situation between lovers.

Returning to our text, the mention of rain and jasmine immediately place Chivakan's song in the *mullai* (jasmine) landscape of early and painful separation after marriage. This is hardly intuitive, as we are contextually at a moment of promise, occurring right before a wedding. The rain and the jasmine therefore strongly suggest to the informed audience that the moment of marriage already

holds the seed of painful separation. Such a notion resonates well with the *akam* commentarial tradition, which acknowledges that love, at any of its stages, inherently entails a measure of loss or separation. The hill and waterfall, however, which link the songs of the two lovers, appropriately belong in the premarriage landscape of stolen love. Such a mixture of landscapes is not uncommon in the classical *akam* context. Here, however, it sets the stage for further creative use of the old *akam* “grammar of love.”

To begin with, the manner in which these evocative nouns are repeated calls for attention. The rain, the waterfall, and the hill reappear in clear and intensifying patterns throughout these stanzas, so that a usually suggestive and economical evocation of landscape in the *akam* grammar is replaced with deliberate repetition. What is the work doing when Chivakan asks:

Need I say  
that when lightning roars in the rain  
a little snake shivers in fear?  
Need I say  
that she, breasts chafing  
under strings of gold, is sick  
with lightning and with rain? (724)

Chivakan (or the poet Tiruttakkatevar) is quite literally asking if these *akam* clichés are worth repeating. His answer is a resounding yes, and he goes on to demonstrate the creative possibilities that such a strong poetic tradition opens for the poet. Tiruttakkatevar’s repetitions do not cancel out the content of the condensed evocation, but rather add to it and dramatically alter its effect. The evocative rain of painful separation becomes, increasingly, an actual rain that thickens the pain in question and a recurring sound that makes us listen to the music accompanying the words.

This repetition also creates a governing sense of associative connections, which resist a closed set of metaphors. In the verse quoted here, it is suggested that the suffering heroine is the little shivering snake. However, the repetition of the rain and thunder disturb this suggestion, as her breasts, with their strings of gold, bring to mind clouds and thunder. The heroine is sick because of the lightning, but she is also somehow the lightning itself, perhaps implying that Chivakan, when he speaks in the voice of her friend, is also suffering like the little shivering snake. These semantic loopholes should not be overstated. Rather, the repetition creates the sense of constant movement between images. It poses a demand for constant reflection and revision, which contribute to an effect of subtle and dynamic emotions.

As Chivakan’s song evolves, the structure of repetition marks a shift to Kantaruvatattai’s point of view:

Need I say  
that when rain pours from clouds

in the sky, a waterfall rumbles  
 on the hill?  
 Need I say  
 that when she, lovely as shadow,  
 sees the waterfall rumbling  
 on the hill, her heart  
 breaks apart? (725)

The waterfall on the hill is first a result of the rain, and then repeated as the object of Kantaruvatattai's perception, which in turn causes her heartbreak. This repetition, even more emphatic in the Tamil, weaves the traditionally minimalist and suggestive force of a waterfall, in terms of an *akam* vocabulary, into a different aesthetic that includes naturalistic causality and explicit psychological dimensions. It also poses an articulate question of perspective, as Kantaruvatattai simultaneously sees the waterfall, and is herself seen by Chivakan, to be "lovely as shadow" (725). The irony is hard to miss: Chivakan sings in the female friend's voice, asking himself to see what she (Kantaruvatattai) sees. Note, in this regard, that this is all framed as a stanza within the text, with an archaic flavor of the *akam* conventions. Structurally, the use of a marked register of *akam* within a work from the tenth century makes for very apt grounds (some may say, the sine qua non condition) for irony to take place. By saying very little, and in a subtly ironic tone, the poet is effectively asking the following nontrivial questions: Can a lover see his beloved? Does seeing the beloved amount to seeing the world through her eyes? And, can a (renewed) grammar of love enable him to see?

