

My ornament:
writing women's moving, erotic bodies
across time and space
A novel and exegesis

Volume 1: The Novel

My ornament

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*My ornament:
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Bibliography

Abstract

This thesis is divided into two volumes, the creative work and the exegesis.

The creative work, *My ornament*, is an Australian novel set in India. It explores—from a feminist perspective—issues of desire, subjectivity, agency and connection among three women and their moving, sexual bodies across time and space. In so doing, its aim is to place women at the centre of literary/critical discourse, emphasising connection rather than differences across cultures. The voices of the two main characters, Rachel and Muddupalani, alternate, cross over, merge and pull apart in the narrative that moves between the 18th and 20th centuries, Australia and India, with the third mythic woman, Radha, a textual presence in the poetry written by Muddupalani.

The exegesis constructs an intellectual and fictional genealogy for the novel, situating it in a 21st-century discursive space. While it is a work of Australian fiction—with an Australian author and protagonist—I suggest that it contributes to the following writing traditions: South Indian poetics and 18th-century culture; Francophone women’s literary theory, in particular *écriture féminine*; and notions of ‘dancing desire’. This account of choreographing a fiction (of the self within a text) moves along intersecting planes through the liberatory spatio-temporal territory available in cultural nomadism and transnational feminist practice.

Together, these two volumes create a new discursive space by linking seemingly disparate elements and fictional characters to create a region in which women—writing and dancing women—can connect and move freely across cultural and time zones; as heterosexual erotic beings, they articulate their desire and reflect it back through their art.

It is recommended that the novel be read before the exegesis.

Note to the examiner/reader

See p. 200 for a Glossary of Terms, an explanation of family connections, and information about 18th century characters.

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Doctor of philosophy declaration

I, **Christine Gillespie**, declare that the PhD thesis,

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is no more than 100,000 words in length, including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. The thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

My ornament

Part One

*To which other women of my kind have
epics been dedicated?...*

*You are incomparable,
Muddupalani, among your kind.
A face that glows like the full moon,
skills of conversation...*

*These are the ornaments
that adorn Palani
when she is praised by kings.*

From introductory canto to
Radhika Santwanam
by Muddupalani

*You are my ornament, my life,
my jewel in the sea of existence.
Be yielding to me forever,
my heart fervently pleads!*

Krishna speaks to Radha in
Jayadeva's twelfth-century epic,
Gitagovinda.

*

I slump and sigh in the heat of the Saraswati Mahal Library and wonder if I will ever find the dancers. There is one at the guest house, fashioned from wrought-iron, part of the grille that keeps the monkeys from coming into my room. The metal straps have been forged into lush womanly curves, the arc of the sari, the almond eyes, the curled oysters of lips, metallic mouth, the watermelon breasts with strawberry nipples. The temple dancer of Tanjavur.

'The dancers? Yes, there were many,' says the Pandit, a small, quiet man. Then he lectures me about the great poets who wrote in Telugu. The sounds lumber towards me, the bulky names jamming in the narrow tunnel of my ears. Muddupalani. Ah. A name that I recognise. I have read about her. She wrote a scandalous erotic poem in the 18th century.

'Are there descendants of Muddupalani in Tanjavur, Sir?'

The Pandit goes to his metal cupboard, unlocks it and ferrets around. His work station is a little wooden brown desk next to a pillar in the spacious central area of the library. On the desk, there is a blotter with a cardboard backing, held at the corners with triangles of leather. A metal lunch tin peeps out from a little basket of woven plastic, green with yellow ducks. A huge round clock on the wall says 12.30. The Pandit continues to rummage.

'Are there any elderly temple dancers in the area, ladies from the old tradition?'

The Pandit believes that there might be. He finds a little book with cardboard cover and yellowing pages. He opens it and reads the curly language. 'Do you read Telugu?' the Pandit enquires.

I shake my head. I find it hard to understand his English.

He tells me that Muddupalani's mother and grandmother were also dancers and musicians, famous. He begins to draw a diagram of their family tree. It is hot. The overhead fan gyrates slowly and I wish it was set on top speed to move the heat of South India. 'They were descended from *ganikas*,' he says. I nod and smile. Heavenly *ganikas*. He gives me the pen. Write that down, he says. I am an incompetent, who cannot understand. G-a-n-i-k-a. I can't even understand the letters. Finally, I have it—

'heavenly ganika'. The air is barely moving. My stomach is still delicate. I had vomited and expelled food from my body all night, hollowed out like the wrought iron dancer.

I nod and hope that he will finish soon. Muddupalani's epic poem. I have to write down the title—*Radhika Santwanam*. Bangalore, he says, and I can't imagine what that big city has to do with it all.

'But, Sir, are there any ladies related to Muddupalani now living in the area?'

He is not sure. He cannot say. And if there are, they will be shy ladies. The Pandit looks longingly at the lunch in his basket.

'Could any woman become a temple dancer?'

He speaks and I don't understand.

'Sir, you are an academic?'

He laughs gently. 'No, madam, I am a humble man. I am the Telugu Pandit.'

I pick up the paper family tree, thank the Pandit and leave him to eat his lunch.

'Do not thank me, madam,' he says, 'it is my duty.' He puts the book back carefully in the cupboard.

I walk in the wrong direction and see the stacks of palm leaf manuscripts in shelves in the open area. Outside, I fall into a waiting auto-rickshaw and go back to the guest house to sleep. It is only later that I wish I had copied it, taken away those curly Telugu words of Muddupalani.

That night, I make notes on my visit to the Pandit:

Muddupalani—dancer and poet, a heavenly ganika, wrote an epic poem in Telugu—Radhika Santwanam. Bangalore?

I puzzle over the names. It is all that I have from the expedition.

Later, I lie on my back on the narrow bed and close my eyes. Against the lids there is a picture of a corridor. The ceilings are high. It is as if a camera pans along the wall, across windows that look out onto the Palace courtyard, pallid with moonlight. I glimpse someone moving quietly along the corridor in front of me, disappearing again into the shadow. I follow her. In the next strip of moonlight, I see her roundness and curves, her fleshiness. She is shorter than I am. She vanishes and there's another figure, a man. Bulky. He moves silently. Grabs her. I can't see in the dark. She gasps.

Clothing swishes and rustles. She grunts. Her voice rises up in steps, seven notes of an octave.

I gasp. Muddupalani and her lover. I pant, the strings in my groin thrumming, waiting for that eighth note, the resolution, mine and hers. There is a moment of suspense... and we both cry out.

*

Rachel stands under the shade tree by the great Kaveri River. The chai wallah hands her the hot sweet tea. Two chickens peck and a goat fossicks on the dusty flat space in front of her.

A small car pulls up. Rachel sips her chai and watches an imposing gentleman stride grandly into the holy shrine, an ordinary 1920s construction. He is followed by a plump young man.

At the other end of this arid patch of flat ground there are two blocks of concrete with a narrow path between. 'Bangalore Nagaratnamma,' says the chai wallah, gesturing in that direction. Rachel groans. She could go to the end of this desert and walk between the blocks. The remnants of small foreign creatures jump around still in her guts.

It is all too hard. Her research on the dancers is getting nowhere. The Tamil professor never answers his phone. The Tamil university is miles away. A desolate place, a scholar at the Saraswati Mahal had told her. You will need to take snacks. She is at the shrine built by a dancer for the saint, Thyagaraja, not far from Tanjavur. And it is hot.

An auto-rickshaw roars into the dusty place and a well-padded lady emerges and bustles inside the shrine.

Rachel yawns under the tree. The Telugu Pandit mentioned heavenly ganikas. Were ganikas dancers? Were they goddesses? Where are all the dancers? Then there were the devadasis. She has read about them, the temple dancers. Heavenly ganikas... she wishes for a heavenly place, cool, surrounded by dancers.

She will cross this arid wasteland, walk between the concrete blocks. There is a perversity in this action, taking off across the red dirt as the sun beats her around the head. She approaches the blocks. Bleakly. Bleak blocks. They are a sign from the

gods. Square, heavy. White. Rachel's body is bleached, baked. Can't she be blithe, not bleak? White body block. Blitheringly idiotic, making a film about dancers in India. Making a film about women whose stories are vanishing. She sweats, she does not feel well in this heat and she is making no progress. But there is a figure seated behind a little gate at the end of the white block catacomb. She plods through. A black stone woman sits cross-legged, her hands in prayer position, a pink garland around her neck and a pale green silky cloak across her shoulders. Rachel takes a picture through the grille. This woman must be Bangalore Nagaratnamma, the dancer. She looks back up the entrance and across the red dirt, directly into the doorway of the inner sanctum of Thyagaraja's shrine. Figures move in the shrine. Rachel hears the sound of little cymbals, the port-wine voice of a woman singing. A tall figure dances.

I follow the rich woman's voice and slip in the side door. A youngish man sits on a cotton mat next to the singer, clapping small cymbals together. An older man dances, tall, bald and wearing a snowy dhoti and kurta. His feet slap the floor, his hands gesture, fingers clusters of angles, head moving from side to side. Sweat darkens the neck of the man's kurta, on the curve at the top of his spine. Age - mid sixties? He is in front of the saint's image, absorbed, holding a conversation with the stone figure, with hands, limbs, face. I watch and follow the story in the expressions that move over his face and animate his hands—*Listen to me, My Lord. There is such bliss in your presence. Do not abandon me.* I read the words made by his body. At the singer's closing cadence, the dancer is still for a moment, holding his final attitude and we are suspended in the last notes of the song.

I focus my camera and take a shot during the long pause. The dancer moves, bends over and catches his breath, hands on thighs. He goes to the side, panting and wiping his neck with a towel. Head swivels in my direction. 'And what are you doing, capturing me on film, young lady?' he asks. I scramble up.

'Young? Hmmm. Lady? Well... '

He gives a short laugh and looks at me sternly. 'I dance here each year for my blessing angel,' he tells me.

He asks me a few questions and walks grandly across the space to show me a plaque on the wall, the dedication to Thyagaraja from Bangalore Nagaratnamma. He

tells me that Thyagaraja wrote songs in praise of Krishna, such as the piece that the plump lady had just sung.

'Nagaratnamma told my mother,' says the tall patrician gentleman, "Through Thyagaraja I got patrons and money. The least I can do is build a shrine in his honour."

Mr G V Rajagopal Pillai transports me from Thyagaraja's shrine to his house, Brindavan, in the heavenly air-conditioning of his little car.

*

In the vast central gallery of the house, I sit with Mr GVRP at a big table. 'Excuse me,' he says. He goes to the wall, onto all fours and walks his feet up until he is doing a supported hand stand. 'Good for the spondylitis,' he explains. He comes down. 'I'm always in training,' he tells me when he is upright again. 'I dance on two occasions each year. For Bangalore Nagaratnamma, the lady who built the shrine, and again in a Krishna temple for my birthday. I am a devotee of Krishna.'

Then my new friend cruises towards the kitchen door, pauses, one leg inches from the floor, swivels. 'Would you like to do something wicked?'

I nod.

'You will have some cold coffee? I make it in the most decadent way.'

We sip our drink. 'Wicked enough?' he asks, assessing me. I groan with pleasure.

He gives a short laugh and leans forward to conspire. 'It's the cream. The cream,' he whispers, 'and a touch of salt. That is the secret.'

He leans back in his chair, folds his arms, narrows his eyes and questions me closely about my project.

'Dancers. That's a bit vague... ah, ganikas. Now you're talking. But these days we speak of these ladies as *devadasis*.' He leans across the table, hands in front of his chest. 'The devadasis,' he says, 'are wonderful women.' His head shakes with the emotion of his words and his eyes are closed for a moment. '*Wonderful*.' He pauses. 'They alone have kept the culture of our country alive through the generations. *They alone*. Forget all these Brahmins and their culture-vulture nonsense, spending millions of rupees on dance classes for their virginal daughters, B Comm. students all, to

acquire nice accomplishments. And to what purpose? They get married to a google-eyed boy who has watched them perform. And? The husband will not have them displaying their bodies to other men. They give it up. Dancing is not their *life*.' He pauses and waves his hand gracefully towards the door. 'Just a little upstream there is a summer palace built by the Maratha kings and the street of the dancers is there. Oh, yes, close by.' He sits forward and his voice is quieter. 'You are interested in Bangalore Nagaratnamma?' I nod. 'As you may know, she republished the epic poem of Muddupalani. After it was banned for its obscenity by our moral guardians, the British.'

'My mother knew her well,' he said. 'She was a glorious singer. She would come to our house often, for ceremonies, cradlings, marriages. My mother would invite her. She had such a dignity and grace. She often wore green and many beautiful ornaments.' He pauses, overcome. Waves his hand again. 'Make yourself at home. Explore.'

Rachel can feel every part of her feet curling down on the iron-red tiled floor of Brindavan. She experiences herself gliding across the gallery, below the balconies that must be the entrances to bedrooms and sitting rooms, past the divans covered with printed sheets. She recognises a tribal design from Maharashtra, bolsters in the red appliqué of Rajasthan and cushions so soft that she wants to lie down and dream her dances. The pictures on the wall are not Moghul miniatures, but bold paintings, modern, with splashes of colour. Family photographs cluster on a side table: a woman with a serious expression, about Rachel's age, sparrow-like, hair in a bun at the nape of her neck; a man, bald, not unlike her host, with deep-set eyes and a distant expression; a teenage girl with bushy hair, wearing an ornate *churidar*, dressed for some occasion. Rachel learns later that they are Kamala; Jaganathan, Kamala's husband; and their daughter, Saraswati. There is also a photo of a young man, bearded, handsome, in a peaked cap, the adopted son of Kamala's brother. Rachel doesn't catch his name. Names. Names. She will need to make another list.

Rachel continues to flow towards the bougainvillea and her eyes still pan across to the doorway, the double doors to the terrace. She moves as if she is on a rail, a camera zooming in to the hectic magenta of the blossoms that hang heavily against the round white pillar.

A close-up of the blossom, common, but exquisite.

Rachel breathes the word *ex-quisite* as her old dance teacher would pronounce it. She would tell her new friend later, Mr Rajagopal Pillai, your house is *ex-quisite*, because nothing less would do.

Rachel, with her camera-eye, goes down the steps to the first square terrace before the lawn and the river. The Kaveri. Glare from the water blinds her, so she minimises the lenses of her eyes.

There is a cottage on the edge of the river beside the steps to the water, a miniature of the Raj residence behind her. Rachel looks at the great Kaveri, at a branch borne along on the tide.

Mr Rajagopal Pillai plays an old record for Rachel in his music room upstairs at Brindavan, a song about Krishna sung by the famous Bangalore Nagaratnamma. He asks her to call him 'Tata', grandfather, even though she is forty years old, and invites her to stay in the cottage on his grounds. After she takes up residence there, she slips out along the path to the Summer Palace which is not far upstream. Perhaps Muddupalani stayed there. She wades out into the river and swims down to the steps below Brindavan, wondering what lurks in the murky depths of the great Kaveri.

During dinner she and Tata discuss the devadasi/dancers. He wants her to make a film about the revered Nagaratnamma. She declines, explaining that it is definitely Muddupalani whom she wishes to research. She had become interested in such a project last time she was in India, learning the Indian dance form of Bharat Natyam. The dance-guru, on discovering that she was a film-maker, said she should document the lives of the devadasis, the women who had carried the culture, poetry and dance of India. Rachel's last film project was 'The Ecstasy of St Teresa'. At the cottage she reads books about Krishna, the divine lover, and studies posters of him with his consort, Radha, which she has put up on the wall.

*

She lies in bed, watching the dawn and listening to Sakkubai washing the clothes on the steps, the scrubbing brush on the sudsy bed sheets, the chime of the metal bowl as she moves it across the stone surface, the slap as she spreads out a towel on top of the river before dragging it in and wringing it out with her thin, ropey hands.

Sakkubai is talking and there's a male voice, not Tata's and not one of the staff. It is an educated tone, not deep, a little hoarse perhaps. The *bai* laughs, answers the man and then her voice fades. She must be walking up to the house.

Rachel jumps out of bed, pads across the room and peeps around the door jamb. There is a young man on the steps, leaning forward, legs splayed, bending from the waist, brushing a great sheet of black hair that touches the stone of the steps. He wields the brush in long strokes, from the scalp to the ends, and again and again, vigorously, in his baggy shorts and a red tee shirt—dilapidated, for neatly dressed India. Rachel gapes and waits to see more. He throws the wall of hair up and it arcs as he straightens; Rachel pulls back to study his face. He is beautiful, there is no doubt—tall and well-built, with a moustache and beard, eyes large and brown. He stares across the river, dreamily, his face in profile.

*Thy dark form is charming to look upon,
thy lovely eyes loom large.*

Rachel laughs.

*And there is thy flute,
spreading forth nectar from thy holy lips.*

No, this young man has only a hairbrush in his hand and he still stands with legs apart, firmly braced. Not in a Krishna attitude. Rachel steps forward out onto the balcony as the young man looks around.

She is aware of the history of balcony scenes as she moves. She studied that famous play about teenage passion in year ten at school. She smiles like the milkmaids from Krishna's village, leaving their mortar of wheat grains, throwing aside the grinding pestle, or stepping out of their husband's bed, or emerging from a bath in the river, sodden, all of them drawn like iron filings to the magnetic allure of the god. She laughs as she walks forward and puts her hands on the balustrade.

I leave the cottage and stand on the steps with this young man as the pink dawn turns into the harder yellow of day across the river. I cross my arms over my breasts.

'Do you wash your hair in the river?'

He smiles. 'No, I came here to dry it.'

I have no idea who this man is. 'I'm Rachel.'

'Surinder.' He shakes hands and there is a quiet amusement in his tone and a sense that he is waiting to see what I will do. The accent is confusing. He reminds me of someone I have seen. That's right, there was a beautiful Argentinean man on the train from Chennai to Tanjavur, with long hair tied back, but not vast lengths of luxuriant tresses like Surinder's. 'Are you South American?' I burst out and then blush at my gaucheness.

He laughs gently. 'No, Indian. From the Punjab.'

'Oh'. We both look across the river. 'Can I ask a personal question?'

He nods.

'What does your family think... of you... having all that long hair?' He looks like a European who has lived in Goa for months, perhaps a postgraduate student, with hair glossy and lush. I had never imagined such hair on a man.

Surinder is trying not to smile. 'They totally approve. I should come clean at this point. I'm a Sikh.'

I stand like a cartoon character with question marks above my head and my mouth in an o-shape. I look at the river's edge as if there might be a boat there that has transported this man to me. I blush again at my lack of cool worldliness. Of course, he must be a guest of Tata's. What a fool I am.

... he smiles

and gazes at my body with his lustrous eyes.

His eyebrows are the bow,

and his sidelong glances the arrows

which strike against my heart.

'I'm actually a nephew,' he says, and apologises to me for being mysterious. I slap my forehead—the young man in the photograph in the house. I stare.

Surinder chats easily. He is doing a PhD at Madras University, in Architecture. His family is not so interested in his studies, having expected that he should have followed medicine like his grandfather, or agricultural science like his father who runs an efficient farm near Chandigarh. 'And what brings you to South India?'

I explain about my film.

He fills me in on the family connections: that Tata's nephew, Jaganathan, is married to Kamala. Surinder is Kamala's nephew; Kamala is his father's sister. He hints that there is a rift in the family. Brindavan is actually owned by Kamala's

husband, Jaganathan, who has considerable business interests. They have a daughter, Saraswati, who is at college. I try to make sense of the tight web of the Indian family that he is describing and I am so enamoured of Surinder that I don't even wonder that he is a Sikh while his great-uncle, Tata, is a Hindu.

The crickets squeal in the heat of the evening, in waves that knife the ear drum and cut into the brain. Rachel and Surinder stand on the steps again. The tinny sounds of Leadbelly seep from Tata's music room in the lulls between cicada crescendos. Rachel concentrates on the black plastic disc revolving on Tata's phonograph, the grooves wavering under the needle, trying to ignore the pangs of desire for Surinder that surge and ebb, like the evening sounds, but from her groin, along the wires in her body. Hard-wired, she is, for passion. They stand on the steps outside the cottage in this tension. An electric shock would zap them if one was to place a finger on the other's body, a charge that might rip through them and throw them to the ground. Rachel distracts herself by lighting the scene, the faint pink above the line of bushes and palms across the river, a pale bronze in the glass doors of the balcony. Surinder stands at that end, between her and the wings of the stage, her cottage.

She has never been one to hold back from leaping into passion, although old enough to know better. She walks towards him. He looks at her with his neutral expression and she is about to electrocute herself.

I lead him by the hand up the path to the Summer Palace. We stop under the trees every so often and he kisses me. Yes, I am scripting the situation and the scene is one of desire. I pull him along every so often. The scene must progress to the Summer Palace.

We cross the courtyard, between the shadowy arcades, skirting the raised platform of the *mandapam* in the middle. Nandi, the bull, crouches there looking across the water. His stone head turns, stretching his neck, and he gives forth a fleshy bellow across the moving waters. I pull the creaky door that scrapes across the stones of the arcade and there is no other sound.

Surinder is holding my hand tightly and I can't bolt ahead, spring up the stairs. We lean against the wall and move in the shadows. I stop half way and kiss him. He pulls me to him, saving me from the edge perhaps.

*

The woman is silhouetted against the arch of sky, the black form stretching against the pearly air as the man holds her shoulders and kisses her neck. Her body is an arc with the poise and extension of a dancer. It is hard to tell who she is in this setting, this palace of the Maratha kings where she can take the air by the river in the heat of the Tanjavur summer. It could be Muddupalani with her lover, Pratapasimha. Perhaps the King built this place for her. If it is Muddupalani in the faceted jewel of a pavilion, there will be a certain amount of display in the movements of the two lovers. After all, the King is an embodiment of Lord Krishna.

The pillars will be hung with spider web silk that drifts in the drafts of air surging up the stairwell. While the door is left open, no one would enter the King's tiny domain that juts out into the sky with water on three sides. The courtiers stroll on the steps below or lounge in the twin pavilion across the steps, chatting and laughing, an eye to the arch and the two premiere lovers, the silhouettes that come together and move apart in a dance of desire, in which the woman moans and sighs in waves of pleasure, with an elegant urgency that will cause the bards to write more lyrics of love and yearning as Pratapasimha whispers to his consort, 'You are my Radha. Together we will fight the forces of darkness and we will triumph.' And the woman sighs, her gold ornaments jangling, the hangings drifting with the gust of perfume as his hands stroke, pull, pinch, churn at her *yoni*, so that she cries and shudders and the musicians step up the rhythm of their song and the voice of the courtesan is urgent as she asks her Lord to pleasure her more, by placing his *lingam* into her body. The courtiers cannot hear the words, but they watch as the two figures sink down, King and ganika, Krishna and Radha, onto the red and gilded cushions and the silk carpets of the tiny bower where they will perform their union, sate their senses and all will be well with the universe.

If the woman in the pointed arch is Rachel, she fits the same black cut-out on the sky, but there is a restraint in the line of her body. When Surinder's mouth becomes too hungry, she pulls back, rationing the kisses, savouring the slow food of his tongue. He is engaged in a project to prise apart, gently, the 'o' of her pursed lips, to press into her and feel the softness inside. She resists and then gives a little, making

a space for him in her body, small, contained, then opening slightly like a flower. She will offer her self in tiny increments, her mouth, this gradual opening to him. To a point. Only the face and perhaps the neck. She holds his hands in her own. Rachel's body gives, Surinder tears his hands free and holds her to him so that he can enclose the rest of her while savouring the exquisite minutiae in the movement of her lips. There is a fluidity about Rachel's movement that promises a heavenly world. He lets out a cry, takes her mouth, shudders, comes, like a man who is starving and who has entered a banquet and cannot maintain the illusion of table manners as his body is filled, until he shouts for more. Rachel strokes the side of his mouth, then pulls him across the stone floor that is clotted with dust and rotted leaves, down the crumbling stairs and out to the mandapam where Nandi watches.

*Radha raises lovely splashes in the River
Saffroned breasts slip from her bodice,
Across them her hair hangs wet;
Blue stoned ear rings dangle on her cheeks.
Her hips sway slowly like an elephant's;
A girdle swinging loosely at her tiger-thin waist.
The play goes on, in the waters of the Yamuna;
Immersed in love, swamped with passion...*

Rachel helps Tata catalogue records and types a musicology article in his music room. She flirts with Surinder and they discuss his Doctoral project—the use of space in Hindu temples.

*

Rachel stands at the top of the steps, watching Surinder brushing his hair, leaning over, back flat like a table, legs astride. He swings his hair around, grabbing it into a hank with his right hand, twirls it up on his head, catches sight of Rachel. She is wearing an emerald green *lungi* and her tight Rajasthani embroidered top. She holds a papaya in her hands, the skin yellow and flecked with green. The stainless steel handle of a knife sticks out from the top. She has plunged the blade in through the thin skin and deep into the orange flesh, perhaps as far as the black seeds that cling by little gold strings to its heart.

Rachel smiles at Surinder. She stands there like Krishna, one leg bent supported by the ball of the foot, weight on the right foot, or she could be Radha, except that there is a striking lack of ornament. She has a cloth bag over her shoulder that bulges with two ripe mangoes, dappled with tiny spots towards the tip, like moles on glowing skin. She slides the papaya into her bag, keeping eye contact with the young man on the steps and walks slowly away along the path, looking back over her shoulder. She sees that he has let his hair fall down around his shoulders and waist as he strides up the steps to follow her.

She stops under the coconut trees on the path to the Summer Palace and waits for him. She puts the cloth bag down by the path and holds her arms out, gazes at him as he approaches, at his strong calves in the dilapidated shorts, the hair swinging around over his red tee shirt with the hole in the neck, at the silver Sikh bangle on his wrist. But Rachel's plan does not stop here. She has choreographed a dance that goes further than the narrow rut of a path by the sharp prickly bushes. She picks up her bag. Surinder will follow her. She swings her hips and glides along the path, a dancer, placing her feet with precision on the soft hard clay, in between the stones. She veers to the right along a tiny track and up to the wall of the great block of a ruin, the Summer Palace. Rachel has reconnoitred. She will not look back. She keeps going, over the mound of rocks and through the low doorway that is hung with green canes covered with pink flowers. Surinder will tell her later that it is *quis qualis indica*, also called Radha/Krishna bush. But now, she moves forward and a hand pushes the trailing strands away as she steps through.

He holds her arm as they climb over a spill of broken red bricks and she accepts his help although she is sure-footed. They stop by an opening to the river, with more bushes. Two men fish from a boat upstream, small hunched figures. There is a stone ledge, broken, like a low altar, that has fallen on top of a smashed frieze of a dancing girl. It's the correct height. Rachel unpacks her bag and places the fruit on the ledge. There is nowhere to sit or lie but that's not part of the plan. She hands a mango to Surinder. He peels it and the juice runs over his hands. He looks at his sticky fingers as she unhooks her blouse to the waist. 'Eat,' she says and he bites into the fruit. The peacock screams and they both jump. 'I wish it would not do that,' she whispers, but knows that it is in the bird's nature. He wipes his mouth on his wrist. He offers her the

fruit and she bites into it, her eyes closed. They kiss sweetly and the juice drips down her chin onto her breasts as he feeds her the first mango and peels the other one. They eat it and he watches the orange sticky liquid dribbling to her nipples. He grabs the papaya and slashes it open, carves it into wedges, flicks the black shiny seeds out with the tip of the knife and they eat that too. The patch of shade from the broken roof is moving away from them and the hot sun dries the juice. Rachel wipes the blade of the knife on the edge of the stone and slips it into the cloth bag. Surinder stands with his hands held out in front of him as if he has just finished a meal and is making his way to the hand basin. Rachel cups her hands under her breasts. 'Eat,' she says, 'so that I can close my blouse.' The sun is hot. Surinder lifts her onto the ledge and works with diligence, with fingers and tongue, sucking the sweet nectar that streaks the white papayas of her breasts. And they listen to her breathing in the still air of the ruin, until she moans and cries out and shudders in his hands, her breasts licked clean. They jump again as the peacock screams. She does up her blouse, hook by hook, and his fingers precede hers, moving on her skin as it is encased again in the embroidered cotton.

'You are beautiful,' he says. 'I will buy you ornaments.' And his face is open and happy. She laughs.

'I don't wear jewellery.'

'Come,' he says, his voice thick. 'We'll go back to the cottage.'

Rachel says that she will stay for a while. His expression changes.

Nothing is as it should be. He runs his hand over her hip, steps forward, begins to scrunch up her lungi in his hand.

'No,' she says. 'Not today. Please.'

'Come,' he says, sliding his hand between her legs. She jumps and is tempted, but she has a plan.

'No, not now.'

Surinder stands up tall, tosses his head. It is the proud-Sikh-warrior look that she will come to know. She says, 'There is no rush. First it was kissing. Now this.' He looks uncertain. She kisses him on his sticky hand. He turns and climbs over the rubble, without looking back, and disappears through the green curtain. She watches. Yes, she will continue this seduction, but avoid any clammy involvement.

Rachel sits on the slab of stone in the triangle of shade that is left. She lies down and arcs her body, feet on the ground, shoulder blades over the edge, stretching her chest, extending her arms above her head until they touch the ground. The peacock screams again. She jumps and looks, but can't see it.

Surinder is young. There is no rush. He can learn about the sweetness of the body, its contours and lush valleys, and she is happy to teach him.

It is too hot here. She curls up from her stretched position and rises, clasps her arms above her head, bends at the hips and stretches forward until her back is flat, then down and her elbows are almost on the ground. She looks between her calves and there is a glint in the corner. She unfolds upwards and moves across the stone slabs, pulls back the vines. There is a tall cracked mirror in an alcove at the back corner of the room. It is transparent in some parts where the silver has peeled off and is coated with dust. She will clean the mirror and look into it to see Muddupalani.

*

I have the steps of the Palace to myself. I stand on the bottom step, arrange the lunghis, the purple and green, stretch the bathing cap, set the goggles in place to keep my eyes open and see into the depths. I look around furtively once again and spring out in a flat dive, thwack.

She enters the river, then surfaces, treads water for a moment, checking the banks again. The peacock screams and the dancers move around among the tangled green in the great block of the Summer Palace. Muddupalani is there, laughing. She walks out onto the steps as Rachel ducks her head again for the Australian crawl, the sun striking the silver lycra of her swimsuit. And what would Muddupalani see? A fish woman with scales that are pewter in the brown of the sacred river, her legs kicking, feet churning the surface, up and down, saplings of white, the body long. Arms appear, pale triangles framing brown water at the waist, curl up, straighten, land on the water and pull this fish woman along. Muddupalani laughs and rubs her eyes. The sun strikes the fish woman's buttocks, part silver and part pinkish flesh. The fish has a green skull, not unlike a human's, or a cap made of a great lotus leaf, shrunk and moulded to the size of a woman's head. The face is in the water. After three strokes, left and right, left, a face swivels out to the side and the fish opens its mouth and

seems to breathe in. It has great bulging eyes with a black line from the sides around the back of the head, as if they are held together by a ribbon. The mouth closes and the fish face points down into the water. And what would the fish woman see if she strained her neck, broke her stroke and looked back? But she stays in rhythm, scooping through the water with her hands like paddles, looking through the lenses of her goggles into the deep, knowing that any shape she sees will be merely a knotted tree stump or some perfectly natural and real phenomenon.

Rachel is washing away the foolishness of her attraction for Surinder. How mature you are, at forty, Rachel thinks to herself. She keeps her stroke steady. The current pushes her along. She can see the tree marker below the steps at Brindavan. She will swim across the current. The angle is about right. But the current is strong. She strengthens her stroke, kicks vigorously, twists her body to take her to the right. She is panting with the effort. There is the jagged tree past the step. It would be a bore to be swept into that. The breath steams in and out of her chest. She will progress to the next part of her plan with Surinder.

I strike out and touch the step just upstream of the jagged tree branches. I gasp as I rear up out of the water and again as an arm hauls me in.

'What do you think you're doing?' It is Surinder.

I laugh and pant, bent over, holding my knees with my hands, trying to get my breath back. 'Just swimming.'

'But it's dangerous. You could have been swept into the branches.' He points to the black, jagged monster, its arms flung out of the water, and I can't help laughing as the adrenalin is pumping and I'm standing in my swimsuit, a lunghi dripping around my waist and another around my neck, being coddled. I shrug and try to look as serious as Surinder. 'But I was just swimming.'

'Women don't...' Surinder lifts up his shoulders to his ears and spreads his arms, trying to find the words. His eyebrows are raised in the middle and curled like caterpillars. 'You don't do that in India.'

'Why not?' I am genuinely interested. Perhaps the river is too sacred for a female swimmer.

'Because we were worried,' he barks and strides off up the lawn to the house. Tata has gone off to Tanjavur for the day; his aunt and uncle are still in the States; his

cousin is still away at school. Surinder must be the worrier. Or he is unhappy with my choreographing of love-making and aquatics.

'I'm sorry,' I call after him, conciliatory. But he doesn't turn around.

When I go up to the house later to say goodbye, there is no one except Sakkubai washing the floor. She doesn't know where Surinder has gone. I wait for a while and then leave for my research trip to Chennai.

This is as it should be. I will not be diverted by passion. It is more fruitful to make films about it. The fruit of the loins. Digital. Flickering images. Dancing light.

*

Rachel is hot and frustrated, working in the Madras University Library, hoping to find a translation of Muddupalani's *Radhika Santwanam*.

The Telugu Professor stares out the window at the beach and the murky Madras sky. 'Muddupalani,' he says. 'Yes, her work is most erotic.' There is another pause. 'It is possible to speak of it between lovers, but not between people.' He pauses and I realise that he will not speak of it to me. I change the subject. Does he know where I could get a copy of *Radhika Santwanam*? He has heard of a recent edition of the C P Brown version, a paperback. He will make enquiries. Perhaps his department can order one from Hyderabad. After all, it is more likely to be found in a Telugu-speaking city. I tell him about the Bangalore Nagaratnamma edition. Ah, yes, his father had a copy and used to read it to his mother. He could hear them giggling. He is not sure what happened to the book. It is likely that there are many copies around in Chennai, but where to look? What to do?

If we can find a copy of the text in Telugu, does he know anyone who would translate it? A woman, I add. I would like a woman. He thinks for a while and picks up the phone. He speaks in Telugu, his voice soft and smooth. All I can discern are the words *Radhika Santwanam*. He hangs up. Yes, it is possible that this lady might do it. I must meet her. I thank him effusively, telling him that I will come back in a few days to check on progress regarding the ordering of the book. Things take time in India at the end of the 20th century.

My dear Rachel,

It is heart-warming to hear that you are making progress with your research. It is essential that you obtain the text of Radhika Santwanam. Professor R has indeed been helpful. I have met the lady he recommends as a translator and I can think of no better person. However, she is busy.

Since your departure, I have been thinking like an Agatha Christie sleuth. Refer to me in the future as Mr G V Marple. Do you realise that the Telugu pandit probably has the Bangalore Nagaratnamma edition of Radhika Santwanam? THAT must be where he found Muddupalani's lineage. THAT is where it would be!! I am horrified that you did not pick up on this when you met him. But then I suppose you don't speak Telugu.

There is much that you can accomplish in Tanjavur. I have arranged for you to revisit. Train ticket enclosed. Surinder will take you around. Please ring for more details. As to your meeting a devadasi, I feel that it would be beneficial for you to complete more research before I introduce you to some ladies. And it is about time you learned Telugu, or at least Tamil.

Return to Brindavan at your earliest convenience. My niece and nephew are due back from the States soon and you can meet them.

*Yours with warm regards,
G V Rajagopal Pillai*

*

Rachel floats towards the plump plaster-relief dancers on the wall of the Tanjavur station exit, voluptuous, in yellow paint that gleams in the sun. He met her on the platform, as if fate and the gods had put him in her path. The beautiful man in the peaked cap with his almond-shaped eyes. But this man in jeans is not an incarnation of Lord Krishna, nor was he sent by the god, rather he is a product of Tata's organising mode, Tata the wizard, the messenger of the god. The god of love. Manmatha. Rachel has read about him, the cupid of India. Rachel wants to leap and dance across the high-ceilinged booking hall, run-run...jump! Run-run...jump! She would spring over the bundles of newspapers that came off her train, with the men squatting, picking at the knots of hairy string with knobbled knuckles. She would leap past the queue at the ticket box and burst into song. The men in the queue will slink

over, line up behind her and perform athletic Bollywood movie antics. Surinder will tear off his cap and the tight black scarf she can see underneath, his hair will cascade like a shampoo ad and they will box-step and kick, twirl and sashay to left and right, hips, thighs and feet flashing in the long shaft of early morning light.

In fact, Rachel and Surinder walk sedately. Rachel has not decided on the dance style of their relationship. Perhaps it is not Bollywood, that unsatisfactory alternative to pure nakedness or passion. Passion. She is afraid of her body, the twanging and pinging of pheromones in her proximity to Surinder.

They walk across the dusty floor, reach the steps, pass the yellow plaster dancers and emerge into the glare.

We have dumped our luggage in the Railway Retiring Rooms. The ease of being in each other's company has gone. We are away from the river and the Summer Palace. He had arrived on an early train to book two rooms with the railway matron, efficiently, for my arrival. There is only one room free. We have to share.

He is doing his duty, has put aside time, as a good nephew should, to help a friend of the great-uncle, translating the world of Tanjavur and trying to convey some of its meanings to this foreign woman from South of the equator, postponing by a few days a trip home to Chandigarh to see his parents over the December break.

*

Who is this woman whose feet grip the stone floor of the Maratha Palace? She walks slowly, listening to voices interspersed with the thin sounds of music. Her toes are spread, tiny curves between them, but the small toe is bent. Perhaps it has been in a ballet shoe. The arches of the foot are high, the cables, ropes of muscle and cartilage holding the structure together, strong and at the same time delicate, a work horse of a foot that has taken too much weight, stress, drudgery. This woman has long hair hanging on her shoulders. She listens for the voice of Pratapasimha, the King, in the quiet corridor. Wooden panels line both sides. This arcade has been blocked off. One panel is a door. The woman pushes it. A bare bulb casts a dull light on the middle of the large space inside. Washing is spread along a rope between pillars. The voice in the room accompanies flickering images of a woman with a *bindi* on her forehead.

There is a blast of film music and a photograph of her children, spruce and ready for school. She speaks. More music. The TV woman holds up a peacock blue bottle of laundry detergent. An old man in a white lungi sits on a plastic chair and dozes in front of the television. Rachel closes the door and continues along the corridor, listening for old voices.

Rachel's camera collects fragments of this place. A doorway looks out onto a dusty courtyard with occasional sprouts of yellow spiky grass. A grey stairway climbs the wall to the left, its curved side not really a balustrade, with contours and grooves like a bone, soft curves, weathered and grey. Her gaze drops to the middle ground where coconut husks and tattered plastic bags lie in the dust. She takes a photo. Rachel is trying to flesh out an 18th-century woman, her sensibility and passions. Why these fragments of the place? She can't say.

Rachel moves around the durbar hall where the King used to receive guests. It is not as she had imagined. Arches hold up a high timber ceiling and the space is broken up with slim wooden pillars. Dancers had performed here. It would be difficult for a large group of women to move easily. Constricting. Of course they would use the space intelligently. They were familiar with pillars. There were many in the temples and the mandapams. The only unrestricted space was a temple courtyard, outside in the open. Space. But she was projecting her Wide Brown Land sensibility on the site. The crowding of objects in India could be seen as an intricate pattern that required, enabled, an arts practice of extraordinarily delicacy, elaborate and heavily ornamented. Rachel tries, she really does, to transport herself into another skin, to translate herself into Tamil or Telugu when her mouth does not speak the language. Can her body speak? She throws the *dupata* across her right shoulder. It is an annoying pink, a colour that she would never wear in Melbourne. But Surinder had pressed her to buy some Indian dresses.

She had enjoyed modelling the churidars for Surinder, as he offered opinions, taking the purchases seriously. She had a film to make. Modest, comfortable dress should be a useful component of her gear. They had left the shop with three outfits. Rachel is wearing one of them. She had put her embroidered skirts aside and slipped into this costume.

The big scarf is nylon. It is sliding already. She must buy some safety pins. Many dupatas are draped over the breasts and pinned. She has noticed this on the bus.

And there is much to be done with a filmy fabric that can be flung back with a toss of the head to snag the eye of the beholder. She takes the edge in her hand in a balletic gesture and slides it across her throat, glancing across at Surinder. But he is immersed in his sketching. In five days they will be back in Chennai where Rachel will continue her work. From there, Surinder will take the long train trip to Chandigarh and into the bosom of his family. Rachel knows that, if they touch, the plan will unravel.

Rachel sits down cross-legged, takes her writing book out. She will listen for the voice of Muddupalani, watch for her gestures and try to find her on the page.

Rachel writes.

A woman stands, almost hidden by the line of pillars that are close together at this angle, like the teeth of a comb, the band of musicians standing to one side. She wears a dance sari. She is somewhere behind the row of pillars, out of Rachel's line of sight, up the steps in the stone part of the durbar hall, below the ornately painted arches, just in front of the throne. The King, Pratapasimha, sits there. Muddupalani moves for him alone. He watches her, his large plain face radiant with the charisma of power, for he is the King of Tanjavur, the fertile delta of the Kaveri river, with its rippling green rice fields and the canals that his forefathers have built. He sighs. Muddupalani watches his full lips. She wills him to smile but it is not in the nature of monarchs to squander the accumulated riches of their hauteur. He is swathed in layers of fine fabric, lush embroidered tunics. Both sovereign and ganika are hung with heavy gold ornaments. She will captivate him. It is the task she has been groomed for from the day that she was chosen, and she must maintain her position at court. There are others in the durbar hall, small groups, but their importance is minimal. A ganika's first duty is to create *rasa*, that effusion of feeling, the quintessential sensation of the music and the dance, the bond between the artist and the *rasika*, the viewer. To mesmerise her patron. Her lips part and her head moves. She is Radha, imploring her Krishna to come to her.

Her hips are round and smooth, her brown arms polished to a sheen with fragrant oils. The King's black brows undulate to the bridge of his nose and roll away. He is swamped by the heady scents of fleshy arms and the artistry of the moving body, the sweet voice.

Rachel's words straggle over the page.

The King licks his lips, shifts in his seat and looks around, annoyed, at the petitioners waiting in line, at the emissary from the East India Company, freshly arrived from Fort George far to the north. And Muddupalani senses that his aesthetic appreciation has shifted from the more judicious, intellectual parts of his mind and has shot down through his viscera, concentrating in the rigid strength of his groin, so that he is ready to sport with his mistress. This is no diminution of higher feelings, because did not Lord Krishna give himself wholeheartedly to matters of the flesh? The King nods to his Prime Minister and conducts his mistress from the room. Strains of music announce his departure and the pale foreigners are nonplussed by his disappearance, but they are just English messengers from some distant, cold island, far away from the riches of Tanjavur. They sniff the complex air of India and inhale drifts of tangy spices. Lunch, surely, will not be far away and the King will reappear.

The pale woman in the churidar stops writing, places the pen in the spine of her book, runs her hand over the cream page and closes her eyes. Perspiration trickles down her outer ribs. The rest of her skin is damp in a room with no fans, but there is a tiny draft of cool air crossing the space from the open doorways. She sits cross-legged, her groin open and soft, following the progress of the other woman leaving the hall, the dark one in the dance sari.

She does not let them go far, the King and the other woman.

They enter the cool, dark corridor at the back of the hall. The King has pushed Muddupalani in front of him. There is a longer view of her now. She leads, her hips swaying, her tiny waist and curved torso gliding. Yes, she is like a temple sculpture. She turns and smiles at the King. He takes a breath, catches her and steers her into the small room he has recently had prepared, a retiring room for these moments, because, as everyone knows: *Only the man who has touched the courtesan's breasts can become the commander of a fort; only one who has stared in her face can be a king.*

*

I move my hand with the expertise of my trade and I caress his lingam. His mouth closes over mine and he explores my tongue in the cave where my voice is silent. There is no need for song just now. The nerves make music in my flesh. I look again. He is enchanted. I work. His mouth is open and his lips loose. He groans and

shudders. Then he opens his eyes and watches me. His hand travels down from my face, over my breast, ribs and belly, into my sari, my groin, and he feels the hot flesh of my yoni. My face quivers. I moan. My Lord's fingers move. He slides them slowly and my loins are liquid heat. For he is Lord Krishna whose fate it is to move women to love. He watches and smiles. He moves me to cry out for myself, to shudder and groan, and he is My Lord for the things that he can do. We lie on the cushions and I drift to another place where there is silence and I am my yoni, a point of pulsing flesh.

I have had my moment of transport. I compose my features to include him in my existence. I have returned. I kneel before him. I am the first dancer in the firmament of Tanjavur. He loosens his garments. I perform for My Lord. I work. His body is a temple that I build and demolish. I am his ganika.

The musicians strike up outside our room. They celebrate the potency of the King. His strength revives. He unwinds the silk from around my hips, pushes me to the purple cushions on the floor. He bites my nipple and enters me and we rock together in the dark scents of flesh and myrrh so that I reach that place again where there is no time and my being disperses and pulses.

The music has changed key and My Lord has come. The Prime Minister has sent his sign. He will tell the guests that the King is performing some religious ritual before he takes his food and now, his adoration of Lord Krishna completed, he will attend to matters of state. I open the door to the servants, who stand there with water and towels. My Lord blinks. He is the King who has no idea of the minute choreography of life.

*

Rachel lies on her bed in the Railway Retiring Rooms. Surinder is taking a bath. The tin dipper clanks against the metal bucket and on the white-tiled floor. Quiet. He must be lifting it. Slosh. He is pouring it over his body. Clank. Silence. Gushing water. Rachel lounges, reading her notes.

At the Maratha Palace, today, they had visited the museum, as well as the durbar hall, up steps and out into a small courtyard where a small Nandi sat staring at a plum-coloured door. The walls were patchy aqua paint, flaking back to white. There were other doors with large padlocks and a little staircase winding up and away to

somewhere. The museum was behind a large grille. An ancient retainer followed them around. 'Areca nut cutter,' he said as Rachel looked at an instrument that could be 18th-century toenail clippers. 'Fan,' he said as she looked at a fan. She told Surinder that the shrivelled man was crowding them. Surinder delved into his pocket, put a note into the guide's hand and asked for tea. The sum must have been large because his decrepit body took off at a trot and she could concentrate.

Now she had Surinder to herself. He was sketching the fan for her because he calculated that it must have belonged to some lady in the 18th century. She watched his pursed lips, his head on one side, fingers clutching the pencil, the smooth strokes, the rhythms of his marking the paper and she wanted to laugh in the riotous chaos of her desire for him. A broom leaned against a chaise longue. Rachel shifted it away from the dark green velvet mossy mound on its curly brown legs, the cedar curved over at the end into a scroll.

She propped the broom against the wall, stroked the velvet, yawned.

'Muddupalani's couch,' said Surinder, smiling at her. 'Why don't you lie down?'

She wished she could, but was too respectful of museum objects, especially as a visitor from far away. 'The old man will come back.'

'You won't do any harm. Go on.'

'They don't seem to be looking after it.'

'I'll give the old chap twenty rupees.'

'Only that. To sit on a museum couch?'

'He would sell me his grandmother for 100. This is India.'

Rachel needed to think about this. The man arrived with the *chai*. Surinder gave him a bundle of rupees and muttered instructions. The man shuffled off.

Muddupalani's couch? No. It was almost certainly Victorian, but she didn't tell him that. She lay on the couch on her side. Surinder stood and watched, took a photo. They drank their tea and listened to the crows outside on the dusty playing field of the school next to the Palace and Rachel made her plan.

*

The next morning, Rachel leads Surinder along the walkways of the Maratha Palace. She looks to the right through the tall barred windows and focuses on the palm trees,

the fronds against the sky, not dropping her gaze to the rotting plastic bags among the coconut husks, not today, shaking her head when Surinder asks where they are going. When he stops, she pulls him by the sleeve.

The man at the small table with the roll of tickets nods to her and they continue. Surinder raises his eyebrows as she drags him along, through the tiny dark rooms, up the stairs to the courtyard where the hunched old retainer stands next to the small Nandi, watching for them. He shuffles to the plum-coloured door and they wait as he rattles the key in the padlock. Surinder opens his mouth to speak. Rachel puts her finger to her lips. Beside the door, three cacti thrust up from the spindly weeds of the pathetic flower bed and Rachel wants to laugh at their prickly tumescence. It would be a nervous giggle because her head is light and her stomach is sending anxious pulses to her brain. Her plan could go wrong.

She takes a photograph of the door, the wall, the cacti. The same with the next shot. Surinder asks for the camera and snaps her as they stand behind the old man. She will look at it later in Australia and see the vulnerable expression underneath the brazenness of her behaviour, as she waits for the door to be opened.

They step over the door frame. There is a huge ancient upright fan roaring in the big room.

'Muddupalani's couch,' whispers Surinder and she feels deep satisfaction at his amazement. The green chaise longue is placed at an angle in the middle of the otherwise empty space. There is a row of small windows high up in the outside wall showing blue sky. The only decoration is the clutter of jasmine garlands, strings of cream flowers, a massive bundle on the couch. Our man does not have skills in the decorative arts for strewing or festooning, but he has carried out her orders to the letter. Rachel almost laughs again at the faint whiff of pine disinfectant that breaks through the perfume of jasmine, from the damp arcs that still mark the floor which must have been washed with a big wet cloth moments before their arrival.

I put the loop of the padlock in the hasp on the door and turn toward Surinder, dropping the dupata. I unhook my blouse. Two undone, six more. I think about the blouse to distract myself: it was perhaps modified for the tourist market, with a low neck, almost as fitted as a sari blouse, dark purple, embroidered, but reaching to the waist. No, I am not wearing the modest churidar with the dupata. Surinder bounds

across the room. He breathes in sharply and grips my shoulders. The breath. A dancer always follows the breath. It will all unfold now because he is touching me again. It is a dangerous step, seducing this young man, but I am an Australian, after all, an emu, who will run home over the plains, while he is a peacock who will strut in dry gardens and stand on stone walls.

'Do you think this is a bad idea?' he asks.

I tell him about the emu and the peacock and he smiles. I explain that they can lie together at the Maratha Palace this one time, on the dancer's couch. I, who have had lovers before, and should know better.

I take off his cap, drop it on the floor and wonder about the black scarf that holds his knotted hair in place. I put my hands gently on either side of his waist and he jumps at the voltage. I lift my chest a little to remind him of the hands on my shoulders. He relaxes and one hand moves, the finger tracing my neck to the ear, then down along the line of bone at the base of my throat, down to the groove between the breasts where he places a second finger. And I will remember every movement, for how could I forget this day?

Rachel's chest rises and falls under the minute caress of the two fingers. Surinder brings the other hand from her left shoulder and follows the same course with her left side. He looks down at his two hands unclasping the third hook, feeling the curve of her breast. Rachel drops her arms to her sides and it is simpler, just their gaze and his unpeeling of her and the charge through her body as he unhooks and traces the arc of her breast. And so on, until she is undone. He pulls the blouse aside as if he is parting two curtains and he kneads her breasts, moving his face forward to kiss her. But this is not how she wants it. Has he forgotten the Summer Palace? She will choreograph now. She leads him to the couch and the backs of her knees rub against the velvet. She brings her hands up to take his, guiding the fingers to circle her and to stroke towards her nipples, four fingers and a thumb holding the white globes of flesh and pulling towards the point, stretching her so that she arches her back and her body becomes heavier, thrumming like wind up high in power lines. She drops her hands then and lets him do as he will. She leans her face forward and he kisses her hungrily, then pulls back as if to savour his first course. He kisses her softly, then more deeply, his fingers moving to the rhythm of her breath, until she begins to pant and feel faint. She

takes his right hand, slowly, scrunches up her skirt, places his palm on her thigh. She lifts her leg, swivels a little on her standing leg, places the foot on the couch, swings the knee out at the hinge of her groin. He gasps and his hand moves along the angled limb and cups her buttock, then his thumb investigates up and down the groove of her. Then he shoves it inside her so that she cries out and shudders again and again. She turns, shaking, lifts the bundle of blooms, placing it on the curved mound at the end of the couch. She takes the dupata from one shoulder, folds it and spreads it on the green moss. Surinder grabs her around the waist. She undoes his belt as he presses her back into their fragrant bed. He lifts her skirt. She takes out his penis. 'I want this to be beautiful,' he says, frowning and making his mouth a line of concentration. She pulls him down and he plunges into her. He twitches, cries out, comes and lies on her, covering her, gasping. She bears his weight until he lifts his upper body. She sighs and tells him that she is happy. He lies beside her and she is wedged against the mossy side of the couch. He runs his hand through her hair.

'Madam,' he says, 'I hope that you will treasure the flower of my virginity,' and she notes the ironic tone and the seriousness of his eyes and she cries and he wipes tears away from her cheeks. His hair is still screwed up in the black scarf. She tries to pull it off but he shakes his head and points to the door where the old man is rattling the outside bolt and calling out. Surinder answers, pulls out of her, moves away from her, stands, composes himself, crosses the room, unbolts the door, places 100 rupees into the gnarled hand, shoots the bolt back, returns to the couch, lies down beside Rachel and strokes her hair, his hands hard on her scalp.

*

They lie in the Railway Retiring Rooms, taking delight in their bodies as the trains are announced on the platforms below. The lightness and humming in the nerve ends. Madurai train, platform one. The gusts of passion and the flashes. Trichy train, platform three. The body heavy, vibrations low as the bass notes of a cello, sinking into the white sheets of the room. Rachel and Surinder's hands explore flesh and they laugh as they throw the ball of jasmine garlands, browner now, the scent heavier, bruised, from bed to bed. The beds are not pulled together. Surinder had resisted. What would the matron think if she came to the door? Rachel had shrugged. The

matron was not her aunt, she said, nor was she Surinder's and he laughed and called her his Radha.

Surinder moves to get up and Rachel lies on him to prevent him from leaving this room for the world of buses and timetables. He says that he should ring his old lecturer and find out about Maratha palaces in the district. They must visit the Tanjavur Big Temple, Rachel reminds him, releasing him to go for his bath, pulling the top bed sheet, a lungi, over her. She yawns and sighs. Happy. Yes, she is happy. She tries to doze, to drift back to the suspended state as the water gushes in the bathroom. And the Telugu pandit. She must see him and organise the copying of Nagaratnamma's *Radhika Santwanam*, the treasure in his grey metal cupboard. The chatter of what she must do begins. She runs her hand over her belly to drive the thoughts away and to grasp a few more moments of suspended bliss. Her hand moves up to her ribs and over her breasts and she wishes that they were pert. You would not say that she is overly anxious about her body, partly because it is trim and healthy, but her lover, yes, for the moment that's what he is, her lover is a young man, used to looking at the girls with long black plaits, in pinks and oranges, flicking dupatas over their shoulders, on the street corner as he stands by his motor bike chatting with his mates. The pang lasts a second and she sighs again and dozes.

Someone knocks vigorously on the door and Rachel jumps as if her aunt is there. Voices. The wrong room? No, it's the matron. And another voice, high pitched like a bird's. She calls out in Tamil.

'Who is it?' Rachel shouts, leaning on her elbow. The twittering voice calls back. 'It's Surinder's cousin. Saraswati.'

'Just a minute.' Rachel springs from the bed, snatches Surinder's clothes, flings the bathroom door open and puts them inside. 'It's your cousin,' she hisses. Surinder, a lungi half wrapped around his waist, hits his forehead. Rachel springs out into the room, straightens the jumble of sheets, sweeps odds and ends into her bag, runs her hand through her hair, slips into a loose dress that lies on the floor, races back to the bathroom.

'What's her name again?' Throws a dupata across her chest.

'Saraswati,' hisses Surinder. She looks back at the room, shoves the ball of garlands under the second bed, throws a dupata over her chest, leaps to the door and pulls back the long bolt.

'Saraswati! Hi.'

My dear Rachel,

Kamala, my esteemed niece-in-law, has commanded me. Yes, she and Jaganathan have returned from The States and I am desperate as they wreak havoc with my musical solitude, although at the same time I am devoted to them and, as always, am a paragon of familial devotion. What's more, they have met up with a dreadful cousin of Kamala's, a Sikh from the Punjab, a luminary in the Archaeological Survey of India, on the management not the artistic side. He is around these parts on business and has a loud laugh, having spent a year in America. But, to get to the point: Kamala has commanded me to organise his entertainment. I have sent him off with Saraswati in your direction. How fortunate that you told me you would put up there. Kamala insists that Surinder should take them down to Kumbakonam on a little tour. She is falling over herself for this great booming man, but that is another story. By all means accompany them south. If I were you, though, I would stay put and do your work until Surinder comes back in a couple of days to assist you again.

I look back fondly to our peaceful days together at Brindavan and our wicked sprees with cold coffee.

Yours truly,

G V Rajagopal Pillai.

PS. Kamala is most interested in your project. She agrees with me that the cottage is ready for you at any time and she is impatient to meet you.

Rachel wakes up to the perfume of jasmine. Surinder is draping fresh garlands over the wooden bed head and around her pillow. He pours a cup of steaming coffee from the metal pitcher he has brought and she smiles at him with the contentment, the joy, of a single woman who is looked after. He is back from making the arrangements for the trip with the uncle and Saraswati. He kisses her on the forehead and tells her that he must go soon, but first, he wants her to help him. She kisses him on the mouth and he puts his arms around her. She takes off his blue peaked cap and tries to undo the

black scarf that keeps his hair in place. He hesitates but allows her to keep going. She undoes the knot on the top of his head and the hair falls around him to his hips, thick and black, and she runs her hand through it, bundles it into shapes, lets it fall as he makes love to her and she is surrounded in black silk as she comes, in a spasm of pleasure, watching his face inside the dark curtain of his hair.

As she returns from the suspended place, she takes him in her arms, shocked that she will pine for him—or perhaps just his body—while he is gone for two days. He hugs her, kisses her and pulls away as the recorded lady announces the Madurai train arriving on platform three.

Surinder drags a great pile of pale blue cotton out of his overnight bag, finds one of the corners and hands it to her. Then he reels out the rest of the fabric, holds the diagonal corner and pulls it taut, on the cross, from the other side of the room. He ties a corner to a bar on the window, finds the other two points and folds them into the hammock of material, straightening the sides, running his hands along, forming the bulk into a smooth long band. When there is a stretch of pale blue toffee, he undoes the corner from the window and folds the length loosely, his arms crossing over each other, rhythmically, and Rachel has never seen a man who could fold like that, until he reaches her and takes her corner, sitting on the edge of the bed, kissing her on the forehead and then on the lips. He passes her a mirror from his bag and they sit cross-legged, facing each other, as he arranges his reflection in her hands.

Surinder pulls his hair up away from the forehead, ears and neck, holds it at the crown of his head and twists it into a knot. He takes the pointed end of the fabric, holds it to his scalp, feeds the hank of blue up and around in swathes that overlap over the ears, cutting across the forehead, neatly covering his hair. When there is only the last point of blue, he spreads the material and tucks it in around the crown of his head. He smiles at her.

'Now you see me as I really am,' he says and she looks at this man, cross-legged on the bed, neat, strange, in his pale blue turban that matches the checked shirt, fresh from the *dhobi's* iron. And she focuses on the tiny curls that escape from the folds at the nape of his neck and can't understand why she is trying not to cry.

I sleep for another hour. Trichy train... The train lady announces as if there is never to be any change in the circumstances of a woman's life. The certainties of the Madurai and the Trichy trains are there in the measured voice.

There is sweeping on the veranda. Always sweeping. Sound effects for Indian films—sweeping.

