

John Adams A Flowering Tree





A Flowering Tree

An Opera in Two Acts

Music by John Adams

Libretto by John Adams and Peter Sellars
adapted from the Indian folktale and poetry
in translations by A.K. Ramanujan

Jessica Rivera, *soprano*

Russell Thomas, *tenor*

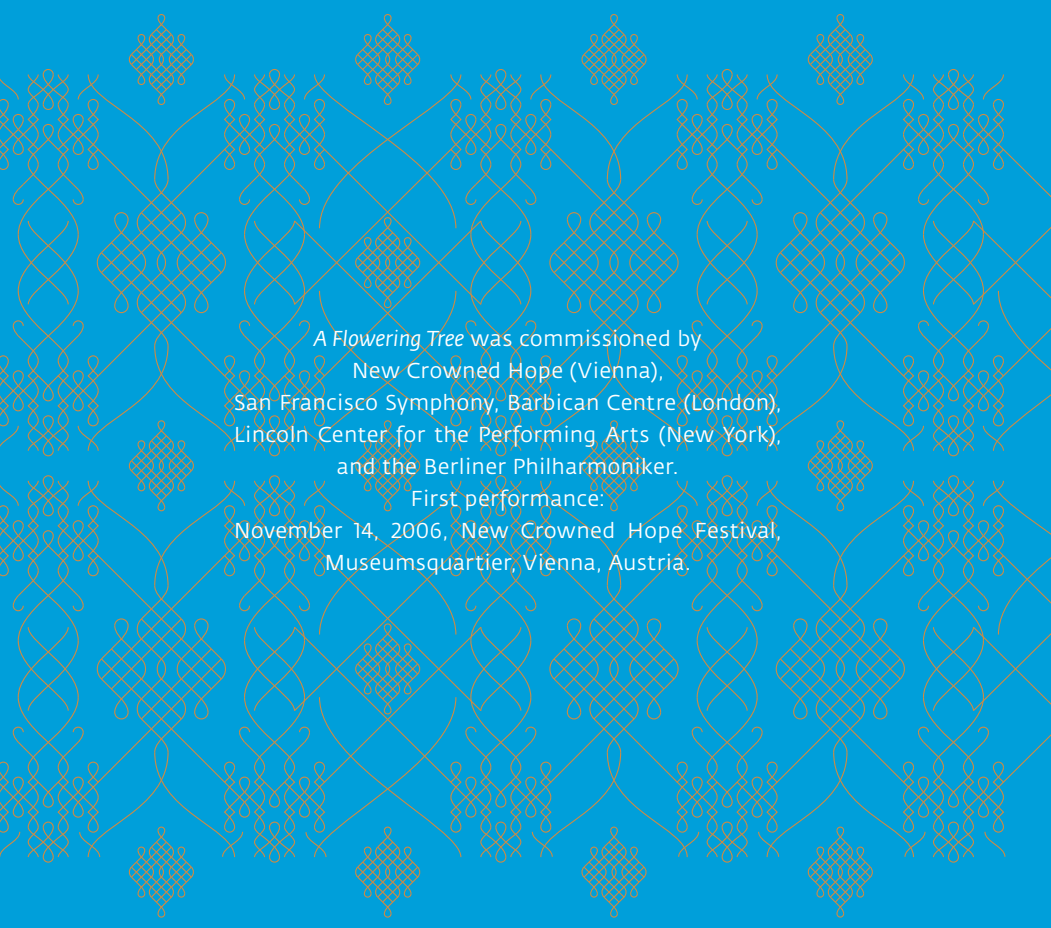
Eric Owens, *bass-baritone*

London Symphony Orchestra

John Adams, conductor

Schola Cantorum de Venezuela

Maria Guinand, director



A Flowering Tree was commissioned by
New Crowned Hope (Vienna),
San Francisco Symphony, Barbican Centre (London),
Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts (New York),
and the Berliner Philharmoniker.

First performance:
November 14, 2006, New Crowned Hope Festival,
Museumsquartier, Vienna, Austria.

Disc One

1. Act I Scene 1 3:52
2. One morning... 8:41
3. Kumudha's Prayer 6:40
4. Scene 2: Flores Chorus 2:44
5. Kumudha and her sister... 8:53
6. Scene 3: Audience with the King 2:25
7. Mamá Mamá, ¿Por qué nos pegas? 4:43
8. Scene 4: The Wedding 3:50
9. They brought her to me 5:38
10. Bride and Groom 6:24
11. The bride sunk her face... 5:45

Disc Two


1. Act II Scene 1: Orchestral Prelude 6:59
2. "You are cruel." 3:50
3. "Kumudha once more..." 5:45
4. "Days passed..." 5:12
5. Scene 3: Before I laughed with him nightly 6:31
6. Scene 4: Kumudha and the Beggar Minstrels 10:03
7. Scene 5: We had all but forgotten you, Prince 5:43
8. The Prince recognizes Kumudha 5:41
9. Kumudha's Final Transformation 3:15








In the 2000-year-old South Indian folk tale *A Flowering Tree*, a beautiful young girl devises a plan to help her impoverished family: she transforms herself into a tree, from which she and her sister gather the fragrant flowers, weave them into garlands, and sell them at the marketplace. They carefully perform the ritual, which requires two pitchers of water for the girl to turn into the tree, and two pitchers of water for her to turn back into human form. A prince from the nearby palace spies on her and wants her for his wife. After their wedding, the prince commands the girl to metamorphose for him. She complies, but his sister watches from a hiding place and, envious of her sister-in-law's powers, forces the girl to perform the ceremony for a group of her friends. After the girl turns into a tree, however, they break her branches, tear off her flowers, and abandon her, without helping her turn back into human shape. She languishes in a netherworld, not quite tree, not quite human. The prince, distraught at his wife's disappearance, begins to wander through the country as a beggar. After a long time, haggard and wasted, he ends up by chance in a distant town; his wife, separately, has managed to reach the same town, where the queen happens to be the prince's long-lost sister. Shocked at her brother's deterioration, she tries to help him, but to no avail. Finally, as a last resort, her servants bring the half-woman, half-tree to the prince. Husband and wife recognize each other even through their drastically changed appearances, and with pitchers of water he restores her to her human self.



This tale became the basis for John Adams' 2006 opera *A Flowering Tree*, commissioned for the New Crowned Hope Festival in Vienna for the 250th anniversary of Mozart's birth. The impetus for the opera was an invitation from the festival director and longtime Adams collaborator, Peter Sellars, who invited composers, choreographers, filmmakers, and other artists to create responses to Mozart's late work. *A Flowering Tree* is Adams' response to *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*), Mozart's final opera. Like *The Magic Flute*, *A Flowering Tree* is a love story about transformation, trial by fire, redemption, and everyday miracles.


Mozart finished his magical, tender score for *The Magic Flute* after immersing himself in the sober historical world of *La Clemenza di Tito*. *A Flowering Tree*, Adams' radiant reflection on innocence, emerged from the darkness of his previous opera, *Doctor Atomic*, about the creation of the atom bomb and its ramifications. While the chorus and orchestra in *Doctor Atomic* deliver their power at full force, *The Flowering Tree* is delicate, sensuous, and subtle, like the folk tale itself. Although the orchestra in the pit is large—there are 32 percussion instruments, along with strings, winds, brass, harp, and celesta—much of the opera sounds like chamber music, with only one or two solo instruments joining a singer against a shimmering dreamscape. This is music of intense intimacy.

