

I bow before you, guru among poets, before your
 lotus feet, Vālmiki. O crown-gem upon the head of
 Bhārata, I, your slave, humbly follow after you just
 as the wretched poor follow as camp followers of an
 Indra among kings when that king goes on a pilgrimage
 to a sacred spot. Meditating day and night on foot-
 prints you have left, how many pilgrims before me have gained
 entrance to fame's temple, by subduing world-subduing
 Śamana—to become immortal. Śrī Bhartṛhari;
 10 scholar Bhavabhūti, called Śrikanṭha; a man of marked
 mellifluence, Kālidāsa—known throughout Bhārata
 as the favorite son of Bhārati; most captivating
 Murāri, epitome of his namesake's melodic
 flute; and poet Kṛttivāsa, a repository of
 achievements, ornament of this Bengal. —O forefather,
 how am I to sport with regal geese upon the lake of
 poetic *rasa* if you do not guide me? I shall string
 anew a garland after plucking blossoms tenderly
 from your literary garden. I strive to beautify
 20 our language with divers decorations, but where shall I
 (impoverished me!) obtain that gem cache, Ratnākara, if
 you do not help? Show compassion, lord, to this needy one.

Golden Laṅkā, swimming in a sea of bliss, was ringed with

golden lamps, like an Indra-among-monarch's queen in her
necklace made of precious stones. From building after building
music could be heard; troupes of dancing girls performed, singers
sang sweet strains; loving women dallied lovingly with their
men, honeyed high-pitched giggles bubbling from their lips. Some were
occupied with love play; others sipped on spirits made of
30 sugarcane. On doorways garlands strung with fruits and flowers
hung. From the fronts of houses banners fluttered; lamps burned in
windows; and streams of people flowed through the thoroughfares in
uproarious waves of sheer delight, as during some grand
festival when the city's residents go wild. Heaps of
blossoms rained down from all sides—the town grew redolent with
sweet aroma. Lañkā that night was awake at midnight;
Sleep went door to door, but none bid her step inside his home
or even begged the boon of rest. "Tomorrow Indrajit,
Indra among warriors, will slay Rāma. He will put down
40 Lakṣmaṇa. He, with a lion's roar, will drive that pack of
jackal foes to the ocean's shore. He will bind and drag back
here that Vibhiṣaṇa—will chase away that Rāhu from
the moon, and thus the eyes of earth will be refreshed when once
again they gaze upon this wealth of nectar moonbeams." Hope,
a sorceress, sang her song down streets and lanes, by temples,
parks, from doorways, and in homes that night in the stronghold of

those Rākṣasas—and why should not they float on joyful seas?

In the Aśoka grove, alone, aggrieved, the beloved
of the Rāghava wept silently in her darkened hut.

50 Unruly guardian matrons had abandoned that chaste
one and were pacing some ways off, all intoxicated
by the thrill of gaieties—just as the tigress leaves a
dying doe and, bold at heart, further prowls the forest. The
woman's face was pale, aha, like sunstone crystal in
the dark recesses of a mine (where rays of sunshine fail
to reach) or like Ramā, *bimba*-lipped, beneath the waters.
Pavana sighed like a mourner at a distance, heaving
with emotions. In sorrow, leaves quaked and rustled. Birds perched
mutely on branches. Blossoms fell in piles round about tree
60 trunks as though the trees, consumed by burning heartaches, were of
themselves tearing off their finery. Afar a river—
the loud lapping of her ripples like snuffling cries—headed
for the ocean as if to tell the lord of waters of
this tale of woe. Moonbeams could not so much as penetrate
that thick forest. In foul waters does the lotus ever
bloom? Yet still that grove was splendid from her matchless beauty.

The woman sat alone, like radiant Prabhā in a
somber hovel. At such a time pretty Saramā came
crying and sat at the chaste one's feet—pretty Saramā,

70 the Rākṣasas' Rājalakṣmī, dressed as one of their wives.

For some time that bright-eyed one dabbed at her tears, then in a soothing voice spoke, "Those uncouth matrons left you here alone, my lady, and returned to the city where all enjoy the celebrating on this night. Learning that, I came to worship at your feet. I brought along a container of vermilion. If you permit, I shall place a dot upon your pretty forehead. You are a married woman; this garb of yours hardly suits you. Alas, he is a wicked one, that lord of Laṅkā! Who could ever tear the petals off
80 of such a lotus blossom—I fail to comprehend how he could strip the jewelry from your exquisite person!"