I can concentrate now that Surinder is away. There is much to be done. I rummage in my bag distractedly for my notebook. There is a small velvet box there and a card. I open the envelope and read:

Dear Rachel.

You are my Radha.

Love from Surinder.

The box contains a silver bracelet, pliable, smooth, scaled, like a snake. I pick up the silver rope, but I need a second person to hook it on and I am not a jewellery person.

I collect the photographs from the processing place by the station. I lay the images out on the bed.

There is a shot of this man in the blue peaked cap, shading, making marks on the paper, looking up. I had snapped over his shoulder. His pencil was poised above the paper.

I move the picture of Surinder closer to my face to focus on the curl escaping from under his cap and I am sad again that he has gone and I contemplate my growing fetish for long, long black hair. But, I can concentrate now.

I spread out more Palace pictures. There are the gargoyles, high, close to the ceiling, lurid, touched up in dreadful colours.

I write on the backs of the pictures:

Surinder. 20/12/ 99.

Saraswati and Uncle from Delhi, train station, Tanjavur. 20/12/99

Rachel. 20/12/99.

Surinder/Muddupalani's couch. Maratha Palace, Tanjavur. 20/12/99.

Rachel's photos are spread out on the bed. She needs to pack up soon. One can only stay at the Railway Retiring Rooms for two nights after a train journey. She will move to go to a hotel, perhaps the dreary Tourist Bungalow, the one with the wrought iron dancer screwed into the window frame. She looks at the picture of the dancer at the

Maratha Palace, the one with the blonde hair who flung herself among the slim wooden columns when Surinder was immersed in sketching the canopy above the King's throne.

I threw myself across the space, running until I reached the far corner. Then I turned, paused and sprang across the flagstones in great arabesques, run-run...jump! run-run... jump, hanging in the air, landing and springing, my lungs working as I ran between the pillars, criss-crossing all this space. For moments I was suspended, before the resolution of the leap, the landing. At the end, I sank to the floor and rolled and rose, rolled and rose, came up on one knee, lifted my chest, extended my arms and became aware of the room. I danced only for myself as Surinder kept sketching on the other side of the vast space.

Surinder had insisted that he should organise her move, but she wanted to stay in bed and see him go. And she is efficiently sorting out the last few days. As she keeps telling herself, now she can get on with her work. She knows what she has to do. There are two full days.

She lies down on the bed and closes her eyes, feeling the glossy pictures sticking into her arm and her hip, the edges sharp, the slick finish sticky. The silver snake is around her wrist. She has asked the matron to hook it on for her. She pulls the white sheet up over her and curls up like a foetus. She shivers in her sweat and listens. With a glorious blast, a locomotive thunders into the station, the brakes grinding and wheezing to a halt below her bedroom. She must move, she tells herself. Her face is cooling in the wind of the fan. Sharp points of pictures lacerate her skin. She sits up and peels the colour snaps from her back and thighs, wondering if the images will be dissolved in the sweat and heat of her flesh.

*

At the Rajarajeshwara Temple, I cross the wide bridge over the moat. A boy in a niche under the archway calls to me, 'Two rupees,' and hands me a lotus bud that I will offer Shiva. The boy slaps the white point of the bud with the palm of his hand and it fans out, like splayed legs, into a full bloom, delicate pink near the stamens.

The courtyard of the temple is vast and the big black bulk of Nandi, the bull, squats under his roof. There is a woman there beside Nandi as I pass, her hand on the

god, head close to his flanks, praying. Surinder told me later that devotees whisper their secrets to Nandi and ask him for favours, such as a kind husband who will not beat them, a boy child.

Between the gate and Nandi is the platform where the King and his retinue used to sit during festivals to watch the dancing. Rajaraja was a great patron when he built the temple ten centuries ago. I have read in my little temple book:

In Chola period, Rajarajeshwara Temple employed 400 dancing girls, 12 dancing masters, 16 musicians, 72 drummers, 7 pipers, 11 potters, 5 carpenters, 3 barbers. Each dancing girl had a free house in the temple street. The temple became rich in medieval time. The devadasis were paid high salaries and received lavish gifts from patrons.

A bell clangs, a drum thuds and I follow the throng up the stone steps and into the ancient main building, inching myself forward, among the saris, dhotis, polyester shirts and trousers, until I am at the doors of the inner sanctum. The gigantic lingam of Shiva—the black stone phallus—is draped with long garlands of white jasmine in a pattern, a texture of white lines on the black stone with a keyhole of black in the middle. There is a silver eye on the side of the lingam and a brass spiral staircase to the right where a priest climbs up and throws buckets of milk over the god's image, the whiteness cascading and dribbling down the smooth black surface. Another priest walks down to the pressing crowd, accepts the coconuts, garlands, lotuses, packets of red *kumkum* powder from the devotees. I place my flower on the tray with twenty rupees, warm my hands on the sacred fire on the tray, take the holy ash, place it on my forehead and join my hands. Then I wait for the offerings to be presented and to see what the gods might return to me. The priest comes back. One old woman receives a banana and a packet of red powder. The priest hands me a jasmine garland and some sweets.

I sit in the shade of the arcade on the South side and scribble in my notebook. Muddupalani would have danced here for the King.

*

Muddupalani has a friend. We will call her Manikyavalli. She will be given to the god today because she is twelve.

Muddu follows the dancers, grown up, in her new gold and blue clothes. She must be moving now under the huge stone gods by the gates. We can't see her yet. Here comes Manikyavalli at the front of the group with the senior devadasis and her mother, visible from my vantage point on the edge of the arcade.

Of course, the women in Muddu's families are ganikas, not devadasis, the same only different. Even Muddu is not sure how. In Tanjavur they are all dancers, but she will never be dedicated to the god in the temple. By now she must be passing by the flower vendor and swooning with the fragrance, jasmine and lotus, added to the rich scents of the dancers, the heavy musk and sandal clinging to her nostrils in the confined space of the arched entrance. This is her first ceremony in the Big Temple.

Here she is, coming into the frame, into focus, emerging from the great archway. She cranes her neck as she enters the vast courtyard to see the King on the platform. Pratapasimha, her Lord, is young. She observes him from behind her grandmother's carmine and gold sari, as she steps with care and grace. She could not disgrace her eminent family by mixing up her feet, plodding or tripping. The King has a round face and big eyes, light brown, and a thin moustache. Muddu is to catch his eye for just a moment.

She has practised with her lids, lashes, brows and her feet. Her dance guru had spent days preparing her to walk into the temple. The body tall, the head erect. Feel, he said, feel the string through the body. From the base of the torso up through the spine. Through the head. Feel that someone is pulling on that string and stretching your body up, tall. And where is the sweet expression on the face? Yes. Heel, curl, toe. Loosen those muscles, he had ordered, tapping her instep with his bamboo cane. She walks out from the archway into an ocean of sound, the clashing cymbals and the thudding drums. The heel touches the ground with strength, but delicacy, and the foot curls down. As if without thought, her guru said. Spontaneous.

'Seven is too young for jewels, my Muddu,' her grandmother told her this morning.

'Yes, Ammama,' she replied demurely.

Ammama looked down to fix the lotus petals and tender, tiny vine leaves in Muddu's hair, the black kohl on her eye lids and just inside her lower lashes, outlining the gold and white of her eyes.

'The King must see you unadorned. The sweetness of your young body needs nothing.'

Ammama bent lower to attach the strand of white jasmine to the girl's coiled plait and the scents of her oiled smooth breasts oozed into the air.

'In time, kings and princes will bedeck you with rich ornaments. These will cover you, even when you are otherwise naked.' She laughed as she held the girl's chin in her hand and her heavy gold bangles clunked together down her forearm. There was a shadow in the doorway and the mother glided into the room. Muddu gasped. Of course, her mother was always bedecked with jewels and drifting in a haze of scent, but today, she was a human sculpture in red and gold.

'Those eyes!' she said to grandmother. 'It is tempting to apply just a little more kohl to make them even bigger.' Her hand floated like a tiny leaf to her cheek.

'No, no, we are discreetly presenting a young bud, too tender, yet, for the picking.' The grandmother laughed, her voice low and rather hoarse as she clutched the mother by the arm and they jangled and smiled. There were whispers at the back of the chamber.

As Muddu twirled in front of them for final inspection, she saw a cluster of heads peeping around the curtain.

The servant girls were running their expert eyes over her, assessing the goods, her marketability, and speculating about the economic future of the house.

On the way back to the room I hold the jasmine that Shiva has given me and I wonder. There is no dancers' street left near the Big Temple, no dancers' houses. Where did Muddupalani live? I will put my lotus and the garland of jasmine on my bed. We used to put tiny pieces of wedding cake in little tins, under our pillows when we were children. The cake helped you to dream of your future husband. Now, I put a small black stone lingam, the souvenir that I have bought at the shop, underneath my pillow.

*

I wander around the *choultry*, this guest house for pilgrims, with its erotic carvings.

I am more and more irritated. I wish that Surinder's cousin was not there. She is young, I tell myself. Why stiffen my spine in annoyance when she gives those

delicate, tinkling laughs and throws her dupata over her shoulder? Just because I don't like girly simpering. She is being herself, though, an Indian virgin who has seen too many Bollywood films. I know, because we saw one last night. Not with the Sikh uncle. He has gone to the North to make executive decisions in the Archaeological Survey of India, thank God.

There were just the three of us.

'You will like it,' Surinder had told me. 'It's an art film. What luck that it's on now. It presents difficult issues about Kashmir.'

We jammed into the packed cinema at the back of the dress circle, where the fans spun without hope of moving the hot stale air that rose from hundreds of mouths and armpits and settled on our skin.

The credits rolled. Elegant shots of jeeps labouring through cold misty mountains. Wonderful photography. There were terrorists, then suddenly girls singing and dancing in a sunny field of green wheat.

'I can't believe it.' I moaned. 'It was going really well.'

Surinder looked at me, surprised, and I slumped back into the chair. And the hero's wife was a fool. Loyal to her man, admittedly, but when something went wrong she made little whimpering sounds when she spoke, common to heroines in Indian movies. I sighed loudly. 'Women whimpering in a serious political film,' I whispered.

Surinder looked at me angrily. Saraswati, on the other side of him, must have wondered what was wrong.

The story moved on. More exquisite shots of Kashmiri mists and mountains. Complex characters, both government and terrorist. Then the Kashmiri hero/villain was locked up in an old building awaiting his fate. Would he be executed? Probably. He burst into song. I laughed. A good film ruined.

Surinder jumped up.

'Let's go,' he said, furious.

'I'm sorry,' I said as we stood out the front of the cinema, 'but the woman's behaviour...'

'She was a simple village girl,' said Surinder tightly.

'Village girls would hardly make little whimpering noises when something goes wrong. Surely.'

Surinder stared into the distance.

'I'm just not used to this genre,' I said, 'I'm sorry.'

Saraswati lost her purse somewhere over the evening and made little mewling sounds of distress. Surinder dropped me back at the room and rushed out to help her look for it.

She is a young girl in a strange place. Of course, it must be distressing. And Surinder is her cousin. It was his duty to help her.

I look at her now, across the choultry, talking animatedly in Tamil to Surinder's architecture friend. Surinder is nodding. Yes, I feel left out. I speak only English. They have tried to include me, but they forget and lapse back into Tamil. I am the foreigner, so this is as it should be. But, I paid for the taxi. This is *my* research excursion and they have barely spoken to me of the choultry with its erotic carvings. It is a Maratha building, the lecturer friend has said. It was constructed by Pratapasimha for one of his wives, Yamunambai. This is the type of construction where Muddupalani would have walked, danced, written her poetry, caressed the King. What was her relationship with the wives? I decide that Muddupalani must have organised the building project. It would be a pleasant guest house in which one might stay on a trip with a lover. Pilgrimages have always been an excuse for tourism in India. There is a tank just down the road for bathing on a hot day. Yes, a ganika would be able to liaise with a stonemason to realise these figures that are bold and sexy. This one to my left. Athletic. The curved body of the dancer, the King leaning forward with his mouth open.

It's hot. I slide down, sit against the wall and doze.

*

My favourite stonemason is up on the frail bamboo scaffolding. I had urged My Lord to employ him to work on the rims inside the domes of the arcade and a selection of pillars, where the breezes swirl through in the afternoon while the air outside is sluggish and oppressive.

I recline on a mat, watching the figures of gods, kings and women emerge from the stone with each blow of the chisel. A king tall and erect, his ganika a little shorter and, by their side, musicians with drums and flutes.

The nephew has been hewing rough shapes ahead of his master, preparing the way, referring to scribbled human forms in whitewash that the mason has sketched on the smooth surface. The figures become more languorous.

The sculptor takes a rest and I can gaze at the figures in the quiet of the morning, with only the occasional cry of the crows stalking about on the dry earth outside. The chips have been swept up carefully next to the pillar beside the mat of my sculptor. We will weigh this pile and pay him according to the amount of stone he has removed, as he exposes these marvellous figures. He or his apprentice nephew sleep beside it, protecting the discarded shavings so that another mason will not steal up during the night and take a basket full to give weight to his own valuable surplus.

My sculptor is over by the far pillar, shovelling rice into his mouth, scooping up great globs from the palm leaf spread out on the stone floor before him. He smiles slightly and jerks his head towards a pillar further down the breezeway. The pillar is in shadow. He points. I move along to a new carving on the square surface further along. I stop and observe. It is at eye height if one were resting on a low cot in the heat of the day. I gasp. The curve and twist of the dancer's body, stretched like a bow, make me cry out. Her legs are over the shoulders of the King, as she extends back and around, holding his thigh and his calf, twisted, her face stretched towards his phallus. And he seems to lift her hips towards him, leaning forward to reach her with his mouth. I throw my head back and laugh. She is exceptionally agile, impossibly, open and my sculptor has been generous in the amount of stone he has allocated to the King's sacred phallus. It must of course be My Lord. And there is no need to ask the identity of the dancer.

I laugh and clap my hands and the sound rings in the dome. The King and his ganika are joined, captured by the clanging chisels and etched for all time. I will pay my sculptor a bonus. A ganika must always be working, if she is to become the star of the Tanjavur firmament and every ganika wants to be immortalised, surely.

The sculptor's eyes are cast down to his rice and fish curry, in modest expectation of his large fee. And I hug myself deliciously. I will bring My Lord and show him my surprise and we will lie in the breezeway, in the heat of the day, and sport among the swelling gods and dancers. I want his touch again. Still, he has not taken my maidenhood. I shiver with fear. All is not right with My Lord. We will come

here on the way back from our pilgrimage to the Swamigal at Kanchipuram and he will take me, I am sure.

*

I wake in the choultry with someone stroking my face. Surinder is squatting in front of me.

'I'm sorry. I have been neglecting you.' He looks over his shoulder, before giving me a furtive kiss, reaches in his pocket and pulls out a silver bangle, simple, a tube. He holds my hand and slides it onto my wrist. I reach out my arms and he pulls me to my feet. I lead him by the hand and show him the frieze with the King and the dancing girl. She is hanging from his shoulders, buttocks against his chest, her calves clutching his back, body arched like a bow, neck stretched long, to reach his huge phallus with her mouth. The King's head leans forward towards her sex.

'Are you athletic?' Surinder whispers.

I laugh and stop. Saraswati is standing next to us.

'What's so amusing?' She peers at the frieze.

'The King pleasuring his ganika,' I say with satisfaction, stealing a glance at Surinder.

He is smiling. Saraswati laughs, blushes, adjusts the dupata across her breasts and turns quickly away. She is twenty years old.

On the way back to Tanjavur in the taxi, Saraswati grasps my wrist. 'What pretty silver,' she says. 'Did you purchase these pieces in Chennai?' I want to say, no, they were gifts from a lover, but I will be kind to her. She is Surinder's cousin. I nod and smile and she takes my hand.

'Did you learn something about your dancer?'

'Yes, I did. Thank you.'

She takes my other hand, leans back, appraising me.

'You are lovely, with that blonde hair and slim figure,' she says. 'We must dress you up in a sari some day. Don't you think, Surinder?'

Letter from Tata to Rachel: He has found people to assist her in her research, including a possible translator of *Radhika Santwanam* if she can come back and meet him ASAP.

Letter from Rachel to Tata: Expresses gratitude, but claims that she must help an Australian friend 'stranded' in Goa. Surinder will take her there, a detour on his way home to Delhi.

*

I think back to the morning after the first night with My Lord.

I was home early. They were not expecting me, so I could observe my mother supervising in the kitchen when my palanquin was brought into the front courtyard. Her eyes followed the servants around, the girl cutting up *brinjal*, laying them out on a plate, salting them so that the bitter juices could collect underneath. I was happy that we would eat brinjal, biting into the glossy black-skinned globes, their rich translucent gold flesh stuffed with spices. It was my favourite dish that Amma had ordered for my fourteenth birthday. And there was something sad about my Amma. She stood like a beautiful bird that had been shot down by a hunter's arrow, trying to remain upright, its plumage providing a balance, alone in the middle of the floor.

On the other side of my conveyance the red flowers of the cactus were vivid against the white wall, the green spiky shafts pushing up towards the balcony above, severe against the shorter shadow of the fig tree with its curving trunk in the middle of the swept courtyard. I watched Amma when she heard the slight thud as the bearers lowered the palanquin onto the stone. She flew forward, clutching the heavy gold chain around her neck as if she would strangle herself, elegantly. 'Muddu, you are early! We were to collect you at midday.' Her façade went through at least half of the expressions we dancers assume. Fear, certainly, joy, confusion... She peered, searching my face and then stood back, her arm extending like the wing of a swan that is unable to leave the ground. Her fingers slid under the gold choker at my neck. 'Oh, Mahalaxmi! Oh, Saraswati!' she muttered feeling the thickness of the gold. 'Ammama!'

My grandmother, like a tall ship, sailed towards me across the floor. 'How are you, my sweet one?' my grandmother asked. My mother's fingers still gripped the thick gold of the choker as Ammama's eyes expertly assessed it. Then they both stared, searching my face for clues. Then my throat, and the hard, pointed nipples of my tiny breasts. I am told that I am not easy to read. But none of us are. We have mastered the art of facial expression. Sometimes, though, I allowed my thoughts and

impulses to be like the weather, passing over my countenance in graceful waves. 'Did you please him?' 'Was he gentle with you?' they asked simultaneously. I nodded and smiled for the first time and looked past them to the girl taking the next brinjal from the pile, slicing into the purple and black and spreading it out before her.

'Your Lord and King has been most, most generous,' said my mother.

'It is a strange ornament.' My grandmother was uneasy. 'Is it comfortable?' I ran my fingers over the delicate lapis bluebirds on the wing with tiny diamond eyes and the sapphire butterflies of the sweet hard wide yoke and I nodded. My mother's hands fluttered to the back and she unscrewed the pin that held my prize in place. The two gold slabs swung open and they both stared at my neck, their hands wafting up to their mouths. I had seen it in the mirror this morning when the women were bathing and oiling my body, and I cried out in pain when they touched my bruised nipples, watching the vivid red and black bruise of neck and breasts where he had bitten me and kissed me all night. If I moved my head too much and stretched, that side of my neck ached. By now, the bruise must have been blue, black, purple and yellow, mashed brinjal.

'And when he took your maidenhead... ?' whispered my mother.

I shrugged and shook my head and they looked profoundly shocked. 'He said he would send for me. Tonight or tomorrow night. When I have rested.'

They looked uncertainly from my rich gold choker back to me. And I loosened myself from their hold, went through the curtain, into the bedroom that I share with my cousin. I took off all my clothes, placed the new necklace beside my bed, removed the gold chains, rings and bangles and, completely unadorned, climbed under the soft silk quilt, making sure that it did not scrape my nipples, stretching myself out long and thin, remembering his whispering in my ear, the arching of my body under his soft hands that did not probe far enough or deep enough, my tears as he bit me and caressed me softly with his hands and sucked the life out of me through the spots on my neck. I recalled my sobbing as one hand pinched my nipple so that I cried out in pain, watching his smiling face, listening to his silky voice as the other hand moved in the new throbbing softness between my legs and I begged for more.

Through the curtain, I heard my mother's muffled words to my Ammama, 'What is happening? Has she pleased My Lord?' I did not wonder about this at the time. I was deep in the dark ebb and flow of my body, sensate, the brain a mere

membrane like the rest of the soft organs and ropes of blood, muscle and nerve which now sang and hummed with circles of vibration from my groin, my nipples and the dark patch on my neck. As I touch my yoni, the image of My Lord's hands and mouth was like a moving picture in my eyelids and I went over it again and again, waiting for him to send for me.

*

He kissed me on my eyes and reached into his pocket. More ornaments. A pair of earrings, ornate, silver pendant hoops, flat, with miniscule gold flowers etched onto silver vines, with tiny bells, twenty at least, hanging from each ring. He reached for my ears, but of course, there are no holes to probe with metal spikes, to fix the rings. He would not have noticed. It is unimaginable that a woman would not be pierced.

He kissed me with passion and there was a grimness in his resolve to let go of his duty for three weeks, to postpone his trip home, to take me on an adventure. I cried, and he smiled as if he understood that I have a soft side, that I can shed tears of joy, perhaps like the glittering crystals on the cheeks of a Bollywood actress. My tears, though, were of regret, that I was abandoning my dancer, my work and my friend, Tata, and I wept with the knowledge that nothing good can come of it, this last fling. But my body was being moulded by his fingers, tongue and silver jewellery and he was inscribing his mark on my skin. But, as he said, it would only be for three weeks.

'I wish you would wear them,' he said, examining my ear lobes, and I cried again, at the beauty of the ornaments, my thirst for euphoria and my fear that I will be overwhelmed.

Clouds thicken the sky.

Tamala trees darken the forest.

The night frightens him.

'Radha, you take him home!'

They leave at Nanda's order,

passing trees in thickets on the way,

until secret passions of Radha and Madhava

triumph on the Jumna river bank.

*

Surinder takes Rachel to visit old Portuguese churches in Goa to in an attempt to understand her (Irish Catholic) background. They stay in a small, simple family hotel at the beach. The proprietor, a retired Goan seaman, has visited Melbourne.

The next day, as they lie in bed, Rachel touches the dull silver bangle that Surinder wears, turning it around on his wrist that has become darker and mottled in the sun.

'It is one of the signs of Sikhism,' he tells her. 'The others are the beard, the turban, the *kirpan* (a little dagger) and baggy underpants. As you have probably noticed, I don't wear the last two.'

Surinder explains that his religion believes in equality and that everyone should follow their own idea of God. A woman can read the holy book in the *gurdwara*. She has the same status as any man. He admits that all the gurus were men, but that the principles of Sikhism are based on tolerance.

'If you visit a gurdwara, there is always a communal kitchen and dining room where anyone is welcome to sit down and eat. The local community provides the food and people often take turns to work there. My father might drop in with a bag of wheat for the chapattis. I might serve the food once in a while. If you go there and you are the chief minister of the state, or the highest Brahmin, you must sit and eat with anyone, no matter what their social status might be.'

She asks him why he is studying Hindu temples. Why not gurdwaras? Why not the great Sikh Golden Temple in Amritsar? Surinder shrugs.

'It is necessary to understand everyone as far as possible. And we have Hindus in our family now.'

Rachel had forgotten. Of course, Surinder's dear grand-uncle, Tata, is Hindu. So is the uncle, Jaganathan, as well as Surinder's cousin, Saraswati. He and Kamala are the Sikhs.

He tells me that he will take me one day to see the great shrine of the Sikhs, the Golden Temple, in Punjab far to the north. A pilgrimage to Amritsar.

*

Muddupalani is with Pratapasimha, 'holidaying', on a pilgrimage to the holy city of Kanchipuram. They are in the *mutt*, a type of monastery, to take teachings from the

guru. They attend the traditional rituals. When Muddupalani consults the guru in a private audience, he comments on her vivacity.

'But,' says the Swamigal, 'your strength will be sorely tested.' He takes my hands. 'In your lifetime you will see events that you cannot imagine, the forces of darkness unleashed. But, like Radha and Krishna whose love saved the cosmos from chaos, your love and vigour will bring you and your Lord through these dark times.'

I return to my cell and rock on the bed, a small towel stuffed into my mouth to muffle my sobs, so great is my anguish at the things I must bear. I am a girl, alone with my secrets and my fate. And who will ever know my story?

*

Rachel lounges in bed with Surinder in Goa. She gives him a gift that she has bought at the hippy beach market, a pop-up *Kama Sutra* book. They read it and play.

'You have taught me many things,' he says, his hair grazing my breasts. 'You are my guru.'

I laugh and pull him into me.

'What would you like to do?' I ask him as we make love. 'When we make love. Tell me.'

'I'd like to chain you up with fine chains,' he says, 'and tease you...'

And he pulls back his upper body, reaches over to the table, lifts his turban, brings back a silver rope bracelet, wraps it around my wrist and does up the catch. He holds my ear lobe. Tightly, so that it burns.

'You don't wear my ear rings,' he whispers.

'I'll try,' I say, and we continue to move our bodies.

'Mmm,' he is doubtful. 'If you can't bear to have your ears pierced, how can you bear to have me entering your body?' he asks.

'My skin surrounds you,' I explain. 'I cannot bear objects penetrating my skin.'

'But it would please me greatly if you would be pierced to wear my ornaments,' he says, and I nod and feel him deeper in my body.

Surinder tells her the traditional Hindu story of Dronacharya, the guru, who is entitled to ask anything (*gurudakshina*) in payment from a student that he has taken through the manly skills, including archery. The guru is envious of the skills of his pupil Eklavya,

and demands that the boy cut off his thumb as payment. Being duty bound, the boy does so, knowing that he will never be able to draw a bow and be a warrior.

'That is my story,' Surinder pulls me to him, 'and I hope that the gurudakshina that you ask is not too painful,' he says, hugging me tightly.

Later, when he is asleep, I take pictures of him, lying on his back, his arm out across the bed. The curve of his cheek and his curl of eyelashes. The ruched triangle of sheet where one leg is raised. I write in my school exercise book with the star Indian cricketer on the front, about sand and ripe papayas, fresh fish and Surinder's body enmeshed with mine and the adventures on the slopes, the peaks and in the ravines of our bodies.

Or on our other adventures—if I say to him, this place looks interesting, he researches, reads maps and plans, then we pack the motor bike and speed away, swoop around Goa, sometimes staying a night at a small hotel. He anticipates my desires. He asks for nothing.

We fly through India on the bike. It is like a dream.

We stop at restaurants that have probably never had a blonde woman eating rice at their table and certainly not one with a Sikh man. I eat chilli chicken without the chilli and drink beer to anaesthetise the thighs and buttocks that are stiff from the bike. We are going to Karnataka, he says, and I sigh and don't care where we go. Is this the way it is for Indian women? Being looked after. But they are cooking and cleaning and taking care of relatives. And few of them have money of their own. I pay the bills.

*

Rachel and Surinder visit a National Park on their travels. Rachel feels cramped and craves privacy, having been on the motor bike for days, in the full gaze of thousands of people, but there are throngs of locals in buses going through the park. Rachel wants to walk but is warned of wild elephants. They go back to the small tourist bungalow.

*

'Tell me a story,' I say to Surinder.

He props himself up on his elbow.

'One of the main characters is a dancer, a courtesan, famous in Tamil literature.'

He pushes a strand of hair back around my ear.

'Kovalan is married to Kanagi—there is a statue of her in Chennai, near the University. She is chaste and faithful. Kovalan becomes obsessed with the beautiful courtesan, Madhevi, spends his money and time with her and neglects his wife. But he feels guilty and decides that they should go to another city, Madurai, so that he can be out of range of the temptations of Madhevi...'

'Madurai? South of Tanjavur?' I show unusual geographical knowledge.

'Yes. We will go there some day. Anyway, Kovalan and Kanagi go to Madurai to start afresh. When they reach the edge of the city, Kanagi stays in the care of friends and Kovalan goes in to town to sell his wife's beautiful gold anklet to raise some money. It's one of the few remaining pieces that they have, after his infatuation with Madhevi. He has sold all his wife's ornaments to buy gifts for his mistress.

'Kovalan is falsely accused of stealing an anklet belonging to the Queen, then imprisoned and executed by the king. When his wife, Kanagi, comes to know of it, she laments and places a curse on the town. Then she twists off her left breast. It becomes a fiery missile and she hurls it at the city and everything burns to the ground. Only Brahmins, old people and cows, chaste women and children are saved. The story is called the *Silipadikaram*.'

*

One day we lay on satin cushions, his head in my lap, and I held the book and read to him about Madhevi in the *Silipadikaram*:

*Her black hair, redolent of ghee, gained in lustre
by being treated with an infusion of essence,
and perfume in herbal water; its moisture
banished in fumes of incense.*

My Lord moved his head and breathed in the scent of my body. Ostentatiously. I pretended not to notice and maintained my concentration on Madhevi, the beautiful dancer. I continued to read:

*Her tresses, parted five ways, were with musk laced,
her toes were painted with red paste;*

*signet rings encircled her tender fingers,
anklets and tiny bells graced her ankles.
Her thighs were clasped around with circlets of gold,
over the garments she wore a girdle of pearls.*

I read on as My Lord distracted me. He ran his hand softly up and down my thigh. I fixed my eyes on the page and told of the full moon glowing over the beach and the groves of trees, of the houses, lights and flower stalls, as Kovalan and Madhevi moved towards the tent on the beach where they would make love. My Lord shifted his position. He brought both hands to my yoni and pressed the diaphanous silk into me with one finger. I continued to read, of the young men and women who sported themselves with abandon in a nearby grove. My Lord concentrated on the task of pushing up my short gown, his fingers moving up and up. He watched. I knew that he would stop if I registered any reaction. Still, I read and tried to quell the waves that surged through me as his fingers moved. My voice was higher now but still steady. It must remain steady. Kovalan and Madhevi were on the sea shore:

*There a tent was fitted
up for Kovalan, its sides embellished
by painted screens, its insides furnished
with an ivory-legged bedstead.*

*Taking up the veena,
Madhevi turned toward Kovalan and tended
the flame of love to a blazing incandescence.*

At this point, my voice broke and I groaned as My Lord applied his tongue to my yoni. He stopped and raised his eyebrows. I must not allow my artistic concentration to be shattered. I took a long slow breath, my body singing, in a voice so deep and resonant that it might drown out the thin words that I forced from my throat. I read the last four lines of the canto, my voice cracking at the end.

*The chariot of the sun appeared in the east,
and awoke the blue bees from their sleep
inside the screw pine flowers,
as honey and pollen await their labors.*

'Ah, my Madhevi,' said My Lord, '*with the sweet yoni like a cobra's hood*'.

And still, he has not taken my maidenhead.

'Did Kanagi ever complain to Kovalan about the time and money he spent on the courtesan?' I asked.

Surinder shrugs. 'Probably not. She was a dutiful wife.'

'Why did she suddenly become brave in the end? Destroy the city?'

'I suppose in the cause of justice, her love for her husband.' Surinder yawns. 'It's only a story.' He looks at his watch. 'Anyway, we have to leave for Terekhol.'

'Perhaps Kanagi was just furiously angry with everyone. It's a big step to tear off your flaming breast and burn a city.'

Surinder dries his hair. I pick up the yellow bottle of oil. 'I shall brush your hair,' I say, not ready to move into the world.

AO pure coconut oil. *Fresh and natural. Made from rare coconuts and filtered twice to give you pure, sparkling clear oil.*

Surinder sits on a chair in the doorway to the little yard. I lift lengths of hair and brush outwards in long strokes, away from his head, let them fall, pick up another, as the hair dries. I rub coconut oil in and we swoon with the sweet smell. I run my fingers through the black silk strands, coil them into a knot, unfurl them, let them fall heavily around Surinder's hips, as he sits with his eyes closed and lips parted. 'I will go today and have my beard shaved,' he says dreamily.

He stopped wearing his turban after the first week, screwed his hair up in a knot, wrapped it neatly in a black scarf. With his blue baseball cap on, you'd never know that he was a Sikh, except for the beard.

'Yes,' I say. 'Do that.' And I pull his head back by his great rope of hair until he opens his eyes and looks up at me. He tells me that he loves me and I smile. What can I say? How can he love me when we barely know each other? But, through our skin, our limbs, our sex, we have understood much. And I will miss him desperately when he is gone. I stare at him greedily, knowing that I will savour all of these images when I go back to my other self, far away below the equator.

'Do you think in Punjabi?' I ask him.

'When I'm with you, my thoughts are in English,' he says.

'What term would Muddupalani use for a woman's sex?'

'Muddupalani would have called it a *pundai*, if she was making love in Tamil,' says Surinder. He does not know the word, if she made love in Telugu.

It does not occur to me to ask him for the word for cunt/vagina/ pussy in Punjabi. Maybe we are making love in English.

And I let go of his hair.

Dear Tata,

I am having a restful holiday and will be fortified to work in earnest when I reach Chennai in four days. I will ring then and see if you are in the city or at Brindavan. The last stage of the trip is a visit today to Terekhol, the 17th-century Portuguese fort on a great rock in the North of Goa. I believe that it's beautiful and peaceful there. We need to cross waterways on ferries to reach the place.

I look forward to drinking wicked cold coffee with you—soon!

With warm wishes,

Rachel

Surinder combs his beard, pulls a peaked cap on, straightens it and turns from the mirror. 'I'm going to get it shaved off right now,' he says suddenly, 'it won't take long.'

He strides out the door. I will meet him on the steps to the beach. I check that there is a film in the camera and take *The Silipadikaram* out from the pack. I wish we could go soon, reach Terekhol and lock ourselves away in a quiet place. I glance in the mirror and pull strands of hair down the side of my face. There is a flash of mouse colour streaked with grey at the roots. I lean forward and study the dull line forming at the scalp, the regrowth. Surinder has admired my bloneness.

I look again and remember the woman I met in hospital years ago with the broken arm, struggling to lean forward with her razor to shave her legs before her husband came. 'Why bother?' I asked.

'I have to do it every day,' she said. 'He marvels at the smoothness of my thighs and calves and that I am different from other women who have hair growing on their legs. I have never told him that I shave them.'

I will go to the beauty shop when we come back from Terekhol. For a pedicure, red toe nails, a manicure and my hair blonded again. For Surinder? If so, what's the point? Surinder will be gone. As he said, it's now or never.

I sit on the stone wall at the top of the steps, waiting for him. I think of Kovalan, how he left Madhevi, with her great beauty and artistry in dance and song. And I think about the ways of men. I am slumped on the wall. There is also my work and my deceiving Tata.

Half an hour passes and the young men are milling around ready to talk to a lone foreign woman.

Here comes Surinder. I can recognise his walk in the distance. I have the camera ready to record the event, excited that he will be a clean shaven Sikh. Is there a touch of Delilah in my gaze? I, who have influenced him with the decadence of the West. A wild, wicked, Western woman. Will he be emasculated if his beard is removed? Perhaps, like Samson, he will not be strong enough to fight for his God. He will wallow in my arms and not go back to his family to be smothered with turban material and thick creamy milk on the model farm in the north. I hold the camera up and look. He becomes larger in the square of the view finder. Wearing the navy peaked cap. But he has a beard. I lower the camera. He strides up, irritable. Every man in Calangute has decided to be shaved this morning. He waited in a queue for twenty-five minutes and then abandoned the project.

We walk back to the hotel and pack the bike. 'It may have been strange for your folks,' I say, 'with you walking in the door in a turban, clean shaven.'

'That's true,' he says, as if it's the first time this has occurred to him. He stands with his arms hanging loosely at his sides. 'I'm starting to think like a foreigner. They would have been horrified.'

I'm a bad influence.

The bags are packed by the bed. He strides over to the mirror. 'I can't travel like this,' he says irritably and unzips his pack. He pulls out a folded turban and shakes it out, his lips pressed together in a straight line. He ties a corner to the bar on the window, stretches it out on the diagonal and folds the sides in. The turban ritual. I wander outside and wait for him by the bike, watching the pigs rooting around in the rubbish swept up against Uncle's wall.

*

A flashback. Muddupalani's account of the fanfare as she and Pratapasimha departed from Tanjavur on their pilgrimage to visit the Swamigal. Later: They are now on their

way back, to a sojourn in a 'sylvan retreat' by the river, like Radha and Krishna, with their entourage camped some distance away.

My Lord will at last penetrate my body with his great lingam. This is what I prayed for fervently during our pilgrimage.

*

Terekhol. Northern coast of Goa.

Red sky. Just before sunset. A couple strides across rocky soil. Cliffs in distance. Rachel and Surinder. Scrawny sheep graze on the spiky grass and follow narrow furrowed tracks.

Rachel and Surinder climb down over the black rocks to a tiny crescent of sand surrounded by rocks. Rachel sits on the sand. Surinder lies on his back, his head in her lap.

If this was a Hindi movie, the camera would zoom out to show girls in filmy saris, dancing and singing on the cliffs, boys in black flares and spangly tops, lines of them, gyrating in the sun.

But here, there is just a close up of Rachel and Surinder.

We stay for a while in the blissful peace. No staring Indians. I sit with him on the sand.

'My sister was excited to see waves for the first time at Bombay,' he tells me. 'She was sixteen and had never imagined so much water.'

I had seen the dingy water lapping against the stone wall along Marine Drive, a spoiled Australian, turning her nose up at the Bombay smell.

I want to tell him about summer days when my parents piled the kids in the car, with the beach umbrella, buckets and spades, egg and lettuce or Vegemite sandwiches, my Dad with thin white legs poking out of old army shorts, on summer Sundays at St Kilda beach.

But he is in his own world, frowning. In the bliss of our days, he sometimes disappears and I know that he is immersed in the panorama of his Indian responsibilities.

'Does your sister have a boyfriend?'

'She's interested in someone. And he's a good chap.'

'In what ways?'

'He's steady, reliable. He will look after her.'

'How do you know?'

'I have made enquiries. It's part of the job of the older brother.' We sit for a while. His sketch book lies unopened on the sand.

'Will she marry him?'

'It would be customary for her to wait for me to be married off first. The older brother.'

'What do you want to do with your life?'

He shrugs and raises his eyebrows in surprise. 'It's irrelevant, really. I will take up my responsibilities. Maybe, a government job, preservation of old buildings.'

'But what do you *really* want? What gives you most pleasure?'

'Sketching. I'd like to paint and take photographs. All the time. But they would never allow it.'

'Why not?'

'How does it contribute? To the family?' His shoulders seem to be sagging. I give him a hug.

'Will you do a sketch for me now? Please?'

He nods, picks up his book and begins outlining a boulder in charcoal. I strip to my underwear, bolt in, splash and float in the clear shallow water. These are real waves. I swim out for a while, feeling the strength in my arms and thighs, plunge under and rear up, float on my back and stare at the sky. Cool water on skin. Just Surinder and me. The weeks of his caresses, bunches of red roses bought from the stalls outside temples and churches, the bottle of Marquise de Pompadour champagne for breakfast, spending the last of his monthly allowance. Our great excursion on the motor bike. And now, the Special Room at the Terekhol Fort.

I swim and wallow around, then look up. Surinder stands on the sand, all dressed up and wearing his turban. He watches me as I rear up out of the water and streams run off my hair and drip from my arms and face. 'You're like a silver fish,' he calls, 'flashing in the waves.' 'Come in,' I yell, moving to a rock pool. Surinder slowly takes off his clothes, piles them on the sand, wades in towards me in his undies and

socks, turban still neatly tied, then stands and looks down at me swaying in the quiet water. 'Come on, float with me!' I say.

'I can't swim, I'm a land creature.'

I pull him gently down into the water and kneel on the sand. 'Relax.' I put one hand under his neck, the other flat on his chest and spread him out on his back. He keeps his turban just out of the water. 'Lift your head and float.' His shoulders begin to soften and his arms bob on the water. 'Look up at the blue and trust me.' He stares solemnly into the sky and the pale yellow at the back of his turban becomes saturated. Gradually, it turns dark and heavy with the weight of the water.

'I'm sure that's a sea eagle up there.' He squints into the sky as he lies back and I pull his floating body around the pool, my hand held lightly at the base of his turban. 'Guess what?' he says.

'Mmm?'

'I love the way you take the weight out of my body and make it light.' And I pull his floating body around the rock pool. 'Even when we're on dry land.'

'I'll miss you when you go home,' I say. He stiffens and I have to push up at the base of his spine to keep him afloat. 'But I'll be back in three weeks,' he says in a mock bright voice.

'Will you talk to them about me?'

He sits up with a splash and straightens his turban.

'They wouldn't understand.'

'Not even your modern sister?' He had told me that his sister is assertive and their father indulges her and enjoys her outspokenness.

'They're Indian,' he says, wading heavily through the water. And later, I cling to the image of him, in the vivid present, wading, swaying from side to side, stepping on the sharp shell grit, towards his pile of clothes on the sand. I look. I record the images. And I will remember this and feel a great aching tenderness for this sweet man, in his turban, socks and underpants, moving heavily, his feet sinking in the wet sand, carrying his duties back to the land.

I lie on my back with my eyes closed. Muddupalani flashes across the pink screen.

Medium shot of her weeping and holding herself, rocking from side to side on a narrow bed.

'Let's go,' calls Surinder, climbing into his trousers. 'We didn't make love this morning. Come.'

And I know that we need to go more deeply into the forest, or the sea, where we can become lighter.

*

In the Special Room, Surinder takes off his turban and lies on the bed.

I lean on my elbows, stretching and arching my back, dreaming, elbows on the rail of the little balcony, my breasts hanging like white papayas as I see the caravels and breathe in the spices, watching the red sun slide down towards the horizon. The Portuguese commanding officer would have stood here firmly, eyes narrowed, searching the sea for clippers and men o' war sailing down to plunder pepper, cumin and cloves to spice up Mediterranean meals.

I observe from our cliff top the creased blue sea ironed out to a hot flat sky. I can see two fishermen on the river, dots in their little boat, moving towards the estuary, a silver cleft slashed into the tawny hump of coastline. The lunghi tied loosely around my waist hardly moves in the air. I open the lower shutters and the sun streams through the curly wooden posts and makes a hot crinkly triangle across my feet on the slate floor. Surinder presses against me, cupping his hands around my breasts. I arch my back more and he slides his hands under my shirt and pulls at my nipples as if he would squeeze all the juice from ripe fruit. I twist my head and shoulders around and he kisses me with his lips and teeth, still tugging at my breasts. He slips off my cotton shirt, lifts up my hair, pulls it back, kisses and bites my neck so that the strings inside me vibrate even more. He slides my lunghi up my thighs and as he touches me, I watch the fishing boat slither out of that slit of an estuary towards the ocean. The men are like two tadpoles now, arms moving the paddles, thin black tails on the silver gash. 'Can I...?' he asks and I laugh at the hushed tone. Yes. Yes. I stretch and arch, as we move and I hold the rail, the sun now painting a hot yellow triangle on my legs.

'Look at the gold on my legs,' I say.

'I'd like to cover you with fine gold chains,' he says. I tell him that I am happy with the silver. He produces a silver rope necklace and snaps it around my neck.

Where does he get all this silver? It excites me—ear rings, silver rope bracelets around my wrists and neck and ankles.

'Can... they... see us?' I ask in time to the rhythm of our bodies as I look at the dots of the fishermen.

'No, no.' He grips my shoulders, his mouth on my neck and he keeps moving in and out of me. Then his hands slide around my hips and down my pelvis and his fingers hold me open and hook into me. I shudder, gasp, laugh, raise an arm and wave. The tadpole tails wriggle in the blue as the fishermen acknowledge me. I laugh again like a bird clinging to my perch on the cliff and we shudder and are still.

We sleep in each other's arms.

I wake, thin, cold snakes on my neck. My bracelets catch in his hair as he lashes new silver necklaces around my throat. I laugh. He slides up onto me and he enters me smoothly and hooks me to his body.

'Ask them where we can see the full moon rise,' I say to Surinder as we drink cold beer in the restaurant. Surinder leaves for Delhi and Chandigarh tomorrow. It is not long until sunset. Surinder yawns. The sun has turned red. It won't be long now.

'Come on. Where's the moon?'

'You Australians and your bloody moons,' says Surinder and we trudge off, moving into the scrub. A red figure glides along the narrow track across the point. 'Happy full moon,' shouts Surinder. The sweeper from the fort pauses.

'Come to my house,' she must be calling.

'Thank you,' yells Surinder, 'but we have an appointment. I am with a woman who is going to the moon.' His voice sounds harsh. She waves and disappears. We are nearly at the top of the ridge. Surinder takes the lead and strides ahead, a set look on his face. I am panting along behind. The moon must be there. The little bushes snag the soft fabric of the purple dress that I wear. I feel the softness against my skin. It is slightly clingy, calf length, buttons down the front, with a scooped neck, my boldest outfit, suitable for this scene which changes genre to become a tacky soft porn film. I could tear this page of script out of my mind, but there is some satisfaction in replaying it sometimes.

SCENE. *Two figures in a landscape, moving ahead, up and down the slopes. There is always another swell in the land, another ridge further on. They are looking for a high point to gaze down at the luminous tip of a big moon sliding up from the rocks and pressing into the sky. They plunge on and up. The light fades.*

SURINDER: *(grumbling.)* How far now?

RACHEL: *stops, out of breath, hands on thighs and leaning forward.* Don't Indians find moons romantic?

Surinder is looking at her breasts. He grabs her hand and pulls her down on a patch of dry stubble. She lies on her side, propped on her elbow, a hand on his thigh.

RACHEL: What about the...?

He kisses her hard and she mumbles, moon, into his mouth. He moves her hand to his groin. He shivers, unbuckles his belt and pushes her head down as her fingers open his jeans in the long shadows against the red sky. She teases him with her mouth and tongue.

RACHEL: What if the lady comes back?

SURINDER: She is having her dinner.

He lies back, his hands curled, suspended in the air.

RACHEL: *teases him. Whispers.* So bold. What will Mrs Siddhu say, with her eldest son... ?

Surinder gasps and pushes her head down again.

RACHEL: ... behaving in this manner... so shocking and such a nice young man he was too. *Lifting her head from his penis. Until he met this woman. Her head goes down again.*

SURINDER *comes with a shudder.*

RACHEL: this terrible foreign woman...

SURINDER *shudders again and cries out.*

RACHEL *lifts her head up and laughs at the moon that is now pressing its tip just over the ridge. She nibbles his thighs and he recoils, pulls away and lies on his side staring at the prickly bush next to them.*

Surinder marches ahead of me as the night crashes down and the grey sea crawls like a slug and slips back at the base of the steep cliff. The path is rough and I trip on a

jutting rock as we push on, making for the spots of light above the whitewashed stone wall of the fort.

The restaurant is empty except for us. Surinder reads an old newspaper, the thin pages flapping sharply as he turns them, until our Pomfret is served. He frowns at his plate. I stare out the doorway where the light from a fishing boat blinks in the dark. The fan whirs and I shiver.

'What's wrong?' My voice is pathetic in the quiet room. Do I sound like a whimpering Indian woman in a Hindi movie? He glares at me and we could be on opposite sides of the dry moat down below, just above the rubbish, the used Frooti packets and the drinking straws. 'Please,' I say and there is no sound except for the fan and the howl of a cat outside in the courtyard. Surinder gazes at me and his face is blank. 'Don't look at me like that. Please.' My chest is tight. 'I can't bear it.' He stares at his plate. I pick up my fork and the fan whirs. I gasp, 'I am the foreign slut who sucked your cock in the open air? A woman that you would not lower yourself to speak to?' My voice shakes and I hold the tips of the fork in front of my face like a tiny fan and stare through the tines. 'Different from the modest women in your family. The perfect mother and the vivacious, virginal sister.' The legs of his chair screech on the floor and the cutlery on his plate jangles as he jumps up from the table. 'Maybe someone out there was making a movie. And they filmed us. No, I'm making a movie,' I say, 'a documentary about the stunted sex lives of Indians,' I hiss, 'And my camera crew filmed us. And they'll see you—your family will see you—in my Hindi movie.'

'Don't speak like that,' he says and strides to the door.

'I didn't know you could be such a bastard,' I spit out. He stops, looks at me, stunned, then leaves the room.

If this was a Hindi movie, there would be loud music as the pure young man escapes from the clutches of the pale woman. And she would throw herself on the ground and weep in gasping little sobs.

I dig the prongs of the fork into the palm of my hand so that the pain will distract me and I hold my breath to stop the hurt. The cook and the waiter watch me from the kitchen as I put the fork down neatly on the table and walk slowly out across the courtyard and up onto the battlements.

The yellow light of our sitting room shines onto the bluestone steps. I stand for a few minutes in the deep battery niche in the wall and then walk around the perimeter of the fort under the full moon, a pale alien that has landed in a hostile place.

*

He picks up my ear rings off the bedside table. Their little gold flowers are laced together with fine silver vines. I had taken them out of my jewellery case last night to look at them in the dreary hours when he slept. He hands them to me. Briskly. And I can't stop myself. I grab his arm and beg him to put off his departure north. If he would only stay two extra days... 'Rachel,' he says stiffly. 'I am going tonight. And I don't want to talk about it.'

My throat is tight.

He sits opposite me. 'They are waiting for me to come home,' he says. 'It is a shocking thing for them that I spend time away, even a few days, let alone three weeks. Don't you understand this?'

I stare at him.

'Last time I rang, my sister cried and said, "Why are you doing this to us? Why aren't you here?"'

I stare at the stranger before me, from another world, and can think of nothing to say.

Neither water nor lamp is pained when the writhing fish dies

Or the moth is burnt to ashes.

Eventually my mouth forms words, 'Yes of course, we have already agreed that you will go.'

'And you have decided to stay on for two nights,' he says, as if reading charges against me. 'We should have left earlier. I could have taken you back to Chennai.'

I sit down on the bed and look at him. 'Why do you torture yourself?' I ask him. 'Why do you punish me? We are here for our three weeks. What do you want?'

But he is on the other bank and would not hear me across the moat. 'Come,' he says. 'We have to go.'

I grab him by the arm. 'Then let's... let's go in to Panijim first and I will have my ears pierced.' I shiver. He says nothing.

We pack and leave the Special Room, the sheets piled up in tangy Himalayan peaks, smelling of seaweed, sweat and sex. I stand in the sharp shadows of the courtyard and do up the top buttons of my dress, the purple rayon, soft, buttoning down the front. The skirt covers my calves. I wrap the dupata around my hair and neck for modesty and against the sun and wind. I rub sun cream onto my throat. Surinder throws things in his bag, frowning. His mind is not with me in the fort, but tied up in the long coil of his turban, in the ancestral whisperings from North India. I listen to the surge of the sea, like the roar of the football crowd at the MCG. I can hear it at home in Melbourne when the wind is from the south, on the other side of the world. When the match is over, the barrackers surge out of the ground, charged with the shouts of winners and curses of the losers. And they go home on the train, wearing the team colours, to cook up some sausages for a barbeque, perhaps with a couple of cold cans of beer. The TV might be on in the lounge room for the stalwarts to watch a replay and the interminable commentaries. Home. Australia. And it is all relaxed. So relaxed.

I sit on the motor bike side-saddle, nicely, my skirt tucked in so that it won't billow along the road. We cut through the thick sunshine on the cliff, plunge down the winding road, down through the spotted shade and flashes of light, under the coconut palms and down into the damp valley. The heat burns my throat and I am sore from sun and sex. I sit stiff and tall, holding onto the bar at the back of my seat. I am careful not to touch his body. The pale woman who has seduced the impeccable young man of the Bollywood movies. She who must be punished.

In the village, we stop by a chai stall. 'I must ring them,' he says over his shoulder and strides off. I watch him go. It is an uneven contest with the family ghosts.

And this is where our Bollywood movie goes off the rails again. Such things happen. Perhaps I want to appal him? Want him to watch another shocking movie? With me a heroine. In charge of events. Want his damn family to see it. A follow-up scene to *The Full Moon at Terekhol*.

*

SURINDER walks off briskly to find an STD phone.

RACHEL waits. Villagers pause and look at her by the temple steps. Small children watch her from behind the chai cart. She watches gaunt chickens peck at the hard,

swept earth around the roots of the tree. She takes out her Polaroid camera and snaps a picture of the solemn children. They cluster around, marvel as they watch the image appear, grab the print and scatter. She sighs and stares up at a papaya sapling, its fruit like full breasts swelling out from the thin trunk. She walks towards the tree into the shade behind a shack.

A slim boy comes out of the shack, legs and shoulders muscular from hauling fishing nets at dawn with the other men of the village.

BOY: Ah, madam. The beautiful lady at the window. At the Terekhol Fort. *He is poised and smiling gently.*

RACHEL: No! *laughing, no, no. She blushes, looking up at the swelling papaya tree and then down at the ground.*

A grey-haired man carries a large drum of fuel out the back of the shack. He swings it from his shoulder down onto the ground. He is broad-chested and there is a family resemblance to the young man who is staring coolly at her breasts. She smiles at them.

THE OLDER MAN *speaks rapidly to the boy in the local Konkani language.*

BOY In our boat, we saw you at the window. At Terekhol. My father wishes a request.

They laugh, the three of them. Rachel breathes in deeply and inhales the saltiness of the nets against the wall while their eyes fondle her body.

I glance through a gap in the palm frond wall of the chai stall. Surinder is still hunched over the desk in the STD booth, a little way up the road, listening to the voices from the north. And how I hate them right now. How I hate his nice family. The chickens peck at my feet. I lift my shoulders and rotate them slowly up and back, stretching my chest and spine and swaying just a little and the men smile. The boy reaches for my camera. A picture.

BOY: A special picture, Madam. *His voice is matter-of-fact.*

She looks around the corner of the stall. No one. She smiles, complicit. The boy waves at a pile of rope-yellow papayas by the door and then brushes the palm of his hand across her breasts. The father gives the order, quietly, and the boy undoes her top

button with care as if he is unhooking a small fish from a tangled line. And he jerks his head for her to follow. She smiles and undoes two more buttons.

You see? This is not the stuff of a Hindi movie.

The father bites his top lip and watches with avidity. He picks up a knife. With a swift stroke, he bends, lifts the papaya, slashes it open, cuts a slice, spills the black shiny seeds on the ground and hands it to Rachel.

OLDER MAN: Eat.

Rachel bites into the yellow flesh as the boy unbuttons the dress to her waist and slowly folds it back. The two men look at her and give a deep sigh. The father steps back and watches her slurp the piece of papaya between her lips. He peels a golden mango and hands it to her then watches the yellow juice running down her chin and onto her bare breasts as she leans forward, her chest out, and she is dripping as the boy aims the camera and clicks. The boy swallows, as if his mouth is dry, as the image whirs out of the camera.

RACHEL: Come, (*tenderly*), you are thirsty. Have some papaya and mango juice.

Nectar of the gods.

She brings the boy's head towards her and his mouth opens. He sucks the sweet yellow juice from her nipples and she gasps as he licks it off the white globe of her breast.

SURINDER *calling out from the road.* Rachel!

Rachel looks at the walkway along by the chai stall. She is panting.

The boy licks the last of the juice from her breast.

RACHEL *cries out and shudders, buttoning her dress.* Coming! *She licks her hands and wrists.*

The script has many possibilities. Some of the themes have been rehearsed in the earlier *Breast Scene at the Summer Palace with Surinder*. She laughs. Perhaps she has a breast fetish. The foreign woman knows the scene's variations. She plays them back in the mornings, listening to the traffic in Chennai in the next few months, or later, to the sound of the magpies on her TV aerial on the other side of the world. Sometimes the scene runs for longer. She always gives the photograph to the men—unwise, you might say—placing her finger over her lips and saying *sshh!* and the old man kisses the photograph as she calls out, 'Coming!' She wipes the back of her hand across her

chin and then dries it on her thigh. That is all she needs to do to tidy up because her breasts are licked and sucked clean. Often she runs the scene so that neither man touches her. It is she who initiates this show, displaying herself to them, watching their craving and moving to it. And indulging her own desire. But always the three are locked in a gentle conspiracy. She plays the versions as she will, spread out, limbs loose and open, on her back on her hand-printed Indian bed sheet, and she shudders on the bed as she watches through the crack in the wall of the chai stall.

*Now my soul cannot rest,
strapped to the wheel of fire.*

Surinder striding down the road, calling her name, as she comes while the boy's mouth is at her breast.

*The berserk clouds have come
without any message from him.
When frogs, peacocks and nightingales sing
and the cuckoo calls wistfully,
when dark descends and lightning strikes,
she who loves is afraid.*

She orgasms, cries out and it sounds like a bird, as Surinder draws closer. She can see him through the crack.

'Rachel?'

And she calls, 'Yes, I'm coming,' and shudders again.

No, this is not the stuff of a Hindi movie, is it? Nor is it an art film about an elegant courtesan.

*

'The piercing,' I whisper in his ear as we climb on the bike. Surinder nods as we swoop down and across the waterways on the ferries, into Panijim. I shiver in the heat and shift my buttocks on the back of the bike. Soon there will be tiny holes in my ears. I breathe and try to stop my stomach from heaving, banish the word 'piercing' from my mind, study the tourists in their shorts, Rajasthani coloured vests and dry, bleached blonde hair.

We find the building, the swirling psychedelic decoration above and around the shop door, oranges, purples and greens, slim-hipped men with Afro hair playing guitars. *Amrita Body Art*. Women in slinky dresses swirling out of clouds, little lamps billowing purple incense.

The studio upstairs is Spartan with a dark-stained floor, Rajasthani mats and a scatter of embroidered cushions with little mirrors. On the wall are framed posters of tattooing conventions. An old hippy lopes forward, a corpulent American with grey thinning hair tied back in a pony tail, wearing an Indian shirt and Levis.

I have my camera. I will not vomit.

I comment on the posters. Yes, he has been interested in body modification for years. His real passion is tattooing. These days, there is such a creative view of body art. He goes to tattoo conventions, Derby in England and Boston in the US, sponsored by rock bands and promoters.

There is a picture of a beautiful woman on the wall, scanty clothing, gothic, black eye make-up, pale skin with fine filigreed lines of vines and tiny leaves on her upper arms, tiny curling lines on her cheekbones. The poster is dark. A wave of nausea almost swamps me. I raise my camera and take a couple of shots to distract myself.

I sit on a cushion, cross-legged on the floor. Elwood inspects my ears, heaves himself up and clanks about in a recessed area behind a tie-dyed curtain. 'I don't think I can go through with it,' I whisper to Surinder.

Surinder pushes a strand of hair off my face and tucks it behind my ear. 'It will please me greatly,' he whispers. Surinder has not asked much of me.

The piercer squats beside me, arranging his gun, a packet of latex gloves, swabs and alcohol on a stainless steel tray. 'You're pale. Lie down,' he says to me, handing Surinder an immaculate white hand-loomed little towel, heaving himself up and padding back through the curtain.

I give the camera to Surinder.

He spreads the towel under my head, and lowers me down onto the cushion, kisses me deeply as my torturer pours a potion in his alcove and brings it for me to drink, the bottle in the other hand. I gulp the bucket of bourbon and feel the warm waves through my head and chest.

'Make her comfortable,' Elwood says and Surinder lays me down on the cushions, turning my head to one side and stroking my hair. He kisses me and I hear the snap of the latex gloves settling around Elwood's big hands. 'Enjoy the terror,' he says jovially. I watch the coiled snakes on his arm as he takes my ear lobe. The gun pings and I have a tiny burning feeling in my ear.

'Three more?' asks Surinder. I nod. Then again, a volley three times on the rim of my ear. Elwood tears open a tiny packet and swabs the holes. I take a deep breath, on the edge of fainting, fear, arousal even, as the rings are being slid in.