Interestingly, Chivakan wins the competition while these questions remain very much open. Winning, it seems, is not very conducive to an intimate knowledge of love. The conventions of the *akam* dialogue allow for these structural asymmetries, in which Chivakan playfully sings in the girlfriend's voice, while Kantaruvatattai answers very openly in her own voice. Kantaruvatattai sings again and again the very question that Chivakan left open: can he see? It could very well be her predetermined defeat that allows for her lucid description of his shortsighted glance. The artist's failure, rather than his or her success, conveys the most penetrating insight about love. Within this extract describing artists at their performance, this readily reads as a striking metapoetic statement.

Kantaruvatattai's song, even more intensely than Chivakan's, is governed by repetitions, such that the three verses are slight paraphrases of each other. One is tempted to read something of a repetition compulsion into her song, as her few looping sentences brilliantly communicate her pain. In any case, all three verses return to the waterfall on the hill. It is an *akam* footprint, as described earlier, and a strong statement of her condition in which the waterfall tortures her like a sword. It is also a reference to Chivakan's song, paraphrasing what he stated, in the voice of her friend, to be the content of her glance. Her song, then, affirms and elaborates on his observations, but also implies that his very song is a torturing

sword to her. If we take the dialogical situation in these verses seriously, this is only reasonable. His song was quite clear about his inability to see her; her song mourns this fact, tries to make him see her with elaborate descriptions of her beauty, and explicitly asks over and over again if he really cannot see.

As Kantaruvatattai performs her preordained failure, she asks her reverberating question, which sums up the inherent separation involved in love. To put it plainly, even in the most intimate of situations, there is never a true unity of perspective, and misperceptions of one another are bound to happen. The description of her failure, in which the song and the veena never become one, quite literally corresponds to the content of her lament. Love, the passage suggests, is not about becoming one. Only her condition of loss reveals this inner truth, which, as we have seen, must first be staged in an idyllic language of perfect accord. This accord, however, is produced by a man who cannot see. Of the two, Kantaruvatattai is the true artist who fails and therefore sees.

By way of conclusion, I should briefly mention that Tiruttakkatevar, the author of this text, is a self-professed Jain monk. The framework of the entire *Chivakan's Gem*, which follows that of various Jain Prakrit sources, supports a Jain philosophy of life. Chivakan, the serial groom, eventually marries Mukti, or Freedom, and renounces the world and its bodily pleasures. One question, then, is how does the extensive presence of erotic love, which makes for most of this vast work, support its Jain conclusion. If one were to seek cohesion between the erotic content of the work and its strong "Jain" framework, it is perhaps the attentive reflection on modes and conditions of seeing and feeling in the world, not of indifference to it, that somehow prepare the ground for the radical conclusion of renunciation.

It might, however, be altogether wrong to read this work through the lens of its renunciatory conclusion. The author of *Chivakan's Gem* is clearly invested in the poetics and dynamics of erotic love, and his work is a massive poetic endeavor that includes different elements and tensions. The excerpt discussed shows that, among other things, the poet is purposefully reusing the authoritative and nonsectarian Tamil grammar of love. In doing so, he is broadening that grammar to include a series of meditations on the noncoincidental relationship of love and defeat, and on the role of defeat in both a lover's and an artist's ability to see.

#### SWEETNESS THAT MELTS THE HEART

##### *Kesavan Veluthat (Far Reader)*

Indian aesthetics, particularly in Sanskrit, has always considered love as the "king of sentiments." Anandavardhana, a ninth-century literary theorist writing in Sanskrit, has gone to the extent of saying that reading about love in literature can cause the utmost pleasure. For Anandavardhana, reading about love can also render a reader's heart tender. Commenting on Anandavardhana about a century later, Abhinavagupta, another prominent literary theorist, says that love "melts the



heart of a reader in every way." What we have in the passages from *Chivakan's Gem* is exactly that—an occasion for love to melt a reader's heart. The whole work in general and these passages in particular carry us to an ethereal world where it is all sweetness and where we find our hearts melting.