Opening her canister, the wifely Rākṣasa with tender care put a spot of powder in the part within that woman's hair; another spot of color brightly shone upon her forehead, ah yes, as from Twilight's forehead shines a gem-star.¹ That dot affixed, Saramā took dust from that one's feet. "Forgive me, Lakṣmī. I have touched the body craved by gods, but your slave remains a lifelong servant at your feet."

90 And with that, the youthful woman sat down once again at those feet. Ah goodness me, it was as if a golden lamp radiated brightly in the ten directions from the foot of a *tulasī* tree. In a soft voice Maithilī spoke,

"You reproach Daśānana all for naught, O moon-faced one.

I myself shed my ornaments, casting them away when
that sinful one seized me in our forest hermitage. I
scattered them along the path, as markers. It was that bridge
which brought my savvy Raghu lord to this golden Laṅkā.
Gems, pearls, precious stones, what is there in this world which I would
not renounce, my dearest, to regain my treasured husband?"

100 Said Saramā, "My lady, this servant of yours heard of
your *svayamvara* from your own ambrosial lips and why
that jewel of the Raghus went into the forest. Please
tell me, chaste one, how that Indra among Rākṣasas snatched
you away? I beg you—slake your humble servant's thirst with
showers of ambrosia. Your unmannerly guardswomen
are now far away. Take this time to tell that tale to me,
for I would hear. By what ruse did that thief trick Rāma and
the worthy Lakṣmaṇa? And by what *māyā* did he slip
into the Raghu's house and purloin such a gem as you?"

110 Just as the sacred stream pours out in mellow tones from the
mouth of Gomukhī, in like manner spoke Jānakī, that
honey-tongued chaste wife, to Saramā with affection, "You
are Sītā's ardent well-wisher, friend. So, if you would like
to hear of past events, then I shall tell you. Listen well.

"We were living, bright-eyes, on the Godāvāri's bank, like

a pair of pigeons who had built their nest atop some tree,
quite tall, and lived contentedly. Round us lay a dense wood,
named Pañcavaṭī, one that seemed much like the garden of
the gods on earth. High-minded Lakṣmaṇa looked after me
at every moment. And I ask you: what does one lack who
has the storehouse of the Daṇḍaka at his disposal?

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Warrior Saumitri would always find me fruits and roots. At
times my lord would track wild game; but, dear friend, that heroic
Indra among Rāghavas—he is known throughout the world
as an ocean of compassion—abstained from taking life.

"I forgot all about my former happiness. I, the
daughter of a king, a wife within the Raghu clan—but
in that forest, friend Saramā, I found even greater
joy. In all the four directions round our cottage flowers
full with color bloomed daily—how can I describe it? Spring
roamed the Pañcavaṭī forest constantly. The king of
cuckoos used to wake us in the morning, cooing sweetly.

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Tell me, moon-faced one, what queen opens up her eyes to such
a flattering panegyric? The ecstatic peahen
with her peacock used to dance before my door. Is there a
pair of dancers in this world, good woman, equal to that
twosome? Guests would regularly visit us, bull and cow
elephant calves, fawns, feathered friends, some with golden plumage,

some white, some black, some variegated, like Vāsava's
 140 bow upon the crest of the best of clouds. All were gentle
 creatures. I ministered to each and everyone with the
 tenderest of care; I would nurture them with utmost love,
 as a river—itself brimming with water through favor
 of the clouds—nurtures the thirsty in a desert. A pond
 served as my mirror. I used to pluck blue lotuses (price-
 less gems) and wear them in my hair; I would adorn myself
 with an array of flowers. My lord would smile, addressing
 me teasingly as Vanadevī. Alas, true friend, shall
 I gain again the lord of my life? Will these hapless eyes
 150 within this worthless life span once more light upon those feet—
 lotuses in hope's lake, objects of my heart's desire? O
 harsh Fate, for what transgression do you judge your thrall at fault?"

Saying that, her ladyship succumbed and wept in silence.

Chaste Saramā cried too, drenched in the water of her tears.

Moments later, Saramā, the Rākṣasa wife, wiping
 dry her tears, addressed chaste Sītā's feet, "If it pains you to
 recall the past, my lady, then enough! What is the good
 of living it again? I see your tears and want to die!"

Replied the honey-spoken one (as honey-throated as
 160 *kādambā* waterfowl), "If, alas, this luckless woman
 (dear, you lucky one) should not cry, then who in the world should?

Listen, I shall recount for you what happened. For just as
 during the monsoon rains, sweet confidante, a swollen stream,
 tormented by floodwaters, overflows her banks and spills
 her waters left and right, so too does the agitated
 heart spill its tale of woe to others.² That is why I speak—
 please hear me out. Whom else has Sītā in this hostile land?