'Relax. Relax,' Surinder whispers, turning my head and stroking my hair and neck, kissing me on the forehead. I look at the poster on the wall, a skull with snakes crawling out, intertwined like the intricate patterns of Celtic design. Elwood turns and pours another whiskey. 'You will wear my ornaments,' Surinder whispers close to my ear. I gulp down the whiskey. Surinder kisses me again, holds my head, and I nod.

There is a hum in the room as I am pierced again, four times rapidly, in the other ear and desire rides on the wave of revulsion that sweeps me. Elwood swabs the piercings and puts little gold sleepers in each hole. 'The ones that hate it get to love it,' he says with feeling, clearing his tray away and standing above us. 'She needs some pampering,' he says, 'I'll go for some coffees.' He grins and winks and as we hear his heavy step on the stairs, Surinder picks up the camera, takes a shot, kisses my ears, tells me how beautiful they look and caresses me.

He pampers my body for some time, telling me that I must wear more of his ornaments, until we are interrupted by clumping and whistling on the stairs and Elwood rears up with our coffees. We compose ourselves and I am delirious and swamped with a torrent of euphoria and horror, at his touch, and for what I have done.

*

In our silken tent My Lord plucks grapes from a plump bunch, purple on a silver plate. Some he eats and some he drops distractedly around us. We have been camping by the river for some days after the privations of the mutt. It was my idea to pitch a pavilion in the wilderness. The holiday has made him more relaxed. I watch and cajole him into dallying a little longer, so that I can read to him one last time in our bower. I have little time to achieve my dream.

Our departure is imminent. We must leave our heaven and return to the whispers and machinations of the court. General Manoji has sent messengers galloping from Tanjavur to say that the city is restless, plots are hatching while the King is away. And I pray that My Lord will maintain a balance, with the spiritual lift of the pilgrimage and my determined devotion to support him. And like Radha and Krishna, we will conquer the forces of darkness.

I pick up the book, stroking the leather binding. We have reached the part where Madhevi, distraught at the rejection by Kovalan, writes him a letter:

*A long white screwpine petal she selected
and wrote thereon what her heart dictated,
putting the point of a jasmine bud to use,
dipped in crimson flower juice.
'The Prince of Spring presides over the joyous mating
of every sentient being;
and the moon is no better, aggravating
the pain of loneliness revived at nightfall;
when lovers cease from union, satiate,
and when parted ones remain obdurate,
the love god's flower-decked arrows pierce them fatally;
knowing this, come and save me.'*

I pause. Tears well in my eyes for the ill-fated Madhevi.

I read on. Madhevi sends the letter with her maid. But Kovalan is unmoved. He believes that Madhevi is acting. After all, that is her profession. He says to the maid:

*'Erotically aroused, at the onset of twilight
and hungering for the food of love,
repeating words like a parrot,
mincing her steps like a swan,
flaunting her splendour like a peacock,
and putting on the modesty of a maid,
with long piercing eyes, she gave herself
wholly to me in a hidden bower;
I have seen through this guise also.*

'Ah, the beautiful Madhevi,' says My Lord, pushing another grape between his lips and staring at the flapping roof of our tent. I dry my eyes with my sari end and lean just a little forward as I read, so that my breast is level with his eye. He must not sigh for another dancer when I am here, even a fictional character in an epic. He moves and his temple grazes against my nipple.

I read on. Madhevi receives the news that Kovalan has rejected her:

*Hurt beyond words, Madhevi lay reclined
on the flower-strewn divan that hurt;
she did not close her long, flower-like eyes
and she sighed the endless night through.*

I want to weep with Madhevi, as she is abandoned by her Lord. But I continue her story, moving my body slightly, my voice and my nipple subtly caressing My Lord. He sighs and absently brings his face to my breast, rubs his cheek, a feather touch, against my nipple. I shiver and keep my voice even.

*The red lotuses opened their petals wide,
sweet mango trees put forth tender leaves,
pretty acoka trees put forth tender leaves,
spring was all round with a riot of blooms;
only Madhevi of sharp spear-like eyes
lay wilted, blasted by Kovalan's cruelty.*

Madhevi is losing her Lord, and I am afraid for myself. How long before my Pratapasimha tires of the arts of his Muddupalani? I try to hide my tears, for is this not what we are trained to do, to dissemble? And why am I, a young girl with great prospects, in fear for my future? My Pratapasimha has pushed a finger inside the *pallu* of my sari, pulled it aside as his lips open. He gazes upon my breast and I give him my nipple, my back arching as I breathe in and my solar plexus is full of the strength of a ganika.

Yes, My Lord's gaze is reverent. For does not everyone know? *The King gains his power from gazing upon the breast of a heavenly ganika.*

*

I had prayed at the mutt that I would be taken by My Lord, for that is my fate as a ganika, so far withheld from me by the gods.

At first, I could not bear the worried stares of my Ammama and Amma after the first night with My Lord. From the whispers and head shaking, I was a failure. Of course, they discussed it endlessly, Ammama had made discreet inquiries regarding the King's amorous activities with the residents of the Mangalavilasam. But it would be in the interests of a wife to dissemble and pretend. The pressure to produce heirs, legitimate or bastard, was intense. And, in my case, the pressure to allure weighed down in the same way.

Two days later, My Lord had called me and I was sick with desire and anticipation. What did my body care if My Lord pleased me in every way but the act of entering me? My sex had strained towards his lingam, even though I was already sated, over and over, to the point of exhaustion, by his hands and his mouth on me and in me. The worry about my maidenhead was purely professional.

When they collected me in the palanquin after the second night, they leaned forward and asked me sharply, 'Did he take your maidenhead this time? Did he?' I was, after all, an investment.

And I nodded and blushed, looking excited and triumphant, using the skills of deception that they had taught me.

And when will he call for you again?'

'Tonight.' I blushed and simpered.

There were great celebrations and I succumbed and bathed in the warm approval of their smiles.

And still, on the river bank, months later, I was a virgin ganika.

But I must help My Lord to let go of the weight of his responsibilities.

I took him into the forest where we collected sticks and logs, lit a fire, watching the red flames consuming the wood as the great Kaveri flowed by.

We lay on cushions in each other's arms on a rug by the fire and I followed the moulding of his smooth black limbs, soft like a lotus. I must be gentle with him. For so long, I have heard his shuddering and groaning in the nights and now I wanted him to play with me, among the sticks and stones by the river, my groin heavy with desire to open myself to him. I removed all my ornaments, unhooking, piling them into a great mound. My gold belt fell heavily on the tangle of precious gold. Then I

pushed Pratapasimha over onto his back. I carefully undid all his royal chains and precious gems. Beads of sweat lay on our skin. He opened his crystal eyes and we looked at each other in the terror of our nakedness. He rolled me over, skin on skin. His hands slid up to draw back my hair and his mouth moved to my neck.

I clung to him and touched him until he shook with desire. Our bodies smooth and nude.

'O, my love.'

'Muddu, I want to take you,' he said, thrusting into my unadorned body so that pale blood and juice flowed from my yoni.

Our attendants are closing in. Our camp is being dismantled. The only part left is the silk tent. Our horses are saddled and we must gird ourselves again in gold and leave this dream to rejoin the world.

*

She stands dripping in a towel and looks at him. They are at the hotel he has found for her. He flips through a sketch book as he sits on the bed and looks at pictures of Rachel.

In the Special Room at Terekhol he had asked her to model for him. In the first picture, she is sprawled, her body slightly twisted, the silver of the ornaments gleaming dully on skin that has the texture of pastel, a pinkish white, with cloud-grey shadows under the crescents of her breasts and in the cup of her armpit. Her eyes are closed and mouth slightly open. There is shading where the bed sheet outlines her legs and the corner of the sheet just covering her sex.

Surinder turns the page and studies another picture. Rachel lies in the same position, but the sheet has been pulled down, below the black suede tangle of her pubic hair. The yoni is exaggeratedly open, the lips apart, the pink bud of the clitoris protruding.

And there is a faint smile on Surinder's face. Rachel stands alone and watches him aroused by the pictures of her. She walks forward, still dripping on the floor. He catches sight of her and his expression snaps back to the detachment he has assumed since the full moon at Terekhol. Her body stiffens with rage. She grabs the drawing, panting, and her towel drops to the floor, her hands shaking so much that she is almost

incapable of ripping it to shreds. He watches her, uncomprehending. 'You,' she pants, 'you look at this image of me with... with excitement, and you have nothing, nothing but coldness for me, here, right here, before you.'

She pulls at her ear rings and drags them from her lobes and it takes so long with her trembling.

'This holiday with you... you asked me to come.' She tries to undo her bracelets, but can't work the tiny catches. She holds out her wrists. 'Undo them. Go on.' He looks at her and shakes his head and she wonders if her face is red and blotchy, frightening. 'Do it. Do it!' she screams. He unfastens the silver chains. She grabs them from him and flings them on the bed with the ear rings, then grapples with the anklets and throws those on the pile. She breathes in and holds her breath. 'Go,' she says. 'Just go. And take this stuff with you.' She points at the bed, turns and walks into the bathroom, quivering, fist in her mouth, sits on the cold white tiles, waiting to hear the door of the room close.

When he is gone, she dries her unornamented body, moves into the room and throws herself on the bed to sleep. There is no jewellery left on the sheet to puncture her skin, he must have taken it with him.

Rachel is on the train to Chennai, in the ladies' compartment. She has eluded detailed conversation with all of her companions, except for one woman who tells the story of the marriages in her family. When they settle for the night on their sleeper beds, Rachel dreams a scene in which Surinder's family disapprove of her. She cries and misses him. She has a brief dream of Muddupalani and her 'silver project'.

*

We are at the Summer Palace. I am still smarting at My Lord's reference to Madhevi and the way she would adorn herself. Yes, it was some time ago. And I am carrying out the first stage of my plan here with the backing of General Manoji who knows nothing of the detail.

The pavilion is exquisite. Why refit the house of another? you may ask. Well, it is a tiny area and the challenge not too large. I have marked out the territory as mine, just as a tigress would maintain an area of cool jungle for her own, in the face of marauding wild creatures.

The inner circle arrives from Tanjavur, their talons and claws neatly filed, bobbing through the terrain in their palanquins and the stream of pack animals groaning under the loads—of silks and satins, veenas and sitars, fragrant ointments and poetry—to wallow and sport by the cool river. The ladies are to be installed here during the troubles in the city and the men who can be spared accompany them. Small throngs can jostle and congregate in the other pavilion on the far side of the steps, to catch the air as it rises from the water. They will crane their necks if My Lord and I are absent from their company in the hope of spontaneous diversion, rare in our time, to see what erotic entertainment they may glimpse through our diaphanous screen.

I have worked hard. A ganika who is the mistress of the King does not lie around all day in a fug of incense and heady oils.

It is almost the end of this terrible year, halfway through the century. We have survived an attack by the French and Chanda Saheb. They breached a wall with their cannon and their troops swarmed into our northern tower. The King has agreed to parley with the aggressors, but his behaviour is inconsistent and he may order a foolish attack before we are ready. The General has other ideas.

That pallid snake-in-the-grass Frenchman, M Duquesne, was the spokesman with Chanda Saheb. They appeared from their encampment at the Marriyamman Temple with a list of demands that include thousands of pagodas in tribute. My Lord made a counter offer and Manoji prolongs negotiations, as he waits for English and Dutch soldiers to swell our numbers. We will be reinforced, he says, and there will be the sight of the English flag, which may impress our foes and indicate a growing interest from other foreigners in our fate. Manoji had bailed me up in the corridor outside My Lord's chambers and said that we are mobilising 4,000 horse, 30,000 foot soldiers. Perhaps I should take My Lord to the Summer Palace for a couple of days, while the negotiations drag on and we wait for the foreign troops.

The timing is perfect. My Lord is a brave warrior, but his shaking and moaning has increased with the tensions of the time. And I have faith in the General's practical knowledge of the affairs of state. As long as I do not displease My Lord or be seen to be in cahoots with Manoji against him.

But I digress. My work on this diversion in the pavilion of the Summer Palace is most timely.

My Lord arrives now for our quiet evening, with his new poem to read to me and a copy of the *Silipadikaram*, as I hoped he would.

I sigh and sink back into the pale blue silks of the enormous pillows, re-fluffed, deliciously soft as My Lord's gaze slides over my body and its adornments, then over the sky blue silk chiffon curtains that drift in the slight movement of the air, and the pearls and silver bells at the hem, weighing them so slightly that they swell a little and then come to rest on the fine lines of grape vines. Yes, there is a touch of green among the blues and tiny silver lotuses of the silk carpet. I have refitted the pavilion exquisitely—with the permission of the Queen, of course.

He has a calm demeanour, despite the pressures of the court and the harassment of our enemies, and I can see that he is excited by this blue paradise.

I recline in the frigid blue and silver scene under the full moon among the cushions, draped in a film of silk chiffon that covers me from the toes to the throat. My Lord bends, catches the corner between finger and thumb and pulls, dragging the flimsy cloth, so that I am revealed in my ornaments.

I lie before him, my arms ringed with silver amulets, my wrists with bracelets and bangles in silver and glass. Yes, silver. My throat is encased in a wide silver collar and my breasts in cones of fine silver chain mail as if it is crocheted, joined in the middle by a brooch studded with moonstones. I move my ankles a little and tiny flakes of silver tinkle as I move. My hair is dressed with jasmine flowers in silver filigree, and tiny silver chains are draped between my ear rings and the diamond studded nose ring. From the girdle wrapped around my hips hangs a triangle of silver fabric of fine chain mail like a tiny pointed handkerchief. 'Ah,' sighs My Lord as he kneels in front of me in the moonlight, 'I will have you now. No time for preludes.' He grabs at the girdle and unhooks it expertly. He looks surprised, amazed at my new French ornament. Attached to a tight band that encircles me is a strip of silver that covers my sex, and hides the labia. Another narrow band goes between the cheeks of my buttocks to join the girdle at the back. He opens my legs and leans over me. His phallus grazes my knee as he examines the device, searching for the hook to remove it. He looks at my face. I am not ready to provide clues. He pulls at the contraption, surprised at its strength. I nearly laugh, but my good training in *abinhaya* enables me to gaze at him appealingly, as if to say, please My Lord and Master, I burn with desire, unchain me from these things and take me. Then he spies the little recessed

hinged door between my legs. He fumbles it open and sees the lock. I continue to gaze at him this time triumphantly, or I hope it is a look of triumph. We have not been taught such an expression. 'Where is it?' he asks, his voice thick. 'I want the key.'

'It is lost,' I say. 'Find it for me,' I am shocked at the tone of command in my voice. 'It has probably dropped and is lodged somewhere.' He scrambles around and looks on the carpet and under the cushions. I shake my head and invite him to me with my eyes. He feels around urgently in the cones that hold my breasts, checks the crystals on my ankles for tiny keys, the amulets on my upper arms, the filigree in my hair. Then he sees the smile on my face and begins to look in my body, beginning with my ears and my mouth, feeling around urgently. 'You are not helping,' he mutters. I look at him with pity and roll over onto my stomach or my back. He gasps and, moves the silver band, explores, 'tell me where it is,' he hisses, his hands moving over and into me. I am excited, but my abinhaya lessons are valuable in a way that I have never used them before.

He has forgotten the flowers in my black coils of hair. He tears a frangipani apart, seizes the key, moves me over onto my back and opens the little trap door. His hand shakes and he has to take a deep breath as he inserts the key and turns it. The metal snaps open and I raise my hips as he tears the chastity belt from my body and stabs into me.

Dupleix's mistress had ordered my new ornament from Paris and it needed little alteration from our silversmiths. Before all these troubles with Pondicherry, of course. I am not one to plot with the enemy.

As we lie touching each other in the moonlight, I tell My Lord about the Christian knights of the Sangam period in Europe who would lock up the yonis of their wives and go to war against the infidels. He roars with laughter and vows to do the same with his ganika. 'And what of the silver?' he asks. 'It is a thrilling scene—your body in the blue and silver of the moon, your ornaments. Such... exquisite beauty and taste. You have excited me greatly, but... silver!'

'Ah,' I say. 'That is where Madhevi excelled. She had taste, too, a mythical woman with unlimited resources to ornament herself and create legends. Real women are not often as fortunate.'

My Lord laughs and pulls me to him. 'Talk to the goldsmiths tomorrow,' he says, 'and create some jewellery that will establish the legend of Muddupalani.' And he begins the game of love anew.

There is rustling and whispering in the other pavilion. The courtiers are jostling for position to take in the erotic play of poetry and the body.

And I give thanks to Shiva and the Swamigal at Kanchipuram that they have restored My Lord to health and a robust appreciation of his ganika.

Part Two

Deliverance is not for me in renunciation.

*I feel the embrace of freedom
in a thousand bonds of delight.*

Rabindranath Tagore

Gitanjali

Back in Chennai, Rachel meets Tata. There is awkwardness: by going off to Goa, she has missed out on the research opportunities he arranged for her. He comments pointedly on all the silver jewellery she wears. (She had found all the pieces in her bag when she took the train back to Chennai. Surinder must have put them there before they parted in Goa.) Tata is angry, but will help her for the sake of the dancers. As a peace-making gesture, he suggests a trip to an ice-cream parlour.

'You must watch your figure,' I tell him reproachfully, as he gives a haughty wave to the young man in the ice cream parlour '50s American uniform. 'Or you will move like a sack of potatoes when you dance.'

'Rice,' he says tartly. 'This is South India. A sack of rice. We are not dedicated potato people like you.'

It is dark when we waddle out of the brightly-lit Palace of wicked delights.

'Surinder should be back in a few days,' he says.

I nod and look the other way, hoping that my blush is not noticeable.

'Kamala maintains that he has had some tiff with his family,' Tata continues. 'Relatives can be tedious, with their gossipy stories. When they start, I just turn the music up to a higher volume. Kamala is frantic, though. It seems that her father is dying. She has always been hopeful of a reconciliation—what with her marrying outside the Sikh fold, and one thing and another. She has had Surinder as an emissary all these years, back and forth to the north, so to speak. There has been some movement. That rambunctious big uncle from the Archaeological crowd talked the old man into receiving Saraswati. She is there now. That foray to Chandigarh is a coup for Kamala.'

I smile. How irritating it must be for Surinder to have his cousin twittering around for a week, but then, he is accommodating. And he is attached to Kamala and his grandfather.

Tata drops me back at my stark hotel near the university. 'Continue the hard work,' he says, like a general at the Front, urging on his troops.

The little bells on my anklets tinkle as I climb out of the car.

On the train, I had woken just before we arrived in Chennai. I rummaged in my bag for toothbrush, towel and soap to go to the hand basin at the end of the carriage. My hands came upon a box. I lifted the lid. Inside, there was a jumble of silver—ear

rings, bangles, anklets, bracelets, necklaces and a new piece, a creamy pearl on a curly piece of silver that must be a nose ring. Of course, I should have tossed the lot out the train window.

Dearest Rachel,

Yes, I received your note and, of course, I want to see you. But, having said this, I must be honest and tell you that, while I love you, we have no future together. I'm sure that you understand that. The illness of my grandfather has brought back to me my family responsibilities with even greater force. I am also making every effort on Kamala's behalf. It all weighs heavily on me, especially as I have now learned something of freedom.

I have missed you so much.

With love from

Surinder

PS. I have never heard of the hotel, but your directions should get me there.

*

The balcony of the Mayapuri Hotel is dark. If it was a film set, the lighting man has not arrived yet to bring up the silvers and the black and grey shadows, with tree tops roiling and coiling under a flat moon. The night has cooled down and I enjoy the cool marble floor under the soles of my feet. I spread my toes and the loose night dress touches my skin in the slight breeze.

The old retainer has let me in to the room that I have booked for the night, then departed with a soft click of the door, the signature discretion of the place. Tata had mentioned the Mayapuri Hotel, with a nostalgic smile. It was a place of mystery, cars waiting at the tall gates, gliding up the driveway, disgorging shadowy figures for assignations. It was established in the flapper era by a cross-dressing retired colonel. There are photographs in the dimly-lit corridors of masked revellers in costume with champagne in their hands.

I look at myself in the mirror, at the satiny, cream silk, the softest that I could find, cut on the cross so that it clings and flares slightly at the hem. Like the evening dresses in the French film *Last Year at Marienbad*, with its mirrors, corridors,

ambiguities, amnesia, muddled memories, illusions of debonair smooth-haired men and slinky women. The dress has thin straps and a low neck that just covers my nipples. My hair is long enough to fluff out, shiny and slightly curly, but I oil it and pull it back into a comb, in waves like the woman in the film, but leaving a couple of strands curling at my neck and around my face, like cords. I wear the ornaments that Surinder has given me and look in the mirror, wondering who this woman is.

She has lost weight. Her kohl-rimmed eyes look larger than usual. Does she resemble an anorexic model? Gems glint in her ears. The tiny bells of her anklets tinkle. Thin face and glittering eyes. Hot hot skin.

There is a tap at the door. The woman in the mirror waits. It is Surinder. His smile changes and his face is intense as he moves towards her, taking her in his arms and bending her body, kissing her on the neck, the cheeks and the lips. 'It has been the longest three weeks of my life,' he says, his voice muffled in her mouth. He stands back and looks at her, from her oiled hair to her painted toes. He runs his finger along her eyebrow, down the bridge of her nose and says her name as he pulls gently on the tiny pearl, set in the curl above her nostril. That woman in the mirror at the Mayapuri, the hotel of illusions.

He slides the narrow straps off my shoulders, the dress falls and I stand before him. His hands are hard on my body and he tells me I am like a pearl, creamy and ravishing, in my ornaments.

I groan and sigh as we touch each other: Mmm! Uhhh! Oohhh! Mmm! And I am swooning, but seducing this man who must desire me and we must reach the pinnacles of passion. I will use my body, dance, stroke, suck, receive his cock into me, deliver myself up to him to be pierced and loved. I will wallow and be suspended, but I will choreograph.

His hands are between my legs and I groan and recite Muddupalani, pausing when I need to gasp, shouting or whispering, as I am able, a commentary of flesh and juice. 'Mmm,' I groan.

Mmm!

uhhh!

oohhh!

mmm!

ohh! Wonderful!
On a bed
strewn with flowers,
like two furious elephants
the Master of Passion
saying, 'You're incredible!'
Together we
begin the game
of Love.
Moaning
sexy words,
scratching with
knife-sharp nails,
your hand pushing
into me.
Gripping me tightly,
you slipped off my dress,
softly,
caressing my breasts
gently.
You push
against my body,
grabbing my hair
in your fist.
Covering my strong thighs
with your own,
you shove and heave,
pausing and then
pushing so hard,
so suddenly,
teasing,
laughing,
sucking,

*teasing more,
going further
and further,
Radha and Madhav
play each other's bodies.
In ecstasy,
we reach
the rapturous peak
of the love god, Manmatha,
and die
together,
conquerors
both.*

I recite the words. I impersonate the writer, I orchestrate the commentary, in time to the rhythms and tones, the notes as we play each other's bodies. Muddupalani. I laugh. *And die together...* and I float in the release, the syncopation, my breathing still. If I draw in air or sigh or move, the space will open to the next beat when I will fall and, later, he will go. *Conquerors both.* We are spent. And I want him to open his eyes and say, 'You are my Muddupalani.'

*

I lie on the silk sheets and wait for him to come back to me and I remember the second time I was chosen. I never want to think about the first time, many years before.

I lounged in the palanquin, with Grandmother jangling and tinkling beside me, bedecked in her heavy ornaments. Mine were discreet, merely the jasmine and seed pearls woven into my hair, fine gold chain anklets and bangles, tiny diamond stud earrings. For our visit to the Wives' Palace.

I sank back further into the cushions and watched through the crack in the curtain, the coconut palms waving in the wind, the carriages with their fine horses; mounted Maratha soldiers in their dhotis, tunics and bright turbans; a veena maker, strolling along, carrying his instrument down our street, delivering the swelling shape in its yellow cotton wrap to a dancer's house nearby. My body was a bundle of tired

bones, kept neatly in place by my overworked muscles. That's how a girl feels after her *arangetram*, Amma had told me, knowingly. A debut is always like that.

The music hall had been crammed. Many at court had heard of the new girl in our house and the rumour was—no doubt helped by Ammama and the Queen Mother—that I had been groomed for Pratapasimha himself. It was not just my talent, I realised much later, but the close friendship between Ammama and Anaburnabai that had launched me. Ammama often met the Queen at the Mangalavilasam and the two of them whispered and shook their heads, plotting, as women do, to maintain their positions in a man's world. And, five years ago, when the power struggle had occurred on the death of Pratapasimha's father, it was Ammama who had encouraged Anaburnabai to be tough, to hold fast against the murder of her other son, a 'bastard' pretender to the throne. Anaburnabai, Maratha, darker-skinned, married to the sword, not to the person of the King, in the local temple. And Anaburnabai had prevailed. Her Pratapasimha was King.

Ammama smiled at me and I was glad that I had not tripped over my feet or puffed and panted like an overweight elephant. I had danced for the yellow bird, for the beautiful lady in the mist of heady scents who rescued me, but that was a long time ago and, as I said, I prefer not to think about that time. My body moved for the mild young man, the King, before me. I must hold him with my eyes and never let him go. And I had stolen a secret glance at him while his mother asked us to visit her at the Mangalavilasam. He had become a stolid young man, big, perhaps a little plump, a thickness around the jowls for one so young. But more attention to his sword play should tone up the body of My Lord. I smiled to myself. Here I was becoming proprietary. My Lord, indeed. And I was not yet his.

The palanquin bounced gently on the bamboo poles shouldered by our bearers and I was lulled by the sway. My hand moved up to the pearls and jasmine. I found a long strand of hair and pulled it out, a fine lock and I twirled it around and around my finger and gave it a little jerk. 'Muddu,' said Ammama sternly, 'no twirling. You will go bald on one side.' But I was exhausted and nervous. The ladies were to discuss my future. But that is something else that I prefer not to think about. My eyes must have been big and serious, because Ammama chuckled and said, 'Sweet one, there is no need to be afraid. It is all arranged. Except for the detail.' The detail—the kilos of gold that she would receive from the King. I tried to relax.

Our bearers swung around and lowered us onto the stones of the courtyard. The fountain in the middle played gently, the droplets catching the bright sunlight. A servant scooped from the water leaves that had fallen from the mango tree. We climbed down and I wondered if some stain would show on my new fine silk sari, in the palest peach with gold edges. It was the third time that I had menstruated, my organs hardened into a stone that sat inside me above the new pubic hair that sprouted gaily around my sex. And the blood chugged slowly through my veins and two thin pains shivered along points inside my hip bones. I wanted to lie on the low wall by the fountain, one hand trailing in the water, but arrangements were to be made and one must have a sense of occasion.

The Queen Mother, Anaburnabai, was gracious. I bowed, made the *Namaste* prayer position and touched her feet respectfully. Then I flickered a glance at her, as she announced to my grandmother that I was the new sweet young flower of our house. We sat for some time and took pomegranate juice and I was careful in the grace of my movements and my face. I could not understand everything that Anaburnabai said. Sometimes she switched from Telugu to Marathi, for she is a Maratha. The kings will always have a paler, Telugu first wife, who will bear the heir to the kingdom. Ammama told me so. Anaburnabai was plump and comely with large breasts and a small waist, and she stared and blinked as if she had an eyelash in her eye. There were four wives altogether, married to the sword. I watched her innocently, but really knowingly, for I had pieced information together from listening to the undertones of ladies' talk. Sometimes they would remember that I was there, on the floor, where I had slid down in the silken cushions. At some interesting time in the conversation, they would say, 'Muddu, you must go now. The discussion is for ladies only.' And I knew that it must be exciting, what they would say, with no girls allowed.

Finally, I was dismissed by Ammama, so that they could speak of wondrous ornaments and the gold pagodas and silver rupees that the King would graciously bestow on us, as the first man in my life, for whom I would dance, sing and recite, tantalise with my conversation. I would spread the paste, grate the areca nut, wrap it all in a leaf of the most artful shape and feed him the most juicy and spicy *pan*. Massage him with luxurious oils and pleasure in all ways, for he was now My Lord. I wandered from the room that was heavy with the weight of rich brocades and sweet incense of the Wives' Palace.

A breeze sprayed water from the fountain onto the stones and across my aching feet. I sat down on a small patch of carefully clipped grass and closed my eyes, with the feathery shadow and drifting water playing gently on my face. And the blood in my body hummed and pulsed heavily like the drone of the *tanpura*, its strings plucked so slowly. I sighed. I was the new ganika for the great King, Pratapasimha, who was young and elegant like the exquisite Lord Krishna.

My head was nodding and I leaned against the tree. Someone coughed. I jerked and popped my eyes open. Govinda stood on the other side of the fountain, the sweet boy who had used his fists in defence of my honour.

He had chased some boys who threatened me in the street as I returned from a dance class at Guruji's, urchins who said bad things about ganikas. I had lost an ankle bell then. Govinda had found it and returned it to me.

Govinda laughed at the surprised expression on my face when I woke in the courtyard and I laughed too, forgetting to mould my face to a sentiment of yearning or to fling a glance of allure across the bubbling water. He pulled something from his pocket and held it up in the rainbow spray of the fountain. It was a tiny brass ankle bell. And it had fine tracings of vine tendrils and tiny leaves. He waved it in front of me, kissed it with a flutter of his long lashes, eyes rolled back in his head, a grotesque parody of devotion, then with a shaking hand, he placed it back reverently in the breast pocket of his tunic. We chortled and hooted and my face screwed up and relaxed as it has not done for so long, there under the tree. Our laughter echoed against the stones of the Mangalavilasam and the tears formed in my eyes. There was the murmur of ladies and my grandmother's throaty laugh. I rose and sat demurely on the side of the fountain, with a quick loud snuffle because my nose had run with the abandon of my happiness. Govinda winked at me and disappeared in the door with a message no doubt from the King to his ladies, looking dignified but jaunty in his court dress, his curly hair escaping from under a casually wound red turban. He is the nephew of the Prime Minister, of the Nayyaka family.

Ammama gestured. I moved forward with grace and flair, touched the ground in front of Anaburnabai and we departed in our palanquin, with my grandmother humming contentedly. I peeped through the curtain, hoping to catch a glimpse of Govinda leaving the Palace, but instead, I saw Pratapasimha's new young wife,

looking at me from the first floor window and, while her skin was pale, there was a dark brooding in the expression on her delicate face. I must take care.

*

Whispers and laughter float in through the balcony door. The dense cyprus trees sigh, muffling the sound of the city with their foliage. Figures appear on the balconies. Champagne glasses clink. A dancer arrives in a car, bedecked, a jewel. A plump singer caressing the strings of her veena. From rooms nearby, plaintive voices call to Krishna.

I lie on the silk sheets in my suite at the Mayapuri and wait for Surinder. It is several days since he has come. He has left a message that he will visit me tonight and I have prepared myself for my lover.

The tailor has made me another dress. It is silk, purple like a grape, the neck draping, but lower, barely covering my nipples. And I have a surprise for Surinder.

The door rattles and opens. I straighten, turn and draw in a breath. My hair is bushy in the humid air. Surinder has a determined expression that falters every so often. I hold my breath and feel that I will suffocate unless I feel his hands on my flesh.

He looks at me and sighs, pain on his face as he strides forward, so that I cry out with the tension of my uncertainty. He holds me, kisses my face, pulls my hair back in a thick rope around his hand, lets go, puts his hands into the loose top of my dress and feels my breasts, looks at them and feels my right nipple again, the ring that I have there now. He takes in a jagged, long breath. Twice more I have had a needle thrust through my skin.

Then he pulls out from his pockets silver ropes and clips bracelets to my wrists and lashes another necklace around my neck. He hooks the clasps at the back and his finger move along my jaw line and down to the knobs of bones in my throat where the rope sits.

The chains are still around my neck.

Then he looks and looks at me and his tongue and mouth and fingers play with the ring in my hard nipple. And I stand. The new silver rope is tight around my neck

with its dull glow, the scales of a snake that settles like a taipan in the hollows of my throat.

Charcoal drawings lie on the Rajasthani carpets and rows of photographs. We have barely left the room, but we have not been idle. The traffic hums beyond the walls of the Mayapuri. The days pass. I can barely open my notebook to write. I am too busy, with my oils and unguents, sweets to slip into the mouth, luscious fruit to lick and savour and make patterns, writing on our bodies. Dreaming of the Dark Lord.

I yawn. I must learn how to make pan for my lover, how finely to chop the areca nut, the dexterous spreading of the paste, neat rolling up in the betel leaves, the slide of it between his lips.

*

My Lord sits in the scriptorium among his scribes and librarians on a silk cushion, feeling the surface of a palm leaf with the tips of his finger. 'Madam,' he says briskly, 'I am at your service. If you are to follow your dream, we must begin.' He bends the slat in his hands to test its flexibility. 'Lord Krishna appeared to you?'

I nod. 'He ordered me to write a poem in His honour.'

He shifts on his cushion. 'Well,' he says, with a twinkling eye, 'here is my divine self, awaiting your words, Madam. It is unfortunate that you did not begin this enterprise weeks ago. We have a celebration in only a few days.'

It will be My Lord's thirty-eighth birthday. 'Ah, My Lord,' I say, 'my Ammama and your respected mother, Anaburnabai, have arranged an exquisite entertainment.' I drop my eyes modestly. 'And, of course, I will dance for you.'

I smile. Pratapasimha coughs and turns the leaf over. I do not wonder at the time that he fails to answer me. He should have told me of his satisfaction that his ganika will dance for him on that special day. Instead, he is inspecting the other side of the palm leaf with a professional eye.

A scent of citronella drifts over us. He peers at the surface, throws the leaf down and claps his hands. The junior scribe rushes forward with more leaves. It is years now since I had the idea for writing this work. Sixteen years? And much has happened since then. Since I was a girl of nineteen. And in my maturity there is no time to lose, I must be a shining literary star.

Three men squat by the window, deftly cleaning the manuscripts. One loosens the dust with a squirrel-hairbrush, another wipes the surface with a damp cloth, and the third lays the slats out to dry. My Lord is shouting orders. There is fear in the scriptorium. They have heard of the King's wild rages. Dread seeps through the Palace.

'And have they been cured for three months?' He snaps. The apprentices shoot imploring looks and the master leaf man assures the King that the leaves have been buried in marshy water at the edge of the tank for four months in preparation for the royal stylus.

A group of round-eyed conservators work huddled in the far corner, their heads jerking slightly. One unties the bundle of a manuscript, separates the leaves, holds them up to the light for inspection and passes them on to the conservator who smears the surface with the black paste of coconut juice mixed with wood charcoal. The inspector holds up a slat. Squiggly holes riddle the surface, the shape of the creatures that have eaten them. The group glances furtively at My Lord and hastily hide the offending leaf. Too late. My Lord's vigilant eye brings them undone. 'Bookworm!' he roars. 'I will not abide worms tunnelling through the bundles in my library.' And the conservator wallahs apply the preservative pastes with increased vigour, their hands in a blur of activity. The fumes of camphor oil, citronella and lemon grass oil waft through the room. They dread finding a leaf that has lost its flexibility, and pray fervently to the gods that no leaf will be brittle enough to fall apart in the royal presence.

My Lord tests the point of his stylus, leaving a tiny dint on his right forefinger. He leans forward over a long leaf slat laid out on the stone before him. This is a man ready for work. 'Come, this is standard, surely,' he says.

I begin my salute to the gods. My Lord corrects my syntax when it is defective. I watch the tip of his stylus inscribing tiny marks on the firm surface of the long leaf. I reel off the names of the gods. The muscles move on the backs of his large hands, controlling the minute curlicues on the surface before him.

I must pull myself together, overcome an uneasiness that I feel. Krishna called me long ago to tell the story of Radha and a ganika in her prime must have—simply must have—literary allure.

Also, I have an appointment with the goldsmiths later today for the second part of my plan.

I move out into the light. The words tumble into groups and lines. I speak and My Lord Pratapasimha inscribes:

In my dream one day

I saw the child Krishna

clad in a golden dhoti,

His colour charminerchaya

like a storm cloud,

not fair, not black.

A pearl pierces His nose,

vermilion marks His forehead.

He is fragrant

with kasturi,

his eyes compassionate.

On His head

is a peacock feather.

A flower garland

and golden chains

adorn his divine image.

Bells jangle

on His feet.

He holds Radha's hand.

I fall on my knees

before Him.

'Please write

Appeasing Radha.

It is close to my heart,'

He says.

'And dedicate it

to me.'

My Lord etches the last line of my dream in his tiny even script, straight lines of text on the long thin rectangle of leaf, the introduction to my account of Lord Krishna's

love for Radha. 'Ah,' Pratapasimha says. 'This work will bring great fame to the name of Muddupalani.'

My Lord takes a rest. A scribe rushes forward and takes over the task. I dictate the next section: as is the custom, a paeon to the heroism of the King. I will read it to him one night when he is troubled or when his mind turns to younger women. Then I pace among the librarians and fragrant leaves and move on to the next section of my poem, enumerating the attributes of my eminent family. My caste, *sudra*, is not at all elevated, but so what, when one is a heavenly dancer? I praise my grandmother, Muttutanjanaika, such an accomplished veena player, her singing sublime, an exquisite dancer when she was young. And she speaks beautifully at meetings. The young—even the senior—devadasis ask her to negotiate for them with the priests at the Big Temple. And my cousin, Ramamani, a star in our house, her eyes large and glowing, endows temples to Shiva and Parvati. Devotees immerse themselves daily in the purifying water of the tanks she has built. She has bestowed lands on promising musicians and poets, flung open her doors and invited them all to her table which is laden with the fruits of the earth. In my poem, I extol the virtues of these women.

And I? Muddupalani? I continue to pace, perhaps even to strut. The scribe watches me. 'Write,' I snap and his head jerks forward.

*If I am not
the goddess Ramba,
would Pratapasimha
take me as his lover?
I have wealth,
outstanding qualities.
My face is fair as the moon.
My words are
even fairer.
I am kind, compassionate,
generous.*

The scribe writes vigorously, with the thought of generous streams of rupees tumbling and gushing before his eyes—I will pay him a bonus if he makes a fair copy of my words. 'I am kind, compassionate, generous,' I reiterate, 'These are my ornaments.' Yes, I wear my virtues with the same style as the golden adornments and precious

gems on skin and hair. Beautiful words fall like warm honey from my lips. I dance with my feet, my hands, my whole body which aches with the love, sadness, of the human heart. And I move to tears both kings and gods.

'Well,' says My Lord. 'Your work will be widely read when it is completed.'

I turn to him. 'No,' I say. 'I do not wish to be merely read; rather, my verse must become ornaments for the throats of the learned.'

My Lord laughs. He likes my boldness, as long as it is tempered by total devotion.

I stand and pace the room and I dictate:

*A face that glows like the full moon,
skills of conversation, matching the countenance.*

*Eyes filled with compassion,
matching the speech.*

*A great spirit of generosity,
matching the glance.*

*These are the ornaments
that adorn Palani,*

when she is praised by kings.

Such was my arrogance at the time, in the heady heights of the Tanjavur galaxy, unaware that the forces of darkness were massing against me.

*

I lean on the balcony rail and look into the shadows on the lawn. Charcoal crowns of trees billow against the silver sky. The chateau could well be plywood, but I stand on a chequered marble floor, black and white. *Last Year at Marienbad:*

'We met last year,' the man says.

'No. That was not me,' the woman tells him. 'Perhaps it was a dream.'

Muffled laughter comes from one of the rooms further down the balcony. I expect double doors to be flung wide and the dinner-suited man and slinky woman to float onto the terrace, lighting Gauloise cigarettes and speaking French. I could watch and listen for a while without the help of subtitles. Then the film would flicker off and I would stand up and shuffle out of the cinema into a wintry Melbourne night.

Surinder is sleeping. The double doors to the next room are ajar. More laughter seeps out. And so does a snake. I feel no surprise. A woman. A snake. It is written.

The snake stops on the black and white squares and its head is turned towards me, a greenish tinge on its scales—a python, not poisonous. A tall, lithe figure slips out the door, looking at the floor. He leans down, but stops, seeing me. 'Ah,' he says, 'he likes you. See him waving his head.' He scoops the snake up and in the next moment, I feel it around my neck. I stand stiffly, not able to look.

'I know this is fine,' I whisper, 'but it is new to me... a snake. I don't like... dogs even.' I am unable to say more because my nerves are vibrating when the snake moves.

'When a bird is trapped in a room and it flies on me, I shudder.' I whisper this to him as the snake slides from my shoulder, along my upper arm and follows the curve under my breast.

'He likes your breast,' says the man.

The black trees swirl and sigh in the silver sky.

'Of course,' I say, attempting bravado. I clutch the railing of the terrace, my breast encircled by the even slither. The snake curls upwards, across the bare skin of my chest and throat to my breast bone and insinuates itself towards the silver rope chain at my throat. An asp in my bosom. Serpentine. Insinuating. The nerves in my body have been taken over and my only sensation is the snake. 'No, not towards my face,' I whisper and clutch the railing more tightly. The man rests the side of his hand lightly on my throat and the snake coils around his arm. At the edge of my vision, its tongue flickers and its head sways up past my temple. Snakes coil and uncoil in the minds of women. I can blame mythology. But I speak now from the subtlety of his touch on my skin, the smooth slither around my breast.

'He can be aggressive,' says the man, reasonably. 'He senses the feelings of humans. You were watchful. He liked that. And he tried to win you over. Through your skin.'

'I'm glad he didn't try to slide down my neck,' I say to him and shiver.

'Perhaps next time,' the man says, his arm slightly extended, so that the snake curls his way onto his body, waving its head. The man turns, slips into his room and closes the door.

I move across the terrace, my long night dress sweeping over the tiles and push the door slowly so as not to wake Surinder. A hand grabs my arm. Surinder pulls me to him, hitches up my night dress and runs his hands over my breasts. 'I liked that,' he says, his voice thick. 'But you didn't let him move around you.' He circles my breasts and pulls them out long, his finger and thumb around my nipples and the ring. 'Perhaps tomorrow night,' he says as he holds my neck and kisses it, the other hand slithering down my body and inside my vulva.

And for days, we listen to soft music and are weary.

'We are the lotus eaters,' says Surinder. I raise my eyebrows. 'Indians are perfectly aware of the Romantic poets...' He pauses and intones:

... the languid air does swoon.

*There is sweet music here that softer falls
than petals from blown roses on the grass.*

And we eat the lotus day by day in our languor and vow to live the lotus life at the Mayapuri.

'I camped in the desert,' she tells him when she wakes one afternoon. 'I slept in a swag under the stars, fished in the water hole, caught yellow belly, cooked it over the fire, watched the fat drip and hiss in the flames, ate it in a piece of bread, then pulled my blanket tight against the desert wind.'

'What about the wolves, the wild animals?' he asks.

'There are none,' she replies, 'except for snakes, and you can put a magic circle of crumpled paper around the bed and a snake will not cross it. There are no people,' she continues, 'just wallabies and eagles. Can you picture it? It is worth the legions of tiger snakes and taipans to be alone in such a place.'

'And will I be there?' asks Surinder.

'Yes, yes,' she says.

'It sounds exotic,' he says.

'Except for the flies,' she says. 'So many flies.'

Surinder does not listen. 'I will strew the bed with gum leaves,' he says romantically. 'There in the wilderness, I will scatter them like rose petals.'

'I will cut a lock of your hair,' says Surinder. Sometimes, I scoop it up off my neck now and tie it back with a coloured elastic loop in the heat of the day. And Surinder can pull it loose at night so that it hangs down. He takes some scissors, snips off a lock, curls it up and puts it in a little pocket in his wallet. Later, when he is asleep, I take a strand of his hair, as I had done once before on our epic voyage, carefully cutting it at the scalp and pulling it gently out of the loose topknot that is wound around the top of his head for sleeping. He murmurs and stirs but sleeps on. Then he wakes up and blinks. 'I should phone the folks,' he says. 'It's been so long. And Kamala. They will wonder what has happened.' He yawns. 'But I don't have the strength right now.' He turns over, hugs me and goes back to sleep. I push the scissors and lock of hair under the pillow for later and smile.

We eat mangoes and lick our fingers. 'When I am a famous film-maker,' I tell Surinder, 'I will buy the Summer Palace and renovate it, with murals of stunningly erotic activities, satin cushions and silk wall hangings, beautiful music floating through the rooms as the Kaveri flows by. I will of course read poetry composed for you, at elegant soirees on steamy nights.'

The silver anklet, a line of tiny bells, the miniature seed pods, the little peas rattle as I walk. But, mostly, we are the lotus eaters and I am a glamorous figure in a flickering black and white movie, not one who is making a film of her own.

The next day, I rouse myself. There is some zing in my muscles. I need to move. Stretch and stretch. Am I not a dancer? I stand, stretch limbs and torso. I dance and dance, for Radha and Krishna, her fear of loss and separation, until I am exhausted by the heat and lie on the bed.

You stroll in from the balcony. 'Ah-hah!' you cry, 'the jingling stops when you are on the bed. This will not do. Lazy girl.' He pushes me to my feet. 'Dance,' he says. 'You will dance for me.'

I assume a Bharat Natyam attitude, contained, my expression one of cute, chaste seductiveness. I lunge. My anklets tinkle as my feet slap on the stone floor. He lies on the bed and watches and I wonder if I should pause and peel him a grape. I retain the upright torso, my feet flashing, arms out, fingers like birds, face coyly flirtatious. I retain the facial expression, work on its variations and slowly loosen the perpendicular stance, gradually, curving the spine, working from the abdomen and the

pelvis, taking up space at different levels, swaying close to the floor, sweeping, not moving far. Dancing in the space, between India and the South. My expression changes. It is more raw than any of the rasas. I move. I am a siren who dances. Surinder leans forward at the boldness of my body. I offer myself to him. His face is that of the rasika who experiences the sap rising, the artistry, the juiciness of the dance. He slides from the bed.

I lie still as he undresses me. He spreads my arms and legs out and my silver bonds move on my limbs and neck. He strokes the skin of my belly, pushes his fingers in the silver rings of my lips, holds them open wide, kisses and eats my yoni, remarking on the delicacy of its texture and taste. Then he enters me in one clean slice.

I want to go out one day. 'I have no coloured glass bangles. Buy me coloured glass bangles,' I demand. 'We must go to the bazaar and for sweets. I want bangles, green, indigo, red, a dozen to tinkle on my wrist.'

'No no,' he says. 'The glass bangles are like the bell on a cat so that it will not chase birds. The glass bangles are given by the mother-in-law so that she can hear where you are. If the bangles rattle, she knows that you are kneading dough for the chapattis or cutting the mangoes to make the *amrit* pulp for dinner. If there is no jingling, she knows that you are sleeping or that you have slipped out into the courtyard or even the street. And this would never do.'

I lie in the room and a Mayapuri lady massages me and prepares me for my lover, who has gone out into the world for sweets, for mangoes and papaya and grapes and all manner of treats to pamper me.

When he comes back, he seems troubled. He strokes the corner of his mouth next to his moustache and he looks into the distance. I can see that he is still in the outside world, even though I am dressed in my ornaments, with only a fine gauze dance sari that hides nothing of my body. Ah, yes, he has contacted his family. The call from the north has overtaken him.

I dance again for him, to keep him languorous and swooning.

He pulls back, supports himself on his arms and looks down at me. 'You are completely open for me,' he says. I nod and he enters me, plays with me, pleasures me

until I whimper with exhaustion, in my silver chains. And when he has had enough, he frees me, massages my sore body with sweet oils, kisses me softly and says, 'My darling, it is I who am chained and pierced with love. And how will they ever tear me away from you?' And I want to say, it is up to you. We have been again and again to the magic land of the Love God, Manmatha, and returned, victors both.

When I wake later, he has gone out. There is a note on the bed:

*My darling Rachel,
You are my ornament, my life,
my jewel in the sea of existence.
Be yielding to me forever,
my heart fervently pleads!
Surinder.*

I wait for him. I pace and tear at my hair when I do not hear from him for two days. Then there is another note. His grandfather has had a bad turn. He must comfort Kamala in her isolation. If his Tata dies, all Kamala's hopes for reconciliation are lost. It is the least a nephew can do. He will see me in a few days. He will miss me more than he can bear. I pace and tear my hair.

*

My Lord asks me why I smile to myself. I have a secret plan for his thirty-eighth birthday, a huge celebration, plans known only to my musicians and Grandmother who is devising the program. When we reach Tanjavur, I will summon my musicians, begin rehearsing in earnest and check my costume.

The designs have been with the goldsmiths for weeks. I have drawn them myself and am pleased with the detail and excited by the project that My Lord had made possible, since his challenges to me, in the silver pavilion some time ago. He is of course a generous patron with exquisite taste, using only the best craftsmen when he commissions and selects my ornaments, but it is I who have conceived of this idea—a magnificent ensemble of gold and precious stones.

Of course, I will be Madhevi, bedecked with her jewels, in the great tradition of Urvashi, the heavenly ganika who danced divinely for the god, Indra; I, Muddupalani, the heiress to her glamour.

When I leave the goldsmith, I find my mother at home with the sari seller, tossing exquisitely coloured silks, like waterfalls, across the floor, the layers building up into a shimmering rainbow river. We both choose some new pieces and we leave the merchant with his assistants folding and stacking.

My mother is quiet when I explain the glorious costume that is being made, my voice rising with the excitement of my magnificent scheme. Her hand drifts up to her face and she holds a forefinger across her mouth. I stop, stroking the new silks. 'What is it, Amma? Something has happened.' I wait. A dog barks mournfully in the distance and a girl in the street practises her scales in a thin reedy voice: sa re... 'It will be the pale girl dancing for the King's birthday. Not you, sweet Palani. That is the date Ammama has fixed with the Queen Mother, for her debut.'

This is the new girl that they have selected for our house some months back, this girl from Pondicherry with the French father. She is silver like a star, a rising star, and my heart stops in fear that she will play her veena for My Lord, sing sweet songs and sport in his bed, before the year is out. And a tear falls on my golden necklace.

I rise, walk to the door and turn. 'Why did Ammama not tell me?' I choke on the words. They have betrayed me.

Why have I not seen the signs?

I pass the grand houses of the dance families. I unlock my own house, that My Lord had presented to me for my thirtieth birthday, where I have not dwelt for some time. The servants will lift the dust sheets from the furniture and I will celebrate My Lord's birthday in my own way. And I will plan for my Madhevi performance. Oh, yes.

The day has come. There are none of the usual young women to preside over my toilette. At my own house, Kannan, my loyal servant, is fetching and gathering, while those with more expertise in cosmetics, perfumery and dressing of hair serve the moonbeam girl further down the street.

Kannan massages me with oils of exquisite fragrance, sandal paste and perfumes that Dupleix imported from France. (Yes, I know. They are our enemies, but one must engage in covert transactions in the cause of beauty.) I don my dance sari and ornaments with care and prodigious skill.

I emerge from my closed palanquin at the Palace, heavily veiled, swathed in a large French cloak, after the festivities have begun. We have set up a private dressing area - or hiding place, for I am completely ready—in a rarely used room to the side, and four young men of our house, brothers of the musicians, keep watch outside as I peep through the curtain.

There is a song extolling the virtues of the King. My grandmother stands to the other side of the stage and she is tense before the presentation of the pale one, this exotic new product of our house. I watch the girl from my hideout. Her performance is better even than I had thought, more experienced than when she danced at the temple some weeks ago. There is a freshness to her movements and a hint of languor that might tempt a man to believe that he could rouse a budding sensuality with the strength of his ardour. I watch the expressions on My Lord's face. He is pleased with her, although, as I have said, he does not reveal much. He sits there, between his two wives, plump women whom I revere. But what hope has a wife? Our women age fast when they are not dancers. And I realise that I am nervous for what I will do.

I watch my grandmother's expression change constantly from surprise to satisfaction, that we have a young girl of talent coming on, to mild anxiety. Perhaps she wonders whether My Lord might fancy her before I, her favourite, have enjoyed all the potential of his patronage, due to my mature talents and professional charms. My heart is heavy that she has not spoken to me about the plans for tonight. Her larger loyalty must be to ensure the flourishing prosperity of our house, with the emergence of new stars who would shine in the firmament of the royal court. But I am bitter that she did not tell me. My Lord smiles at the girl, the slightest of smiles, and his mouth remains slightly open. I know that look. My stomach contracts. And I, who have been trained to accept the ebb and flow of patronage, feel a sudden nausea. This is the first real test of My Lord's affection for me. Of course, he has looked at other women; he has a team of wives. It is easy to see that a man would want to take the flower of this girl's virginity, crushing the lily of her skin and watching it blush. Yes, Ammama is about to offer this girl to My Lord.

But it is too late to agonise. She finishes and there is an appreciative hum in the hall. My Lord is stirring, ready to rise at the end of the short program. My stage assistants, with their impeccable timing, carry a row of extra lamps onto the stage as the musicians play the introduction and step before the lights. My Lord looks

surprised and takes his seat again. On cue, I step out. Those who are rising stop and freeze in their positions. There is a collective gasp, and the only movements are those of my body as the whole court gapes.

My feet flash in front of him, the lac-painted soles highlighting their adornment, a string of silver petals overlapping each other and extending from the ankle to the big toe, and my ankles, with their four anklets. The row of little silvery bells tinkles; another, of golden wire, is plaited in a beautiful design of vines and leaves. Above my ankles, all is gold. My golden thigh-clasps gleam and grip my expanding muscles. Around my waist, in graceful folds, is wrapped a piece of the finest pale blue-coloured muslin, and over this transparent film is fastened a girdle of two-and-thirty strings of lustrous pearls. Above my elbows, the brilliant gems of my amulets glow in the lamp light. Some of the bracelets, which clank deliciously when I move, are of delicate coral, some of plain gold, and some exquisitely engraved and set with diamonds and emeralds. My fingers fly like birds on the wing, one ring with a huge emerald in the centre and a circle of diamonds set around it. All the eyes in the room move up and over my body, across the many necklaces that cover my bosom from the neck to the navel. One of them is a golden chain; another a twisted cord; another a string of beautiful beads; and another a garland of pendant golden leaves. A splendid clasp that covers the back of my neck holds all the necklaces in position. My ear rings are set alternatively with diamonds and sapphires. On my head is fastened a network of ornaments that exceed in beauty all the other jewels. So much gold.

I dance for My God, my Krishna, my Lotus-eyed One, as he sits between his wives, his eyes bewitched by the supplicating movements of my body and the sultry adoration expressed by my soft mouth, my forehead, my eyes which rarely leave his. He smiles and his mouth is slightly open. And he extends his hands to me, accepting the melting body and soul that I give him, the dissolving of myself, the sum of my worship, flowing like molten gold through his divine person. As the music fades and I am prostrate before him, there is a total silence among the hundreds who throng the durbar hall. I feel My Lord's hand raise me up.

And I hear the whisper of my grandmother's voice, her fury at the side of the stage. I breathe an invitation in the ear of My Lord and offer him a goblet of wine, directing him to the place for retirement from the throng that I have prepared. And we slip behind the purple velvet curtains so that I can give him what is left of my body

and soul, withholding nothing from his divine pleasure. 'Ah, Madhevi,' he sighs, touching my adornments—my ornaments and my body—against the roar of excited voices outside our curtains. 'My Muddupalani, you are a heavenly ganika, from Urvashi and her flock of celestial dancers,' he says, his hands moving over me. Taking off a large ring, he slips it on my finger. Unclasping one of my bracelets he has me place it on his wrist as he lies back, besotted by the aura of the divine. With the King's ring on my finger, I look at him and invite him to the game of love, as the courtiers must be rocking outside on the waves of sensuality.

'Later,' he whispers, kissing me on the neck. 'Soon. Your public awaits you.' He leads me from the velvet pavilion and there is a storm of applause.

My triumph is complete. I catch a glimpse of those who do not clap—the moonbeam girl's mother stares at me with blatant hatred, standing by a pillar with Yamunambai, who throws a cold look that I do not understand. My heart freezes. But then there is Govinda by the door. He does not clap but looks at me so that the fear that rises in me abates.

The next day, I begin to pay the price of my victory. My Lord says to me, 'Muddu, you are incomparable in your glamour and your love-making, my heavenly ganika. No doubt you would be the perfect one to pass on your wiles to other girls of talent.'

'Ah, yes, My Lord, skills can be taught but those other, those indefinable qualities...' And I have to hide my tears.

Yes, I must be frank with myself, break through the veils of delusion, recognise the chill breezes of danger and the thin floor that holds me up above the abyss.

*

I have a public performance soon, or it will seem that way—the only foreigner, on the arm of a handsome man.

I have nothing to wear to the wedding so Kamala and Saraswati are dealing with the crisis.

I am at Brindavan, where the rest of the family is now in residence, even Surinder, back from the bedside of his grandfather. Kamala is a bird-like creature who wears Lucknow *chikkan* saris on the occasional days that I have met her, fine cotton with embroidery. She takes a walk each morning, up and down the veranda of the

house, in her elegant chapals with the small high heels, clack, clack, clack. Up and down. 'I am not a sneakers person,' she had announced.

There are several exquisite silks rippling on the backs of chairs in the cottage at Brindavan. Kamala and Saraswati decide that an olive green one with silver, grey and black edging will be perfect. 'And it will go beautifully with your green eyes, Rachel dear,' says Kamala, as if I am a teenager.

Tata, Kamala, Jaganathan and Saraswati were invited, but they have decided that, as a treat for everyone concerned, I will go instead, accompanied by Surinder. Prince Charming is taking me to the ball and my fairy godmother is decking me out in finery for the occasion. He will do his duty as a nephew. I will have the experience of a local wedding and the girl's family will have the extraordinary benefit of a foreign guest.

The sari chosen, we glide down the driveway in the Mercedes and onto the road to Tanjavur, Saraswati and Kamala frowning at the magnitude of the task ahead.

In the first shop, the girl unpacks sari blouses from tissue paper in pale blue boxes and I try them on in a curtained corner. We find one that fits in the shoulders, but is extremely loose around the ribs and the fitted bra cup is a strange angle for my breasts. My body is not an Indian shape. I swim. An Indian woman with shoulders as wide as mine will have considerable amounts of padding around her ribs. I could have the sides run in? Kamala tut-tuts. You must go to a tailor and have one made to size, Kamala tells me sternly. There is no time now in this emergency situation. 'A black stretchy blouse,' Kamala says valiantly. The man in the shop flings one on the counter. This will do for tonight, but it is a poor option, for lazy girls and people too modern to take trouble to have the blouse made just right.

It is easier to buy the black poplin petticoat that pulls in and ties at the waist. 'How lovely that Surinder is taking you to a wedding,' says Kamala, as the stretch blouse and the petticoat are wrapped. 'It is important to experience all aspects of a new culture,' she smiles, 'such as weddings.'

We pass a blouse piece shop. The folded squares of material are stacked through the spectrum of green, blue, pink, magenta, madder lake, carmine, and matched the cyclamen.

We speed back to Brindavan and begin my toilette and dressing. Kamala ties me into the petticoat, tugging it down so that it sits on my hips. 'Safety pins,' she

orders. I confess that I have none. Saraswati runs out of the cottage and up to the house. 'The petticoat must be well-secured,' she says sternly. 'It is the foundation of sari tying.'

In the meantime, I rub foundation cream onto my skin, apply kohl on the edges of my lower eye-lids and brush on mascara. I ask whether the event will be a love marriage. Kamala laughs. 'That is a naive view,' she says. 'In India, there are three requirements for a match—good astrological reading, caste and money, which is connected also with prospects. If the groom has an MBA at Harvard he is a good catch, an investment. Even if the parents are less wealthy, such qualifications would count for a lot. And looks? Complexion is a strong consideration. Parents hold their breath at the birth of a girl, hoping that her colouring will not be wheatish.' Kamala laughs again. 'Otherwise, looks are totally irrelevant. A bonus.' There is a brief silence. Kamala and I fold one of the saris while we are waiting.