The cast is stripped down to just three solo voices: the girl, anonymous in the original story, to whom Adams gave the Tamil name Kumudha; the Prince;



and a Storyteller, Adams' invention, whom he refers to as "an all-purpose, omniscient baritone narrator." The versatile chorus fills in remaining roles, deftly switching characters within moments in one scene, for instance, from the pontifical commands of the King (in English) to the shrill accusations of Kumudha's mother (in Spanish). Because of the cast of three, with the Storyteller peripheral to the action, the encounter between Kumudha and the Prince becomes its own enchanted microcosm around which everyone and everything else revolves, and the music remains always in its service. There are times, for instance in Kumudha's plaintive prayer to Śiva in Act II, when the entire drama lies in her wide-ranging lyrical vocal line, while the orchestra around her is nearly still, holding quiet chords. Even at the opera's most violent moment, when Kumudha's sister-in-law taunts her and nearly destroys her, the chorus' shouts of "Muchacha!" are exuberant and jazzy, the scene's aggression implied rather than overt. Much later, when Kumudha and the Prince are reunited, the Storyteller's voice is alone, in hushed phrases answered softly in the strings, and the orchestra moves forward in tentative questioning phrases as the couple approach each other. Only in the opera's final pages, when Kumudha completes her final transformation, do the full orchestra and chorus envelop the two lovers in a rapturous embrace.


With the exception of the Nativity oratorio, *El Niño*, each of Adams' forays into opera and music theater have dealt with contemporary themes: *Nixon in China*,



The Death of Klinghoffer, *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky*, and *Doctor Atomic*. What Adams and Sellars recognized, of course, is that the ancient Indian tale speaks to our time as urgently as any contemporary subject. For this opera—their sixth collaboration, and the third for which they themselves have created the libretto—they chose Kannada poetry and folk tales in translations by the South Indian poet, scholar, and translator A.K. Ramanujan, who writes:

In my twenties, I collected tales from anyone who would tell me one: my mother, servants, aunts, men and women in village families with whom I stayed when I was invited to lecture in local schools, schoolteachers and schoolchildren, carpenters, tailors. I wrote them down by hand and, years later, when I could afford a tape recorder, recorded them. I had no idea what to do with them. I had no thought of writing books. I was just entranced by oral tales. I had read *Grimm*, *Aesop*, *Pañcatantra*, *Boccaccio*, the *Ocean of Story*, and devoured any tale that appeared in any children's magazine. I had no idea I was doing what was called folklore.


Like most folk tales from around the world, *A Flowering Tree* synthesizes two discrete elements: first, an impossible narrative (a girl turns into a tree; a prince marries a peasant), and second, mythic archetypes which resonate deeply with all of us, no matter what our beliefs. We recognize the girl desperate to help her mother; we know the spoiled boy who demands that his father procure the girl he wants; we've witnessed young girls tormented by their peers.



In Ramanujan's version of the tale, Kumudha has just started puberty (the words for "flowering" and "menstruation" are the same in Sanskrit and Tamil). She wants to use her transformational powers for good, not selfish, purposes; but her own husband fetishizes them, and his sister viciously abuses them. Only through a rite of passage, a stripping of all his riches and status (which we remember from the story of Siddhartha) can the prince prove himself worthy. The moment of recognition which concludes the story—two soulmates dramatically transformed, but now attuned to understand each other—may remind us of young Tamina and Pamina from *The Magic Flute*.

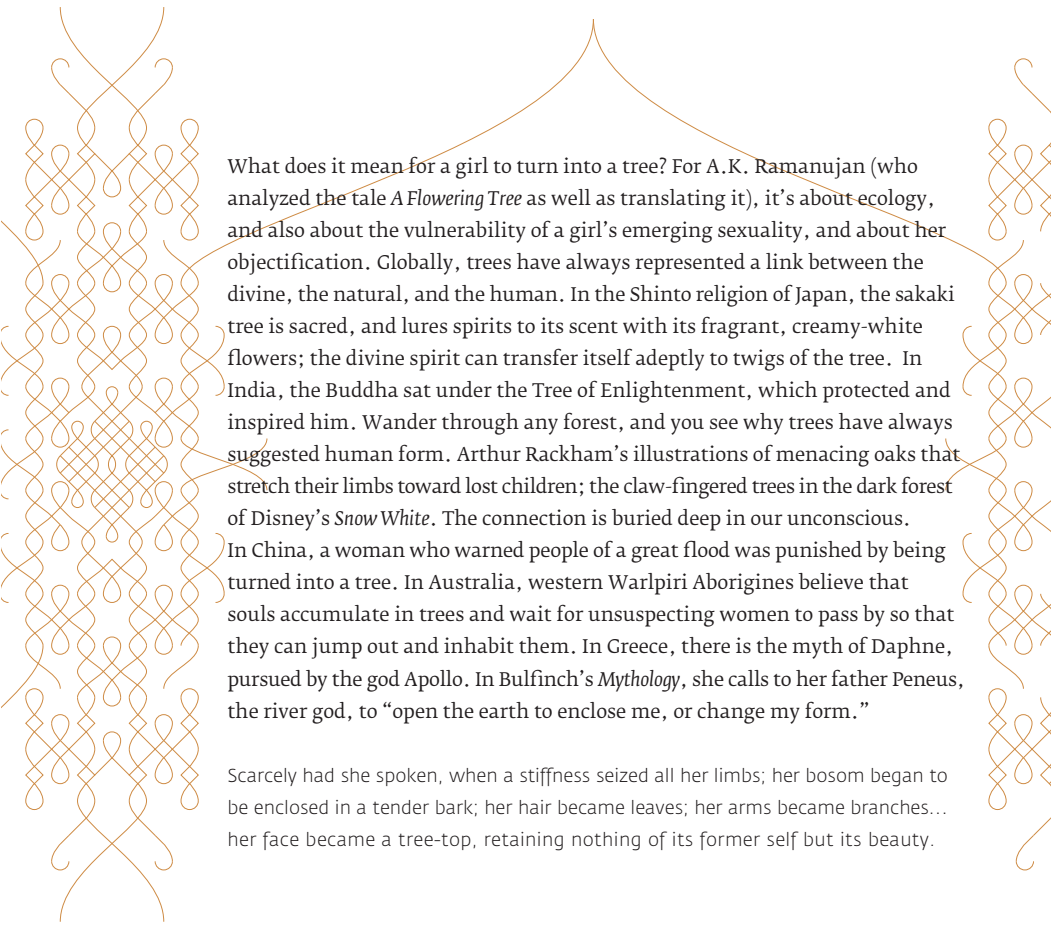
Adams has described Mozart's late works as being "of almost totemic significance for me as an adolescent...I would not be the same person today had not these pieces existed." Like Mozart's, Adams' music stands up to rigorous analysis, but communicates immediately without any prior experience or study. And like Mozart, he finds inspiration in folk songs, in daily life, in what he himself calls "the vernacular." Both composers transcend notions of class and social status, of "high" and "low." Both manage this feat most elegantly through the medium of opera.

It was Adams' decision to set the chorus texts in Spanish: "I did this in part because I knew that for our first Vienna performances I would have the luxury of Maria Guinand's famous Schola Cantorum de Venezuela chorus...I also felt