"We were happy on the Godāvārī's riverbank in

that Pañcavaṭī forest. Alas, companion, how shall

170 I describe the charm of those deep woods? I would in my dreams
 always hear the sylvan *vīṇā* in Vanadevī's hands;
 or I would sometimes sit upon a lake shore and watch the
 amorous play of heavenly maidens, clothed in sunbeams,
 as they sported among lotus clusters. Wives, pure at heart,
 of some sage's family would at times, smiling graciously,
 come to this servant's cottage, as beams of moonlight come to
 a darkened home. I would now and then spread out a deerskin
 (oh my, speckled in a hundred shades!) beneath some tree and
 sit, speaking to the shade as if she were my bosom friend;
 180 or from time to time I skipped and played with a doe in the
 forest and sang again the notes I heard the cuckoo sing.

I gave the young vine to the tree in marriage, chaste one. And

when the couple budded, I kissed the tender sprouts, calling

all of them with pleasure my granddaughters; when the bee buzzed,

respectfully I would hail him as my grandson-in-law.

Sometimes I strolled contentedly with my lord along the
river's edge; we would gaze into tremulous waters at
what seemed to be a new sky, new stars, a novel splendor
to the lord of Night. Sometimes we would climb a hillock, dear

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friend, and I would sit there at my husband's feet, like a vine
at the foot of a mighty mango tree. With the greatest
sympathy my lord would gratify me with a rain of
nectar-words—ah me, whom shall I tell? how shall I tell of
that? In Kailāsa, so I have heard, Kailāsa's denizen,

Vyomakeśa, sits upon a golden throne with Gaurī;
there in front of Umā, Pañcamukha with eloquence
expounds on topics from the Āgamas, the Purāṇas,
the Vedas, and the Pañcatantra. In like fashion, my

good-looking one, I too used to hear such talks. Even now,

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in this deserted forest, I seem to hear that honeyed
discourse. Could such music to this servant's ears be silenced,
O cruel Fate?" In sadness, that wide-eyed woman fell mute. Then
pretty Saramā spoke, "When I listen to your tale, wife
of Rāghava, contempt for courtly pleasures wells up in
me! Willingly would I forsake the comforts of the realm
to go into like exile in the forest. Yet still, it

frightens me to think such thoughts. When the sun's rays penetrate

the dreary woods, my lady, those beams of light themselves make
 bright the surrounding forest; when Night comes to a land, all
 210 faces pale at her arrival! So, why should not all be
 glad, sweet one, wherever you set foot—you who are bliss to
 this world, enchantress of the universe. Tell me, madam,
 by what ploy did the sovereign of the Rākṣasas abduct
 you? This slave of yours has heard the *vīṇā*'s strains, the call of
 the best of cuckoos in among new leaves during springtime's
 succulent months, but never in this world have I heard such
 honey-coated speech as yours. Look there is the sky, that moon,
 whose radiance pales before your beauty, that god, fount of
 nectar, smiles as he imbibes your words of nectar, lady.
 220 The cuckoo and all other birds are hushed so as to hear
 your tale—I tell you. Speak, faithful wife, fulfill all longings."

The darling of the Rāghava continued, "In this way,
 friend, I spent many happy days in the Pañcavaṭī
 forest. Your sister-in-law, that naughty Sūrpaṅkhā,
 showed up and ultimately brought disaster. I die of
 shame, friend Saramā, recalling what she did! Fie on her!
 a blemish upon womankind! That tigress sought to serve
 devotedly the best of Raghus after shunting me
 aside! Livid with rage, Saumitri the lion drove her
 230 off. Then other Rākṣasas came running, and a battle

royal rang throughout the woods. Frightened, I withdrew inside
 our cottage. Whom can I tell, companion, how much I wept
 due to the bowstrings' twanging? I shut my eyes, cupped my hands
 in prayerful supplication, and called upon the god clan
 to save Rāghava. Both anguished cries and leonine roars
 rose into the skies. In a faint, I fell upon the ground.

"I know not how long, my fondest, I remained in such a
 state; with his touch that greatest Raghu revived your servant.
 In a soft voice (indeed, as the gentle breezes sound in
 240 flower gardens during springtime) my husband spoke, 'Arise,
 queen of my heart, treasure of this Raghu son, joy of the
 Raghu palace! Does such a bed befit you, my gold-limbed
 one!' O Saramā, my bosom friend, shall I ever hear
 again those sweet tones?" Then, without any warning that chaste
 one swooned and collapsed; but Saramā was there to catch her.