'As you may have heard,' says Kamala, 'mine was a love marriage. My parents were totally opposed.' She sips her tea. 'It's just as well that Jaganathan is wealthy.' She looks sad. 'It is some compensation for being cut off from one's family.' She clasps her hands together. 'Oh, Rachel,' she says, 'my hopes are fixed on some reconciliation with my family. If my father dies before that...' I try to comfort her, but am shocked that her cheery mask has slid down for a moment. She assumes a serene look and makes herself busy.

After the lipstick, I am ready. My blonde hair is pulled back tightly in a clasp, a few wavy strands hanging at the neck and sides and I have a fringe. Saraswati's footsteps clack on the stone of the house veranda. 'How would you feel if Saraswati opted for a love marriage?' I ask Kamala.

She looks thoughtful and smiles. 'As we get older, there are always other considerations, don't you think, Rachel?' I shrug, non-committal. 'We are in the early stages of delicate negotiations right now, to try to get her settled,' she continues. 'These things are never easy.' She shakes her head, as Saraswati waltzes into the room.

Kamala wraps the silk around me, makes the three smooth pleats and tucks them into the front of the petticoat. 'Now, Amma, we will tie it in the modern way,' says Saraswati, giggling, 'with a little more skin showing.' I look down and gasp at the flashes of white flesh from hip to bra line. It is like a heavy, long and complex bikini. The pallu is pleated and pinned on my shoulder. Kamala stands back.

'You look wonderful,' she says, 'tall and elegant. You wear a sari nicely.'

'Rachel,' says Saraswati, taking my hand, 'I think you are very stylish.' She takes my hand and laughs nervously. 'Would you come shopping with me? I need to update my wardrobe and you have such lovely taste.'

Kamala agrees that Saraswati would benefit from my advice, the worldly foreign woman taking a young girl in hand. And, of course, they are trying to find a husband for her. I smile and agree to guide her through a retail spree. 'You and Surinder will look a most handsome couple,' says Saraswati.

I try to walk. It feels strange with folds of fabric and a thick petticoat brushing the floor. 'What if I stand on the hem and a swathe of silk unravels around me at the wedding, with everyone staring?'

'A sari coming undone is not the usual thing,' says Kamala, 'and you are most firmly secured with safety pins. But try walking up and down the stairs if you are worried.'

Kamala calls out the door. Sakkubai shouts from the house to her cleaning lady friend next door. Someone yells back. She comes in, puts her hands over her mouth and exclaims excitedly at the transformation. Sakku's little son stands wide-eyed in the doorway, clutching at his mother's thin brown arm. The bai from next door appears with her teenage daughter wringing her hands in excitement. The foreign lady in a sari of soft silk that falls gracefully to the floor, wearing Kamala's gold jewellery. Jaganathan has been dragged down from his study.

'Charming. Very nice,' he says absently and disappears again. I am unused to such attention. I try to cover my snowy midriff with the sari end.

'No, no,' says the bai's daughter, 'your skin is so white.' I am scraping my hair back. I hold it at the nape of my neck to twist it up under a clip. The girl gasps. 'Barbie,' she says and everyone laughs and chats in Tamil. What? Do they think that I look strange after all?

Kamala explains what they are saying—that I look beautiful, just like Barbie. Like who? Barbie. Surely I know Barbie? She frowns at me as if I am stupid. The doll called Barbie? She points to her black hair and an imaginary fringe. Blonde, she says. And your long legs.

The women smile. It is a beautiful moment. My hair is freshly brushed and the fringe a shiny gold, too short to scrape back. My flesh is lean compared with the soft

bulk of some pale Brahmin ladies who plod about, with free reign over litres of full cream milk and unlimited *idlis* and rice.

I am no doll. I am no Barbie. One came into our house some years ago. Someone gave it to my younger sister. It was monstrously thin. I have long legs, yes, but like a race horse, like Lady Mountbatten, that Indian Viceroy's wife. Surinder told me so once. One of my better features, but not long like Barbie's, going up, up all the way to her arse. To her what? There is the hint of a vertical crack below her waist at the back and no gateway to the temple of heavenly delights in the front. There is her button nose and pursed lips under that fringe, but no such thing down below.

You look like Barbie. You are beautiful.

I want to be beautiful.

Shall I tell them about the Barbie section in Kmart in Melbourne? About Barbie's kitchen? Do they know about Ken, Barbie's boyfriend? Does he live in India? In white pyjamas and a Gandhi cap? Like an Indian politician? Or in fashionable blue jeans? Ken has no penis. My little sister told me so.

Anyway, enough of this, who am I to be dampening their enthusiasm for Barbie? If my sister could buy one in Australia twenty years ago, there should be such opportunities for little Indian girls today. It is only fair and just. But where are your doll makers? I will visit them and see their wares. Do they make a Parvati doll, or Gauri or Uma? With a fertile body, soft eyes and a benevolent smile. Or a Kali would be good, in her red, black and white garment, swinging her hips and stamping her feet, dancing and singing, I am the beginning of all. I am the Creatrix. I am the Destructress. I am the Protectress. The sari is long. What if I trip over? How do women dig the roads in this clothing?

I stand before them, a doll, and I say nothing.

The bais depart. Kamala must pack to go away on family business. She will see me at Scott's for dinner in one week. There is a 'hello' from the veranda. Surinder. They stand back a little and make way for him. 'You look beautiful,' he says, and the women sigh. Kamala's driver will drop us off and pick us up afterwards, in the Mercedes, my golden coach with six white mice.

Rachel and Surinder glide through the streets in the car. She is surprised at her calm. After all, they have not met for several days. 'I am sorry,' Surinder says. 'Disappearing

like that.... Don't worry, the driver can't understand English...It is so difficult to explain about Indian families. But, Rachel, nothing like this has ever... I mean... I have been the model of an Indian son... I have never spent more than three days away from my family, except boarding school. They were shocked that I was away for three weeks. My sister cried and said, "Why have you done this to us?" But I have told you all this...The ending to our holiday... it was not well done on my part. Then our wonderful time at the Mayapuri Hotel... Oh, Rachel... And now, Kamala wants me here. My parents want me at home in Chandigarh. Rachel, you have thrown my life in turmoil. And all I do is cause you pain.'

Rachel looks out the window for a moment as they pass a crumbling palace, with graffiti on the old walls. Black and white footage of the Mayapuri flickers like a dream.

Rachel looks at Surinder closely. He is suffering, the self-possessed young man who can talk to anyone, who has organised accommodation in exclusive government rest houses for this visiting film-maker from Australia, gained impressive invitations for them. Surinder, well-spoken, with Rachel the exotic foreigner, a formidable travelling team. Surinder, a young Indian man. She squeezes his hand. She has not understood. In her state of suspension, entwined with him, she had renounced the world and all its crass realities. She sees this now, encased in the detached folds of her sari, this elegant foreign woman wearing Binny silk and Kamala's gold ornaments, in the air-conditioned capsule of Kamala's car. She has plunged into the juices of her body and she has drowned.

'We have no future,' he says.

She tells him that yes, they have been living for the moment.

The realities are showing up like old car bodies when a flood subsides. Their lotus eating is fading away like the songs of sirens. He has been worried about his grandfather. Yes, it is sad for Kamala, estranged from her mortally ill father. Yes, he must go back to Chennai in the morning to meet his supervisor. He will be back in a week for Kamala's dinner. She squeezes his hand graciously. 'We will enjoy the evening,' she says.

They glide through a long red canvas entrance marquee decorated with scallops of yellow and orange towards a fairy garden of little lights in the trees, marquees, trestle tables under red canopies, where uniformed servants stand with

serving spoons poised over steaming tureens. They step onto the grass in the garden. Several hundred people chat in groups. Some look. They stop talking. There is a hush. More turn, stare at the couple and stop talking. The moment is suspended, total quiet, except for Rachel's sari rustling forward.

The Sardar looks handsome in his pink turban, for weddings and other celebrations, and there is Indian Barbie on his arm, with her fringe and blonde hair pulled back. Count two beats. The guests begin their conversations again. Rachel strolls forward, the sari heavy on her thighs. The father of the bride hurries up, conducts them to the podium to meet the couple, sitting there lonely and resplendent in their lavish wedding gear. Rachel mounts the steps trying to lift and clutch the front of her sari gracefully. The video cameraman creeps up in front, recording her arrival. She smiles around pleasantly and mutters to Surinder, 'If I trip over the sari, will it be edited out?'

Surinder whispers back, 'The rich Gujarati would have too much sense of occasion to sit around with his mates drinking whiskey next week, laughing as they view the blonde woman crashing to the floor, her sari in silver and green folds around her ankles. Such a misfortune would be deleted.'

'They look glum,' she whispers, after they have shaken hands with the bridal party and exchanged small talk. 'What to say?'

Surinder assures her that the couple will tell tales of their wedding, with the foreigner in her sari, to their grandchildren. He smiles, enjoying her glory and amused at her discomfort. 'Don't worry,' he says. 'And you look wonderfully elegant. You will survive the sari.'

Rachel glances around and she wants to get out of this place. No one comes up and speaks to them.

'I'm not sure that I like Indian weddings. Is this one an arranged marriage?' she asks as they sit down.

Surinder looks surprised. 'I suppose so,' he says. 'It is a strange question in India, considering that 99.99 per cent are arranged.'

The host gestures for them to be offered snacks. 'He's not introducing us to anyone,' says Rachel. 'We're just sitting here like bumps on logs. No wine. No beer. Do you know anyone?'

He shakes his head.

'Families!' says Rachel and groans.

'Yes, they are a responsibility,' says Surinder, 'but they will be here after you have gone home.' He takes her hand and holds it. In front of all the guests. He strokes the palm with his finger and she is engulfed in a great sadness, and shock that she cannot bear the thought of going home.

The host arrives with loaded plates of vegetables and chapattis, and the catering manager who wishes to see that they are happy with South Indian food.

And what does it matter that these people have such ancient attitudes to marriage? So what? She knows that heaven is no place for a married woman. That it is full of dancers and playboys.

'It must be a challenge to have sex in a sari,' Rachel breathes in his ear and watches him shiver. He laughs and runs his finger along her arm.

'Siddhu! And Madam, it is a pleasure to see you again. I am a cousin of the bride. And you are looking beautiful in your sari.'

It is the brash young man from the university. Ragavan, who has pushed himself on her for brief conversations. She cannot stand him. She nods distantly and she is blushing.

'Yes, Siddhu. Madam and I share an interest in the court of Tanjavur and its excesses, do we not?'

'I'm sorry?' she says to him. Surinder's mouth is set in a hard line.

'Please remember that I have that book that we discussed,' the young man continues, insinuatingly. 'It is a key reference on the eroticisation of the Nayyak court.'

'Thank you,' Rachel says. 'You must excuse us.'

'We have a car waiting. Come.' Surinder says to her, darkly, and he strides off, leading the way to the entrance.

*

I had promised to take the girl in hand, give her advice.

'She needs your experience, sweet Palani,' my grandmother commands me. And I must put the finishing touches to this girl, statuesque, with skin like the whitewash on a Maratha column. I cover my face with my hands.

'You are a ganika,' says my grandmother sharply. 'And you have the luxury of many options. No woman in the kingdom has such choice.'

'After a King?' I burst out. She looks at me furiously and I fall down and touch her feet.

This girl wears my patience out. Her abinhaya is simplistic, the expressions that float across her visage. And I slap her because she is stupid. Her lip trembles and I see with some satisfaction the red mark I have made on her cheek. I do not beat her, for that is not in my nature, but she must attend to my words. Does she not realise how favoured she is? Of all the young girls in the house, she, a newcomer, has the chance of a final grooming. And I tell her this, often. Of course she is expert in the singing of sweet songs, and her dance will melt the hardest heart, such is her beauty, like a splash of moonlight.

She must also become tougher and more daring in the art of love. So I slap her harder when she makes a mistake. And it is for her own good.

I train the girl who is reserved for the King. How will this languid, doe-eyed one stand up to the ferocity of My Lord's love making? His savage tenderness is hard on the body. He has never beaten me, but from the time that he took my maidenhead, he probes and takes me with such vigour that I have lain the next day, exhausted and bruised, between the sheets. Such is the power of My Lord, My Krishna, who will pound like an elephant.

But then, it is not as if My Lord is less attentive to me. His messenger comes as regularly to request that I attend to him. Sometimes it is my friend, the handsome Govinda, who takes the time to visit, despite the affairs of state that he must deal with these days. Or My Lord often requests, no, announces a visit to my beautiful house. I can say this without a doubt. When there is a rival, a woman will measure each glance, every word, especially if she is thirty-three years old, to calculate the ardour of her lover. My Lord never speaks of the ice maiden girl, but I know that she is his Ila and that I must pour counsel into her ear and prepare her for him.

I will take to my writing again. Not in the scriptorium, this time. I place on my desk the white virginal paper, holding the pen poised, gazing out the window at the dull monotony of the passing parade that trudges by. I will mark this white expanse with the dark ink of my misery, contemplating the sadness of Radha as she prepares the girl, Ila, for Krishna.

It is not long before I put my pen down. How can I write of Radha and Krishna and their great passion when all I can see is this girl? When will I see My Lord again?

*

It is not long before I see him again. The following evening there is a note, stuck in the bolt on the cottage door:

'Darling Rachel. I am at the Summer Palace. It is all difficult. All my love, S'.

I feel dizzy. I throw my things inside the door and run out onto the veranda, then back in, to stand in the middle of the floor, the note still in my hand. I dash into the bathroom and turn on the shower. Darling Rachel. I soap myself. Be calm; be calm. The water runs down my body.

'It is all difficult.'

I scrub vigorously. We must stop this. Of course, there is no future. It is time to be sensible. I must leave Brindavan. That is what must be done.

I prepare for the farewell, put on my ornaments, the anklets, the silver rope bracelets, the chain around my neck. I pierce my ear lobes with the silver rings he has given me and prick my nose with the little pearl on a curl of silver. I slip on a long loose dress, drape a chiffon dupata over my shoulders and walk along the track to the Summer Palace, a drug addict who is going to score. For the last time.

There is a figure in the pavilion, stripped to the waist and wearing the bright orange cotton lunghi with the blue border that we bought for a song on the road during our adventure. His hair hangs loosely. The sky is red around him. He is not dancing nor playing a flute; instead he gazes across the water, arms folded as if he is cold, one hand pulling at his moustache. A stone skitters along the ground from my sandal and he sees me and smiles, but I have caught the sadness in his face and I am sick in my heart. He comes down and takes me by the hand. We go out through the back near the staircase to the pavilion, through the bushes and trees. There is a tiny cleared area here with a view of the river. A man washes his buffalo over on the other bank.

Surinder tells me that we must live in the moment. It is all we have. He sits opposite me and holds my hands. The sun has gone down. I look across at the man on

the other side. One of his animals is breaking loose. He splashes through the water in pursuit of the beast. Surinder says that he loves me dearly. His voice is urgent. He cannot imagine his life without me. But he can see no future for us. I am not his fate. The sky is red. The buffalo runs up the bank and the man chases it. I tell Surinder that if we want something badly enough... It is not like that in India, he tells me. The light is changing to silver. I watch the man with the buffalo and tears roll down the sides of my face and into my ears.

'Come to Australia with me.'

'I could try for a tourist visa.'

'I mean, for longer.'

'Your immigration would not let me stay.'

'I could marry you.'

'Is this a proposal?'

'I'm not looking for a husband. I have told you, I'm not the marrying kind. It's a way of being together.'

He turns and leans on his elbow. 'They would never agree,' he says. 'Indian families are horribly practical. They are already saying to me, "What will you do when you come home to Chandigarh? Who will employ you with a PhD in South Indian temples?" But I could talk to them next time I go home.'

In the silvery light he brushes the tears away from my eyes with his finger. 'At least they might give me my freedom and I could live in Chennai. And we could be together.' He leans over and kisses me tenderly. The voice of the man fades through the trees as he takes his buffalo home. We are lying side by side in the silvery night. The moon is up.

'You are right about the goddesses,' he says, caressing me. I had told him that there was far too much worship of Shiva's lingam. He takes off his orange lungi and lays it down on the ground. Then he slips my dress over my head and spreads it out. 'There is not enough yoni worship.' He slides me onto our bed. He drapes the silky chiffon dupata over my body. He kneels and prostrates himself before me, lifts my legs, bends his head and adores, opens me just a little and sips the nectar of the goddess. I lie on the warm earth and my finger-nails scrape the little stones as I groan and watch the moon. Surinder looks up. 'I will visit temples and research centres for

ritual cunnilingus,' he says, 'take courses, become a devotee.' Then he opens me wider.

I sit up to caress him, but he pushes me back gently and pins my arms out to the sides. 'Let me worship,' he says, looking at me. 'Your body is silver from the moon.' I move and cry out as he adores. I shudder and cry out again and again. And there is an answering call. The peacock in the ruin of the Summer Palace screams like a woman being ravished. I stiffen, sit up, and pull Surinder towards me. 'He frightens me,' I whisper. 'Come here. Please.' And Surinder moves up, props himself on his hands and looks down at me, his hair flicking over my stomach and breasts. He smiles. 'Are lingams allowed through the hallowed gates?'

I nod and wait until he enters me slowly. And I grab him and wrap myself around him and we move together. We shout. We drown out the sound of the screaming peacock. And I watch the moon and my body slides on the tiny stones under my back.

And that night I dream that I lie on the river bank, the breeze warm on my body as I breathe in the sweetness of the night queen blossom which is strong and sweet after dark. There is a hum that comes to me in a wave, music of a thousand sitars and tanpuras thrumming as the sky changes from silver to black, swirling around, shiny and moving, bees, millions humming above me. The man with the buffalo on the other side of the river shoves the beast into the gold water, but the creature balks at the edge. He gives it a great push and it stumbles forward and loses its footing. I watch it submerge slowly. Thick round bubbles, dull brass bulbs, bulge on the surface and break as it disappears. I squat at the edge to run my hands through the water. My fingers snag in the stickiness. I raise them to my mouth, trailing a golden string over my breast. Honey. I suck my fingers and drape the threads of viscous gold that hangs from my hand so that they criss-cross my body. I smell sweet and bees swarm all over me, tickling my skin as they drink the sweetness. I try to brush them off so that they will not stick to me and die.

*

The peacock on our wall screams.

'You, as mentor, will deliver the girl up to My Lord in his chamber tonight,' my grandmother says.

It is my duty.

Girls rush past with hot water, freshly pressed garments, hairbrushes, flowers and ornaments. I am spared a role in the dressing which is supervised by Ammama, Amma and the girl's mother. I kneel in my old bedroom before the image of Krishna lighting incense and asking him: why do you abandon me, My Lord? I, who love you to distraction. And I wait until the evening. My only duty is the delivery of the girl, and my heart is leaden in my breast.

I take out paper and a pen at my tiny desk. I must write, if I am to retain my calm. The story of Radha and Krishna is now the story of Ila.

The door opens. I put down my pen. The girl stands there and gazes at me with the mask of a ganika, her skin heavenly, like the most delicate pink rose. She is dressed, not in a sari, but in an extraordinary hooped dress that her mother ordered from Paris. Her small bosom, white like marble, is pushed up, the nipples barely covered by the silk of her embroidered bodice, so that she is enclosed in this finery, as well as deliciously available. And My Lord will have such a time, with her face, breasts and neck and then her fine Parisian underwear, loose and accessible. If My Lord wishes it, he can undo the laces of her stays at his leisure, or have her, her torso intact, with the promise of a slow unwrapping of his prize, the snowy skin of her trunk, at another time. It is a brilliant package.

I wave her out of the room and weep, for the sweet body of My Lord, my tears falling on my breast and onto the white paper. How can I give away My Lord to this girl?

*

I dress carefully for Kamala's dinner, the one to which we have been summoned, sensing that it is a major occasion, with all the bustle in the house. Surinder is back. I wonder if all Indians travel around as much as this family.

I wear a long maroon chiffon dress with a black slip. It is slightly transparent, with splits up the sides. I put on all my jewellery and walk across the lawn to the house, carrying the latest batch of work that I have completed for Tata. Kamala had been precise about the time that I was expected: eight o'clock sharp.

They are all there and they look up as if they are just finishing a meeting. Kamala, radiantly happy, Jaganathan, with his usual detachment, Tata, hard to read. Saraswati, smiling, friendly, with her smart new short hairstyle. I had taken her to the hairdresser on our shopping trip. There is the big Sikh uncle with the grey beard and a turban. Surinder looks at me hopelessly then his glance falls away and my heart is gripped in barbed wire that is being pulled tighter and tighter. They have found out about us. The Sikh uncle has come to drag him home. But Kamala looks happy. What is she saying? She is reminiscing about this cousin of hers, the one we had met at Tanjavur. She fondly recalls student days. It is wonderful to be reunited. The Sikh cousin stands rocking on his heels and smiles urbanely, basking in the aura of Kamala's excitement. They speak in Hindi or Punjabi for a few sentences and then revert to English. Kamala's face becomes serious. 'Of course, it is worrying. Of course they must go immediately.'

The Sardar assures her that Tataji's condition is stable, but, when a man is eighty-eight... ' He shrugs and Kamala sighs. Eighty-eight. They must be talking about Surinder's grandfather. My mind is struggling with this basic information because I still feel sick, panicking. 'Saraswati, Rachel, will you help me bring in some dishes?' says Kamala. I stumble out to the kitchen, past the long table that is covered with a white linen table cloth. 'I'm sorry to command you in this way,' whispers Kamala, 'but I had to tell you. We have left you in the dark and you are like a member of the family. This is such an opportunity.' She clasps her hands under her chin.

'Oh, Amma!' Saraswati protests, blushing.

'Alright, we must not count our chickens,' says Kamala. 'As you know, my father is sick. And this is most distressing. But he has spoken of me a couple of times during his illness. He still has not asked for me.' There are tears in her eyes. 'But, my cousin Balwant,' she gestures towards the Sikh in the other room, 'is taking Saraswati to visit Tataji. He says that the last time they clicked.' Kamala raises her eyebrows and her head quivers with anticipation. 'And Balwant is committed to the reuniting of our families in any way possible.' In her excitement, Kamala grabs my hand and holds it to her breast. 'Oh, Rachel,' she says, 'I could never have dreamed... Surinder will accompany them and, well, we know that my brother has been looking for a suitable match for Surinder so that he can marry as soon as he has finished his studies. And it is Tataji's wish to see this happen before he dies.'

'Amma!' says Saraswati.

Kamala lets go of my hand and passes me a silver tureen. 'This is not too heavy?' I shake my head dumbly and take it from her. How will I not drop it? She hands a silver bowl to Saraswati and picks up a beautiful porcelain one for herself. 'Ah, Rachel,' she says, laughing, 'why should you understand all this? It is not unusual in India for first cousins to marry. And, as you may know, Surinder was adopted. And now Saraswati has a lovely new wardrobe that you helped her to choose.'

'Amma!' protests Saraswati again, embarrassed, stealing a glance at me. And the three ladies sail into the dining area bearing their burdens.

We take our places at the table. Surinder, seated opposite me, reads my face, then looks at me beseechingly. The Sardar talks pompously about his business interests in Chennai. His construction company in Delhi is booming. He is almost ready to retire from his government job. Every so often, he refers to Surinder's opportunities in a new position in the Archaeological Survey of India, Delhi. His best friend is the boss in that section. Jaganathan eats steadily, eyes on his plate, nodding. Kamala beams at her cousin and Saraswati sits next to me, moving the rice around her plate.

'Are you alright, Rachel, dear?' asks Tata. There is not enough saliva in my mouth to answer. I shake my head. 'You look ill,' he continues. 'If you are feeling faint, I think you should lie down.'

'Yes. I feel strange,' I say. 'I'll go out on the veranda for a while.' He rises to accompany me. 'No, no. Just a few minutes.'

Tata gives me a keen look and I walk as slowly as I can, placing one foot in front of the other, impersonating a calm woman, my eyes on the door jamb, so that I don't crash into it, left, right, heel-ball-toe, heel-ball-toe and onto the veranda.

I move across the lawn and into the cottage. I throw myself on the bed and sob. Surinder had said that we must live each day, that we must not think of the future. But, Surinder and Saraswati? That gormless girl!

Rachel, don't be ridiculous: it is not her fault.

How long had all this been planned? Why hadn't he found me during the day, at least, to tell me what was happening?

Didn't he have the courage to face me himself? Are all Indians lily-livered pawns in the elaborate games played by families?

Rachel, be sensible. This is a holiday romance gone mad.

*

Why has he not spoken to me? It is one week and My Lord has not sent for me. I go to the Palace and ask for him. Yamunambai smiles at me, her face tight, and says that he is indisposed and needs restorative sleep, that he has posted her at the door to keep away any disturbances. But I must see him, I tell her, he will want to receive me. I hear groans from within and my heart goes out to My Lord in his suffering. I am his Radha and I can ease the pain. A friend of the disgraced Prime Minister appears, his visage bland as a castle wall. 'Where is Manoji?' I demand. I know that the General has been sent on a mission by this man. They look at me coolly and I must go away. And that woman stands in the grim shadows of the corridor and watches, and I know that she is plying My Lord with her daughter who is beautiful as a moonbeam.

I go home and wait. I pace in the gallery of my home. I conjure up the tortures that My Lord is enduring in his troubled mind. I remember the last outburst.

I remember it well, just a matter of weeks ago, the same fear in my chest that I have now.

I sat up in bed and clutched at the ornaments on my bosom and the breath stopped in my lungs as I heard the boom of hooves. What other terrible thing could befall us? Already, My Lord's dreams were tortured. Already, he had discovered only last week that he had been betrayed. His Prime Minister, Pandakai Nayyakam, manager of all trade affairs and keeper of the King's treasure, was a traitor and a thief. He had stolen the King's private money. Nayyakam had departed on an ostentatious pilgrimage to the holy city of Benares, far to the north, with 4,000 devotees. It is through Govinda's spies that we know of Nayakkam's letters to Pondicherry, begging the French to allow him to live at Karaikal under their flag. Troops were dispatched and the thief taken from the bewildered pilgrims, back to Tanjavur to be imprisoned, beaten and tortured. The power struggles at court are more fierce than usual. And I pray to the gods that my dear General Manoji will rise in favour as a result.

I was sitting up in bed. What was this beating of hooves and terrible shouting?

My Lord had left too late for a festival. He had wanted to see the great stone temple car pushed lumbering from its resting place through the massive doors, the

garlands and the incense. It would be inauspicious for Him, He said, if He arrived too late to see it; terrible events would befall Him.

His chamberlain, who understood these episodes, chose the strongest palanquin bearers, lads with broad shoulders bearing the lightest of conveyances to still My Lord's fears of reaching the town after the car had gone. The conveyance was flimsy as a snail shell, wooden, with slim posts and rails, a seat and simple roof for express travel. I warned him that it would be uncomfortable. Why would He not take His time, arrive for the music festival rested and ready to relax and listen to the sweet sounds of veena and voices drifting from the temple across the holy river? But no, he must see the car rumble from the great archway of the temple. His peace of mind depended on it.

So I was sitting up in bed, my heart crashing. The horses had stopped and the roaring continued. My silk wrap streamed behind me as I ran to the battlements. Wildly. I squinted. Where was His palanquin? Why had He abandoned the journey? His face contorted as he screamed and waved his blood-stained sword while porters grunted and strained to open the great doors. Their shoulders bulged; they did not wish to be feel the lash on their backs. What had befallen My Lord on the journey?

Kannan ran in panting, her eyes big like hand mirrors. There had been a... no... not an accident. She twisted the ring around on her little finger. The palanquin bearers, she said, they are dead. I clutched a chunk of gold chains at my throat and the ornaments jangled. 'Tell me!' I shouted at her. There was whispering in the courtyard below and now the wailing of sweeper women for their husbands from behind the kitchens. Kannan just stared at me. I slapped her face. She put her hand over the red mark and spoke.

The bearers had jogged away from the Palace to the festival, muscles standing out in their calves and thighs, the other team sprinting along in the rear, before the mounted troops, ready to take their turn and assume the royal burden when the first lot were exhausted.

As the sun slid up above the bushes, My Lord became more agitated. They must go faster. The land is flat all the way, so they could run at great speed. They were used to the roughness of the road, missing the branches of large trees, but the dust! My Lord had not taken into account that it was April and we had no rain for months. He coughed and cursed and held a handkerchief over his face, but it was

unbearable. He roared at his entourage to stop and, as his bearers leaned forward panting, their hearts racing, propping themselves on their arms, he raised his sword which crashed down and broke a neck and sliced through flesh—a bearer had been beheaded and My Lord was screaming orders: 'Slay the other fools!' And the palanquin was abandoned on the road as My Lord mounted an Arab stallion, shouting, 'My fate is sealed. They plot against me and the forces of darkness are upon us.' Then he wheeled suddenly around and galloped back to the Palace amid the screams of the four surviving bearers who tore off into the forest.

Kannan and I stood listening to My Lord stomping up the stairs, panting. It is I alone who can quell the demons in Him. I knew that I must.

Like Radha and Krishna, with our love we can push back the forces of darkness. The Swamigal said so when I was but fifteen years old. This is my fate.

He bathed and I prayed silently as I rubbed Him with sweet unguents so that His skin was sleek as a deer, on the purple silk sheets. He sighed and was still. Then I plucked my veena and my voice soared with songs of the mighty Lord Krishna and of my love for Him. And I am sure that My Lord dreamed of white jasmine in the forest, fragrant roots mixed with the scent of sandal paste as red lotuses opened their petals wide on the morning in our blue silk tent when He stroked my dew-fresh hair and gazed at my ruby lips. I opened my loins and He took me in our sacred bower, concealed in the forest on the soft banks of the sacred Kaveri.

Then, as I listened to the women ululating in the Palace, My Lord slept and I sat with a sorrowful heart. My voice gushed out and drowned the keening of the women whose men had been cut down on the road.

These memories haunt me.

There is no word from anyone at court. No one knows when Manoji will return. The Wives' Palace is silent. To whom can I go? I thought that I had friends. But they were only admirers, ready to discard a ganika who is no longer an intimate of the King. And it seems that I am no longer such a one.

*

She is abandoned. Her brain is spinning. Surinder will go to Chandigarh, to be ingested into the family's system. His beloved grandfather will die. Surinder will lose Rachel, as Grandfather lost the American lover.

Rachel pictures the two of them, based on the outline that Surinder has provided. She hopes that Grandfather will understand their passion, given his own experience with the American woman. Rachel imagines her, attractive, an artist, with the young Grandfather, travelling across The States; making love in their New York apartment; Grandfather being recalled to India to help with some urgent family problem. The American woman's conviction that he would not come back as he promised to do.

In the room, the American woman plays the saxophone and watches Grandfather. The notes become harder, more brittle. They rise up and fall in showers around the apartment, over Grandfather, catching in his eyelashes and beard, barbed semi quavers scratching his skin. He blinks and looks back at her thin pale face.

Then, in the dusk, the notes mellow and become liquid, seep under the door of the apartment and down the dusty stairs to the basement. The janitor's wife stops stirring the chitterlings in the battered pan and feels a length of music sliding across the back of her neck like moss-coloured velvet. Her son picks up his guitar and his blunt fingers strum minor chords that mix with the wail of the white woman's sax upstairs. The blues seep out through the crack in the window under the ceiling, around the legs of passers-by, into the dark of Forty Second Street, through the city lights and into the black sky.

*

My mother cuts blossoms in the garden. Petals float into my hair as she pulls the branches down and snips the stems with her shears. We sit in the speckled shade and she tells me that she knows nothing of the goings on at court, nor does grandmother. Except that My Lord is enclosed in his chambers and it is said that he is unhinged, perhaps dying. She can see that I am floating in a half world and she takes my hand and strokes it.

I return to my own house and wander in my corridors like a ghost, blind to the new frescoes that I had recently commissioned, depicting a ganika as magnificent as

Madhevi, bedecked in her ornaments dancing for her lord, the King. The blues, the oranges, the gold leaf glow on my walls.

Hooves clop in the street and reverberate off the stone walls. A group of soldiers rides past the dancers' houses, their heads swivelling as if they expect rebels to rush out of some lane, waving swords. The city is quiet and there is a foreboding in the air. I lie on my couch and doze.

Someone gallops up, dismounts and hammers on my large wooden door. 'Madam,' he shouts, 'open up! In all haste!' Several more fists beat on the wood. Kannan and the girls rush into the entrance hall, their hands over their mouths in fear. 'It is Govinda. Open up.' I nod and the doors are flung wide. Govinda sweeps in. 'Come,' he says, 'My Lord asks for you. Manoji is back. He will stand no nonsense: you will enter the King's chamber.' He gives me a leg up and I am astride a black mare that dances as we wheel around and canter up the street. My Lord is dying and Manoji has arrived minutes ago from an expedition. He storms around the Palace in a rage. He had received false information, galloped away in the King's service and left his enemies to line up against him.

The Palace road is still. We slow down to enter the echoing carriageway. Troops are ranged in the courtyard, the rattle of breastplates and the smell of sweat, by the music hall. Foot soldiers sharpen the razor points on lances. It is a show of force. Servants stand in doorways and whisper. In the entrance corridor Manoji roars and stamps like an enraged lion. He is back in charge and the dissidents quail before him. We dismount and Govinda clears a way for me. Manoji stops me. 'The King is dead,' he says. 'Minutes ago, he expired.'

'Why did you go and leave him?' I whisper to the General.

'Madam,' he says, and his face is at war between sadness and rage. 'Madam, *the foot must move as the dancing master orders.*'

Govinda takes my hand and we run along the echoing passageways to My Lord's chamber, several soldiers staying close behind.

His body is laid out on the bed with sweet frankincense burning, and his women keen and wail. On a large couch, not far from the bed, the moonbeam girl kneels, her face the colour of cold ashes, a tangle of gold jewellery in her hands, chains, bangles, like a clump of seaweed snagged on a fishing line.

'Why was Madam not summoned?' Govinda says in a loud voice. The keening and crying stops as if someone had slammed a large door on the scene. The women look at each other in horror at the sound of this sharp tone, this desecration of the death chamber of a god King. 'Why?' Govinda is shouting. 'When the King asked for her... ' He looks around. 'Why?'

It is the girl's mother who comes forward and speaks. 'He did not want to see Madam. He realised the selfishness of her ways.' Her voice is harsh, but her accent sophisticated and foreign. 'The rampant display of arrogance at my daughter's arangetram. He would stand for it no longer.' Her lips are spread tightly across her teeth. 'He did not ask for you, Madam.' There is such hate in the woman's eyes, in the silence of the chamber.

'He did not call for me?' I kneel on the bed and take My Lord's head on my lap and I rock back and forth in my misery. After another silence there is a small voice. The pale girl is still kneeling on her couch, clutching the tangle of ornaments.

'He did call for you,' she says. 'Today and yesterday, he asked for his Radha and no one sent for you.'

'His Radha?' her mother's voice is cutting.

'Yes,' says the small voice of her pale daughter. 'He always called Muddupalani his Radha.' And tears roll down her cheeks.

Yamunambai weeps with the other wives. As I cradle his divine head in my hands, large tears splash on his dark, swollen face. There is blood on the bed. His leg is cut by a sword. 'He dreamed about dogs attacking him,' she tells me. I breathe my pain deep into my body and exhale. A long groan gushes from my chest and spreads around the room. If I had been there I could have stilled his fear, brought him back to life with the richness of my voice, my hands on his body, for I am his Radha.

I place My Lord's head gently on the cushion. I must grieve alone, away from this crowd. The girl climbs off the couch, walks across the chamber and hands me the tangle of gold as big as a melon. 'These are yours. He would have given them to you,' she says, 'His Radha'. I drop the clump on the floor beside the bed and brooches, earrings and anklets clank and jangle on the stone. And I leave the room, a hand on my breast to still my burning heart.

That woman is in the corridor. She steps in front of me, close this time so that I must look her in the eyes that are deep-set in their sockets. 'You. You ruin

everything,' she says. 'And you took away the glory of her arangetram.' The woman spits out words and her head trembles with rage.

'It was mine. My Lord's birthday was always mine.'

The woman's face is close to my own and her teeth are gritted. 'You are selfish. You try to change the course of destiny. A woman. A ganika. Your arrogance...'

'Madam, I must leave you.' My voice is that of a ghost walking. 'I must grieve for My Lord.' And I depart from the Palace, barely seeing the garlands of jasmine braided along the open side of the arcade and the black bees shining like ebony. The courtiers stand in huddles and watch me and I must make my way amongst them, my heart slashed with the grief of My Lord's nightmare sword. And I must not stumble or cry out. I will hold the dark forces at bay, at least for a little longer, for I am Muddupalani and the King had asked for his Radha.

*

My head throbs and my face is blocked up with tears. I place one foot in front of the other until I am in the shower where I huddle. I shiver and turn on the hot tap and revolve blankly, in the comforting warmth that gushes over me. My silver ornaments clank as my hands move over my wet body. I turn off the taps, trail water across the room and stand at the balcony looking at the river.

There is a knock at the door. Why has he taken so long to come to me?

'Why? Why?' I scream then stop, stupefied. It is Saraswati. I stand there, naked except for my silver bangles, my anklets, the chains and silver ropes around my neck, the silver snakes, the rings in my ears, nose and nipple.

'You are all silver,' she says. And the water drips down my body.

'All this,' she gestures towards the house. 'It's not my doing.' She walks forward and holds out her hand. 'Please, don't suffer so much.' I keep staring at her. 'There is a boy that I like, too. We have been meeting.' She shrugs.

'How did you know?' I ask.

'It was obvious tonight. That you... are together. It filled the room. For anyone who could feel it. But that was only me. And Tata.' Her eyes fill with tears. 'I'm sorry. For us, this is normal. But it should not happen to you,' she says. 'You look silver,

beautiful in the moonlight. Surinder is talking to Tata,' she says. 'He will come.' And she turns and walks across the lawn and back to the house.

The moon shines on her and she cannot move or she will gash herself on the barbed wire that binds her heart. She becomes a camera on the ceiling watching her body on the bed, taking shots, static images: of a silver foetus shape, the flesh pulled tight over the buttocks, knees up towards the chin, back rounded like a spoon; then, an aluminium corpse lying in repose, ankles together, toes turned up, hands resting on the hip bones; the next shot a torn-out paper doll, feet turned out to the side; then, the twisted torso, chest on the bed, head to one side, arms bent, the sheet a wrinkled blue triangle in the v of cast metal, her hips rounded, one leg straight and the other pulled up. She wishes that she might manipulate a glint or a twinkle or be pearlescent, but the best she can do is observe a dull glow. She is not sure how long the sequence takes, but after a few shots, the camera, her eye, falls with a thud on the bed.

She stands up and walks onto the balcony and looks at the river, trying to see herself as a mosquito in the big flow of time. But the heart stands in the way and blocks the view. She stretches her arms, straining, to no avail, to break the vestiges of barbed wire lashed tightly around her. She will go to the Summer Palace.

*

The woman stands at the window and watches. She has the deportment of a dancer, but there is an unaccountable stoop to her shoulders, as if the armature of her body is melting at the top.

Muddupalani watches the dancers strewing petals in the street and she hears the clatter of marching feet as hundreds of foot soldiers clump around the corner and past the door, trampling the pinks and the yellows of the flowers. The palanquins are next, jammed with courtiers, whispering and speculating as to their fate under the next regime.

My Lord, My Lord, she whispers as the King's massive and ornate bier sways into view, bearing the sacred body dressed in white linen, strewn with blooms. Flutes wail and drums thud. She should be there, leading the dancers, but she is too tired.

Here are the King's faithful followers, mounted on horses plainly harnessed. General Manoji, creaking in leather and iron, his trusted officers, then Govinda, eyes cast down, then more warriors. Hooves chime on stones. They move past Muddupalani as if a painting is being unfurled in this square of window frame, unreal, two-dimensional. Already, the ululations of the populace curl like smoke from the nearby avenue back to the woman at the window, mourning their Lord, in between the receding blasts of music that accompany the cortege. After the last straggling mourners have gone, the servant, Kannan, and the neighbours slosh great buckets of water over the street to wash away the inauspicious traces of death.

And she walks like a puppet, a stiffness in her body, to her dressing room where Kannan layers her body with fabrics, but no precious metals. No ornaments. It would not be right. But she feels weighed down. She is like a wife waiting for her Lord to come back from battle, leaving her empty bedchamber, placing a hibiscus in a bowl of water by the door, not weaving jasmine garlands in her hair, unadorned, listening until the messenger runs to announce that he has entered the city gate as the porter drags back the creaking door. Then, she must call her women and they will deck her with ornaments and blossoms. So it is with this woman, whose Lord will not return.

She laughs and the servant's eyes grow wide.

'Wife?' She shouts and is thrilled by the great discharge of her voice that rings against her walls. 'I am no wife. My body is ornamented and polished with sweet perfumes, I lie on my velvet couch and wait to receive My Lord. My body is convulsed with passion. It is an instrument that I play. I am Muddupalani.' She laughs, another detonation, and the servant frowns and her mouth drops open. 'I do not manage some dull household, weighed by my ring of dangling keys for cupboards that hold the sacks of rice and the tedious pots and pans of the drudge. Oh, no. My shelves are lined with unguents and sweet oils, my coffer with chains and loops of gold and stones.' She laughs again and Kannan smooths her hair, hoping that her touch will still the strange, loud thoughts of this great lady, her mistress.

The woman watches from her palanquin, on the fringe of the devotees. It is not for her to be in the middle of the melee at Raja Gori, burial place of kings. Only a few wrinkled crones and stooped old men stand by her conveyance. Their sons and

grandsons will be among the pressing throngs, on the other side of the tank, gaping at the funeral pyre and waiting for the waves of auspicious holiness to spread across the multitudes when the wives become saints in the blazing fire, for this is the fate of wives.

The dancer, the crones and the old men have an uninterrupted view of the moving figures still breaking up sticks, shifting the great piles of logs by the river. The two wives sit impassively as women wash their feet and the priests whisper in their ears, explaining the procedure no doubt and exhorting them to continue in their resolve to become *sati*, saints, speeding the progress of their Lord to *nirvana*, and what future would they have as widows, anyway? If they had been more holy in this life, their Lord would not have died. And when the new King brings his women into the *zenana*... The sons help the King's wives to their feet and they make the ritual circles around the pyre as His body is placed on the platform. In the first round, their bodies are erect. During the second, they are hesitant in their movements. On the third round, there is some stumbling. Ah, yes. The priests have been merciful and supplied them with hefty doses of opium, which begin to take effect now. But these wives have a quiet dignity, as they are helped up onto the platform, the priests assisting them to take up the correct postures. The senior wife sits at My Lord's head, with her hand under His neck and her junior at His feet.

And through the curtain, the ganika watches the sons light the pyre of her Lord with flaming torches.

And the women present at the funeral pyre pass around the water that has washed the feet of the two *satis* and the thousands present clamour to take a sip in veneration of these saints.

The only feature that threatens the stateliness of the occasion is the group of four men with the green bamboo hefty sticks to prod, poke and hold down their majesties if they rouse themselves and decide that they cannot stand the flames.

And Muddupalani is tired with a dead exhaustion of the body and fear of the monster chattering in her brain, threatening to tear her to pieces. She must leave. Perhaps she will go to the Summer Palace? She stares listlessly at the scene. The mob cries out, worshipping the burning wives as they take her lover to the highest heaven

to sit at his feet. So it is written. But every dancer knows: *heaven is full of actors, playboys, and courtesans; it's no place for a married woman.*

*

At the Summer Palace, I slip into the ruin and push through debris and vines to the broken mirror that stands by the window above the lapping water. I search for a frosted glass image of a woman in her ornaments, but all I can see is a blotchy face and red eyes crying, crinkling and rippling in the reflection washed out in the skim-milk moonlight. Her nose runs, she snuffles. Where is Surinder? She looks in the mirror. The image is broken up where the silver peels off the glass. This body is fractured, a breast here, the line of the pubic hair there, narrow, a landing strip, the rest gone with depilation, deforestation, laid waste.

*

The water slaps against the base of the tower like a dancer's feet on the black floor of the temple. A lizard darts on the wall by the silk hanging that is flesh-coloured like flaccid meat in folds, hanging flaps of age and death. The lizard flicks its tail. A stream of nausea engulfs my interior, but I cannot vomit or expel any waste from my hard body. It has seized up and I lie here, immobile. It is only my mind that functions, with endless dramas playing out on the barren stage of my life.

I watch, in my paralysis, a woman who performs in a painting that moves. She is in the frame of the Saraswati Mahal, dancing. The audience roars and moves. Why do they not stop, hold their breath, watch? It is the incomparable Muddupalani, performing for them. The painting becomes a close view. I watch her lips in the frame, large in my vision, so that I see the tiny lines forming around her mouth. She is, after all, thirty-five. I feel sick as I watch her eyes open and close, slide to left and right as she seduces her Lord. Only eyes now. Where is she? Yes, that's right, it's the dance hall. But just the eyes visible. There is another sound now, the thudding of a cannon firing. Will it breach the wall of the city? Boom. Boom. The woman in the moving painting dances on, her expressions shifting through the emotions that have been mapped out for her and now wash over her face like sluggish tides. The painting

is accompanied by sound, the dull roar of voices, the court eddying and flowing on the floor below the stage. There are gurgling, disgusting, sloshing sounds. What is this? Water. River. Yes, I am at the Summer Palace. Is it the Moghuls? The French? I cannot move, to turn these paintings to the wall. They slide through me when my eyes are closed and they will not stop. These lurid scenes penetrate my brain, ravish me as I lie trapped in my body.

I am on the bed shivering, even though the rains have barely begun. My skin is brittle like the shell of an egg. If I move even one muscle, the brown casing will shatter and the inside splatter to the ground, the rotten yolk breaking in the white and spreading fetid yellow murkiness across the slime.

If a crack appears, how will I get it, this stuff, back in the shell? Ah, I will call My Lord. He will have my fine casing restored for me, by the Chinese potter who has recently visited our court. He will glue and patch me as he did with my porcelain, the red Sung tea bowl with the curved lip. What is that colour? Not rust, no, deeper. Not liver, brighter. Wine dark. But there is a name. Vivid livid colour quivers in my head. Ox blood. That's the glaze. *Sang de boeuf*, the French would call it. What if there are tiny holes in my shell? The shards lost? Too small to replace? Seeping, oozing.

The muscles in my face are dead. No need to smile for anyone, and I cannot.

That chunk of plaster. The plaster, next to the head of the tiger, on the ceiling will fall on my head and I will die. Kannan! call the servants! move my bed! I measured it with my eye yesterday. It has increased, that crack, by the size of the tiger's fang. Or was it the day before that I calculated? She is looking through the curtain at me again. Kannan. Is she reporting back to my enemies at court? She has been with me now for ten years, but who can you trust?

'Kannan, return to your duties.' A voice issues from this head, perhaps it is I who am speaking. Then, I am being shaken. I cry out.

'Madam, get up,' she says. It is Kannan's voice. I am weary to the marrow of my bones. She leans over me and pulls at my body.

'Get up,' she says. And there is the smell of salt fish in her oiled hair from the coast, after a decade on inland stone floors and silk durries. Her odour makes me dizzy.

'Get up and dance.' She pulls at me and drags me up as if I am a child again and late for my class, with the guru beating on the door with his stick and shouting,

stamping his foot on the floor like a dhobi smashing a wet bed sheet on the washing stone. Dance? I sit on the edge of the bed, hands clasped in my lap, panting. And I have not broken. My body is still one piece despite the oozing slime inside. But my shoulders ache. And on my surface, there is this terrible nakedness. My ornaments have been removed for I could not bear the weight of them on my shell. And where is my Krishna? Oh, that He does not see me like this.

*

Something scrabbles in the corner and there is the cry of some woman, ravaged and forlorn. She should swim and feel the water around her, leave the Summer Palace.

Woman with smooth silver torso and purple lungi tied around her waist pushes old door. Door scrapes across the stone floor. Woman goes up stone steps. Small pavilion. Leans against the pillar and looks across the river. Runs fingers over lips.

*When she looks
into the room where she had spent
many a night
with the lotus-eyed one,
total darkness
creeps over her eyes.*

*When she recalls
His sweet cajoling
and loving words,
her heart breaks into
a million pieces.*

*When she hears
the parrot calling
Krishna's name over and over,
the ringing in her ears
makes her deaf, confused, mad.*

*When she comes close to the objects
Hari held in his loving hands,
the heat rises in her body*

*and she falls in a swoon.
Unable to stay in one place,
she darts
as if she has stepped
on burning coals.
Babbling like one
touched by Demon Desire,
devastated
by the sky
falling upon her,
the charming woman, Radha,
is stricken by
mighty Manmatha,
the Love God
who is born in the heart.*

Woman, naked. Covered with silver jewellery. Moves through twisted vines and saplings in palace ruin. Stoops. Picks up shiny gem from the dirt. Is it an ornament, a jewel dropped by a dancer? Green. An emerald? She clutches it in her hand and the blood wells. It is only glass. A sharp shard. She runs her hand over her breast. Walks to the cracked mirror in the corner. Line of blood on left breast. Blood on fingers of left hand and smudged on thigh.

Agitation in veins and nerves. Craving for Surinder. His body. Rapture of his hands and mouth. She fingers her ornaments, the pearls he gave her not long ago. Muddupalani means 'sweet pearl'. Rachel caresses the creamy hard tears of oysters and weeps. Peacock screams in Summer Palace.

*

What was that? Ah, just the bird. I run my hands through my hair. A chipped fingernail is caught in a tangle of knots. I sit up and I do not break. My movements are languid. Another word that M Duquesne liked. You languid ladies, he would say, smiling, but with those little stony French eyes.

I drag myself to my feet and walk, uncertainly, to the mirror, my thin lungi falling to the floor. Kannan has forgotten to dress me.

The dim figure of a woman is outlined on the dusty mirror. She is dark and small, but sometimes she shifts shape and is tall and white, a spectre with hair as pale as jasmine. I must look more closely. I spit on the mirror and polish it to a heart-sized patch with the purple muslin. There she is, the dark one now, with her matted hair, oily skin around the belly, the cracked finger-nails, a line of dirt under them, her eyes large in dark circles. Kannan will have to go. She has allowed this cartoon figure of a scarecrow. The slovenly slattern! That woman must go. She is not fit to serve the mistress of My Lord, Pratapasimha, King of Tanjavur.

'Kannan!' No answer.

Graire graire! a crow sneers in the tower. The woman in the glass is watery from tears that drip onto my chest. There is an ache in my groin. I am staring at the wax of the candle and it goes out of focus. I cannot be bothered moving my eyes. Sweat beads on my top lip. I brush it away and curl my nose at the smell of my body. The ache in my groin. A hot needle stabs, inside each hip-bone. Perhaps the change of life has come, suddenly and too early. A contraction at the end of my string. A wetness. I put my hand between my thighs and feel with my second finger.

Ah, my finger is brown-red. I wipe it on my arm. It skitters over the skin and stops in a small gob near the bangles on my wrist. I put my finger in the coconut oil left in the tiny green Chinese bowl and paint a pale brown oily stripe across my forearm. My finger takes up more colour and draws a thick, red, vertical line along my breast bone. I dip into my red colour pot and refresh the streak over the bumps of my breast bone. I extend one leg, step, stamp and lunge. The torso sinks and my thighs are parallel with the ground. I dip again and draw a red band, following the line of my under thigh, the curve along to the middle, the nick in the curve. A drip falls on the skimpy dance sari. I catch the next drop on my finger and inscribe a circle around my left breast. I dip again and paint the other breast, draw a line from the circle to the nipple, paint it cherry red with my thumb and forefinger. It becomes hard like a seed pod. I pinch colour onto the other one and shiver. I rise up to vertical and continue my painting, my stylus keeping pace with the supply of pigment between my legs. The petal-shaped eyes, the full breasts, the attenuated waist and exaggerated hips of my dancer are as curved as any stone devadasi on the wall of the Big Temple.

My finger-nails make delicate patterns, a filigree of tendrils across my stomach, a bird on the wing, elegantly curved.

The picture is finished. I move it. I am a temple dancer. I am a bronze god, Nataraja, right leg bent, left leg elegantly stretched into the space out across in front of my groin, left arm extended, the hand soft. My fingers flutter beside my cheek. I change position. Now I am Lord Krishna, playing his flute for the milkmaids. I smile at them, seductive. I move again, dropping gracefully to the floor, looking up beseechingly to where Krishna had stood. My lotus-eyed one, My Lord God, I am yours. Your Radha. I catch sight of a woman in the mirror. Is it Radha? No, it's the scarecrow. Muddupalani.

I rise and my face is frightening. I step and slap my foot on the ground. Thighs splay out. Strong. Arms wide and the forearms up. Ho, I am Kali. I have killed. Ho! I yell. My blood drips on the floor. I am a tiger. I drop on all fours, snarling at the other big cat in the mirror. I yawn and bare my teeth.

Kannan shouts. She will bring water to wash me.

I hear a scream, like a woman in pain. I look across the room. The walls have disintegrated. Vines and small trees sprawl among the rubble. A scrap of a moon shines down. A woman, naked, covered in silver jewellery, moves through the twisted canes and saplings in this ruin. Lines of blood patches her pallid left breast, blood on the fingers of her left hand and smudges on her thigh. Yes, she is pale, but she is not the moonbeam girl. She is some other woman. This one's hair is like silver or bleached silk. She stands beside me and looks in the mirror, her mouth open. The scream. She runs her fingers over her body and I know that she is bleeding for Lord Krishna and the rapture of her love for her Lord.

We look at ourselves in the mirror.

She walks across the broken bricks, picking her way delicately, like a dancer, and then disappears through the doorway into the courtyard. I follow.

This woman dreams down the steps, assesses the silvery stage as if she will leap, jump out onto its rippling surface. On the lowest step, she hitches her purple lungi up around her waist. The torso is silvery grey. Perhaps she will dance on this shimmering sheet of silk. But no, she slides into it as if it is water and strikes out, arms like paddles. Pale body in silver and black. Legs kick. Anklets and bracelets drift around limbs. Arms lift, straighten and scoop through. It must be water. Muscles in

her shoulders work in the moonlight. A fish. Black, white, grey. Silvery dashes on river stage inscribed by moon.

I am a dancer. My toes curl on the stone to the slow rhythm of the drum in my chest that propels me forward towards the silver stage, my hands joined in prayer posture. At the top of the steps, I wait for the applause. A dry clapping sound like hollow bamboo on a windy night. Clusters of huge faces, lotus leaves in a breeze smile and nod. I hold out my hands, offering myself to them, descending the steps, feet firm, body erect. Take me, my face tells them. I am yours. Your heavenly dancer. Fragments of sharp sounds pierce my ears, a squealing of magnified bat calls. The heart lump inside thuds against the hard bone of my ribs. At the bottom of the steps, I put my foot on the shining stage and in that instant the applause stops dead, as if the gods have slammed a huge door and the audience is shut outside the dance hall. But the iron light remains. There is still the light.

I feel that I may sink as I walk onto the empty stage, I wade, my graceful movements curtailed by the malign divinities. The stage shimmers and moves and still the pale creature slides across the surface. I close my eyes because it is all flat, a picture, washed out with no colour, like grey jelly. I look again. The pearly figurine still moves, milky arms flailing one at a time in the air and disappearing into the viscous silver black of the stage. It is a woman playing a fish, with a lustre on top of the muscles of those arms, elbows pointed, the arm straightening, then scooping back down and disappearing, penetrating the surface of the stage. And around her waist is a dance sari, coming loose as she glides, kicking her legs and, after every fourth stroke, her face swivels and the fish mouth opens, takes air and buries itself again. And the dance sari... I laugh because it is the same as mine, the only colour in this jelly world, deep purple, streaming out behind her. And I walk towards her, calling, my arms stretched out to her because she is swimming across the stage as if it is water. There is another scream. The door slams shut on the dance hall and I shiver, up to my waist in the river, my sari dark and heavy unravelling across the top of the water. And the screams of the peacock mingle with the cries of Kannan. 'Madam,' her voice is hoarse, 'come back.' And I laugh again because I have seen the silver woman picture on the current of the river. A fish? A goddess? A thin shaft of moonlight?

*

I pull myself out of the water, panting, stand on the steps, the gauze rag sticking to my body. At least my heart is pounding now. At the Summer Palace I had felt washed out like a paper replica of a body, a slip of the imagination, a spectre. Panting and dripping. I squeeze out my hair and climb the steps. The nice Australian film-maker? Some deranged Amazon, undoing the wet hank of material from around her waist and jingling naked in her chains, like a bad drawing, although, then again, her breasts are not as pointed or her lips as massive, or her eyes as wide as the body parts in an adult comic.

In the cottage, Surinder is slumped in the armchair.

He tells me that it was all a shock, this marriage idea of Kamala's, that he does not want to go ahead with it, that he will talk to his mother about me. This is the way it is done in India. One does not directly approach the father. I feel that I understand. It is like praying to the Catholic God. You first take your requests to the Mother of God and she will intercede for you with her only begotten son. Yes, it must be like that. But why didn't the petitioner ask God the Father, the one in charge?

Rachel, you are not listening, I tell myself. The young man hunches in the chair, in his neatly pressed checked shirt, his trousers with the crease, his hair trussed up in a maroon turban, and I do not recognise my lover.

'Why will you talk to your mother?' I ask him.

He tells me that he wants to marry me. If only his parents will give him his freedom. But there is his sister to consider. She is engaged now to the decent chap he had told me about, an airline pilot from a good family. She likes him. It is a love marriage, sanctioned by the family. When Surinder is married, she will have the green light.

'Just come to Australia with me', Rachel says. 'It would be easier.'

Surinder explains that this is not possible. It will cause a great scandal in the family. That the parents of his sister's fiancé will never approve a marriage with an unstable family, where the eldest son has run away with a foreigner. Surinder leans forward and stares at his hands.

'I must do my duty,' he says. 'And there is Kamala and there are my debts to her.'

It should all be simple. Why then this terrible drama? As if Rachel has been wrongly cast in a play and no one had given her the script. She is feeling the dead weight of her limbs and her ornaments. She begs Surinder to go so that she can turn over the dreariness that has returned, wet and cold, away from the crazed passion of the Summer Palace.

'I will talk to Tata,' he says. He steps forward as if he wants to hold her, but there is the wide ocean of their difference swelling between them. He walks from the cottage and she watches his rolling gait in the frame of the door, then a long shot as he plods across the lawn and up into the house of the family. She knows that she should not be here.

Part Three

... When I had the love of Krishna, then I was truly alive.

Muddupalani,
Radhika Santwanam

A message from my mother. Ammama wants me in Tanjavur. My stomach plunges and my breathing snags in my wind pipe.

The scribe is due and I must write.

Ammama is complaining that I have stayed away too long. My mother reports her words: what is this strange behaviour? Staying at a farm? Such places are for the peasants, toiling in the fields, or the minor patrons, the zaminders, inviting devadasis from some local temple to dance for them and offer favours at small palaces situated on their little acreages. It is not the place for a ganika, alone with her servant. Such is the view of my grandmother. But in this place I can huddle and heal my wounds.

I lie on my couch, as the breeze blows through the hall from the river. It is several weeks since the terrible time at the Summer Palace. I try not to think about those weeks, or were they months?