*Chivakan's Gem* follows the adventures of a prince, Chivakan, who wants to avenge the murder of his father. In the course of his wanderings, Chivakan encounters and marries many beautiful women, so much so that the poem has been called "the book of marriages." The passages at hand are from the third canto and are about a music contest between the daughter of the king of celestial musicians (known as *Vidyādhara*s), Kantaruvatattai, who vowed only to marry a man who could defeat her in a music contest.

The contest begins. Chivakan lifts his veena, its golden gourd painted freshly, its elegant frets of coral, its ivory tuning pegs studded with diamonds. Note carefully what happens. The tremulous sound of the strings floods the sea-circled world with music—a music that is pictured as "fluid as the draught of immortal life, / sweet like fine honey" (722). It is the string of the veena (the word for "string" in Tamil also means "vein" or "nerve") that the musician touches; the music it produces is meant to go straight to your heart. Without our knowing it, we are drawn into the audience, alerted to the need to expect something out of the ordinary, something between fine honey and the nectar of immortality.

The performance proceeds. Sound fuses into sound, a garland of flowers falls from the musician's hair, celestial and terrestrial beings fall unconscious, birds and animals faint, trees and stones melt, all are absorbed in these opening notes. We in the audience are included in this process of utmost absorption.

Then follow three verses in which Chivakan sings in the voice of the girlfriend, one of the typical personas of this poetry. Usually in poetry of this type, the girlfriend addresses the male protagonist, urging him to show pity on her friend, but in this case the protagonist may be Chivakan himself. Nothing is said explicitly; the friend couches what she wants to say somewhat elliptically, if not allegorically. She tells the hero "that she, breasts chafing / under strings of gold, that she is sick / with lightening and with rain," like a little maiden snake shivering in fear "when lightening roars in the rain" (724). It is only natural to expect snake-like qualities in the princess of the celestial musicians: haughty, fearsome, and probably also venomous. But it is rather sweetness, beauty, and sacredness (serpents are the objects of worship in South Asia) that make the little snake attractive. The princess is attractive for the same reasons: she is tender and sweet, and she is even worthy of worship. By invoking the image of a maiden snake, all possible qualities of the heroine are hinted at: she is no ordinary person, she inspires awe; but she is also tender and lovable.

Equally suggestive is when the girlfriend, still in Chivakan's song, tells the hero that her mistress's heart breaks apart when she looks at the waterfall rumbling on the hill, a waterfall that increases in size and intensity in the rains. The friend

also tells him that her mistress, hair sweet as honey, grieves when she looks at jasmine blossoming in the forest during the rainy season, “like stars in the sky” (726). The message is as clear as the medium is beautiful. Perspicuity and sweetness come together and so do her condition of loneliness and the lushness of the monsoon. No wonder “her heart / breaks apart” (725).

The performance continues. The precision with which Chivakan sings, the dexterity with which his fingers move along the strings, and the impeccable rhythm in which he does it all are hard to miss. Veenas drop from the hands of the gods, the celestial musicians are at a loss, and those who inhabit our world are bewitched by wonder. The effect penetrates “the hearts of even / hard-core yogis” (727). The last part is significant: the yogis are said to be devoid of any emotion.

It goes on. Chivakan plays the polished strings of the veena, a veena graced by a bee-haunted garland and decorated with ivory, and his fine-pitched voice becomes one with its resonant tones. The celestial male singers in the sky are at once astonished and dismayed. The very gods are dumbfounded. “Fierce Vidyadhara sorcerers could only praise him.” People on earth are happy. Birds forget their bodies, forget their own songs. “The God of Love [is] put to shame” (729). All the kings on earth, upon hearing the melody, stand still as if painted in portraits. The music of Chivakan freezes its audience, including us, the readers, into a picture-like stillness.

What follows in the next two verses, which actually constitute a single song, is what could be expected. Once the song and the veena’s notes have come together as a rich feast in Chivakan’s playing, Kantaruvatattai realizes that she is losing the contest. His song and the music are “like a hawk and its shadow” (730). The simile is interesting. On the face of it, it may seem that this is not the most appropriate of comparisons. But look at it more closely. A hawk sets its eyes intently on the ground, on what it aims at, as it soars higher and higher in the sky. As it closes in, its prey coming within its reach, the prey is covered by the hawk’s shadow. The coming together of the hunter, his shadow, and the game indicates an imminent union. The notes on Chivakan’s veena and the lyrics of his vocal performance are now so perfectly blended that he has almost had Kantaruvatattai. And she was becoming aware of it.