Just as deep within the forest the feathered one, twitching
 in excruciating pain, falls upon the ground once the
 Niṣāda has taken aim at the lilting bird song on
 that tree branch and let fly his arrow, just so plummeted
 250 that pure wife of a sudden to the lap of Saramā.

After a while the bright-eyed woman regained consciousness.
 Saramā, weeping, spoke, "Forgive my blunder, Maithilī.
 I have made you miserable today for no good reason,

alas, senseless me." In a gentle tone of voice that sleek-haired love of Rāghava replied, "What blunder, friend? Listen well; I shall resume my tale of days gone by. You have heard from Sūrpaṅakhā what deception Mārīca had wrought (as mirages on the desert lead astray!). Alas, my dear, at an ill-fated moment I, intoxicated

260 by my greed, begged for that stag. Grabbing bow and arrow, my Raghu sovereign headed out, leaving me with Lakṣmaṇa, my brother-in-law, for my protection. That *māyā*-deer darted off like lightning lighting up the forest. Behind, fast as the foe of elephants, my husband gave it chase—unlucky me, I lost the reason for my happiness!

"Then suddenly, kind one, I heard a cry for help far in the distance, 'Where are you, brother Lakṣmaṇa, at this time of peril? I am dying!' Saumitri the lion gave a start. I too started, grasped his hand, and pleaded, 'Warrior,

270 go with the speed of wind into that woods; see who summons you! My heart cries out at hearing such a plea! Go quickly—perhaps it is our Raghu lord who calls, charioteer!'

"Responded Saumitri, 'My lady, how shall I carry out your order? How can you stay here by yourself, alone, in these desolate woods? Who knows how many Rākṣasas with magic powers are afoot in the vicinity?'

Of what are you afraid? Who in all three worlds can bring harm
to the ornament of the Raghu clan, who in strength is
Bhṛgurāma's mentor?' Then again I heard that cry for
280 help, 'I am dying! At this time of peril, where are you,
brother Lakṣmaṇa? where are you, my Jānakī?' I could
contain myself no longer, dearest one! Letting go the
hand of Lakṣmaṇa I uttered, at that fateful moment,
'My mother-in-law, Sumitrā, a most kind woman—who
says she bore you in her womb, cruel thing? Providence made your
heart of stone! Now I know some mean-souled tigress deep within
the jungle bore and reared you, meanest one! Coward, you
insult to the warrior clan! I shall go, I shall see who
summoned me pathetically from that forest there!' Full of
290 rage, his eyes now red, that gem of warriors grabbed his bow; in
a wink, he strapped the quiver to his back, stared at me, and
said, 'I honor you as if you were my mother, daughter
of Janaka, as though my very mother. That is why
I tolerate this scolding quite unwarranted. I am
going. Stay inside; be ever on your guard. Who knows what
might take place today. It will not be my fault; I leave you
on your orders.' With that, the champion headed for the woods.

"How much more, my dear companion, shall I tell you of what
passed through my mind as I sat in that deserted spot? The

300 morning wore on; with joyful sounds, birds, deer, and such, many
 fawns, strict vegetarians, elephant calves, both bull and
 cow, arrived. To my surprise, I saw a yogi, lustrous
 like Vaiśvānara, with ashes covering his body,
 an ascetic's *kamaṇḍalu* water pot in hand and
 a pile of matted hair upon his head. Ah, confidante,
 if only I had known that, in disguise, in amongst the
 flowers lurked that vile thing, a deadly viper, a deadly
 poison in amongst pure waters—had I known, would I have
 ever fallen prostrate on the ground, head bowed before him?

310 "Said the one of sorcery, 'Give alms, O Raghu woman
 (you who in these woods are Annadā!), to your famished guest.'

"The loose end of the sari, with which one covers up one's
 head, I drew out and down, then across my face, dear friend, and,
 with palms pressed tight, I uttered, 'Do please have a seat upon
 that deerskin mat beneath the tree and rest a while, my lord.

The Indra among Rāghavas will soon return, with his
 brother, Saumitri.' That scoundrel said (I failed to see through
 his feigned rage), 'I told you, I, your visitor, am hungry.

Give me alms. If you will not, then say so, and I shall go
 320 look elsewhere. Do you, Jānakī, withhold from a guest this
 day your hospitality? Do you, Raghu wife, wish to
 pour this inky smirch upon the Raghu clan? Tell me, is

it pride that makes you heedless of a Brahmin's curse? Give me
 alms, else I shall curse you and be gone. Venal Rākṣasas
 are presently the enemies of Sītā's husband—due
 to a curse of mine.' So I overcame my shyness and,
 alas, dear companion, apprehensive went out bearing
 alms—not realizing I had put my foot into his
 snare. Then and there your brother-in-law, with a grin, grabbed me.