I crave tranquillity, with orderly lines of thoughts and veins in harmony, rather than a tangled mess of clotted ropes. Still, the vivid pictures flash onto the pink of my eyelids, but they no longer thread through my mind in a relentless loop of friezes. A portrait of Anaburnabai comes into focus, then Nayyakan, the disgraced Prime Minister. I shudder. I watch the portraits slide by. The images move more quickly, other familiar faces from the Palace, whispering and plotting in the shadows of stone corridors. The pictures, when they begin, crowd out all other things. I am the object, with these images strapped to my eyelids, slipping by, a pillar here, a wall hanging there. Govinda. I smile. My Lord. It is too painful. The pictures stop. Yes, I have learned to throw a curtain over them if they begin.

I shudder again, as if I have eaten stale fish.

My soul heals slowly in the rich smell of the turned earth and the prattle of the river.

They will be calling me rustic and laughing, behind their hands, or perhaps openly, now that My Lord is not there. What do I care? They tried to hide their amusement when I asked My Lord for a farm of my own, long ago. Ten years, perhaps? But a woman of the world must take care of her future, with the French, the English and Moghuls at our door then, apart from the tortuous machinations of Tanjavur. The little drama of my request for the farm plays out in my head and I watch myself among the courtiers.

'Madam, what will an exquisitely urban creature such as yourself do, languishing among the clods, watching the paddy shoots grow?' asked the Prime Minister, arching an eyebrow in what he considered his ironic look. I gave a smile of fraudulent appreciation at his svelte urbanity.

My Lord took my hand and caressed it, running his finger-nail from my wrist down to the tip of my middle finger, holding the hand flat and open. 'Can this silken skin cause the seeds to send out shoots and the stalks to grow?'

I took my cue: it was only gracious. I lifted my hand and took his finger, at the moment that it brushed the end of my hand and, delicately, I brought it into my mouth, sucked on it neatly and then let it go. The courtiers grinned. 'Can I make the stalks grow?' I crooned. 'But surely, My Lord can attest to the fact that I am expert in stimulating the vigorous stalks of the most divine plants to grow.' And the courtiers guffawed and bleated as courtiers do.

Vine. Vigneron. Dupleix's viticulturist planted the cuttings in the days when M Duquesne was his envoy. I came to see the work, bending, squatting, my ornaments jangling, smelling the turned, moist earth that sat on the side of the damp hole. And I placed in it a bare stick, nothing on it, not a shoot, but M Duquesne said that this cutting would spring into life and become a vine. A cutting, he said, from the Bordeaux region. I was not au fait with his country, but could take great pleasure in a claret from a crystal glass, a different experience from our coconut toddy liquor. Ten years now and I have been patient with these vines, although it is said that the climate is totally unsuitable. Have I become a rustic clod in this short time?

The scribe is due. To work. I must organise my thoughts and write of Radha and Ila as Krishna directed me, long ago. But where will I find the words? They do not sing in my throat or in the muscles of my torso. I must slow the breath, take deeper draughts and still the blows of my heart that bash against the bone fence of my ribs, this heart that can thrash me from within. What if this fence breaks down and my heart punches through? I stand and I breathe deeply.

Eleven in the morning and I have yet to don a sari. The scribe will arrive in one hour with his stylus sharpened and I must deliver myself of a series of verses. Perhaps the words will not come?

I walk to the mirror and look at the woman reflected there. Her hair is tied back loosely. The gown hangs on her shoulders and her form is barely visible behind

the silk that falls to the floor like a curtain. I look at the face and I am frightened at the shocking nakedness, the unguarded gaze as she stares back at me. How can this woman survive without the shield that conceals her obscene fear of this world which tinkles with pointless activity? There is no sweep of beautiful expressions across a mask to beguile gods. The face is soft now and the eyes a deep, deep brown. Yes, I have danced, entranced kings, and lords from Europe who feted me and sang my praises. I have felt the sublime moments of passion that transcended the pettiness of the world and I have joined with the gods. But oh, the exhaustion of it all. And for what? This woman in the mirror who danced for so long on the cracked slate that spans the abyss of powerlessness, who looked down at that tiny child, Muddupalani, clinging to the sides of this dark pit, watching the girls on the step, down the street from Auntie's place, entertaining multiple gentlemen callers. And when they grew old they would live in huts with barely enough rice to pad their bony ribs. Soon, the mouse girl who shares my bed would go there. That was her fate. In the dark of the past, the little Muddupalani and her great hunger to be chosen. For what? I did not know.

You see, I did not always live with my mother and grandmother in our exquisite Tanjavur house. I lived with Auntie in a village for my first seven years. She would not tell me about my mother or why I was living there. We had to piece together what information we could. It was said that Auntie had been a dancer once, but she was poor now and looked after small girls until they reached the menarche. She would plod around the house, insisting on spotless cleanliness from the three or four of us in her care.

Each day I drew water from the well or scrubbed the stone of the kitchen or scoured the pots, with sand and coconut fibre. In a moment of softness, Auntie taught me a song that I hummed in the house or sang sometimes to the bird that landed on the stone wall. The yellow bird, in that grey place. Stay with me, I carolled, oh, stay, stay with me. But he turned his head on one side and flitted away into the blue. My singing could not ensnare him and make him remain. Perhaps my voice was not enough. I moved my hands in the shape of wings and twirled the fingers in front of the bird like the ladies who dance in the village temple. And I moved my eyes and entreated the creature with my lips and all of my face and it watched me for a few

seconds the next time. And the following day, longer. Return to me, oh, return, I would sing as it flitted away.

O charming lord, my Gopala

I will swim with you in the ocean of love.

If you do not return soon,

tears will roll down my cheeks,

like the great stream of the Kaveri.

I tried to draw my tiny yellow bird with me into that warm ocean of love, and when he left me I would cry as I scoured and scrubbed.

How can I forget that day when the elegant lady came and smiled at me, while the man behind her played with the curl at the corner of his beard and assessed me as if he was buying a horse for his stable, or an ornament for a woman? Such was his gaze.

The mouse girl clutched my arm and hissed as I was pushed into their presence across the stone floor, 'Muddu, you must make them love you.' She spat a little when she spoke and always tried not to smile, so that her prominent teeth would not be visible. Her eyes were deep in her head and bright and I called her the mouse, but not so that she could hear me. And there was spittle on my cheek as she said again, 'You must. Make them. Then you will be selected.'

The grand lady nodded. I lifted my thin girl chest and walked slowly into the room, my eyes fixed on them as I would look at the yellow bird. I stood like the dancers in the temple and moved my fingers like butterflies. They watched me with such attention that I went back to the beginning of the song and my little voice resonated in the room and told of loss, as I grasped hold of these people to make them flail in the depths of my eyes. At the end, my chest was still lifted and I stood like the carved dancer in the temple, one hip to the side, the left leg bent behind, arms above my head, gazing up towards the gods.

And the lady swept across the room, chuckled and kissed me. There were tears in her eyes as she said, 'My Muddupalani, you are surely my granddaughter.' And I was in a swoon with the scent of her body as the young man gazed still, biting his lower lip and letting it go. I had made them love me. In the doorway the mouse girl in her brown dress pursed her lips. The muscles in her jaw were strained and there was hatred in her look. And I knew that the lady had selected me, that I would go far

away, and that the mouse girl would move down the street to sit on the step and brush her hair and wait for the customers here in Viralimalai; that was her fate, while this exquisite lady would protect me.

From the day I was chosen by my Ammama, I have risen and glittered in the spangled galaxy of the court. But, now, have I shed my glamour? Did it seep away when the shell of my being broke?

Now, I luxuriate in the growing lightness of body and spirit. But I must regain my substance, for where are my ornaments? What has happened to them? My kindness? My beauty? My accomplishments? Have they left me? What is there of Muddupalani, unadorned?

Now, Ammama is calling me back to Tanjavur. My Amma says so. These are times of change, my mother writes, now that My Lord is gone. We must shore up our position as the foremost ladies of culture and glamour in the whole of the kingdom. Of course it is my grandmother's duty to do the best for our house. But must I play a part in this? Yes, it is my duty.

I am not dressed. How will the words come to me in praise of My Lord Krishna? And how will I answer my mother? Perhaps I will tell the scribe not to come. As I did yesterday. Cancelled. And the day before.

I look out the window at the goat munching on vegetable scraps. My life. Bucolic? Perhaps. But did not Lord Krishna live in the country with cowherds? And he was no bumpkin. I could have pointed this out to the Prime Minister, with his pastoral jibes, but then, what is the point of stoking the flames of envy and rage? And why waste words on fools?

I shout into the corridor, 'Kannan!' She comes running. She will dress me. Just another loose gown. That will do. No kohl around the eyes. No heaviness to weigh me down. No wrapping and swaddling in a sari today. Not yet. 'Hurry,' I say to her. 'The scribe is coming in half an hour.' And this strange little dark woman smiles and runs to find my gown.

I hear the sounds of the countryside, the birds. There is also a thundering of hooves. Some horseman who will pass by my gate. He will not be visiting me. Dear General Manoji comes occasionally to check on my health. That is all.

I close my eyes and search for Krishna. Now it is Radha that I see. One day, Radha's glances linger on the boy, brushing his skin that is dark as a storm cloud.

When their eyes meet, she looks at him in a different way, so that his smile falters and he is, at first, unsure. What is this seriousness in her gaze? Krishna is overwhelmed by a tumult of feeling. When their glances coincide, they smile, his body becomes hot and his sex hardens. Nanda, Krishna's foster-father, notices the flirtation of his brother's wife too, and he laughs. He has seen Krishna dancing with the *gopis* and watches the boy become a man. Nanda sings a song as he takes care of the animals:

Oh, sister-in-law, your eyes burn like coals

for this boy, your nephew, this dark one.

His beard is downy and soft as his glance.

Oh, sister-in-law, will you teach him love's ways?

Nanda will send Krishna through the forest. The forest can be a frightening place for a young man so Radha must accompany him. It is only fitting that she should go. She is his aunt. She will take care of him. Nanda throws back his head and laughs.

I smile at the worldly Nanda, who will give his son the gift of divine initiation with this luscious aunt. Yes, I have flirted exquisitely with sweet young men, but did I not devote myself to My Lord, my Pratapasimha? Did I not renounce all else for him? For such is the way of the single-minded devotee, the convergence of my body and soul, and the fate of the heavenly ganika.

Now the muscles of my face settle into a new mode of movement, free from shaping smooth blandishments. No longer must I worship at the lingam of My Lord until my mouth is aching. My tongue lolls loosely in my mouth, and it will move only to speak my own words. And my yoni will shoot sparks, form sounds, make songs that are all mine, in praise of love and passion.

Radha seducing Krishna. I like this notion—of the woman following her passion. Yes, I like it.

Kannan is here, holding out my loose gown. I must compose myself for the scribe. Radha's lust. Yes, Radha's, not mine. I cannot feel it now. It is all too tiring. What will I dictate today? I see the moonbeam girl, my student, my replacement and then Ila, the young girl who was promised to Krishna. Radha must do her duty.

I wait for the scribe and I pace the floor and hear the voice of Radha:

One day, I teach Ila,

the songs of different lands,

one day, musical instruments.

*I guide her through the nuances
of dance and mime
to play out
the subtlest mood.*

*One day, I draw out
the inner depths of the classics
as she fathoms the mysteries
of poetic styles.*

*I initiate her into the science
of love and passion
and make her sing
its lilting lines.*

*On another day
I din into her
a sense of elegance
and grace.*

*With tender care
I teach Ila
to perfect
the plucking of her veena.*

*I, Radha, my body
like a flowering creeper,
wonder when Krishna will come
and take his pleasure
in all of this.*

Yes, I imbued all these qualities in the girl, although I admit that she did already possess grace, even if it was of the pallid and translucent kind.

There is still the sound of horses' hooves. Shouts. Chickens scattering. My servants talking with some man. Kannan runs to see. She comes back with a letter from Tanjavur. I groan and yearn for the peace of my isolation.

Another letter. I read. It is from grandmother herself. '...if you are unwilling to embrace your duty and return to Tanjavur, I shall come and fetch you myself.'

Surely, I have done my duty for all the thirty-four years of my life, and there must be some reprieve now?

The scribe has entered the courtyard. I breathe deeply into my diaphragm. I will work.

*

I am travelling light. Most of my luggage, and my work, are packed up in cases and bags in the corner of the cottage at Brindavan. Have I run away? Or is this a graceful retreat, in which I can unscramble the muddle in my head? It is a research trip. That's what it is. I rummage in my bag for water. My hands feel around in the great clump of belongings and move over the jewellery box. Surinder gave it to me at the Summer Palace, after we made love the last time. It is dark green leather and large enough for all the silver he has given me. He does not expect me to wear all my ropes and manacles at once. I can travel with it, all tangled in the box, or pack it away in some room, a relic of our times together. I wear no ornaments, except for the rings in the piercings of my body that was perforated by my love. Love? Lust? I try to look out the window, but can see only my reflection and that of the elderly man diagonally opposite. I want Surinder to be sitting beside me, surreptitiously holding my hand, in the respectable two-tier air-conditioned compartment.

I find the water, undo the lid and pour a stream into my mouth, Indian style. The other inhabitants of the carriage watch with interest as I hold the rim away from the mouth. The train rackets on towards Hyderabad.

No one was in the house when I went to say goodbye. Surinder had gone up to Chennai. Kamala and the rest of them were on their various missions. There is Saraswati's marriage to prepare for, or at least her likely engagement. Surinder, married to her, when he is my lover? Of course, Tata knows that I have seduced his nephew. Will he feel that I have abused his hospitality? He is a modern man, or, rather, he dances to the beat of a different tabla. Surinder said that he will talk to Tata. I anxiously prepared myself to meet him before I left, but there was no one in the house. I left a note.

Dear Tata,

I am on my way to the train station and then to Hyderabad for my planned field trip. I wish that we could have talked. Much has happened in the last couple of days and I am confused and devastated.

Given the situation, I will leave Brindavan properly after this field trip. All my luggage is packed up in the corner of the cottage. There was no time to find other accommodation and transport it elsewhere. I hope you are not outraged that I have left things behind.

Surinder said that he would talk to you about his situation. I cannot even guess what your views might be on the way things are.

I will be back in twelve days to pick up my belongings and hope to meet you then.

With warm wishes,

Rachel.

Much of my work is still on Jaganathan's computer. I did not feel entitled to go into his office, to copy the files before I left. Perhaps it would be a violation, considering the circumstances. He and Kamala may know about my treachery. Would they guess? Would Tata tell them? My photographs, fragments of writing and the notes are all in folders in my luggage—Muddupalani, Krishna, Radha, Surinder, Rachel.

As the train approaches Hyderabad, I drift. I sleep. I dream.

I am knocking on the door of my friend's house, my friend whom I have hardly seen since I left school. Marie married a doctor, a bowel specialist. She French polishes the thick brown snake, the cedar banisters of the stairs in her house, and they gleam like a fire opal. I am soon in the house, hearing the story of the project, as I step over the old sheets that protect the pale green wool carpet. And I go through the house and know that this is the life I was groomed for.

In the dream, Rachel wanders through the garden at Marie's place, reaches the immaculate waiting room of her husband, Brian. Inside, there are views of a well-kept cottage garden. Poor, thin Indians sit, waiting to see him.

I turn in the dream and walk to a long heavy curtain, mulberry perhaps. It is only the weight, not the colour that I remember, just a velvet heaviness, a thickness redolent of fruity syrup. I pull aside the wall of fabric and there is a huge aquarium, lit like a watery circus, high with plenty of space to house the creature there, the beautiful man,

with eyelids like sea shells that curl in the corners, shadows under the brown eyes that open and stare at me, as he moves in the water like a giant squid, the legs and the arms, undulating in slow waves on the liquid stage. And this beautiful man is clad in the most sumptuous of tunics, and a spun gold turban that might be worn by Pratapasimha, the King of Tanjavur. And the gold ornaments around his neck drift like seaweed on a log. The amulets on arms and neck are tight and gleaming in the blinding light, with the flash of the precious stones firing like shot silk. And I could just stand and be sucked into the vortex of his beauty, standing in dull admiration, but he is also revolving, so I lose his gaze as he rotates, Bharat Natyam in slow motion. And then I see a straight strand of back hair that has been left out of the tight folds of the turban and I weep and look into the water, blue like the vast Indian Ocean that goes on and back forever, world without end.

And, when I recall the dream, I am a lumbering bird, its feathers dull, beak pressed against the vitrified surface, that will not be pecked open or all the waters of the Indian ocean will surge out and wash me away, this brown-feathered bird that can run like an emu across dry plains. You are gorgeous in your golds, magentas, your braids, sapphires and amulets. You could be Lord Krishna, but it is the mole behind your ear that I see, the one that I have traced with the tip of my wing when we floundered and wallowed in the sucking mud between our worlds at the shore, naked, shorn, moulting, scaled, raw flesh.

Rachel wakes in the morning with a hammering in her head. She is almost at Secunderabad and must compose her mind for work, for interviews with linguists, women writers, professors and dancers. She must develop a positive attitude but she wants to run her hand up the inside of Surinder's wrist, moving the iron bangle aside, so that she can make a slow smooth sweep up the cord of his vein. She knows this will make him shiver and perhaps he will grab her, whisper hot words in her ear and they will fall on the bed together. But Surinder is not here. And there is jealousy there, definitely, like the slimy green sides of a fish tank, resentment against Saraswati, this virgin who is young and firm of flesh, while she, Rachel, is forty-five. She cannot imagine giving Saraswati advice on sexual techniques, like Radha schooling Ila on winning and keeping Krishna. Perhaps it was Muddupalani's duty, to counsel her

successor in the tricks of the trade. Could Rachel do such a thing? Perhaps not. Radha does it. It is there in *Radhika Santwanam*:

*When the beloved
takes you in his arms,
gently jab him
with your breasts.*

*Gently, oh so gently,
when your lord
prints a kiss
on your cheek,
pout your tender lip
a wee bit.*

*When the master
overpowers you
and starts making love,
please keep giving him
one small return push
after another.*

*When the lord of your life
is tired from love play,
quickly move on top.
He is the best
among men of taste
with the most supple
young body.*

*Can you with your ardour
win his favour?*

I wonder!

*Do you think
I am shameless in
speaking freely
like this?*

How could Radha not only train her replacement but ask her lover to be gentle with the girl? It is written. Urvashi, a cousin of Tata's, has sent the translation. Tata arranged it recently. Radha says to Krishna:

Taste her lips

with the tip of your tongue.

Do not scare her by biting hard.

Peck her pretty cheeks with tiny kisses.

Do not scratch her skin

with your sharp nails.

Fondle her nipples

with the tips of your fingers.

Do not pinch them

and make her cry.

Make love tenderly and slowly.

Do not be rough

in acts of love.

How foolish of me

to preach to you, Krishna,

oh, lotus-eyed one!

When you both enter the arena

with passions aroused

and start the game of love,

won't the lines I draw

fade away and vanish?

But, what is all this nonsense? Rachel asks herself. Surinder and Saraswati are not engaged. Nothing is finalised.

She joins the other three passengers in folding up the sleeping platforms and beddings and organising the luggage. Forty-five. She is too old for Surinder. And what is he doing, involved with her? It is madness. He should be marrying an Indian girl, settling down to a desk job with the Archaeological Survey of India. Saraswati will pack his lunch tiffin every day and he will eat it at his desk. Surinder must produce offspring. That is his role. And it is natural for a man to want children. They will have a small boy baby. When the temperature falls below twenty-five degrees

they will swaddle it with balaclavas and scarves. Rachel will fade gracefully from the picture. She can make a tiny film, a small collage of her imagining of Muddupalani. An impression, a glimpse. But first, she will wait for the barbed wire around her heart to loosen.

When everyone is seated, she takes pages from her bag, re-reads the most recent translations from Tata's cousin. What is this one? She picks up a sheet that she received only yesterday. She unfolds the latest piece from *Radhika Santwanam*, Muddupalani's own words:

'Why are you doing this?'
says Ila's brother.
'She is older than you.
Crores of women run after you.
Why are you always pursuing Radha?
It is a wrong relationship:
She is much older than you,
she speaks aggressively
and doesn't have
that discreet quality;
It is not correct.'

'What would you know?'
Asks Krishna.
'You, just a cowherd.
What would you know
about love's ways,
the finer feelings of love?
Only the great scholars
know all these things.
What would you know?
Such things have happened before:
Brahma married his own daughter.
The moon god, Surya
fell in love with Tara,

his teacher's wife.

The King of the Oceans

merged with the river Ganga

and the Himalayas, their son,

came out of the ocean.

Rachel smiles at the verses. Ila's brother berates Krishna for his relationship with Radha. So, it is written. Krishna defends the liaison. Rachel is indignant with the brother. What is wrong with loving a strong, older woman? Hindu gods, in particular, can be transgressive and indulge in taboo liaisons. Krishna says so. Why can't mortals? Because the Brahman priests have been carving smaller and smaller religious boxes for the lives and loves of the faithful. Tata says so, in moments of non-conformism. And Rachel is a realist. She is in India. She is over forty years old.

She will take an auto-rickshaw to Osmania University Guest House and begin her work. But she has also read another fragment of translation first. It opens with the parrot, a common character in Telugu poetry. Tata said so.

When she hears

the parrot calling

Krishna's name over and over,

the ringing in her ears

makes her deaf, confused, mad.

When she comes close to the objects

Hari held in his hands,

the heat rises in her body

and she falls in a swoon.

Unable to stand in one place,

she darts

as if she has stepped

on burning coals.

Babbling like one

deranged by demon desire,

devastated

by the sky

falling upon her,

*the charming woman, Radha,
is stricken by
the mighty Manmatha,
the Love God,
who is born in the heart.*

*

The scribe bustles in. He is rabbit-like and the pall lifts from my mind for a moment as I imagine him hopping among the green leaves of my garden, with his whiskers twitching. But instead, he begins to lay out on the floor the palm leaves that he will inscribe with my words, if I can find them. And who is this, standing quietly in the doorway? The scribe apologises. It is his daughter. His wife is unwell and has gone to her sister's. The girl is anxious and in need of company today. Before I have time to answer, she has moved quickly across the room, with a respectful touching of my feet on the way and she is laying out some needlework before her, neatly and with a quiet determination that I can only stare at. Will Madam allow her to stay? The scribe is a scramble of confusion—an amiable expression of asking a favour of me, while simultaneously trying to glare at his daughter for her modest forwardness, in taking her place before I have given leave.

Girls, I cannot abide girls. The Ilas of the world, who take away a woman's lover. But this one is no beauty, although she has exquisite hair, a great rope of it down her back, and soft eyes, a more attractive version of her father's with less of the beadiness. And she has a sweetness to her, with neither archness nor feigned humility in her mien. She is no Ila. But she does not have the makings of a wife either. She is a family girl, of course, but there is nothing simpering about her. I stare at a point in space somewhere above the floor, and find it difficult to move my eyes to refocus. There is a shuffling outside my field of vision.

The scribe is opening the leaves that have been completed by My Lord, long ago in the scriptorium. The citronella wafts through the room as the slats are taken apart. My Lord. Ila. Krishna. The moonbeam girl.

Hmm? What? The scribe is reading my words.

He drones on. Yes, I have called on the goddess Saraswati to inspire me and I have told the Lord Krishna that these verses are being written on his request, the divine Hari, who appeared to me in my dream.

The scribe runs through the account of my accomplishments:

*Which other woman of my kind has
felicitated scholars with gifts of money?*

He bows politely in the right direction as he reads, solemnly.

*To which other woman of my kind have
epics been dedicated?*

Yes, these things have indeed transpired, in that other world, the court.

*Which other woman of my kind has
won such acclaim in each of the arts?*

Indeed, I have danced for kings. Yes. Yes. But will I be able to write a simple epic?

He continues reading from the completed verses. His voice is taking on a sonorous note.

You are incomparable, Muddupalani, among your kind.

Is there some look in his eye that shows knowledge of my fall? Perhaps I have been compared and found lacking. I look at him keenly. It is not for me to care for the views of a scribe, but his glance may give a suggestion of opinions, gossip, back-biting at court. Muddupalani. Yes, what has happened to her? She fell into a swoon some weeks, or was it months, ago? Who knows? They will shrug. But there is no cautious glance from the scribe. Or not that I can divine.

What? He has finished reading the work to date. What now? What to do?

I shift my body and take a deep breath. What will I call the work? In the eye of my mind, I see the distraught Radha delivering the girl to Krishna's chamber. It must be *The Story of Ila (Iladevium)*. Yes, it must be so. I tell the scribe, *Iladevium*, and I dictate:

*She walks slowly away with the gait of a full-grown elephant, an arm adorned with
gem-studded jewels, leaning on a young girl's shoulder for support, her thoughts still
clinging to Vasudeva Krishna -*

*Footsteps faltering, she looks back one more time, supposedly to remind the women to
close the doors -*

She soon regains her dignity and poise and, without uttering a word to anyone, suppresses and swallows the sobs rising in her throat -

Heaving long sighs and pretending to enjoy the clusters of fragrant flowers hanging around her -

Raising her face to the sky to look at the enchanting moon, she blinks her eye lids and is able to stop the tears from spilling over -

She gazes at the bangles slipping down from the wrists that have become wasted since Hari has gone and pretends to do her hair, raising her arms and letting the bangles slide back into place -

The heat from the shafts of that wicked archer, Manmatha, make her star-studded necklaces flutter and brush against her breasts. And Radha holds these ripe fruit in her hands under the cover of her sari pallu -

Reaching her own dwelling place, she cares nothing for the overwhelming scent of the fresh jasmine buds that are made into garlands and festooned with finest pearls woven by silken threads. Nor does she care about the shimmering black sheen of rows and rows of bees resting on those jasmine flowers, nor for the strong incense wafting from burning, sweet-scented wood chips and scented, fragrant gums -

So, like the setting sun losing its brilliance, Radha languidly lays herself on a couch with intricately carved ivory legs -

And a young girl, with palms tender as new-sprung leaves, massages her feet while Radha looks into the depths of her aching heart.

And I am overcome by a sadness. I must dismiss the scribe and lie on my couch. I am indisposed, I say. The girl appears concerned. The scribe packs up efficiently and withdraws dolorously from the room. Perhaps it is well known that Muddupalani is not herself.

Oh, that the story could change. But it is set down. Radha has lost her lover to the young Ila.

Sleep has evaded Radha through the night. Her heart is tight like a fist in her breast as she pines for her Lord who lies caressing and teasing and bringing a pink flush to the cheeks of that girl. Radha fans herself and watches the moon set, the shrill of cicadas rising to a crescendo as the sky changes from lead to pink like the guts of a split chicken. And she must not walk close to the chamber and torture herself with the

sounds of lovers, the groaning and the thudding of bodies as Hari, the elephant destroyer, enters the girl again and again. Radha stands at a distance across the courtyard and watches the entrance to her Lord's chamber, on the other side of the fountain where the splash of water on stone will drown out sighs and moans that might seep under the large door.

The servants are stretching and rubbing their eyes and Radha moves into the shadows. She must go. She cannot be seen here, skulking and imagining the pleasures her lover takes in another woman.

I do not want this woman to endure such agony in the stifling heat of the morning. I want the story to be different. But she is there, her eyes closed trying to still the clawing passion that ravages her heart, knowing that she must move away. Thus it is written.

I look for Radha in the courtyard. I must make her move. She must not stay and risk pity and ridicule.

Radha opens her eyes. It is almost dawn. A woman and a pale girl are disappearing down the arcade and there is a man of great beauty, dark as a storm cloud, standing in the shadow of the door. He smiles at her and inclines his head toward the chamber. Hari has come, although the sun has not reddened the sky. She stands, almost fainting with joy, her legs weak as Krishna comes to her, striding over the stones, his strong thighs, the ornaments on his arms and legs jingling, the perfume of his divine hair. He runs a finger over her top lip, takes her chin in his hand and kisses her so that she swoons in his arms and groans with the dissolving of her bones. He laughs, grabs her by the hand and they run across the courtyard. Radha gives no thought to Ila who has gone to her own chamber to rest her aching body and to sleep.

Inside the chamber, Krishna pulls Radha to him and moves his hands over her body, so that she shivers and shudders and her groin has melted except for the strings that hold it to the brain, the lips, the neck and the nipples. Of course, Radha does not hesitate to go to his bed which still steams, hot with the sweat of his night with Ila. Hari takes Radha with the vigour of a man, a god who has already tasted the delicate sweetness of a new fruit, and Radha is immersed again in her Lord and her body sings and vibrates with wild passion.

Radha lies still. She is spent, in the arms of Lord Krishna. At first, her mind is lulled with the ecstasy of the moment, her whole body thrumming with her orgasm. That is what a god can do for a woman. Because she has taught him what she wants and he is omnipotent in the ways of pleasure.

But there is the sound of crows cawing and My Lord sniffs with pleasure at the aroma of spices as the rice is cooked for the royal breakfast. And I do not want to lose the suspended moment. I do not want other mortals to enter the chamber and come between me and My Lord.

*'Oh, my love,
play
one more game!
and this time
do be fair to me.'*

*'Dearest,
it is my good fortune
that you have
such a lush body.
I am tired
of that young girl.'*

*'You both looked
so rapt in each other.
Were you gentle with her
or was she hurt?'*

'Don't question me, Radha!'

*'Keep pleasuring me,
Krishna!
Till I say, ahh... wonderful!
that's divine!'*

*'You are greater than me
in experience, elegance
and passion, Radha!
Come, take the lead.
Come, right now,
And lead me in
our game of love.'*

The characters inhabit the page. The moment of passion. The morning after My Lord deflowered the ice maiden. Visiting his chamber, Pratapasimha whispering in my ear, 'You are my Radha. Be true to me forever...' so that I shiver. But he will abandon me again.

My mind is confused. Radha, Pratapasimha, Muddupalani, Ila, Krishna, the moonbeam girl. I close my eyes. Try to remember. And I see an image of a palanquin. The bearers place it on the stones of the courtyard. It is the girl arriving back from her first night, Amma and Ammama admiring the ornament that My Lord must have given the girl. My hand goes to my throat to feel the gold there and I can tell, even at the distance, as I assess the jewel in their hands, that the ornament for my first night was much richer and more lavish than hers.

But My Lord is gone now and I am writing my story.

How can I change the narrative? It is my heritage made flesh, as sure as the meter that I must follow in our poetic form, as sure as the mosquitoes that buzz around our heads before the sun rises in the morning.

Why must I tell the story of Ila? Simply because Krishna, My Beloved Lord, has instructed me so, in my dream? Because I have a story to tell? Because my words will glow like the face of a goddess? But now, I do not feel any radiance, certainly no blaze. I shout for Kannan to come and massage my feet.

*

I am in Hyderabad. I talk to a silver-haired dance guru with long pale pianist's fingers; an activist from a woman's group, her hair short and serviceable to save time; a frail Marxist scholar who speaks to me of Shakti, the female energy of the cosmos, of sex and the hypocrisy of religions; a linguistics professor, retired and living on the

perimeter of the university. Tata's cousin, Urvashi, is using the modern little book for her translation. That is fine according to the Professor. I am finding Muddupalani. I have memorised some of her words. In the translation, I am up to the part where Krishna seduces the girl, Ila:

Teasing,

seductive. Suddenly

He lays a hand

on her breast.

Ouch! You're hurting me,

she cries.

He grabs her

And catches her unawares

by pressing

His lips on hers.

Agitated,

she covers her face

with both hands.

She trembles, wriggles

like a fish

pulled out of the water

when he tries

to unknot her

garment.

When he laughs

at her unease,

she turns her face

away in a huff.

She closes her eyes tight

when he gazes at her,

plugs her ears with her fingers

if he laughs aloud.

So innocent was Ila

when princely Gopala

*set about
to have her.*

There is a letter waiting for me at the Guest House.

Dear Rachel,

I received your note. Your luggage will be safely stored here until you come back to collect it.

You may be confused, but I, on the contrary, am clear in my mind. In fact, let me be blunt.

I had no idea until the night of Kamala's dinner that there was a liaison between you and Surinder. While I did raise an eyebrow, I thought that a flirtation could do no harm. However, he tells me that you have invited him to accompany you back to Australia. He is talking about marrying you. You may feel devastated, but have you considered the disastrous consequences for Surinder and his family? Perhaps in the West it is acceptable to live in the moment with no regard for the future, but not so here.

*I am deeply disappointed in the turn that things have taken,
Sincerely,
G V Rajagopal Pillai.*

*

No work. I have not recalled the scribe until today. The curtains are drawn in my fortress. Who is the enemy? It is grandmother, who will come and capture me away from my pastoral solitude, from my Krishna, my memories. I want to write. Instead I lie again on the velvet couch, overcome by weariness.

I close my eyes to find my story. I want to envisage the beautiful Radha, but it is the ice maiden that I see. Where is Krishna? He does not appear. Instead the girl is there, at the Palace, gazing at My Lord as he passes in his palanquin and he looks back at her. I am bereft. I must breathe. Always, breathe. When will this sadness leave me?

The scribe hurries in with his daughter. He sits cross-legged on the floor, carefully takes out a palm slat, tests the point of the stylus on his thumb and sits

expectantly. The young girl is in the corner, her hair falling over her shoulders, sewing.

I have dictated only a few verses. Radha has been seduced by Krishna, minutes after the girl has left him. The wickedness of the beautiful god! The foolishness of Radha. But I smile as I dictate the first lines today. How would the scribe translate the groans and gasps of orgasm into scratches on palm leaves?

Umm!

uhumm!

ohoo!

ahh!

oh! so wonderful!

On a bed

strewn with flowers

like two furious elephants,

the Master of Romance

saying, 'You're incomparable!'

Those two

begin the

game of love.

Tossing around

lustly little words,

scraping with

knife-like nails,

His hand probing

into her sari folds,

holding her tight,

he peels off her garment

softly,

caressing her breasts

gently.

His hand slides around her waist.

He pulls locks of her hair

in his fist.

*Feeling her strong smooth thighs
with his own,
He shoves and heaves,
stopping and now
suddenly, pressing hard.
Bantering,
giggling,
gurgling,
teasing sweetly,
daring a little
and a little more,
Radha and Madhava
reach the land
of the Love God, Manmatha,
and, joyously playing,
emerge,
victors both.*

I pause to think and, in that space, I hear hooves. A horse in the distance. We wait in the room and listen. Visitors are rare, except for the scribe and his daughter. The galloping grows louder, slows, the horse clapping into the courtyard. A thud as the rider swings to the ground. My grandmother's herald? I want to hide behind the great hanging on the far wall. It is a message: my mother's palanquin approaches. I sigh with relief: it is not my Ammama. But what will I say to Amma? Can I remain firm in my resolve to stay here? Will this poem ever be written?

I dismiss the scribe.

I pace the floor and smooth my sari. Yes, I am dressed today, immaculately, as if the world has not changed. As if I am the same person. Except for my hair.

Amma's scent precedes her through the doorway. A sickening whiff of Tanjavur swirls and mixes with my fears, and I almost faint. My mother on my threshold, fresh from her palanquin, barely touched by the dust and heat of the journey.

She draws in an audible breath. She has always done this before she sings or speaks. 'Muddu...' she says and stops. My mother's voice has always been breathy.

She has always been tentative, perhaps because she has never taken command of her breathing. I remember watching, when I was newly arrived from Viralimalai, the way her patron would give a half smile when she made this small gasp before singing. Yes, it is sexy. There is the vulnerability of it, the hint of weakness, of soft submissiveness. My mother is talking again. 'My sweet, you have become so...' I wait, alert, for the verdict. She has always left the hard things to Ammama and here she is, my mother, visiting alone, with her opinion, perhaps her judgment. '... so... different,' she concludes.

'How?' I ask. I could wilt in her soft words, if she comments on the fading of my complexion, the loss of any bloom that I may have had, a deterioration since My Lord's death and my retreat to the Summer Palace. 'How have I changed?' My voice is gentle. She is my mother.

Amma is nonplussed. Her opinion is being sought. One hand flutters to touch the hair beside her ear as if she will flick a strand back over her shoulder, but the hair is already held firmly with gold ornaments. It is not loose like a girl's.

'Your hair, it hangs down your back,' my mother says, with a tiny shrug of confusion.

I wait for more. I focus my eyes on the form of my mother to hear what she will say.

'You seem... calm, self-contained,' she adds. Her hand goes up to her hair and this time, she tosses her head.

I stand and wait.

'Ammama says that you must come back to Tanjavur,' she says.

'And what do you say, Amma?' I am gentle with her again.

Her head shakes slightly and she stares fixedly at the floor in front of her. 'Of course, we want you back,' she says. 'We miss you. And there is much to be done. The Queen Mother is calling for you at the Palace. They want a performance. It would be a coup for our house. All is not the same, now that Pratapasimha is no more.' She shrugs again and smiles her vulnerable smile.

Her expression cuts through my composure and I want to lift my hand and slap her, this silly woman. 'You miss me but you did not visit me,' my voice says.

'General Manoji said that you needed complete rest,' answers my mother, her eyes round. 'We did not want to disturb you with demands.'

'Demands? Could you not come to me as a mother?' I feel a dreadful calm, but wipe away tears that have, unaccountably, begun to fall from my eyes. 'To hold me and comfort me in my dark time?'

'I am not good at such things,' she says, but there is no shrug. Her shoulders have drooped. I watch her with more attention now and no expectations. There is her half smile, as if her brightness might still save the day.

'It was terrible,' I say. 'The pain.' Now the tears are streaming and I am sobbing. 'I was lost.' I close my eyes and hear the bleak words bouncing off the hard walls and I can do nothing to muffle the sound. There is a rush of sandal oil in my nostrils and a rustle of silk, a hand clutching my arm. 'Muddupalani.' She is holding me in a tight grip. My mother fumbles. She pulls me to her and she is crying. My nose drips onto the purple and gold of her pallu. My stomach heaves. I pull myself away and dry retch. Then I vomit copiously on the floor.

We make our peace. Amma is confessional. She tells me about her life. Yes, she has had several patrons. She has known sadness and drabness, despite the glory of our house. There has been no time for her to unwrap her melancholy, to look at it and wonder. She has always done her duty. She loved a man at one time, but Grandmother did not allow the liaison. He could not be a patron—he was a mere musician. 'No,' she wept as she told me, 'Muddu, you are not his daughter. Your birth was hushed up. Grandmother considered it a bad time in my career.' We both cried for my abandonment at Viralimalai.

Her patrons were men of great distinction. She had even initiated Pratapasimha himself when he reached puberty. It was my mother who had trained this strange young man in the subtleties of love and then lost him to her daughter.

I know now that there is nothing that we dancers can have for ourselves. It must be an easy transition from ganika to sage: we have experienced the impermanence of things and we are taught to eschew attachment.

We take food together when I remember my duties to my guest. She plays the veena quietly and I lie at her feet, watching the crows flap outside the window. She asks me about my life and I tell her about the story that I am writing, of Ila, Krishna and Radha. It is a tale that we ganikas know well—to sing, to dance, to live, to be abandoned.

Before she leaves, my mother does her duty to Ammama. She says again that I am needed in Tanjavur. But, she says, she will tell Grandmother that I am not ready, that I am working, that I am immersed in an epic, that in a few weeks I will be finished. 'We will organise to launch it at the Palace,' says Amma, excitedly. Grandmother has been active in making friends in the new regime. This dance/drama/musical coup will be good for our reputation.

I nod and smile. I can allow them that. They can launch it when it is ready. *The Story of Ila*. I have no objection to that.

The palanquin is at the door. Kannan hands Amma two globes of brinjal from our garden to take home. My mother embraces me and gives me a tiny parcel that she had forgotten. As the bearers jog out of the courtyard, I open the wrapping. Inside is a handkerchief with 'M' embroidered in the corner. I laugh aloud, remembering the time the young Govinda saved me when I was only eleven years old. I gave the handkerchief to the small hero at the Palace.

It is awful returning home after you have lost something. We had been rehearsing for my arangetram in the Palace hall. The carriageway was dark and I did not like the shadows cast by the big pots in the niches by the pillars. Amma would be cross that I had lost a bell from my ankle strap. It's not that there was a lack of bells, she will say, but it is inauspicious for a dancer to lose a bell. And these ones were pretty, with the tiniest tendrils of a vine and little leaves etched in the brass.

I had looked in the courtyard between the Palace and the hall, so beautifully swept that there was not a speck of rubbish on the ground, no leaves, no seed pods from the trees, nothing that even looked like a bell. I counted again. There were the twenty-four still there for one ankle and only twenty-three for the other. Amma always said that I should take them off at Guruji's but I liked to hear the chirping jangle as I walked home and it was the badge of the dancer that I would be.

I wandered through the shadows of the long arched entrance way, even looking behind the big earthenware pots. Nothing. I was almost in the street when a pebble skittered along the ground and landed at my feet. Then, ow! a sharp pain on my cheek. I ran into a niche beside some pots and peeped out. A big boy moved towards me, his bare feet quiet on the stone floor. I looked up and down. Where were the servants carrying cooking pots, the carts with hay or chains, locks and wood? The

boy walked slowly. It was lunch time and they were all inside in the hot afternoon. I pressed myself against the big pot in the niche. But it was no use. I could see him coming, his big wide feet on the ground, his small eyes. My chest thumped.

I stepped out and stamped my foot. It made a cracking noise. The bells jangled and the boy jumped. The long archway reverberated. I stamped the other foot. The boy stopped, unsure. Then he kept moving forward, but I was not as scared now. I screamed and the sound crashed around the vaulted arches and the shadowy niches. I breathed in and filled my chest. The boy stopped and I ran, feeling the strength in my feet and legs. 'Your mother is a brazen whore,' shouted the boy. His voice was hoarse and cracked and went high on some words.

I ran towards the entrance. But I heard a shout and another set of feet pounding and echoing. I turned. A smaller boy was pummelling the lout in the carriageway and yelling at him, knocking him to the ground, such was the strength of his fury. I smiled at my hero, Govinda, who was then a page in the Palace, a little younger than I, with his curly hair and smooth skin. Govinda stopped and looked. My panting breath had stilled, like the dancer that I am; my chest pounded, but I could smile as if my body was totally at rest. He came towards me, took the fine white cotton handkerchief that peeped out from my waist and solemnly dabbed at the small gash on my cheek. He put it in his pocket. I carefully took his own handkerchief from his pocket, smiled, and walked out of the carriageway. And I turned my head and gave him another look. Another smile. Practising. Govinda was still watching me and did not notice as the big boy got to his feet and slunk away.

I ran again until I could hear the voice of my mother, sweet and breathy, singing of the beauty of her god. I burst in and stopped dead in the middle of the music room so that she almost dropped her veena with fright. She put it aside and jumped to her feet. 'Sweet one, what is it?' She touched my cheek and made little cooing noises so that I began to sob and tell her the story of the boy, as I sat in her lap and ran my finger over the curves of the veena's huge gourd.

'I thought he was going to hurt me. When he came towards me.'

'He did hurt you,' she clucked, touching the small gash and red mark on my cheek.

'But I was afraid he would do something bad.' She hugged me. 'And he said terrible things about you.' The large diamond studded pendant at her breast stuck into

my ear so I wriggled out of her embrace and told her what the boy had said, sliding the lump of gold up and down the chain around her neck and darting glances at her face.

'Brazen?' she said, 'Huh! we are gilded, golden. We are diamonds, rubies, sapphires, even coral, amber or jade. But never... brass!' She smiled and I thought she was a goddess, this beautiful lady who is my mother. She screwed her eyes closed for a moment and sighed. 'He is an ignorant yokel. We do not listen to these people. You will only walk to the hall with Manikyavalli from now on. Or you will go only to Guruji's house.' She ran to a cupboard, took out some ointment, bent down and rubbed it gently on my cheek. 'You screamed? Good! Someone will have seen him leave the entranceway, I will make enquiries. This boy will be dealt with,' she snapped. And then her voice sweetened again. 'You were brave, my Muddu.' She hugged me again. 'Now, we will have some *sangeet*.' She picked up the veena, plucked it so that the strings shivered, waved at me to sit on the mat beside her and sang. Her voice slid over the glass doors of the cupboards where the instruments stood. It flowed out into the courtyard and the canary began to whistle, so that Amma laughed. She swayed as she breathed out the music and nodded to me and I came in at the fourth bar and we sang of the Lord Krishna, until the light had gone:

*He has sent for me today
with overpowering love;
It is my dearest Krishna,
my heart is overjoyed now!
Beckoning my flower-like body,
coiling blossoms on my plaits
saying it would serve as gold
for the day I grow ripe...*

I curled up on the mat, listening to the crickets and frogs as the maids clattered the utensils in preparation for dinner, and Amma lit candles and lamps until she sat down again and took my hands in hers. 'The gods dance,' she said, 'Shiva, Krishna. And we are dancers, descended from the heavenly *nattaka ganikai* Urvashi, who danced for Indra, the King of the gods. We, too, are *ganikai*.' She shrugged and frowned. 'But you know this.' She squeezed my hand. 'We are the poets, the musicians, the dancers. This is our joy, our burden. To use our bodies, our voices, our minds so that men will feel

ecstasy of the spirit. And recognise the gods in themselves.' She shrugged again, as if bereft of words, and shook her head. 'This is who we are. You do understand?' She had told me this when I was six and first came to her, at the beginning of my training. And it is almost the climax of all my training, my arangetram, before the King at the Palace, under the critical eyes of the courtiers. And my debut would be only the beginning. I practised my smile, the one I beamed at the sweet Govinda, and I put his handkerchief, with a 'G' embroidered in the corner, in my tiny jewel box.

I laugh and Kannan rushes in to see what the noise is about. I run to my chamber, pull Govinda's handkerchief from my first jewel box, the one that I have kept for all these years, I wrap it in paper—a piece that I have discarded, with a brief account of Ila that is crossed out. I command Kannan to find a servant who must saddle up and take my parcel to Tanjavur.

*

Dear Rachel,

It is a joy for me to do this work. I cannot imagine why all the cantos have not been translated into English before.

Of course, I am pulling along slowly. As you are aware, the archaic Telugu is not easy. There are moments of terrible frustration when I know that it is not possible to convey the complexities of the language.

Muddupalani was indeed strong. She also portrays Radha as a woman with her own mind! I laughed when she castigates Krishna. It is a wonderful thing for a woman to challenge a god, isn't it?

I hope that you will tell me if the translations read well in English. This task must be a democratic enterprise. I rely on you to see that the ideas and images are conveyed with clarity. Also, I am not a bona fide Telugu scholar. There will be boffins in the academy who will tut-tut that I take on this work. After all, my dissertation was on Chaucer! Not Nayyak Telugu court poetry. But I have spent many hours of enjoyment, puzzling over such work. In the end, it is all in the negotiation of meaning, don't you think? In these cosmopolitan times when we try to understand each other. Send me back your responses. I hope that we will meet soon.

Sincerely,

Urvashi

PS. Has Tata told you about the parrot? It is a convention of classical Indian poetry. He is a messenger about matters of love. In this case, he has been spying on Krishna and the girl, Ila. He visits Radha and torments her about what he has seen.

PPS. I hear from Kamala that Saraswati is doing well in Chandigarh and Surinder is aware of his responsibilities as a nephew. He is a wonderful young man. It would be such a superb match and modern, as well as familial, but crossing religious boundaries, as our dear Kamala did so many years ago. Give my love to my uncle, Tata.

'Listen, Radha'

said the parrot,

'to something more that happened:

He also said

that he would no more call you

the Queen of Passion,

but that he would give the title

to Ila the charming.

I am shocked

that Krishna

could utter

Such words.'

'Listen, Rachel... ' said the voice. I look up from my bed in the Guest House at Hyderabad and he is there, perched on the wardrobe, a bird, with great bright wings, but the eyes are glassy and cold and the voice is the insinuating tone of Ragavan. And he tells me that the air is changing in Chandigarh. Surinder has begun to look at Saraswati anew, running his eyes over the curves of her body.

'Rachel, she is sweetly plump,' says Ragavan, his voice a nasty squawk, 'her flesh that is firm and round.'

I pull the pillow over my head. Ragavan extends a wing that sweeps across my head like a papier-mâché construction. He knocks the pillow away and continues to

talk and his voice changes register, becomes deeper, more velvety, smooth as coconut oil.

'Her body, so, so young.'

I put my hands over my ears. There is a flapping and a thud. He lands on my chest, pecks my fingers away from my head, crouching over me on the bed.

Oh, my poor Radhika!

Your yearning for him

is rising like a

growing mountain!

Are men truthful?

Loyal?

Is there a constancy

in them?

'Everyone wants to have a virgin, don't they?' continues Ragavan. 'New. Impressionable. You know what it's like. You had Surinder. His first fuck.'

His voice goes on and on and I sob.

'Stop it! You don't know. What would you know?' I yell at him.

But he continues, 'They disappeared into a room together.' Ragavan flaps his wings and flies up. 'Surinder and Saraswati together.' He squats on the top of the cupboard again. 'For an hour they were gone. I flew in at the window and sat on a beam just by the bed and you would be surprised...' I put the pillow over my head again and rock from side to side. When I take it away, he is still talking. 'And Surinder emerged adjusting his clothing and Saraswati, flushed, eyes clouded, smoothing her kameez.' Ragavan laughs, a dry cawing, and gives a flap with his wings. 'Her hair was... quite... dishevelled. And that look of spent passion. You know it, don't you? That look.'

In her eyes

is there now

a starry twinkle?

In her walk

a sway and spring?

Her whole being

has this coy grace.

Now our Ila

has gained a new glamour.

'Rachel,' Ragavan says from the shadows, 'what do you think of that?' He laughs and there is a beating of wings. I wake, groaning, with a dint in my chest where he has sat.

Rachel. I slap myself and my face stings. Rachel, Ragavan is not here. He is not the parrot nor is he in Chandigarh, spying on Surinder.

But I am afraid of Saraswati, now that she is Ila, and I remember Ragavan in Chennai.

I was sitting with the PhD students in the library, poring over a reference. There was a power failure. By the time the fans were still, the sweat was dripping off my forehead. There was no point in staying in this oven. I moved through the shelves of the main room, under the oil paintings of eminent men of letters and out into the glare. I would try to get an auto back to the flat. Groups of students stood around chatting under the trees in the still air as I waited by the gate. A car pulled up and a young man jumped out. 'Ah, the Australian lady. Let me drop you home.' He was the tall and good-looking Ragavan, with the closed expression. He had talked to me before. I had met him at the wedding with Surinder. As I hesitated, he walked around the car and opened the passenger door, blocking the path of traffic coming in the gateway. 'I am not a stranger,' he said. 'We have met many times before, Madam. Please, we are holding up the traffic.' I hesitated. The students were all staring and the autos tooting. I climbed in and he closed the door.

'I have wanted to meet you again,' he said, weaving among the trucks and cars on the beach road. 'I have interesting material for you. As I have told you, my thesis is about power in Hindu states in South India in the Nayyak period. Of course, there is some overlap into the Maratha period, with your Muddupalani.' I couldn't help showing interest. He smiled as I nodded. 'Yes, it is a key reference. I have information that I think would be useful to you. There is material about Pratapasimha —Tamil inscriptions.'

He watched my expression, the lust for information. I wanted it, badly.

'I think you are an interesting woman,' he said, looking me up and down, and I felt more tired and wished I was not there. He was one of the whispering, snickering group, the staring huddle who would sit at the far table in the library. I nodded, non-committal, as he turned into one of the side roads to Triplicane, tooting and pressing

slowly through the melee of pedestrians, autos, motor bikes and men pushing trolleys and barrows.

'Please, drop me anywhere here. I don't wish to put you to any trouble,' I said.

'No, no. I am going in your direction. But may we take a slight detour to collect the material at my room?' I told him that I was in a hurry. But he ignored me. 'It will only take one minute. Did you know that there are monuments to Pratapasimha's wives near Tanjavur?' Auto drivers, passengers and pedestrians craned around and looked at us.

'You know Surinder well?' I felt the need to ask.

'Yes, but we have never been close,' he said shortly. 'I come from an old Madras Brahmin family.' He was quiet for a while, except for his continued honking on the horn.

'I wish you would stop that incessant tooting. It is of absolutely no use,' I said irritably.

He considered me and smiled. 'Ah, you are a woman who knows what she wants.' We passed the shop where I make my phone calls. 'You are a film-maker?' I nodded. 'Your life must be different in Australia,' he added. 'Much freer.' The door of the car was rattling. I pulled it. He slowed down and leaned across, opened and quickly slammed the door. His arm lightly grazed my breast as he brought it back to the steering wheel. 'Recently, I found a reference to Pratapasimha killing two of his palanquin bearers. In the Tamil inscriptions. Probably a bit mad.' He stopped outside a block of flats. 'Come in, just for a few minutes.'

I was sorely tempted and he knew it. 'Just a moment or two of your time.' I shook my head and looked at my watch.

'No, I really must go.'

'You have come this far.' His confidence was amazing. I shook my head again. My hand went to the door handle of the car.

'No, no,' he said. 'If that's how you feel, I will of course drop you home.' He started the car and my hand fell from the handle. 'You know, there is actual evidence to suggest that Muddupalani was not the author of *Radhika Santwanam*.'

'I don't believe it. How could there be evidence?'

He laughed and shrugged. 'I find you attractive,' he added. He turned the corner into the narrow street and stopped near the hotel where I was staying. I tried to

open the door. My ironing lady stared from her stall and the chai wallah gaped. He drove on a short distance.

'Stop the car. Now.'

'What's the hurry?' He braked. I still couldn't get out. 'It's O.K. The lock sticks every so often.' He leaned forward and his hand went towards the neck of my dress. 'That's a beautiful dress,' he said. 'A nice shade of purple.' I shoved his hand away.

'Open the fucking door. Now.'

'Mmm. I like a woman with spirit,' he said and he unlocked the door.

'You are an arsehole,' I spat at him as I jumped out.

'But you like Indian men, don't you?' His parting shot as I bolted up the road, over the rough ground, through the gateway, up the stairs and into the hotel, locking the door behind me. I threw off my clothes and showered, scrubbing my skin. I looked at the purple dress in a heap on the floor in the doorway. I took out a stanley knife, bared the blade and held it above the dress. But I couldn't slash it. I couldn't do it. How does he know that I am Surinder's lover? And I was sure Muddu wrote her epic. Sure. But proof either way is virtually impossible.

I dried myself and looked in the mirror. My breasts and throat were red from scrubbing. And I wondered what I would say to Surinder. But, then, Surinder is gone.

The next day, at the library, the snickering group stared and nudged more than usual. I saw Ragavan leave, so I followed him out. He pretended not to see me, so I stepped in front of his motor bike and he jammed the brakes on and skidded. The men hanging around the chai stall stared more than usual. 'A smart thing to do,' he said tightly.

'I wanted to have a little chat,' I said. 'Your behaviour yesterday was totally out of line.' He craned his neck back and made round eyes. 'I don't like you and your friends' snide conversations about me in the library. As if I am some sort of whore.' Ragavan raised his eye brows as if to say, oh really? 'Just because Surinder is my lover does not mean that I am remotely interested in any of you lot. I am not some scarlet woman. Sorry to disappoint you.'

'Scarlet? You're just a white cannibal,' he said, his voice high-pitched.

'How scary for you,' I laughed.

A muscle in his cheek twitched. 'You're eating him alive.'

'I don't think it's any of your business. You're not even friends.' I told him.

He revved his motor bike. 'Well, one good thing: it's a status symbol here to have sex with any white woman. That's something.'

I stood back and watched as Ragavan steered the bike around me and took off down the street. My body was hard with fury.

Why dwell on the envy of some frustrated young Indian man? I plodded back into the library. To work. I must work or I will lose Muddupalani.

*

To work. I move onto the floor and sit cross-legged before the palm leaf slats that contain the beginnings of my text. And I must plunge into my body and find the words, then pull them into the light of day. Yes, the lethargy is less crippling, now that I feel the contours of my body, the thighs resting along the floor, the buttocks, the groin open and relaxed, fingering the flesh of my words. I dip my pen in the ink. It is not that the scribe is inefficient, but I like to hear the scratching of the nib on the thick paper, feel the pen nicely controlled by my index finger, and see the curves and dashes of script moving across the page. The scribe will come tomorrow. He will make a good copy of today's work on the palm leaf manuscript, and then he will continue from my dictation. It is anything but extravagant to have two copies of the work at this early stage. And there are the perils within any library—the tunnelling bookworm, leaves drying and splitting prematurely.

My wrist glides across the paper. I write in a fair hand and the marks appear just as I wish. It was not always so. At Auntie's, I would look at some message that came. I would turn it over in my hands before taking it to her. The marks, the squiggles on the paper, what secrets did they hold? Guruji unlocked language for me and it is my tool now. It has lifted me up from the morass, into the heavenly reaches of Tanjavur.

How many languages does a person need in life? I asked myself in the early days. I was an ignorant small girl then, but I was doing well with my Sanskrit.

When Guruji Tirumala Tatacharya gave me a test in grammar, every one of my answers was correct. Guruji was pleased with my poem in Telugu, even though it was only short. He said that one day I would write many long *prabhandas*, not the military ones, of course; I would be happy to leave those for the men poets. And I

could hold long conversations with the maids in Tamil. But now Guruji wanted us to learn Marathi. For what purpose? Guruji said that the Prime Minister and the clerks used Marathi for their lists and rules and memos. What use could it be for a dancer?

Manikyavalli and another girl made up a class with me, which was much more fun than having a teacher all to myself. We had four days before the premiere of the new Marathi prabhanda about the King. We must have the words to congratulate the poet, Guru Pandit, in Marathi, and understand some of the words of the piece.

Guruji had one of the two copies. Paper. We were allowed to touch it that morning. I washed my hands and turned the sheets while we all looked at it. Only fourteen pages. Of course, I had seen Marathi pages before, but this time I looked closely because I had to do work with it. The script was different from the Telugu which burbles over the paper, curly and round, with jaunty scrolls and squiggles, sometimes little darting animals, or apples and oranges with curly stalks, all rolling and hopping across the page.

Guruji picked up the first sheet and read the Marathi. 'The author invokes the blessing of the God and Sharada, the goddess of learning. And some of you would do well to invoke this goddess instead of staring out the window.' He rapped Manikyavalli on the knuckles with his stick and she jumped, leaned forward and gazed with great interest at the pages. I laughed, but Guruji didn't see me. We were progressing with our lessons in abinahaya in our dance classes, learning to change the expressions on our faces like beautiful masks, so we were becoming better at pretending to be fascinated when our teachers droned on. Guruji continued, 'Raja Pratap... His fame in the world is consistent with his name, Pratap, which means glory. He is the second incarnation of the Manmatha, the God of Love, in his beauty, and a crest among all kings.'

He does have a nice face, Pratap, our young King of Tanjavur, with broad shoulders and he is tall. I will dance for him one day.

Guruji raised one arm and shouted: *He is heroic in destroying the enemies of the Lord of the three Universes and is invincible in battle by any army, however strong and brave they may be.* Guruji raised the other arm and looked dramatic: *Behold! Tanjavur the unconquerable city.*

I turned the page around on the table in front of me. The Marathi is more sensible than the cheerful Telugu. There was the line across the top of the marks

which hung like sleeping bats from the ceiling beam. And, occasionally, a snail or a spider slid across the beam. Guruji's voice continued, slow and deep, like a frog making a speech on a lotus leaf in the pond by the temple. The poet describes the terrible things the Moguls have done. *They carried away the beautiful wives of the priests.* We pricked up our ears. Manikyavalli looked worried; she was to be a devadasi in the temple and would lose her maidenhead to a suitable Brahmin, probably a priest, when she passed childhood. She did not want to be carried off by a Mogul.

'No,' I whispered, 'they took wives, not devadasis.' She looked relieved. Guruji glared at me. 'Muddupalani, repeat that line. In Marathi,' he snapped. I gave him a garbled version and he thought that I had been listening. We leaned forward to hear the gruesome fate of the wives at the hands of the savages. *They carried away beautiful wives of Hindu priests to the shores of the Arabian Sea and thence to foreign lands to be sold as slaves.* We gasped and my mouth formed a small 'o'. Guruji's nose was tight with disgust at the ways of the barbaric Mussulman.

