POETRY

TALES

KAHINI

Rabindranath Tagore

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1. THE BROKEN SONG

(গানভঙ্গ — Gaan Bhanga)

Kashinath was singing, a young man in his prime, his voice filling the whole hall;
in his throat seven notes were at play, seven notes like tame birds perched and singing.
His throat was a whetted sword, turning, dancing, wheeling through every direction —
no one could tell where it would go next, flickering like lightning, quick and bright.
He built his own snares of difficulty and then, himself, cut cleanly through them;
the whole assembly listened, amazed, and murmured again and again, "Bravo, bravo!"

Only the old king, Pratap Ray, sat like a block of wood;
no one's song pleased him — no one's, except Barajlal's.
Since boyhood he had given his life over to that one voice —
how many songs of clouds on rainy days, how many Holi-season melodies!
Barajlal had sung the coming of the goddess in autumn dawns, sung her departing hymns,
till the king's heart brimmed over and swam away in its own tears.
Whenever friends had gathered and filled the hall to overflowing,
Barajlal had sung the cowherd-songs of Gokul, in Bhupali, in Multani mode.
How many times a wedding-night had come to that house —
servants dressed in red, a hundred lamps burning,
the shy young bridegroom seated, dressed in jewels,
friends his own age teasing him, whispering close to his ear —
and there, before him, Barajlal had struck the raga of Sahana.
All those days, all those songs, still lived on, brimful, in the king's heart.
So when he heard any other voice but his, it could not reach him, could not touch the quick;
it was as if some vanished life should wake at a word of magic, and would not stir.

So Pratap Ray only watched, now, Kashinath's voice going for nothing —
tune after tune returning to itself, never finding an answer in his heart.
When the song paused a moment, and Kashinath sought his rest,
Pratap Ray turned, smiling, and threw a glance toward Barajlal.
Leaning close to his ear, he said, "Ustad-ji, sing us a real song —
is this what they call singing now? Shame! This is like some trick played on a bird —
a cat's game of hunting. There were real songs, once.
Now, alas — how little honor song is given."

Barajlal, old, his hair gone white, a white turban on his head,
bowed to everyone, and slowly took his seat among the gathering.
With a thin hand, its veins standing out, he lifted the tanpura,
bent his head low, closed his eyes, and took up the raga Iman Kalyan.
His voice came out trembling and faint, and died away in the corner of that vast hall,
like a small bird that cannot fight its way through a storm, however hard it tries.
Pratap Ray sat at his left side, offering him a hundred encouragements —
"Ah — beautiful, beautiful," he murmured in his ear, "sing out, let your voice go free."

But the rest of the hall grew restless. Some began whispering to each other.
Some yawned; some dozed; some simply rose and went home.
"Boy — bring the tobacco and betel here," someone called to a servant.
Someone fanned himself vigorously and said, "It's terribly hot today."
People kept coming and going; not a moment stayed quiet.
The hall had been silent — now, little by little, noise rose in a hundred forms.

The old man's song sank beneath it all, a frail boat lost in a storm —
all that could still be seen was his finger trembling on the tanpura's strings.
From wherever, deep within, the song's melody had once risen of its own joy,
now some careless, heedless clamor pressed down like a stone on the mouth of that spring.
Where was the song now, and where the life in it — they pulled apart, going different ways,
and yet, to keep his lord's honor, Barajlal sang on with all his strength.
A line of the song slipped from his memory, lost somehow in confusion;
he hurried back to it, tried again, wanting to set it right.
Again it slipped away, would not come back; in shame he shook his head,
and started once more from the beginning — and once more lost it, let it go.
His hand shook twice as hard now, and he called his old guru's memory to mind.
His voice trembled, pitifully, like a lamp guttering, guttering in the wind.
At last he let the words of the song go, and held onto only the bare tune,
and then, suddenly, with a great sob, he broke down weeping in the middle of his singing.
Where had the play of melody gone, where had the rhythm drifted off to —
the thread of the song snapped and fell away, in a shower of tear-pearls.
His companion, the tanpura, in his lap, received his bowed and shamefaced head —
he forgot the song he had learned; what came back to him was the grief-song of his childhood.
His eyes brimmed over. Pratap Ray passed a hand gently over his body —
"Come, let us leave this place," he said, with a tenderness full of pity.
Leaving that hall of a hundred burning lamps, their eyes both brimming,
the two old friends went out together, hand still holding hand.

