

ILLANGO ADIGAL'S
Silappadikaram
THE POETIC NARRATION IN LINES BY
K K Hebbar

Presented by : Jyotirmoy Bhattacharya



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First Edition: September 2025

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Published by Book Alinda
2nd Floor, 100B, N. S. C. Bose Road, Kolkata - 700040

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Printed in Kolkata, India.

ISBN

INR: 1500/-



‘Silappadikaram’

ILLANGO ADIGAL

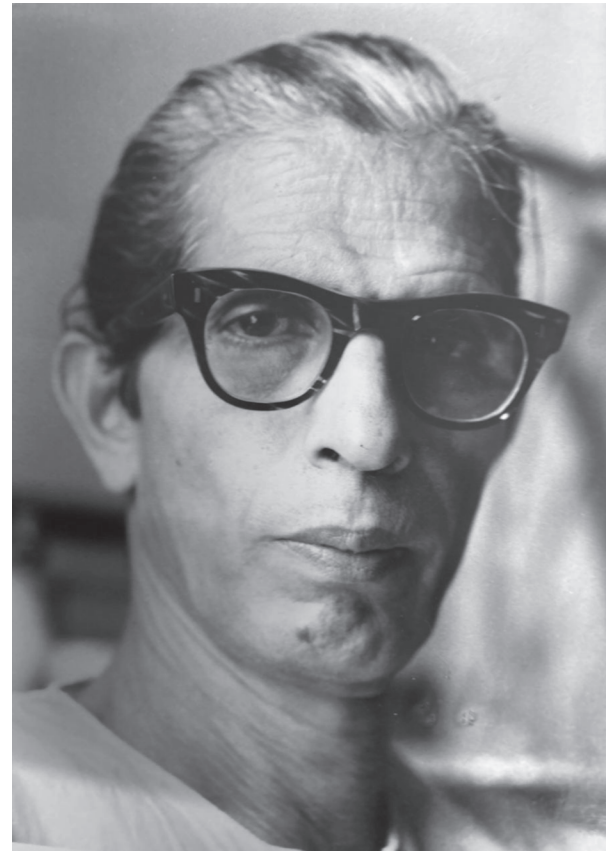
Illango Adigal a Chera prince from 2nd century CE is the author of Silappadikaram. Illango is said to be the brother of Kodungallur based Chera King Senguttuvan. According to legend, an astrologer predicted that he would become the ruler of the land. To obviate such a happening, especially when his elder brother, the rightful heir, was alive, the prince became a Jain monk taking the name of Illango Adigal. Astrologers predicted that he will be famous and remain in people’s heart for a long time. He rendered the epic in Tamil poetry and has remained famous and in people’s hearts.



Born in 1911 in Karnataka, Kattingeri Krishna Hebbar was inclined towards art from his early childhood watching his father work as part time clay sculptor, occasionally making Ganesh idols. Hebbar received his Diploma from Sir J. J. School of Art in 1938. At the initial stage he felt the strong urge to paint in a genre which drew inspiration from traditional Indian art. A visit to Europe in 1949 opened his eyes to the best of western art. He settled down to study at Academy Julian in Paris. He was inspired by Paul Gauguin via Amrita Sher-Gil's artistic vision of expressing Eastern culture through Western techniques. Despite his exposure to the Western method of art work, Hebbar's work remained rooted in the folk traditions of India. His early paintings of landscapes and figure compositions disciplined him and made him create his own unique style, rhythm, and colour. To understand rhythm, he even learnt the dance form of Kathak from Pandit Sunder Prasad. It was this intimate knowledge of the performing arts that helped Hebbar understand the rhythm and

movement of the body which led him to develop his own unique style of drawing nicknamed 'Singing Lines.' His singing lines adeptly captured the vibrant energy of Yakshagana dancers in the elaborate costume, complete with the head dress (ketaki mudhale) and the breast-plate (kavacha). Inspired by the Sri Lankan philosopher Ananda Coomaraswamy's discourses, Hebbar began exploring his creativity through the traditional Indian art found in Jain manuscripts, Rajput and Mughal miniatures, and the Ajanta frescos, harmoniously blending it with surrealism and abstraction in his work. With a textural aspect to his colors, he combined the classical and representational forms of image making in his paintings. The most impressive part of Hebbar's oeuvre are his line drawings stretching across the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. In a few lines he was able to fill out a lively figure.

The fifty-one line drawings he has done for the ancient Tamil epic, Silappadikaram are pure magic. He brought to life through



his line drawings the popular story that centres around a silambu or anklet owned by the protagonists Kovalan and Kannagi. Their attempt to sell their silambu unfortunately coincided with the stealing of the queen's anklet by the state goldsmith. By the twist of stories made up by the goldsmith, the king ordered for the execution of Kovalan. Ultimately the Pandyan king died of grief because of his miscarriage of judgement for killing Kovalan.

Hebbar's drawings of Indian sculptures, found on famous monuments, emphasized rhythmic quality over intricate details. He simplified forms, often drawing continuously without lifting his pen and omitting elements that hindered this primary goal. Through exaggeration and distortion of certain parts, he aimed for maximum effect with minimal lines, thereby establishing his unique artistic style. He used simple lines without shade to convey lively facial expressions.

As he gained proficiency in recording what he wanted in lines

and could hone his skills, he started searching for the hidden beauty in the interplay of lines. The evocative quality of straight and curved lines, rhythmic movement of lines began to engage his attention more and more. Some of the notable paintings of Hebbar are *Hill station* (1931), *Karla Caves*, *Maidenhood*, *Beggars* (1955), *Cock Fight*, *Hungry Soul* (1952), *Folk Rhythm* (1962), *Storm* (1969), *Homage to Indian Music* (1971), *Full Moon* (1972).

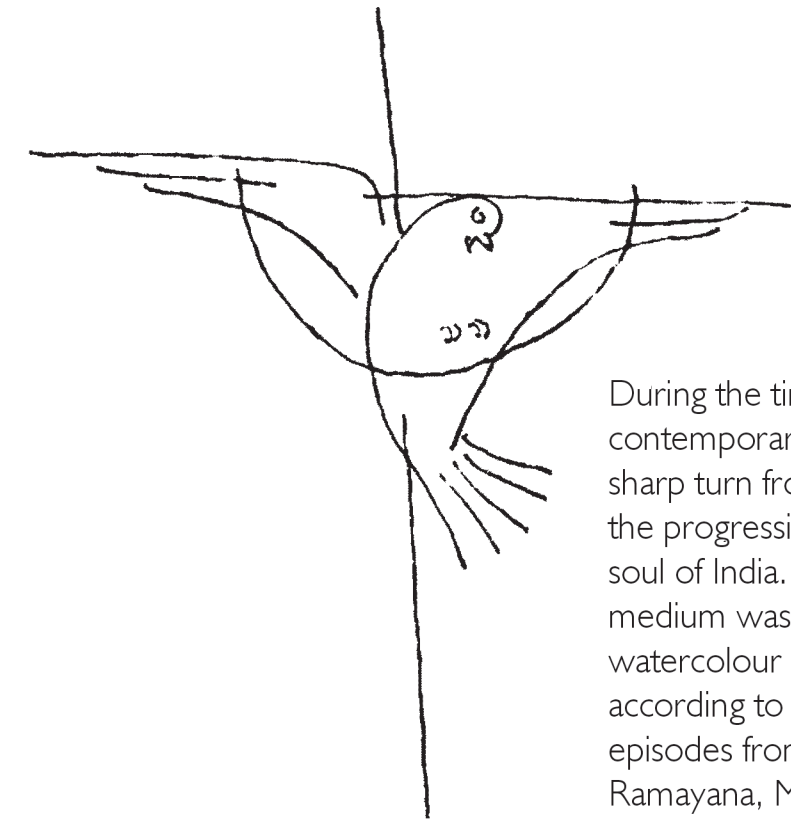
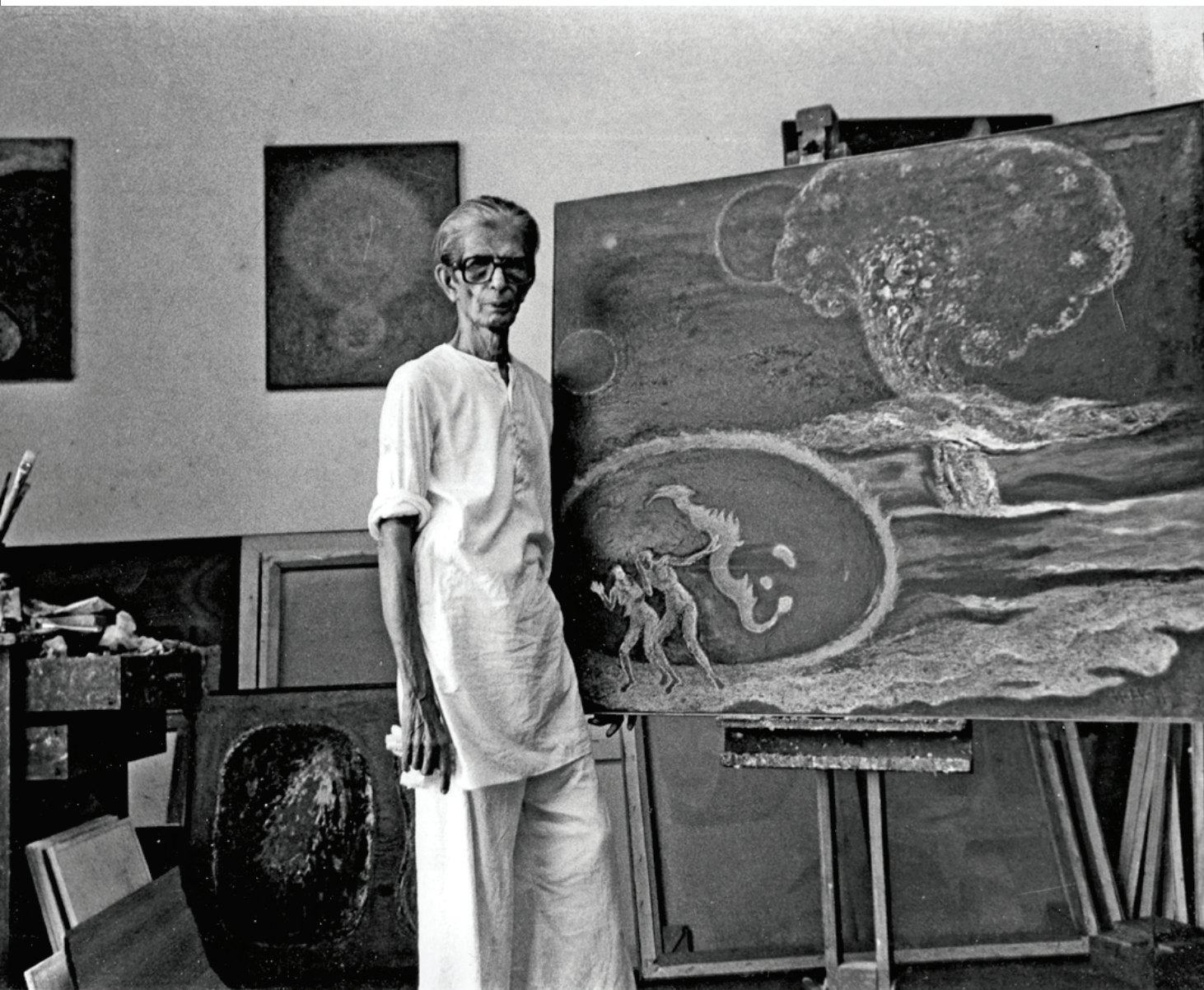
Like many of his contemporary artists, Hebbar also faced the challenge of understanding the dilemma of modernism in the art world. To understand it, Hebbar took refuge in his own tradition and culture while using Western tools like canvas and oil colours. He found his own space to define his style through line, form and colour and establish his own identity. His painting, “The Divine Herdsman” bears testimony to this thought process.

In one of his interviews in Sunday Standard Magazine with A.S.



Raman he said, 'I don't need hackneyed symbols like triangle, swastika, serpent etc. Anyone can just rearrange these in compact patterns and claim to be profoundly oriental. I create my own symbols. I don't sentimentalize or romanticize anything. I just use my personal symbols to emphasise the truth as I perceive it.'

Through his extensive body of work, ranging from insightful portrayals of rural life to dynamic depictions of classical dance forms and mythological narratives, Hebbar captured the essence of India with an unparalleled sensitivity and vision. His contributions to modern Indian art are celebrated for their ability to bridge traditional aesthetics with contemporary expression, ensuring that his artistic voice continues to be of relevance in the art world even today.



During the time of Abanindranath Tagore and his contemporaries, the perspective of Indian art studies took a sharp turn from the Western methodology to the Eastern. For the progression of Indian art, artists went on to search for the soul of India. This search broke the dawn of a new era. The medium was heavily dominated by the influence of watercolour during that period. Artists not only drew according to their own subjects, but they also illustrated episodes from the Indian mythological texts — starting from Ramayana, Mahabharata, up until the biography of Buddha. The various ancient regional texts and stories of India, too, became the subject of their artwork. The treasure trove of artworks of Nandalal Bose, Asit Kumar Haldar, K. Venkatappa, and D. P. Roy Choudhury, among others, contributed immensely to the history of Indian art. Today, art is divided into different genres, but there was a time when artists did not let themselves be restricted within any kind of categorisation. On the one hand, they experimented on canvas, on the other, they expressed their art

consciousness on different subjects utilising various types of print medium. Be it a line drawing or a watercolour, every medium was used as a way to demonstrate their inner thoughts. The illustrations based on the Epic of Silappatikaram by K. K. Hebbar are not just limited to some line art. Utilizing the simplicity of line and form, he preserved the essence of his own style and continued to convey a new paradigm of modern art- it is truly a gift to us. These sensitive visual narrations by Hebbar of Ilango Adigal's epic are its modern manifestation, but continues to transcend the constraints of time with their relevance.

- Jyotirmoy Bhattacharya

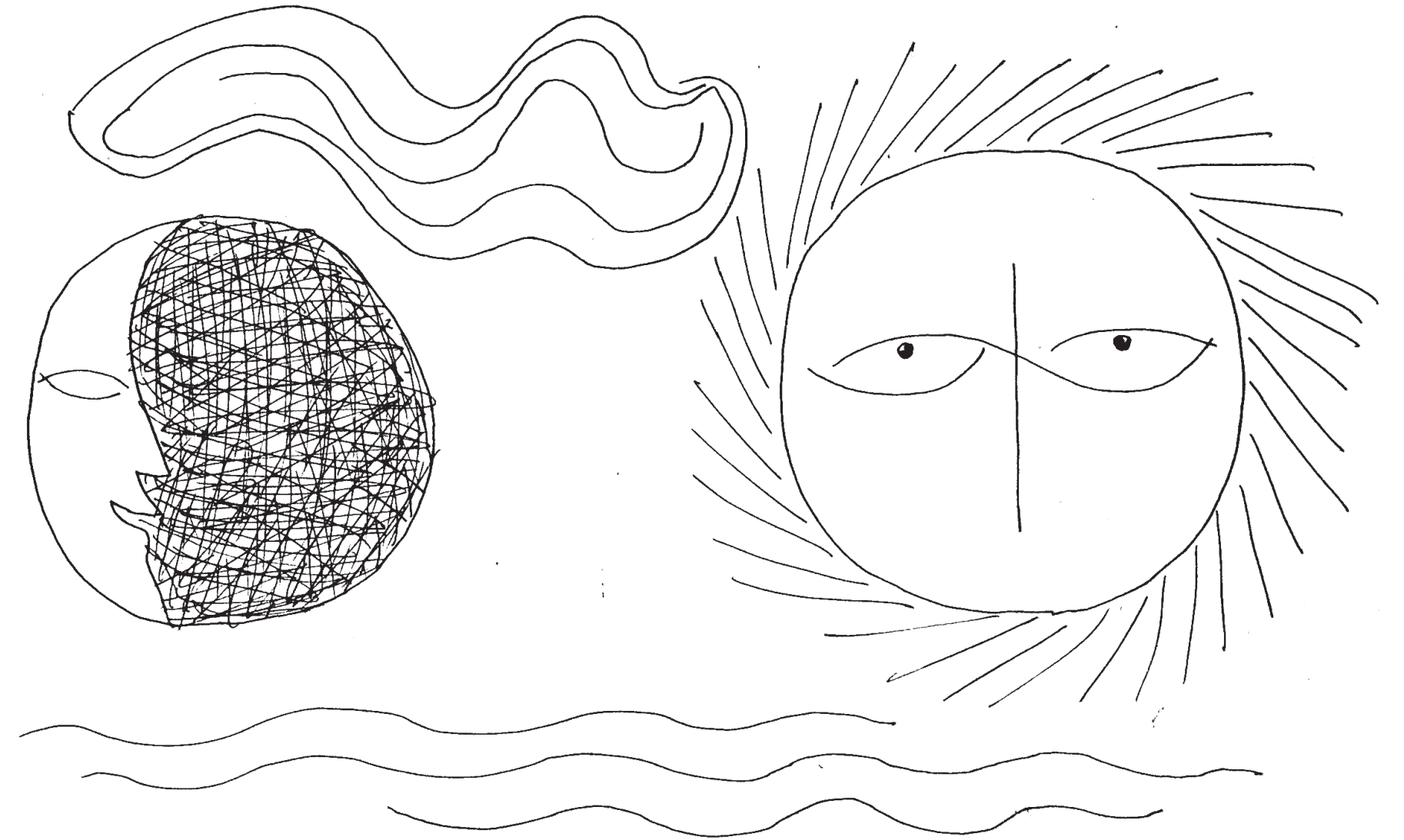


Hebbar's Poetic Narration

Silappadikaram

Text: Dharmil Adhyaru, Rekha Rao Hebbar

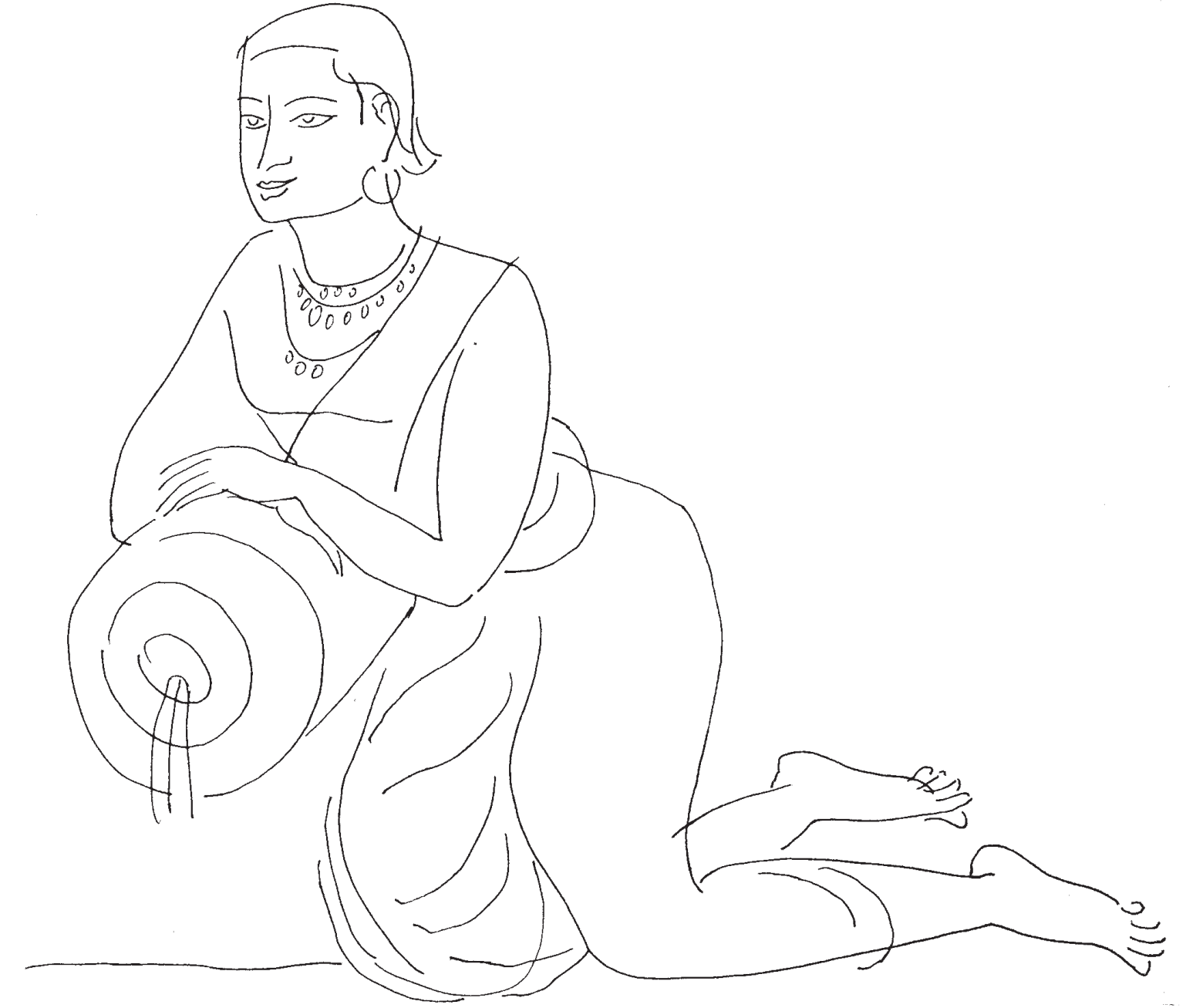
Golden sunlight bathed Puhar, the majestic Chola capital ruled by the noble Kalikalan, standing proud as the sacred peaks of the Himalayas. This divine city attracted foreigners to its harbor while streets bustled with traders of flowers, gems, and exotic wares. Skilled artisans and musicians abounded. The magnificent urban design radiated from royal streets to worker quarters, with a vast marketplace between. Such boundless treasures filled Puhar that even if the entire world gathered within, its wealth would remain untouched.