Guruji put another page down on the table in front of me. I studied the script again. *The soldiers were fierce-looking, sturdy and strong like the messengers of Yama, the God of Death,* he intoned. No, the letters were nothing like bats. They all faced the front in their straight line, like groups of warriors holding their shields above their heads and running forward into battle. Guruji became more heroic: *Their lengthy whiskers were jet-black and were hanging like heavy iron locks.* I looked at the page. There were arrows going through the air. And some of the soldiers held their bows above the shields.

I put my head down and looked closely. The words were elegant, too, some like combs that could be moulded in filigree gold to make a delicate and most unusual ornament for the hair. Guruji read on, describing the presents that the King bestowed after the victory on the learned men, the Prime Minister, the officers and servants. ... *rich shawls, embroidered turbans, costly garments, riches and several valuable ornaments.* Guruji did not sound happy. Perhaps he was one of the learned men that the King forgot. I looked again at the elegant combs on the page. I would ask Amma if the goldsmith could make a gold Marathi word for her birthday. But then, she might not approve; most words are serious things to be moulded carefully in the mouth and in the ears. She might say, 'A word? A comb? Muddu, you are being precocious

again.' I never really knew what it meant, precocious, but I knew when she was going to say it. What is the Marathi word for comb? Yes, a comb nicely fashioned in the gold—a golden word.

I return from my memories. I put the pen down and watch the goat rooting up the spindly grass outside my window. What can I add to the story of Ila? Lord Krishna has instructed me and I must write.

*

I arrive at Brindavan to collect my luggage and to face Tata. I have veered between guilt and fear, to anger, and even to amusement since I read his letter.

He must have heard the auto-rickshaw pull up in the driveway. He stands majestically in the middle of the gallery to receive me, a stern look on his visage.

'Your luggage is still in the cottage,' he says, as if he is in a Shakespearean play.

'I'm sorry if I have disappointed you,' I tell him. 'But I thought you were broad-minded.'

'Huh!' says Tata and glares.

'This is not friendly, Tata,' I respond boldly. 'I am disappointed.' There is little space for me to be contrite.

He places his hand on the back of a wooden chair, perhaps posing for a historic photograph.

'You have created potential havoc.' He walks around the chair, waves his hand for me to sit on the divan and seats himself. 'At least I have prevented Surinder from ruining his own and his family's lives,' he adds, still glaring at me.

I wait.

'He has agreed not to speak to his mother about you. She would intercede with his father, who would be furious and make life more difficult for everyone, including Kamala and Jaganathan.'

'And Saraswati?'

'The marriage would still go ahead, if indeed the negotiations continue successfully.'

'And me?'

Tata purses his lips and there is another silence. 'Surinder has agreed to do nothing until he and I meet again. I wanted to discuss matters with you first.'

I speak quietly. 'You will remove me neatly or ask me to do the noble thing. He will marry a woman he doesn't love, for everyone else's satisfaction. He will give me up. It would make a nice Bollywood movie, wouldn't it? The patriarch tells the wicked woman that she is ruining the young hero's life and begs her to go away. She will meet the hero and tell him that she doesn't love him any more.' My voice has become louder. 'Where are the dancing girls?' I look around the gallery.

Tata is silent again.

'We have an opera along the same lines,' I add. '*La Traviata*. But I am neither a courtesan, nor am I dying of consumption, and this is not the 19th century.'

'I am perfectly cognisant of Verdi's work,' says Tata stiffly.

Another silence.

'What do you want?' Tata asks.

I sigh loudly. 'In this Bollywood movie, the patriarch should offer the dancing girl a thousand rupees to go away. She would throw the coins on the floor and run from the room, weeping loudly. Not long after, she would see the error of her ways, leave her licentious existence, rent a hut in her native village, live a life of penance, doing good for the poor.' My voice rises dramatically. 'Perhaps the hero, happily married with a chaste wife—she has been making little sobbing noises in the arms of her mother all through the film—anyway, the hero who also has dutifully fathered a tiny son and heir, might anonymously provide his lost lover with a meagre annuity to make her last days of suffering more comfortable. I am not the dancing girl character.'

There are domestic sound effects as Sakkubai clatters metal plates in the kitchen.

'I want what's best for Surinder,' I tell Tata.

'Going to Australia and being with you is best for him? What will he do there?'

'Live a life that is of his own making.'

'Does Surinder want to have children?'

I shrug. 'This crisis has all happened because of the dynastic marriage project. There has hardly been time to make a life plan.'

'If he goes with you,' says Tata, 'his family will cut him off. Never speak to him. Because of the disgrace and his selfishness in hurting them. His sister's marriage would be cancelled. If he goes with you, his happiness would lie entirely in your hands.'

'He's an adult. Can't adults be responsible for their own happiness?'

'And what if it goes wrong? With your toy boy?'

I am stung by his words and take a gasping breath. 'We will make it work.' And I am shaking now. 'What do you mean 'toy boy', Tata? How can you be such a hypocrite? You have boys visiting you. Not just one, either.'

'They help me with my work.'

'Don't lie to me. You are the one with toy boys.' I am raising my voice. 'I care about Surinder. I am causing havoc? You bring young men here when Kamala and Jaganathan are away and you lecture me about my moral life. You have even sneered at Indian society's lack of freedom, the obsession with breeding. You told me it's like a stud farm. Anyway, you're no saint.'

Tata leans forward. His voice is quiet. 'What I do is my business,' he says. 'As long as I do not throw it all in their faces. I am seventy-three. I have carved out a good life for myself. And I do not use anybody. I am not an immoral person. Amoral, perhaps.' He allows me a small smile and then he is serious again.

'Do you love Surinder?'

'If you mean, do I want to be with him all the time and touch him, yes.'

'That sounds like pure lust.'

'Have you never been in love, or lust, Tata?'

'Of course I have.'

'With someone you didn't want to lose?'

'Yes.'

'What happened?'

'The person was totally unacceptable. I gave them up.'

'Do you regret it?'

'I think about it every day. But one must do one's duty.'

'And you have lived alone all these years in a country where everyone is paired off?'

'There are the compensations of family. And I have my work.'

The bai still clatters in the kitchen. Now she sings a squeaky Tamil film song. Tata looks out the door, perhaps at the bougainvillea flowers or, further into the distance, at the Kaveri and beyond. We both look out the door.

What more can we say? Perhaps I should go.

Tata stands up. 'I will order tea,' he says, crossing the room and calling out to the bai. When he comes back, his tone is gentle as he adds, 'I need to think more about these matters. How is your work?'

I tell him that it is going well. My voice is small and flat. That I am getting to know Muddupalani, that I have so much material, that I want to lay out all my images and read through all the notes, when I get settled. Perhaps I will leave for Australia soon. Perhaps I have enough material for my project, a different sort of film from the one I had planned. I ask him how Surinder is. Tata says that he is sick with some respiratory problem. His family are fussing around after him. He has lost his voice. It is common in such circumstances. Surinder will leave Chandigarh and come back to visit Brindavan soon.

We study the bougainvillea again.

I tell Tata that Urvashi has sent me a new fragment of her beautiful translation, which I will read it to him. I find the sheet of paper and begin:

*He promised he would come
back very soon.
Many days rolled by,
each day a year long!
Have his favours moved elsewhere?
Am I cast out from his heart?
Is he with Ila?
With his tormenting flames
the cruel God of Love
is burning my body.
Listen, sleep left me
the day the beloved went away.
All food is distasteful.
My ears are shut
to every other word.*

Without him the day does not move.

This yearning for him

will not let me be still.

I must have cast the evil eye

on some couple

one day

that pays me back with

this agony of separation.

Tata clears his throat when I finish reading. He takes out a large handkerchief and wipes his nose. 'You look tired,' he says gently. 'You must stay the night in the cottage. We will talk again in the morning.'

The boy brings me dinner in the cottage. I walk up to the Summer Palace in the moonlight after I have eaten. I move past Nandi's rump in the thin white light. Bouts of desire for Surinder are burning me up. I need cooling. I take to the water, and revel in my fear of immersion in the brown liquid, of the shapes that loom in the deep.

Later, I pull myself out of the water by the cottage. There is a yellow flickering of a lamp on the other side, further upstream. A baby cries and a goat bleats.

*

The scribe stares at me and at the table in horror. I had watched him lay the palm leaves out carefully by the door to the courtyard, on a long table under the window. He told me that they needed to breathe. Later, his assistant would oil them.

We stand on the step and gape at the goat trampling and munching the leaves. And there is no one to blame. It is my goat, part of the pastoral torpor of my present life. 'Kannan! What is this goat doing in the courtyard?' I yell. I must shout at someone. Kannan scurries in and takes the creature outside the wall, as the scribe's daughter snatches a leaf, beautifully inscribed, from its masticating jaws.

'What shall we do?' I am distraught. All this work. Yes, I had begun to make a copy, but had completed just a few pages. My spirit is not yet robust and capable of surviving the normal disappointments of life. I will give up this mad enterprise. I sink

down into a wallow of self-pity. 'I cannot, I cannot continue,' I say, shaking my head and rocking from side to side.

The scribe holds his stylus like a gun that has discharged and missed a wild boar. 'Madam,' he says, 'I am deeply sorry...' And there is a dispirited silence in the room.

The quiet daughter speaks. 'It does not matter. It can be done again.' We gape at her. 'The words are stored, safe from goats. In my mind.' We continue to stare. She recites:

His grace! his enchanting ways!

His generosity!

His charisma!

His elegance! his allure!

His ease! his finesse!

His dignity! his playfulness!

His way of winning hearts!

... recites the scribe's daughter...

An ill-starred woman like me,

is she worthy of

this man with such

divine charm?

He plays with me

in marvellous ways

with kisses and sweet words,

makes love again and again.

How can I live

away from such a man?

The scribe and I look uncertainly at each other. She picks up a palm leaf that has been mauled and mangled by the goat, glances at the few legible words, looks up and says, 'Krishna talking about Radha.' She looks at us and recites again from memory:

If I ask her

not to defile me

by kissing me,

she strokes my cheeks

and presses hard on my lips.

If I ask her

not to touch me,

she hugs me,

thrusting her full breasts

at me.

If I ask her

to stay at a distance

modestly,

she grabs me by the hair

and swears at me.

If I ask her

not to sleep with me

since I have made

a vow of abstinence,

she slides onto the bed

and starts making love.

She takes pleasure in me and,

in turn, lets me

drink at her lips.

The scribe's lips purse and then tighten over his teeth. He is clearly struggling with amazement at his daughter's prodigious recall, relief that the completed work can be rewritten, and shock to hear an innocent family girl proclaim such overtly erotic verse.

Umm!

uhumm!

ohoo!

ahh!

oh! so wonderful!

On a bed

Strewn with flowers

Like two furious elephants...

'That will be enough,' the scribe hisses. The girl stops her recitation and stares demurely at the floor.

I try not to laugh. 'Well done,' I say to her, taking her hand. I will purchase a sari for her as a gift. 'Well done... ?'

'Kalindi,' she says, eyes still cast down.

I look at her more closely. No, she is not pretty, but there is a composure in her bearing, as if she is her own person, for the moment anyway, despite the fact that she is at least sixteen years old. Of course, she wears no kohl around her eyes. She is a family girl. I have never studied such girls before.

The scribe gives his dry little cough and flashes a discreetly meaningful stare.

'Your daughter is most intelligent... and dignified,' I tell him, hoping that this is reassurance enough that I am not about to whisk her away to the life of a glamorous ganika. She is not the type, and I have no energy for entrepreneurial activities.

'Yes,' he says, resignedly. Of course intelligence is not a quality required in a wife. It may even be a liability, so perhaps finding a match for her is a challenge.

He bustles home with his daughter who will dictate my poem, from memory. I shout for the boy, order more ink and choose some fresh paper.

It is evening and my pen moves on in the buttermilk moonlight. I read back what I have written:

*All men are actors
indulging in falsehoods,
cruel by nature, self-serving
in actions. They do not know
what compassion is.
They are fickle liars!
And amongst them
the greatest,
the most wicked
Master of Romance
Is you my Lord!
Oh butter-stealing Krishna!
How can I expect any
kindness from you?*

Krishna has come back to Radha, after his time with Ila, protesting his love. Do I agree with Radha, about men? Well, it is I who have written these words. If I concur, I will be doomed, or blessed, with a celibate life for the rest of my days. But let me look further. It is written. I have inscribed the words myself, in keeping with the story of Radha and Krishna:

*He listens to
every charge she makes.
Then Krishna the flute player
looks at her and says,
'Oh woman of such grace,
chastise me!
I bow before you.
Forgive my wrongs.
I fall at your feet.
And let us end this,
call a truce.'
And he touches
her feet with his
forehead, like a
black bee resting
on a lotus.*

Yes, it is written, by many others and now by me: the man is charming, a seducer. Will the woman forgive?

Later, I wander among my vines that are almost empty of fruit. Mottled brown and green leaves hang on the long canes that twist around the trellis. One grape dangles near my face, like a blighted gem, a hole in the brown skin where it has been pecked by a bird, a grey ring around its tiny stem where mould is spreading. And there is a hand on my shoulder. It is Govinda. He must have walked his horse the last few miles to surprise me. We look at each other as if it is the most normal thing that he should be standing there. It is twenty-four years since he found my ankle bell in the carriageway and we have seen each other constantly at court.

There are no expressions that I can extract from my facial vocabulary to arrange the cheeks, eyes, lips. Behind it, my soul is a featureless country where a cool

breeze has been blowing. There are no ornaments jingling or flashing, just the space of this landscape and the balmy breeze. As he gazes into the dark of my eyes, I am afraid of what is there in the shadows of my soul. Govinda puts his arms around me and pulls me gently to his breast. And he hugs me and rocks me from side to side, so that I close my eyes and feel the warmth of his body and hear the beating of his heart. 'Muddupalani', he says, and it is the first time that he has said my name. And I hug him tightly and feel like an ape or a chimp, clinging to another of my kind. He lifts his hand and strokes my head and one of his rings becomes caught in the black coil of my hair that is knotted loosely at the nape of my neck. We move out of our embrace and walk along the furrow towards the house arm in arm. He takes me to my sitting room and presses me gently onto the green chaise longue with my head at the lower end. I close my eyes as he loosens my coil of hair and I hear the rings that he has slipped from his fingers being placed on the table. He must be kneeling, sitting on his heels. He must have picked up my hairbrush that Kannan has left there, and he brushes from the crown of my head to the end of my tresses. My scalp tingles with the bristles of the brush and the gentle pull as he reaches the end of each lock. He is gently kneading my soul and I can feel the cool breath in my nostrils, the lids lightly covering my eyes, the cheeks soft, the mouth loose, each part of my face relaxed. And I smile just for myself, just for myself.

It is sunset when I wake, my hair still a waterfall over the end of the moss green couch. He has left the brush on the tiny carved table near my shoulder and covered me with a silk sheet and I remember the strokes of the brush in my hair, for that is all he touched. All that he has touched.

There is a piece of black satin ribbon on the table. I pick it up, tie my hair back at the nape of my neck, sit down cross-legged at my tiny desk and pick up the pen, whole, intact, untouched. And I write:

*Chattering of birds,
red-legged cranes and long-tailed walls,
Rises higher and higher.
The red-eyed Master
begins his journey
and the crescent moon wanes
on the western hill.*

Marble stones, frozen still.

Clusters of twinkling stars

lose their lustrous shine.

Light from oil lamps

pales.

The Love God,

Manmatha,

lies exhausted

after an all-night war

and separated lovers

sigh with relief.

The morning after. Yes, it is a sweet tiredness. I put my pen down. I run my hand from my forehead around the edge of my face and down over my breast, and I think to myself, no, Muddupalani, despite the chaste life that you are currently leading, you are not averse to passion.

*

Tata and I lunch together. He tells me that he has spent many hours in thought since our discussion last evening. He looks up from cleaning his plate of *rasam*, rice and curd, with gravy neatly staining his fingertips. He waves his arms. 'It is crucial,' he announces emphatically, 'that you finish your research. And we owe it to the dancers, do we not? Do not wallow. Saraswati has gone north to ensnare the Siddhu family. Surinder is, indeed, the pawn, but all is not lost. Love is indeed the most important thing in life, but we must pull on with the small things.' He stops, eyes closed, and his head shakes with emotion. 'You will stay at Brindavan when you are not engaged in your field work. Jaganathan's fancy gadgets are at your disposal. I have talked to him about your project and he too is keen that you will continue. Kamala will be back soon. In the meantime, we will dine together each evening and you will report on your progress. Yes?'

I jump up and hug him and he clucks and tuts, but is pleased. He has forgiven my deception. It must be the only way that love affairs could possibly be conducted in India.

I open my mouth to ask questions, but he continues, 'Sometimes it is best to just wait and to see how things unfold. Fate moves in mysterious ways.' He jumps up from his chair. 'I have a surprise for you,' he says. 'We will visit a devadasi lady today. Quickly, get yourself ready. We must sally forth with haste.'

Rachel meets the lady and interviews her, with Tata as interpreter.

I am quiet on the way back. It is too dispiriting. Jivraratnam was not drifting about in a haze of musky oils and floral scents. She lived in a hut. This lady never had a full-time patron.

'Well, that was not the norm,' Tata says excitedly. 'The ladies that I met were treasured.' He holds his hands up, his eyes closed. 'They had the space to say no. All of their liaisons took place in the home where they were protected by the family. If some fellow turned up inebriated or there was any untoward behaviour, he would be requested to leave.'

'But, Tata, you met the most successful of these ladies. Realistically, Jivraratnam was a prostitute, in a position sanctified, slightly, by her being a devadasi.'

'It wasn't that bad.' Tata is indignant.

'The temple didn't even give women like Jivraratnam a subsistence wage. And after the Anti-Devadasi Act was passed... when was it? In 1947... these women were considered the lowest of the low.'

'Yes, but this was not always the case,' says Tata. He sighs.

Have I been glossing over the dancers' lives? Romanticising Muddupalani's? Exoticising?

We speak of other things. I admit to Tata that I have missed a deadline for script development and also, I have been offered three months work on a film in Australia. I need money. What a shame that I have not written an 18th-century bodice ripper about Muddupalani and sold it to some Bollywood contact of Jaganathan. That would have made me some cash. *Muddupalani and the King*. *The Heavenly Ganika*. I try out the names on Tata.

'I think that you should seriously consider a bodice ripper,' says Tata. 'You have plenty of research, don't you? And you've written Muddupalani?'

I laugh.

In the evening I try to assemble some sort of narrative from the images that I have, of temples and rivers, choultries and mandapams, Brindavan and the Summer Palace where I have wandered with Jaganathan's camera, recording images of crumbling rock faces, tangled vines, the water of the Kaveri, flowing like molten aluminium around a sharp branch that bores through the surface. I sit on the floor with my notes and photographs arranged around me, on the bright cotton rug with the photos, postcards and posters. I place the images in two piles, trying not to think too much about the ordering of Rachel in India, the polaroids and prints: the gentle slope of Surinder's shoulder where flesh dips into a shallow well of muscle; the pocked black surface of steps in Yamunambai's choultry; the perfect almond of Krishna's kohl-rimmed eye, set in the flawless blue-grey of his complexion; the detailed twists of a maroon rope—Surinder's turban; Surinder's hip, the skin dark against the orange lunghi; the gold hills and valleys of an ornament that hangs from Krishna's belt, studded with pools of ruby. Surinder's profile, a black cut-out, hair in a topknot, against the red evening sky at the Tanjavur Railway Retiring Rooms; I place it in the pile. I spread them in a fan on the rug and add two more—his arm against the white twill sheet on the rickety bed, the dark shadow in the crook of his elbow. I spread it out around me. The sum of my work in India?

I will sort and number the images. Sorting and numbering are balm for the soul.

My ornaments are in a box by the bed. I am unadorned. My hair is tied back with a piece of wool, I wear my cotton churidar and I am comfortable. Before dining with Tata, I comb my hair and apply pale lipstick as a mask to brighten my face.

'Don't give up on Surinder,' he says, raising his hand like a guru dispensing blessings. 'There are ways and means. The match is not finalised. And that's not necessarily the point anyway.'

Tata is being mysterious. Perhaps there is a hitch in Chandigarh. I try to still my mind and not speculate. I have my work, I tell myself, and I had tacitly agreed, when invited to stay on, that I would watch the workings of fate unfold.

Tata tells me that Surinder is coming to Brindavan the day after tomorrow. We are looking at new images that I have downloaded from Jaganathan's digital camera.

Kamala is due back from Chennai tomorrow. Tata's friend, Urvashi, is visiting soon and we will go through the translations together. Yes, I have my work. Passion is not important. I will make a slide show. Combine the images.

'Perhaps it's best that I don't meet Surinder. I will go to Chennai. There's plenty of work that I could do there.' I look with detachment at a picture of Radha, another carving. She stands, arching her back and stretching, as Krishna's penis goes into her. It is high contrast, black and white, taken from a book of temple sculpture.

'He wants to talk to you,' Tata says firmly. There has been no word from him to date and I have forced myself not to ask. Kamala has sent a postcard celebrating the successes of Saraswati who stayed on in Chandigarh for an extra week. But, as she keeps saying, nothing is definite. Everyone keeps saying, nothing is definite. Perhaps we will somehow keep going, Surinder and I, if the uncertainty can continue. I put this thought aside with my photographs.

Tata says that there are moves afoot. He doesn't have all the details, he says. 'Just don't give up. And wait until Surinder talks to you.' He holds his hands out in front of him, palms towards me, and closes his eyes. His head shakes gently and he will be drawn no further.

I don't see Tata until the following night at dinner. I have been invited at the last minute. Kamala is radiant. And I feel sick again. Tata darts glances at me. 'Rachel, dear, why should I hold back?' she says, spooning rice onto a plate, adding dhal and passing it to me. 'Please take some vegetables.' She pauses. 'We could not have asked for more. The match is almost finalised.' There are tears in her eyes. 'Almost. Many calls back and forth to Chandigarh. To my brother! And Balwant, our champion at the other end.' She laughs her tinkling laugh, 'Although, I must say, that in the detail Tata has come forward as a tough negotiator.'

Tata gives me a meaningful look and I stare at him in horror. How could he betray me like this? As soon as it is barely decent to do so, I leave and rush over the lawn. I throw clothes into a bag. I will go tomorrow. I have no friends left at Scott's, only patrons—Kamala and Jaganathan. I stand still and look at the floor covered in pictures. The walls. The floors around the edge of the room. Fragments. Nothing whole. But I am discovering Muddu, I tell myself. She is present. She has not failed me. I pull my case off the top of the wardrobe, drag clothes out of the cupboards, fall onto the bed. I cry. I doze. I dream.

I am with a group of friends and family, walking onto the large square, roofed terrace of a strange house. Long shadows cast by the moon fall across the polished floor. A servant comes to meet us. Up the steps of the wide entrance, a family eats at a long table in soft yellow light. Surinder is among them. I can just see him in profile as he leans forward to take a mouthful of chapatti. I ask to speak to him and the man goes in and whispers to a Sikh, grey-bearded and tall, clearly the father, who sits at the head of the table. He shakes his head, leaves the table and comes down. No, he says, my son is not available. However, please let me offer you a drink. You have travelled far. I watch Surinder, eating, his eyes down, not seeing me. I walk out and stand at the edge of the terrace. A huge Gothic church, black, shiny obsidian, looms out of the moonlight across a flat vacant area. In the middle distance, narrow bare saplings are lined up in thin white rows.

I pace in the cottage at dawn to the gurgling of the river and the cawing of crows. There is a note under the door from Tata. 'Things are not what they seem. Don't disappear on me. I insist that you wait and speak to Surinder this evening. I repeat—all is not as it seems. Tata.' And I have to laugh. He has read too many boys' own adventure books. Perhaps Surinder has agreed to the marriage with Saraswati and will elope with me. Or he has arranged a stay in the proceedings for a quick fling with me on the eve of the Big Day.

I pace, move pictures around. I cannot bear to bundle them up. Some lie on the bed next to the purple dress that I pulled out of the wardrobe last night. The sheer chiffon dupata lies on the floor beside a bright picture of a temple dancer. I lie on the floor and stretch, clasping my arms above my head and feeling the muscles loosen in my chest and up into my armpits as I breathe deeply and my back releases onto the cotton mat on the floor. The slinky cream Mayapuri dress hangs up on the cupboard door. I lie flat, draw my knees up to my chest, then drop them to the side, keeping my shoulders on the ground, and the muscles in my waist and upper back give a little as I breathe and loosen. My extended fingers touch cold metal—my silver jewellery lies on the floor by the pictures of Krishna; next to my work table, coils of snake bracelets, necklaces and the waist belt, pools of silver chain and a tiny pile of rings for my piercings, those that are not already in my skin and flesh.

What is the point of this meeting with Surinder? I hear Kamala's laughter at the house and the distant clatter of metal pots that the bai will be placing outside the kitchen when the food is arranged on the serving plates. I can't eat anything.

I have no scenario, no script for Surinder.

I look at the woman in the long mirror. She is thinner, taut with the determined swimming in the swirling Kaveri each day. I watch her pick up a pencil off the bench and draw lines of kohl under the bottom eye lid. Her eyes stare out at me, larger in that pale face inside the black frame around the mirror.

Rachel turns on Jaganathan's projector. She has been working hard, assembling her slide show, a collage of her time in India, writ large.

The first image flashed on the cottage wall is a charcoal drawing, with bold curves, a woman with a flimsy sari wrapped around her hips, round thighs, standing, one hip out to the side, the weight on that leg, not unlike Krishna's pose really, but with melon breasts and arms above her head like a dancer. No curved elbow to hold a flute. The charcoal arcs boldly in the exaggerated curves of a temple dancer carved in stone. Translated onto paper. It is supposed to be Rachel, but Surinder has laid his own mental template over his real flesh model—transforming her into a South Indian dancer. Perhaps from the wall of the Big Temple in Tanjavur. Not Rachel at all. Except maybe the face.

Rachel looks at the big projected face and she flinches. It's hard for an independent woman, an Australian film-maker, about to write a script for her first feature, so hard to look at this drawing, especially now that Surinder is lost to her. It's definitely Rachel's face, rather longer than she would like, with hooded, half-closed eyes, and the mouth a little open as if someone is holding a peeled mango out to her and her starving, thirsty, lips are opening to devour it. It was at the Mayapuri Hotel in Chennai, that place where they could be whoever they wanted, suspended between India and the rest of the universe. Where Rachel became Surinder's ornament. Not in any Western tizzy sense. Not some shepherdess with palest pink fluted dress, porcelain, translucent face. Oh, no. Nothing like that. The word ornament has a different meaning in South Indian poetry and dance.

Rachel's face is hot as if covered by a rash, with the pain of the recognition. She shifts her gaze, studies the charcoal lines of the nipples, remembers Surinder working on the piece.

At the Mayapuri, she had moved from the archway and the double doors, stretched, smiled at the artist, as his hands shaded and made sweeping marks on the paper. She squatted behind Surinder, leaned against him, looking over his shoulder. The nakedness of her expression. Her neck flushed as she felt the warmth of his back. She pretended to be a drawing teacher, poked her finger at the cream, grainy paper clipped onto a board.

'Overworked,' she told him with a strained laugh. 'It is common for people to overwork detail in life drawing,' she said crisply. 'Men's lingams... ' (they liked to use the Sanskrit word) '... are often inscribed hard on the page, pendulous and exaggerated.'

Surinder turned his head and looked at her mildly.

'In drawings made by men,' she lectured, 'the woman's yoni is generally a gloomy forest bisected by a shadowy ravine where the lips should be merely a hint, a light scribble. And the nipples...'

Rachel threw back her head and her laugh was a little shrill. Her eyes flicked back and forth across the nipples, shaded and lined, the charcoal spread delicately with the finger, then an outline, like the teat on a baby's bottle, a hard black line, sharp against the white paper.

'So, they are overworked,' Surinder said, twisting towards her, lifting his hands, applying and spreading charcoal to her skin, shading in the black powder from his fingers, darkening the circumference and top of her pink, pointed nipples. She arched her body, so that her breasts jutted out, the nipples erect, almost as exaggerated as the lines in the drawing, and her face assumed the expression of the charcoal woman as Surinder sculpted her flesh with his hands, working on the three dimensions of her body.

Now, in the cottage, Rachel groans and puts her hands over her face, but the image is still there. She shudders, flicking her hair like a dog shaking water off its body and paces the room, with the giant abandoned woman watching her from the white wall. Abandoned? To passion? By Surinder? A weird noise bounces off the wall. Rachel isn't sure if it was a sob. It must have come from her. Otherwise, there is

only the sound of the projector in the room and laughter coming from the big house. Rachel holds her hand over her mouth to stop any further seepage.

Rachel sits on the cotton mat, keeps her hand over her mouth and rolls into a ball, clutching her knees up to her chest with the spare hand, feeling old, spent and tawdry. She will try to get up and go to the Summer Palace.

Total darkness

Creeps over her eyes.

When she recalls

His sweet cajoling

And loving words,

Her heart breaks into

A million pieces.

The door is open onto my back veranda. I hear Surinder's voice, calling over his shoulder to Tata or Kamala, a discreet announcement of his approach. I spring up, turn off the projector, lean over, drag the purple dress off the bed, slip it over my head and pull it down over my body.

'Rachel,' Surinder bounds through the door, an urgency in his eyes, but then pauses and smiles uncertainly at me in the middle of my pictures. There is little space to move. He looks around the room at the façade of the Big Temple, the view from the window of the Special Room at Terekhol, hundreds of images, mainly distance shots.

There is a small space on the floor in front of me. He moves across carefully and sits down. 'You have... so much here.' He leans forward, gently takes my face in his hand and kisses me gravely and sweetly on the mouth. 'All this work. While I've been away.' It is almost a reproach. He says it as if he has been on some quest with a momentous task, as if he is surprised that I was not stricken with grief at his absence, like a wife, at the window, scanning the horizon for a glimpse of his figure, galloping towards our gates, and now weeping with joy at her husband's return from battle.

'So...' my tone must be mildly enquiring. I am an island amongst my pictures: the curly cedar end of the green velvet couch, like an arthritic knee that lies under the curve of my ankle; the dancing girls chipped out of stone, naked except for a flimsy suggestion of cloth across their hips; the mass-produced black lingams in the Big Temple shop; the doorway to Jivraratnam's poor hut; the garland of jasmine from

Muddupalani's couch, brown and crushed; a snap of Surinder's charcoal drawing—my face, the mouth slack with desire.

Surinder tells me that he has missed me to his bones. He shifts a postcard of Krishna and the Gopis a little further to one side and leans forward as if he would take my hand. I make no move but just sit, with a detached tenderness for him. He looks up intently and I want to drop my gaze, in case I sink and am drowned in honey quicksand.

'A lot has happened in Chandigarh, Rachel, and I have not stopped thinking about you for a moment.' He scans the weighty collation of our time together, of Tanjavur and the dancers, the photographs, notes, postcards, books, and says irritably, 'I find it stuffy in here. Can we go out by the river?'

We sit on the steps close to the water and he takes my hand. 'Rachel, I am speaking to you at the first chance. It's true that I am to marry Saraswati.' My detachment begins to crack like an egg shell. 'There is nothing to be done about that.' I open my mouth to speak, but he leans forward and places a finger over my lips, before kissing me gently. 'Don't tell me that I am weak,' he says. 'It is more complex...'

'... than a foreign woman can comprehend.'

'Yes,' he says firmly. 'I think that is true.'

'I am put on the earth to train young Indian men for their brides,' I say. Surinder looks at the river again and twirls the curl next to his mouth as if he must find the right words. The air is still and heavy and there are drops of sweat on my forehead. He stands up, 'Let's walk.'

I hold back. 'To the Summer Palace?'

He nods. 'Will you wear my ornaments?' His voice is matter-of-fact.

I see the quagmire of honey and I shake my head.

'I will not break your resolve and seduce you,' says Surinder, tenderly. He stands back. I point to the peridot nose ring, the five studs in the curl of my left ear. My hand brushes over my left nipple and down over my torso. There are also my two silver bangles. He nods and I am conscious only of the blood and life in his body as we hold hands and walk down the dark track.

In the little pavilion the archways frame pointed sections of black sky with only a few dots of stars and the platinum river. Surinder holds both my hands and tells me that he cannot live without me. And I listen and feel no indignation now. It is as if

should be that he would feel this way and tell me of his devotion. A young man must marry to preserve dynasties, underscore family interests and preserve the honour of his house. It is only fitting. And it is clearly an excellent match. I loosen my grip on his hands.

We will say goodbye and I will leave him here with his plans for conquest of the Rajagopal Pillai family and its riches and I will depart, the bangles on my arm clanking down as I touch my hair, the buzzing in my brain like a myriad bees on the bougainvillea that grows in the ragged soil of the walkway where no garlands hang. I should go soon and leave him to contemplate the bridal chamber he will share with the young girl under the roof of his proud family in the north. My hand goes to the peridot nose ring and I feel it move against the cartilage of my nostril. My finger runs along the studs in my ear. These people will live their lives as they should, but will not know Paradise. I run my hand over my breast and torso. After all, as Tata says, *heaven is full of actors, playboys, and courtesans; it's no place for a married woman.* And I will be there in the celestial heights one day, among the seraphim and cherubim, fingering stiff paper covered with verse, reading words in many tongues, enthralled by the thrum of the tanpura, guitars; dancing with ganikas; watching video clips of rock stars strumming riffs, among heartbreaking men with golden eyes, in all, all of my silver ornaments. And Surinder will not be there. For *it is a grave sin to sleep with anyone else but the person you love, even your wife.* And this is an Indian saying, not one brought here by a rank outsider.

Surinder is talking. 'You must listen, Rachel,' he is saying. 'We can be together. I want you to be with me, but it is not as you may have foreseen it.' He smiles. He is not sure. 'Clearly I can't come to Australia.' His smile falters. 'But there is a way.' He takes a breath. 'Darling, I want you to come and live in Delhi. Close by me.' We are standing in the pavilion, as we did months ago. My hand goes up again slowly and distractedly to stroke the peridot in my nose. I look around me at the rubbish on the floor and wonder how much time it would take to clean this little faceted jewel of a place, hang it with gauzy curtains, perhaps pale blue. I would stand here covered in silver, looking across the river. My lover could drag me down onto pale blue satin cushions...

'I will take care of you and be your lover.'

My mouth is loose as I gaze at him.

'A pretty flat, in a quiet street, with a view of trees and a rose bush on your terrace.' He takes my hands again. 'You will do your work. Make beautiful films. Dance, too. And you will invite me to your bed.'

I am still blank and I say to him, 'But where would I live? There is no dancers' street in Delhi. No dancers' street any more.'

He laughs as if I have made some witty remark, then says that he must allow me time to take in what he has told me. We will speak of it again in the morning.

I look out over the river and listen to his steps on the gravel of the courtyard. He had agreed reluctantly to leave me there in the pavilion.

He is proposing that I become his mistress? But I am in the silver pavilion and some things are confusing here.

I turn and walk down the steps and across the courtyard. I stop beside Nandi in the mandapam, put my head against his warm hard flanks and whisper questions to him. I step out of my dress and leave it in a purple puddle on the steps: it would only weigh me down. The steps are smooth stone and I strike out into the water.

The following morning, it is Tata who appears in my doorway as the sun makes long gold stripes across my balcony and floor. He refuses tea in a business-like tone and we sit on the balcony in a patch of shade from the fig tree.

'Rachel,' he says, the palms of his hands before him and his eyes closed, 'I know that we are in agreement: love and following one's passion are paramount in this world. And I am sure that the gods would endorse this viewpoint. I bow to fate like the best of us, but I can never understand why we mortals cannot have our cake and eat it too, if the situation arises.' He leans forward and continues his preamble, 'I have devoted significant portions of my energy to achieving that in my life, on behalf of myself and significant others.'

Tata explains that while he thought that dowries were foolish in this millennium, he has taken some part in the family matrimonial negotiations. 'Clearly, Surinder, and indeed Kamala, are from a highly esteemed Punjabi family, modestly comfortable in their means,' says Tata, 'while Jaganathan is... ' Tata whispers the last words, '... obscenely, rich.' Tata considers that his beloved nephew should have his own funds, so that he is not dependant on a wealthy wife, funds that he could dispose of as he wishes. Accordingly, Jaganathan and Kamala have provided well for both

Saraswati and Surinder, as individuals, in the marriage settlement. 'And they are far too modern to believe in *dowry*, but there you have it,' Tata chuckles. Surinder's family have the pleasure of a highly suitable match, bringing two prominent families together with the dynastic satisfaction and general wealth inherent in this situation. Tata apologises for the vulgar details of money that, nevertheless, seem totally pertinent to the current situation.

'I am to live in Delhi as Surinder's mistress and receive a slice of his cake?'

'Yes,' says Tata. 'That is the nub of the matter.'

I am quiet for a while. 'But I'm Australian,' I try to explain.

Tata is confused. 'We could get you permanent residency. And if you're homesick, we could send you off for a trip home every other year. That could be easily managed.' There are no holes in the situation. It is worked out with great thought for the needs of a foreign mistress. Now Tata looks expectant as if I should be jumping up and clapping my hands. I have a feeling of unease, but I try. 'You have been wonderful to me, Tata. As always. Will I need to learn Bharat Natyam and to play the veena?'

'Yes,' says Tata, 'of course you could do that. And I will give you advanced lessons in the making of pan!' He laughs. 'An independent woman in Delhi. You will make films, conduct salons, perhaps. And the flat is in such a charming area. Green and quiet.'

'The flat?'

It is one of three, part of the family trust properties. I think it would be the most pretty.'

'You have chosen the flat?'

'Well, it's available.'

'But it's not mine. I have my own house in Melbourne.'

'You said that your father owned the house you live in.'

'Yes, but it's still mine. I make all the decisions about it. And I would never have to leave.'

Tata is astounded. 'You would never have to leave this flat.'

'Tata, I know that you would always do the best possible for me. But the place belongs to the family of my lover. Or the family of my lover's wife! In Melbourne, I

am independent, Australian. I am a woman of property. And what would I *do* in Delhi?'

There is a shout from the house. Tata rises, rolls his eyes. 'More dynastic machinations,' he mutters, and departs.

I walk out on the balcony, lean on the marble rail and watch a stick being borne along on the tide of the Kaveri.

Tata comes back later in the day. 'I would have spoken of *work* as well as *love* in our previous meeting,' he says, 'but was hijacked by Kamala.' He sighs. 'But one must be flexible on the small things.'

He delivers two jewellery boxes, with a note. From Surinder, he says. This time he will take tea.

'On the subject of your profession,' he says, 'Jaganathan has been interested for some time in your project. He wants to talk to you about a feature film.'

I gape. A series of wonderful images fast forward through my brain, abstract, grainy, the surface of skin, the ridged cage of a rib...

'Does he want Bollywood songs?' I ask. 'Rows of dancers, decked out in harem pants, thrusting their pelvises and jumping off walls? A wet sari sequence, with Muddupalani under a waterfall? A heroine making little sobbing... '

Tata gives this a moment's thought. 'Not necessarily,' he says in his efficient voice. 'Look, surely, it's a great opportunity,' he adds. 'There may be some details... such as an Indian co-writer for the script.' He looks at my popping eyes. 'But all the minor points can be worked out. You would work with all the best people.' Tata will give me time to take it in. He changes the subject. Surinder is working in the house in a frenzy of activity to finish the last details of his thesis submission. Late. He will take the train tonight for Chennai. I am used to the sudden arrivals and departures of the family. Tata talks on. I nod and don't listen.

'And Saraswati, how would she feel about the... arrangement?'

Tata shrugs. 'Surinder and I are the only ones who have discussed you, other than the business of the film with Jaganathan. Saraswati would understand, eventually: she is brought up to be a pawn in the matrimonial game, but will have the chance to throw her weight around in her wifely role... '

'And Kamala?'

'Kamala need never have to confront the situation. Although she will suspect and then know. Most things can be accommodated in India as long as the façade of marriage is maintained and family bonds are not threatened.'

When Tata leaves, I open the little box. It contains an exquisite bangle, a plain circle with squared edges and tiny emeralds set into the smooth metal. It is gold, engraved on the inside, from Surinder and the date. Not to be worn at Brindavan, I would say, or not for a few years. I open Surinder's message: 'You are my ornament, my life... ' it says. 'Darling, meet me at the Mayapuri tomorrow night. I love you, Rachel, and I want to be with you always.'

I open the second, larger box. It contains a hideous matching set of gold drop ear rings and an ornate necklace with rubies set into the pendant. There are two 500 rupee notes for a taxi fare in the envelope with Surinder's message. Gold and money.

*

I feel less flaccid as I dance for an hour each day, enjoying the stretching of the hamstrings and the pull of the muscles in my chest, extending the front of my torso. Each day I am recovering my dancer's deportment, and there is a lightness now, even joy. I have a new mirror, clear and without blemishes, where I watch myself move. This woman before me makes no demands. I can please her in just the sensation of the blood pulsing through my veins and it is for me, myself alone. I try moving with no expression on my face, willing every muscle to lie still and relax, and when I have finished the piece I laugh, bending over, watching myself in amazement as my mouth opens and I blatantly display my teeth. For myself alone.

The scribe delivers the finished manuscript in the afternoon. He is accompanied by his quiet daughter. Perhaps he fears some further natural disaster will befall the manuscript, both palm leaf and written versions. Kalindi makes the Namaste greeting most modestly, then sits in the corner of the room and plies her needle. It is still sewing of a basic nature, the repair of simple kurtas and night dresses. Can she not embroider some beautiful cushion or stitch a delicate garment? Why not? I do not know. But then, her costumes are hardly gaudy, always in browns and greys, as if she is a thrush or a myna. I find that there is more detail in my noticing outside world, these days. It is not just the world of Ila, Krishna and Radha, a universe of white

pillars, the clink of gold ornaments, the heady smell of perfumed oils. I now view the world of earth, water and air, even girls. Yes, the cosmos also contains cactuses, spiky grass, grey hairs, sprouting plants and, of course, goats.

'So,' I say to the scribe. '*The Story of Ila.*' He bows and hands me the bundle of palm leaves neatly strung together.

'Madam, excuse me.' I stop and turn. It is the quiet daughter. 'I think the story is not about Ila.' I stare at her and her father gapes. What is this girl doing? Is there no end to the interventions in his work? He had meant to ask her to stay home, but always she is ready at the door, with her bag of sewing, any palm leaves that he is taking to the farm nicely wrapped in cloth and tied neatly ready for the journey. It has been so since she was a child, her firm will. She holds a tiffin with lunch that she has prepared for them to eat under the shade tree in the courtyard or on the banks of the river while Madam goes to her chambers, so that they munch and hear the humming of a tune and the slapping of her feet on the stone.

'What is the story about?' I pause by the door and lift my chest. A dancer must adjust her body and hold it strongly.

'It is about Radha,' says the girl respectfully. 'And the way Krishna keeps her loving him.' The scribe raises his eyebrows in a pained manner, but she will not look in her father's direction. 'Oh, Madam! When you dictate your verses, I see into Radha's heart,' says the girl passionately.

I smile. 'We shall call it *Radhika Santwanam, Appeasing Radha,*' I say to her and turn to the distraught father. 'Is there room for a new title at the top?'

'Always, Madam,' he says tartly, 'it is not uncommon for my poets to change their titles. May I suggest *The Story of Ila* as a subtitle?'

'Excellent,' I tell him as he sits on the floor, extracts a stylus from his equipment and inscribes the title at the beginning of the first palm leaf, *Radhika Santwanam.*

I decide on the sari that I will give the girl when our session is finished, a russet georgette with yellow and maroon pallu. It is discreet in its colours, but much more vivid than the ones she wears at present. And books. Does she have books to read?

The scribe and I conclude our work. I tell him that I would like to chat with his daughter and that I will send her home later with Kannan. He seems surprised, but not altogether appalled. Perhaps it is not a bad thing that Madam takes an interest in her.

I ask the girl to recite some of my work. I listen to the rise and the fall of the cadences and my hands move in time to the rhythm. I lead her, still reciting, out into the courtyard. I walk before her. Taiyum takka. Tai tai thi thi tai. Heel ball toe. The rhythm: Tai thi thi tai. Tai tai thi thi tai. To the vineyard, along the furrows to the river bank. Tai tai tai thi thi tai.

The goat looks up then goes back to munching a tuft of grass. A cow stares solemnly from the next field. I move my body to the girl's words, to my words, and I hum with the doves as my tanpura, with the Kaveri flowing past to the delta and the sea. The words flow on and my body steps and sways, swoons and steps out. I am Radha. I am Krishna. The girl sings my words:

*As the silver bells
on her ankle chains
make
silvery tinkling sounds,
Radha, with her left foot,
pushes Hari's head away,
that sacred head
worshipped with great reverence
by saints and sages.*

The girl sings and I dance. The sun is setting across the river as we tell the whole story of Radha, Krishna and Ila. On and on until it is the end of my story I turn, with my arms extended. The scribe and Kannan stand under a tree, pink in the lighting of my dance hall. The girl sits at the edge of the clearing. I pause. There is a stillness. Then I throw my arms wide and laugh.

I have danced and sung Madhevi from the *Silipadikaram*.

I have danced the *Gitagovinda*.

Now, I have danced for Kalindi and my new courtiers, the cow and the goat, in Krishna's hall by the Kaveri.

I have danced Radha.

And now I am dancing and singing Muddupalani.

*

Quiet voices murmur in the next room at the Mayapuri. I stroke make-up onto my face, smooth it under my chin and around my eyes. I apply kohl and mascara. My eyes look large and the green is vivid.

I spin around before the mirror and assess my body. The shoulders and arms are still slim, but with muscle tone, and I am thinned out at the waist and belly from my swimming. I slip on the cream dress from the last Mayapuri rendezvous and I am covered in my ornaments. The champagne is in the cooler on the low table that is surrounded by brocade and silk cushions. Next to the chilled stemmed glasses lie my new gold bangle, ear rings and necklace.

I have been to the beauty shop where my feet were soaked in a basin of water and the girl sat on a tiny stool, ripping wax and hair from my body. While there I studied the poster on the wall: the face of a woman took up most of the frame, with her windswept blonde hair in large waves breaking out the back of her head and into the blue heavens. Her skin was golden. Superimposed on the faint image were two white horses and a foal. The woman wore a short Grecian tunic and was bare-legged, riding one of the beautiful stallions. I stared and pondered at the caption, 'The happiest women like the happiest nations have no history'. The women around me smiled and chatted about new saris for graduations and marriages.

Tamil film music blared from the small sound system. The proprietor counted money and her daughter trimmed my newly blonded hair. She assured me that any grey roots had been covered by the new colour. On another wall there was a small hanging, a black plastic heart with gold edging and gold writing across the heart:

Kiss is the key of

Love

Love is a locker

of

Life.

Surinder arrives. He takes in the woman standing before him.

He kisses me and holds me. 'I have been waiting for this moment. But I feel such... uncertainty.' He studies me, searching for hints, lifts my wrists. 'You aren't wearing your new bangle.'

'It doesn't go with the silver. And I'm not sure about gold on white skin.'

He laughs. 'We will cover you with gold.'

I thank him for the beautiful bangle. Did he buy it in Chennai? No, in Delhi. He runs his hands over my body and tells me that he wants to be with me forever. He kisses me and tells me that I am the woman that he loves.

'And the necklace and ear rings?' I ask him.

He says that Saraswati chose them. I ask him if he has slept with her. He looks coy. No, he has kissed her just to see what it was like.

'She went with you to buy jewellery for your mistress and you didn't make love to her afterwards?'

Surinder bites his upper lip, then grabs me and tells me again that I am the only one. He kisses me and I am melting. Then he pulls back.

'Please, darling, let me reassure you that you will be secure. It will all be done properly.' I nod. He holds my face in his hands. 'You are not certain,' he says, urgently. 'Surely you will not refuse me. I could not bear it.' He kisses me again and his hands move over the soft dress, across my nipples, my hips and groin.

I ask him if he had suggested to his parents that he wanted to marry me. He looks surprised. No, this plan for me had eventuated and it had seemed perfect. 'You did say that you were not the marrying type.'

Rachel and Surinder undress each other. She takes the champagne and leads him over to the bed where they toast each other's bodies and pull the pale blue filmy curtains around them. And Rachel begins to cry and pull away. Surinder reaches for her.

They are touching each other urgently when the door opens and closes with a click. Surinder looks at her and across the room. The shape of a woman sits down gracefully, cross-legged, on a cushion. She picks up the voluptuous curved tanpura and its drone fills the room. There is a click and the sound of river water running, of a soprano singing a phrase. Then the woman in the room utters a long low note that soars and falls and the two voices answer each other, the woman on the CD high and

clear, the woman in the room, her voice low and thick like honey liqueur, as the tanpura thrums like a heart beat.

*Hari reaches for
the weeping Radha,
caresses her feet
and pleads with her:
'Do not cry, my love!*

I am your own.

*Say what you wish
and I will do what
pleases you.'*

*Saying these words
He grabs the protesting
Radha into his arms.*

*Overjoyed, Radha
falls into a rapture.*

*Hari brushes her face
with his lips,
strokes her cheek,
caresses her
softly all over.*

*And she kisses him
sweetly in turn.*

*He tickles her
with his nails and
excites her.*

He unties her garment.

*She rises
like a female elephant
eager for a game of love.*

Surinder makes love to Rachel as if he will die at any moment. He is tender at first, then he lifts her buttocks and nibbles, licks, driving her desire so that her whole body

is alert to his mouth as he feasts, drinks with such thirst, his face wet with her so that she will scream.

I cry then and the tears fall down into my ears while he lifts his upper body and wipes the kohl from under my eyes with the corner of the sheet. The music dies, there is a click and a jingle of bangles and the woman is gone, the scent of sandal lingering in the air when the door has shut.

I climb on top of Surinder and he holds me still.

'You won't have me as your patron?'

I frown. 'I don't know. There are no dancers' streets any more. I would be marooned in Kamala's flat in India.'

'Are there dancers' streets in Australia?'

'There are many other places to be yourself. Unobserved. To dance. To make love. Without demands and constant people. I wanted you to come.'

He tells me that he is not free.

'Perhaps your children can be.' Our tears fall and we continue to move our bodies until we both cry out with the joy and the terrible anguish of it. Surinder falls asleep and I look at his face as he lies in my arms.

We lounge on the cushions and finish the champagne. I make pan for my lover, choosing the juiciest betel leaf, opening the silver container, dipping the third finger in the white lime paste, smearing it delicately on the leaf, taking the perfumed areca nut slivers from a gold pot, sprinkling it onto the paste. My lover will like some sweetness to counter the tang on his taste buds, so I take a spoon of brown paste, *catechu*, and wrap it all into an exquisite parcel. I fashion a bird. It requires practice and skill. One must have a varied repertoire of charms and graces. My fingers twist and turn, and here is the betel leaf now with the green wings that I have fashioned, as I hold the juicy morsel above my lover's mouth, so that his throat and neck stretch and I dangle it into his mouth. My guru has schooled me well. And he has told me about Urvashi. She was the nymph, the *apsaras* in Indra's heaven. She was proud of her beauty and liked to test her charm on the men in the god's court. One day, Mitra and Varuna were so excited by her seductive dance that they lost their vital fluid involuntarily. In their shame and anger they cursed Urvashi and cast her out of heaven down to earth. The ganikas and devadasis are the daughters of Urvashi, the dancer.

I lie on the silk cushions and am in the heaven of the ganikas.

I have a story to tell Surinder in the clear high notes of the soprano and the low thrum of the plump woman and the fragments, the images that fade in and out on the white wall; the aluminium flat estuary in the heat of the day at Terikol; silver snake jewellery; the black Telugu hooks, curls and loops flash on white paper; Krishna's peacock feather; my leg against the door of a black car, a white thing with its own shadows; the devadasi on the wall at the Kumbakonam temple; the black Marathi script, like a comb.

The images, flow, fragment, refract, flicker, flash, fade, as the deep honeyed voice of the woman ceases her lament for the absent god, Krishna. Surinder hugs me fiercely, tells me that I have found Muddupalani and she must be shown to the world, and it is more than I can bear.

He falls asleep on the bed and I watch him breathing. I move his arm from across my waist. He mumbles something and doesn't wake. I stroke his cheek with a soft touch and watch his eyelids quiver.

Rachel pulls the curtain across the bed, gently. She turns on the dressing table light and catches sight of her white face in the mirror, the red eyes. She slips out of the satin silk dress, writes a note, pulls on jeans and tee shirt, stuffs the dress into the bag with her copy of the slide show, the music CD she has made, and all the fragments. She turns out the light, steps into her sandals, wipes her nose on the back of her hand, looks back at Surinder, the 'v' of his leg bent up, his hand on his forehead as he sleeps.

I open the door to go to the airport.

*

Epilogue

*Look,
Hari is here, dwelling
in my heart.
I can see his image
day and night.
Why then this ache of longing?
Were there not others
who fell in love?
Were there not others
who suffered separation?
Did they lament
in such anguish like me?
Others would have died
while I go on breathing.
But these are all useless words.
When I had
the love of Krishna,
then I was truly alive!*

Muddupalani
Radhika Santwanam

I am at home and the magpie warbles outside, as I watch my magic lantern show. CDs, projector, sound system. I roll down the cane blind to cut out some light and sharpen the images, but they are now striated by thin bands of shade. There is Surinder, behind those fine bars, a shot I snapped when he was asleep. He preferred to lie on his back, his hand resting on his forehead, as if one limb was plugged into his dreams. The 'v' of the elbow. I can put the one of Krishna next, the detail from the cheap, shiny, street stall poster, with his left arm raised, fingers moving up and down the bamboo of his flute, as he seduces maidens and wives and widows and dancers.

The letter from Surinder is on the table.

Dearest,

I must tell you again, you are my ornament, my life... and you know the rest. My soul aches for you and I am desperate to caress your body and make love to you.

I am a sad fish in this featureless sea. I am not Krishna to your Radha, for he is easily distracted by the delights of the gopis and I am devoted to you only.

At the same time, I am impersonating the good young Indian man, beautifully. Life goes along on its own pragmatic level, the one that I understand so well. Yes, I wear the day-to-day mask of the man who has accepted his fate, but I have been with you to that place where there is no other time, just the moment of joy.

Rachel, I know that I am breaking our pact by contacting you. I will not enumerate reasons why you should come back.

Darling, I love you with all of my being,

Surinder

I note the poetry of his words and the familiarity of the Roman script. The letter sits beside a copy of *Radhika Santwanam* on the table. Of course, I can't read the red Telugu characters on the cover, so I study Radha in her contorted, coy pose, fighting off the advances of beefy, garishly-blue Krishna. I flick through the volume. The page numbering of the introduction is in Roman numerals, spare spear shapes, perpendicular or forked, crossed, set at steep angles by centurions. I stand forlorn and stare. The Telugu characters of the text are more voluptuously curved than the Roman letters, whorls of hips, orbs of buttocks, scrolls of breasts, in neat rows of type, curved hooks, loops and curls. Coiled bodies, twisted limbs, unwinding around each other, splayed legs, concavity, sinuosity, tortuousness. Bangles, bracelets. *Ornaments.*

The live soundscape in the room changes. The crystalline magpie calls have melted away. Instead, crows caw from over the back. There are more of them around than last summer. They sit in the big gum tree diagonally across the lane. I have an image somewhere of crows on the sand in Goa, not far from the Terekhol Fort where Surinder and I perched behind the battlements for a few days and made love and war. Forget the crows, Rachel. It's a pathetically gratuitous link.

I click the button and glance at Surinder's charcoal drawing of me. No. Off. I will delete it from the slide show later, when I have the energy. There's a rectangle of light, no slide projected on my pale pink wall. The colour is aubergine according to the paint shop. An aubergine wall. Brinjal. Bitter juices seeping from the salted fruit. Click. The next slide. It is the word *ornament* in Telugu. Someone wrote it for me at the Secunderabad Railway Station when I waited for a train, just a few weeks ago. I copied it in big thick black text onto a card when I came home. I photographed it the other day, the squashed 'o' first, then the curlicues. Only one straight line. How do I know that I have made a good copy? Was the original from the man on the station more graceful? Have I distorted it in my sweeping black marks? Lost some of the nuances? There it is, big on the wall, *ornament*.

I roll up the blind. A tongue of sun licks the image on the wall and it fades in the glare of the Melbourne summer. The magpie sits on the TV aerial of the Greek widow's house next door. I lean across, press another button. A tanpura throbs and drones and Tata's plump singer mourns the absence of her beloved god, Krishna, the song that she sang for us at the Mayapuri. I pick up the letter again. Surinder loves me? He gave me gold ornaments when I left.

Surinder wants me for his ganika. Is there not a small pile of gold ornaments? The air ticket he sent me? Are there not blossoms of jasmine, thick with bees, outside my window? The woman sings the words of Muddupalani. I commissioned this lady to put them to music for me. I listen and practise my expressions, creating rasa, but for myself, just for myself. I will make my film. It is all here, in the veins and arteries, the vibrato, the whirring fluids and the shudderings, the nerve endings, the clitoris.

... *When I had the love of Krishna, then I was truly alive.*

* **end** *

Glossary *

Abhinaya	The art or expression in dance by which the performer can convey ideas and feelings by means of gestures, mime, facial expression and bodily movements.
Amma	Telugu term for 'mother'.
Ammama	Telugu term for 'grandmother'.
Amrit	Nectar of the gods. It has special importance in the Sikh religion. It is also a dessert made with mango in some parts of India.
Apsaras	A heavenly nymph, elegant and beautiful, proficient in the art of dancing.
Arangetram	The graduation performance of a Bharat Natyam dancer.
Bai	Literal meaning: lady. Often a suffix to a woman's name as a term of respect as, for example, Anaburnambai. It is also used to refer to the cleaning lady.
Bharat Natyam	Indian classical dance developed in the 20th century, based on the dances of the devadasis.
Bindi	Generally, a dot on the forehead worn as decoration by women.
Brindavan	The rural area where Krishna spent his boyhood and where his clan kept herds. It is on the banks of the Yamuna River.
Brinjal	Eggplant / aubergine.
Churidar	The loose trousers and tunic with a large scarf worn by women. Also known as 'salwar kameez' in North India.
Devadasi	A woman who was married to a deity. She gave service at a temple and was often an accomplished dancer. In the 18th century devadasis had a high social status but later, in times of colonial 'reform', their position decreased and they were widely considered as immoral prostitutes or victims of the society and of certain corrupt religious practices.
Dhobi	The men and women who take in washing as an occupation.
Dupata	The large scarf worn as part of the churidar outfit.