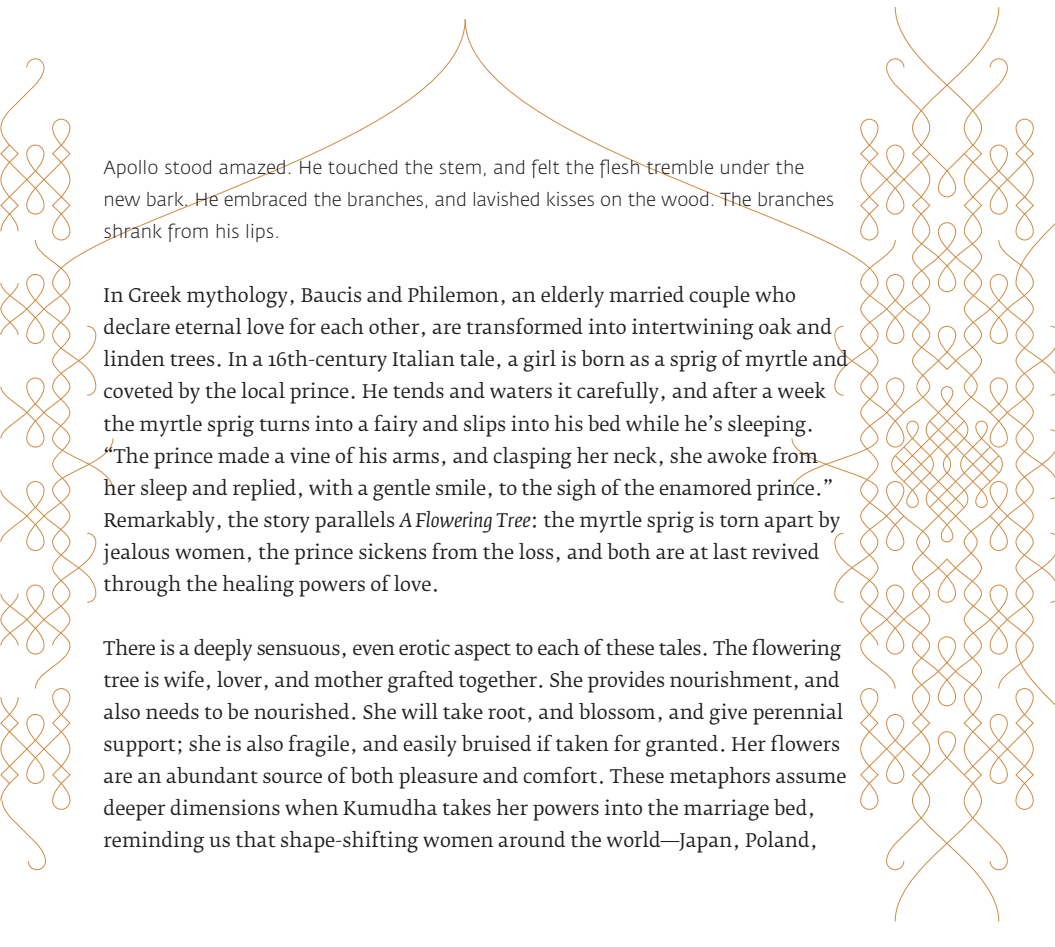
that Spanish had become my second language, that its sonorities and particular rhythmic profile had become expressive of my daily life in California.” The orchestra for the premiere was the Joven Camerata di Venezuela, graduates of that country’s remarkable music education program. Sellars added three Javanese classical dancers—Rusini Sidi, Eko Supriyanto, and Astri Kusama Wardani—to shadow the three soloists with elegant choreography. At the premiere in Vienna on November 14, 2006, everyone, even the orchestra and Adams conducting, wore colorful Indian costumes, creating a rainbow of hues onstage.

With a text in English and Spanish, an Indian tale, a Venezuelan chorus and orchestra, and Indonesian dancers, a composer other than Adams might have chosen to cobble together a multicultural pastiche, with musical references to ragas and gamelan and Latin dances. Instead, Adams chose a more subtle route, delving beyond cultural differences into the essence of the story. Even when he evokes a Ramayana monkey chant in Act II, the music itself, bristling with hocketing winds and off-kilter brass fanfares, reminds us more of his own *Harmonielehre* than it does Balinese traditional music. Things are never as simple as they seem on the surface; even individual instruments take on multidimensional roles. So while the soprano and alto recorders (which Adams uses for the first time in his orchestration) may evoke Hispanic folk music, they also recall the netherworld of *Orfeo ed Euridice*. If the glockenspiel hints at gamelan, it also summons up Papageno’s bells from *The Magic Flute*.



What does it mean for a girl to turn into a tree? For A.K. Ramanujan (who analyzed the tale *A Flowering Tree* as well as translating it), it's about ecology, and also about the vulnerability of a girl's emerging sexuality, and about her objectification. Globally, trees have always represented a link between the divine, the natural, and the human. In the Shinto religion of Japan, the sakaki tree is sacred, and lures spirits to its scent with its fragrant, creamy-white flowers; the divine spirit can transfer itself adeptly to twigs of the tree. In India, the Buddha sat under the Tree of Enlightenment, which protected and inspired him. Wander through any forest, and you see why trees have always suggested human form. Arthur Rackham's illustrations of menacing oaks that stretch their limbs toward lost children; the claw-fingered trees in the dark forest of Disney's *Snow White*. The connection is buried deep in our unconscious. In China, a woman who warned people of a great flood was punished by being turned into a tree. In Australia, western Warlpiri Aborigines believe that souls accumulate in trees and wait for unsuspecting women to pass by so that they can jump out and inhabit them. In Greece, there is the myth of Daphne, pursued by the god Apollo. In Bulfinch's *Mythology*, she calls to her father Peneus, the river god, to "open the earth to enclose me, or change my form."

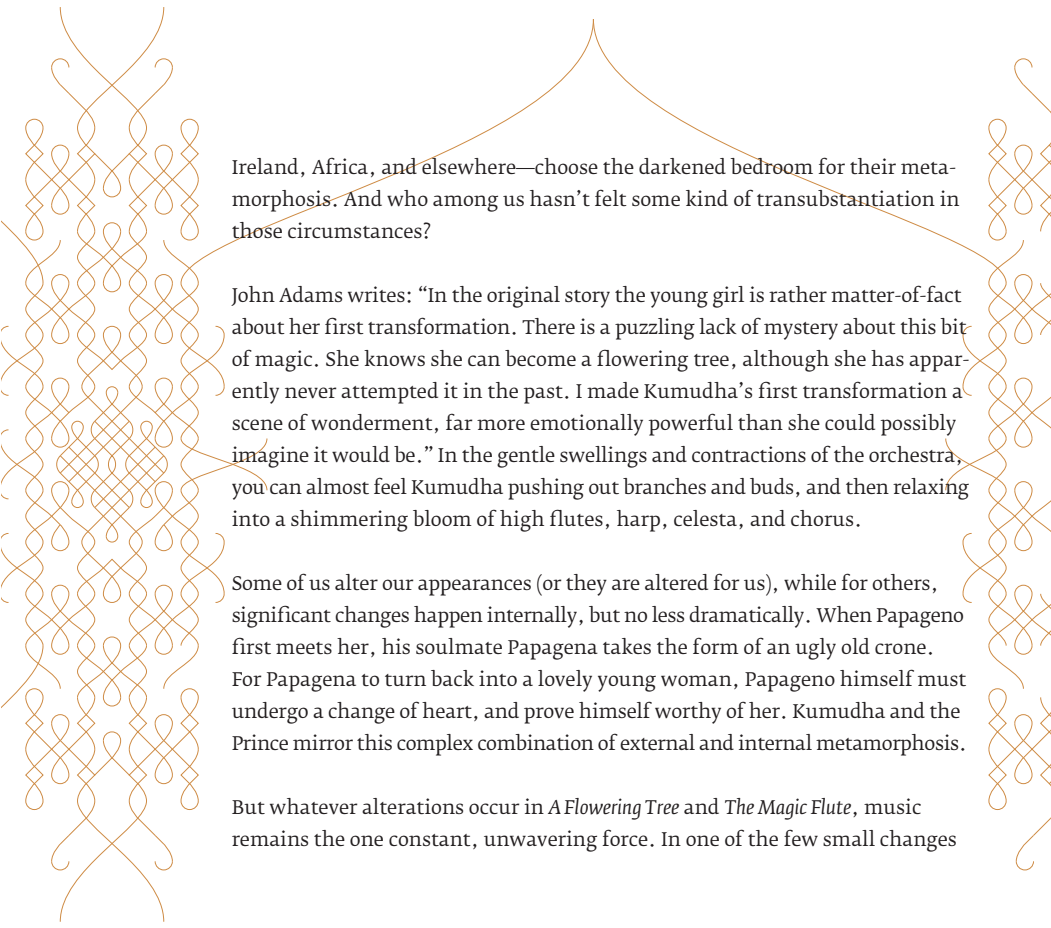
Scarcely had she spoken, when a stiffness seized all her limbs; her bosom began to be enclosed in a tender bark; her hair became leaves; her arms became branches... her face became a tree-top, retaining nothing of its former self but its beauty.



Apollo stood amazed. He touched the stem, and felt the flesh tremble under the new bark. He embraced the branches, and lavished kisses on the wood. The branches shrank from his lips.