Puhar housed the wealthy merchant Masattuvan, honored by King Kalikalan and generous as Kubera himself. His sixteen-year-old son Kovalan, a glorious and splendid embodiment of youth renowned throughout the land, captured the heart of many a fair maiden; young women with faces as radiant as the moon sighed longingly, declaring him:

"A glorious youth incarnate,
Blessed by Murugan!"



Puhar was also home to noble Manaikan, honored by King Kalikalan and generous as rain upon parched earth. His daughter Kannagi was the family's most perfect offspring, a graceful and peerless maiden with virtues pure as gold. The women of Puhar sang her praises:

"Radiant as Lakshmi,
Upon her lotus throne;
Immaculate as Arundhati!"





The auspicious marriage of Kannagi and Kovalan, blessed by Lakshmi-Narayana, was celebrated grandly in Puhar with conch shells, drums, and streets lined with white parasols. After Vedic vivaha ceremonies beneath a pearl-adorned pavilion, they retired to Masattuvan's mansion where they embraced in passionate union, their flower garlands entangling like Kama and Rati themselves.

“May you remain entwined
Together in eternal union
In the embrace that never fades.”

Kovalan's mother gifted them a house with wealth and servants. As the years passed, Kannagi's fame as an exemplary householder spread throughout the land.



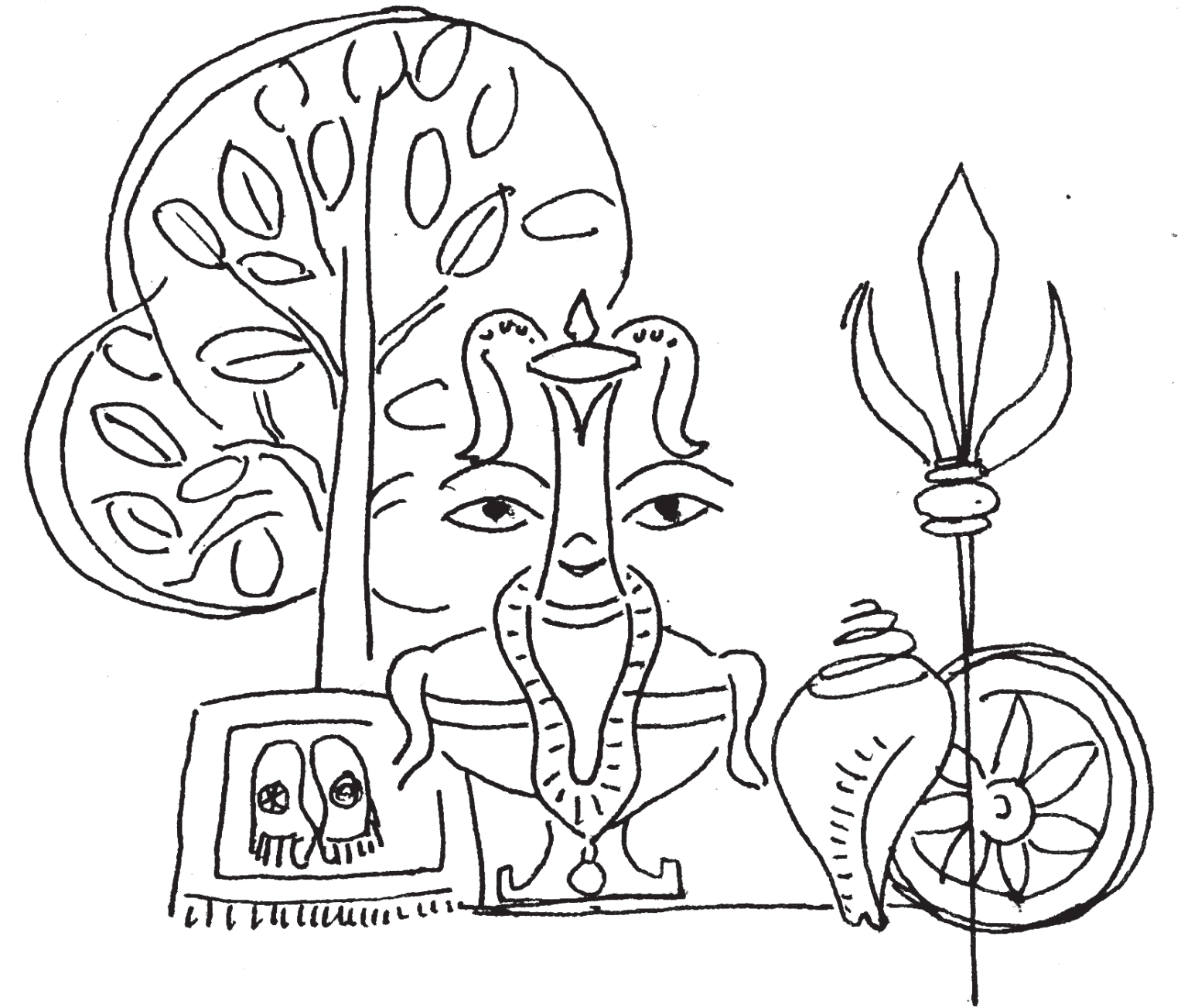
Puhar was also home to the exquisite dancer Madhavi, descended from the apsara Urvashi who was cursed by sage Agastya to dance on earth after a distracted performance for Indra when she glanced at her beloved Jayanta. Jayanta followed Urvashi to earth, and their union established Madhavi's lineage. Of matchless beauty, Madhavi mastered dance and singing through seven years of rigorous training under experts in classical, folk styles, and the theatrical forms of the vettiyaal and the potuviyaal.





As Madhavi's maiden performance approached, she was summoned before King Kalikalan. The site of her dance had been meticulously prepared in accordance with the guidance of diviners, with the stage measured using the traditional span of a bamboo rod.

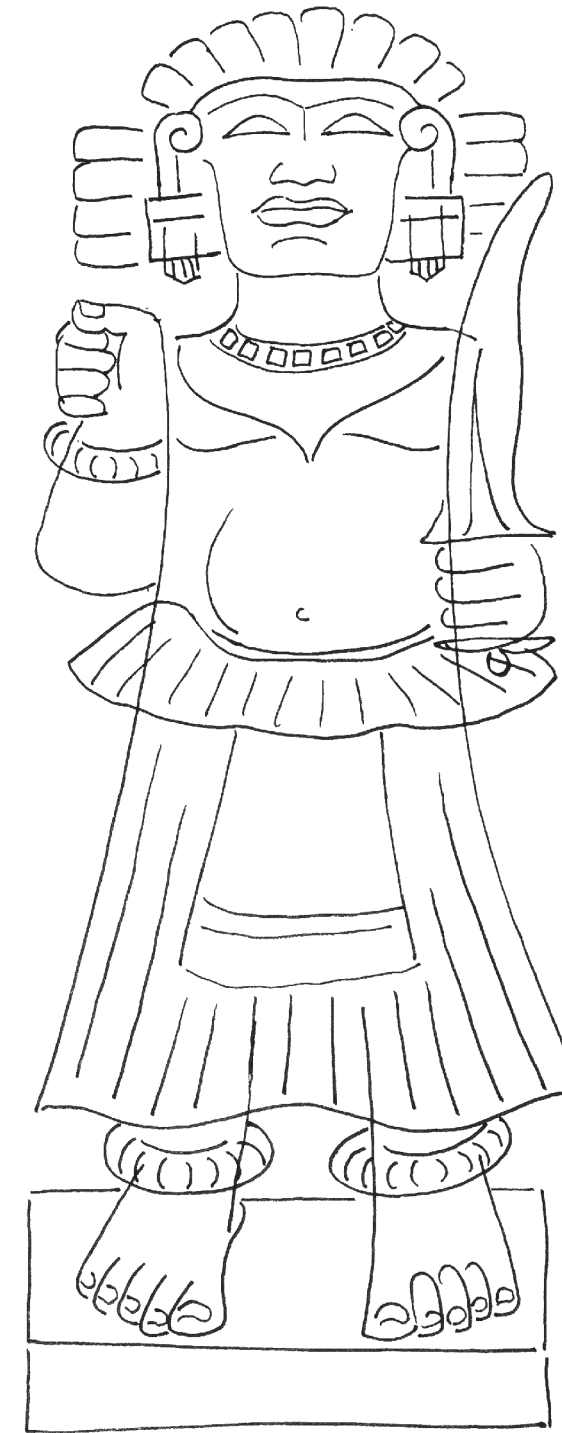
There were dual doorways for the performers, deity idols for worship, and bright lamps in every corner that prevented shadows. A large curtain was drawn over the stage, and on a painted canopy hung strings of pearls and flower garlands.

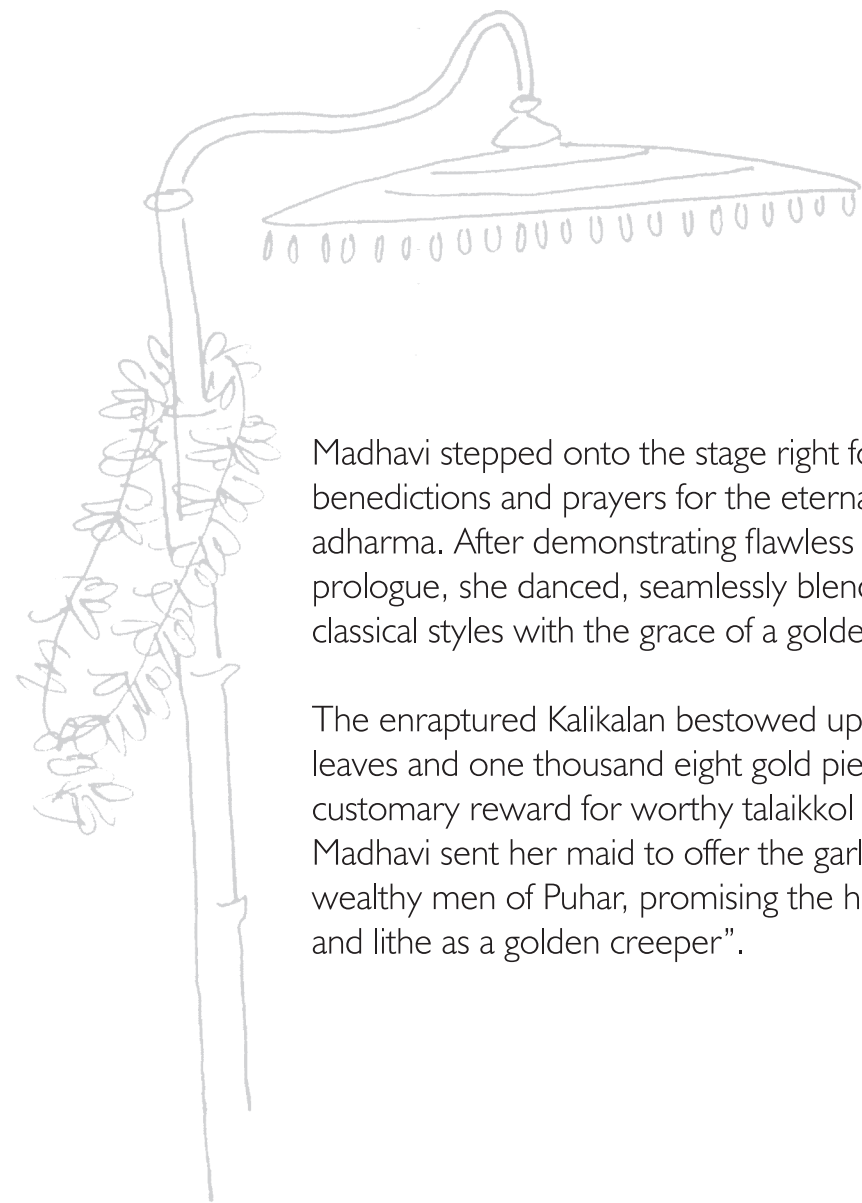




The most auspicious spot on the stage held the sacred talaikkol — the handle of a splendid parasol taken in battle from an illustrious king, coated with gold and inset with nine precious gems. The talaikkol symbolized victorious Jayanta, son of Indra.

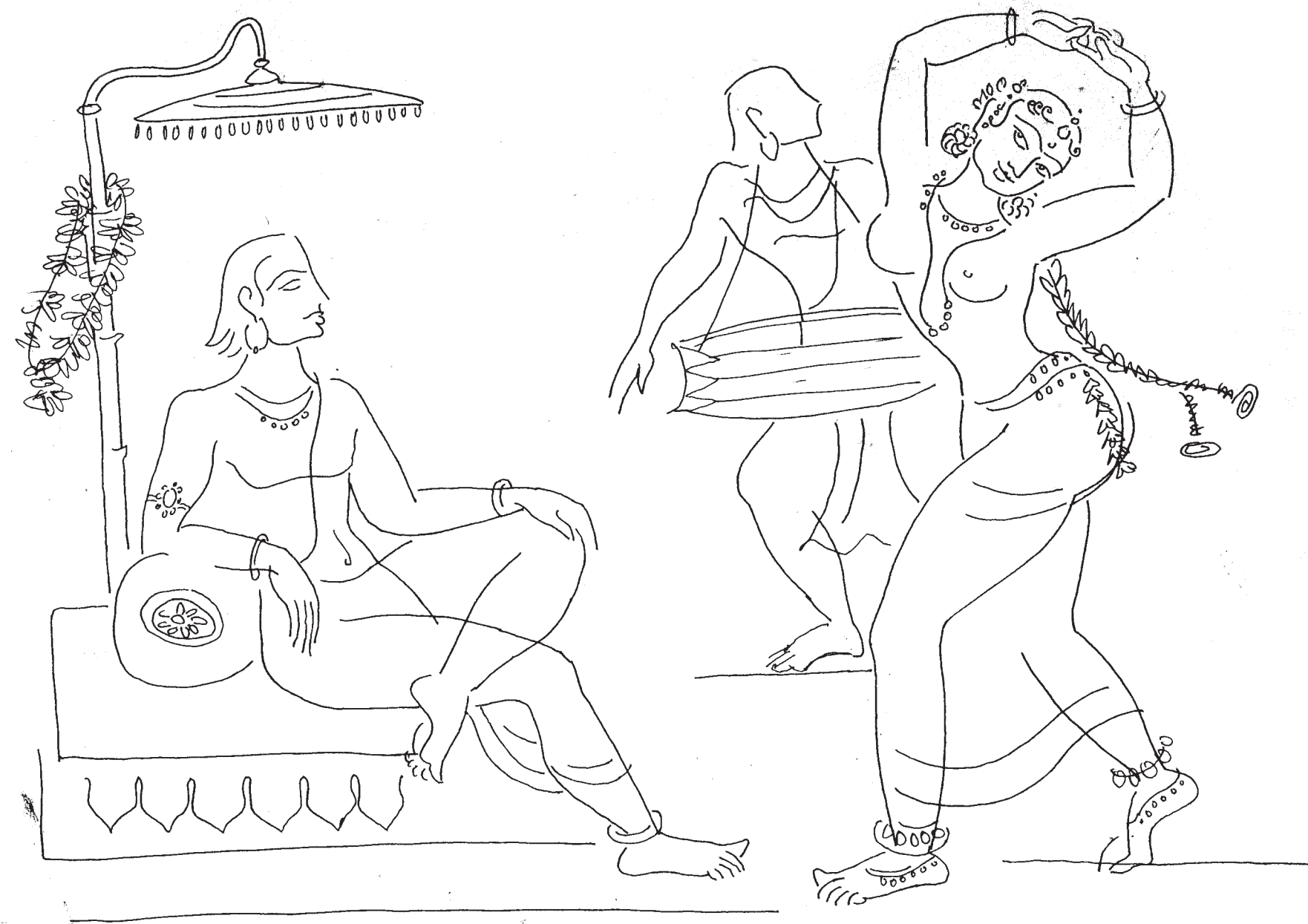
On the day of her performance, Madhavi first conducted the traditional rituals, bathing the talaikkol with holy water and wreathing it with flowers. It was then paraded through Puhar on the royal elephant, greeted by drums and conches, and installed on stage with ceremonial fanfare.





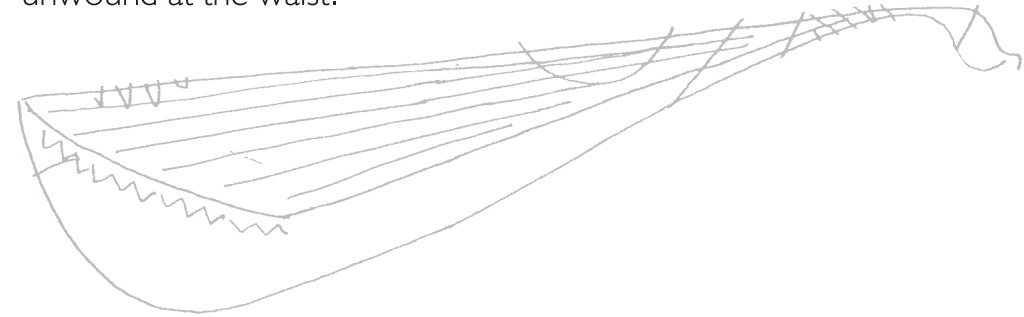
Madhavi stepped onto the stage right foot first, beginning with benedictions and prayers for the eternal victory of dharma over adharma. After demonstrating flawless vocal prowess in a four-part prologue, she danced, seamlessly blending northern folk and classical styles with the grace of a golden liana.

The enraptured Kalikalan bestowed upon her a garland of green leaves and one thousand eight gold pieces, which was the customary reward for worthy talaikkol bearers. Seeking a patron, Madhavi sent her maid to offer the garland to the noble and wealthy men of Puhar, promising the heart of her mistress, "supple and lithe as a golden creeper".



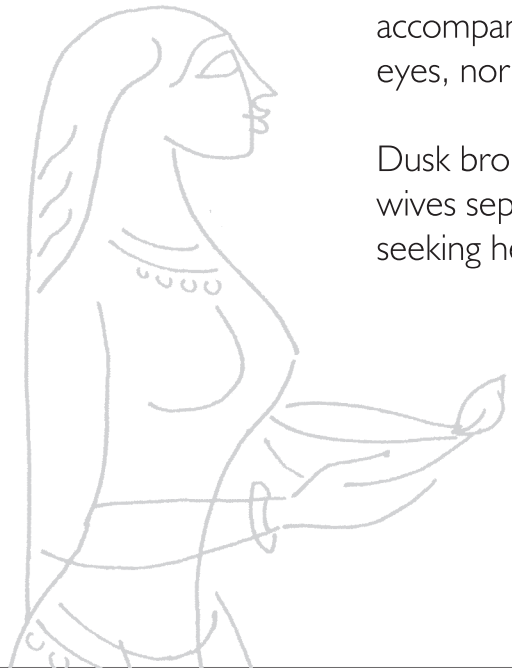
Fate decreed that Kovalan, entranced by Madhavi's dance, purchased her garland and entered her home. He embraced her untouched beauty with rapture while she surrendered passionately to him upon a couch strewn with petals and blossoms.