330 "Once, my moon-faced one, I was walking through the forest with
 the Rāghava; a doe was grazing by a distant bush.
 Suddenly I heard an awful clamor; seized with fright I
 looked and saw a lightning-bolt-like tiger strike that deer! 'Save
 her, husband,' I said, falling at his feet. With a flaming
 arrow that best of warriors turned that tiger in a flash
 to ashes. With tender care I hugged that forest beauty
 then set her free, my friend. The sovereign of the Rākṣasas,
 like that very tiger, seized me in his clutches! But no
 one happened by to free this hapless doe, my lovely,
 340 at that moment of disaster. I filled the forest with
 my woeful cries. And, I heard sounds of wailing; perhaps
 Vanadevī, a mother pained by her servant's plight, was
 weeping. However, all that crying was in vain. Iron
 will melt by fire's power; does a stream of water soften
 it? Then will, my dear, the hardened heart yield to drops of tears?

"Off came the mass of matted hair; away, the ascetic's
water pot. In regal charioteer's attire that fool
hoisted me onto his golden chariot. He spoke much,
that perverse fellow, roaring angrily at times, at times
sweet talking; Saramā, I die of shame recalling that!

"That charioteer drove his chariot. And just as cries
the frog, held in the jaws of some lethal snake, so too I
cried, pretty woman, and to no avail. Those golden wheels
creaked and rattled, inundating with their noise the forest,
alas, drowning out this luckless woman's screams for help. When
trees, frightened by the power of Prabhañjana, thrash and
crash about, who can hear the pigeon coo? Finding myself
in difficulty, I forthwith, friend, stripped off my bracelets,
bangles, necklace, my tiara, choker, earrings, anklets,
and ornamental girdle. I scattered them along the
way. That is why no ornaments adorn my wretched frame,
Rākṣasa wife. You rebuke Daśānana all for naught."

The moon-faced one fell silent. Then Saramā spoke, "Your slave
is thirsty still, Maithilī; please give another draught of
nectar to her. Such a gift makes ears today seem useful!"
In sweetest tones that one whose face is like the moon resumed,

"If you indeed are bent on knowing, then listen well, my
woman, for who but you will hear Vaidehī's woeful tale?"

"Just as the Niṣāda, once he has caught a bird within
 370 his snare, returns home joyously, Laṅkā's sovereign in like
 fashion drove his chariot; and alas, dear one, just as
 that bird cries as it flutters anxiously, attempting to
 break free from fetters, likewise I too cried, my pretty one!

"O sky, I have heard you carry sounds (I prayed silently),
 shout out this slave's plight there where are that Raghu crown-gem and
 my husband's brother, Lakṣmaṇa, that world-conqueror! O
 Samīra, you who carry scents; I, at your courier-
 feet, respectfully implore you: go quickly to where roams
 my lord! O cloud, you who bellow fearsomely, call to my
 380 husband with your thunderous rumblings! O bumblebee, honey
 maker, leave your blooms and buzz the news of Sītā round the
 grove where that warrior, Indra among Rāghavas, is now;
 sing Sītā's song of woe in your "pā"-note song, O cuckoo,
 companion of the spring! His lordship will listen to you
 if you sing!" In this manner I lamented, but none heard.

"The golden chariot moved on, nimbly dodging the sky-
 splitting mountain peaks, forests, rivers, streams, and sundry lands.
 You have seen with your own eyes, Saramā, the speed of that
 Puṣpaka; what is the point of saying more about it?

390 "A short while later I heard in front of us a lion's
 terrifying roar. Our team of horses, frightened, bolted;

the golden chariot lurched unsteady. With my eyes wide
 open I saw perched upon a mountain's back a warrior,
 the spitting image of Bhairava, like some black cloud when
 Pralaya happens! 'I know you,' boomed that best of warriors.
 'You thief, you are Laṅkā's Rāvaṇa. What married woman
 have you filched today, horrid one? Whose house did you darken,
 snuffing out its lamp of love? You make a habit of this
 sort of thing, I know well. By slaying you with keen arrows,
 400 I shall wipe away today the stain on all who would bear
 arms! Come forward, witless one! Fie on you, Rākṣasa king!
 Is there a reprobate as shameless in this whole wide world?'

"And with that said, my friend, the Indra among champions roared.

I myself fainted on the spot, there in the chariot.