Fort George	Base of the East India Company, later Madras and now Chennai, capital of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu.
Ganika	A courtesan in 18th-century India. At that time her role and life were similar to those of a devadasi, but the ganika was not married to the god nor dedicated to the temple.
Gopi	Literal meaning: 'cow-herd' girl. This term is usually associated with the young women cow-herders who had a great love for Krishna. Radha was one of the gopis.
Gurdwara	A Sikh temple / place of worship.
Krishna	A Hindu god, incarnation of Lord Vishnu, renowned for his beauty and glamour and known as a consummate lover. He has been embraced by many devotees whose love is described as <i>bhakti</i> . Krishna is known by many other names, including Govinda and Jaganathan. He is often portrayed with a flute held up towards his mouth.
Lingam	A phallic-shaped symbol for worship of the god, representing the god Shiva.
Lunghi	A sarong.
Mandapam	The hall of a temple, often open-sided.
Pallu	The loose end of a sari that is draped diagonally across the torso and over the shoulder.
Pan	A snack made from ground (or thinly sliced) areca nuts (<i>supari</i>) wrapped up with spices in betel leaf. It has ritual significance in Hindu ceremonies and can be an offering to the gods in the temple. Part of a courtesan's training was to wrap the small leaves deftly into different shapes for her clients.
Pondicherry	A port, north of Tanjavur. It came under French rule in 1675 and vied with the British for control of Southern India in the 18th century.
Prabhanda	A suite of songs.
Radha	Krishna's lover, his <i>shakti</i> (female energy and counterpart). While illicit, their passion is an example of the highest and purest love.
Rasa	A term used in Indian aesthetics. It literally means juice or sap, essence or flavour, and denotes the strong emotional experience

derived from an aesthetic experience, such as dance. There are nine rasas, the main one being *sringara* or passionate love.

Rasika	One who experiences an art form as a viewer or reader and enjoys the rasa, the aesthetic emotion of the work. The rasika is an active participant in the flow of feeling between artist and viewer/reader.
Sangeet	Music, usually singing with musical accompaniment.
Sati	A funeral custom in which a widow would be immolated on her husband's funeral pyre.
Tanpura	A long-necked Indian lute which, when plucked, emits a droning sound.
Veena	A stringed instrument with a central shaft that holds two gourd resonators. It is held diagonally across the body.
Yoni	From the Sanskrit meaning 'divine passage', 'sacred temple', 'womb'. Associated with the goddess Shakti. It also means 'vagina'.
Zenana	The women's part of a household.

* These explanations are an approximate guide to the meanings of Indian terms, many of which are layered with complex cultural resonances.

Surinder's family

Surinder Siddhu: the adopted son of a North Indian Sikh family.

Jaganathan Ranga Pillai: Hindu uncle of Surinder; husband of Kamala. Married outside his religion. Owner of the house, Brindavan, on the Kaveri River near the city of Tanjavur in Tamil country. The Ranga Pillais are land-owning families originally from Telugu country to the north.

Kamala Ranga Pillai (née Siddhu): Surinder's Sikh aunt, born in North India, sister of his adoptive father.

Saraswati: only daughter of Jaganathan and Kamala.

Mr GV Rajagopal Pillai: Jaganathan's uncle (his father's brother)

Surinder's adoptive grandfather; estranged father of Kamala, who lives in North India.

Characters in 18th-century Tanjavur

Muddupalani (1730 – 1790) was a courtesan/ganika, born into the Potti Botti family, a prominent matriarchal house of musician/dancer/poet courtesans in the kingdom of Tanjavur, active in temple and court affairs.

Pratapasimha reigned as king of Tanjavur from 1739 to 1763. He was a prolific playwright and fiscally irresponsible. As a result of the forces of colonialism and his mismanagement, during his reign Tanjavur lost its status as a rich and cultured principality in South India.

Anaburnabai was Pratapasimha's mother.

General Manoji served Pratapasimha as leader of his army and advisor, fighting and making treaties with the English, French and the local Muslim kingdoms.

Dupleix was Governor-General of Pondicherry from 1742 to 1754. He was in constant conflict with the British as he negotiated with kingdoms in an attempt to subjugate South India.

M. Duquesne was an envoy to Tanjavur, acting for the Governor of Pondicherry. He is mentioned in Anantarankam, P., Price, J.F. & Dodwell, H.H. 1904, *The private diary of Ananda Ranga Pillai, dubash to Joseph Francois Dupleix, Governor of Pondichery* [sic]: a record of matters political, historical, social, and personal, from 1736 to 1761, Superintendent Govt. Press, Madras.

Other characters in the novel are fictional.

*My ornament:
writing women's moving, erotic bodies
across time and space*
A novel and exegesis

Volume 2: The Exegesis

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A Research Thesis in two volumes submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements
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Introduction

The title of my novel, *My ornament*, has a strong metaphoric function, both in the fiction and in the exegetical reflections. It encompasses the emotional resonances of the writing and encapsulates a number of discursive issues that arise in the text. It is a motif deployed to choreograph the shifts in subjectivity and agency for the women characters—for Rachel and for Muddupalani—across time and space, on the sensuous surfaces of Indian texts, in particular Muddupalani’s *Radhika santwanam*.¹

The experiential base of the novel is drawn from a number of trips to India, as well as two periods of living in a provincial city South of Mumbai, in the state of Maharashtra, for several months at a time. I lived in a sexual relationship with a North-Indian man (B.G.), wearing *salwar kameez*²—the baggy pants, tunic and large scarf—at his suggestion. I mixed only with Indian people, mainly the middle class speakers of English, intellectuals, feminist activists, writers. I communicated in my inadequate Marathi,³ the vocal attempts often accompanied by extravagant gestures and body language, as I interacted with the local shop-keepers, the cleaning lady, the dhobi who ironed my dresses, while pondering on the complex layering of Indian daily life.

B.G. and I lived as an autonomous couple in a miniscule gap, surrounded by the tight local web of family duties that friends and acquaintances were engaged in: we dwelt outside of the ‘familial-conjugal enterprise of domestication’ as Hélène Cixous would say, in her ground-breaking essay, ‘The laugh of the Medusa’ (p.290). For me, social life was limited and there were few public places in the early 1990s where a foreign woman could acceptably go alone without a clear purpose. To make sense of the extraordinarily different life experience, to increase my imaginative space and, as a writer, to connect it with artists in my host culture, I undertook some preliminary research on women artists of Maharashtra. This gave me a framework in which to meet dancers, musicians, writers, film-makers—mainly feminist—and a bona fide reason to use the local university library. It also enabled me to ask the question that has always interested me: how does a woman nurture her creativity, in particular, her writing? What are the factors that foster or inhibit it? How might the

¹ I consider the motif, *ornament*, in Chapter one.

² Salwar kameez are termed ‘churidars’ in Tamil Nadu, the setting of the novel.

³ The language of Maharashtra.

experiences of these Indian women artists differ from my own? I did not know at the time that these reflections would be the basis of a novel.

I travelled around the state, in this space that I had made for myself, in an otherwise potentially intense and claustrophobic situation. While there was an atmosphere of love and care in my life at the time, there was not much leeway for the individuality of a mature, single Australian woman in the Indian setting. Personal boundaries tended to melt or become rigid structures, with confused readings of cultural/gender sensitivities and reactions, generating tensions that can come with the patriarchal construction as well as 'regulation of bodies and space in this contested area' (Ahmed in Eagleton 2003, p. 248). These experiences and reflections were mixed with my sensitivity to the fact that I was a guest in a cultural space, with a constantly shifting awareness of my own colonial and post-colonial failings. Ahmed, a feminist theorist interested in transcultural issues, recognises the 'complex locations of Western women as they rewrite and participate in colonial discourses' (p. 248). At the time, given the overwhelming totality of the world in which I lived as a stranger, I did not give much thought to *my* effect on the space and place that I inhabited in India. And I was not at all sure who *I* was. During these months, the woman in the salwar kameez was different from the one who wore a sari for gala occasions, or the wearer of long, loose dresses in the house during the heat of the afternoon. (These women were different again from the one who wore jeans or skirts in Australia.) Then there was the reading and writing woman, the one who became involved in a Mumbai feminist organisation⁴ who, as a devotee of performance, sat transfixed in theatres for all the classical dance and music programs available in a provincial city. There was also the Australian woman with the Indian lover in the small, uncharted space of the erotic/exotic in the heat, dust and noise of the material world.

Accordingly, I developed an understanding of the different 'I's who existed and who manifested at different times and places. The public 'I' was demure, following social cues, taking up little space in the street, painfully aware, especially in

⁴ I spent many hours on the train to Mumbai and travelling with members of Stree Mukti Sanghatana (Women's Liberation Organisation), watching their play *Mulgi Zali Ho (A Girl is Born)* performed in slums, villages and universities. I interviewed the playwright Jyoti Mhapsekar. Later, I organised (accommodation and food among friends, as well as contacts) for twelve of the members to perform the play at the International Women Playwright's Conference in Adelaide 1994. I was made an honorary life member for services to the organisation.

the first few months, of the constant presence of the gaze.⁵ Then, there was the transitional ‘I’ who changed out of the churidar and into jeans and a tee shirt in the women’s toilets at the halfway mark, the inbetween space of Singapore or Bangkok airport, on the flights back to Melbourne.

As I strode around the Antipodes, I speculated on the different ‘I’s of the Indian women I met. The ones who entered my sphere, the wives who stayed at home, the working/family women, a continuum across class and caste. I encountered almost no single women. What was the nature of their becoming? How did it intersect with my developing subjectivity (a single woman, with her lover, her own money, away from her family, not engaged in a clearly defined career, easily apprehended by the interested Indian observer)? This raised myriad questions for me about the role of agency,⁶ of the self and the other, in particular relating to my experience of the erotic *writing woman*. In India/Australia/India, she kept a diary of her project of becoming, recording the vivid moments, as well as fictionalising them—short stories based on Indian life.⁷ She drew on a fund of reading—having a window on the present world (*The Times of India* delivered); taking an auto-rickshaw to the university library to devour Indian history, social science, poetry, fiction, aesthetics, the arts.

I decided that I wanted to write an Australian erotic novel set in India, with an Australian protagonist, a literary work that was not an *Oz Kama Sutra*. A friend recommended reading for me, beginning with the women mystic saints. I began with *The Songs of Mirabai*, by the late 15th-century North Indian Hindu saint who not only wrote ecstatic poetry about her god but left her Rajasthani royal husband and home to follow Krishna, showing herself in public—dancing ecstatically in temples in her devotion to him. I was struck by the sensuous verse, the summoning of images of the god as a lover, divine, but earthly as well. I speculated on the connection between the erotic and the spiritual, the way it was expressed by women from different cultures. My Irish Catholic experience of the divine was hardly erotic, and the feminist activists I met in India, rather than indulging in time-consuming Krishna-inspired raptures, were focused on their professions, voluntary political work for social change, plodding up the stairs at 10pm to reach home and cook chapattis for their mother-in-

⁵ Mulvey (1974) first used the term for the act of looking at other (particularly women’s) bodies as erotic objects.

⁶ Anzaldúa advocates new notions of ‘agency’ that move from ‘victimhood’ to a higher level, that question what we’re doing to each other, to those in different countries, and to the earth’s environment, that acknowledge relationship and motivate us to act collaboratively (Anzaldúa & Keating 2002, p. 2).

⁷ Gillespie (1995, 1996, 1998).

law. This text led to further reading and the recognition of Krishna as a potent male mythic presence. Back in Australia, I read *Syncope: the philosophy of rapture* in which Catherine Clément connects East and West in the space of syncopation. Holding the breath before the beat in music, suspended after orgasm, the subject attempts to escape, from time, but also ‘from a part of itself that denies access to intimacy’, stuck in its ‘unbearable collection of *belongings to*’ in time and space (Clément 1994, p. 251). The notion of this liminal zone resonated strongly with my experiences, reflections and fictions.

I began to write, assuming that I would immediately conjure up the main protagonist, Rachel, a contemporary erotic writing woman.⁸ But the first image that drifted in and out of my consciousness was a woman alone and having a nervous breakdown in a bleak palace on a great river. It was not Rachel, but Muddupalani (1730–1790), whom I had met for the first time in the pages of *Women Writing in India: 1600 BC to the present* (Lalita & Tharu, 1991). The Prologue to volume one contains an account of this 18th-century historical figure, poet, courtesan and dancer—who wrote the erotic epic, *Radhika santwanam*. Lalita and Tharu present Muddupalani as a feminist icon of Indian womanhood. Not only is there a strong sense of agency in her story, but she is transgressive in her textual portrayal of the erotic woman, Radha (Krishna’s lover), from the woman’s point of view.

As I continued to write, Muddupalani developed her own strong voice. I became anxious and wondered if Rachel would be audible. After all, she was to be the lynchpin framing the narrative, as well as being a vehicle for exploring many of the author’s issues and questions about the lives of both an Australian and an Indian woman. Muddupalani did take over for a while, but Rachel’s voice gained in timbre and volume as I wove it together with that of her 18th-century ‘counterpart’. Concurrently, Radha became a textual presence, as the main protagonist in *Radhika santwanam* but also as an element in the inter-subjectivity of the women. Their voices blurred at times, particularly in the transitions from one world to the next, as I matched similar motifs in their lives. In writing the three women, losing and finding themselves through their erotic bodies and their art, I realised that Rachel, by the end

⁸ I was Asialink Writer in Residence in Malaysia in 2000. I stayed at Rimbun Dahan to write the first draft of *My ornament*.

of the narrative, was more like a *ganika*⁹ while Muddupalani was more like a modern writing woman.

Positionality and methodology

As a feminist I advocate and work, in bursts, for women and feminist issues.¹⁰ As a writer, I have a further commitment to creating women characters and placing them at the centre of literary-critical discourses, as part of a wider political process. As a researcher, I acknowledge the difficulties of ‘maintaining the links between knowledge and action’ (Ahmed in Eagleton 2003, p. 237). I also recognise the ontological centrality of the embodied, social existence of gender as a basis for a feminist epistemology, as well as the belief that grounded research and creative production can contribute to the increasing emancipation of women globally. Theorists such as Grewal and Caplan (1994) advocate transcultural feminist reading and writing practices from around the world, avoiding essentialising the term ‘woman’, in:

feminist work that attends to issues of class, caste, and sexuality (that) interrupts... binarism, working against the hegemonic formations that occur within both sides. (Grewal 1996, p. 13)

As a Celtic-Australian woman born into a settler society, I am conscious of the complex intersections of identity and locations from which I speak and write, as well as their contradictions. I am also conscious of the temptations of many white Western feminists to universalise women’s experience¹¹, despite disparities in the material existence and agency of women. And while there are rich discourses of identity politics and assertions of difference, I am interested in pursuing commonalities and areas of resistance across cultures, in this time of globalised capitalism and a dominant patriarchal discourse of US hegemony and transnational and national

⁹ Ganika: a dancer/courtesan in 18th-century India. At that time, her role and life was similar to that of a *devadasi*, but the ganika was not married to the god nor dedicated to the temple.

¹⁰ I have worked in women’s health and education, including Women’s Health Victoria, BreastScreen and the Cancer Council. In 1999 I was the writing facilitator for the multi-media Warrior Women project, that resulted in an exhibition that toured Victoria. I facilitated the writing projects *Inspirational Women* and *Heartsongs in the Key of C*, also for women with breast cancer. See Gillespie, Moloney & Fry (2006).

¹¹ ‘Feminist work has collided with work on ‘race’/ethnicity and racism, a collision that is now fairly well documented (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Amos and Parmar 1984; duCille 1994; Mirza 1997; Bhavnani 2001)...It was only when women of colour challenged...hierarchies of power within feminism (and) its universal claims...that the...complacency in the women’s liberation movement was disturbed’ (Bhavnani, K and Coulson, M, in Eagleton 2003, pp 73 – 74.)

religious fundamentalist movements. I consider that it is crucial for women to make spaces of connection. My mode of exploration of such commonalities is fiction.

To explore connection and to begin my research, I needed in particular to find out about Muddupalani, a woman very different from me; to study her, not just as a historical figure but also as a textual and cultural presence. I knew from Lalita and Tharu that Muddupalani was a controversial figure when her epic poem, *Radhika santwanam*, was considered obscene and banned by patriarchal/colonial forces in the 20th century. She was rehabilitated by a member of her community, Bangalore Nagaratnamma, who 'wrote back' against the empire, editing a new version of *Radhika santwanam*, with an Introduction that was a powerful statement of advocacy for the artistic and moral reputation of the dancer and her community (Nagaratnamma, 1910). This action, standing up to famous male critics of the time, was a key factor in developing a discourse of South Indian woman as writer/dancer/agent, built upon by later work, for example, Lalita and Tharu's *Women writing in India* (1991).

Such writing women challenge the severe limitations of numerous cultural/textual constructions of South Asian woman. Many contemporary feminists deplore 'Brahminic cultural fictions' that posited a perfect (Aryan) Hindu woman who was above all chaste, faithful, passive and self-abnegating so that an

asexual glorification of women limited them to socially-confined roles whose boundaries were fixed and well-defined, eliminating the possibilities of transgression or cultural errance. (Mehta 2004, p. 544)¹²

Mehta goes further, homing in on the Indian class and caste system as they affect South Indian women, specifically:

Discriminatory practices based on skin colouring and the... cultural inferiority of non-Aryan social systems depicted [Tamil and Telugu people] as cultural anomalies who were less Indian and therefore, less Hindu than the fair-skinned northerners. (p. 542)

Accordingly, Muddupalani as a textual figure introduces a bold challenge to static and repressive notions of Indian 'woman'. She was a Telugu-speaker living in Tamil country, born into the 'low' *sudra* caste. As an artist and courtesan, she was also a stellar figure in the kingdom of Tanjavur, inhabiting complex and contradictory sites

¹² Mehta discusses the situation of Indo-Caribbean women in British Guiana (Tamil and Telugu); it is clear from the paper that her remarks are relevant to women on the sub-continent.

of performance. How, I wondered, could this dancing/writing woman demonstrate her subjectivity and agency in an Australian novel?¹³

In 2000, when I undertook my first field trip to India to learn about Muddupalani, I met K. Lalita, editor of *Women writing in India*, who provided me with invaluable contacts for my project. I located and interviewed feminists, intellectuals, dancers, historians, Telugu academics and two elderly devadasi ladies. I sourced material dealing with aesthetics and the history of Tamil country, specifically literary/cultural analyses of 18th-century Tanjavur; texts about Indian dance, music and drama; and historical and contemporary studies related to devadasis.¹⁴

The only extant work by Muddupalani is *Radhika santwanam*. Telugu and English speakers could not point me to other primary sources directly relating to her, so I had to piece her life together. I arranged for translation of the text into English and waited expectantly in Chennai for each instalment to see what I could learn and to wonder: what is there in Muddupalani's writing to excite the controversy and later rehabilitation of Muddupalani as an erotic writing woman?¹⁵ Despite (or because of) the paucity of material available, I had no intention of making Muddupalani only an intertext for Rachel's film. I had the need and the latitude to imagine her as a full-blown character.

In writing a novel about a Telugu-speaking Indian woman of the 18th century, this Celtic-Australian found that the post-colonial problematics did not just go away. Such an attempt certainly requires imagination. I find Gayatri Spivak's comments on reading and understanding world literatures useful in this context. The process, says Spivak, does not involve the activity of 'learning about cultures.'

Rather, you need to be imagining yourself, really letting yourself be imagined (experience that impossibility) without guarantees, by and in another culture, perhaps. (Spivak 2003, p. 52)

This imagining and being imagined is a key process in *My ornament*, with the contemporary character, Rachel, not only imagining Muddupalani, but also imagining herself in an Indian location. Radha is a vivid presence in Muddupalani's imagination, her role model, shaping her identity as an erotic writing woman. In addition,

¹³ While there is often a blanket of religious correctness surrounding cultural productions in India (for example, the banning of Deepa Mehta's 2003 film, *Water*), there is robust debate about women and agency. An example is Gairola, 2001.

¹⁴ See footnote 46 for details of field work. Some valuable texts related to devadasis/ganikas include: Marglin (1980); Meduri (1996); Kersenboom-Story (1987); Ramanujan and Shulman (1994); Srinivasan (1985 & 1988); Soneji (2004). See Works Cited for further references.

¹⁵ Mrs Sarojini Premchand, a Chennai poet who writes in Telugu and English, translated fragments of *Radhika santwanam*, in consultation with Emeritus Professor Chekuree Rama Rao, Hyderabad.

Muddupalani breaks out from an Australian imagination at the Summer Palace as she imagines Rachel. In this liminal fictive space, the characters are letting themselves ‘be imagined’, seeking a space in South Indian feminist writing discourse. And the author of *My ornament* knows, like Spivak, that there are absolutely no guarantees.

This exegesis

In the exegesis I attempt to engage in an ‘erotics of thinking’—within the framework of creative writing discourse from a feminist perspective—to make multiple connections among the discursive, political and aesthetic issues raised by the thesis novel. In the process I draw on discourses of transnational feminism, cultural nomadism, *écriture féminine*, and of the heterosexual erotic, as well as dance and planetarity.

‘Erotics of thinking’ are ‘affective connections’ in one’s engagement with texts, according to Rosi Braidotti, in her *Metamorphoses: towards a materialist theory of becoming* (2002). Such thinking may achieve ‘the unity of the aesthetic with the cognitive and their joint contribution to an ethics of empowerment’ (Braidotti 2002, p. 95). In outlining this ‘erotic imaginary’, she points to:

a nomadic, fluid notion of thinking that bridged the constitutive gap between mind and body, reason and imagination, being and becoming. (2002, p. 106)

In this fluid space there is room to move in the thesis for a fictive and exegetical consideration of the nomadic subject in process which bridges the gap in regard to political will as well as desire that is not necessarily conscious. This is a zone inhabited by Braidotti’s ‘becoming woman’ (2002, p. 97), a notion congruent with *écriture féminine*.

As a reading and a writing woman, I have been variously influenced in my research and fiction by Francophone women’s literature, and my project is in the spirit of Hélène Cixous’s oeuvre as she explores ‘the relations between women, femininity, feminism and the production of texts’ (Moi 1985, p. 102). In my discussion of the subject in process, I shall refer frequently to ‘The laugh of the Medusa’, which advocates:

writing that inscribes femininity as woman, embodied, speaks out. She must ‘write her self’, creating an ‘insurgent’ writing that takes a woman back to her body. In the process, as she speaks, she bursts into history. (1983, pp. 282–4)

As the textual figure, Muddupalani bursts into my imagination. She locates herself in my Western consciousness, making a further leap from South Indian to transnational contemporary discourses. In writing her and launching three women on an intercultural trajectory through time and space, this project requires a firm grounding in transnational feminism. Like Inderpal Grewal, I want to avoid essentialised binaries between Western women and women in ‘Third World’ countries. And I concur with Grewal’s advocacy of an increase in the ‘focus on the multiplicity of discursive practices utilized by women’ (Grewal 1996, p. 12), in a recognition that information flow, reading and writing practices in transnational cultural production and reception are produced in diverse locations and are not all one way: Muddupalani and Radha have much to teach Rachel and the author. Accordingly, *My ornament* is an attempt, in the words of Gayatri Spivak, ‘to write the self at its othermost’ (2003, p. 91).

Summary of chapters

The five chapters of the exegesis are a synthesis of the key issues that arise from (or that have informed) the writing of the novel *My ornament*. Chapter one considers the motif *ornament* as it illuminates issues of women’s dancing sexual bodies in the novel. Chapter two outlines ways in which *My ornament* writes the body, particularly in relation to *écriture féminine*. Chapter three problematises the heterosexual erotic and women’s agency in *My ornament*. Chapter four writes the moving body, finding feminist and queer spaces inhabited by a cast of writers and dancers, in which fictive women can choreograph, perform and improvise their subjectivities. Chapter five charts the time/space trajectory of the Australian feminist writer mapping women’s desire across and inbetween centuries and hemispheres and depicting an 18th-century Indian woman dancer who is an historical figure.

A key link—or a gem—in the chain is the notion of *ornament*, both South Indian and Western, which is taken up in Chapter one.

Chapter one. *Ornament as motif*

In the novel, the motif of ‘ornament’ illuminates notions of women’s dancing sexual bodies, translating across time and space. As Rachel and Muddupalani’s relationships with each other—and with their lovers—develop, new meanings of the term emerge and shift from Western to the richer South Indian connotations in the shared resonances of the intersubjectivities-in-process.

The Macquarie Dictionary (1997) defines ‘ornament’ as ‘an accessory, or detail, used to beautify the appearance or general effect. A person who is an “ornament” adds lustre as to surroundings, society etc.’ She is a decoration, an item that celebrates excess. She may be a plaster statue. Her likeness may rest on a shelf, a decorative detail in the scheme of some larger design. As an ornament, she may be one of a mass-produced run of women who are all the same, with no meaning beyond herself who, over time, might at best develop sentimental value for the owner. As ornament, she does not have the power of an idol to be adored or of a sculpture, an object of art that has cultural and market value.

These impressions of ‘ornament’, in relation to women¹⁶, exist on the first level of recognition in a Western cultural reading of the title of the novel, *My ornament*. They problematise the shifting balance of equality and inequality in relationships; raise issues of subjectivity and agency; the gaze; and the translation of an ‘other’ into an object whose value can be easily assessed and dismissed. All of these reverberations resonate in the material lives of the women characters. While Rachel and Muddupalani are sometimes ‘ornaments’ in the Western sense, they are often transformed by this motif in the multiple meanings of Indian poetics. In writing *Radhika santwanam*, Muddupalani follows the same traditional structure as the *Gitagovinda*, an earlier and more influential Radha/Krishna erotic poem in which the poet Jayadeva begins the narrative with the recognition of desire, moves through stages of separation and yearning and then to the final consummation. (To some

¹⁶ It could be argued that both Surinder, and indeed Krishna, are ornaments in the same way. However, in this chapter, I have concentrated on the issue of women as ornament, in an attempt to unfix the traditional patriarchal ‘individual (bourgeois white male) subject of Western humanism whose centrality had elided questions of class, gender and racial differences.’ Sunder Rajan, p. 10. See p. 36 of the exegesis for a discussion of the issue of the objectified Asian man, in relation to the character of Surinder.

degree, the thesis novel follows these stages as well.) ‘Ornament’ is a key motif in these texts. When Jayadeva’s Krishna has strayed from Radha and wants to return to her, he acknowledges her preciousness as he begs:

You are my ornament, my life,
My jewel in the sea of existence.
Be yielding to me forever,
My heart fervently pleads! (p. 112)

In Radha/Krishna poems, the characters are always covered in gold and precious stones. The lovers, both the man and woman, ornament themselves and each other, with garlands and jewellery, in sensuous, poetic images of mouths, shining bees, glowing faces, fragrant flowers, curved flesh, so that the woman is cherished, desired, divine, powerful, an ornament. In the process, Radha achieves the status of the divine by the very nature of the erotic rapture that exists in the embodied sexual connection that she enjoys with her lover, a relationship that is mutually dependent and giving.¹⁷ In *My ornament*, too, the women are precious gems, as the adornments of the male characters, but there are further complexities. Seven-year-old Muddupalani is being prepared by Ammama, the grandmother, for her first appearance before the King at the Big Temple. Ammama tells her:

‘The King must see you unadorned. The sweetness of your young body needs nothing.’
Ammama bent lower to attach the strand of white jasmine to the girl’s coiled plait and the scents of her oiled smooth breasts oozed into the air.
‘In time, kings and princes will bedeck you with rich ornaments. These will cover you, even when you are otherwise naked.’ She laughed as she held the girl’s chin in her hand and her heavy gold bangles clunked together down her fore arm. (p. 36)

Jewellery will be the mark of this girl’s success. From the time of her professional debut, six years after this scene, Muddupalani uses ornaments as a tool and a means of assessing and displaying her public and private power. When she adorns herself in spectacular silver jewellery (and little else) she is donning armour, assembling her weapons against a threat, the new talent—the moonbeam girl—whom she fears will be her successor. When the King is dead, the great tangled ball of ornaments is the token of the right to mourn at his side. The new girl’s mother has claimed both. When Muddupalani arrives:

¹⁷ Radha is often regarded the female side of Krishna. Shakti (the wife of Shiva) is the supreme creative power of the Absolute Being, a dynamic part of the Hindu cosmology. Shakti is a philosophy and practice of women’s power, particularly in South India.

The girl climbs off the couch, walks across the chamber and hands me the tangle of gold as big as a melon. ‘These are yours. He would have given them to you, his Radha,’ she says. I drop the clump on the floor beside the bed and brooches, earrings and anklets clank and jangle on the stone. And I leave the room, a hand on my breast to still my burning heart. (p. 36)

It is Muddupalani who is represented by the great gold chunk of gems, chains, pendants and loops—the riches of the King, his ‘life in the sea of existence’—as she takes the first step to go away, leaving the matted clump behind, and fall apart at her home in the dancers’ street, and then more completely at the Summer Palace, where she will be stripped of her ornaments. Similarly, Rachel’s relationship with ornaments parallels the shifts in agency in her relationship with Surinder, but her trajectory is different. She succumbs to his urging her to be pierced to wear his silver jewellery, then goes further in piercing other parts of her body (under her own volition). This raises complex issues of feminism in relation to body politics and ornamentation, which would suggest to some theorists masochistic submission to a patriarchal norm of beautification and a giving in to a lover’s wishes, against her own feelings.

Almost at the end of the novel, Surinder’s gift raises power issues. Sending the gold bangle with the lavish one thousand rupees for a taxi is an overt act in his modelling of her into his 20th-century courtesan—transforming her into a ganika, a dancer for the gods. She is a figure who must be garlanded, adorned, adored. She is his Radha, his Muddupalani, who dreams of bees and honey and is worshipped by him. In the realm of the trope, ‘ornament’, she has the capacity to turn him into a god. But finally she rejects the transaction, takes off her ornaments, changes into her jeans and leaves for the airport.

Muddupalani provides three further dimensions to the term ‘ornament’ in *Radhika santwanam*, which are firmly located in the richly erotic tradition of Sanskrit and Telugu courtesan poetry. The first refers to embodiment and character traits as ornaments. Following tradition, in her opening stanzas the poet enumerates her outstanding qualities—a face that glows like the moon, conversational skills, compassionate eyes, generosity:

These are the ornaments
that adorn Palani,
when she is praised by kings. (Lalita & Tharu 1991, p. 117)

So here, and in other Indian lyrical court poetry, character traits are surface, bodily phenomena, in the same list of ornaments as a beautiful face, worn by the individual

like ornate clothing or jewellery. Accordingly, character development is then an increase in one's 'ornaments'.

More broadly, embodied woman as ornament in Sanskrit and archaic Telugu poetry is a means of defining and explaining traditional Indian poetics, as well as being a trope within the texts themselves. Hijjas, in *Ornamented bodies*, uses the Sanskrit term *alamkara* in her discussion of women's Sanskrit court poetry (1999, p. 87). 'Alamkara' means both jewellery worn by people and figures worn by poems. This theory was originally proposed by the 9th-century CE Sanskrit literary critic Anandavardhana. He writes about both literal and implied meaning (*dhvani*), suggesting that the body parts of the woman are like the surface meanings of the poem—the individual characteristics, or gems—while the sum of the parts is the indefinable quality, intuited by the reader, the charm (of a woman), the metaphor for *dhvani*, that makes up the whole. This latter element of poetry is not paraphrasable (Anandavardhana, Abhinavagupta & Ingalls 1990). Alamkara is a range of poetic devices and rhetorical figures from alliteration to metaphor. So what makes the text beautiful is 'woman' and the definable textual specifics of the poem, her ornaments.

The third element is the poetic convention of using a woman's body as a symbol for the beauties of nature, descriptions of landscape and vegetation, a combination of woman/ornament/poetry/natural world. The discussion of 'ornament' in Sanskrit and Telugu literatures suggests that these meanings are complex, not just for the callow Westerner but also for Indian readers. Hijjas notes that Sanskrit poetry assumes the reader will do a lot of work. The same could be said for Telugu, particularly in translation. These literary conventions—the nexus between ornament/woman's body/poetry/beauty—are confidently followed by courtesans such as Muddupalani in their poetry, as well as by male poets in South Indian court life.¹⁸

Muddupalani and Rachel, as women artists, subvert and extend the resonance of alamkara/ornament. They are not just the subject of nor the *form* of a poem; rather, they are creating their own work, extending their agency, claiming the qualities that are their ornaments—their sensibilities, their sensuality, in their dance and their making of erotic text. In so doing, the women inhabit the textual space. They are not merely fleshed out in a poem, but by creating their own embodied filmic or poetic expression they develop a voice and celebrate woman's erotic bodies from the

¹⁸ Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam (1992) mention examples: 'women such as Rangajamma and Ramabhadramba' (p. 53).

desiring woman's point of view. As Cixous says, in her (woman's) speech and writing, the profound and moving element is 'the song; first music from the first voice of woman which is alive in every woman' (1983, p. 285). Muddupalani is a writer, a scholar, a singer, a dancer, aware of woman's song, woman's voice. When she begins writing *Radhika santwanam*, with the King in attendance, he encourages her, with royal largesse:

‘Well,’ says My Lord. ‘Your work will be widely read when it is completed.’

I turn to him. ‘No,’ I say. ‘I do not wish to be merely read; rather my verse must become ornaments for the throats of the learned. (p 87)

Muddupalani has a larger vision for the text that she is beginning to create. It has a physicality. It will be like jewels lodged in the body, precious text that can spill, overflow, from the mouths of those who read and speak it. Women at the end of the second millennium write the body, in the same spirit:

proclaiming it so that other women can relate to the experiences and say: I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard of songs. (Cixous 1983, p. 280)

The term ‘ornament’ echoes the French feminist notion of *jouissance in écriture feminine*, but it is even more multi-faceted—closely associated, I would suggest, with the Indian aesthetic of *rasa*. According to Barbara Stoler Miller, the translator of Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda*, ‘*rasa* is at the heart of all Indian artistic expression. *Rasa* is literally the taste or flavor of something’ (Miller 1977, p. 14). It is the sap or juice of a plant, but in traditional Indian aesthetics it is the feeling, the relish, the heightened aesthetic rapture that flows between the musician or dancer and the *rasika*, the viewer, the listener. Its power was realised and expressed by Sanskrit poets and critics, so that not only is *rasa* available as a rapturous feeling, but it was also an organising principle, in the same way as *dhvani* (implied meaning) and *alamkara* (ornament) in Indian poetics. There are multiple connections within this aesthetic framework. Poems such as Jayadeva's and Muddupalani's would have been sung and danced according to the Carnatic system of classical music, in these explorations of the ‘aesthetic potential of sexual passion’ (p. xi). Erotic sentiment (*sringara*) is the ultimate *rasa*, the expression that a dancer such as Muddupalani must learn:

We were progressing with our lessons in *abhinaya* in our dance classes, learning to change the expressions on our faces like beautiful masks. So we were becoming better at pretending to be fascinated when our teachers droned on. (p 165)

Sringara was the emotion that overwhelmed Radha and the gopis of Hindu mythology, as they felt and acted upon the urge to leave their husbands' beds, their

domestic and other work to go to Krishna, dance rapturously and couple with him simultaneously, each one thinking that she was the only one. Sringara is uncontained, beyond the law, where passion is paramount. In rewriting desire, the erotic body and connection in *My ornament*, rasa opens a space for transcultural aesthetic correspondence, offering a notion of the intersubjectivity of dancing bodies that resonates with the French feminist notion of jouissance in *écriture féminine*—rasa, the sap that runs in the *jouissant* inbetween.¹⁹

‘Ornament’ expands traditional Western frames and opens the gap for an exploration of new economies of desire. For the woman maker of text, her ornaments are her strong character traits, her embodied beauty, enshrined in text of her own making. Significantly, both Rachel and Muddupalani leave their jewellery, their precious stones, behind, replacing them with fluctuations and tensions in their agency, as they make more creative space for themselves, each choreographing and performing her newly ornamented character in a metaphoric staging of *woman*, across space and time.

¹⁹ Note: this point will be developed further in Chapter four.

Chapter two. How does *My ornament* write the body?

In the previous chapter I discussed woman as ornament in my novel, attempting to expand Western notions of this trope by locating it in an Indian aesthetic context. Chapter two concentrates on my creative process and the feminist poetics of writing woman's body, with particular reference to *écriture féminine*.

During the early stages of drafting the novel, I was drawn to the lush theorising of Hélène Cixous, for example in 'The laugh of the Medusa', and her extravagant assertions of the embodied writing woman resonated with me as I discovered the characters of Rachel, Muddupalani and Radha. The first fragment I wrote for the novel—the scene in which Muddupalani 'falls apart' at the Summer Palace—shows a 'mad' woman, immobile, exhausted, dishevelled, unmasked, dissolving. In retrospect, it was not an optimistic beginning for a work that deals with women's agency. In the scene, at first Muddupalani is passive:

I lie on the bed and shiver, even though the rains have barely begun. My skin is brittle like the brown shell of an egg. If I move even one muscle, the shell will break and the inside will splatter to the ground, the rotten yolk breaking in the white and spreading fetid yellow brown across the slime. (p 122)

In the first draft of this scene, I had Kannan, Muddupalani's companion and servant, taking a strong part in her mistress's recovery, drawing on her experience of women's 'falling apart' and pulling themselves together, encouraging Muddupalani into a trance, in which she laughs, dances around, physically abandoned. This idea came not from a Western feminist study of Freudian hysteria but from an Indian source, an ethnographic study of Mukkuvar women who lived in a mainly Catholic South Indian fishing village (Ram 1991). I was fascinated by a 'syndrome' described in the study, in which women were 'possessed'. They participated in a healing ritual, in a safe space. Here, a woman faith healer helped them to drive out a demon, calling on the Virgin to save them as they screamed and threw their bodies around, until they had reached some resolution. As an Australian woman, I found it interesting that in such South Indian communities there was a socially recognised way for women to deal with mental/emotional crisis.²⁰

²⁰ There were strong connections in these rituals with some traditional practices of non-Brahminic, South Indian Hindu women. I am unaware of Western ways of dealing with mental illness in such a way, with women supporting each other so strongly in a community setting.

In later drafts of Muddupalani falling apart, I kept Kannan's confident handling of the situation of passivity and the breakthrough to action, but instead of the Catholic servant orchestrating her traditional ritual, I had Muddupalani devise her own. When she sees herself in the mirror and realises that she is bleeding, she paints her body with menstrual blood:

A drip falls on the skimpy dance sari. I catch the next drop on my finger and inscribe a circle around my left breast. I dip again and decorate the other breast. I draw a line from the circle to the nipple, paint it cherry red with my thumb and forefinger. It becomes hard like a seed pod. I pinch colour onto the other one and shiver. I rise up to vertical, and continue my painting, my stylus keeping pace with the supply of pigment between my legs. (p125)

It was not until much later that I could see that the scene I had written resonated with a feminist trope—the abject body—characteristic of *écriture féminine*. According to Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*, the abject refers to the human reaction (shit, vomit, body seepage) a place where:

identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject. (Kristeva 1982, p. 207)

While Muddupalani is a relatively emancipated female subject, elevated in Tanjavur society, her life has been a constant interactive *relating*, as she struggles to hold up the King, the incarnation of Krishna, trying to stave off his disintegration and the fall of the state:

I will hold the dark forces at bay, at least for a little longer, for I am Muddupalani and the King had asked for his Radha. (p 117)

In her exhaustion, there is no time and energy for being an independent writing woman. As a 'becoming woman', she must eventually 'attempt to disconnect her sense of being from the patriarchal logos' (Cavareros in Braidotti 2002, p. 164), but there is power inherent in this matrix of abjection. Kristeva asserts that the socially perceived danger of the 'polluting' menstrual fluid has its origins in the perception of blood as an 'uncontrollable' power of the feminine that threatens male phallic power (1982, p. 71). She associates this euphoria of the abject with *jouissance*:

One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [*on en jouit*]. Violently and painfully. A passion. (1983, p. 9)

In this space Muddupalani is deconstructing her socialised self, experiencing the euphoria and suffering as layers of subjectivity dissolve, losing her identity in her 'desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen body, for language, for blood'

(1983, p. 295). As she makes marks on her body, she displays similarities to Cixous' Prométhea, becoming one of Cixous' 'admirable hysterics':

Write on what is alive? But up to now I thought of myself as writing on paper. Sometimes the paper was thick enough, in fact, for me not to feel the **blood** flowing under the skin, under the paper... I warn her: 'I am writing on you, Prométhea, run away, escape. I am afraid to write you, I am going to hurt you!' (1991, p. 15) [my bold].

For now, abjection has enabled Muddupalani to refashion her ornaments as she wishes. She will revisit her own experience again later, risking hurting herself (like Prométhea), to wipe her flesh clean of the inscriptions of patriarchy, dancing, speaking and overwriting the skin with blood, but legibly, on paper. She will reconfigure her own life through her creation of the Radha/Krishna story, in the gradual 'becoming' of the writing woman and her own text, *Radhika santwanam*.

Muddupalani's abjection and the imprinting on the body are mirrored by Rachel when she farewells Surinder the day after the seduction on 'Muddupalani's couch':

she lies down on the bed, feeling the glossy pictures sticking into her arm and her hip, the edges sharp, the slick finish sticky. The silver snake is around her wrist. She has asked the matron to hook it on for her. She pulls the white sheet up over her and curls up like a foetus. She shivers in her sweat and listens. With a glorious blast, a locomotive thunders into the station, the brakes grinding and wheezing to a halt below her bedroom. She must move, she tells herself. Her face is cooling in the wind of the fan. Sharp points of pictures lacerate her skin. She sits up and peels the colour snaps from her back and thighs, wondering if the images will be dissolved in the sweat and heat of her flesh. (p33)

Rachel's sweat is potentially more powerful than the images on the photographic paper, able to overwrite frozen visual text with the fluid of the embodied moment, an abjection that is, according to Kristeva, 'what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules' (1982, p. 4). Braidotti refers to such abjection as akin to a radical sexual ecstasy: 'this experience is one of utter dissolution of boundaries of self, species and society' (2002, p. 162). It is another side to jouissance, the oceanic sexual pleasure, the realm where the three women come together—Rachel, Muddupalani and Radha.

I continued with my exploration of *écriture féminine* and Francophone writers, feeling that this was an empathetic space for my thinking and imagining, this time, revisiting or locating French fiction. I read the work of Annie Ernaux, whose novels and short fiction—writing style, themes and images—resonated with my text. In *Fragments around Philippe V*, Ernaux writes:

We made love on a Sunday in October, I was lying on a piece of drawing paper spread out on the bed. He wanted to know what kind of picture the mixture of his sperm and my menstrual blood would make. Afterwards we looked at the paper, the damp picture. We saw a woman whose face was being devoured by her thick mouth, whose body seemed to fade and flow, formless... Writing and making love. I feel there is an essential link between the two. I can't explain it, I can only record those moments when this appears most clearly to me. (1999, p. 50)

Ernaux's character, like Rachel, is inscribing marks 'on what is alive' and colouring the drawing paper with her desire, 'writing on paper' but with ink that is sperm and menstrual blood. The narrator of the *Fragments* and Rachel have comparable understandings of sensation moving through the permeable membrane between abjection and jouissance, 'the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (Kristeva 1982, p. 4). Like Annie Ernaux, I wanted my characters to cut themselves free and face the consequences. According to Clément:

Human *jouissance* requires that one lose one's head; that is the foundation. That is the only way to obtain the simulacrum, the moment when nature's harbour is reached, when the mooring ropes that hold fast the subject—consciousness, its *cogito*, its history, and through that everyone's history—are cast off at last. (1994, p. 15)

Rachel's research in India encompasses a study of ecstasy, making her own story a casting off of mooring ropes, grounded in the connections Clément establishes between the abject and the ecstatic. In *Syncopé*, she looks to Christian or Eastern mystics to explain this abjection/jouissance in which:

they all describe the same ocean. A flood; a torrent of waves; a delicious immersion; a feeling of drowning; arriving in a liquid that rolls, shakes, exhausts... and 'oceanic feeling'. (p. 201)

Radha, Muddupalani and Rachel's jouissance is the 'pleasure which radically exceeds cultural laws and limits' (Silverman 1984, p. 321). From Clément, I returned to Cixous who says of her fiction:

the novelistic dimension is displaced for me. . . the adventure is not situated on the exterior; it does not manifest itself with linked scenes . . . It is in the in-between scenes where what are the essential things for us...always take place. (Cixous & Calle-Gruber 1997, p. 68)

I could not relate my own prose to this degree of 'interiority'. My novel definitely has a 'story' as well as 'linked scenes', but the links and transitions are equally important—textual interstices for intersubjectivity. I turned to other fiction to make comparisons, to *Mauve desert*, by the Canadian Francophone writer, Nicole Brossard (1998) who considers herself a practitioner of *écriture féminine*. I studied Brossard's style, the vividness of her writing of women, who were nevertheless at times just

sketches against the light that shimmers and shifts in the timelessness of her desert. I decided to model some paragraphs from *Mauve desert*, following Brossard's text closely, the cadences of the sentences, the rich, evocative style. This material became the prologue to the novel, a passage in which the three characters of *My ornament* are indistinguishable. I liked the poetic prose, the intersubjectivity, but after some agonising I deleted my poetic, oceanic prologue, deciding that it was inconsistent with the tone of the rest of the novel and did not sit comfortably with the characters. However, I saw parallels between Brossard's and my writing. In Brossard's novel, the desert is a trope in which the women, several of them, are sometimes indistinguishable, embodied but inbetween. Melanie, the fifteen-year-old, driving her mother's car, is immersed in the dry country:

In the desert one gives in without ulterior motive with the pliancy of a being surrendered to space. The horizon is a mirage that orients the thirsting body. (1998, p. 28)

In a similar way, the river is the connecting medium for the women of *My ornament* to experience their triumphs, escapes, sinking and recoveries from disaster—in the water, at the Summer Palace, on the steps or in the cottage at Brindavan. The sacred Kaveri flows in mythic, contemporary and historical time, a warm amniotic fluid in which Rachel can stretch her limbs, wearing her swimsuit, and make a space for her Australian body to be in tune with her South Indian existence, in a place outside India/Australia:

Muddupalani is there, laughing. She walks out onto the steps as Rachel ducks her head again for the Australian crawl, the sun striking the silver lycra of her Speedos. And what would Muddupalani see? A fish woman with scales that are pewter in the brown of the sacred river, her legs kicking, feet churning the surface, up and down, saplings of white, the body long. (p. 17)

Time warps as Rachel experiences herself from the imagined point of view of Muddupalani. This scene is mirrored later in the novel when Muddupalani walks onto the unstable fluid stage when the performance of her self is faltering. Muddupalani sees Rachel:

And I walk towards her, calling, my arms stretched out to her because she is swimming across the stage as if it is water. There is another scream. The door slams shut on the picture and I shiver, up to my waist in the river, my sari dark and heavy, unravelling across the top of the water. (p. 127)

At the river, the women meet in the Cixousian 'in-between' liminal space. Their lives are texts, but interleaved, from one character to the other, from first to third

person, with an ambiguity at the beginning of the transition to each linked scene, aiming for a subtle crossover, so that the reader may not be sure which world she is in. However, while I created these inbetween, trans-historical spaces, the style of my novel is relatively 'realist' and comparable to the writing of Annie Ernaux. The commitment to telling a story differs from the *écriture féminine* of writers such as Hélène Cixous, for whom narrative is not a primary focus and 'the adventure is not situated on the exterior' (1997, p.67). My characters are not adventuring in a vast interiority of textual space.

Later in my writing project, I read (and identified with) A.S. Byatt's account of writing her novel *Possession* in the 1980s. She says:

...my interest in both character and narration had undergone a change—I felt a need to *feel and analyse* less, to tell more flatly, which is sometimes more mysteriously... I found myself crossing out psychological descriptions, or invitations to the reader to enter the characters' thought process. (Byatt 2000, p. 131)

In a similar manner, my process eschews psychological accounts and analyses. Instead, I am telling story in a filmic way, so that the reader observes the characters in action as the alternating scenes intertwine. Rachel, the film-maker, observes and imagines, just as the author of *My ornament*, constructs a largely exterior narrative of women spanning the 18th and late 20th centuries. This process aligns with Kearney's insight that 'storytelling may be said to humanise time by transforming it from an impersonal passing of fragmented moments into a pattern, a plot, a mythos' (2002, p. 4). Nevertheless, I wondered: is experimental prose necessary for a feminist writer? Trinh says that:

Experimentation with form is an absolute necessity for a woman writer. For what has been done and how that was done neither says what she has to say nor provides the way of saying it. (1991, p. 6)

It is possible to experiment, to find one's voice but not produce 'experimental' prose, and surely there is room for stylistic variation within a feminist political framework. In 'Feminist art and political imagination', Mullin warns against generalisation by feminist art theorists that certain styles (for example, realism) are either suited to or inappropriate for feminist art production. Mullin states:

My claim that specific works are feminist reflects their impact on me and my assessment that they have the potential to have a similar impact on others. I call artworks feminist if, in my judgment, they focus on sex and gender and work toward politically progressive change. (2003, p. 190)

The necessity for a distinctive literary form is not mandatory in contemporary feminist fiction. The writer must find her own way. In fact, radical stylistic rupture—for example, Cixousian experimental language—and lack of narrative drive in fiction could be considered esoteric and off-putting for the majority of readers. Ultimately, I want my writing to be accessible and to have the potential for communication with a broad community of women. According to Mullin:

The contemporary (feminist) writer who... accepts the call to disrupt fictional conventions . . . must recognise the possibility that her text may bear little relationship to the way women experience their lives, and she may find that her audience is limited to an elite of feminists familiar with theoretical concerns... [and] may contribute little to political exchange. (2000, p. 134)

Despite the fact that *My ornament* is not radically experimental in style, it focuses on sex and gender from the viewpoint of the women who are strong presences, making gaps for them to meet in an interstitial textual space as their stories cross between the ‘I’ and the ‘she’ of the poet/dancer and the film-maker, echoing each other, in these jouissant²¹ narrative cavities. The women, at times ‘admirable hysterics’, experience ‘voluptuous moments’, enacting textual performances and fleshing out ideas of becoming with a ‘carnal and passionate body’ (Cixous 1983, p. 290) as the subject matter of the fiction.

²¹ Clément 1994: Translation: the French infinitive *jouir*—‘to enjoy, be in ecstasy, to have an orgasm’; *jouissance*—‘ecstasy, orgasm, enjoyment’ (p. 291).

Chapter three. The feminist heterosexual erotic

My Ornament explores aspects of women's sexual desire across time and space, by writing about three fictional characters - the 20th century film maker, Rachel, the 18th century dancer, Muddupalani and the mythic Radha. The characters may dwell in a liminal zone of abjection, syncope and jouissance, but they inhabit a social/political world and this raises questions for me—as a feminist writer—about the politics of the erotic, and where the novel sits most comfortably in feminist writing discourse.

The political issue of agency is raised, for example, in Part Three of the novel, when Rachel stares at a poster on the wall of the beauty shop. A tall blonde woman on a white horse rides through clouds. She studies the caption, 'The happiest women like the happiest nations have no history' (p. 192). Like the figure in the poster, Rachel is buffed smooth, depilated, stripped back to some poster-version of woman, rootless, country-less, with no past, to the point where it may appear that her relationship with Surinder is the key factor that defines her.

This scene from *My ornament* reminds me of my first experience as a reader of erotic writing. When I was a naive twenty-year-old, a friend lent me a copy of *The story of O*. According to one of the blurbs in the front of my current paperback copy, the novel is 'a maze of perverse relationships... where the primary bond is mutual complicity to the pleasures of sadism and masochism' (Réage 1975). The work was favourably reviewed by (male) critics such as Grahame Greene, Harold Pinter and J.G. Ballard, and in 1960s Australia it was considered to be a decidedly 'underground' publication, shocking, even sensationally controversial in its explicit sex. In the novel, a young Parisian woman agrees to become a sex-slave to her lover. She is taken to a chateau in the country and subjected to sexual practices that are increasingly painful and objectifying, which she embraces as sources of ecstatic sensation, until she reaches total self-annihilation as a subject.

During my first reading of the text I experienced complex reactions. I was thrilled and disturbed at the same time, wondering that a woman could choose to place herself in such a position to experience extremes of bodily ecstasy. I found myself identifying with O, recognising the darker areas of the psyche and being uneasily aware that O, in the end, was portrayed as totally powerless, nil, nothing zero, O. Well into the seventies, we debated *O* enthusiastically. Was it porn? Was it erotica? We referred to Susan Sontag's article, 'The Pornographic Imagination'

(1969), as we strained against the puritanical remnants—including the issue of censorship—of 1950s Australia.

Then, and now in 2007, I find Sontag's a fascinating text about erotica, literature and *The story of O*, which raises questions about and influences the writing of my current novel. (I return to Sontag and *O* below).

As a second-wave feminist, my attitudes to the erotic in art/fiction are mixed. As a reader, I felt optimistic and excited in the late Sixties and the Seventies about 'liberation' for desiring women. However, in the Eighties the term was heard less and less as, I believe, the early goal of the women's movement to free woman's body was left behind—as was the right to pursue multiple sources of pleasure—in the discursive spaces of American and English feminisms. Vance's *Pleasure and danger: toward a politics of sexuality* (1992) describes and contextualises the gradual marginalising of the heterosexual erotic for women as a result of the anti-porn debate, with its almost total emphasis on the visual and a privileging of the male gaze, in which male sexuality was deemed dangerous for women and men were the enemy (Vance 1992). Braidotti contrasts a 'generalised backlash' in critical thought—including issues of women and the erotic—in the US during the 1980s, with the European experience. She states that:

on the Continent feminism was experimenting with writing, eroticism, and the exploration of ways and means of making difference as effective tools for social policy and legislation. (Braidotti 2002, p. 29)

With the 'sex-wars', American and Australian feminist discussion took a negative turn. Heterosexual desire was downgraded in the hierarchies of sexual pleasures and there was no flowering of an Anglophone erotic literature for women exploring multiple sources of pleasure for women.

The issues of masochism and of domination are elements of female sexuality/practices that were problematic for theorists such as Jessica Benjamin and Michelle Massé. Their arguments raise issues of agency for the women in *My ornament*. In *The bonds of love: psychoanalysis, feminism, and the problem of domination* (1988), Benjamin discusses Freudian theories of domination and the evolution of a duality that leaves women out of the equation. In her discussion of *The story of O*, Benjamin writes:

Erotic domination, for both sides, draws its appeal in part from its offer to break the encasement of the isolated self, to explode the numbness that comes with false

differentiations. It is a reaction to the predicament of solitary confinement—being unable to get through to the other, or be gotten through to—which is our particular modern form of bondage. (1988, p. 83)

For Benjamin, this is not a viable way of connection between individuals, but merely an instance of women accepting the status of object as an inevitable aspect of the feminine. She maintains that:

[to] halt the cycle of domination... the other must make a difference. This means that women must claim their subjectivity and so be able to survive destruction. (p. 221)

Rachel, Muddupalani and Radha relinquish power in various incidents in the novel, in their relations with men, but they usually recognise what they are doing and they are not destroyed. The scene in the Goan tattoo studio, as Rachel goes to have her ears pierced,²² certainly has masochistic overtones:

‘Relax. Relax,’ Surinder whispers, turning my head and stroking my hair and neck, kissing me on the forehead. I look at the poster on the wall, a skull with snakes crawling out, intertwined like the intricate patterns of Celtic design. Elwood turns and pours another whiskey...

There is a hum in the room as I am pierced again, three times rapidly, in the other ear and desire rides on the wave of revulsion that sweeps me. Elwood swabs the piercings and puts little gold sleepers in each hole. ‘The ones that hate it get to love it,’ he says with feeling, clearing his tray away and standing above us . . .

(Surinder) pampers my body for some time; telling me that I must wear more of his ornaments... and I am delirious and swamped with a torrent of euphoria and horror, at his touch, and for what I have done. (p 65)

While Rachel does not experience extremes of pain or humiliation in this scene and there is no complete stripping of subjectivity as in the abjection of O, she is not bravely facing her fear of needles and piercing but submitting herself to a symbolic domination. She is pleasing Surinder and, as a trade-off, experiencing the ‘torrent of euphoria’. But Rachel is self-aware, and her recognition of enjoyment in playing out a masochistic situation is a textual gesture towards the ambivalence of Julia Kristeva’s subject/object as discussed in Chapter two. It is also a case of Rachel, despite her apparent objectification, choreographing and playing out her desire.

In her work, *In the name of love: women, masochism, and the Gothic*,

²² The issues of piercing and body modification are hotly contested in feminist theorising. See: Jeffreys (2000) and Riley (2002). For me, even ear piercing is a revolutionary act—my father thought that only tarts had pierced ears. My writing of piercing scenes may well be a late rebellion against him, located, ironically, in a part of the world where pierced ears are almost universal and nose piercings for women no cause for amazement.

Massé argues that women have been taught to crave love and that its intertwining with pain is natural, originating in the self, with fiction being one of the primary sources for women to ‘learn’ this. Massé emphasises that masochism's causes are external and real, not a ‘natural’ part of being a woman but that, as Freud says, they are a problem of ‘the interaction between the psyche and social life’ (Massé 1992, p. 5). Both Muddupalani and Rachel are temporarily ‘assigning subjectivity to another’ in the novel as per Massé. Rachel does so in her piercing experience to reach the state of an intense delirium. Similarly, Muddupalani submits to the King’s sexual needs and derives pleasure from these interactions but, as time goes on, she becomes more exhausted, soothing the King’s developing madness. However, in this time of intense strain, she is aware that in many ways she is the one with power—within a larger context. She is playing out the Radha/Krishna dyad of holding up the universe against the forces of darkness as a result of their love.

‘In *My ornament* the characters are clearly struggling in patriarchal societies (and mythologies). The novel maps the shifts, rises and falls in their power and their insights into these shifts. For example, Rachel and Surinder discuss the fate of the courtesan, Madhevi: Kovalam's wife is the heroine, not the courtesan.. Rachel, in particular, is self-reflective regarding issues of agency, throughout the novel. She challenges Tata on his judgment of her when he, himself, has negotiated for a lifestyle outside the conjugal, domesticated norm. She watches the levels of her power swing and change, in her interaction with Surinder, from masochistic tendencies to a clearer sense of her own strength. See, for example, my discussion of ‘the gaze’ in chapter four. But there is no assumption in the text that submission is an inevitable part of the heterosexual relationship. On the contrary, I assume that there are power issues in every relationship. While Surinder may be dominant in the piercing scene, he is also subject to the patriarchal confines of his society in the life options and choices that he perceives as available to him. And, in the end, Rachel packs up and leaves him to pursue her creative goals while Muddupalani ceases to carry the weight of the world—being part of the dual lynchpin supporting the cosmos—and walks away from her stardom to be an unadorned woman writing her body.

Concurrent with the cautionary readings of female desire by theorists such as Benjamin and Massé, there has been the robust development of lesbian and queer

discourses on the erotic and the continued tradition of Francophone literature.²³ Up until quite recently, Anglophone heterosexual women, by comparison, have been left high and dry, unless they can identify with liberatory impulses in queer or Francophone literature.

From the 1990s, in the more recent discourse of women's erotic body, contemporary expressions of desire are more wide-ranging. Anglophone contemporary erotic fiction, from the Nineties and into the millennium, ranges from the mass-market 'post-feminist' heterosexual porn specifically for women²⁴ to the fiction and theorising of 'sex radicals' such as Pat Califia, who sees masochism as just part of the range of erotic pleasures available to persons of all persuasions.²⁵ Her 'subversive' pornography includes varied sexual identities, practices, performance and fantasies, which are viewed as a continuum rather than as sets of polar opposites. Masochism is definitely not at one end of the scale and feminist agency at the other.²⁶ Califia described herself as an s/m dyke in her book, *Public Sex*, which advocates embracing lust and condemns conservative feminist inclinations to 'punishing or eradicating dissenting sexualities' (1994, p. 65). Califia does not pussyfoot around. She/he²⁷ writes with a wide experience of sexual issues, demonstrating a belief in radical choices that claim agency, break down stereotypes and oppression and are thus inherently political:

It is one more brick in the Great Wall of Feminist Propriety that separates the ladylike lesbians from the female sex perverts. This new category of sexual deviant, created by real feminists, individuals, women who do S/m, women who crossdress, butches and femmes, women who are promiscuous, women who use pornography, transsexual women, women who work in the sex industry, women who have fetishes, girl-lovers, bisexual women, and just about anybody who has a clearly defined sexual preference and spends time trying to fulfil it. (p. 63)

²³ As Rita Felski points out, 'the works of writers such as Jeanette Winterson, Gloria Anzaldua, and Nicole Brossard, as well as key predecessors such as Monique Wittig and Gertrude Stein, have inspired much reflection on the links between sexuality and writing, between lesbian themes and fragmented, playful, textual forms' (2000, p. 8). An Australian writer who has explored similar themes and forms is Fallon (1989).