Here is a situation where the two contestants are nearly matched. It is an apparent paradox that the daughter of the king of celestial musicians has to lose the musical contest—in fact, wants to lose it—if she is to win the hero. At the same time, she is too proud to give in so easily. She does not want to be a walkover, as it were. She has no time to lose. “Lovely / as a young peahen, her eyes sharp as spears / tapering like leaves at the tip” (730), she takes her seat, veena in hands, and begins to play and sing. As she sings and plays, her long hair cascades down her back, her earrings and gold palm-leaf jewels flash on her ears, and “her delicious brow stained / with sweat” (731). Her neck bends slightly toward the left. She is beautiful beyond compare, her song plaintive and sweet. While his song and the notes on his

veena are compared to a hawk and its shadow, she is like a peahen, her eyes sharp as spears and tapering like leaves at the tip. The chain of imagery is complete, and the poet gives indications as to where we are headed. She knows she is losing; but she succeeds in turning her loss into a gain.

Her song is contained in the next three verses. Here it is the heroine who does the talking, responding to her friend, with the hope that the hero will overhear the conversation. It may sound as if she cannot wait anymore. She is eager to lose, albeit after putting up a fight. She asks her friend:

"Pallid with love are my breasts, covered with jewels  
crafted like leaves, and my brow, a bent bow.  
The waterfall on the hill gleams like a sword.  
Tell me, my sweet-spoken friend: how can *he*  
fail to see? (732)

Pallid with love are my forehead, brilliant  
as the crescent moon, my eyes limned with mascara  
that are always ready to do battle, and my all-too-heavy  
breasts. On the high mountain  
the waterfall that gleams like a sword  
flashes like lightning. Tell me now,  
my friend with eyes like spears smeared  
with poison: how can *he* fail to see? (733)

Pallid and bright are my perfect breasts,  
my delicate, dancing arms, my forehead  
like the crescent moon. The waterfall  
teeming with precious stones flashes  
high on the mountain. Now tell me,  
my friend, your words sweet  
as sugarcane: how can *he*  
fail to see?" (734)

The contest is over and Kantaruvatattai has both lost and won. Her voice quivers; her gentle fingers cannot move up and down the smooth strings anymore. The sung melody and the sounds of the veena do not resonate; they fail to become one. The song falls, but not from heaven. She is simply not able to think. She sits there, defeated. She has accepted her defeat, but she has done it triumphantly. She lets the jeweled veena slip from her hands. She is wounded. She is trembling, and embarrassed out of shyness. "This wide-eyed queen among women slowly / and truly lifts up the nuptial garland of gold / as if straining to lift a mountain" and adorns the prince standing before her, "his anklets / engraved with flowers" (736). We see the shyness of a bride who is marrying the person she wanted even at the cost of her own pride. The complex emotions are brought out very effectively by the choice of words here. Her anklets ring softly, "and her belt / was shimmering like lightning as she walked, / just a little hesitant, but with a grace

that would put / even a graceful goose to shame" (737). Then she tosses the garland on her lord as if to tell the audience, those of us who have been drawn into them and all of us who live in this world, that being selfless is its own reward.

Two things stand out. First and foremost, there is the conflict of emotions. Born as a celestial princess, Kantaruvatattai is an accomplished musician in her own right. It is unthinkable for such a person to lose a musical contest, much less to an ordinary human. At the same time, she had fallen in love with this prince of the human world, who had put "the God of Love to shame." By losing the contest, she wins him. The feelings of being wounded, embarrassment, shyness, the trembling—all show this very effectively. In the case of the much-married Chivakan, this is only one of his many conquests. A perfectionist in the art of music, he wins a contest and a bride.