"When I regained consciousness I found that I was lying
 on the ground. Through the skies, the Rākṣasa charioteer
 in his chariot warred with that other warrior, shouting
 menacingly. Can a woman's tongue, my lovely lady,
 recount such conflict? Afraid, I shut my eyes. And sobbing,
 410 I importuned the god clan to come to the aid of that
 warrior to overcome the Rākṣasa, my enemy,
 then rescue me, this slave, from present danger. I resolved
 to plunge into the forest, to flee to distant lands. But
 alas, dear, I, stumbling, fell, as if felled by a violent

earthquake. I then prayed to mother earth, 'In this forsaken
land, O Mother, open up your bosom, purest woman,
and take in this unfortunate one! How can you bear your
saddened daughter's torment? Come quickly! That foulest one will
soon be back, alas, my mother, as a thief goes back in
420 dead of night to where he buried secretly his stash of
jewels—another's riches! Come rescue me, O Mother!'

"A booming battle raged throughout the skies, my pretty one.

The earth shook; the environs filled with noise. Again I lost
consciousness. Listen, gentlewoman, listen closely, friend,
to this unprecedented tale. In a dream I saw my
mother, my chaste mother earth. That lady of compassion
came to me, her thrall, and drawing me to her side, uttered
these sweet words, 'It is according to Fate's wish, my child, that
the king of Rākṣasas should kidnap you, dear one; because
430 of you, that lowlife with his line, will be expunged. I can
not bear this burden, and so it was that I conceived you
in my womb, dear one, to lay waste Laṅkā. At the fateful
moment when foul Rāvaṇa had touched your person, I knew
Fate had finally turned toward me; and I gave my blessings to
you. You, Maithilī, eased your mother's suffering. Now I
shall open up the doors on what will come to pass; do look.'

"Companion, I saw before me a cloud-piercing mountain;

there, as though all drowning in a sea of sorrow, were five
 warriors. At such a time my Raghu sovereign arrived with
 440 Lakṣmaṇa. On witnessing my lord's drawn face, confidante,
 I grew worried—what more can I say of how I wept? Those
 five warriors bowed before the Rāghava king and his younger
 brother. Together, they then went into a charming city.

"The Raghu warrior, having slain the local rajah in
 pitched battle, placed the finest of those five upon the throne.
 Messengers ran off in all the four directions; warriors,
 thousands and thousands, lion-like, came scampering, raising
 a horrible din. The earth trembled, my friend, beneath the
 weight of those warriors' feet. Afraid, I closed my eyes. But my
 450 mother, smiling, said, 'Of what are you, Jānakī, afraid?
 King Sugrīva, best of allies, marshals troops to free
 you. The champion your husband slew was known as Vāli, a
 king renowned throughout the world. That city is Kiṣkindhyā.
 Look there, a company of heroes, all comparable to
 Indra, arms.' I looked and saw arrayed those Indras among
 warriors, streaming like a flow of water during monsoon
 rains, roaring threateningly. The dense forest split asunder
 with a horrendous thud; streams dried up; forest creatures dashed
 away, panic stricken; the whole world, friend, filled with rumblings.

460 The army reached the ocean's shore. There I saw, Saramā,

my dear, stones afloat on water; many hundred warriors
 grabbed hold of mountains, wrenched them free with a mighty heave, and
 flung them in the water. Artisans at work in concert
 built a wondrous bridge. By my lord's command, the monarch of
 the waters, that very Pāśī, placed fetters round his own
 legs. With that ocean, incapable of being spanned, now
 spanned, the soldiers swaggered on across. And this golden land
 reeled beneath the pressure of those hostile feet. 'Victory,
 Raghu sovereign, victory!' all cheered. I wept for joy, my
 470 confidante. Inside his golden dwelling place I saw the
 sovereign of the Rākṣasas on his throne of gold. Within
 the assembly hall there stood one warrior, wise like Dharma
 incarnate, who said, 'Worship the best of Raghus; return
 Vaidehī lest you and yours should perish.' But the foe of
 Rāghava, drunk upon the liquor of this worldly life,
 kicked and swore at him. His feelings hurt, that elephant of
 warriors defected to my life's lord's side." Said Saramā,
 "My ladyship, how can I ever tell you how saddened
 by your sorrow was the sovereign Rākṣasa's heroic
 480 younger brother. We both cried far more than I can tell you,
 chaste one, when we thought of you." "I know," replied beautiful
 Maithilī, "I know that Vibhīṣaṇa is my greatest
 benefactor. Likewise, you, friend Saramā. That luckless

Sītā lives today is due solely to your kindness, kind
one. But listen, I continue with my marvelous dream.