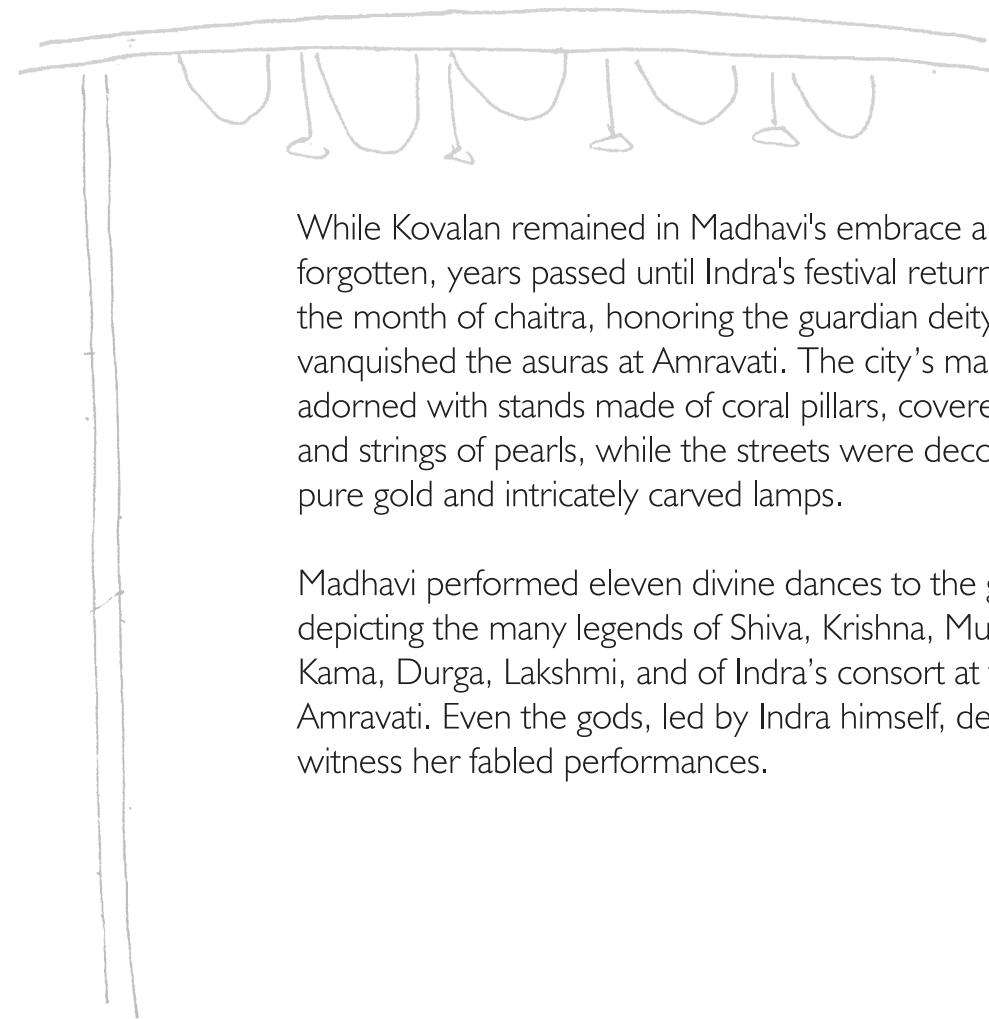
In the intervals between their love-making, Madhavi ventured onto her moonlit terrace, her red girdle undone and diaphanous gown unwound at the waist.



While Madhavi surrendered to ecstasy with Kovalan, Kannagi's heart was wracked by grief. Through karma's incomprehensible design, he had forgotten his faithful wife who waited in a plain white robe, wearing only her bridal pendant, her radiance and her sole ornament. Kannagi's radiant face had no trace of the perspiration that accompanied the arts of passion, no kohl that defined her doe-like eyes, nor any tilaka on her forehead, not even her captivating smile.

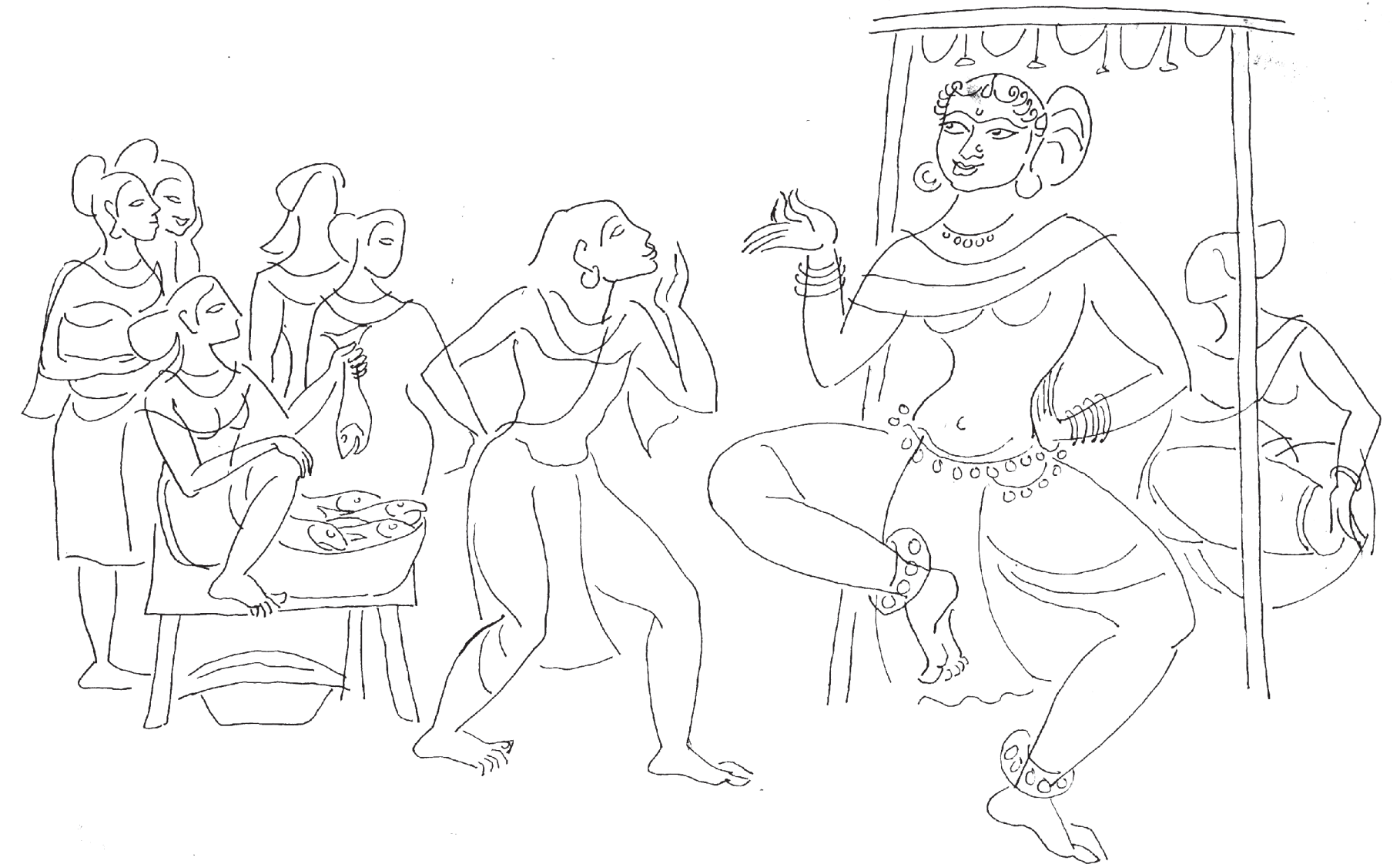
Dusk brought joy to women embraced by lovers but sorrow to wives separated from their husbands, as the earth herself lamented, seeking her lords Surya and Soma.





While Kovalan remained in Madhavi's embrace and Kannagi stood forgotten, years passed until Indra's festival returned to Puhar during the month of chaitra, honoring the guardian deity who had vanquished the asuras at Amravati. The city's mansions were adorned with stands made of coral pillars, covered with gold, gems, and strings of pearls, while the streets were decorated with vases of pure gold and intricately carved lamps.

Madhavi performed eleven divine dances to the glory of Indra, depicting the many legends of Shiva, Krishna, Murugan, Vishnu, Kama, Durga, Lakshmi, and of Indra's consort at the gates of Amravati. Even the gods, led by Indra himself, descended to earth to witness her fabled performances.



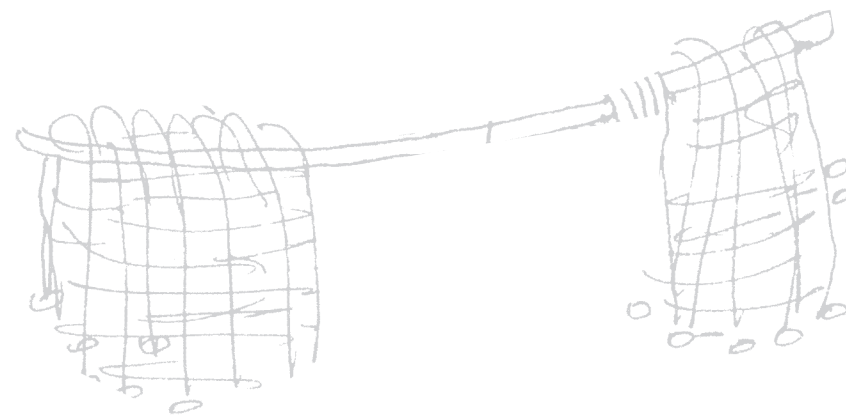


As the festivities concluded, Puhar's citizens departed for revelry by the moonlit seaside. Among them was Kovalan with Madhavi, in her chariot, passing lamp-lit streets carpeted with flowers. At a secluded, pandanus-encircled cove, they reclined on a couch bounded with tapestries.

In the midst of these celebrations, discord first sprouted in Kovalan's heart as his love began to wither from Madhavi's growing fame — karma's imperceptible work seeding doubt within. Melancholy guided him as he sang:

"Is this radiant Soma upon her face?
Eyes like painted fish, brow a delicate bow,
Raven tresses dark as clouds.
Is this Yama in her eyes like spears?"





"Is she a goddess by the restless sea?
This lithe girl with lustrous hair
Keeps birds from her drying fish;
Her fair countenance afflicts all witnesses.
In melancholy, my heart remembers
The fragrance of the grove, soft touch of the sand,
Her bashful words, the tender, bountiful bosom,
The delicate brow upon her radiant face.
In anguish, I recall the shores ravished by the waves,
This enchanted grove, her long hair, perfumed, undone,
Her eyes are as sinuous as painted fish.
As it dies, my heart remembers
Conch-strewn shores, the smell of unopened petals,
Her radiant face, lips like blossoms, her tender bosom."





With her fair companions by her side, Doe-eyed Madhavi, dismayed by Kovalan's faithless songs and trembling with dark forebodings of replacement, sang of the seaside grove:

"In fragrant groves among sweet flower clusters,
We saw the crab make love with its mate;
I know not why he left without word,
My prince upon these roaring waves.
He left on his chariot, stealing his precious victory,
He left without thought. Let him leave!
I will not forget him though he forsakes me.
O boundless seas, your waves wash away his furrows;
You conspire with my foes, your waters clear his traces;
Yet, you spread his memories across your swirling domain.
As you swallow his memories and our love dies, thus shall I leave you."





When Kovalan heard Madhavi's passionate songs, his mood darkened as indomitable karma played its part, convincing him of her faithlessness. He abruptly withdrew from her embrace, and announced his departure. Devastated, Madhavi returned home in her chariot with her maid, a deep lament filling her being. She climbed to her manor's highest room, and though filled with despair, wove a beautiful garland with an elegant message for him:

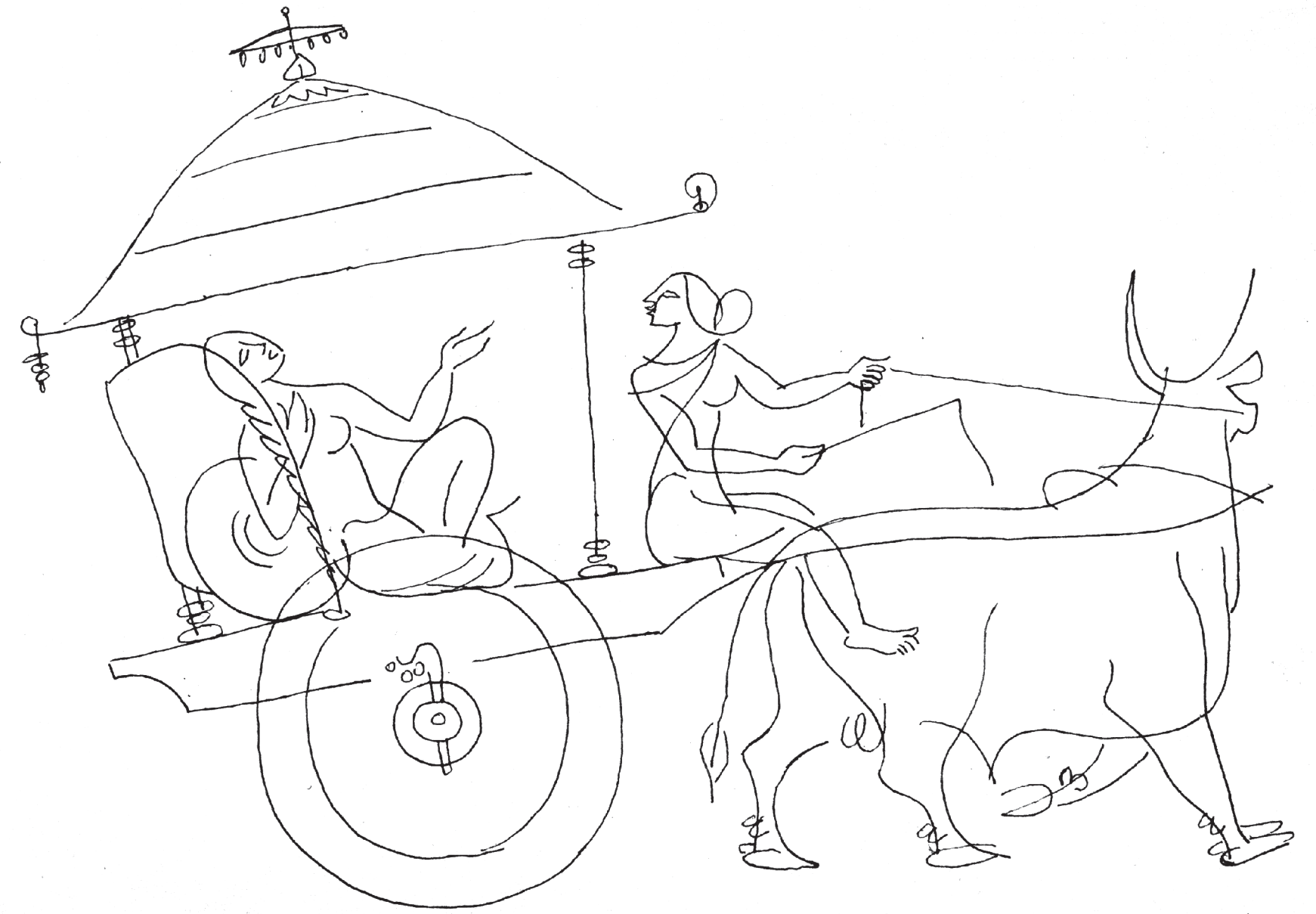
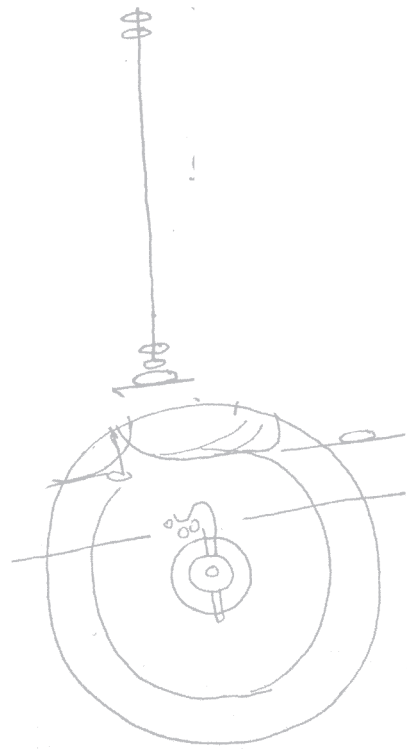
"Crown prince of my life,

Spring is here, enchanting with Kama's fragrant arrows

Lovers that met briefly, lovers who once parted.

Even the radiant moon is not safe from his ardor.

May my longing reach your heart."

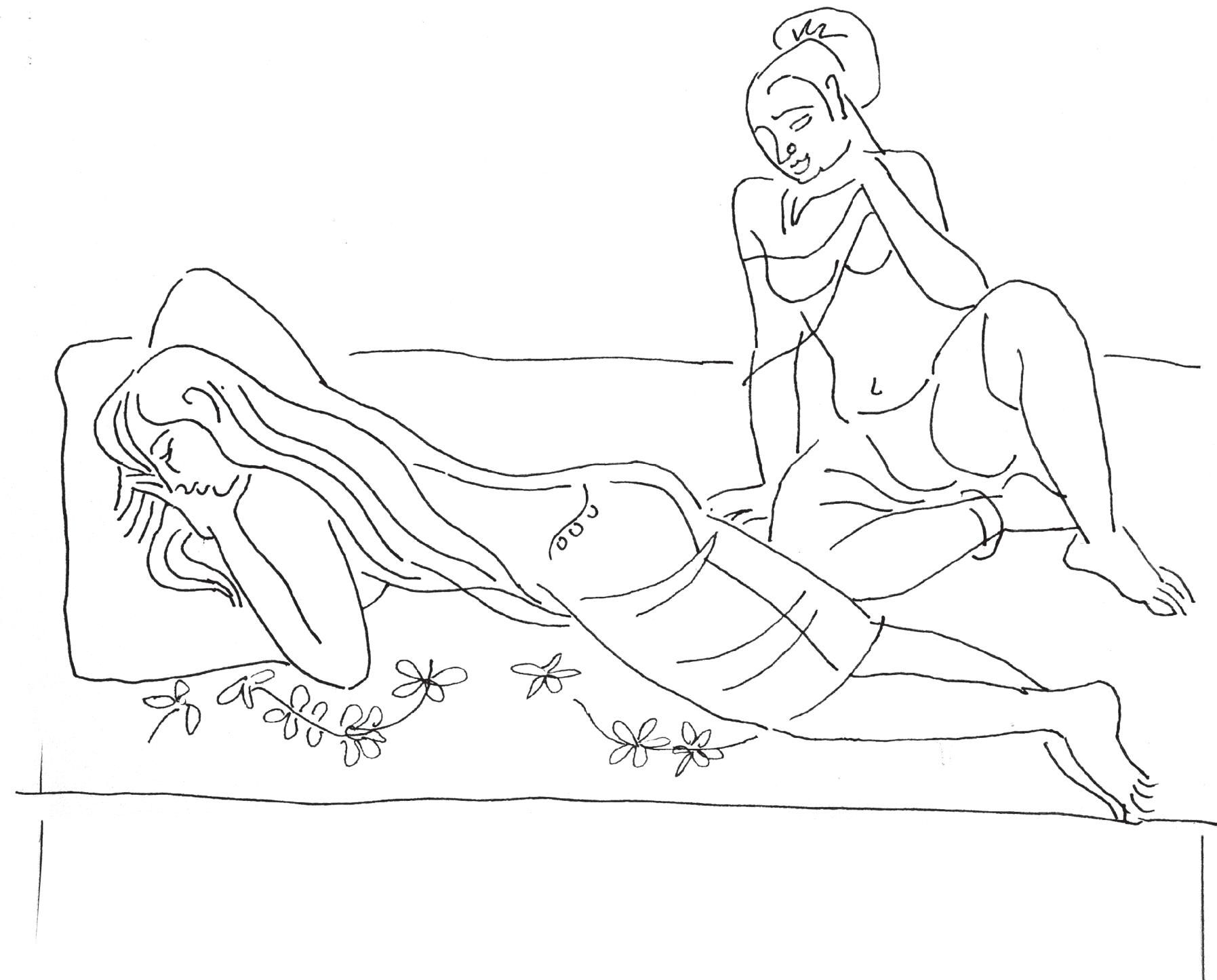




When the message was composed, Madhavi sent her maid Vasantamala to deliver the elegant wreath to Kovalan. Upon seeing the inscription, his features hardened as he rejected it, bitterly recounting how the "dancing girl" had performed various deceptive dances — alluring, shy, seductive, passionate, indignant, and finally despairing — only to twist his true feelings.

When a distraught Vasantamala returned with his cruel words, Madhavi consoled her, "Though he is sorely missed, he will return with the morning".