Barajlal, his palms joined, said, "My lord, our gathering — it is broken now.
New people have come among us; they bring their own new tastes, their new fashions with them.
In all this world, our gathering was ours alone — only you, and only I —
never bring a new listener there, I beg you, my lord, at your feet.
A song does not belong to the singer alone — there must be two, meeting as one —
one to open his throat and sing it out, another to sing it back, within his heart.
Only when the wave of water strikes the shore does its true murmur rise;
only when the forest-assembly shivers in the wind does its true rustling come alive.
Wherever, in this world, a sound exists, it has always found its answering pair, from the very start —
where there is no love, my lord, only a mute and empty gathering —
there, no song can ever wake."

Boat. Shilaidaha, 24 Asharh, 1299

2. THE HUMBLE OFFERING

(দীন দান — Din Daan)

The king's servant came and said, "My lord, with much pleading and prayer —
the greatest of holy men, the noblest among men — he will not shelter in your temple of gold.
Today, at the edge of the road, under a tree's shade,
he sits chanting the names of God. Devotees gather round him, crowd on crowd,
and with the overflowing flood of their joy they wash the very dust of the earth until it is blessed.
Meanwhile your temple stands almost empty — as a bee, leaving behind a whole treasury of golden honey,
suddenly, drunk on the scent of a lotus, spreads its swift wings and flies off, humming,
toward some newly opened lotus-garden, its thirst turned eager elsewhere —
so it is with the men and women of this town; they pass your golden shrine without a glance,
and hurry on to where, at the roadside, the devotee's lotus-heart has opened
and pours out the very fragrance of heaven. On the jeweled altar your god sits alone, in an empty temple."

The king heard this, and in anger came down from his throne
and went himself to where, in the tree's shade, the holy man sat on a mat of grass;
and bowing at his feet, he said, "Look, teacher — a temple built by a king,
gold from its very spire, piercing the sky itself — why do you forsake it,
to sit here at the roadside, singing hymns of praise to God?"

"There is no god in that temple," said the holy man.
The king said, in anger, "No god! Sannyasi, you speak like an unbeliever.
On a throne of jewels a bejeweled image of the god shines and burns — is that thing empty?"
"Not empty," said the holy man. "It is full — full of a king's pride.
You have set up yourself there. Not the god of this world."

Knitting his brow, the king said, "With twenty lakh gold coins I built that unrivaled temple,
piercing the very sky; with sacred rites I offered it, and made my gift to god.
And you tell me that in that temple there is no place at all for god!"

Calmly the holy man said, "My child — in the year when, in a burning famine,
twenty thousand of your own poor subjects stood destitute, homeless, without food or clothing,
at your very door, and wept, their prayers unanswered,
sheltering in forests, in the mouths of caves, in the shade of roadside trees,
in the crumbling courtyards of ruined temples split by the wild fig's roots —
that same year you spent twenty lakh gold coins to build your own dazzling house of gold
and offered it up to god! That day, God himself said:
'In my own house, without beginning, uncountable lights already burn,
shining through infinite blue distances; the walls of my house are built of things eternal —
truth, peace, compassion, love. But that small, wretched, miserly power
that could not give a house to its own homeless subjects —
that is the one that gives me, instead, a house!' And in that very moment he rose and left,
to become, with the poor, at the roadside, under a tree, the shelter of the poor.

As foam swells vast upon a bottomless sea, and yet is nothing but emptiness,
so, utterly empty, is your temple, upon the face of this whole world —
nothing but a bubble of gold, and of pride."

The king, blazing now with rage, cried out, "You hypocrite, you wretch —
leave my kingdom this very moment." The sannyasi answered, in a calm voice,
"Wherever you have already banished the one who loves your devotees,
there, O King, is exactly where your devotees already stand exiled."