In Greek mythology, Baucis and Philemon, an elderly married couple who declare eternal love for each other, are transformed into intertwining oak and linden trees. In a 16th-century Italian tale, a girl is born as a sprig of myrtle and coveted by the local prince. He tends and waters it carefully, and after a week the myrtle sprig turns into a fairy and slips into his bed while he's sleeping. "The prince made a vine of his arms, and clasping her neck, she awoke from her sleep and replied, with a gentle smile, to the sigh of the enamored prince." Remarkably, the story parallels *A Flowering Tree*: the myrtle sprig is torn apart by jealous women, the prince sickens from the loss, and both are at last revived through the healing powers of love.

There is a deeply sensuous, even erotic aspect to each of these tales. The flowering tree is wife, lover, and mother grafted together. She provides nourishment, and also needs to be nourished. She will take root, and blossom, and give perennial support; she is also fragile, and easily bruised if taken for granted. Her flowers are an abundant source of both pleasure and comfort. These metaphors assume deeper dimensions when Kumudha takes her powers into the marriage bed, reminding us that shape-shifting women around the world—Japan, Poland,

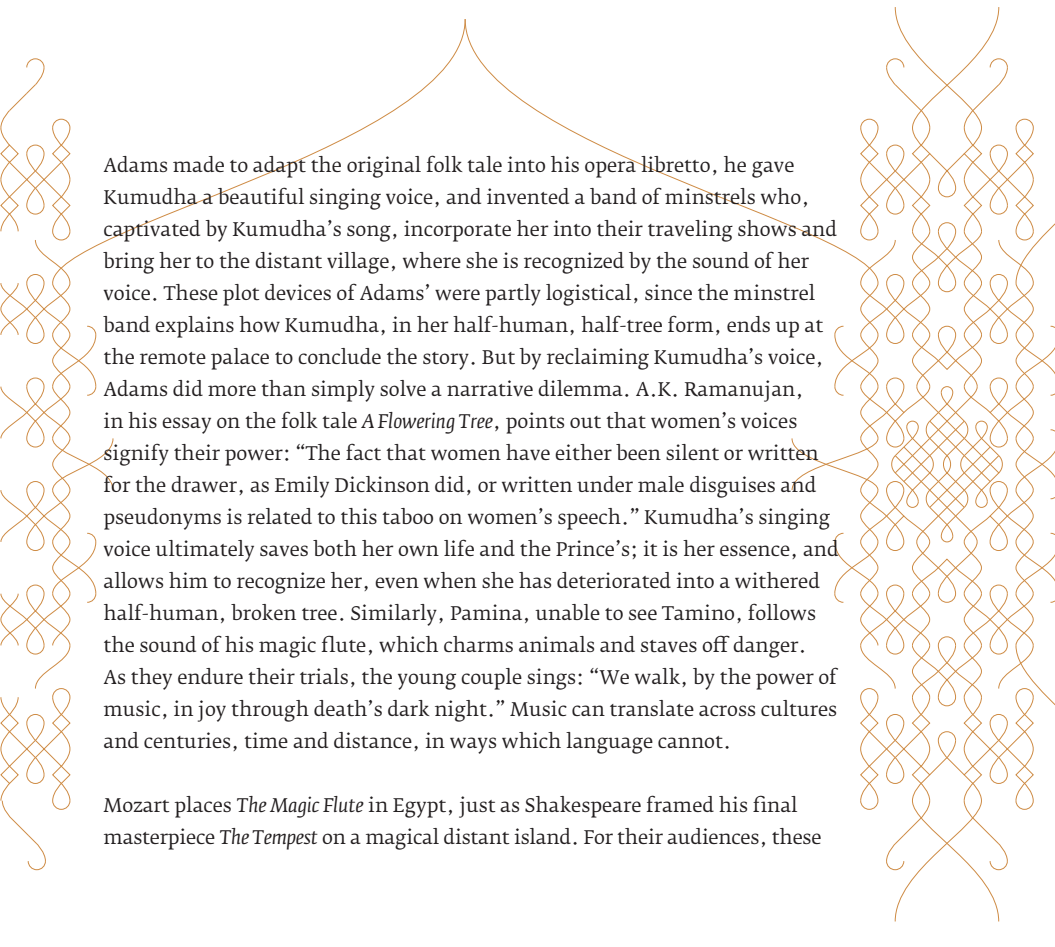


Ireland, Africa, and elsewhere—choose the darkened bedroom for their metamorphosis. And who among us hasn't felt some kind of transubstantiation in those circumstances?

John Adams writes: "In the original story the young girl is rather matter-of-fact about her first transformation. There is a puzzling lack of mystery about this bit of magic. She knows she can become a flowering tree, although she has apparently never attempted it in the past. I made Kumudha's first transformation a scene of wonderment, far more emotionally powerful than she could possibly imagine it would be." In the gentle swellings and contractions of the orchestra, you can almost feel Kumudha pushing out branches and buds, and then relaxing into a shimmering bloom of high flutes, harp, celesta, and chorus.


Some of us alter our appearances (or they are altered for us), while for others, significant changes happen internally, but no less dramatically. When Papageno first meets her, his soulmate Papagena takes the form of an ugly old crone. For Papagena to turn back into a lovely young woman, Papageno himself must undergo a change of heart, and prove himself worthy of her. Kumudha and the Prince mirror this complex combination of external and internal metamorphosis.

But whatever alterations occur in *A Flowering Tree* and *The Magic Flute*, music remains the one constant, unwavering force. In one of the few small changes



Adams made to adapt the original folk tale into his opera libretto, he gave Kumudha a beautiful singing voice, and invented a band of minstrels who, captivated by Kumudha's song, incorporate her into their traveling shows and bring her to the distant village, where she is recognized by the sound of her voice. These plot devices of Adams' were partly logistical, since the minstrel band explains how Kumudha, in her half-human, half-tree form, ends up at the remote palace to conclude the story. But by reclaiming Kumudha's voice, Adams did more than simply solve a narrative dilemma. A.K. Ramanujan, in his essay on the folk tale *A Flowering Tree*, points out that women's voices signify their power: "The fact that women have either been silent or written for the drawer, as Emily Dickinson did, or written under male disguises and pseudonyms is related to this taboo on women's speech." Kumudha's singing voice ultimately saves both her own life and the Prince's; it is her essence, and allows him to recognize her, even when she has deteriorated into a withered half-human, broken tree. Similarly, Pamina, unable to see Tamino, follows the sound of his magic flute, which charms animals and staves off danger. As they endure their trials, the young couple sings: "We walk, by the power of music, in joy through death's dark night." Music can translate across cultures and centuries, time and distance, in ways which language cannot.

Mozart places *The Magic Flute* in Egypt, just as Shakespeare framed his final masterpiece *The Tempest* on a magical distant island. For their audiences, these



were Great Unknowns, populated by wizards and wise spirits and wild animals. In Mozart's time, it would have been unthinkable for a Venezuelan orchestra and chorus and Indonesian dancers and a California composer to join forces for an ancient Indian folk tale in Vienna, Austria. Only in our era of speedy travel and instant communication is such a thing possible. Every speck of the world has been explored, conquered, researched, documented, or so it seems. We can fly to Mozart's Egypt or to Adams' India and witness these miraculous contradictions and composite realities for ourselves. No longer do we have to imagine them from travelers' reports, as did Dürer with his rhinoceros, or Hokusai with his sea creatures. Have we then lost the innocence of *The Magic Flute*? Perhaps we can find it not in geography, but in humanity. Wherever we turn on our planet in the early 21st century, there is still that girl willing herself a way to lift her family out of poverty, believing in the power of miracles. And we ourselves can choose to neglect the flowering tree, or to tend it with water and love.

— Sarah Cahill





Act I

Scene 1

Storyteller

Children,

I want to tell you a story—
a story of love,
and then pain,
and then love again.

This is Kumudha.
Like the flower
she's named for,
she is beautiful,
and always has been.