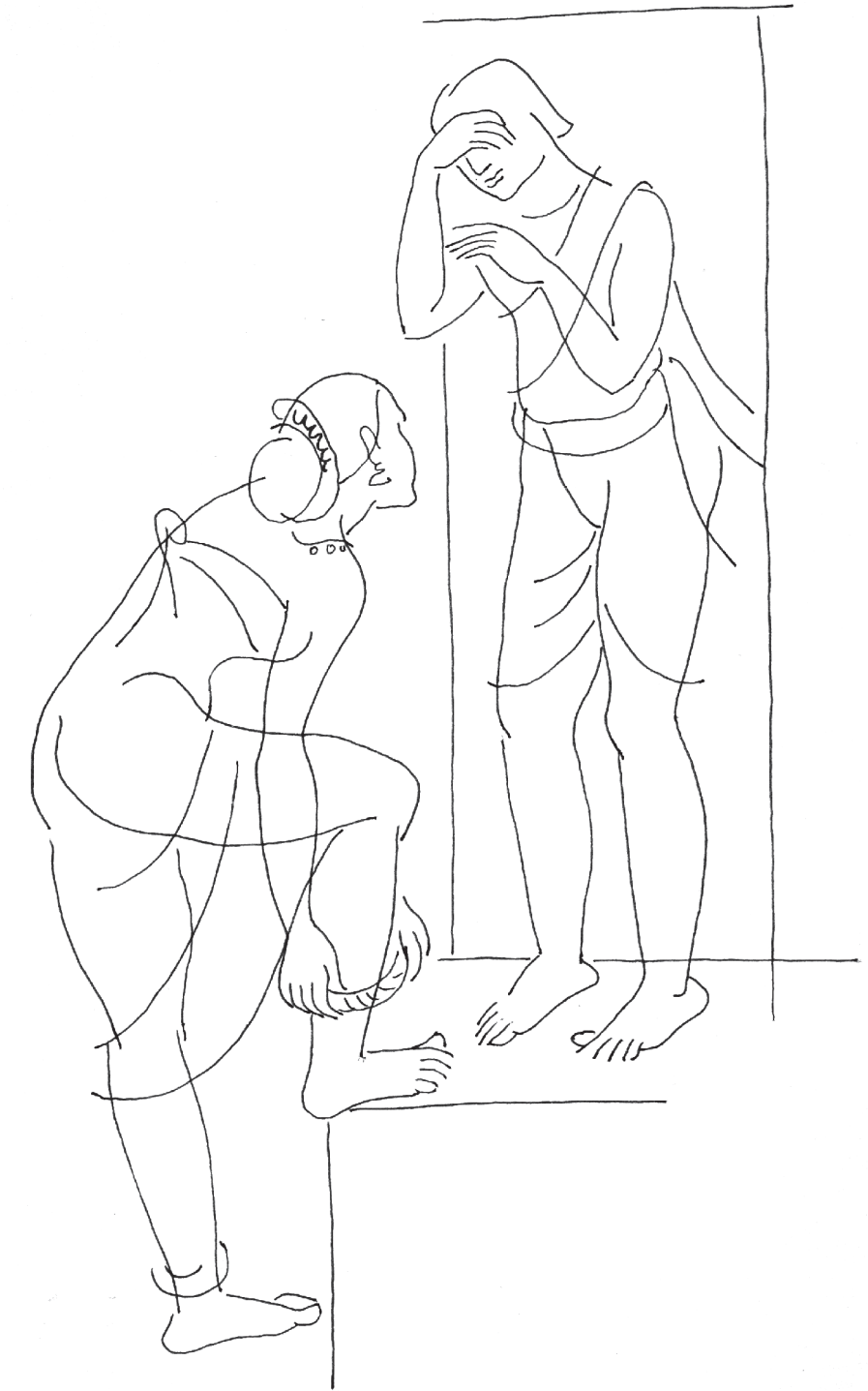
As she spoke, her heart was overwhelmed with grief and she lay awake all night on her couch strewn with the flowers of spring.





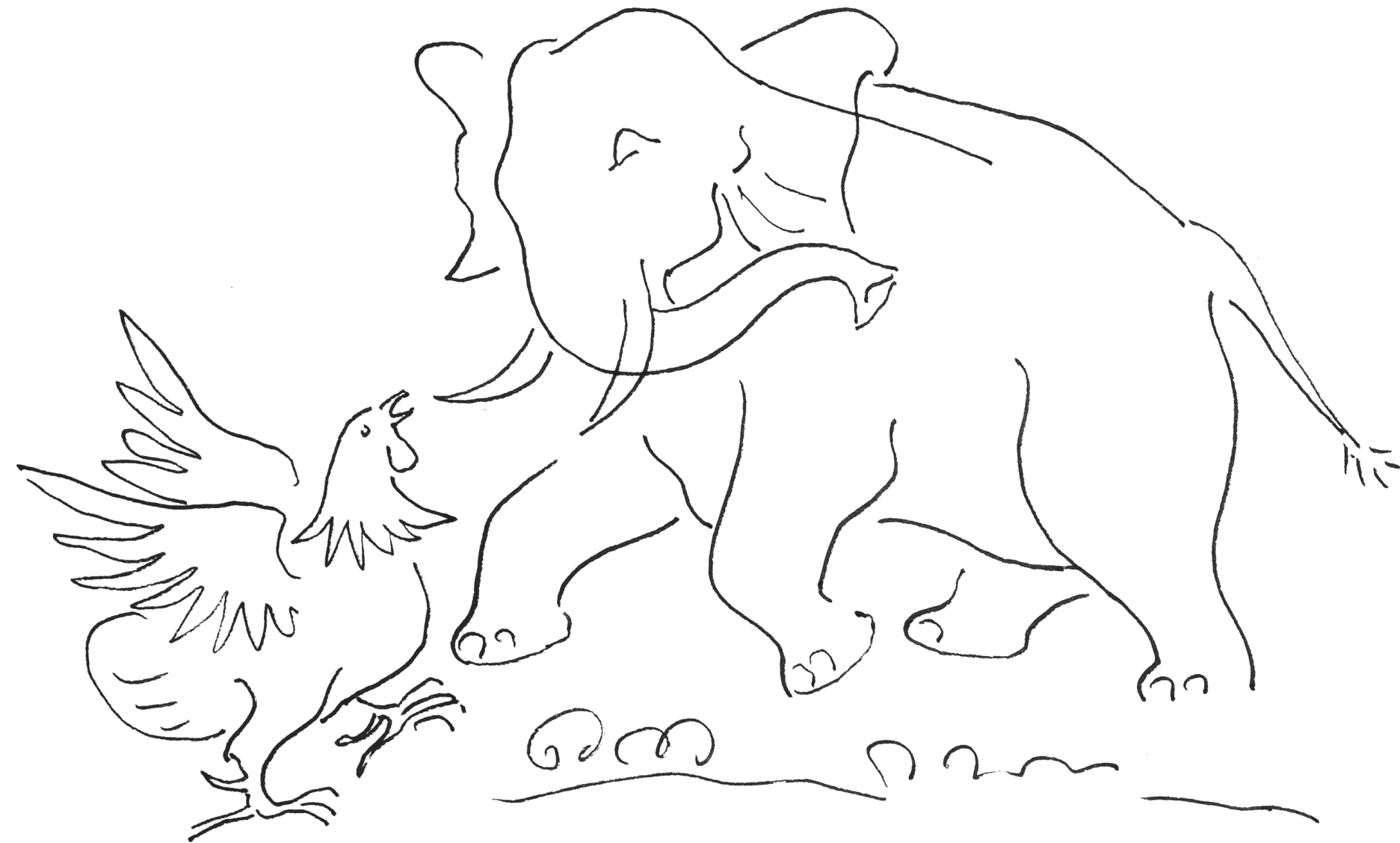
As fate separated Madhavi from Kovalan, evening settled over Puhar. Kannagi's friend Tevanti visited to console her, prompting Kannagi to reveal a foreboding dream of journeying to a city where misfortune befell Kovalan and, yet, how at the end of these days, only indescribable joy awaited them.

As Tevanti departed, a shame-filled Kovalan returned to his faithful wife, filled with remorse at his despicable actions and for squandering their wealth in deceit and untruth. Kannagi felt hope return to her heart, and offered her golden anklets to her husband as a gift. Together they departed for ancient Madurai before dawn, to seek their fortune, as karma moved along its immovable orbit.



Before dawn, Kannagi and Kovalan departed through the high walls that shielded Puhar, circumambulating Vishnu's temple and passing Indra's seven halls. Upon reaching Kaveri's northern banks, they encountered Kavunti, a revered nun who, recognizing karma's immutable shadow over the couple, joined their journey. They traveled through lotus thickets and fields, heartened by song of farmers and ploughmen, until they reached the city of Srirangam, where they took a boat toward the temple-dotted southern bank.

Kannagi, Kovalan, and Kavunti then entered Uraiur, a city built where a tiny rooster once defeated a majestic royal elephant — a feat of bravery that prompted the king to establish the settlement on this sacred ground.





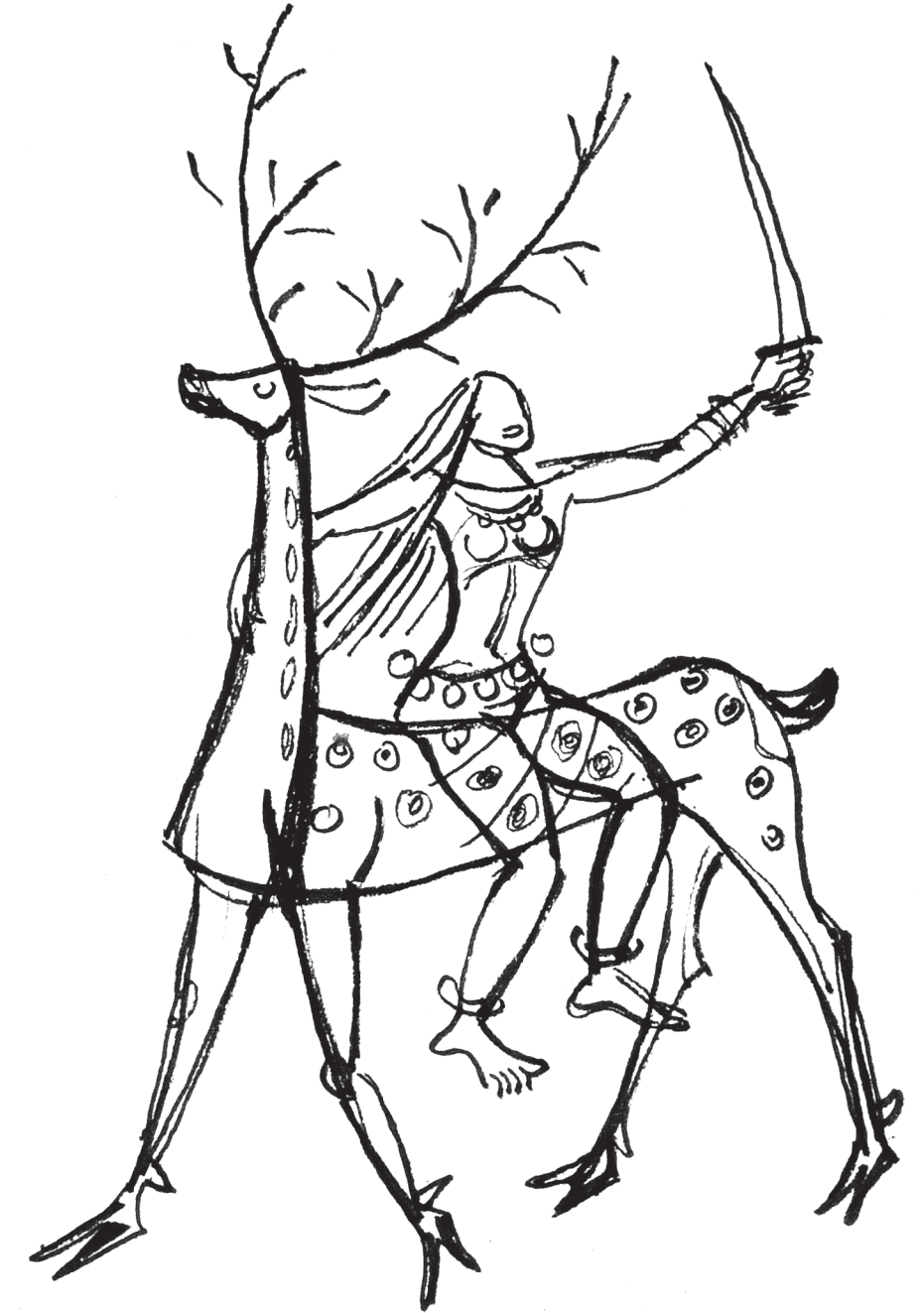
After resting in gardens near Uraiur, the travelers journeyed southward and met a revered brahmin at a sanctuary. He revealed his home lay in the distant Kodagu hills, and he had sought the blessings at Vishnu's temple on the Kaveri islet. There he witnessed the splendor of the red-eyed Blue God, clothed in gold with a floral garland, holding his four divine weapons — the Sudarshana chakra, Padma lotus, Panchajanya conch, and Kaumodaki mace — while reclining on Anantasesha with the Goddess Lakshmi beside him.

The brahmin then described three routes to Madurai: the right through parched forests to Sirumalai hills; the left to Vishnu's sacred hill with a riddling nymph offering three boons; and the center path through forests and villages. Taking the middle route, Kovalan encountered a seductive nymph disguised as Madhavi's maid, but overcame her through prayer to goddess Aiyai. The travelers then sought refuge in Aiyai's temple, sacred to the fierce Eyinar hunters.



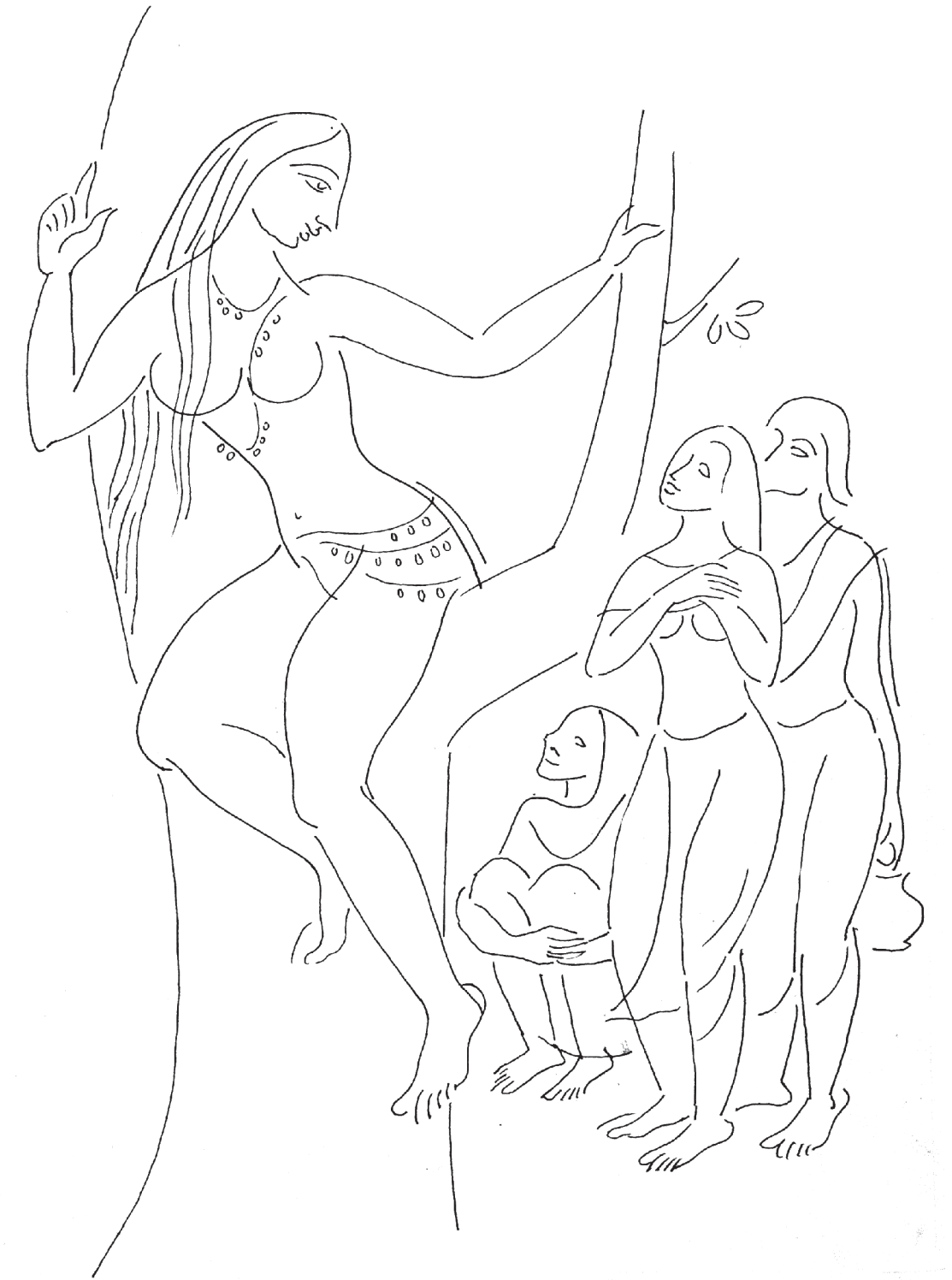


The Eyinars had chosen a virgin to embody the goddess Aiyai, adorning her with hair twisted into a tuft as a serpent and bound by bowstring, the curved tusk of a boar as a crescent on her forehead, a tiger-tooth necklace, and a tiger skin girdle. Mounted upon a black-antlered stag, and surrounded by women bearing offerings of toys, parrots and peacocks, she approached Aiyai's shrine amid thundering drums and trumpets. The forest echoed with hunters' songs praising her virtues, born to the courageous hunter clan whose glorious bows never falter.



The ceremonial shrine to the goddess who rules with three-eyed Shiva was encircled by fragrant orange and cinnamon trees, and groves of sandalwood, sal, and mango trees. Honeybees created a serene symphony as they gathered nectar from flowering boughs. As the virgin prostrated herself before the altar, she became possessed by the goddess; pointing at Kannagi, who stood silently with Kovalan, she proclaimed:

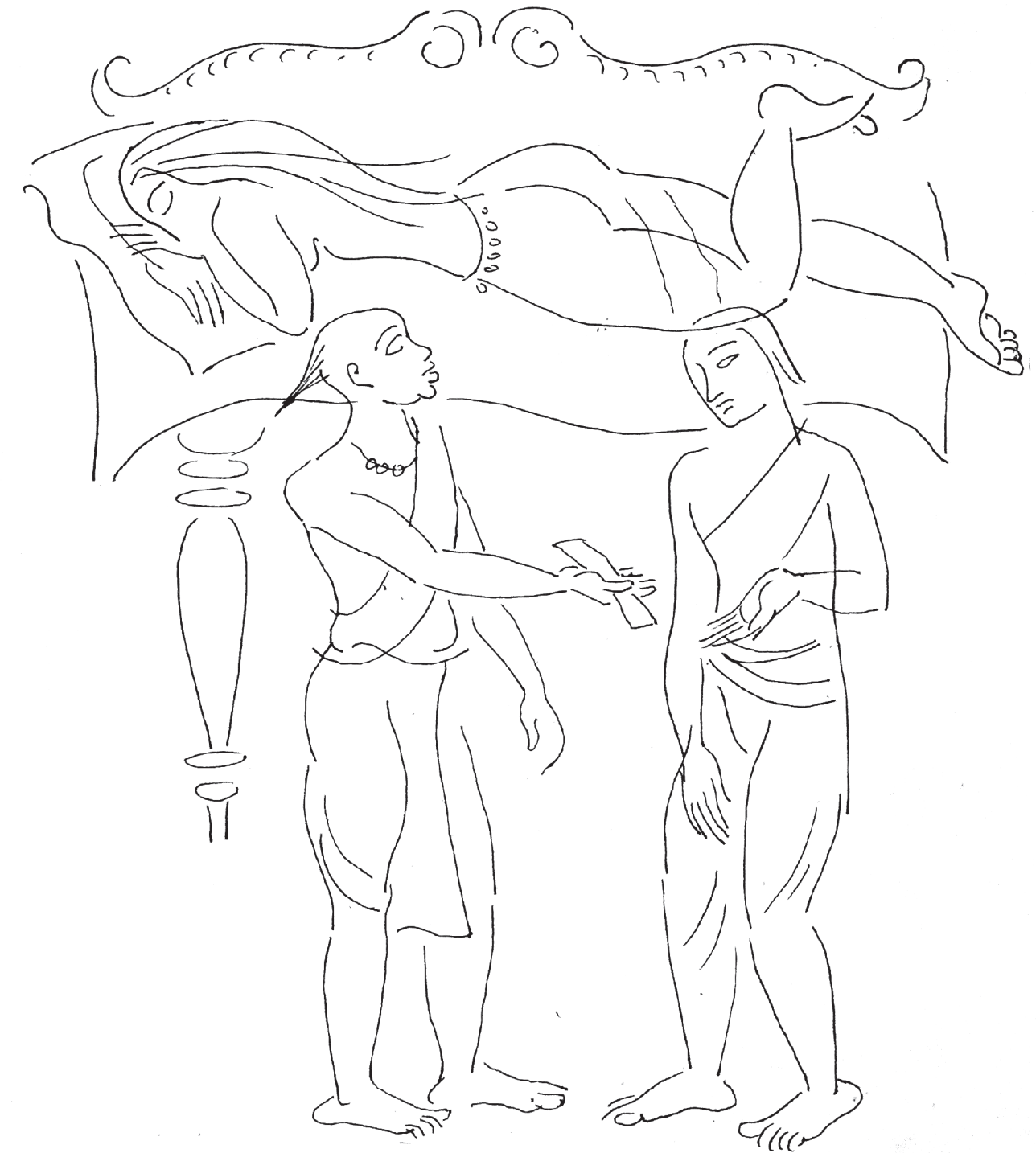
“There stands the one foretold!
Queen and peerless beauty of the Kodagu hills,
Radiant jewel crowning our earth,
Lighting it up with her glory!”



As the Eyinar ceremonies concluded, the travelers awaited the cool of moonrise before journeying to a brahmin village. There, Kovalan encountered Kausikan from Puhar lamenting beneath a withered madhavi plant, the herald of spring. Overjoyed at finding Kovalan, Kausikan revealed that Puhar mourned his departure like Ayodhya had mourned Rama — his parents grew frail, his friends and family lay mired in grief, and Madhavi was turned pale by grief and bedridden with sorrow. He delivered her palm leaf message:

"Was I to blame for your fleeing at dawn,
With your wife, wordless?
My tortured heart wanders, seeking wisdom."

