

Women's Wisdom Through Ages

Translated by R. Parthasarathy

This selection comprises poems in Tamil, Sanskrit, Pali and Hindi by fifteen women poets over a span of a thousand years. The Pali *Therigatha* ("The Songs of the Elder Nuns," 6th century BCE) is the earliest collection of women's religious verse that we know of. It comprises seventy-three poems that were written down sometime in the first century BCE in Sri Lanka. Vimala was a former courtesan of Vesali, who after her initiation into the Buddhist order of nuns realized the impermanence of all things and was on her way to enlightenment. Her poem is an extraordinary spiritual testament.

The earliest Tamil poetry goes back to a period between 100 BCE and 250 CE, and it is found in numerous anthologies that were later gathered together in two great collections, the *Ettuttokai* ("The Eight Anthologies") and the *Pattuppattu* ("The Ten Long Poems"). They comprise 2,381 poems that are ascribed to 473 poets, including thirty women poets, of whom the best known was Auvaiyar. The nine Tamil poems in this selection are from three of the eight anthologies, namely the *Akananuru* ("The Four Hundred Love Songs"), the *Kuruntokai* ("An Anthology of Short Poems"), and the *Purananuru* ("The Four Hundred Heroic Songs").

The four Sanskrit poems are from the *Amarusataka* ("Amaru's One Hundred Poems," 7th century CE) and the *Subhasitaratnakosa* ("The Classic Anthology of Fine Verses," 11th century CE). Vidya (between 650-850 CE), whom the critic Rajasekhara (9th-10th centuries) praised as the "Kannada goddess of speech," was the best known of the Sanskrit women poets.

Mira's poem from *Mirabai ki Padavali* ("Mirabai's Songbook," 16th century) is a textbook example of *viraha-bhakti*, the devotee's agony at being separated from God.

Of the poets themselves we know nothing apart from their names, but their poems continue to speak to us with a freshness and immediacy that is nothing short of a miracle. Pali, Tamil, Sanskrit and Hindi have a rich oral tradition. The poems were composed to be *heard*. Indians did not only read with their eyes but also aloud, and it follows that the sound of a poem is supremely important. I have tried to keep the auditory dimension of the poems in mind while translating. A successful translation reproduces as many aspects or elements of the original without doing violence to its sense of wholeness. It is naive to expect that everything that is present in the original text will show up in the translation. We now accept the fact that translation inevitably results in some kind of loss. The loss is real, and two factors contribute to it: 1) the differences between cultures that are sometimes insurmountable; 2) the absence of a one-to-one correspondence between languages. Culture-specific elements such as symbols, for instance, are the hardest to translate because they have no equivalents in other cultures. Hard to translate, again, are linguistic elements such as idioms and rhetorical devices, that are unique to a language. Underneath the English translations, I hope, the Pali, Tamil, Sanskrit and Hindi poems can be heard loud and clear.

Tongues of Fire

*Young and overbearing—
drunk with fame, beauty,
with my figure, its flawless appearance—
I despised other women.*

*Heavily made up, I leaned
against the brothel door
and flashed my wares. Like a hunter,
I laid my snares to surprise fools.*

*I even taught them a trick or two
as I slipped my clothes off
and bared my secret places.
O how I despised them!*

*Today, head shaved, wrapped
in a single robe, an almswoman,
I move about, or sit at the foot
of a tree, empty of all thoughts.*

*All ties to heaven and earth
I have cut loose forever.
Uprooting every obsession,
I have put out the fires.*

Vimala, Pali / Therigatha 72-76

The Tiger

*Where is your son? you ask,
leaning against the fine pillar of my house.
I don't really know where he is.
This womb that bore him is now a desolate cave
a tiger once prowled about.
Go, look for him on the battlefield.*

Kavarpentu, Tamil / Purananuru 86

Empty Pools

*The sun's fiery disk moves across the sky
like a fire that burns down a forest and leaves
the flowering silk-cotton trees without leaf or bud,
so that they appear like a row of glowing lamps
lit by a jubilant throng of women at the festival of Karttikai.
Even the pools in the forest have gone dry.*

*How I wish he had spent the time with me,
for it would have passed quickly!
How I wish he had run with me on the sand dunes
where the flowering branches hang low,
and the forest stream passes through,
and the fine sand is spread out like a woman's bodice!
His arms could have had what his heart desired:
body drowning in body swept along by love.*

*My innocent eyes, that fill up steadily with tears now
like empty pools brimming with water from springs,
could get over their pain, then, and fall asleep.*

Auvaiyar, Tamil / Akananuru 11

Lament for a Husband Swept Away in a Flood

*Nowhere have I found him, my noble lord,
not at the village festival among the throng of
warriors,
not even among the girls, clasped together, dancing.
I am a dancer. How the glittering conch-shell bangles
around my wrists come loose as I think of him, my lord,
my sole pride and joy, who was a dancer too!*

Atimantiyar, Tamil / Kuruntokai 31

The Battlefield

*On the weak, shriveled arms of the old woman,
the veins stand out; her stomach is gnarled
as a blade of lotus. Unnerved by the fighting,
her son had turned his back on it. So folks whispered.*

*If he had fled in the heat of battle,
she thundered in a rage, these breasts that nursed him
I'll tear to pieces. Sword in hand,
she groped around in the bloodstained field,

turning over one lifeless body
after another. When she found her son
lying prostrate, hacked to death,
she rejoiced more than on the day he was born.*

