

## Person & Place

The waves break

In eternal call to the pohutukawas  
Two redbills flap down  
In their dive  
Dürer's passions large & small

Having sent all scrambling back to shore  
The sea thunders in  
Digging holes in the sand  
Like turtles about to lay eggs

This could be the very spot  
Taurere!  
Where the great canoe Aotea  
Beached one stormy night  
These the shores  
Where the historic gift  
Of Hawaiki kumara took place  
& the gift of the karaka berries  
From Turanga to Parehuia

Alas, this is also an accursed shore  
Where pohutukawas shed their shame  
All along the running beach  
Sad the maiden who sees her father  
Slain at the hands of her lover  
& her lover slain in weary battle  
So far from home

Somewhere in the Ruahini ranges

*Te Abu ki Turangaimua*

Marks the spot he fell

*He hono tangata e koro e mohi*

Somewhere ...

In the virtual reality of Taurere

There's a gnarled karaka tree

From its branches hang

The whitened bones of Parehuia

She looks up

The starless sky

Stars do not die

The everchanging forms

Of dust & gas swirl

Take abode in one body

Then take off again

Atoms like troubadours

Take their stories

From body to body

*Affirming the ties*

*Between person e' place*

## In Medias Res

In tumbled sport the sea collects  
stories from shore to shore  
drawing in with a kiss  
running out with the tide

It's on these mythic shores  
she chose to make her home  
*..... a vagrant, a player  
who holds nothing & whom nothing holds  
granted only, by a questionable sea,  
to gaze at the land of (her) choice*

Here, Sargon of Akkad  
here, Horus, here Moses, here Karna  
all set adrift by their mothers in waters  
laden with the world's stories

This could also be the shore  
the boats set sail to drop triangular cakes  
for fish to nibble

Ch'u Yuan's leaping fish hum softly  
flaunting tensions distributing seeds  
of *die gestundetete*

The ancient & the now walk in step  
the past collapsing over the present  
*I wait & wait till you  
blow my mate to me*

Kannaki stands in the shadows  
Kovalan & Matavi exchange verses  
on the enigma of clause embedded love  
their delirious tongues fly across  
the open wound of a cleft breast

Ilanko floats up

With bloated indignant eyeball  
commands a proper telling  
of the moral (sting?) in the tale

*(articulation is but a plank  
over the abyss)*

## Tradition & the Poet II

Re: A 5<sup>th</sup> Century Epic of South India

(Making Free With Parthasarathy's 1993 Translation)

Great literature knows  
Love may require one to bury  
The Beloved's head in a pot of basil  
That love knows no narrative  
But that of double-speak

*The sliding word dances  
dissolves and rematerializes  
to describe this region  
of otherness and desire*

It's the first day of Spring  
The full moon is in Virago  
The resplendent city of Puhar  
Wakes to its annual Festival of Indra  
Streets begin to overflow  
With princes, royal councilors,  
Courtiers, noble merchants,  
Horsemen, charioteers

King Muchukuntan of Chola dynasty  
Bears in procession the auspicious drum  
To the Temple of the White Elephant  
Oboes, harps, tambourines  
Chants of priests and bards fill the air

A lone woman dressed in her maid's clothes  
And a veil over her face emerges  
From a mansion in the boulevard  
Where merchant princes dwell

*She is Lakshmi herself goddess  
Of peerless beauty that rose from the lotus  
And chaste as the immaculate Arundhati*

Kannaki walks rapidly past homes  
Of brahmins and landed gentry  
Physicians, astrologers and astronomers  
Great musicians, bards and panegyrists  
Till she comes to the street of dancers  
Actresses and courtesans

She looks up  
At the gaily festooned balconies  
Which was Matavi's?  
Matavi whose mastery of five types  
Of literary Tamil, four melodic patterns  
And eleven kinds of dance by age twelve  
Captivated everyone

*...In the bedroom  
Matavi's couch was sown with homegrown  
Mullai petals, musk jasmine  
...Undone was her red  
Coral girdle that blazed over her mound  
Of love, and the fine garment unwound  
From her waist*

...In the shadows  
Kannaki sheds bitter tears  
*Annihilate but time and space*  
Erase that infamous dance  
That mesmerized Kovalan!

Festival revellers draw near  
Young women with painted breasts flee  
Half heartedly from broad-chested young men  
Perfumed with sandal paste

It was thus Indra's Festival ends  
With dances, masquerades and amorous  
Encounters

    On the beach  
Matavi's servants would erect  
The love pavilion for the night's revels  
On fine sand a small enclosure  
Planted with fragrant pandanus

Perhaps they're there now  
Matavi enchanting Kovalan  
With her siren songs  
Unbearable thought!

Kannaki hurries back  
The way she came  
(Poetic licence, my dear readers  
    Kannaki never did roam far from home  
    God forbid!)

As she enters her home  
Kannaki is startled  
By the grief-stricken face  
Of long absent Kovalan  
He folds her in his arms  
And weeps for forgiveness  
Has he come to stay? she asks  
No! they're to leave tonight for Maturai  
To redeem his honour and lost fortune

Is there anything left? he asks  
Only the anklets on her feet, she replies  
That'll do, let's away, he urges  
Where's Matavi?  
This, Kannaki does not ask

Nor does Kovalan narrate  
His dramatic exit from  
The pavilion on the sand  
His footprints washed away  
By the *counter-signing* sea  
(a parting much celebrated  
in verse and drama)

Thus Kovalan returns  
His years of neglect forgiven  
And we're told  
*even the gods adore her  
who adores no god  
but her husband*

Readers, time and fiction  
Take their customary leap  
We're now in Maturai  
Capital city of Pantiya kingdom

And here the denouement gathers speed  
Ilanko's *deus ex machina*, the royal goldsmith  
Pins his theft of the Queen's anklet  
On Kovalan

The King  
Commands the culprit's death  
and it's done!

When the news reaches Kannaki

*A female Prometheus*

(says Parthasarathy)

Bursts forth

(a scene even more celebrated  
in verse, drama and film)

*Hoy, door keeper! Hoy, watchman! Hoy palace guards  
Of an irresponsible ruler whose vile heart lightly casts  
Aside the kingly duty of rendering justice! Go! Tell  
How a woman, a widow, carrying a single ankle  
Bracelet from a pair that once joyfully rang together,  
Waits at the gate. Go! Announce me!*

Admitted to the royal presence  
Kannaki smashes to bits her anklet  
Rubies and diamonds scatter  
In eight directions

Kovalan is not the thief  
The Queen's anklet being inlaid  
With pearls!

The King clutches his heart  
Falls & dies  
*...even Kings, if they break  
The laws, have their necks rung by dharma*

Kannaki is not so easily appeased  
She rushes out of the palace  
Beating her breast wailing vengeance  
On the city of Maturai