Recognizing Madhavi's blamelessness and the sorrows his despicable actions had wrought, Kovalan asked Kausikan to deliver a palm leaf with an explanatory message to his parents to banish their anxiety, as he sought absolution.



The travelers completed the last part of their journey by night. At dawn, they were greeted by Madurai's sacred sounds — Vedic chants, thunderous drums and conches from the great temples of Shiva, Vishnu, and Murugan. Their weariness was washed away from the victorious drums of warriors, from the trumpeting of war elephants and the neighing of the horses.

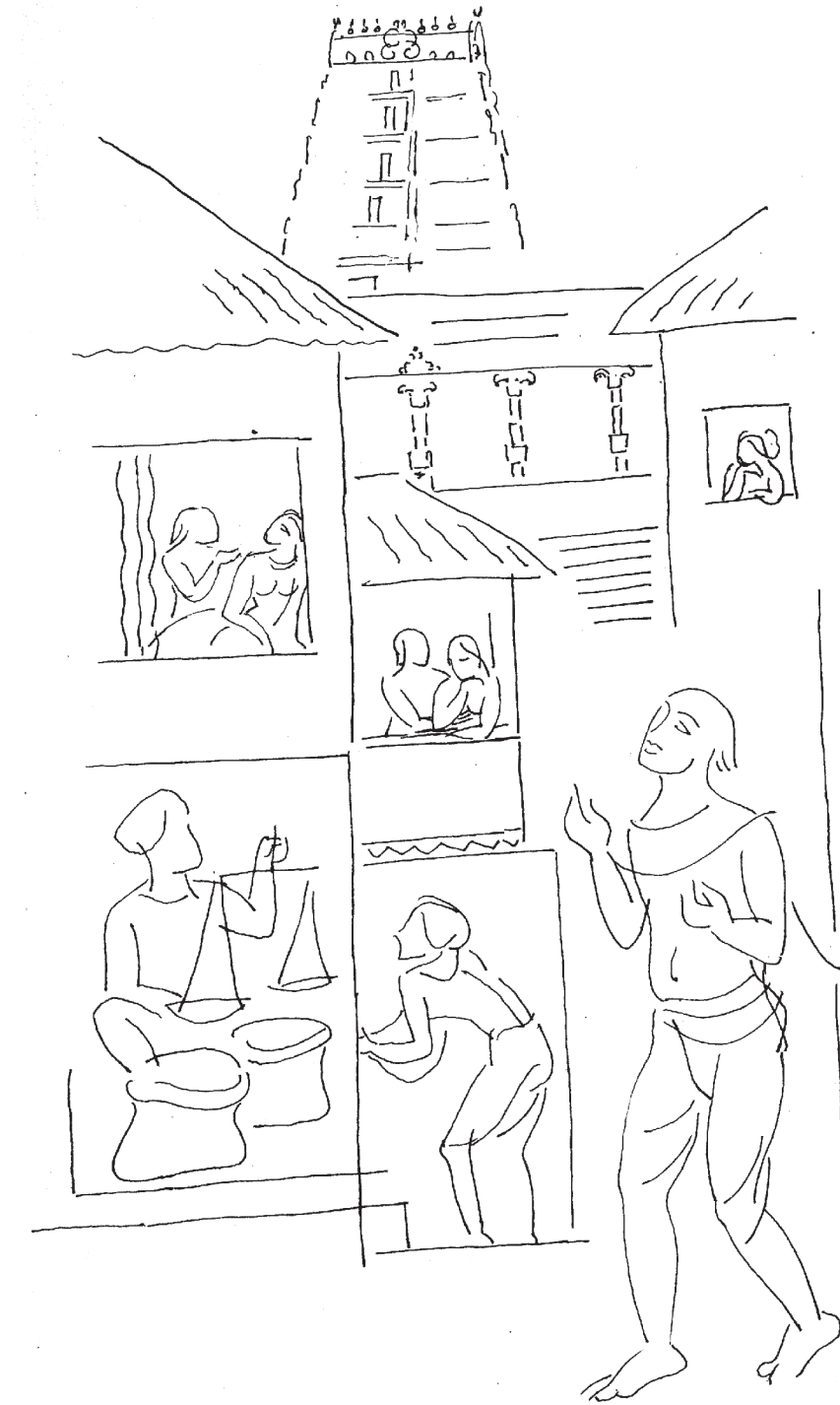
As they crossed the river Vaigai to enter the city from the south, Kovalan asked the nun Kavunti to protect Kannagi where they rested at sacred Potiyil while he sought the merchants of Madurai. Kavunti spoke of the blade of inevitable karma, comparing Kannagi and Kovalan trials to those of the avatars Rama and Sita, destined to be separated in this life, yet united for eternity at the end.

Consoled by her words, Kovalan entered magnificent Madurai through gates guarded by Yavanas, its splendor unfolding like Indra's boundless treasure.





Kovalan wandered through Madurai's marketplace, encountering shops trading in carriages, weapons adorned with pearls, and healing herbs. He observed artisans crafting works of copper, bronze, and ivory. Further on, jewelers sold flawless diamonds, emeralds, rubies, sapphires, and pearls as white as the moon. He passed the renowned goldsmith street, cloth merchants with towering cotton and silk bales, and grain traders with their balances and produce. Such remarkable wealth permeated this quarter that even kings envied its residents.





Kovalan walked through the courtesans' quarter, where performers skilled in theater forms, gestures, and music lived in mansions secretly visited by kings. Many had received the sacred talaikkol. Their perfect faces with lotus-like eyes bore faint smiles between crimson lips.

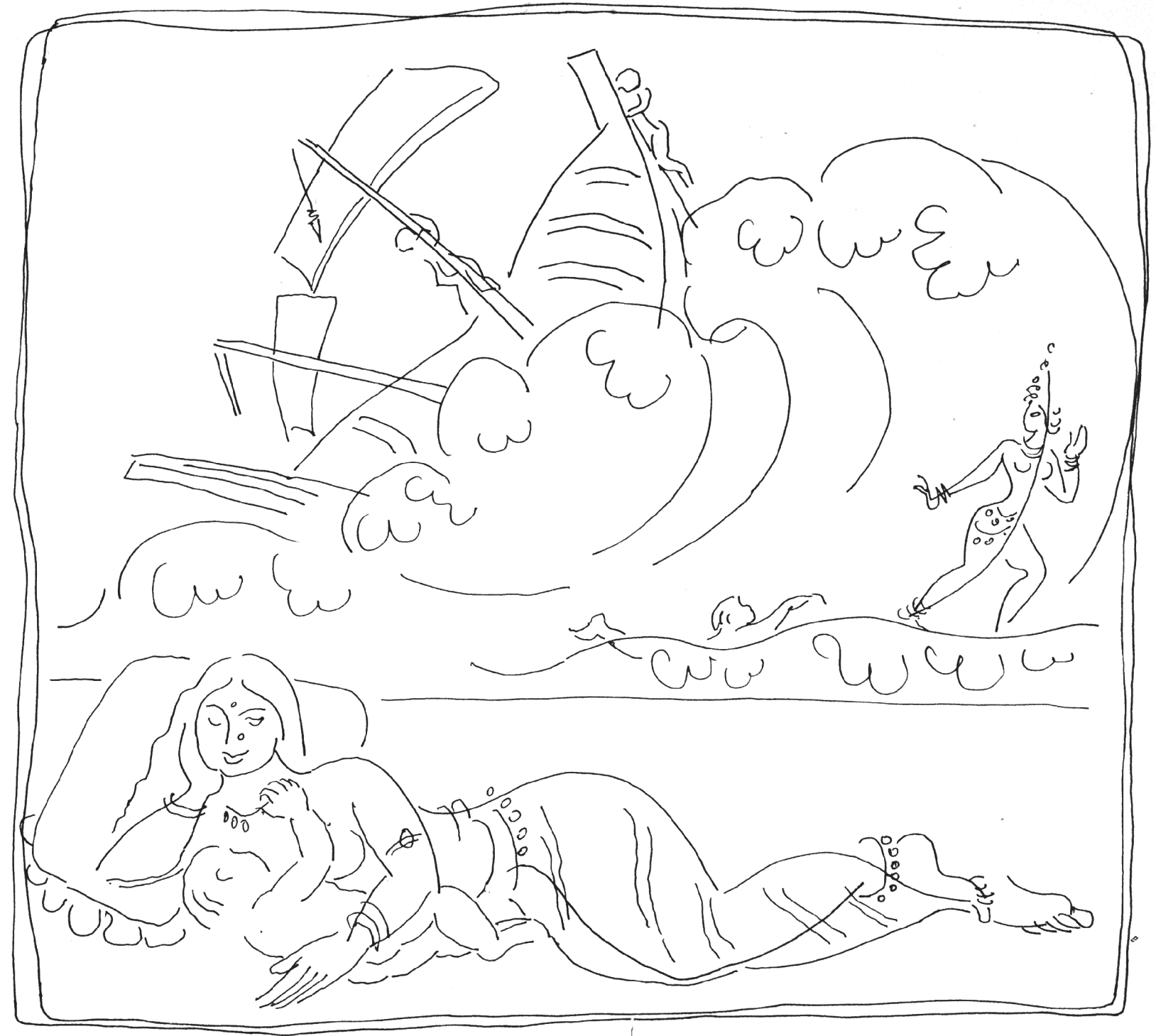
Throughout Madurai, these graceful women strolled with their wealthy patrons toward riverside gardens and pleasure boats, or reclined on moonlit terraces. During the rainy season, they braid their hair with mountain flowers, and adorned themselves with saffron paste and pearl-strung garlands.

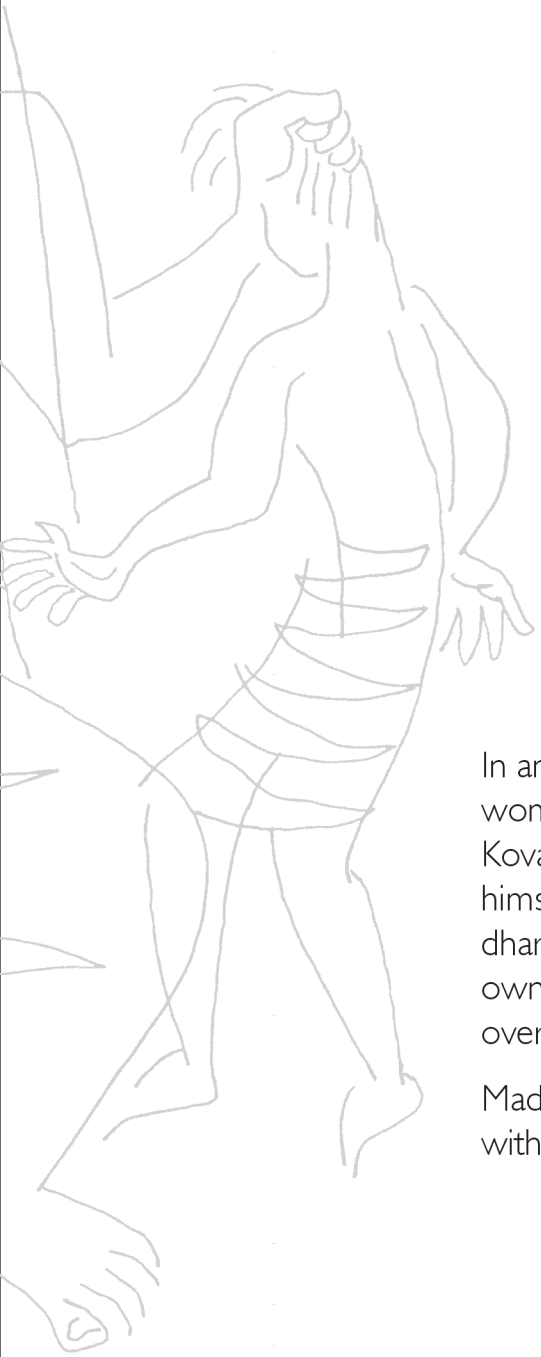




When Kovalan returned to Kannagi that evening, he chanced upon Madalan, a revered brahmin who was visiting Potiyil. With divine prescience, Madalan recounted stories from Kovalan's past births, urging him to recognize how his suffering stemmed from his karma despite worthy deeds.

In one birth, Kovalan had fathered a child with Madhavi, who he named Manimekalai after the family goddess who had once rescued his shipwrecked ancestor. After the naming ceremony, he displayed his benevolence by distributing his wealth among the brahmins and the needy.





In another of Kovalan's births, a misguided man had defamed a chaste woman and was seized by a ferocious spirit that devoured evildoers. Kovalan was moved by the villain's mother's plight. He offered himself to the spirit instead, but the spirit refused, declaring it against dharma to replace an evil life with a noble one as it would taint its own karma. After the wrongdoer was devoured, Kovalan watched over the bereaved mother like his own through her remaining years.

Madalan urged Kovalan not to despair, to walk the path of dharma without hesitation; everything was happening by the design of karma.





While Kovalan conversed with Madalan, herdsman Madari came to pay respects to Kavunti, who entrusted Kannagi to her care, praising her as a virtuous wife who had endured the arduous journey from Puhar.

As dusk fell, Madari led Kannagi past returning herdsmen who carried lambs over their shoulders and jars of milk hanging from staves, accompanied by cows searching for their calves, and herdswomen in twinkling bracelets. She welcomed Kannagi into her home and introduced her to her daughter, remarking that despite wearing only her beauty as ornaments, she outshone Madurai's much adorned women.

After a night of rest, Kovalan gazed at Kannagi in affection and embraced her with regret: "O faultless woman! You are the beacon of light to the whole earth, and it is time for a new start to our life. I will depart now with the golden anklet and return only after appropriating its true value."





With a strangely heavy heart, Kovalan walked away. As he walked by the sheds of the cowherds, he passed a humped bull, which the herdsmen considered an ill omen.

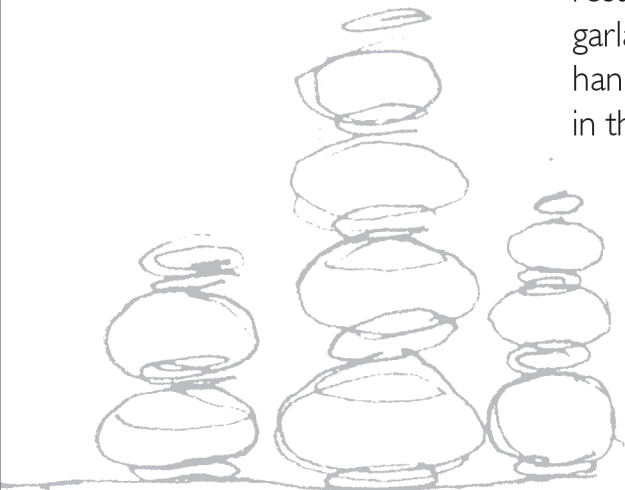
Kovalan approached a goldsmith in Madurai's marketplace, seeking to value Kannagi's golden anklet. By karma's design, this was the royal goldsmith who had stolen the queen's anklet and saw an opportunity to shift the blame. He told the king, Tennanavan — eager to appease his angry queen — that he had found the thief. Without proper inquiry, the king ordered Kovalan's execution if found with a golden anklet. Though the guards initially doubted Kovalan's guilt, the goldsmith spun tales of the deceptions of master thieves to convince them.

As dusk fell over the land, the guards struck Kovalan down, his blood soaking the parched earth as he met his inescapable karma.



In the village of the cowherds, Madari's daughter rushed to her with alarming omens they were seeing all around – bulls with tearful eyes, butter that would not melt, lambs that lay still, and cows that quivered in fear. To assuage the impending ill, Madari arranged the kuravai dance honoring Krishna, Pinnai, and Balarama.

Seven maidens named after the seven svaras (Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, Ni) formed a circle, with three portraying the deities and the rest their young companions. The dance began with Pinnai garlanding Krishna with tulsi leaves, followed by dances holding hands in a circle, and songs praising Krishna's defeat of the demon in the form of an orange tree.





“O Krishna, blue as the ocean!
At the samudra manthanmanthana,
With Vasuki and Mandara,
You churned the unfathomable womb
Of the sea.
Yet, you let yourself be bound
By a churning rope in the hands
Of beloved Yashoda-mata.
Such is your maya!
Such is your grace!”



“O Krishna, God of the gods!
Yashoda-mata was blessed
To see the universe in your divine mouth.
Yet, you licked
All the butter stolen from the pot!
O Krishna, Narasimha, vanquisher of evil!
You covered
The three worlds in two strides
With your lotus feet,
And enveloped the darkness with your light.
Such is your maya!
Such is your grace!”





As the ceremony concluded, a herdsman returned from Madurai standing silently in a corner with her brow drooped, prompting Kannagi's anxious inquiries about her missing husband. The cowgirl revealed Kovalan had been executed without investigation, accused of stealing the queen's anklet.

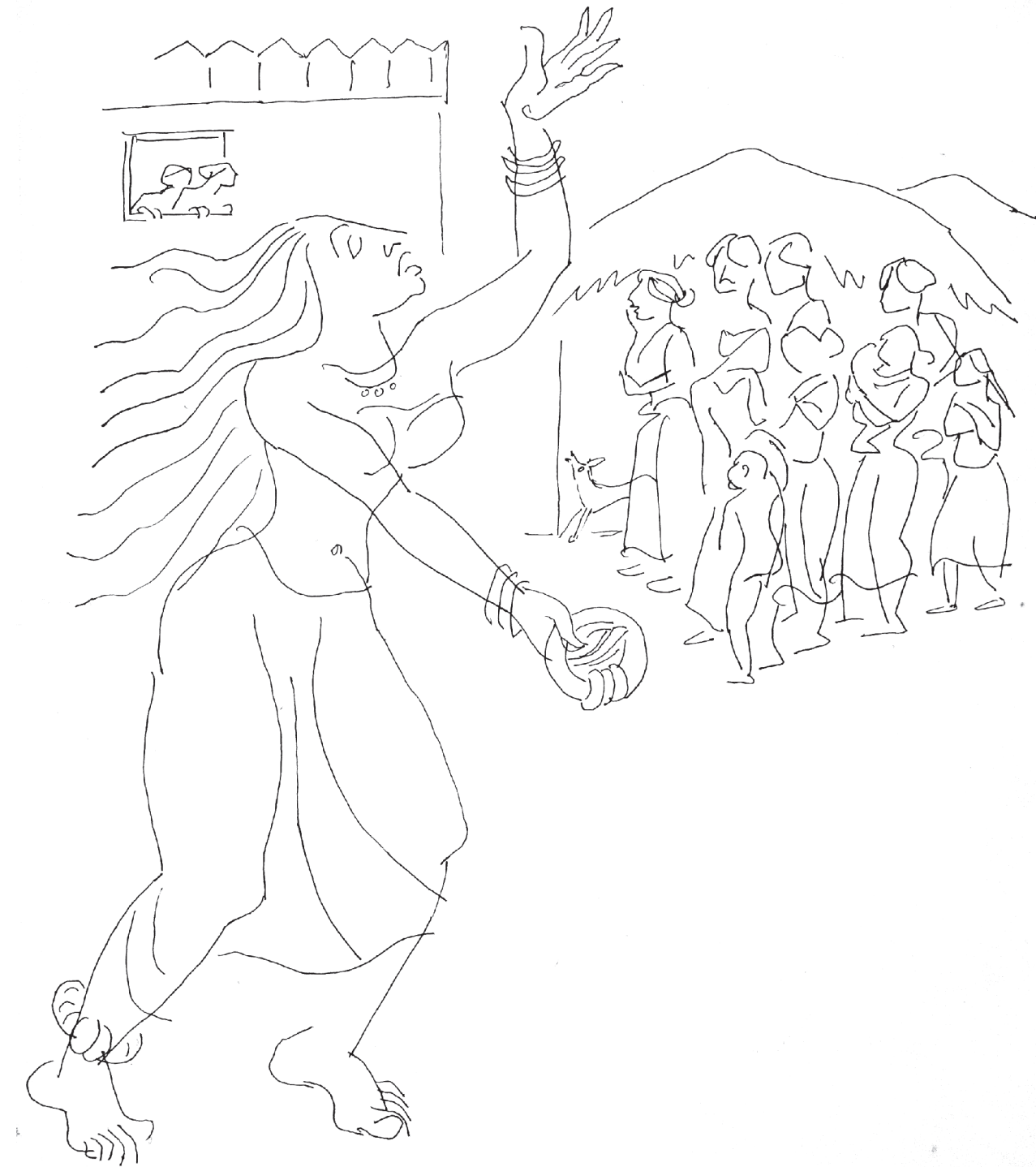
Kannagi collapsed in grief before recovering to lament, questioning if her karma was to suffer under the king's adharma, and appealing to Surya as a witness. Surya's voice resounded from the heavens, condemning the grave injustice against innocent Kovalan and prophesying that Madurai would be purified by the fires of dharma.