20 Shravan, 1307

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3. TWO BIGHAS OF LAND

(দুই বিঘা জমি — Dui Bigha Jomi)

Only two bighas of land were mine, and even that was lost to debt.
Said the Babu, "Do you understand, Upen? This land — I mean to buy it."
I said to him, "You are a man of vast estates; for you the land has no end.
But look — all I have left is just enough ground to die upon."
The landlord said, "Well, friend, you know I've laid out myself a garden;
if I had those two bighas, in width and length my plot would run even and true —
you must give it up." Then I stood, my hands pressed together at my chest,
and said, my eyes brimming, "Have mercy — spare a poor man's only home!
Seven generations of my people have lived as men on that soil;
that earth is worth more than gold! Sooner, in my poverty, would I sell my own mother
than sell that ground, luckless as I am!" His eyes went red, and the landlord
stood a moment in silence; then he said at last, smiling a cruel smile,
"Very well. We shall see about that." A month and a half later
I was driven from my homestead, out onto the road — he had a false decree drawn up,
and sold off everything, for a debt that never was.
Ah, in this world, the one who already has plenty is the one who wants still more —
the hand of the mighty is forever stealing what little the poor man owns.
I thought to myself: God does not mean to leave me sunk in the pit of delusion —
so in exchange for two bighas of land, he gave me instead the whole wide world to read.
I took a wanderer's robe and went from land to land, a holy man's disciple —
how many enchanting places I saw, how many wondrous sights!
Through mountains, over seas, in lonely towns, wherever I roamed, whenever I roamed,
still I could not forget, by day or night, those same two bighas of land.

Through market, field, and roadside so some fifteen or sixteen years wore away,
till one day at last the longing rose strong in me to return to my own land.
Hail to you, hail, O beautiful one, O Bengal, my mother-country —
the breeze off the Ganges' bank, so soft, so cool — it was you who gave my life its rest.
Your unbounded fields, your dust that kisses the very forehead of the sky —
your small still villages, nestled deep in shade, each one a nest of peace.
Mango-groves thick with leaves, the playgrounds of herd-boys —
still, unfathomed tanks of black water, evenings cool with tenderness.
Honey-hearted, the wives of Bengal go home bearing water on their hips —
just to say "Mother" makes the heart grow restless, brings the tears up to the eyes.
Two days more, and in the second watch of the day, I entered my own village,
leaving the potter's house to my right, passing the chariot-ground to my left —
past the market clearing, past Nandi's granary, keeping the temple behind,
parched and weary at last, I came, I arrived, at the edge of my own home.

Shame, shame on you, a hundred times shame, O faithless, shameless earth —
whoever comes, to him you belong; is *this* what it means to call you mother?
Would you even remember the day when you were a poor and loving mother,

filling your skirts with fruit and greens and flowers, holding them out for me?
In what strange fashion do you deck yourself now, to charm some other, in such rich dress —
leaves of five colors woven at your waist, your hair threaded through with blossoms!
For your sake I have wandered, homeless and joyless, exiled from door to door,
and you sit here at ease, you sorceress, laughing your days away!
In the pampering of the rich you carry yourself without shame now —
you have so changed — nowhere left, not a trace, not the faintest mark of what you once had been!
You who were once so full of grace, who fed the hungry from your own store of nectar —
however much you laugh now, however you dress, you were a goddess once, and now — a slave.
With a shattered heart I turned and turned again, looking all about me;
and by the old wall, still standing there — that same mango tree — can it be true?
I sat beneath it, and in the tears of my eyes my grief at last grew calm,
and one by one, in memory, the days of my boyhood rose before me.
I remember still: on nights of storm in Jyaishtha month I could not sleep —
how, at earliest dawn, I would run out, racing to gather up the fallen mangoes.
That same sweet, hushed afternoon; that same slipping-away from school —
I thought, alas, shall I ever find that life again, search where I may!
Just then the wind rose, let out a breath, and shook the branch above me;
two ripe fruits fell to the ground and rolled close beside where I sat.
I thought to myself — perhaps, after all this time, my mother has known me again —
and for that gift of tenderness, in deep respect, I bowed my head to her, just once.