Kakkaipatiniyar Naccellaiyar, Tamil / Purananuru 278

The Heron

*He said, I am leaving, going away.
And I knew that once again
he was playing games with me.
Get lost. And don't bother coming back,
I snapped at him.*

*But where is he, my lord?
For only he can comfort me.
Tears fill the space between my breasts,
now a vast pond where white heron
with black legs stalk their prey.*

Nannakaiyar, Tamil / Kuruntokai 325

A Tamil Mother Sends Her Only Son into Battle

*Let these thoughts pass from her! Monstrous though it was,
her resolve was in keeping with her ancient lineage!
The day before yesterday, her father knocked down
an elephant on the battlefield and died soon after.
Yesterday, her husband foiled a thick column of warriors
before he was mowed down himself.
And today, when she heard the war drums ringing in herears,
she was choked with longing. Shaking all over,
she put a spear in the hand of her only son,
wound a piece of cloth around him, and rubbed oil
into the topknot of his wild unkempt hair;
and though he was all she had, she told him:
Go! and sent him into battle at once.*

Okkur Macattiyar, Tamil / Purananuru 279

Under the Spreading Laurel Tree

*On shores hugged by the ebb and flow of the ocean,
on sand dunes in the shade of the laurel in bloom,
and in groves alive with birdsong,
we made love, my man and I.*

*Even now my eyes see him and my ears hear him.
Even now my arms glow with pleasure
as we embrace, waste away as we come apart.
Tell me, friend, what does all this mean?*

Venmanippiuti, Tamil / Kuruntokai 299

The Riverbank

*He can't stand well water, the child's father,
refuses to touch it. Would you, neighbor,
keep an eye on the house, alone as I am,
while I slip out for a moment to the riverbank,
overhung with gamboge and spiked with reeds
that may prick my breasts with their sharp, broken stems?*

Vidya, Sanskrit / Subhasitarnakosa 807



The Bed

*The knot gave way, and the skirt clung to my hips
fastened somehow by only the cords
of the unsteady girdle
as my lover approached the bed.*

That's all I know, dear friend.

*Who he was, or who I was, or how we did it
I don't remember even for a moment
once he took me in his arms.*

Vikatanitamba, Sanskrit / Amarusataka 101

The Search

*He couldn't have dug himself into the earth
and vanished, nor risen to the skies,
nor crossed on foot the high seas that stood in his way.
If we track him down in every country,
in one village after another, house by house,
there is no way our lover can give us the slip.*

Vellivitiyar, Tamil / Kuruntokai 130

Heart of Stone

*How our bodies were one before!
Then they grew apart: you the lover,
and I, wretched one, the loved.*

Now, you are the husband, I the wife.

*What else could have made a stone of the heart
but this? A bitter fruit hard to swallow.*

Bhavakadevi, Sanskrit / Subhasitaratnakosa 646

Then and Now

*I lost my virginity to the man
who is now my husband.
These are the same moonlit nights,
and this is the same breeze that floats
down from the Vindhya mountains,
laden with the scent of flowering jasmynes.*

I too am the same woman.

*Yet, how I long with all my heart
for the riverside, overgrown with rushes,
that once knew our wild, joyous lovemaking!*

Silabhatarika, Sanskrit / Subhasitaratnakosa 815

Sand Houses

*I don't care if mother comes to know of it.
Nor do I care if this fine little street,
with its loose tongue, hears of it.
I swear by the god of Pukar of swirling eddies
that nothing really happened except this.
We were splashing about in the sea by the grove,
I and my friends, our garlands swaying,
making toy houses by piling up sand.
And just as we were stretching ourselves for a moment
to get over our fatigue, a man showed up.
The evening light has faded and I am tired.
Girls with delicate arms, lithe as bamboos!
If I had a meal with you, as your guest,
on a soft plantain leaf that is spread out,
and spent the night in your boisterous little village,
would it be all right? he asked.
On seeing him, we lowered our heads
and hid ourselves, and in a pleasant voice, we told him:
This food is no good; it is moist fish that only the poor eat.
Look, someone said, don't you see the boats
pulling in with their tall flapping pennants?
We knocked down our sand houses that instant with
our feet.
And as the rest of the folks were leaving,
he looked at me in the eye and said:
May I also leave, tell me, girl with the pretty face?
I was so overwhelmed that I replied feebly:
Yes, you may. But he stood there,
clutching the staff of his lofty chariot, still gazing at me.
To this day, he appears so to my eye!*

Pontaiy Pacalaiyar, Tamil / Akananuru 110

When Will You Come, Beloved?

*How can I sleep without my Beloved?
Wrenched from his arms how can I survive?
I drown in the flames of love.
Without him my house is dark and unwelcome.

Of what use are lamps in his absence?
Not for me the pleasures of the bed.
I spend my nights sleepless.
Will my Beloved ever come home?

Frogs and peacocks, cuckoos and koels
call out to one another. Lightning thrashes about
in a net of black clouds. Thunder fills me with terror.
In vain I fight back the tears.

Tell me, friends, what shall I do? Where shall I go?
How uproot this pain?
Like a venomous snake, his absence has bitten me:
in wave after wave, my life ebbs away.

Go, bring me the herbs at once.
Who among my friends will return with my Beloved?
You stole her heart, Lord. When will you meet her?
When will you come to talk and laugh with Mira?*

Mira, Hindi / Padavali 2.72

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