²⁴ This mass-market pornography for women raises interesting issues of consumerism and 'post-feminist' writing. See Sonnet (1999). These issues are not central to this discussion.

²⁵ Califia also wrote in the '80s on lesbian S/M themes. See Samois Collective (1982).

²⁶ Jessica Benjamin considers that the main protagonist in Pat Califia's *Jessie*, 'a thoroughly independent woman', is not so different from Réage's character, O. (Benjamin notes the title of the anthology of lesbian sadomasochism, *Coming to Power* and its alternative subtitle, *S/M: A Form of Eroticism Based on a Consensual Exchange of Power*.)

²⁷ Born female in 1951, Pat Califia came out a lesbian in 1971. In the 1990s Califia made the decision to transition to a male gender role and is now known as Patrick Califia. He has written a range of fiction and non-fiction on sexual freedom, in particular BDSM.

As a ‘ladylike’ heterosexual (and possibly ‘female sex pervert’), I celebrate Califia’s advocacy of breadth of sexual preference and feel relief that there are possible jouissant locations for *My ornament*, so that I have not been cast out into the wilderness by any remaining remnants that may lurk in an arid, grim, puritanical feminist box. Nevertheless, there are still questions that the feminist writer might consider regarding the heterosexual woman in erotic fiction—Rachel, Muddupalani and Radha—and ways in which they retain agency.

In ‘The Pornographic Imagination’, Susan Sontag considers this problem indirectly in relation to the character of O, as part of her reading of *The story of O*, arguing that Réage’s novel is a significant work of literature, rather than merely pornography. She considers that:

Its protagonist has complex feelings, emotions and motivations (the transcendence of personality... which O seeks and eventually attains. (p. 55)

According to Sontag, there is a plot; language is taken seriously; the novel has ‘originality, thoroughness, authenticity and power’ and, novels such as *L’ Histoire d’O* exist in dialogue with each other [my emphasis]’ (p. 41). Here, I believe, Sontag’s model for literature could also be a means of considering agency. Like O, neither Rachel nor Muddupalani are in any way ‘stereotype sex-object figures... whose consciousness remains unaltered by her experiences’, in contrast to the totally objectified and one-dimensional Sadeian character, Justine (1969, p. 55). Also, significantly, Réage’s novel exists in dialogue with others.

Some feminist theorists would say that we have not progressed in our attitude and depiction of (particularly heterosexual) women and desire. Braidotti still has a dim view of the general state of feminist discussion on women and the erotic:

I would say that ‘the body’ in USA feminism cannot be positively associated with sexuality in either the critical or the public discourse. (Braidotti 2002, p. 31)

In Australia, at least since the mid-1990s, there has been a revival of interest in women’s heterosexual ‘literature about lust’ (Sontag, p. 46), and an opening up of the discursive space for writing and critiquing erotic fiction, providing possible locations for *My ornament* in this space. At this time, three Australian novels were published: Justine Ettler’s *The river Ophelia* (1995), Linda Jaivin’s *Eat me* (1995)²⁸ and Tobsha

²⁸ Linda Jaivin did write about her novel in her paper, ‘Why sex makes me laugh’, *Hecate* vol. 20 no.1, May 1994.

Learner's *Quiver* (1996).²⁹ Later, Nicki Gemell's *The bride stripped bare*³⁰ and Cameron Redfern's *Landscape with animals* (2006) appeared. Of these, I will focus on Ettler's novel, because it has been taken up and critiqued in Australian feminist discourse on women's desire and I will consider the possibility of *My ornament* being located in some similar space.

At the time of publication, critics had reservations about *The river Ophelia*. Don Anderson found it 'deeply shocking' (ABR, July '95: 50). Rosemary Sorenson's newspaper review in the same month described it as 'cheap and unknowing': 'All the rubbing and juicing that goes on between the sheets... is offered up here with relentless lack of skill' (1995).

In October, the journal *Hecate* joined the debate with four critical articles about Ettler's novel. The critiques differ markedly. One of the pieces, Costigan's 'Queering "The River Ophelia"' points out the narrowly heterosexual nature of the work. It also challenges 'the text's representation of S & M as a practice implicitly grounded in abuse, as well as lacking "fluidity"' (1995, p. 70). In contrast, Henderson's 'Sex, writing, and "The River Ophelia"' is more positive, locating the work in Gen X grunge writing, suggesting that we need more narratives and representations of Sadeian women³¹ (Henderson 1995, p. 69).

Ferres in 'Justine Ettler: "The River Ophelia"' (1995) describes *TRO* as an erotic female fantasy in which the characters Justine and Ophelia are:

not produced out of real life, but out of a textuality which this novel makes visible, that crosses the lines between canonical and popular culture. (p. 7)

Ferres credits Ettler with a novel of some note. While I do not especially admire *The river Ophelia*, I acknowledge that both Ferres and Ettler herself make a space for it in feminist discourse. In the last of the four articles in *Hecate*, Ettler sees her novel as 'an intervention into Brat Pack texts'³² from a feminist point of view. Another

²⁹ According to writer Nick Earls, Learner's book of short stories is a 'non-literary huge seller' that sold approximately 70,000 copies. See Nile, Richard (ed.) (1999).

³⁰ Sarah Dunnant's review in *The Times* suggests that Gemell's hiding behind anonymity in her erotic novel 'feels almost discourteous to feminism'. She considers that the novel 'doesn't make it', that it 'reads more like a slightly undercooked novel about marriage and about the temptations of infidelity than any dark exploration of the female sexual psyche' (2.7.03).

³¹ The term was first used by Angela Carter in *The Sadeian woman: an exercise in cultural history* (1979). According to Carter, "'The Sadeian Woman" is neither a critical nor a historical analysis of Sade; it is, rather, a late-twentieth-century interpretation of some of the problems he raises about the culturally determined nature of women...' (p. 1). For Carter, Sade was 'unusual in his period for claiming rights of free sexuality for women...' (pp. 36-37). Carter saw liberation, including erotic freedom, as a continuous struggle for women.

³² An example is the 'grunge' writing of Bret Easton Ellis and Jay McInerney.

‘intervention’ claimed by Ettler is her location in ‘a kind of lineage of texts that have argued that sex and violence, desire and power, are at the heart of our culture.’ She also compares her work to that of Kathy Acker who ‘performs feminist rewritings of the male literary canon’ (p. 63). So, Ettler is attempting to engage in a dialogue with Sade, Bataille and Justine. She is interrogating pain and violence, creating a version of Angela Carter’s Sadeian woman. In her article, she does not mention *The story of O*, but she is engaging in a *dialogue* that includes conversations among Réage, Carter, Sontag and the present author.

While I acknowledge the range of exploration of the heterosexual erotic in the works of my countrywomen, I feel that more congenial locations for my Australian fiction lie within South Indian erotic discourse and the Francophone tradition.

Hughes and Ince, in *French Erotic writing: women’s desiring fiction* (1999) refer to a review of erotic novels by British and American women that appeared in 1994, which reached the conclusion that:

although those writings have female narrators and focus on women’s erotic experience, they employ too much of the language and the techniques of ‘male’ pornography to indicate any real shift in the prevailing ideology of erotic relations between the sexes.³³ (Hughes & Ince 1999, p. 17)

While Hughes and Ince are clearly not as ‘radical’ in their thinking as writers such as Califia, they view women’s desiring writing as an:

evolving discursification of women’s erotic experience occupying an alternative space to the discourse of male (and some Anglophone women’s) desiring writing. (p. 17)

The literary works of the women writers discussed in their text may retain some of the motifs of commercial pornography and its tendency to being a formulaic model, but many women Francophone writers go beyond such limits in what Hughes and Ince term a ‘transgression of the pornographic by the erotic’ (p. 3). In this discursive space there is ample room for *My ornament*. For example, when Rachel leads Surinder to the Summer Palace as part of her seduction strategy, she choreographs a sexual scene that involves only stimulation of her breasts and the erotic trope and theatrical prop of tropical fruit. On the banks of the river, she is rehearsing a scene that she plays out later when they come down from Terekhol Fort and stop at a village. Surinder has been coldly cruel to her. He makes a phone call to his dreaded family. She re-designs

³³ Rebecca Adams, ‘The pain for pleasure principle’, *The Guardian*, 19 July 1994. According to Hughes and Ince, Adams reviewed four novels, all published in that year.

the ‘breast’ scene, but involves two strangers, fishermen who take on Surinder’s role, in a situation of erotic revenge:

SURINDER *calling out from the road*. Rachel!

Rachel *looks at the walkway along by the chai stall*. She is panting.

The boy *licks the last of the juice from her breast*.

RACHEL *cries out and shudders, buttoning her dress*. Coming!

The script has many possibilities. Some of the themes have been rehearsed in the Breast Scene at the Summer Palace with Surinder. She laughs. (p 62)

In this, she mirrors the boldness of the mythic Radha in *Radhika santwanam*,³⁴ as well as that of its writer, Muddupalani. Here, the breast for Rachel is a key source of her sexual power and pleasure. Similarly, in the erotics of *fin-de-siècle* novelist Rachilde, according to Hughes and Ince, it is female desire that drives the narrative, with a certain perversity that differs from the unwavering, linear goal-centredness of male-authored fiction. In Rachilde’s novels the male can be an object of desire, with the female more interested in ‘autonomous pleasure and lack of interest in penetrative sex’ (p. 5). This is not to suggest that there is no bliss to be experienced with penetrative sex, but rather that Rachel is prepared to take her pleasure in stages, to embrace a diffuse female sexuality where sexual intercourse is mandatory, in an economy of desire where the needs of women are rarely seen as of paramount importance.

In *My ornament*, the scene in which Muddupalani arrives home from her first night with the King raises further issues of desiring women in its complicated erotics. She is a ‘girl-lover’, only just pubescent, whom the King has violated with his deviant behaviour, bruising her young skin but not ‘taking her virginity’ with penetrative sex. Another ‘girl’ desiring subject appears in Marguerite Duras’s *The lover* (1984), the story of an affair between a poor, white adolescent French girl with a rich Chinese man in colonial Saigon in the 1920s, a ‘tale of a white girl’s assertion of herself as an autonomous female subject’ who can explore and enjoy her desire (Ruddy 2006, p. 76). Similarly, the ‘girl-lover’ Muddupalani achieves her own satisfaction, a surprising bonus to the oddities of her lover, the young King. Muddupalani’s experience is not a rebellious act against the mores of her society, as in the case of the ‘white girl’, but the pleasure she experiences outweighs the threat to her career, the

³⁴ *Radhika santwanam*, Poem no. 66, translated from the Telugu by Sarojini Premchand, in consultation with Professor Chekuree Rama Rao and Christine Gillespie.

fact that she cannot reveal to the matriarchs in her house that the King has not ‘taken’ her. In both cases, there is a complexity in the politics of the erotic.

In *The lover* and in *My ornament*, both the girls may be achieving erotic satisfaction in transgressive situations. Similarly, in the work of French women writers of the erotic, it is not love and relationships that are the primary focus, but ‘the unconscious, fantasy and an infinite libidinal territory’ (Brécourt-Villars in Hughes and Ince, p. 17). Writers of the erotic such as Wittig, Cixous and Duras have all been, eventually, embraced by Anglo-American critical theory, both because of their distinct contributions to theoretical discourse and because of the theoretical questions their fictional writings raise (Hughes and Ince, p. 18). In *My ornament*, the three women protagonists move in a similar territory.

The Francophone writer Annie Ernaux could be considered a more mainstream writer in terms of her style and popularity in France. As suggested earlier, there are parallels between her work and *My ornament*. Ernaux describes her approach to one of her novels:

In *Passion simple*, I described—calmly and precisely—the passion of a mature woman, lived in adolescent, ‘romantic’ mode, but also very physically—without the emotional framework, the moral judgment, without precisely the romantic conventions which are expected from a woman writer. (Ernaux in Day & Thomas 2003, p. 100)

According to Ernaux, she was vilified for just such writing; a woman claiming pleasure as the primary goal is unacceptable in the mainstream, transgressive in its foregrounding and descriptions of passion, and disturbing to male and to some feminist critics (Day & Thomas 2003, p. 100). In an acknowledgment of the primacy of a particular lover in her life, Ernaux says:

I was sure that nothing had ever been more important to me, neither having children, nor success in exams, nor travel to distant lands, than being in bed with this man in the middle of the afternoon. (Ernaux in Day and Thomas, p. 101)³⁵

This is the erotic woman, perhaps considered by some as a shocking tart, in the patriarchal filing system where only romantic love is acceptable,³⁶ and which has only

³⁵ The ending to *My ornament* could have been more ambiguous, so as to suggest that Rachel might come back for the passion of the relationship.

³⁶ From a feminist POV, one could say that the romantic is more likely to be patriarchally corrupted than the erotic. It promises something in the future, whereas *jouissance* is fulfilment in the present. Also, romantic fiction usually concentrates more on the male body than providing an account of female arousal.

three folders – virgin, mother and whore. According to the Australian writer Kate Grenville:

Writing is a permitted way of exploring taboo subjects, or taking seriously subjects that are usually trivialised: and writing is a way of making visible the invisible bias of our culture.

These taboos or attitudes can't easily be tackled head-on, but they can be embedded in the rich and seductive texture of the novel. (1994, p. 143)

Having begun this chapter with a consideration of *The story of O*, I now return to it in conclusion. Silverman, *The story of O: the construction of a female subject* considers the significance of the novel:

Histoire d'O is more than O's story. It is the history of the female subject—of the territorialisation and inscription of a body whose involuntary internalization of a corresponding set of desires facilitates its complex exploitation. That history will never read otherwise unless the female subject alters her relation to discourse—until she succeeds not only in exercising discursive power, but in exercising it differently. (1984, p. 346)

There are, indeed, multiple readings of *O*, of women's desiring texts and as many subject positions available to the contemporary woman reader of erotic writing. The same goes for the writer. *My ornament*, in a similar way, brings a less conventional view of women and desire into mainstream reading, contributing to the process of cultural change as women's erotic writing is a developing genre, a 'desiring discourse' that modifies generic and cultural models (Hughes and Ince 1999, p. 11).

In *My ornament*, woman, always the primary subject, negotiates the space and pushes the boundaries available to her in the libidinal disequilibrium of a patriarchal society, 'exercising discursive power' as Silverman points out above. Positions are set in the male/female dyads, only to be subverted and destabilised. Despite the clear tensions, ultimately the women assert their subjectivity. I consider that my novel is an example of 'innovations of textuality' and *écriture* while contributing to the 'erosion of boundaries between mainstream and more formally complex writing' characteristic of contemporary French erotic fiction by women (Hughes and Ince 1999, p.18).

Exploring women's desire in fiction, engaging in discursive dialogue, increases the capacity for enlarging this space.

Chapter four. Choreographing a fiction

In *My ornament*, five of the characters are dancers: Muddupalani, Rachel, Radha, Krishna and Tata are choreographing, performing and improvising their subjectivities through erotic torsos, limbs, looks and touch as they move through time and space in Indian places. They engage in different forms of corporeal intelligence, physical movement in varying erotic/creative connotations and contexts. Desmond, editor of *Dancing desires: choreographing sexualities on and off the stage*, discusses some of these connotations. She suggests in her Introduction that 'much of the current work on sexuality is rooted in literature and thus words, not motion.' The essays in *Dancing desires* emphasise 'bodily enactment... process in time and space... an articulation and materialization of meaning and relationships' (2001, p. 13). While agreeing with Desmond's notion of expressing desire, I believe that there is another process in action, through dance, of the subject rehearsing for Rosi Braidotti's 'becoming I', deploying imaginative leaps in time and space to invent and reinvent identities, so that the 'I', rather than having any essential unity, assembles fragments of 'fictional choreography on many levels into one socially-operational self' (2002, p. 76). I also suggest that the novel, *My ornament*, with its sexual/textual/cultural/fictive becomings, through the intertextuality of dance and writing, continues this process.

Rachel is defined not so much by her dance performance as by her movement practice and skills, her physicality and consciousness of moving bodies, her own and those around her. She is a choreographer, a director who performs only a couple of times in the novel, for example, when Surinder orders her to dance for him at the Mayapuri Hotel:

'Dance,' you say. 'You will dance for me.'

I assume a Bharat Natyam attitude, contained, my expression one of cute, chaste seductiveness. I lunge. My anklets tinkle as my feet slap on the stone floor. You lie on the bed and watch and I wonder if I should pause and peel you a grape. I retain the upright torso, my feet flashing, arms out, fingers like birds, face coyly flirtatious. (p 91)

Rachel performs. Surinder watches. This, again, raises feminist issues of the 'male gaze'. Is Rachel a passive victim? To what extent does dance provide a space for agency as a 'becoming I' (as per Braidotti) in the full beam of the male gaze?

In her work, Mulvey focuses on how subject positions are constructed by visual media texts. She argues that in patriarchal society, men do the looking; women

are there to be *looked at* (1984, p. 26). Critics such as Teresa de Lauretis have argued that positionalities of desire are more complex, asking, for example: ‘What happens when woman serves as the looking glass held up to women?’ (1984, p. 7). In the writing of *My ornament*, I am constructing a fictional, textual looking glass, rather than a display of women as objects, depicting discrete individuals with vastly different intersecting embodied experiences. In regard to the gaze, the feminist reader can also read against the grain. Accordingly, the situation for Rachel is not at all simple. In the last segment quoted from *My ornament*, she is performing as a sex object for Surinder, but *self-consciously* so. She reflects, ironically, as he lounges on the bed to watch: ‘I wonder if I should pause and peel you a grape’—conjuring up this indolent, self-indulgent stereotype of Roman decadence—before launching her body into the a different realm, the physically unfamiliar gestures of Indian dance, her misperformance playing with both ‘passive and active subject positions’ (De Lauretis, p. 143). Even though Surinder has commanded Rachel to dance for him, she has already set up the scene for her own active desire and pleasure before his arrival, as soon as she reached the Mayapuri to meet him:

The balcony of the Mayapuri is dark. If it was a film set, the lighting man has not arrived yet to bring up the silvers and the black and grey shadows with tree tops roiling and coiling under a flat moon. (p. 76)

As she waits for her lover, her gaze is self-consciously filmic:

I look at myself in the mirror, at the satiny, cream silk, the softest that I could find, cut on the cross so that it clings and flares slightly at the hem. Like the evening dresses in the French film *Last Year at Marienbad*, with its mirrors, corridors, ambiguities, amnesia, muddled memories, illusions of debonair smooth-haired men and slinky women. (p. 76)

In writing this scene, the *Marienbad* film³⁷ (1961) came to mind, as it did for Rachel as well. Later, I realised that Rachel was director, script-writer and actor/dancer at the Mayapuri, which, like the Marienbad hotel is a place of dreams, confusion, acting, in a world of melting logos and practicality. In the Alain Resnais film the man keeps meeting a woman at an elegant palace/hotel, insisting that they have met before. The film is an essay on the constructions of desire, time, reality, memory, fantasy of its characters in the sterile setting of the hotel, in which the other characters in their immaculate evening clothes are mere background to the man, the woman and her

³⁷ Robbe-Grillet, A. 1962, *Last Year at Marienbad*, Grove Press Inc, New York. The script had been made into a film directed by Alain Resnais in 1961.

husband/lover. The camera, too, is like a character. Script writer Alain Robbe-Grillet specifies in his screenplay:

The camera having circled, as for the preceding groups (but quite rapidly), the frozen characters, returns quite naturally to the gallery seen at the beginning of the film and starts following it. (Robbe-Grillet 1962, p. 60)

Rather than being a victim of the gaze, Rachel the film-maker is like a camera, recording her sensual, bodily experience at the Mayapuri, the meticulous director, setting the stage, taking the dual role of active woman and the character in her fantasy film script. Rachel plans the scenario:

I will use my body, dance, stroke, suck, receive his cock into me, deliver myself up to him to be pierced and loved. I will wallow and be suspended, but I will choreograph. (p 77)

She is Cixous's Medusa, who can dance and laugh, who can direct and perform a role:

I retain the facial expression, work on its variations and slowly loosen the perpendicular stance, gradually, curving the spine, working from the abdomen and the pelvis, taking up space at different levels, swaying close to the floor, sweeping, not moving far. Dancing in the space, between India and the South. (p. 77)

Rachel dances for Surinder and for herself. In fact, throughout the novel there is a complex tension in the gaze between Rachel and Surinder, in a shifting dynamics in which the white Western woman represents a locus of power by the physical fact of her blonde hair and her pale skin. Therefore, gender is not the only issue. There are parallels here with Duras's *The lover*. Ruddy notes that:

rather than celebrate *The lover* as a tale of a young French girl's resistance to colonial sexual mores and regulations, (her) paper seeks to excavate how that resistance both affirms and challenges the radicalizing and racist dynamics of colonial society. (p. 76)

Also, despite the limited erotic options of the girl in this patriarchal colonial society, it is clear that:

by appropriating the conventionally male role of the desiring subject, the girl lover makes the Chinese man the object of her desire, feminizing him as other men have feminized her. In so doing, she forces her lover to mime the feminised image of Asian masculinity in the white colonial imagination, an image that constructs Asian men as weak, submissive, subordinate, and at times asexual. (2006, p. 91)

Ruddy goes further in her critique of the girl/narrator:

Furthermore, one of the pleasures of loving the Chinese man is to write him down, and through this to make his aestheticised and eroticized body the object of the reader's gaze as well. (p. 91)

Are the Australian writer and her character, Rachel, constructing Surinder as passive and asexual? In the post-colonial space of *My ornament* the issue is more complex.

Surinder does not relinquish power in his relationship with Rachel, although there are shifts in the balance. Rather, he is in a position in patriarchal society, offering her an exotic corner of domestication as his lover in the flat owned by his in-laws, demonstrating a status and ability to operate successfully in a world where she is a stranger. Of course, the Western reader might consider that he is trapped: he must adhere to the model of family duty, while she can change into her jeans and fly away. So, in the novel, there are tensions and shifts in power across patriarchal and colonial issues, and neither Rachel nor Surinder is simply a victim of the gaze.

Another space with room to move for the becoming 'I' exists in dance and queer theory. Desmond, in *Dancing Desires: choreographing sexualities on and off the stage*, explores performances that disrupt patriarchal representations of the feminine and present woman as both desiring subject and object of desire. Desmond's goal in her collection of essays is a consideration of dance:

in a more *jouissant* and less patriarchally disciplined way, emphasising that dance lets us look at bodies for pleasure... in a public staging of desire. (2001, p. 5)

In this zone, where the emphasis is on the agency of the performer, the gaze is not oppressive. Rachel's dance for Surinder is a combination of her own untutored version of Indian dance³⁸—her body miming some imagined version of Muddupalani's style—combined with Western movements that take up the space between South India and Australia:

My expression changes. It is probably beyond any of the *rasas*, more raw. I move. I am a siren who dances. Surinder leans forward at the boldness of my body. I offer myself to him. His face is that of the *rasika* who experiences the *sap* rising, the artistry, the juiciness of the dance. (p. 91)

Rachel is self-conscious, not only of her movements but also of their potential for misperformances and possible meanings in an Indian cultural context. Desmond cites Judith Butler's notion of reiteration in performativity as useful in dance studies:

She defines it as the practice through which social identities are communicated in relation to extant meaning systems, and that allows for change through *misperformances*. (p. 12) [my italics]

Rachel is performing the Indian woman, Muddupalani, just as the author of *My ornament* is not writing India but an Australian woman's experience of the place. By not reiterating the original completely, if that were indeed possible, by misperforming,

³⁸ Bharat Natyam, a modern version of the dance of the devadasis and ganikas.

there is a space made for change, for becoming 'I', in this fictive exploration of some aspects of dance theory.

Currently there is a rich, developing dance literature that covers a vast range of dance styles and their transposition into other art forms. In 'The politics and poetics of dance', Susan Reed gives a useful overview of the state of play in this field:

Since the mid-1980s, there has been an explosion of dance... situating studies of dance and movement within broader frameworks of embodiment and the politics of culture. (1998, p. 503)

A recent analysis of woman and dance is Fischer's critique of Sally Potter's film, *The Tango Lesson*, which is a treatise on the female author:

portraying both the perils and glories of writing. At the same time, the film questions rigid binaries that have haunted feminist thinking—sexual pleasure versus oppression and male versus female roles. (p. 56)

Potter uses the trope of the tango lesson, with a male teacher and a woman student (Fischer 2004). Another paper, 'Belly dance: orientalism—exoticism—self-exoticism' addresses the globalisation of solo Middle Eastern belly dancing, 'a rapidly expanding genre of performance labelled as "intercultural performance"' (Shay and Sellers-Young 2003, p. 13).³⁹

Such dance studies include critiques of patriarchal norms and the regulation of femininity in dance traditions such as ballet, the traditional and dominant Western dance mode, that represents some facet of men's ideal of women, thin, ethereal, disembodied, floating in air. It is a tradition that disciplines women's bodies, valorising jetées, arabesques, en pointe, as high art, rather than situating it as just another (Russian) ethnic dance form that involves pain and strategies such as anorexia, deleting the mature, active sexual body, in favour of a 'non-sexualised corporeality' (Desmond 2001, p. 149). The documentary film *Ballet Russes* (2005) is a clear depiction of gender roles in traditional Western dance, where the artistic director/impresario infantilises his dancers, who begin their careers as young teenagers, 'baby ballerinas', living highly disciplined, sheltered lives in the asexual world of ballet as art form, appearing, in their eighties, as delightful but aged sylphides.

While Muddupalani could not be termed 'asexual' in the novel, there is a sense in which the self-expression of her dance is severely proscribed as she plays out

³⁹ Additional dance references: Browning (1995), Buonaventura (2003) and Ram (2000).

her Radha role to the King's Krishna. It is not until she loses her ganika mask, at the Summer Palace and at the farm, that she becomes stripped back to a more authentic self, without the pressure to perform and excel, to the point where she tentatively discovers her creativity in writing *Radhika santwanam* and allows herself the potential for a relationship that is free from artifice and dissimulation, with Govinda. At the same time, the movement of her body is more subversive in its spontaneity.

In an attempt at making discursive space for subversive choreographies of desire, dance theorist Albright in *Mining the dancefield: feminist theory and contemporary dance* develops a kinaesthetic dialogue that includes Cixous and Derrida as she explores 'the interplay between multiple languages of the female body, knowing that, however incalculable, these are never inconsequential choreographies' (1991, p. 133). According to Albright, Derrida 'identifies dancing as a "feminine" subversion par excellence' (p. 105). Albright considers this an opportunity for the dancer to move *through* instead of locating her(him)self *in* narrative positions, thus being able to step out of meaning before it becomes stabilised, in a zone that is 'one of choreography and movement that slips right through sexual difference' (p. 106). In this space, it may be possible to devise kinaesthetic possibilities of becoming. For example, in the novel Muddupalani has moved *through* the narrative position of dancer/courtesan, no longer trapped in the character of Radha, Krishna's ornament. By the end of the novel this writing/dancing woman can move freely, dance on the banks of the Kaveri, as the scribe's daughter reads her text; and if she is indeed performing, it is for the goat, for herself and perhaps for the sacred river, in her becoming 'I'.

A further space is made for Muddupalani, as well as Rachel, in dance theory. Albright, having introduced Derrida, brings two more protagonists into the dialogue—Cixous with her notion of the physicality of the writing body, in its hysteria and transgression (p. 164), and Vaslav Nijinsky, whose scandalous sexualised Russian ballet dancing caused a sensation in 1912. He had a capacity for performance that transcends 'the feminisation of spectacle' and is both 'homoerotic and heteroerotic':

His peculiar and spectacular stage antics unsettled and undermined the heavily policed cultural boundaries separating male from female, masculinity from femininity, homosexuality from heterosexuality, and human from nonhuman. (p. 61)

This 'ambisexual Hindu god' in the classical ballet *Le Dieu bleu*, performed in 1912,⁴⁰ was a jouissant rendering of desire in the persona of Krishna. Here, in the discursive space of queer theory, we have Krishna, 'The Blue God', Hindu imagery and movement and Nijinsky, to add to the dialogue on dancing desire, making more room for desiring bodies across sexual and cultural boundaries.⁴¹ Albright contends that, taken together, the writing of Derrida and Cixous and performance by Nijinsky cross:

over boundaries of 'self' and 'other' so frequently that the very categories begin to lose their meaning. What is left then, is the dance created by the movement between those places. (p. 177)

Albright has posited this dialogue as creating a jouissant space in dance that includes ballet. I would like to extend her trio to choreograph for a larger caste, extra dancers—Muddupalani, Rachel and Tata⁴²—to add to the conversation with Derrida and Cixous and Nijinsky.

Such conversation opens up a significantly jouissant discursive space for translations of bodily multilingualism that explore varieties of sexuality and desire.⁴³ In this expanding space, women can also improvise and 'misperform' subjectivities and join a wide-ranging kinaesthetic embodied conversation. Derrida, Cixous, Nijinsky, Tata and Krishna together provide the discursive space. Here, Rachel and Muddupalani choreograph women's selves, challenging existing mainstream dance expectations regarding body type, performance, the gaze, discipline, control, expressivity and eroticism. Gr

⁴⁰ Franklin in Desmond (p. 61). Even more famous for its shock value was *L'après-midi d'une faune* also performed in 1912.

⁴¹ The question of jouissant, transgressive explorations in contemporary Indian dance cannot be dealt with in detail here. Mitra (2006) cites dancers such as Mallika Sarabhai, the late Ranjabati Sircar and Chandralekha, who all attempt to reconfigure the language of Bharat Natyam 'by reaching back to its corporeal roots' (p. 11). She also describes a cross-cultural dance production she devised in Kolkata that combined her classical training there as a child with her experience in contact improvisation in London: 'The Kinaetma project 'attempted to "rewrite" most inscriptions upon their [the Kolkata dancers'] bodies to be replaced by expressions of subjectivity, agency and sexuality' (p. 12). According to Mitra, the project was also attempting 'to reclaim the Indian woman's body and sexuality from the bounds of patriarchal nationalist propriety' (p. 15).

⁴² Tata, the seventy-three-year-old dancer in *My ornament*, has little room to move for choreographing his sexuality in the material world of Indian patriarchal society. However, he can make space in Indian discourse of the moving body, performing his desire, dancing ecstatically, annually, on his birthday, expressing his dedication to Krishna, the god who embodies a multiplicity of desiring subjects. Krishna's ambisexuality provides Tata with this locus of expression.

⁴³ Michael Warner and others 'challenge us to question the heteronormativity of the world and to reveal its operation in symbolic practices. *Queer* in this context stands for all that is not heteronormative and is a practice of symbolic production of interpretation that anyone, whether self-identified as "gay" or "straight", can initiate about anything, whether the subject is associated with gay culture or not' (Desmond, 1998, p.11).

adually, through the moving body and the creation of their texts, the women, these 'body artists' (Albright , p. 109) dance, write and voice woman's desires as they become other. And this process is rehearsed, constantly, across time and space.

Chapter five. Writing across space and time

Nancy Paxton quotes a 19th-century Indian colonial romance in her *Writing under the Raj: gender, race, and rape in the British colonial imagination*:

[Menachee] took wing to other scenes, where the drumming of the tomtoms and the orgy of the heathen pooja filled her wild heart with a gladness that made her life complete. (1999, p. 108)

Menachee is the Indian dancer in Fanny Farr Penny's novel, *Romance of the Nautch Girl* (1898).⁴⁴ Menachee opts for these primitive, heathen pleasures, and in the end Felix rejects her to marry Beryl. According to Paxton:

Penny's conclusion asserts, at the same time, the incorrigible passions that, though racialised and abjected, remained uncontained, passions allowed freest expression in the figure of the secularized dancing girl. (p. 108)

The brief quotation from Penny's novel is a cautionary warning to the Australian feminist who is writing women across time and space and who might inadvertently exoticise her 18th-century dancer character, abandoning her to a textual or material abjection similar to that experienced by Penny's Menachee. Or, at the very least, there is the danger that Muddupalani may be hijacked into Western discursive space in the novel. I was aware of the significant risks in such a project. I could give up, or progress in good faith with the likelihood of making mistakes, referring frequently back to Spivak's notion of the imagining required by literature, this means of engaging with the other which has 'no guarantees' (2003, p. 50). One strategy I employed to deal with this problem was extensive research, that included working closely with people able to advise me on Telugu and Tamil cultures.⁴⁵

A starting point for an Australian feminist writer imagining Muddupalani is to consider different representations (and translations) of the Indian dancer—the ganika and the devadasi—in South Indian, as well as in Western discourses, focusing on

⁴⁴ 'Nautch' is an Anglicised Indian word for dance. 'Nautch girl' was a term used to describe devadasis, but it indicates a secular aspect of the dance, performed for human rather than divine pleasure.

⁴⁵ My field work was intensive and I travelled extensively in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. In all, I made three field trips of six weeks each, usually accompanied by a Tamil-speaking researcher, K.T. Gandhirajan, who located temples, Maratha palaces, English and Tamil texts with me. During this time, I visited the sites inhabited and visited by Muddupalani and the court. For one of the field trips I worked in the University of Madras, Chennai, attached to Professor Arasu in the Tamil Department; this was an Exchange scheme with Victoria University. I consulted with K. Lalita in Hyderabad and the Anveshi Centre for Women. Following up Lalita's contacts, I worked closely with V.A.K. Ranga Rao, a Telugu speaker and musicologist, on South Indian dance and music, who provided invaluable information. He read a late draft of the novel and approved the cultural information, making some suggestions for greater precision.

notions of women's moving erotic body in Telugu-speaking settings and in Tamil country. This process is an attempt at feminist post-colonial readings of my characters that do not draw me into some colonial quagmire. Rather, in this chapter, I aim to make further connections between women writers and readers—textual, embodied and 'planetary'—in the writing of *My ornament*.

In the novel, the King sits in the durbar hall, bored with supplicants, including the foreigners whom he sees as 'just English messengers from some distant, cold island, far away from the riches of Tanjavur' (p. 23). In this dreary state of *ennui*, he decides to withdraw and enjoy quality time with his *ganika*:

She leads, her hips swaying, her tiny waist and curved torso gliding. Yes, she is like a temple sculpture. She turns and smiles at the King. He takes a breath, catches her and steers her in to the small room he has recently had prepared, a retiring room for these moments, because, as everyone knows: *Only the man who has touched the courtesan's breasts can become the commander of a fort; only one who has stared in her face can be a king.* (p. 24)

Muddupalani is seen from Rachel's point of view as she notes that, yes, the dancer she is studying has physical curves that follow the lines of an idealised woman in a temple sculpture. There is some irony in this aside, an acknowledgment that both the author and Rachel are at risk of exoticising the Indian dancer, representing her as a petrified oriental object. But then Muddupalani takes on her full power, with her confident perception of what 'everyone knows', that it is she who provides the King's status. 'Only the man who has touched the courtesan's breasts...' These lines are taken from *Symbols of substance: court and state in Nayaka period Tamilnadu* [sic] (Rao, Shulman & Subrahmanyam 1992), a key reference in my research that gives a vivid picture of the embodied Indian woman of the 18th century.⁴⁶ The bold affirmation of the powers of the dancer's breasts, translated from the Telugu by Rao et al, were written by Muddupalani, the historical figure. They are part of the *Radhika santwanam* text.

Like Lalita and Tharu, cultural studies theorists Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam choose the dancer/courtesan as their 'model' of Indian womanhood in *Symbols of substance: court and state in Nayaka period Tamilnadu*. The work analyses a period of significant cultural change in South India, utilising literary texts of the time to consider subjectivity and 'emerging notions of human identity' in Tamil country (p. 56). While Rao et al focus on the Nayaka dynasty of the early 16th century

⁴⁶ The spelling of Telugu and Tamil names varies when transposed into English and Roman script, e.g. Tamil Nadu.

to the 1730s, there is an overlap with Muddupalani's life and times, as they highlight the striking artistic creations of courtesans such as Muddupalani⁴⁷ who appear in these historical works as women with agency and a 'brazen self-confidence' (p. 316), providing symbolic recognition of the status of these, generally self-made, kings (p. 54). In the literature, the poets fashion images of sensuality and excitement in which the artist/courtesan and their lovers indulge with abandon. This excess is located in feminised court ritual, where the King assumes a ritual devotional role, personifying the god Krishna in all his erotic glory, thus proclaiming the body to be 'the primary instrument of transcendence' (p. 61). Rao et al make the point that the heroes and heroines of the literature of the time include Radha and Krishna, and all of them are 'protagonists in dramas of sensual excess and violation' (p.124). I have drawn on these perceptions of power in my portrayal of Muddupalani and her lover and liege, Pratapasimha. Such representations of a god are far from my Christian tradition which sadly lacks the erotic divine. Bhakti, devotion to the god, comes in different forms. One manifestation is sringara, 'in which the worshipper sees Krishna as a lover, as did Radha and the gopis' (Isacco and Dallapiccola 1982, p. 22). In this erotic/spiritual ambience celebrating Radha/Krishna, there is:

a groping towards the individual—the single, feminine human being endowed with a body—is part of a wider process of self-transforming awareness. As already hinted, much of it involves an expanding imagination, which seeks to explore the women's subjectivity in the context of love and bodily experience, always in relation to the male figures surrounding her. (Rao et al, p. 123)

In *My ornament* it is not only Muddupalani who undergoes this 'transforming self-awareness'. Rachel also becomes gradually absorbed into the space of sensuality – and its resonance of the erotic divine—in South India, in her own temporal location and in the imagined cultural space of 18th-century Tanjavur. Towards the end of the novel she is even more convinced that the erotic is the preferred path, in keeping with her developed understanding of and identification with Muddupalani. When she believes that she has lost Surinder to the familial, conjugal enterprise, she dramatises, with some irony, her present life and her vision of future bliss in heaven:

These people will live their lives as they should, but will not know Paradise. I run my hand over my breast and torso. After all, as Tata says, *heaven is full of actors, playboys and*

⁴⁷ Muddupalani (1730–1760) lived in Tanjavur which was ruled by a Maratha king, Pratapasimha (1739–1763), but the court continued many of the linguistic and cultural practices of the previous Telugu-speaking Nayaka dynasty.

courtesans; it's no place for a married woman. And I will be there in the celestial heights, among the seraphim and cherubim, fingering stiff paper covered with verse, reading words in many tongues, enthralled by the thrum of the tanpura, guitars; dancing with ganikas; watching video clips of rock stars strumming riffs, among heartbreaking men with golden eyes, in all, all of my silver ornaments. The Lord Krishna will be there, but not Surinder. For *it is a grave sin to sleep with anyone else but the person you love, even your wife.* And this is an Indian saying, not one brought here by a rank outsider. (p. 186)

Rachel's celestial vision is syncretic and hybrid, encompassing the Christian and Hindu, replete with 'world' (and other-worldly) music. It is sensual, with fingers touching words on paper as glances meet golden eyes. The *actors, playboys and courtesans*—and the writers—are there too, but not Surinder, who has not qualified, having chosen to be a family man, eschewing devotion to the senses and spontaneous sexual love, sleeping with a woman who is his wife, not his lover, thus committing a serious offence against the natural order. For *it is a grave sin...* In the world of the court writers and *My ornament*, Rachel has the entitlement of the lover. This is one performance of the Hindu erotic divine, in courtly 18th-century Tanjavur, reflected in the fictive representation of embodiment in *My ornament*, where the flesh is indeed heavenly, with 'the body' as 'a primary *sadhana*, instrument of transcendence' (Rao et al. 1992, p. 114). Muddupalani was a major player, and Rachel a fictive character imagining herself in a world of changing notions of embodiment, in a spectacular South Indian Nayaka cultural transformation which was 'linked to emerging notions of human identity and to altered paradigms of knowledge, both of the world and the self' (Rao et al., p.58).

Rachel's positioning is achieved through a 'mixture of signs, citations, and echoes' (Cohan & Shires, 1988, p. 50). I suggest that this multifaceted intertextuality links not only an Indian and an Australian dancing/writing woman, but also South Indian notions of the self with *écriture féminine*. In 'Word, dialogue and the novel', Julia Kristeva writes that 'any text is the absorption and transformation of another... and poetic language is read as at least *double*' (Kristeva in Moi 1986, p. 37). In *My ornament* the intertextuality is multiple in its connections, transferring across the text a range of possible readings. The two quotations, in italics, in the fragment from *My ornament* above, are both purloined from Nayaka literature surveyed in Rao et al and given to my characters.⁴⁸ *Heaven is full of actors...* Rachel's words, above, cite

⁴⁸ *Heaven is full of actors...* in Rao et al, p.152.

Muddupalani who has already mused on the subject of heaven and its inhabitants, in a very different setting, earlier, at the queens' sati where she is grieving the death of Pratapasimha and watching the beginnings of his cremation (p. 120). In the above scene, Rachel is also directly and consciously citing Tata who earlier stated that: *Heaven is full of actors...* The second quote from Rao et al in the fragment above is given to Rachel. She says melodramatically, *It is a sin to sleep...*⁴⁹ So there is a cross-over of shared citations in the text, not only between the characters of Muddupalani and Rachel, but with the narrator as well. The same words, from South Indian traditional texts, enable the fictive and fictionalised characters in the novel to inhabit this inbetween space across time.

In the novel a further multiplicity of 'signs, citations and echoes' is woven in an 'intersemiotic translation', a term proposed by Canadian feminist Pamela Banting. In *The Body as Pictogram: Rethinking Hélène Cixous' écriture féminine*, Banting proposes this notion of 'translation' as an alternative model to 'representation'. She suggests that Cixous's corporeal and gendered grammatology begins to make it possible to translate between bodies and texts (1992, p. 240). *My ornament* is a fictive exploration of this translation:

Arches hold up a high timber ceiling and the space is broken up with slim wooden pillars. Dancers had performed here. It would be difficult for a large group of women to move easily. Constricting... Rachel tries, she really does, to transport herself into another skin, to translate herself into Tamil or Telugu when her mouth does not speak the language. Can her body speak? She throws the dupata across her right shoulder. It is an annoying pink, a colour that she would never wear in Melbourne. But Surinder had pressed her to buy some Indian dresses. (p. 21)

In the hall where Muddupalani danced for the King, Rachel makes her first attempts at translating her body into this new space, wearing the new Indian clothes that she had bought under Surinder's supervision. Eventually she transposes herself into Muddupalani.

In her article, Banting re-examines Cixous' deployment of the hysterical body as a glyph or pictogram in 'The laugh of the Medusa', and expands the notion of women's writing. Banting's reading of *écriture féminine* compares 'intersemiotic translation' with the transposition from verbal art into music, dance, cinema or painting. The poetic body, the body as pictogram, according to Banting, allows

⁴⁹ *It is a sin to sleep...* from a South Indian traditional story, critiqued in Rao et al, p. 155.

Cixous to hypothesise women's writing as in part translation between language and corporeality (p. 231). Banting asserts that:

translation among different signifying systems, both verbal and non-verbal—speech, writing, image, song, gesture, caress, and flesh—is not only possible but provides a way out of the problematics of representation. (p. 237)

It is at this point that dance can leap into this space in a displacement of cultural meanings. In *Mining the dancefield* (1991), Albright suggests that movement and the gaps between allow for:

an intricate layering of visual, kinaesthetic, and cultural meanings in which bodies, sexualities and identities can begin to restage the terms of their alliance. For if sexual difference can be conceived as physical motion rather than a set of stable ideological positions, the resultant narratives of desire might then be choreographed with more imagination. (p. 160)

Hence, Albright expands further the notion of dance narratives of desire by positioning it, with Banting, in the multiple possibilities of 'intersemiotic translation'. This cross-over space provides an opportunity for women's agency. Then, on a more literal level, Albright refers to Nancy Stark Smith's movement hieroglyphs that translate dance and bodies into marks on the page. According to Albright, an informed 'effort/shape analysis would reveal, for instance, the dynamics and spatial pathways of the movement' to which lay people could easily have a 'movement response'. These 'little insignias of a moving body' (p. 14) have the potential to leap across time and space. The flourishes, curves and dashes remind me of Muddupalani's 'squiggles on the paper' that she would study as an illiterate girl before she was 'chosen' for Tanjavur life. 'What secrets did they hold?' she asks. She remembers back to her lessons, her first study of Marathi and the Devnagari script with Guruji:

The script was so different from the Telugu which burbles over the paper, curly and round, with jaunty scrolls and squiggles, sometimes little darting animals, or apples and oranges with curly stalks, all rolling and hopping across the page. (p. 165)

Muddupalani, a young girl experiencing intensive training in movement, is conducting her own naïve effort/space analysis of the marks on the page. In the absence of the organising skill that she does not yet fully possess—that of reading—she looks for the movement or stasis of the glyphs:

I turned the page around on the table in front of me. The Marathi is more sensible than the cheerful Telugu. There was the line across the top of the marks which hung like sleeping bats from the ceiling beam. (p. 166)

The viewer who lacks literal understanding must learn to find sense in the marks on the paper, or, if that is not possible, to imagine it. Like Muddupalani, the 'illiterate'

Australian writer must stare at *Radhika santwanam*, at the shapes on paper, ‘rolling and hopping across the page’, and speculate as to their meaning, until she can have fragments of the text translated into English. Then she must imagine what falls in between—the verses that she cannot read, the partly illegible person of their author, Muddupalani. In so doing, she attempts an ‘intersemiotic translation’ between women’s bodies and texts.

Such notions are not apparent in contemporary Indian feminist literary discourse. Lalita and Tharu’s *Women writing in India* (1993) is a huge translation project,⁵⁰ but while their icon of Indian woman is Muddupalani, there is limited theoretical consideration of women’s bodies and texts. Lalita and Tharu do not theorise the ‘mixture of signs, citations, and echoes’ across cultures in terms of women’s bodies and ‘intersemiotic translation’. They acknowledge very briefly that they do not have a great expertise in French feminist thought. In fact, their only reference to Cixous and Kristeva is to say that:

(s)trictly speaking, of course neither Cixous’ concept of *écriture féminine* (feminine writing) nor Kristeva’s notion of femininity as marginality is concerned with *women’s* writing. (p. 13)

Since *Indian women writing*, Susie Tharu has turned to Francophone women thinkers and writers in a transcultural project that includes two volumes, one of French (already published) and the other of Indian feminisms (still to come). *French feminism: an Indian anthology* is translated into English, for Indian readers (Haase-Dubosc et al., 2003).

The 447-page first volume of *French feminism* covers everything from Women and Creativity to Trafficking in Women to Monique Wittig and Olympe de Gouges. It is an attempt to redress the situation where

French feminist thought never reached India directly, but was mediated by translations undertaken in England or the United States by English or American feminists who chose those French texts best suited to further their own needs in their own locations. [The Indian project aimed to create] ‘other internationalisms’. (p. 15)

In the resulting broad survey there are a few brief references to Cixous and Kristeva and no entry in the index for *écriture féminine*. This ‘French feminism for Indian women’ has little to say about women’s desire and sexuality. This is a gap in keeping with many contemporary Anglophone feminist publications.

⁵⁰ The collection includes works in eleven languages and spans 2,600 years. The target language is English.

This thesis attempts to make links between Western feminist thought (viz *écriture féminine*) and Indian feminist notions in the discursive space of women's physical/writing/textual body. While Muddupalani and her writing are clearly located within the milieu of South Indian, Telugu-language and Tamil-country discourse, a crucial link to initiate 'other internationalisms' is *écriture féminine*. The courtesans are celebrating the body in expressions of their sexuality in their poetry and in their dance and music. They create a *jouissance*, a *rasa* as they connect with the *rasika*, the viewer in the ecstasy of artistic, *jouissant* performance, in a society with:

an expanding imagination, which seeks to explore the women's subjectivity in the context of love and bodily experience. (Rao et al , p. 123)

The character of Rachel, and her intersubjectivity with the other women in *My ornament*, translates this *rasa* across time and space to the end of the second millennium, and in so doing raises the question of connection through the capacity to *read* the other: the extent to which Rachel reads Muddupalani; their capacity to read each other; the challenge for the author of *My ornament* in reading (misreading) and writing Muddupalani. But then, this also creates opportunities for connection through writing practice. Surely, one goal shared by writers of fiction is further understanding of the human condition:

One of the novel's major social functions, it could be argued, is to demonstrate and reinforce, perhaps to generate, the assumption that the other is another person like me. (Miller 2001, p. 66)

At the same time, there is the possibility of inaccuracy in *reading* the other, for the characters in a novel. Miller's example is from *Middlemarch* where:

Casaubon is for Dorothea a text to be read, or rather misread, since, like a book, he has a fatal susceptibility to multiple interpretations. (p. 71)

Dorothea and her husband are of the same background, in the same temporal space. Their differences are of sensibility and interpretation, rather than large swathes of time and geographical space in between Rachel and Muddupalani. For example, Rachel is swimming:

Muddupalani laughs and rubs her eyes. The sun strikes the fish woman's buttocks, part silver and part pinkish flesh. The fish has a green head, not unlike a human's. If it is a human, her head is flat with no hair, just a green skull, like a cap made of a great lotus leaf, shrunk and moulded to the size of a woman's head. The face is in the water. After two strokes, left and right, left and right, a face swivels out to the side and the fish opens its mouth and seems to breathe in. It has great bulging eyes with a black line from the sides around the back of the head, as if they are held together by a ribbon. The mouth closes and the fish face points down

into the water. And what would the fish woman see if she strained her neck, broke her stroke and looked back? But she stays in rhythm, scooping through the water with her hands like paddles, looking through the lenses of her goggles into the deep, knowing that any shape she sees will be merely a knotted tree stump or some perfectly natural and real phenomenon. (p. 17)

In this scene the woman on the steps by the Summer Palace, in her heightened emotional state with the preconceptions of her time and location, and her vivid imagination, responds to the phenomena at hand—the woman in bathing cap, goggles and a swimsuit, doing the Australian crawl. Muddupalani reads Rachel, inaccurately, as fish not woman, in the ambiguous inbetween space at the river, a parallel to incomprehension on the part of Rachel as she makes incomplete readings of Muddupalani. With Radha as a further textual connection, in *Radhika santwanam*, the characters read and cite each other, literally and metaphorically, in a triangulation of fictive relationships in *My ornament*. And this reading generates invention: Muddupalani, Rachel and the author are inventing each other. These inventions require a new space in which the writer:

creates a world that must be read with the assumption of (some) shared codes (social, cultural, linguistic) to make meaning. (Hutcheon 1991, p. 29)

According to Hutcheon, this can be achieved by placing the reader ‘temporally and spatially oriented in the fictional world’ (p. 51). Gail Jones’s short story, ‘Eleanor reads Emma’ (1997) creates this zone for her characters, within the imaginary. This space overlaps the ‘planetary’ in Jones’s exploration of reading and writing and translation across time and space. (See discussion later in this section regarding planetarity).

Jones begins her story with the question, ‘What is it to read?’ (p. 44). She answers by placing two women together in a relationship—Flaubert’s Emma Bovary and a fictionalised historical figure, Eleanor Marx, who in fact made the first translation of *Madam Bovary* into English. Jones establishes a subtle and complex intertextuality, a translation and, further, an intersubjectivity between the two women in the story. Like Emma, Eleanor dreams of passion as she fashions French into English sentences:

...when she read *Madame Bovary* it seemed ineluctably her self. I am Emma Bovary, she might have whispered to the night, her voice soft and serious and dreamy as Flaubert. (p. 45)

Of course, Flaubert's heroine has constructed a dream-life from reading romantic novels and has tried to realise it in her own provincial existence, with disastrous consequences.

'No doubt you know Emma Bovary's story,' Jones checks with her reader, before outlining, in both fictive fine detail and broad biographical strokes, her reading of the life of Emma, including Emma's suicide with arsenic. Eleanor immerses herself in translating Flaubert's novel and finds that, gradually, everything inevitably *refers*. Her own life becomes cross-referenced to Emma Bovary until Eleanor, the translator, will also eventually suicide with arsenic. During this process of referral, Jones creates the fictive space. When her brainless lover falls asleep, drunk beside her,

Eleanor's book has fallen to the floor and closed its French pleasures. She extinguishes the lantern and lies quietly, listening to the wind. A detonation of pigeon wings momentarily startles her; then it is the black wind again blowing all around the planet, blowing across the English channel, furrowing the dark cold water, heading eastward, and billowing, and rising to a gale. (p. 53)

Here the expansion is both spatial and temporal, out from Eleanor's claustrophobic domestic scene, borne on the dark wind across the water to France, Emma Bovary's territory, as the fictive narrative ranges across time and space, encompassing readers, writers and characters.

There are comparisons to be made with *My ornament*: Gail Jones shows Eleanor reading Emma, just as Rachel reads *Radhika santwanam*; both Muddupalani and Eleanor are historical figures, refashioned into fictive personae. Jones's Eleanor finds that everything 'refers' to Emma Bovary. Rachel goes further, translating her self into the fiction of a devadasi/ganika, Muddupalani.

Such reading, writing and translation across time and space are theorised in 'Literature for the planet' by Wai Chi Dimock (2001). In her article, Dimock makes a strong connection between Mandelstam and Dante as the early 20th-century Russian dissident reads his treasured copy of *The divine comedy* in gaol. According to Dimock, in such planetary writing, texts bind readers to each other, defying chronology, nationality and geographical borders. Dante is:

a reader, a writer and a translator [for] if writing must end up being a form of translation... from the here and now, it is reading that initiates that process. (p. 178)

Thus Muddupalani's work, like Flaubert's and Dante's, is one of countless texts that come alive, over and over, in diverse locations and times. Such readings turn literature into the collective life of the planet and:

this life derives its morphology... from the motion of words: motion effected when borders are crossed, when a new frame of reference is mixed with an old, when foreign languages turn a native tongue into a hybrid. (p. 178)

Accordingly, we have the opportunity to stop pigeon-holing literatures within national borders, saying predictable things in that context, and to embrace the new meanings available from global readings. For Dimock this has a vital function as:

the human species articulates itself across space and time (allowing) human beings to have a *collective life*, not identical to the life span of a perishable individual or of a perishable nation. (p. 182) [my emphasis]

My vision is that my project is a part of Dimock's 'collective life', a position also taken by Gayatri Spivak's recent theorising on planetary writing, within the discourse of comparative literature. While Spivak's earlier work emphasised women, identity politics and agency, within post-colonial discourses (1988), eighteen years later, she now writes that planetarity is a crucial project in this millennium, proposing, in the final essay of *Death of a Discipline* (2003), for 'the planet to overwrite the globe' (2003, p.72)⁵¹. There are echoes here of Braidotti, who sees this collective life as a form of nomadism, a non-linear break from 'monolingualism':

Moving between languages, speaking several and mastering none, living in constant simultaneous translation, is a possible location for the nomadic sensibility which best expresses itself in creative writing... there are no mother tongues, only linguistic sites from which one takes one's departure. (pp. 94–95)

My reading and writing Muddupalani is an attempt to re-locate and translate *Radhika santwanam* and to place *My ornament* in a transnational feminist space of embodied women, rather than an 'Australian' work trying to appropriate the space of an 'Indian' novel. The process involves the challenge of trying to know the other, to translate her semiotically through the body, to imagine her as one might imagine oneself in another culture.

⁵¹ Susan Bassnet provides a succinct summary of Spivak's planetarity: 'A new comparative literature will need to "undermine and undo" the tendency of dominant cultures to appropriate emergent ones (Spivak, 2003, p. 100). In other words it will need to move beyond the parameters of Western literatures and societies and reposition itself within a planetary context. The original enterprise of comparative literature, which sought to read literature trans-nationally in terms of themes, movements, genres, periods, zeitgeist, history of ideas is out-dated and needs to be rethought...There is therefore a politicised dimension to comparative literature; Spivak proposes the idea of planetarity in opposition to globalisation, which she argues involves the imposition of the same values and system of exchange everywhere.' (2006, p.3).

Conclusion

This thesis, through the practice of creative fiction, explores woman's desiring, dancing, writing body across time and space. It makes a new discursive space by connecting elements of *écriture féminine*, cultural nomadism, women's fiction, transnational feminism, the heterosexual erotic, dance theory, as well as notions of planetarity. These are the main issues that arise for me, as a contemporary feminist, in the writing of the novel.

The metaphor of 'ornament' in my novel provides multiple meanings and a transcultural textual space for women's writing, drawing on South Indian notions of woman, desire and art with their potential to expand traditional Western frames. The trope provides a gap in which to explore new economies of desire that suggest the shifting dimensions of agency and subjectivity.

My ornament writes the body in the discursive space of *écriture féminine*, and the exegetical reflections chart the characters' shifting dissolution and reconstitution of identity as the women relate to their lovers, writing on and with the body. In addition, the exegesis compares and contrasts the narrative concerns and style of the novel to elements of Australian and Francophone women's writing.

In *My ornament* Muddupalani, Rachel and Radha, always the primary subjects, negotiate the space and push the boundaries available to them in the libidinal disequilibrium of a patriarchal society. Positions are set and then undermined in the tensions of male/female relationships, so that ultimately the women assert their subjectivity in settings where there is usually just a cramped corner for them to inhabit. This exploration of women's desire in fiction, while engaging in transnational feminist dialogue, increases the capacity for enlarging this space.

In considering the erotic dancing woman, the thesis makes queer and feminist readings of desire, opening up a significantly jouissant discursive space for translations of bodily multilingualism. Here, women can also improvise and 'misperform' subjectivities, so that Muddupalani and Rachel join the kinaesthetic embodied conversation with an enlarged caste—Derrida, Cixous, Nijinsky, Tata and

Krishna, all body artists, challenging existing mainstream expectations of dance, text and desire.

In its time/space exploration, the thesis makes a bold jouissant intersubjective translation between woman's writing body in *écriture féminine* and the erotic sensibilities of South India, specifically the sites inhabited by Muddupalani, the 18th-century Tanjavur court and its environs, positioning Rachel firmly in this zone, translating the characters back and forth in the fluidity of the erotic writing space.

The process of this project relates to Braidotti's notion of 'in transit', making links 'where things were previously dis-connected (1997, p. 76). *My ornament* attempts such a transit/translation, between India and Australia, the 18th and the late 20th centuries, with new ways of relating across physical, temporal and discursive space.

I believe that, as writers and readers, it is critical at this time that we participate in the creation of such narratives which provide 'new ways of relating' (Braidotti, 1997, p. 76). Seyla Benhabib (1999) suggests that the subject is constituted through developing a 'synthetic' narrative, rather than merely accepting the story into which we are born, changing these stories constantly as we connect with other life narratives. This notion suggests the construction of texts that create 'footbridges between notions' (Braidotti, 1997, p. 76), requiring a leap of the imagination. It is a Deleuzian 'pushing the subject' to his or her limit, in a constant encounter with external, different others (Braidotti 2002, p. 118).

The synthesising of narrative in *My ornament* is a risk-taking 'erotics of thinking' where bodily sensation provides a truth. It is pursued through the characters of three women, precious ornaments, enfolded, erotic, their writing tattooed on dancing sexual bodies, claiming agency in their heterosexual relationships across time and space, as they construct fictional choreographies of the self.

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⁵² This list of works consulted reflects the entire thesis—both the novel and the exegesis.

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