But then, alas, like the messenger of death, from somewhere the gardener came running,
his topknot flying loose, and in a shrill voice he began to hurl abuse.
I said to him, "I have given up everything else, in silence, without complaint —
only these two fruits I claim as mine — must you make all this uproar over them?"
He did not know me; he seized me, dragged me off, a stick raised at his shoulder;
the Babu sat with rod in hand, fishing, his companions gathered round him.
Hearing the charge, in a towering rage, he cried, "Beat him — kill him, if you must!"
And what the Babu said, his followers echoed back, a hundredfold as loud.
I said, "I only beg two mangoes as alms from you, sir, nothing more!"
The Babu laughed and said, "This fellow, in his holy man's robes — a thorough thief!"
I heard him, and I laughed too, though my eyes were swimming — so this, then, was to be my lot!
You, sir — you have become the saint today; and I, today, have become the thief.

31 Jyaishtha, 1302

4. THE GOD'S PORTION

(দেবতার গ্রাস — Debotar Gras)

Village to village, little by little, the news went round
that the venerable Maitra was going to Sagar Sangam, on pilgrimage.
A band of fellow travelers gathered round him, old and young, men and women;
and two boats lay ready at the ghat. Hungry for merit, Mokshoda came and said,
"O elder brother, let me be your companion." A young widow — her two eyes so full of sorrow,
they listened to no reasoning, only pleaded; and her plea was hard to turn aside.
"Where would there be room" — Maitra said to her.
"I will fall at your feet," the widow said, weeping, "only find me a place, however small, somewhere at one side."
His heart softened; and yet, still hesitant, the Brahmin asked her,
"And your young boy — what will become of him, then?"
The woman answered, "Rakhal? He will stay with his own aunt.
After he was born I lay sick for a long time with childbed fever, and there was no hope I would live;
his aunt, then, gave him her own breast, alongside her own child, and raised him with such care —
and ever since, the boy has stayed content in his aunt's arms, forgetting his own mother's lap.
He minds no one when he's wild, but the moment she scolds him,
his aunt comes running, her eyes brimming with tears, and draws him back into her lap.
He will be happier there, in his aunt's arms, than ever in his own mother's."
The Brahmin agreed. Mokshoda quickly made ready,
tying up her few belongings, bowing to her elders,
and amid her friends, setting sail on a flood of parting tears.

She came to the ghat, and found — already run ahead of everyone —
her son Rakhal, sitting up in the boat, utterly calm and silent.
"Why are you here, child?" his mother asked; he said, "I am going to the sea."
"Going to the sea! You little bandit, come down at once."
But again, his eyes wide and steady, he said only the same two words: "I am going to the sea."
However hard they pulled at his arms, he clung fast to the boat.
At last the Brahmin, in gentle pity, said, laughing, "Let him be — let him come along."
His mother, angry, said, "Come, then — I'll throw you into the sea myself."
The moment those words reached his own ears, his mother's heart, pierced at once by an arrow of regret, cried out.
Closing her eyes, she murmured, "Narayan, Narayan" — and lifted her son into her lap,
and over his whole body passed her hand, tender, blessing him.
Maitra called to her, softly, under his breath, "Shame, shame — such words should never be spoken."
So it was settled that Rakhal would go along. Annoda, the aunt, hearing the news from others,
came running and cried, "Child — where do you think you're going!"
Rakhal answered, laughing, "I'm off to the sea — I'll come back, Aunt!"
Half out of her mind, Annoda cried out, "Sir, listen — that boy of mine, Rakhal, is such a wild one,
who will look after him? Since the day he was born he has never once been away from me for long;
wherever you take him, please, bring him back to me."