Let's not forget how the narrative unfolded. The perfect performance by Chivakan, the one that wins the praises of heaven and of the entire world, comes first. Kantaruvatattai's accomplished but imperfect recital comes second, so that the competition ends not with the exclamation mark of victory but with the more complex and ambivalent response of the loser. True, the loss is a triumph of sorts, but the narrative structure may also hint at the gender inequality built into it and at the cost with which Kantaruvatattai's "success" comes. And where are we in all of this: Do our hearts melt completely in the sweetness of the performances and the success in matchmaking? Are we happy for Chivakan? Or maybe we feel more for Kantaruvatattai than for the hero? Such questions lead to metapoetic lessons for us as readers of translation, if we take the passage allegorically: Chivakan's performance may stand for the text in its original language, but it is Kantaruvatattai that stands for the translation before us. The latter is imperfect, perhaps, like any translation, but it is imbued with added complexity and richness of emotion. It may be that it is in response to this richness that our hearts finally melt.

## WHAT'S GAINED IN TRANSLATION

*Sonam Kachru (Far Reader)*

*]prosperous  
]to listen  
]*

SAPPHO, FRAGMENT 85A

No doubt, you've heard tell of what's lost in translation. But in the best of times, there is something gained as well. If, that is, the translator has listened. Really listened. And if the translator allows us to listen in.

I think that the poem in translation before us can be heard making the necessary cognitive room. I think that the poem can also help us feel how it is that listening can change us.

Some might say it's there in the opening. Chivakan, who you will recall was "famous for his perfection / in making music" (722), lifts up his veena, and

Sound fused into sound as he played . . .  
 . . . No one could say if he was singing  
 or plucking the strings. Gods and people of this world  
 fell unconscious, birds and animals became faint,  
 trees and stones turned to water, absorbed  
 in the opening phrases. (723)

What we're told is that sense and sound can fuse in a consuming, absorbing perfection. The effect is a translation of a kind, an "absorption" of one variety of thing into another. Music, here, one might say, is a figuration of the limits of language used poetically. It's as if music can change the fabric of the world, changing us with it.

More than human, these are intimations of a very different mode of being. Chivakan's song is said to be "fluid as the draught of immortal life" (722). What's intimated here is the stuff of immortality, or, perhaps more precisely, a state of being not bound up with the passage of time and the consciousness of differences as is our ordinary, linguistically inflected experience. It is made real for those in the poem in the experience of sounds: the world, for a while, and its inhabitants, lose their edges, and their place.

Allow me to pause here and take a step back from the poem. As I read this, I can't but be put in mind of the thought that the fusion of sound with sound is a more visceral and a more embodied vector for the kind of cognitive absorption some traditions of Indian asceticism have long valorized, and for which metaphors of dissolving, melting, and even fusing have sometimes been used. The absorbing perfection of music, however, does not come from insulating the inside *from* external influence. Like desire, this is a wonder that seems to get *into you*, working on you inside out, a wonder "that penetrate[s] the hearts of even / hard-core Yogis" (727).

The blurring of the boundaries between sense and sound at the level of the production of music is crucial to the absorbing effect: "No one could say if he was singing / or plucking the strings" (723). The veena, mind you, can be played so as to conjure up a human voice; and voice, in song, may be modulated to suggest our sonorous and not our speaking parts. Perhaps you will be reminded of folktales where instruments speak. If you are anything like me, you might recall lessons learnt as a child from instructors in music. "Do not forget," intones the voice in my memory, "that the texts say that the human body is itself an exemplary variety of instrument. Your body is a corporeal veena." And the discipline necessary to realize ourselves in art, some of us were told, even counts as a way to freedom.

Listening, too, can change you. Let's return to the poem before us. The metamorphosis here of a person into its reverberating if unconscious parts is not given

to the singer alone to experience. It changes those who hear it. And such a metamorphosis results in a kind of attention that is close to unconsciousness:

He sang. The very gods were dumbfounded . . .  
 Birds  
 forgot their bodies, forgot their own songs.  
 The God of Love was put to shame. All the kings  
 on earth, hearing the melody, stood still  
 as painted portraits. (729)

Such listening, a variety of connection deeper even than corporeal, animating desire, can make us altogether strange.