"Then the Rākṣasa throng prepared for war; the Rākṣasa
musicians played; and a great cacophony rose into
the skies. I shivered, friend, to see that band of warriors, as
spirited as Hutāśana, mighty as a lion.

490 How shall I speak of all the battle that ensued. There flowed
a river of blood. I saw a pile of corpses, mountain
high, hideous, grisly. There came the headless Kabandha—
ghosts, ghouls, and Dānavas—vultures, buzzards, and all manner
of carrion-eating birds; packs of jackals and countless
dogs gathered there. Lankā filled with fear-instilling noises.

"I saw the Karbūra lord once more in his assembly
hall, but now his face seemed haggard, tears washed his eyes, for he
was grieving. His pride had been humbled in pitched battle by
the prowess of the Rāghava, my dearest! Sadly the
500 Rākṣasa king spoke, 'Aha, Fate, is this what you had in
mind? Go, all of you, and carefully awake my brother
Kumbhakarṇa, the very double of trident-holding
Śambhu. Who can save the clan of Rākṣasas if he can
not?' That group of Rākṣasas sped off; music issued in
shrill blasts; and the womenfolk let out calls of *ululu*.

Cutting a huge figure, that Rākṣasa charioteer

strode in among the troops. But my lord, with keenest arrows
 (who, dear, in the world shows such dexterity?), split his head
 in two! That domineering champion died, as he awoke,
 510 before his time! I got a tingling feeling, bosom friend,
 when I heard them holler out, 'Hail! Victory to Rāma!'
 Rāvaṇa wept. And golden Laṅkā wailed aloud with grief.

"I became, my friend, uneasy when I heard the weeping
 all around. I said to my mother, as I hugged her feet,
 'My heart bursts, Mother, from the sorrows of the Rākṣasa
 clan. This servant of yours ever is distressed to see the
 distress of another; forgive me, Mother.' Mother earth
 responded smiling, 'Dearest Raghu wife, what you have seen
 is absolutely true. Your husband will rout Laṅkā and
 520 punish Rāvaṇa. Open up your eyes and look once more.'

"I saw, dear Saramā, a gathering of heavenly
 maidens, various jewelry upon their limbs, wearing
 garlands made of *mandāra* blooms and attired in silken
 garments. They gathered round me, smiling. One said, 'Arise, chaste
 one, vile Rāvaṇa was finally killed in war.' Another
 said, 'Arise at once, treasure of that Raghu son, bathe in
 scented waters, woman, and dress in sundry finery.
 Goddess Śacī, consort of the Indra of the gods, will
 bestow this very day Sītā to the spouse of Sītā.'

530 "I spoke, friend Saramā, hands humbly palm to palm, 'What use,
O heavenly maids, are these clothes and jewelry to this
thrall? With your permission, I shall go like this to my lord;
let the gem of men see poor Sītā in her beggar's rags!'

"The godly maidens answered, 'Listen, dearest Maithili.
Gems crystallize deep in dirty mines, but the giver cleans
one off before presenting it into the monarch's hand.'

"Now weeping, now smiling, friend, I hurriedly got dressed. I
glimpsed my husband not far removed, alas, dearest, looking
like the ray-ringed sun god on the golden rising-hill. Half
540 crazed, I ran, my sweet-faced one, and fell at his two feet. Just
then I woke. Suddenly, O bosom friend, a room turns black
when the lamp goes out; that same thing happened to me—my world
went dark all around. O Fate, why did I not die then and
there? In hopes of what does this wretched life remain within
my body?" The moon-faced one fell silent, as a *vīṇā*,
silenced when its strings snap. Saramā (Rājalakṣmī of
the clan of Rākṣasas, but dressed as one among their wives)
spoke sobbingly, "You shall have your husband back, daughter of
Janaka. I tell you, this dream of yours is true. Stones do
550 float on water; hero Kumbhakarna, terror of gods,
Daityas, and of men, has indeed been felled in combat; and
now Vibhīṣaṇa serves the winning Raghu lord with his

thousands upon thousands of brave warriors. Paulastya sure
 will die, thus receiving his just punishment; that wicked
 one will take with him his entire line. Now tell me, what
 next happened. My eagerness to hear the story knows no
 limit." Once again the chaste one spoke in sweetest tones, "I
 opened up my eyes, my moon-faced friend, and saw before me
 Rāvaṇa; on the ground, alas, lay that lion among
 560 warriors, like the highest mountain peak, now crushed by lightning.