This is the Prince.
Once a selfish
spoiled young man,
careless, rash,
he is different now.

Together they will help me
tell you the story
of their love.

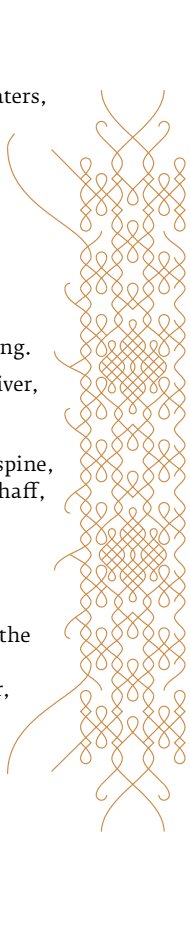
In the time of honey and elephants
in the south of the country
near a town where two rivers

met to mingle their slow pure waters,
near that town
a king ruled among his people.

His son, the Prince,
lived in comfort and luxury.
He lived with his two sisters,
one kind, the other covetous.
Rarely did they leave the palace,
for the world outside
was a place of misery and suffering.

In that same town, close to the river,
an old woman, weary, fretted,
lived alone with two daughters.
With gnarled hands and curved spine,
her sweat mixed with dust and chaff,
she labored in fields,
in order to feed them,
her two precious daughters.

One morning,
working in the heat and glare of the
summer sun,
Kumudha, the younger daughter,
looked at her toiling mother,
and her heart cried out.





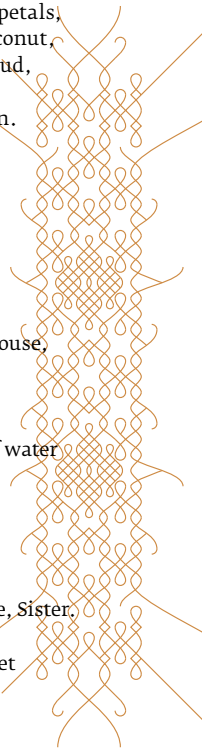
Kumudha

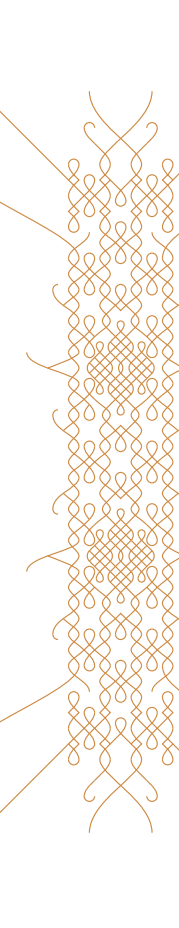
O Mother, it was you
who taught us
the prayer before morning
and evening's song of thanksgiving.
With richest blood
your womb
once nourished us.
Your sweet milk gave us life,
while on your knees, as children,
we bent back in laughter.
But unthinking time
has hardened your face,
cracks your voice
and makes it falter,
while your eyes cloud over
with the gaze of forgetfulness.

If only I could become a
flowering tree,
rain down upon your thin grey hair
cool white blossoms,
with scent of lemon and jasmine!
To serve you,
I would shed my human form,
blossom forth, unfurl myself,
my body a trunk
of dark glistening bark,

my head a crown of smooth white petals,
my flesh the white meat of the coconut,
my face the white of a cumulus cloud,
joyously welcomed, long-awaited
messenger of the coming monsoon.

Sister, quick! Go to the house.
Bathe yourself.
Make yourself clean and fresh.
Put on a white robe.
Go to the well. Bring back
two pitchers of the clearest water.
Do what I say!
Sweep the ground in front of our house,
and prepare for me a sacred place,
right here, right now.
I will sit in meditation.
You, Sister, pour the first pitcher of water
over my poised body.
You will see what I become:
a flowering tree.
Then, sister, gently, oh so gently,
pluck my flowers.
Treat them with the greatest of care, Sister.
Love and bless each one of them,
for we shall sell them at the market
to bring rest and happiness
to our suffering mother.





Kumudha's prayer:

You are the forest
you are all the great trees
in the forest

you are bird and beast
playing in and out
of all the trees

O lord white as jasmine
filling and filled by all

why don't you
show me your face?

Storyteller

Her sister, Kavinila,
poured the water
over Kumudha's head and body.

And as she did so,
she saw a miracle happen.

Kumudha's first transformation.

Storyteller

The sister plucked
Kumudha's flowers
from her delicate branches.

Then, carefully,
she took the second pitcher of water,
and poured it over the flowering tree.
Kumudha resumed
her human form again.

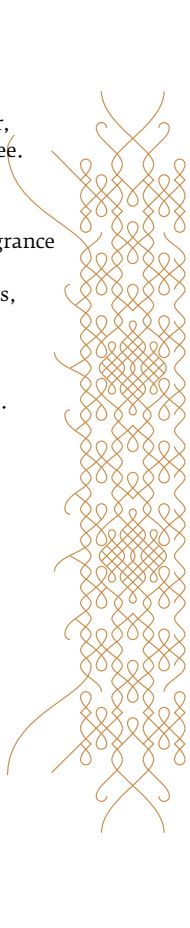
Overwhelmed by the beauty and fragrance
of the plucked flowers
the sisters gathered them in baskets,
wove them into garlands,
and on the next day,
brought them to the king's palace
where they sold them to the crowds.

Scene 2

Chorus

¡Lindas flores!
¡Pétalos aromáticos!
¡Olorosas guirnaldas!
¡Por qué no los compran?

*[Lovely flowers!
Fragrant petals!
Sweet-smelling garlands!
Won't you buy them?]*





Storyteller

Kumudha and her sister
sold all their flowers.
They repeated this secret ceremony
week after week.
Their mother knew nothing of this.

But one day, the king's son,
the idle young Prince,
secretly followed the two
sisters home.
He hid in a tree,
and he watched, dumbstruck,
as the beautiful Kumudha,
unaware,
turned herself into
a flowering tree.

The Prince

Her arms have the beauty
of a gently moving bamboo.
Her large eyes are full of peace.
She is far away,
her place not easy to reach.

My heart is frantic
with haste,
a plowman with a single plow
on land all wet
and ready for seed.

Chorus

¡Mira, niña!
¡Ten cuidado!
Anda por el bosque
Un descarado elefante.
¡No dejes que pise
tu corona de flores!

[Look out, child!

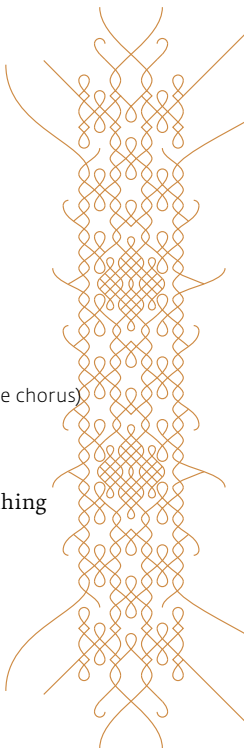
Be careful!

*An insolent elephant
Walks through the woods.
Don't let him Step on
your crown of flowers!]*

The Prince (singing during above chorus)

Love, love,
they say. Yet love
is no new grief
nor sudden disease; nor something
that rages and cools.
Like madness in an elephant,
coming up when he eats
certain leaves,

love waits
for you to find
someone to look at.





Storyteller

The Prince went home
and wandered through the palace
troubled and confused.
He tried to explain to his father.

The Prince

As a little white snake
with lovely stripes on its young body
troubles the jungle elephant
this slip of a girl
her teeth like sprouts of new rice
her wrists stacked with bangles
troubles me.

Storyteller

The King understood.
He knew this was love.
He sent for the old woman.

Scene 3: Audience with the King

She arrived in the palace.
She cowered at the sight
of the royal chamber.
She was ashamed.

Male Chorus (as King)

Do not be afraid, woman.
You have two daughters.
Bring us the younger one.