Strong stuff, admittedly. But I have in mind a different variety of change to recommend to you. The invocation of music as a figure for the limits of poetry is altogether too much of a perfection. It invokes, in fact, precisely the variety of intimate familiarity of sound and sense that is most likely to put you in mind of what is altogether lost in translation. Forget the music, if you can. Listen to the voices.

The invocation of consuming perfection in the poem is interlaced with a far more intimate drama, one that is better suited to being enacted and not only invoked in translation. To hear it, we must allow ourselves to listen in a particular way to two set-pieces, each involving a triangulation. In the first, the heroine's girlfriend speaks to the hero, the lover, about the heroine, the beloved (724–726); in the second, the heroine, or beloved, speaks to her girlfriend, an address that, in principle, is capable of being overheard by the hero or lover (732–734).

I recommend reading these verses as you would a script in a play, whether silently, or out loud. You might try modulating your own voice to capture the different personae, the changing addressees, and the presence of the silent “third” party in each set piece. Notice the way in which who falls silent, and who is in a position to overhear themselves talked about, changes. You might even assign the speaking and silent parts to *actual bodies in the room*, the better to feel the weight of the silent, overhearing witnesses, and the possibilities for dramatic shifts in meaning.

Let's begin with the idea of change. Try reading the following without letting the overpowering displays of poetic power crowd out the scale of human response and sympathetic connection:

Need I say  
 That when lightning roars in the rain,  
 a little snake shivers in fear? (724)

To make room for a shiver, we will have to modulate ourselves, attuning our attention to different scales of concern. But go on,

Need I say  
 that she, breasts chafing

under strings of gold, is sick  
with lightning and with rain? (724)

Did you hear it? There is a transition here, even stranger, I feel, than the blatant metamorphoses we have been given to hear in the figuration of music and its overpowering effect on us. But it is far subtler. If sick with the majesty of roaring lightning and rain you might not hear it. Where there was a little snake, and a barely perceptible shudder, now a very different body heaves, or writhes, or moves, under strings of (serpentine?) gold. The change is one effected in the degree to which imagination can direct our perceptual awareness, a change in the intensity and the scope of how we bring the world under a description.

Such a change seems to me to be different than any connection in transition elicited by the sound of roaring lightning and the shiver of the snake. That is a movement of correlation, lifted up from the prosaic by that marvelous adjective, "little." But what comes next is invention and not description. You could say that to move from the snake to the breast moving from out under the strings of gold is a trope, a swerve in speech and perception. You could say that this involves a change in consciousness. Call it what you will. If you haven't felt it now, you'll surely feel it when you go on to say,

Need I say  
That when rain pours from clouds  
in the sky, a waterfall rumbles  
on the hill?  
Need I say  
that when she, lovely as a shadow,  
sees the waterfall rumbling  
on the hill, her heart  
breaks apart? (725)

The girlfriend is teaching you, the reader, how to listen to voices in poetry. This looks like a sequence. But yet again correlation (the waterfall after the rain) gives way to something that does not quite follow in the same way that a waterfall does rain. The girlfriend has put the witness back into nature, a consciousness, precarious and lovely as a shadow, capable of being changed by what it sees: "her heart / breaks apart"; unlike the rocks on the hill down which the water rumbles?

Something happens as the water moves from the sky to the earth, down the rocks of the hill and then through the mind of a particular kind of person. *There*—that's the precarious stage, and that's the intimate change I would like for us to hear. Note again how this drama is played out against the backdrop of awesome sounds that threaten to crowd out your mind. The roaring and the rumbling, I ask you now, to consider echoes of the absorbing perfection of music. These I hear as competing figures for power. What you must listen for, instead, is the sometimes softly spoken drama, one where the fragility of meaning and acknowledgment is staged in overheard conversations.

Consider the triangle made by the speaker, the listener, and the alternatively present and absent addressee for whom what is said is really meant. Music is a perfection of consummation. The play of voice, and what is meant by what we say, is a felicity of being in-between. Are our words heard? Do our meanings reach their intended target?