"The enemy of Rāghava then spoke, 'Open wide your
 lotus eyes; see, my dear, the prowess of a Rāvaṇa,
 you whose face is like the moon. The world-renowned Jaṭāyu
 dies today by the very strength of these, my arms. It was
 his own fault that he, the stupid son of Garuḍa, should
 perish. Who told that rustic fool to pick a fight with me?'

"I died in warfare, Rāvaṇa, defending *dharma*,' said
 that champion in a weakened voice. 'I fell in face-to-face
 combat and shall go to the gods' abode. But what is there
 570 for you anon? Consider! Greedy one, you, a jackal,
 lusted for a lioness. So, who can save you now, O
 Rākṣasa? O lord of Laṅkā, you have placed yourself in
 jeopardy by stealing this fine jewel of a woman.'

"With that, the warrior ceased to speak. Laṅkā's sovereign hoisted
 me again onto the chariot. Hands cupped reverently,

I cried out, friend, to that best of warriors, 'My name is Sitā,
Janaka's daughter, a servile wife among the Raghus,
sir! If you, my lordship, meet the Rāghava, tell him this
sinful one abducted me, finding me alone at home!'

580

"With a percussive clamor, the chariot lifted off
into the sky. Next I heard a horrible racket; straight
ahead I saw the ocean full of billowing blue waves.
Fathomless, shoreless waters mounted surging crests of white-
caps, in constant motion. I wished to leap into that sea,
my friend, and drown; but that heinous one prevented me from
doing so. In my heart I called out to the sovereign of
the waters and the creatures in the sea, but none heard or
paid attention to this woman in distress. The golden
chariot rushed through the firmament with desire's speed.

590

"There ahead Laṅkā shone before us radiantly. This
golden city, friend, is a pleasing beauty mark upon
the ocean's forehead. But even were a prison made of
gold, my dear, would its glow seem beautiful to a prisoner's
eyes? Just because the cage is golden, is a bird therein
incarcerated, dearest, content in that confinement?
Constantly unhappy is the bird who frolics in the
forest when you place it in that cage. I was born at a
star-crossed moment, pretty Saramā. Tell me, friend, who

has ever heard a tale like this? I am both the daughter
 600 of a king and wife in a line of kings, yet still I am
 confined to prison!" That beautiful one broke down and wept,
 her arms about Saramā's neck; and Saramā wept too.

Moments later bright-eyed Saramā wiped away the tears,
 then said, "My lady, who can contravene Fate's decree? What
 mother earth has said is true. It is Fate's wish, and that is
 why Lañkā's sovereign kidnapped you, bringing you to this land.
 That wicked one, inclusive of his whole clan, will perish.
 What other warriors are there in this warrior-spawning land?
 Where, chaste woman, are all the soldiers who can conquer the
 610 three worlds? Look there, on the seashore, that pack of scavengers
 gorge themselves gleefully on a pile of corpses. Listen
 well, widowed women sob in house after house. Your night of
 sorrow soon will end. I told you, your dream will come true. A
 troupe of Vidyādhari will shortly garland you with blooms
 of *mandāra* and adorn that shapely form of yours. You
 will greet the Rāghava, just as charming mother earth greets
 sweetly succulent spring. Do not forget, pure wife, this slave
 of yours. However long I live I shall keep your image
 in the temple of my heart and worship it joyfully,
 620 just as daily, when Night arrives, the pond in ecstasy
 offers worship to that wealth of moonlight. You have suffered

much in this land, sleek-haired one. But this thrall of yours is not to blame." Said Maithilī with music in her voice, "My boon companion, Saramā, what greater sympathizer in this world have I than you? To me, you are a river in the desert, Rākṣasa wife! You took the form of cooling shade to soothe sun-scorched me! You are the very essence of compassion in this place of no compassion! You are a lotus in these muddy waters! You are the jewel that is imbedded in the forehead of this snake-like golden Laṅkā! What more can I say? Sītā is a pauper, while you, dear, are a priceless gem! When the impoverished find such a gem, do they ever treat it lightly, lovely one?"

Bowing low to Sītā's feet, Saramā responded, "Bid this slave of yours farewell, kind one. My heart wants not to leave, lotus of the Raghu clan. But the sovereign of my heart serves Rāghava. If Laṅkā's lord were to learn I addressed your two feet, he would be furious and I in danger."

Maithilī spoke, "Companion, go home quickly; I hear footsteps in the distance; perhaps the matrons are returning."

Like a doe once frightened, fleet-footed Saramā was off; her ladyship remained behind in that deserted grove, like a solitary flower blossom in the forest.

Thus ends canto number four,

called "Asoka grove,"

in the poem

The Slaying of Meghanāda.