A devastated Kannagi rushed to Madurai with her other anklet, crying for justice through the streets, condemning the king who executed her innocent husband without any investigation. The citizens recognized her grief as a divine portent of doom for Madurai, whose king had failed in his dharma.

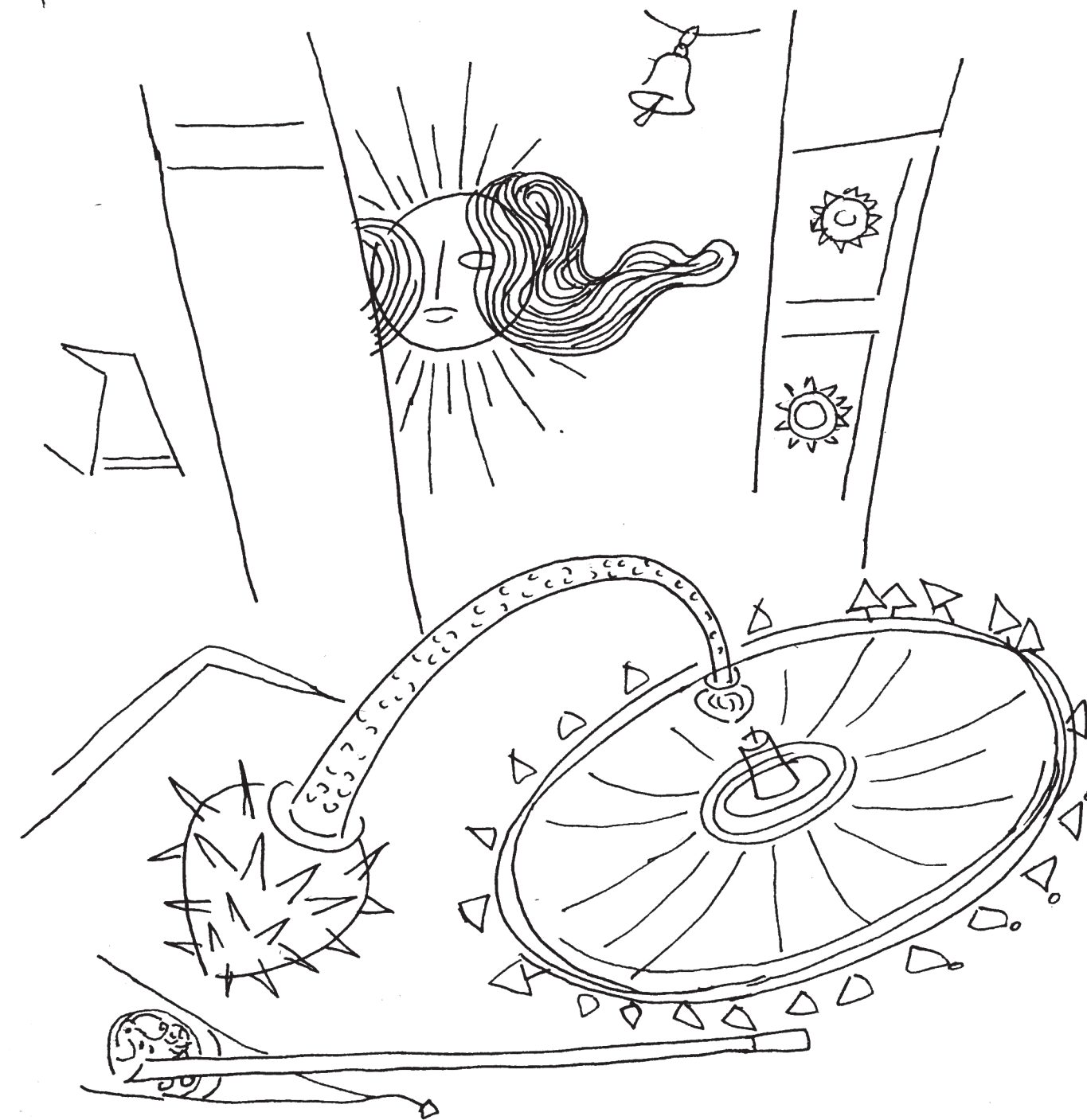
Kannagi came upon Kovalan's blood-soaked body, and a lament rose from her on how at dawn he had given her his garland, yet by dusk lay lifeless. A vision of Kovalan rose from his lifeless body, wiping her tears before ascending to the heavens with gods, bidding her to live peacefully with his love. Though comforted by his words, Kannagi's need for dharma remained unassuaged as she strode toward the royal palace.





At the palace, the queen was visited by a terrible dream: the sceptre of the king lay bent, the parasol tumbled to the ground, the bell at the gates tolled on its own, the right directions quivered in the heavens, a rainbow rose in the night, while a star fell during the day.

As the queen recounted these ill omens to the king, Kannagi demanded an audience, announcing herself as the murdered man's wife. Before the throne, she revealed her origins in virtuous Puhar and explained how Kovalan came to Madurai with only her anklets. She proved Kovalan's innocence by opening her anklet to reveal gemstones, not pearls like those in the queen's anklet. Recognizing his adharma, the remorseful king ended his life upon his throne, followed by his queen. Kannagi declared that the evil that had been sown at dawn must be reaped by dusk.





Kannagi left the palace and roared: “Blameless was my husband, as am I. Damned is this city whose king unjustly put him to the sword!”

She wrenched off her left breast, completed three pradakshinas of Madurai, and cast her breast on the ground. There appeared the God Agni as a blue-skinned brahmin with flame-red hair, revealing Madurai's prophesied destruction would occur when Kannagi had been wronged. Kannagi bid that he spare only the virtuous — brahmins, righteous women and men, the old and infirm, and innocent children. At her words, ancient Madurai was swallowed in flames; its four guardian deities departed, declaring their tasks complete. As courtiers waited unaware of their king's fate and citizens fled, fire engulfed the marketplace, residences, and the streets of the courtesans, sparing only the virtuous while devouring the wicked.





As Kannagi walked through a devastated Madurai, the goddess Meenakshi appeared before her, radiant with a crescent moon glowing in her matted hair, her body half gold and half blue, and eyes like purple lotuses filled with wisdom. She wore the anklets of heroes, and carried her invincible sword in her right hand and a golden lotus in her left.

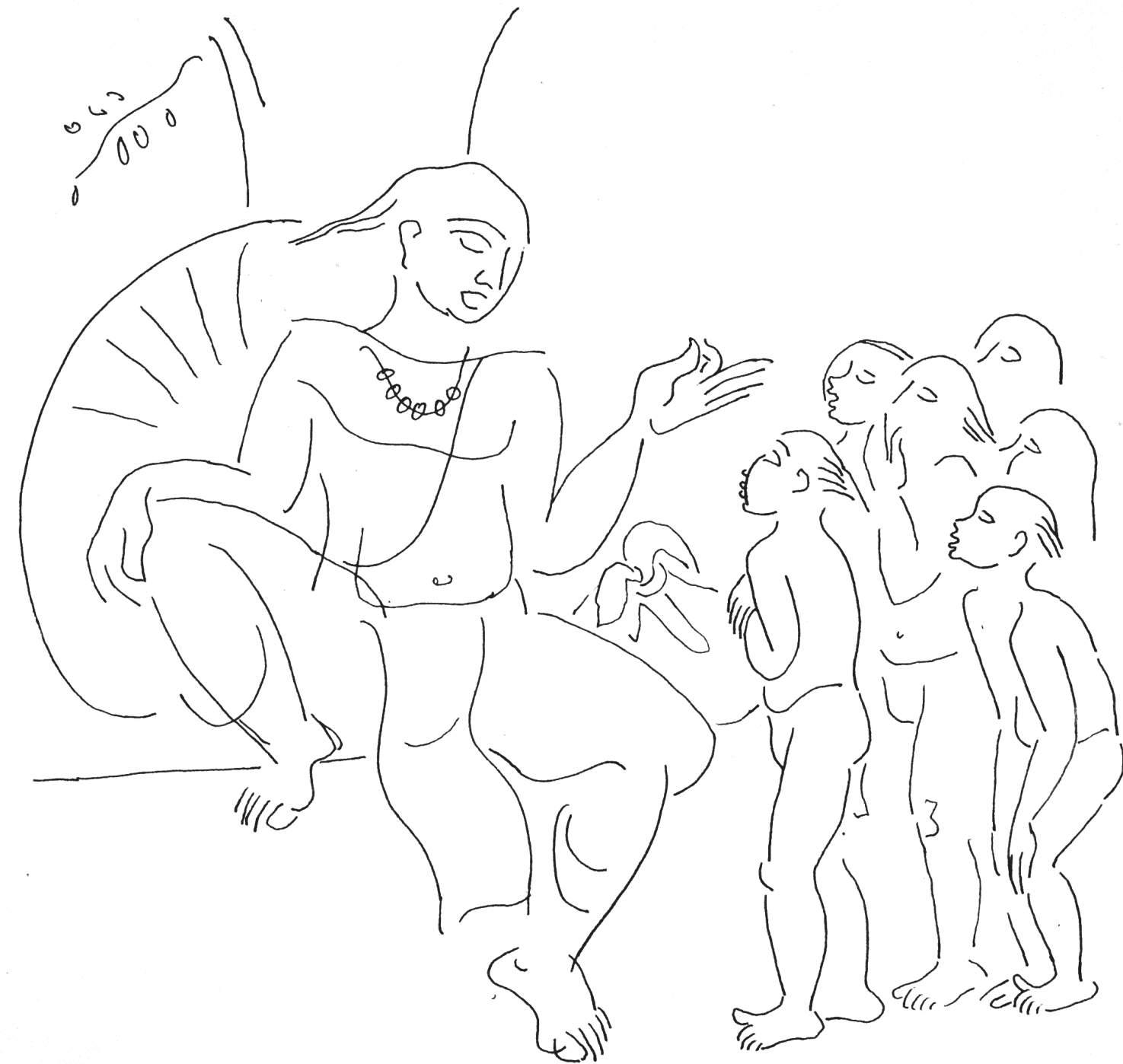
The Goddess approached despairing Kannagi gently, introducing herself as Madurai's guardian deity, lamenting that the king's once-firm scepter of dharma had fallen to adharma. She urged Kannagi not to judge Madurai's kings until she had understood the weight and workings of karma.

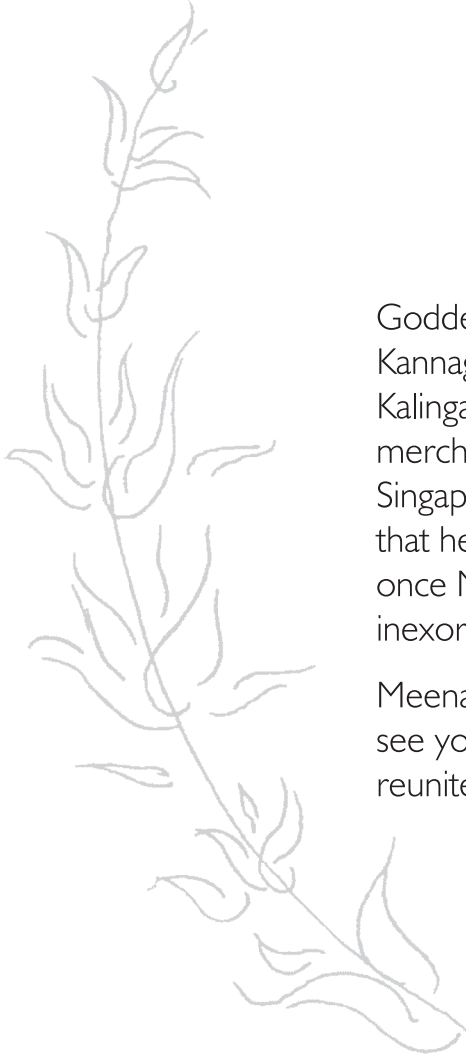




The Goddess recounted how during the reign of an earlier Pandyan king, a learned brahmin named Parashara from Puhar won debates at court, earning riches and gifts from the king. As he traveled, in the village of Tangal, he rewarded a gifted child, Alamar Selvan, with these treasures. When the envious guards of the village imprisoned the boy's father Vartikan on false charges, goddess Durga sealed her temple doors until the king made amends, bestowing land upon the venerable brahmin.

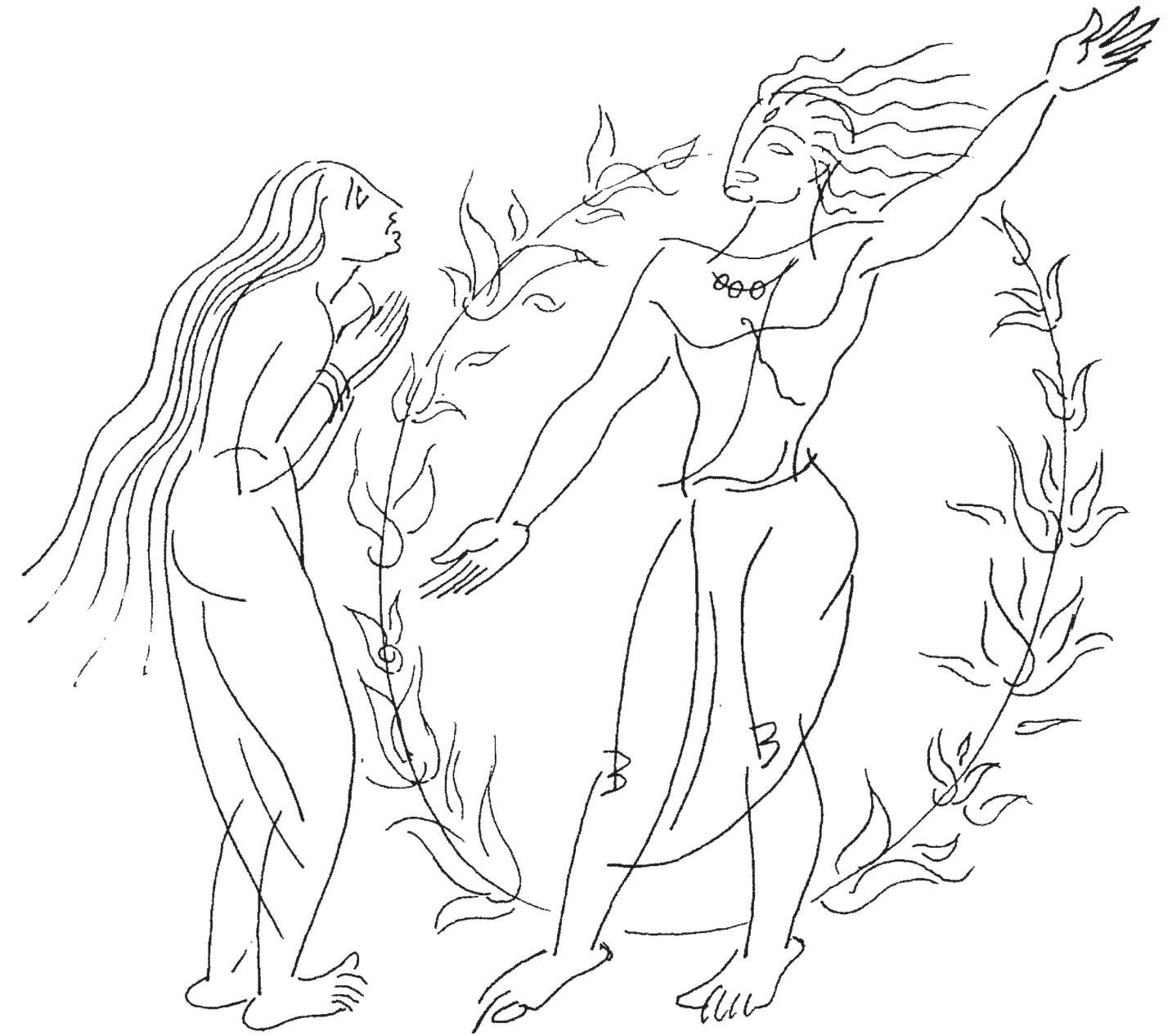
Even though the city came from such a virtuous lineage, karma had foretold Madurai's destruction and the fall of the king and his scepter during the month of Aadi.

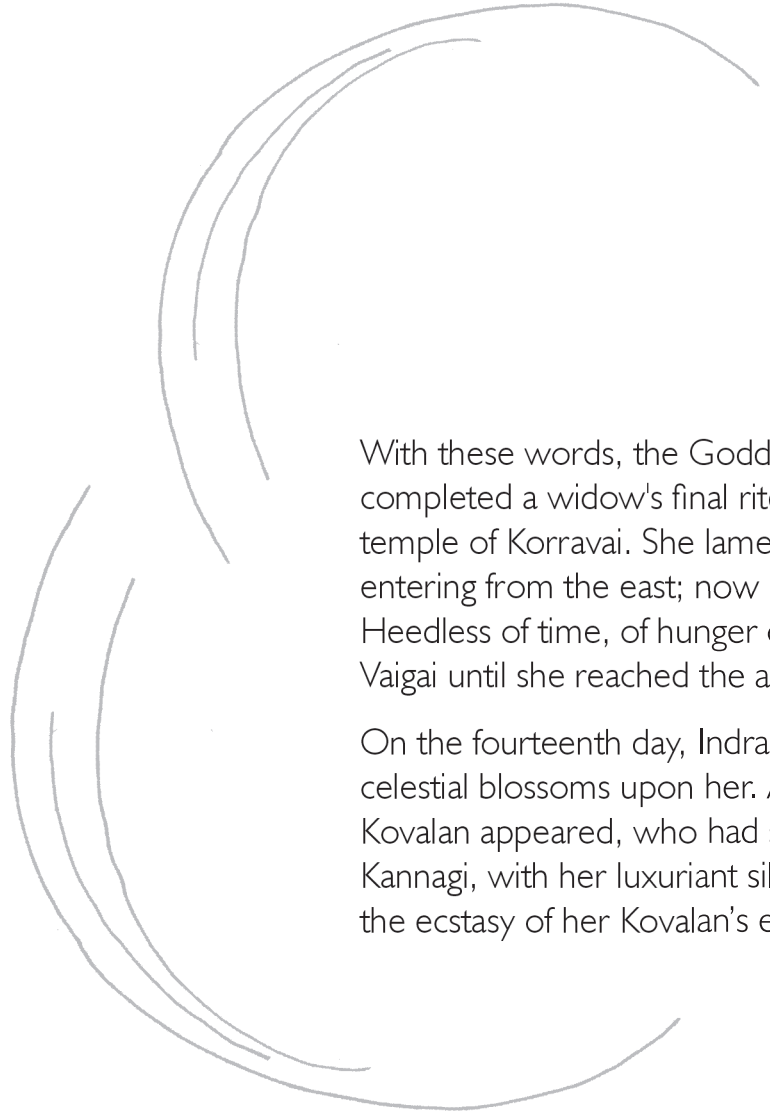




Goddess Meenakshi then revealed Kovalan's past karma to Kannagi. In a previous life as Bharata, he served the king Vasu of Kalinga, wrongfully executing the merchant Sangaman as a spy. The merchant's wife Nili — a past incarnation of Kannagi — roamed Singapuram for fourteen days before ending her life with a curse that her husband's killer would suffer the same fate. As Kannagi was once Nili, her karma passed on between her lives, such is karma's inexorable cycle.