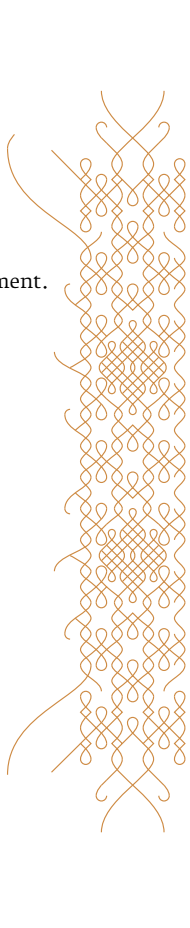
Storyteller

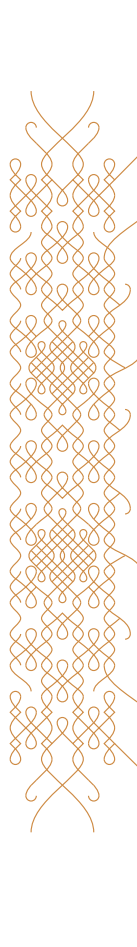
The old woman
was struck stiff with bewilderment.
She screamed at her daughters
She could not understand
how the king would
know about Kumudha.
She returned home,
and she was in a fury.
She took a broom handle
and savagely beat them,
her two precious daughters.

Chorus (as the daughters)

Mamá, Mamá
¿Por qué nos pegas?
La vara es dura,
Nos magulla los brazos,
Saca verdugones.
Mamá, Mamá
¿Por qué nos pegas?

*[Mama, Mama,
Why are you beating us?]*





*The stick is hard,
It bruises our arms,
Covers us with bruises!
Why are you beating us?]*

Chorus (as the Old Woman)

¡Perras! ¡Putas!
¿Dónde estaban?
El rey está indagando sobre ustedes.
¿Por qué conoce él sus nombres?
¿De dónde han sacado todo ese dinero?

*[Whores! Bitches!
The King is asking about you!
How is it he knows your names?
And where did you get that money?]*

Chorus (as the daughters)

Mamá, Mamá!
¡Lo hicimos todo por tí!
¡Deja ya de pegarnos, Mamá!

*[Mama, Mama,
We did it for you!
Please don't beat us, Mama!]*

Storyteller

The girls gave their mother
five handfuls of coins.

They explained how
they had wanted to surprise her.
They explained that
they had only wanted to help.

The old woman begged her
daughters' forgiveness.
She took Kumudha in her thin arms
and she wept tears of love
for her precious daughter.
Kumudha embraced her mother
and kissed her on the forehead.

That night, for the first time,
they ate well.

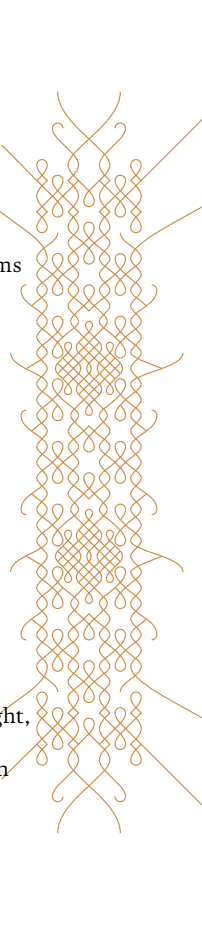
Scene 4: The Wedding

The Prince

Serving in endless bounty
white rice and meat
cooked to a turn,

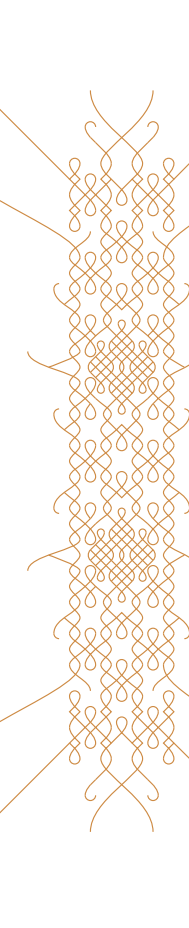
to honored guests,

and when the bird omens were right,
at the perfect junction
of the Wagon Stars with the moon
shining in a wide soft-lit sky,









site decorated, gods honored,
kettledrum and marriage drum
sounding loud the wedding beat,

the women who'd given her a
bridal bath
—piercing eyes looking on,
unwinking—
suddenly gone,
and when the bird omens, *etc.*

They brought her to me
decked in new clothes,
rousing my desire
noisy as pounding rain,
on that first night.

THE BRIDAL CHAMBER

Kumudha

They brought me to him
on that first night,
and they wiped my sweat,
they gave me to him,
me, splendid with ornament.

He said to me:

The Prince

It's hot. Sweat is breaking out
on that crescent, your brow.
Open your robe a little,
Let the wind cool it.

And even as I spoke,
my heart hasty with desire,
I pulled it off,
and she stood exposed,
Her form shining

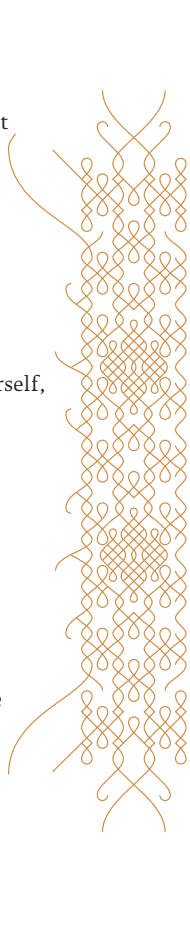
Not knowing how to hide herself,
She cried out in shame.

Storyteller

Bride and groom
lay next to each other
on their wedding bed
in silence.

Kumudha

My lord will not
speak to me.
His glance, so fired with love
when the music rang out
and the guests danced—
his glance now is cold
like wet ashes.
He looks away.





The Prince

Let her begin.
She knows what I want.
Now let her do it for me.

Kumudha

Is it for this
he married me?

My lord,
is it for this bliss
you married me?

Storyteller

They lay apart,
neither touching the other.
The Prince fell asleep.

Kumudha

The still drone of the time
past midnight.
All words put out,
men are sunk into the sweetness
of sleep. Even the far-flung world
has put aside its rages
for sleep.
Only I
am awake.

Storyteller

Two nights passed.
On the third night
she asked him aloud:

Kumudha

My lord,
is it for this bliss
that you married me?
Tell me what you want!

The Prince

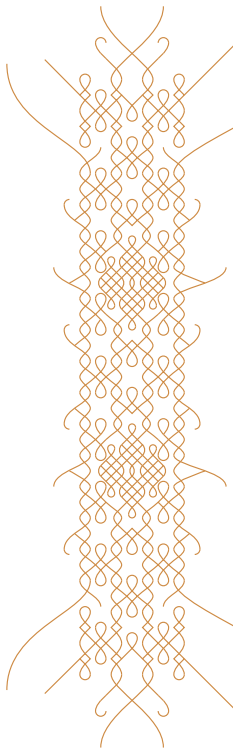
The tree.
The flowering tree.
You must do it for me.

Kumudha

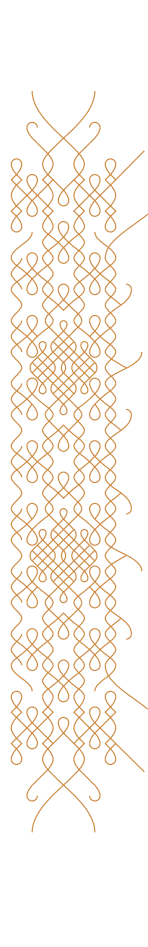
My lord, I am not a demon,
I am not a goddess.
I'm an ordinary girl,
like any other one,
like anyone else.

The Prince

Enough lying.
I saw you with my own eyes!
I saw you become a tree.
From now on that gift
you so freely shared







belongs to me
and me alone.
Won't you do it for me right now?
Turn yourself into a tree.

Kumudha

Green creepers planted inside
the house
twine themselves with the
cane outside
in his country of rivers.

Embarrassed
by his careless, cruel ways, we say,
“He’s a good man,”
but my round soft arms
say, “Not so, he’s not,”
and grow thin.