And being conscious of this, saying what you want heard while seized by this tense inbetweenness, can change you. As it does the heroine, “whose song,” after speech, “fell far from heaven. / She couldn’t think” (735).

Did *we* fail to see it? Listen to the change that occurs between these lines

and my brow, a bent bow.	On the high mountain
The waterfall on the hill gleams like a sword.	the waterfall that gleams like a sword
Tell me, my sweet-spoken friend: how can <i>he</i>	flashes like lightning. Tell me now,
fail to see? (732)	my friend with eyes like spears
	smeared with poison: how can <i>he</i> fail
	to see? (733)

When I first read the heroine’s words, all too quickly, I am ashamed to say that I did not catch the flash of change: not the lightning; not the poison; not the accelerating shift in tone and stance. Rereading, slowing down, it now feels to me as if a sword has been unsheathed, as if one has talked oneself into readiness for war (“with eyes like spears smeared with poison”). You will need to try enacting this in different ways, even try to modulate your breathing, and play with your sense of dramatic timing if you are to do justice to the accommodation the speaker appears to reach. Take a deep breath before continuing:

The waterfall  
teeming with precious stones flashes  
high on the mountain. Now tell me,  
my friend, your words sweet  
as sugarcane: how can *he*  
fail to see? (734)

The *gleam* of the waterfall in verses 732 and 733 is a play of surfaces. The flashing light now comes from the interplay of surface and depths, from reflections of what we now see revealed under the surface. As we speak, listening to what we say, more of ourselves, or new possibilities that we might yet have be true of us, is available to be seen. Is “see” the right word here?

Consider again the two complementary refrains of the two set pieces: *Need I say?* (724–726). *How can he fail to see?* (732–734). What does poetry ever need to say? What does it ever bring into view that we might otherwise fail to acknowledge? This is a question facing all of us experiencing poems, and all of us experiencing poems in translation. “Seeing” is a figure of speech for the experience of the bone-deep alchemy initiated by poetry at its best, and the expectation of acknowledgment that moves so many of us, so often, to speak. We speak at times because we



wish to be seen by another, even if so often all that happens is that we speak, and listening to ourselves, we change, so coming to see ourselves anew.

Translation, the untwinning of sound and sense in one language, and the search for a new familiarity, a new relationship of sound and sense, in another, is a variety of triangulation, a variety of being in between. It is no less a site of possible change, of new possibilities for voice and self-consciousness. Possibly, it is a variety of unconsummated love. To experience it, you have only to allow yourself to form part of this triangle, allowing yourself full consciousness of the fragility of the sense of these words, and all that goes into making a voice, as they make their way from one world to another. (I'll allow you, so to speak, to construct your own triangles, each with their own possible apexes, each potentially changing the way in which you experience reading the poem.)

You have to be willing to experiment: to try and realize these voices as potentially your own, with their meanings coming to inform your possible experiences. Again, the criteria for success here is not that of consummation. It shall perhaps never be as it is with a hawk and its shadow (730). These words, and their meanings, will, perhaps, never be entirely your own. And perhaps these voices will only ever remain parts that you might play. The mere possibility of changing by listening in is everything.

To be sure, realizing such possibilities involves of us a kind of renunciation. And that is, "as if to say / to all of us who live in this world that being selfless / is its own reward" (737). We read translations not to learn about another world. We read to see as much as we can of who we might be, could we but momentarily overlook who we are.

What has reading this translation with me allowed you momentarily to forget?

Perhaps you have even, however briefly, forgotten that there is an "original" for what you have read? Such forgetting, in small doses, can act as an antidote for the nostalgia that too often accompanies our reading of translations. All of us are at times too quick to become attached to our presumptive sense of our place in this world, and our feel for the too-settled place of everything else in it. We are too quick to feel for our attachments what some among us feel for their place of birth. What the translator, and the enjoyer of translations, must work from is a contrary conviction: what will set us free is the unsettling wisdom that we might none of us be at home. Not yet.