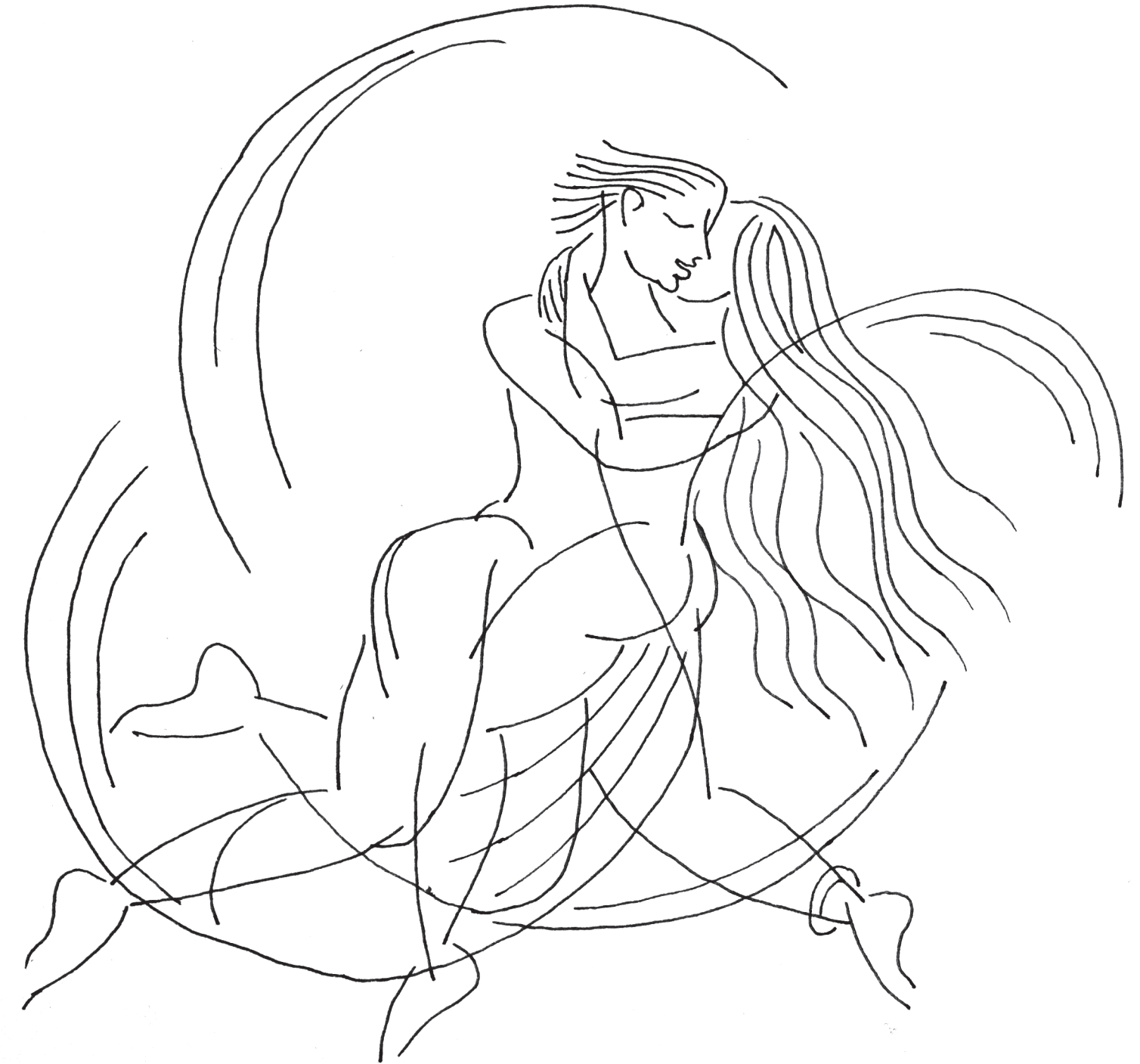
Meenakshi then promised Kannagi, "Though you will never again see your husband in mortal garments, in fourteen days you will be reunited with his celestial form."





With these words, the Goddess swept away the fires. Kannagi then completed a widow's final rite, breaking her golden bracelets at the temple of Korravai. She lamented, "My husband was at my side entering from the east; now I depart forsaken through the west." Heedless of time, of hunger or injury, she wandered along the Vaigai until she reached the abode of Murugan on Netuvel hill.

On the fourteenth day, Indra descended with the gods, showering celestial blossoms upon her. As she watched in awe, a celestial Kovalan appeared, who had shed his mortal frame. Thus it was that Kannagi, with her luxuriant silken hair, ascended to the heavens in the ecstasy of her Kovalan's embrace.



King Senguttuvan, a mighty Chera hero whose ancestors had carved their bow emblem into the Himalayas and subdued both the Kadamba dynasty and the Yavanas, was overcome with an urge to visit the hill of Netuvel. With his queen Ilango Venmal and royal retinue, he journeyed from Vanchi through blooming forests and shimmering rivers, reaching the banks of the Periyar. As they stopped to rest, Senguttuvan heard the enchanting voice of maidens singing in the distance:

"Come, bejeweled friend!

Let us swim in dancing streams,

In shimmering falls bright as Indra's vajra

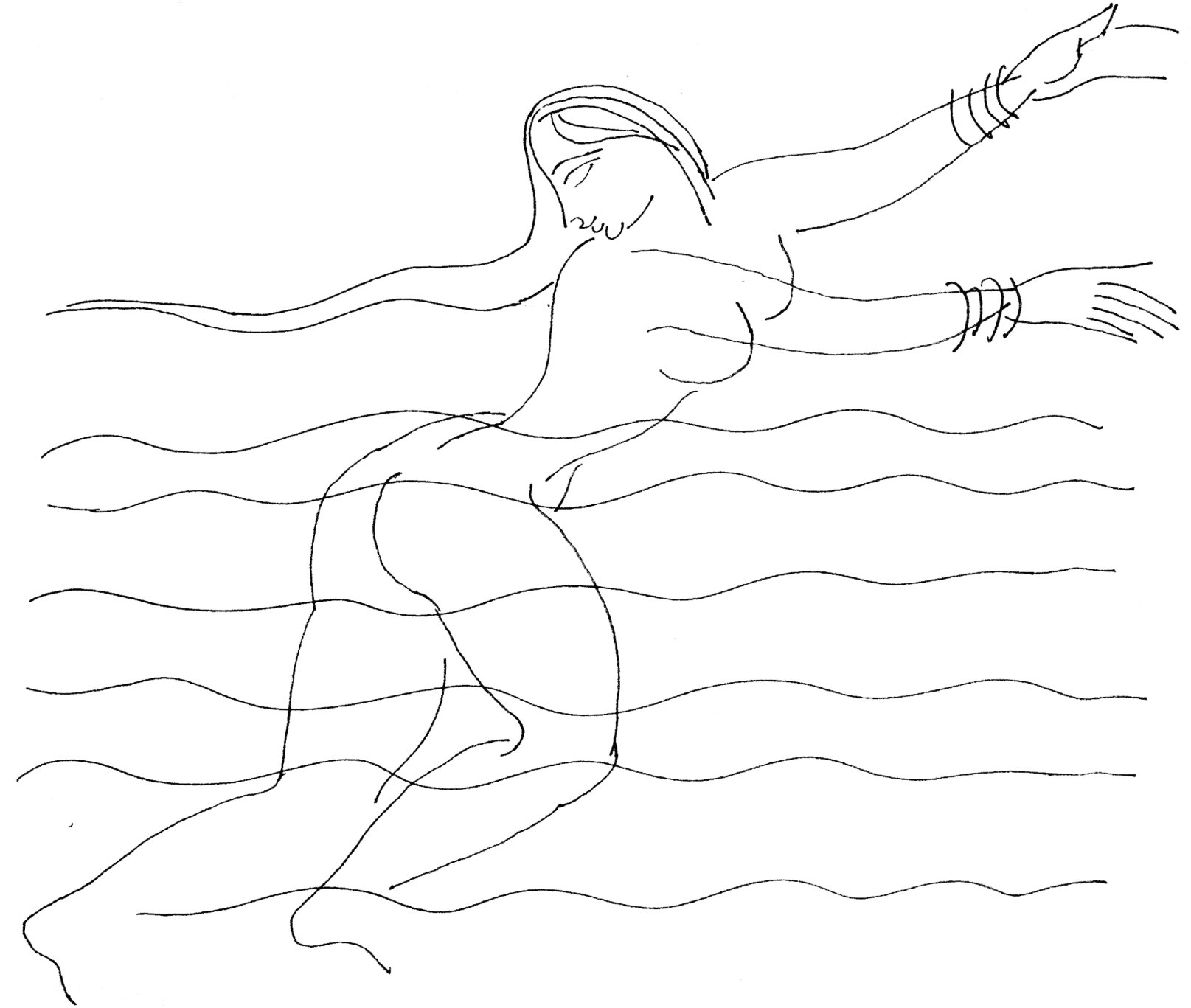
Upon Netuvel mountain.

Though we bow to the mountain king,

Let us cool our hearts in misty waters.

Friend, envy not these streams around him,

We shall play as they swirl around our king."

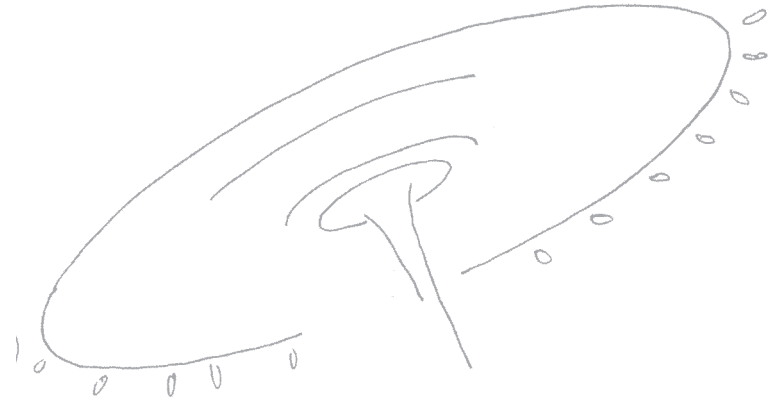




The maidens that lived in the sacred hills came to pay tributes to the king of Vanchi. They described encountering a radiant but grief-stricken woman standing underneath a kino tree. The maidens recounted chancing upon her while bathing in the springs and dancing in the flower groves — a one-breasted woman trembling with grief whom they likened to the Goddess Valli. She revealed herself as the one whose husband was taken by ill karma as Madurai and its unjust king burned.

Suddenly, celestial blossoms showered upon the divine woman, and the gods descended to escort her and her reunited husband to the heavens. Overcome with joy at this divine spectacle, they worshipped her with offerings, songs, and dances.





In the royal retinue was a renowned poet, Shattan, who narrated the tragedy of Kannagi and Kovalan to the king; Senguttuvan condemned the Pandya king's adharma while acknowledging his redemptive death. He consulted with his queen Venmal about whether they should honor Kannagi or the Pandyan queen who nobly followed her husband to restore dharma; they chose to worship Kannagi, the goddess of virtue.

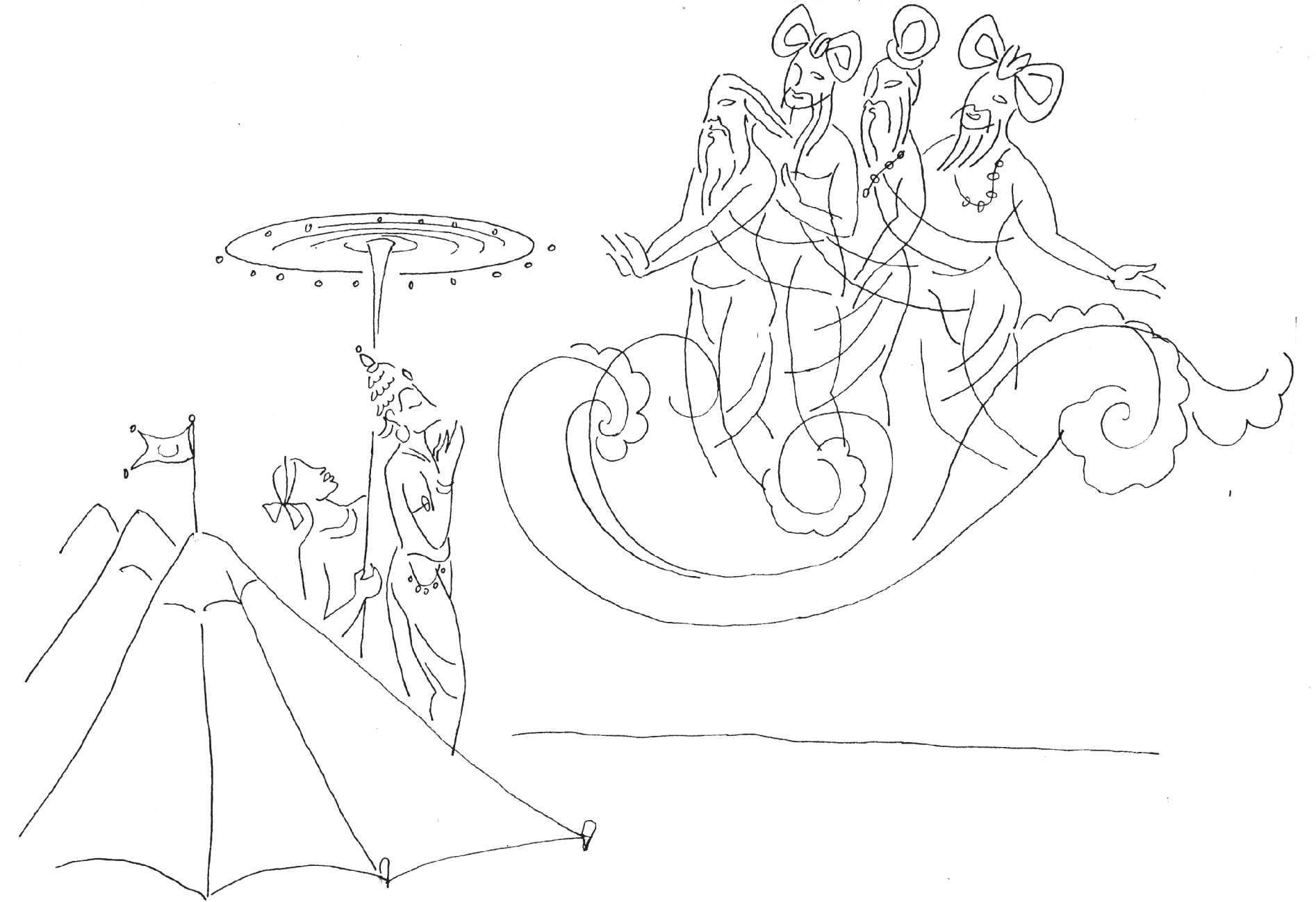
The king's advisors suggested using sacred stone from either Potiyil or the northern Himalayas. Senguttuvan proudly vowed to conquer the northern mountains for the more worthy stone. After heeding minister Villavan Kodai's suggestion to announce his intentions in Vanchi, the king proclaimed his quest before the court, ordering his ancestors' sword and white parasol carried ahead of his army.





At dawn, Senguttuvan visited the great temple of Shiva, placing the wooden sandals of the God upon his head before circumambulating the shrine, after which he departed for the north on his war elephant.

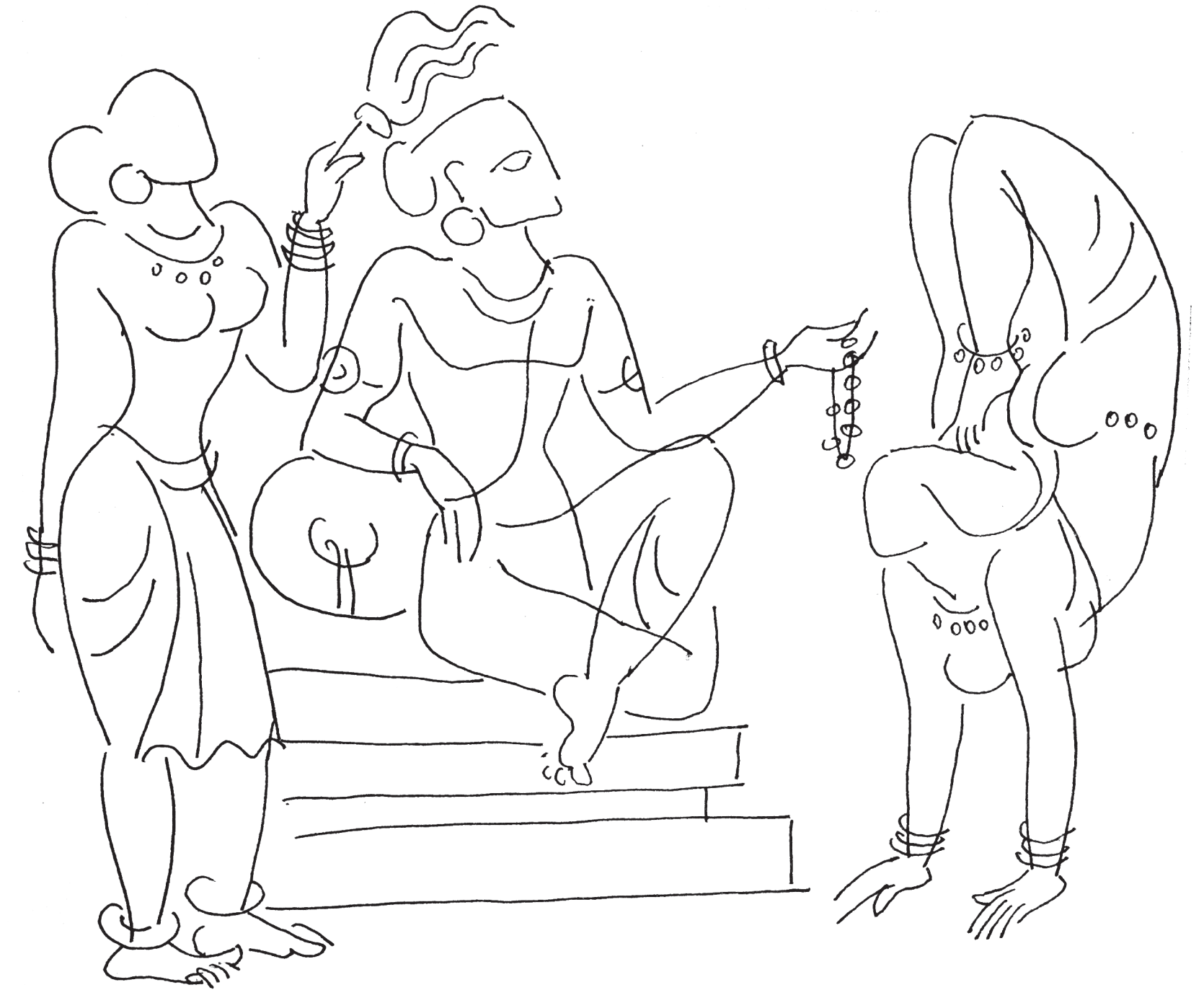
His vast army reached the Nilgiri mountains, where celestial brahmins from the kingdoms of the gods, traveling through the skyways of the heavens, visited his encampment. These radiant sages, journeying to the sacred Malaya hills, blessed the king, praising him as Shiva's chosen protector of dharma, before continuing their pilgrimage.





On his journey, the king was greeted by Konkana dancers dressed in rainbow-colored robes with flower garlands nestled in their dark curls. Their mischievous doe-like eyes flashed as they sang of the flowering of longing in summer for absent lovers. They were followed by dancers from the Kodagu hills with rich bangles and fish-shaped eyes, who sang of gathering monsoon clouds heralding the return of lovers. So pleased was Senguttuvan with their artistic performances that he rewarded the dancers with priceless jewels and ornaments.

After crossing the Ganges, Senguttuvan's forces met the vast northern armies led by Kanaka, Vijaya, and Uttara. The brutal battle ended with the Chera king's decisive victory.

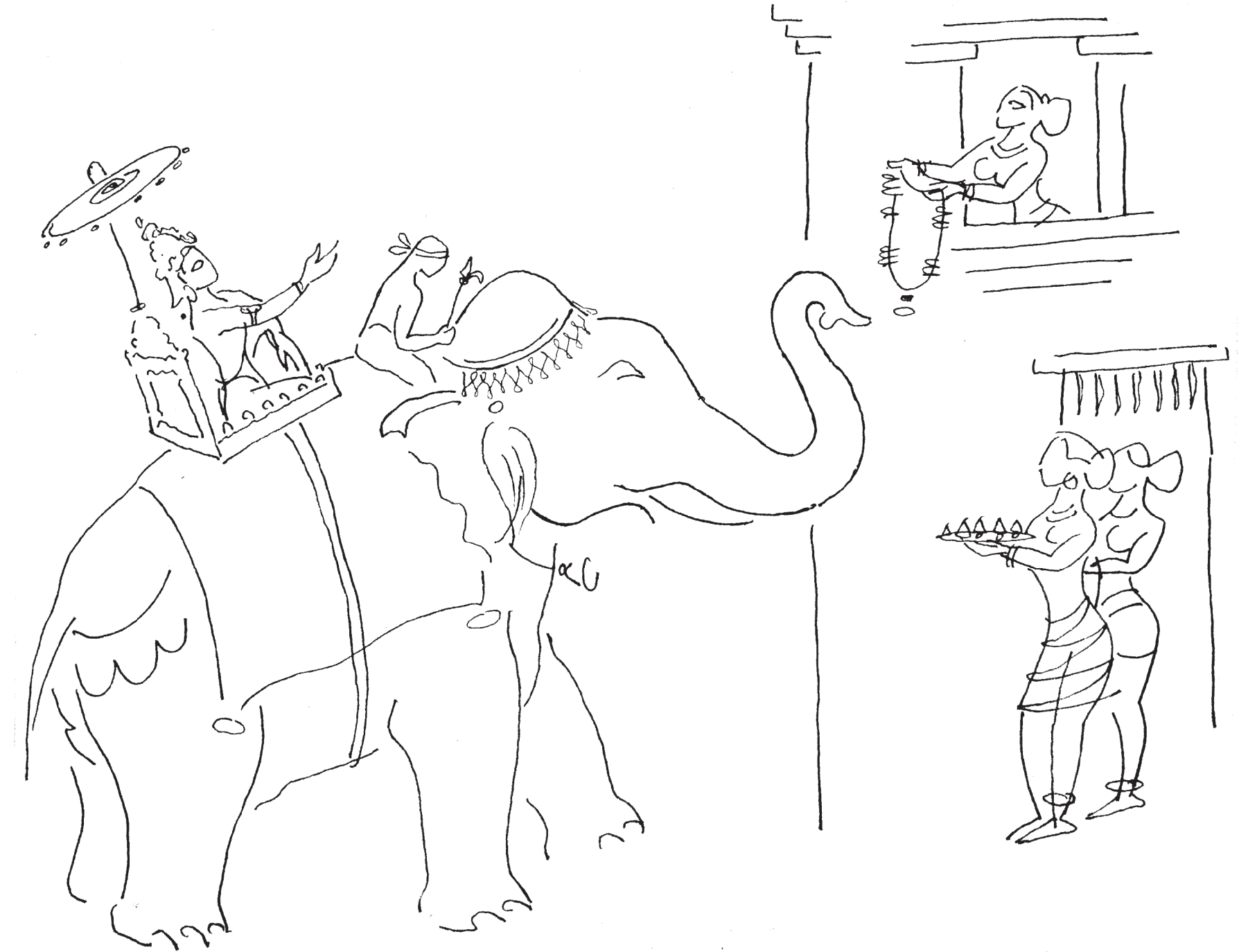


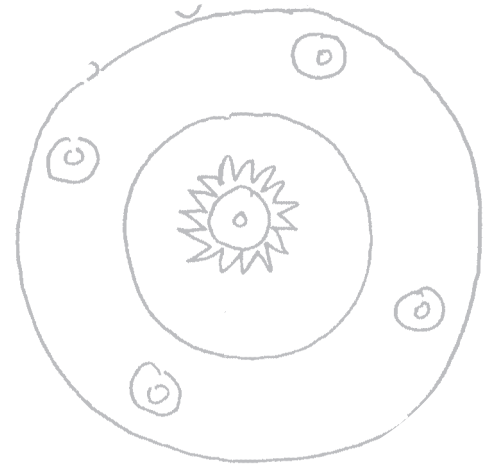


Triumphant, Senguttuvan proclaimed friendship to all rulers who followed dharma; a division of his army brought the stone from the golden peaks of the Himalayas, which was then carved in the image of Kannagi and bathed in the holy Ganges according to rituals. Once they had rested, the royal astrologer reminded Senguttuvan that thirty-two months had passed since leaving Vanchi. The king bade farewell to his northern allies before beginning his homeward journey. Meanwhile, Queen Venmal waited restlessly for his return in the magnificent palace until a song of the tribal girls lifted her heart:

“The king returns,
Wreathed in sirissa,
Upon his charging elephant;
Short is the journey to his queen.”