The Prince

We can sleep on the flowers
and cover ourselves with fragrance.
That would be lovely.

Storyteller

The bride sunk her face
in the end of her sari,
and begged him not to be angry.
She would do what he wanted.

She asked him to bring
two pitchers of water.

*Transformation music. Kumudha becomes
the flowering tree in the bedroom.*

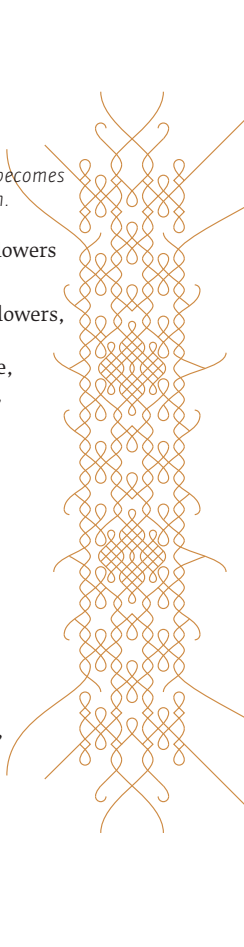
The fragrance of Kumudha’s flowers
filled their bedroom.

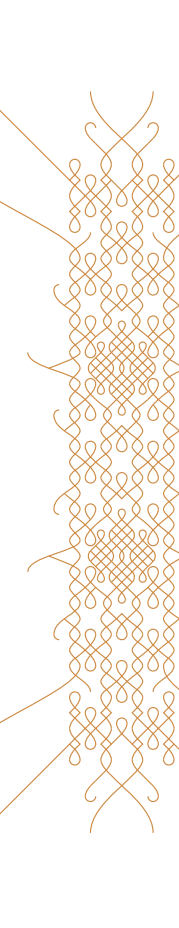
Together they spread out the flowers,
made a bed of them,
covered themselves with more,
and while the great city slept,
they made love amongst
the delicate scents.

Act II

Storyteller

The King’s elder daughter,
jealous of Kumudha’s beauty,
spied on her day and night.
One night she hid herself
in the couple’s royal chamber,
and there,
shocked in amazement,
rigid with envy,
she watched





as the flowering tree
took shape.

The next day,
while the Prince was off hunting,
the jealous sister
invited all her friends
to go out to the royal orchard
that stood behind the palace.
She said to all she invited,
“We’ll bring Kumudha.
She’ll do her trick,
turn into a flowering tree.
You’ll see.”

Chorus

Muchacha, muchacha,
ven con nosotros,
ven al huerto

Muéstrate, mústrate,
explicanos tu magia.
luce tus flores,
la raíz y las ramas

¡Adorna! ¡Adorna!
nuestras negras trenzas
de flores y ramas
como una fina guirnalda.

*[Sister, Sister,
Come out to the orchard.
Show us this magical gift.*

*Show your flowers,
Your long supple branches,*

*Our ink-black tresses
Cry out to be dressed in
A garland so perfect as that.]*


Kumudha

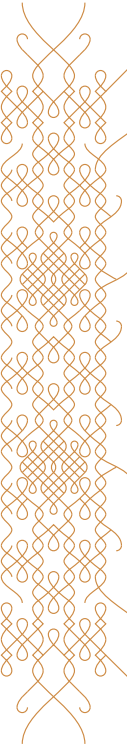
You are cruel.
You fill me with shame.
But if you must force me,
bend me with your taunting,
I only ask that you treat me, the tree,
with the deepest reverence.
The water pour carefully.
Chant for me softly
and follow the form
of my every order.
This is no game for children.

Kumudha's prayer

Śiva, you have no mercy.
Śiva, you have no heart.

Why did you bring me to birth,
wretch in this world,
exile from the other?





Tell me, lord,
don't you have one more
little tree
made just for me?

*Transformation music (Kumudha, against
her will, becomes the flowering tree
once again)*

Storyteller

Kumudha once more
assumed the form
of a flowering tree.
But the sister's foolish friends
ignored her instructions.
They carelessly spilled
the pitcher of water.
They broke the tree's branches,
tore off its flowers,
and they ran off,
leaving
Kumudha alone.
It began to rain,
and Kumudha struggled to regain
her human form again.
But she couldn't.
She could not gain her human
form again.

Now she beheld herself,
neither tree nor princess,
neither tree nor loving wife,
a stump of flesh, a shapeless thing,
a twisted, mutilated body
with neither hands nor feet.

She crawled like a worm
to a rain-soaked gutter
and passed the night there,
a wounded carcass.

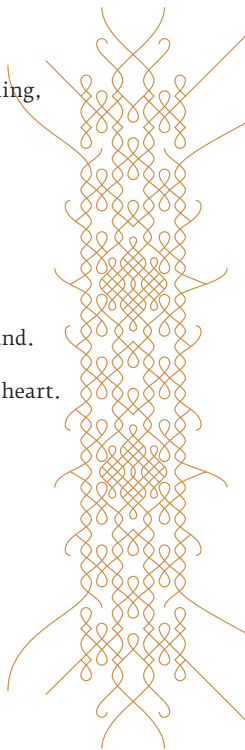
Kumudha

It's dark above the clutching hand.
It's dark over the seeing eye.
It's dark over the remembering heart.
It's dark here
with the Lord of Caves
out there.

Chorus

¿Por qué te escondes, niña?
¿Por qué tienes miedo?
¿Por qué te avergüenzas de
dejar ver tu cuerpo?

*[Why are you hiding, child?
Why are you afraid?
Why are you ashamed
to let us see your body?]*





Storyteller

Days passed, and then months passed,
but there was no news of his wife.
In despair and mourning, the Prince
changed his brilliant royal clothes
for the plain robe of an ascetic.
He let his hair and beard grow long
and wild,
and he wandered aimlessly
throughout the country.

His own people did not recognize him.

Chorus

Te fuiste, montando elefantes.
Te fuiste, montando caballos.
Te cubriste de bermellón y de almizcle,
o hermano.
Pero te fuiste sin la verdad,
te fuiste sin sembrar lo bueno
y sin cosecharlo.
Montando soberbios
elefantes en celo,
un blanco fácil
del destino,
calificaste
para el infierno.

*[You went riding elephants.
You went riding horses.*

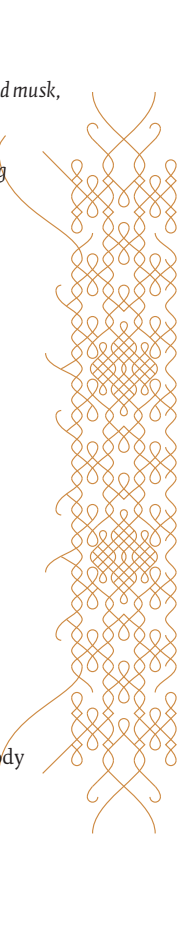
*You covered yourself with vermilion and musk,
O brother.*

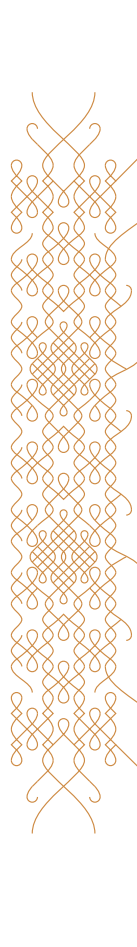
*But you went without the truth,
you went without sowing and reaping
the good.*

*Riding ruttng
elephants of pride,
you turned easy target
of fate,
you qualified
for hell.]*

Storyteller

Kumudha, a “thing”
with no legs and no arms,
lived in a gutter.
She begged for her food
and slept with animals.
Passersby were appalled
at the sight of her.
She’d avert her eyes
from their shocked stares.
But Kumudha could still sing.
Beggars in the street,
themselves misshapen,
would pick up her stump of a body
and carry her, a freak,
from town to town





where she would sing sad songs
in her clear and beautiful voice.

Kumudha

Before I laughed with him
nightly,

the slow waves beating
on his wide shores
the lone palmyra
bringing forth heron-like flowers
near the waters,

my eyes were like the lotus
my arms had the grace of the bamboo
my forehead was mistaken for the moon.