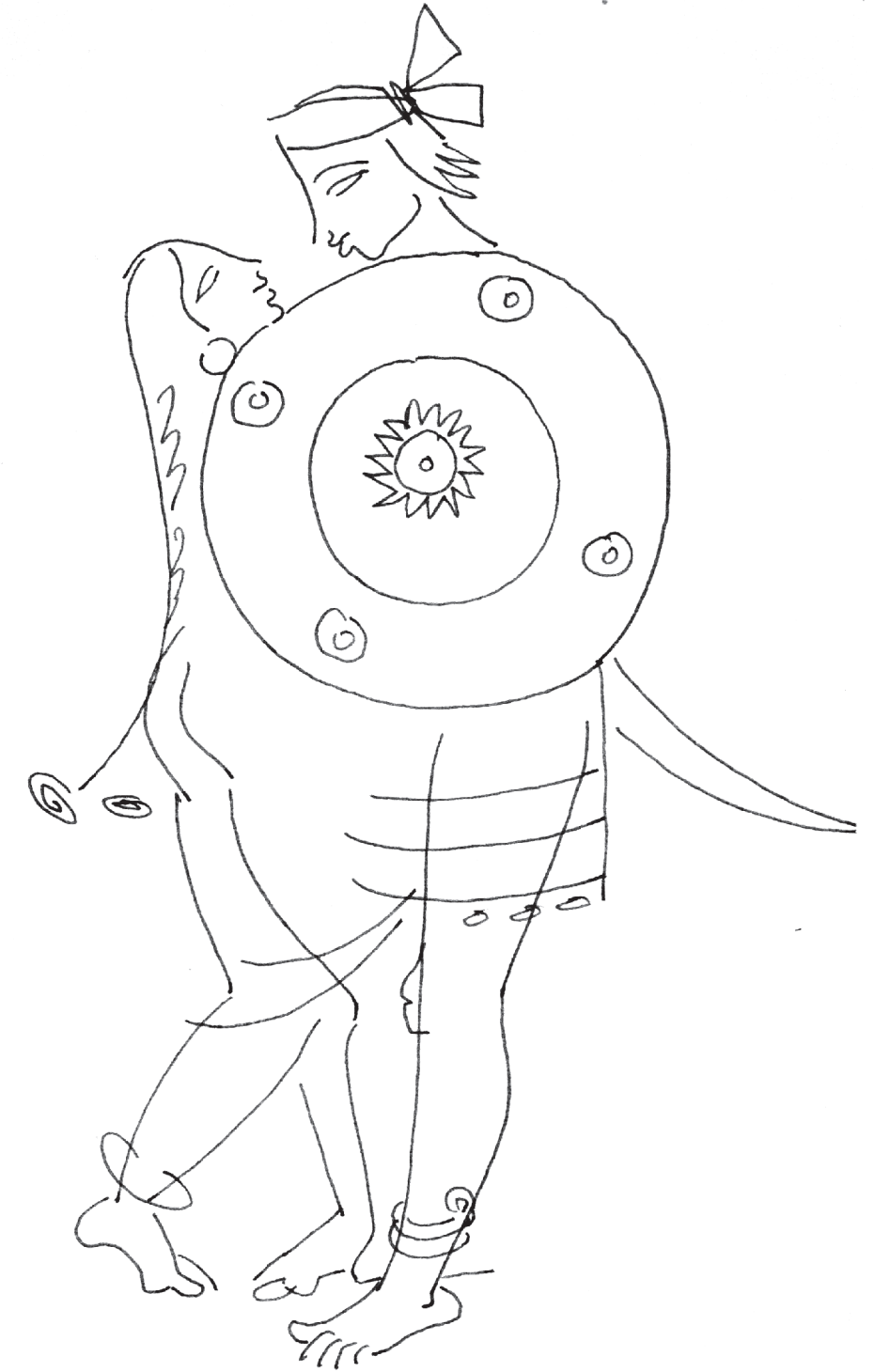
She adorned herself with golden bangles as conches and chariots announced the king's triumphant entry into Vanchi, mounted upon his war elephant and shaded by his white parasol.





As evening descended on Vanchi, maidens placed fresh flowers and lit lamps in their homes. Throughout the kingdom, brave warriors who had returned adorned with flower garlands and gold chains found themselves tangled in the passionate embrace of young women whose eyes were decorated with kohl. Kama had pierced the lovers' hearts with his soft arrows, and maidens with faces radiant in the moonlight served as his messengers through their ardent glances.

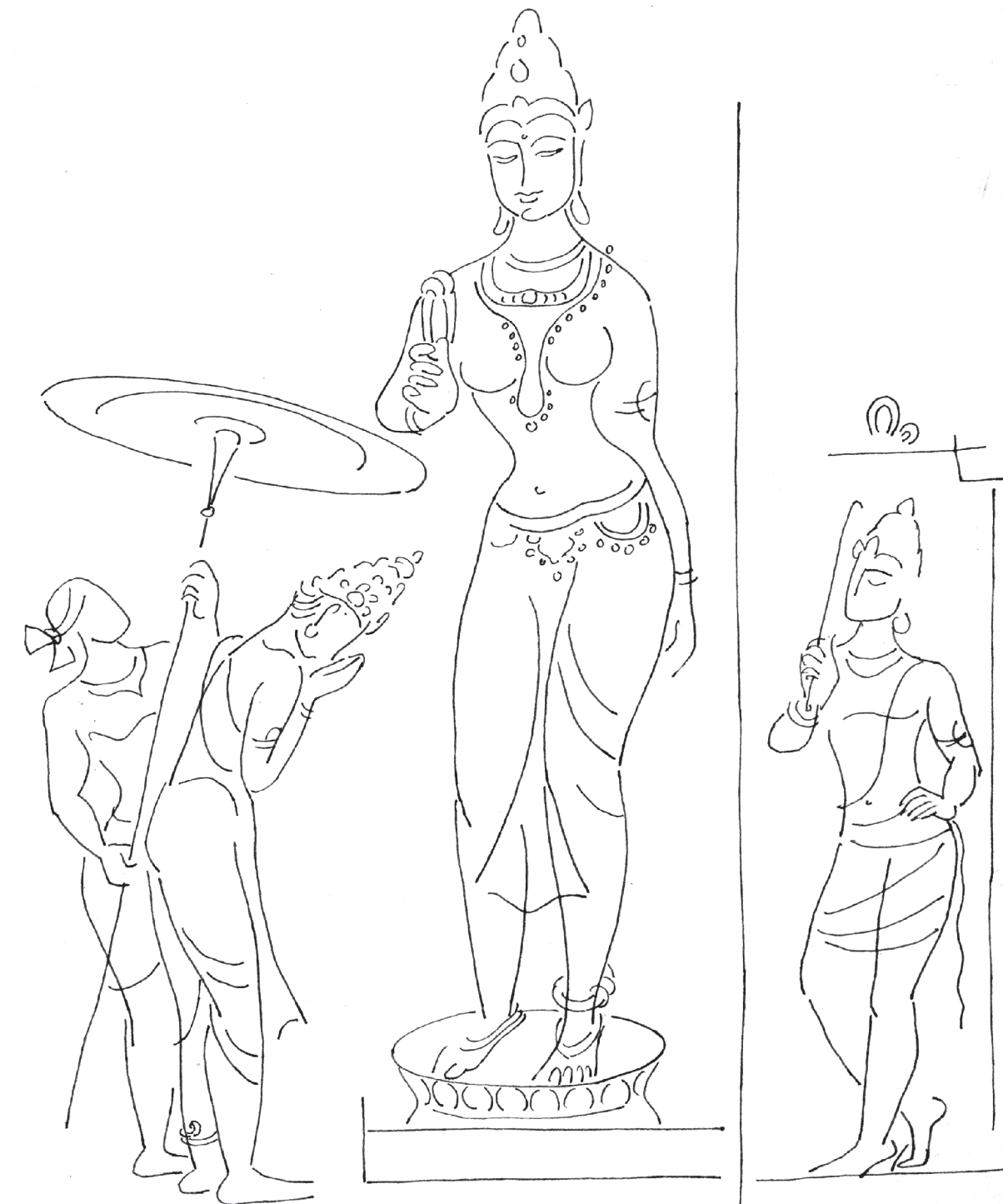
The king and queen were enjoying the performance of an expert dancer from Puriayur when they were visited by Madalan; the revered brahmin explained to King Senguttan, "Naught can escape the wheel of kala; even now, your youth fades, your body ages, though your spirit remains indomitable. Though you have conquered the world, you are a prisoner of your own anger. Let the rest of your days be spent in serving the gods and your people."





Under Madalan's guidance, the royal brahmins conducted a great yajna according to the four sacred Vedas. The kingdom's finest architects and sculptors built a temple for the Goddess of Virtue, with entrances guarded by the kshetrapalas of the four directions. When the construction was complete, Senguttuvan himself performed the first consecration rites and worship ceremonies. The deity carved from Himalayan stone — the face of the king of mountains — was then adorned with exquisitely crafted ornaments.

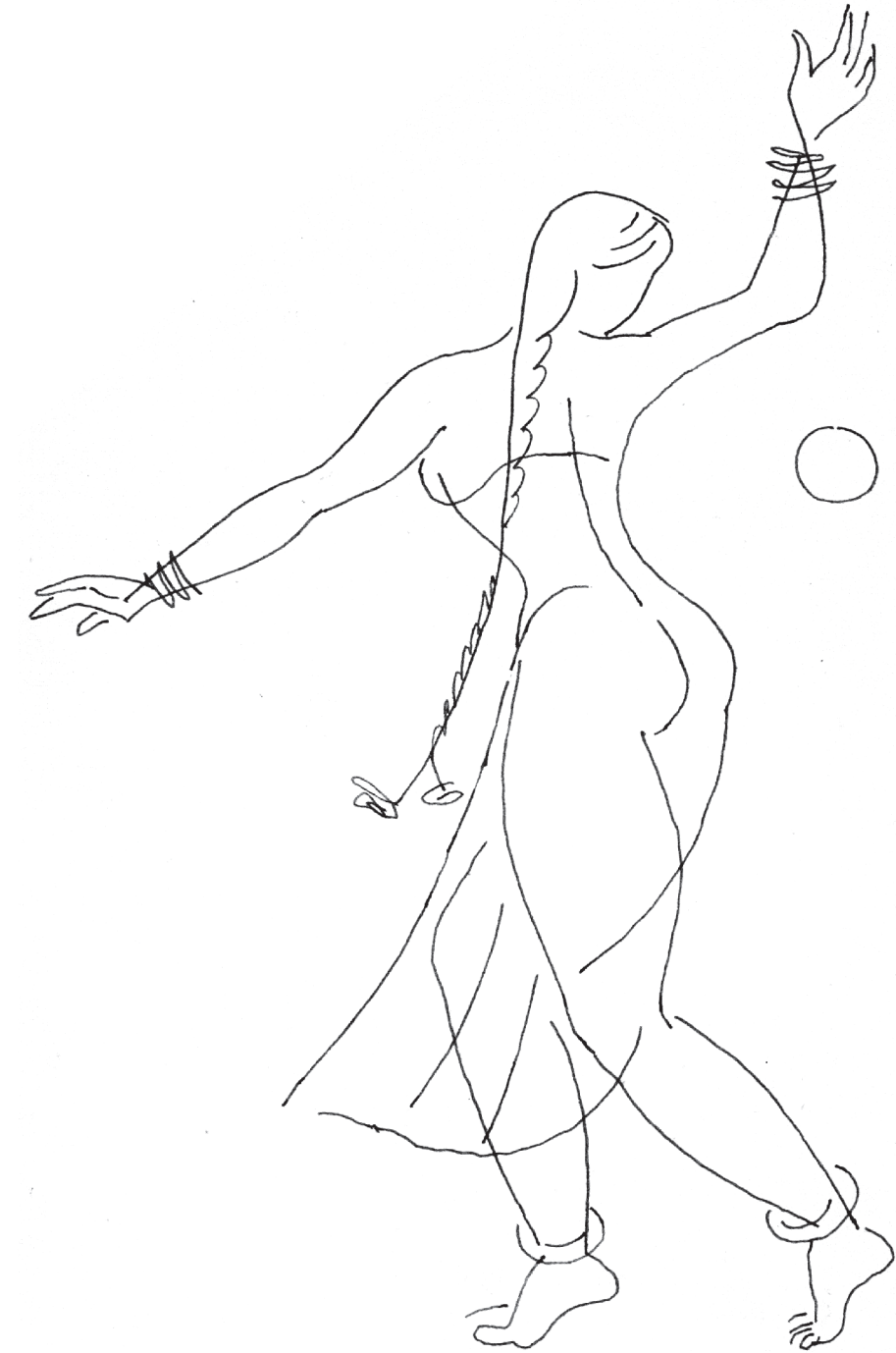
As the king bowed before the deity, Kannagi's voice echoed through the temple, 'Noble Senguttuvan, let it be known that all the evil that transpired was the work of karma; Tennavan was faultless, and is now by our side, honored and loved in the kingdom of the gods.'





The assembly erupted in celebration as they heard the celestial voice of the goddess. The women began to dance and praise Kannagi, as they performed the kandukam of the colorful ball and the annamai kuravai of the wooden ball:

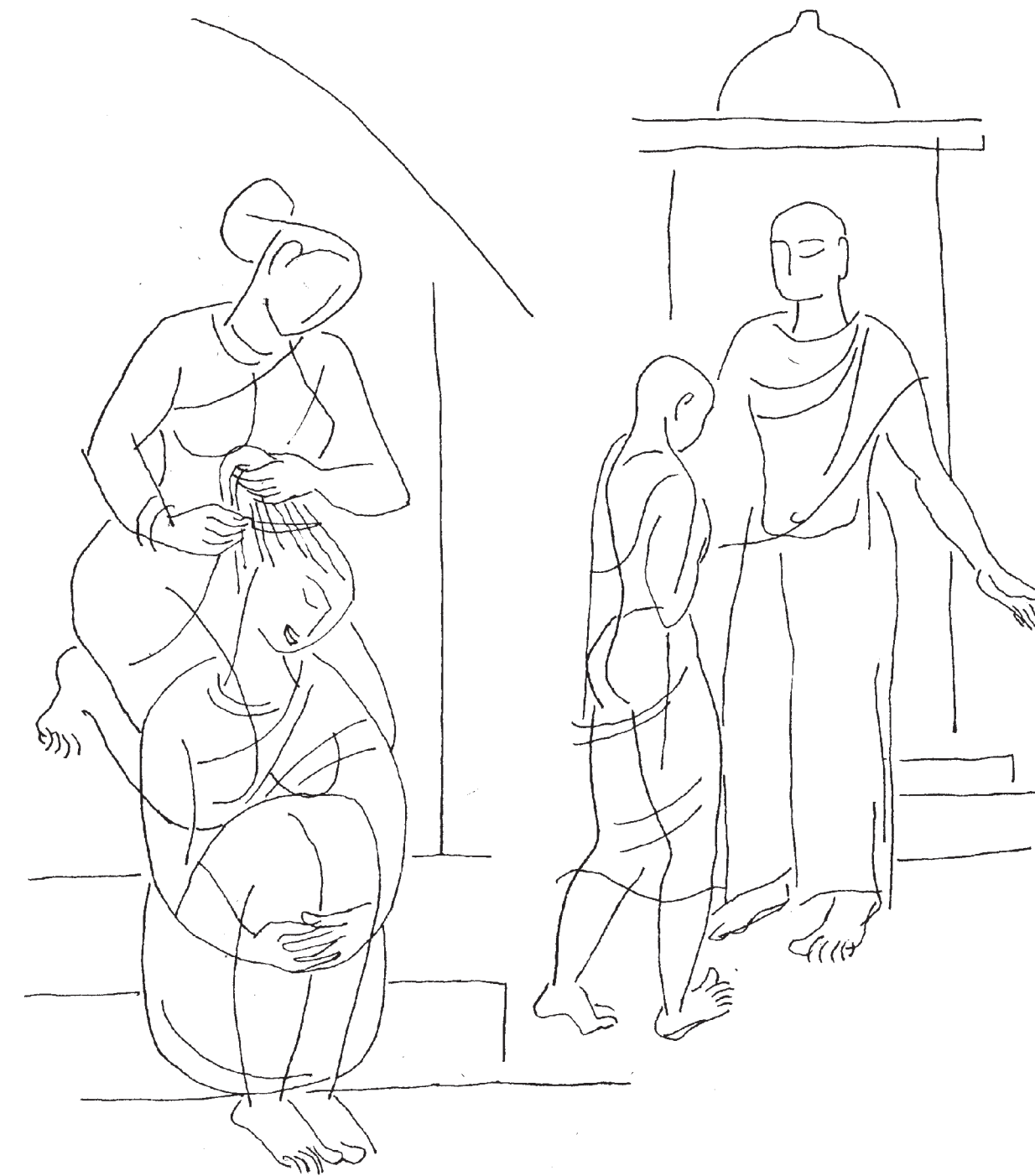
"Maidens! We will play with colorful balls,
Our golden girdles tinkle as we move like lightning.
Let us sing of the Tennavan, adorned with Indra's wreath,
The mighty Cempiyan ruling glorious Puhar,
Whose ancestors guarded Indra's gates.
Swaying on colored swings, hair floating like clouds,
Let us praise the valorous Cheras who split the Kadamba
And carved their bow-crest upon the Himalayas.
Let us honor our lord Senguttuvan who protects earth
Under the threefold banner, of the bow, the tiger, the fish."





Tevanti, friend to Kannagi, had traveled to the consecration with Madari's daughter. After the ceremony, Senguttuvan asked her for news on Madhavi and her daughter, Manimekalai. Tevanti described how young Manimekalai, though just blooming into womanhood with lustrous hair, pearl-like teeth, and lithe form, never completed her dance training. Her mother Madhavi, devastated by her own life as a dancer, cut her daughter's flower-braided locks.

Manimekalai then entered a Buddhist temple, embracing the eightfold path. Her severe vows caused such lament throughout Puhar that it seemed as if Kama had abandoned his flowery arrows in rage.





Madalan then narrated the fates of those connected to Kovalan and Kannagi: Kovalan's father Masattuvan distributed all his wealth to the needy and joined the seven-fold order, while his mother died of heartbreak. Kannagi's father Manaikan gave away his possessions and joined the Ajivakas, shortly after which his wife also passed away. Madhavi, overcome with grief, renounced worldly pleasures and dedicated herself to Buddha's teachings. He ended the tale by explaining, 'Timeless is this truth about karma that all actions, virtuous or malefic, leave their mark upon our lives. O noble king, you have seen the cycle of karma unfold before your very eyes!'"

After the revered Brahmin had spoken, Senguttuvan and his wife made countless offerings at the temple of the goddess. He appointed Tevanti as temple custodian, circumambulated the shrine three times, and bowed before the deity. Kannagi's divine voice blessed them from the heavens. "Tathastu, virtuous men and women of the Blessed Earth!"