But now...

The Prince (wandering through the desert)

Four parts of the day
I grieve for you.
Four parts of the night
I'm mad for you.

I grieve for you
lie lost and sick for you.

Since your love
was planted,
I've forgotten hunger,
thirst, and sleep.

Storyteller

Meanwhile
the Prince's younger sister,
she who had taunted Kumudha
and coaxed her to the orchard—
this younger sister
married the king of a distant town,
and she became its Queen.

By chance,
a wandering group of minstrels
brought that stump of a body,
Kumudha,
to the town of the Queen.

Chorus (as the Beggar Minstrels)

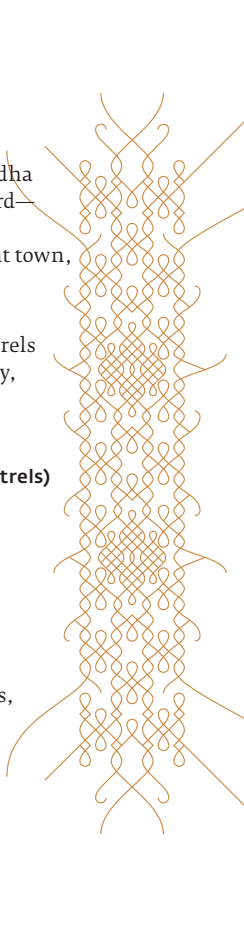
Un río corriente
es todo piernas.

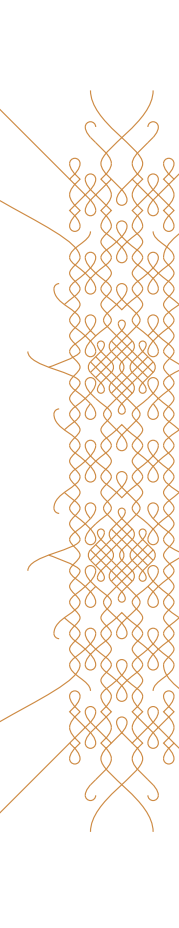
Un fuego ardiente
es todo bocas.

Una brisa soplante
es toda manos.

Por eso, o señor de las cuevas,
para tus hombres,
cada miembro es un signo.

*[A running river
is all legs.*





*A burning fire
is mouths all over.*

*A blowing breeze
is all hands.*

*So, lord of the caves,
for your men,
every limb is a symbol.]*

Kumudha (singing with the Minstrels)

The heart, knowing
no fear
has left me
to go and hold my love
but my arms,
left behind,
cannot take hold.

Storyteller

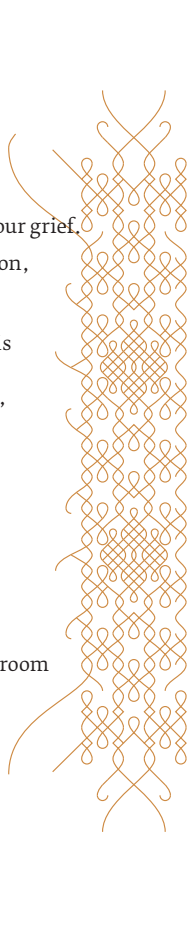
We had all but forgotten you, Prince.
Now you come to the town
of your sister, the Queen.
Sick and covered with lice,
eyes blank and lifeless,
you care not where you wander.

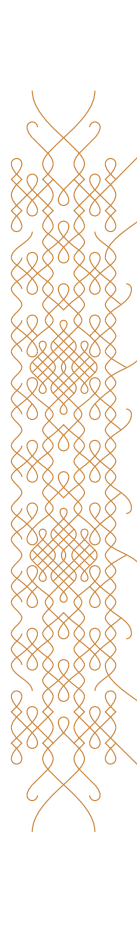
At the sight of your
pale gaunt body
she breaks down into sobbing.

“My brother,” she cries.
But you stand there, lifeless,
you recognize no one,
a face without movement,
mute as a stone.
Nothing will break the shell of your grief.

Knowing the Queen’s desperation,
several of her maids
went looking for help.
In the marketplace they saw this
hideous “thing,”
this armless and legless bundle,
wrapped in rags,
singing for alms.
Hearing her song,
but never suspecting
who she was,
they took her and bathed her,
wound her in silk,
rubbed her with henna
and oil of sandalwood,
and they brought her to the bedroom
of the mute and lifeless Prince.

In the quiet of evening,
drawing close to him,
Kumudha, slowly and with
great tenderness,
pressed against his cold flesh,





massaging his chest
with the stump of her arm.

(The Prince recognizes Kumudha)

The Prince

In this time of rain and thunder,
tormented without end,
heartsick
and sicker by the hour,
I've come hurrying,
dear girl,
to bring you back your beauty.

Chorus

¡Príncipe!
Ahora noble y cariñoso,
cobras vida a la vista
de su cara,
al sonido de su voz.

*[Prince!
Now noble and loving,
you come alive
at the sight of her face
and the sound of her voice!]*

Kumudha

I'm the one who has the body,
You're the one who holds the breath.

You know the secret of my body,
I know the secret of your breath.

Storyteller

Quick! Get water!
She will be a tree again.
Where her branches are broken
you set them right.
Where a leaf has been damaged,
you bind it up.
And when her wounds are healed
pour water over this perfect tree.
Kumudha, your love,
will become whole again.

(Kumudha's final transformation music)



London Symphony Orchestra

Violin I

Leader: Stephanie Gomley
Lennox Mackenzie
Helena Wood
Nigel Broadbent
Ginette Decuyper
Michael Humphrey
Claire Parfitt
Harriet Rayfield
Colin Renwick
Nicole Wilson

Violin II

Evgeny Grach
Sarah Quinn
Miya Ichinose
Norman Clarke
Matthew Gardner
Belinda McFarlane
Andrew Pollock
Hazel Mulligan

Viola

Gillianne Hadow
Malcolm Johnston
Maxine Moore
Peter Norriss
Jonathan Welch
Natasha Wright

Cello

Alexander Somov
Jennifer Brown
Mary Bergin
Noel Bradshaw
Hilary Jones

Francis Saunders

Double Bass

Colin Paris
Patrick Laurence
Michael Francis
Matthew Gibson
Gerald Newson

Flute

Andrew Nicholson
Martin Parry

Piccolo

Sharon Williams

Oboe

Gareth Hulse
Kate Clemmow

Cor Anglais

Christine Pendrill

Clarinet

Fiona Cross
Sarah Thurlow

Bass Clarinet

John Stenhouse

Bassoon

Robert Bourton
Joost Bosdijk

Contrabassoon

Dominic Morgan

Horn

Tim Jones
John Ryan
Angela Barnes
Jonathan Lipton
Nic Branston

Trumpet

Christopher Deacon
Gerald Ruddock

Trombone

Dudley Bright
James Maynard
Andrew Waddicor

Timpani

Dominic Hackett

Percussion

Neil Percy
David Jackson
Chris Thomas
Scott Bywater

Harp

Karen Vaughan

Celesta

John Alley

Soprano & Alto Recorder

Marion Scott
Ben Norbury



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Assistant engineer recording: Ansgar Wempe
Assistant engineer editing and mixing, mastering engineer: René Möller
Recording facilities: Teldex Studio Berlin

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Photography by Ruth Walz and John Adams

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For Nohesuch Records:

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Editorial Coordinator: Ronen Givony

Production Supervisor: Karina Beznicki

Executive Producer: Robert Hurwitz

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Original Javanese dance by Eko Supriyanto, Astri Kusama and Rusini Sidi

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Speaking of Siva, Kannada bhakti poems by Virasaiva saints, A.K. Ramanujan, translator, London, Penguin Books, 1973.

The Interior Landscape, Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology, A.K. Ramanujan, translator, Oxford University Press, USA, 1994.

Poems of Love and War, selected and translated by A.K. Ramanujan, Columbia University Press, New York, 1985.

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