Rakhal said, "Aunt, I am going to the sea, and I will come back."
The Brahmin, full of tenderness, said, "As long as I am there, sister, you need have no fear for your boy.
This is the cold season, the rivers are gentle, there is a great company of pilgrims, no danger on the road at all;
the whole journey, there and back, is two months — I will bring your boy safely home to you."

At an auspicious hour, invoking Durga, the boats set sail,
and the women of the household stood at the ghat, their eyes full of tears.
In the dew of the winter morning the village glimmered along the banks of the Churni river.
The pilgrims returned; the pilgrimage was over. The boat lay moored at the bank in the afternoon, waiting for the tide.
All wonder had worn away by now; Rakhal's whole heart cried out for home, for his aunt's lap.
Water, only water, on every side, until, from looking at it so long, his spirit had grown troubled.
Smooth, deceitful, coiling, merciless, greedy, its tongues licking, serpent-like and cruel,
treacherous, brimming with false calm, raising a thousand hoods, hissing, roaring,
forever hungering after earth's children, its mouth watering for them.
O earth, O tender one, O silent one who never speaks, O steadfast, O constant, O ancient one,
enduring house of joy that bears all violence, soft and green —
wherever anyone dwells you draw them close with your unseen arms, always, O beloved —
with what vast longing your calm breast, stretching to the horizon, pulls at us!

Every moment the restless boy came, and asked the Brahmin, in an eager, impatient voice,
"Sir, when will the tide come today?" Suddenly a stirring passed through the still water,
and both banks woke, at the news of hope. The boat turned its face;
with a soft cry the mooring-rope grew taut, and with a churning song
the sea's own conquering chariot entered the river — the tide had come.
The boatman, remembering his god, quickly cast off, and turned the boat north.
Rakhal came and asked the Brahmin, "How many more days before we reach home?"
Before the sun had set, within two miles the north wind's force began, little by little, to rise.
Where the sandbar met the Rupnarayan's mouth, in that narrow channel a battle broke out
between the flooding tide and the north wind, wild and unrestrained.
"Bring the boat to shore!" the passengers cried out again and again.
But where was the shore? On every side the maddened water clapped its hands
in its own furious dance, with a hundred thousand hands,
and hurled curses at the sky, foaming in its rage.
On one side could be seen, far off at the edge of the bank, a thin blue line of forest;
on the other, the greedy, raging, savage flood surged up toward the calm sunset sky
in open, arrogant rebellion. It answered to no rudder,
and the boat reeled and staggered, drunk and unquiet as a fool.
Mixed with the freezing wind came the chill of terror, and it shook the men and women till they trembled to their bones.
Some sat stunned, speechless; some wept, and cried out toward the sky, calling their loved ones' names.
The Brahmin, his face ashen and dry, closed his eyes and prayed.

Against his mother's breast Rakhal hid his face, trembling, silent.
Then the desperate boatman cried out to them all, "Someone among you has broken a promise to God —
whatever was vowed was not given, and that is why these waves rise so — this storm, out of season.
Listen, now, while there's time — keep your vows; do not trifle with an angry god."
Whatever each one had — money, cloth, whatever it might be — they flung it into the water without a thought.
And yet, in that very instant, water rose into the boat in a terrible surge.
The boatman cried out again, "Whoever has taken back what belongs to god — speak now, this moment!"
The Brahmin suddenly rose and said at once, pointing at Mokshoda,
"This is the woman who dedicated her son to god, and then stole him back again."
"Throw him in!" — with one voice the terrified passengers roared, merciless with fear.
The woman cried, "O elder brother, save him, save him!" — and with both arms, fierce,
she pressed her son to her breast with all her strength.
Wild with fright, the Brahmin cried out, "I am the one who will save you!
In your madness, forgetting you were a mother, you gave your own son to god —
in the end, it is I who must see that he is kept safe! Pay the god his debt;
by breaking your word, you will drown every soul in this boat!"
Mokshoda cried, "I am only a foolish woman — what did I say, out of anger —
O witness of every heart, was that to become the truth? Could you not see, even then, how far from true it was, sir?
Do you listen only to the words on a woman's lips, and not to the truth in a mother's heart?"
While she spoke, the boatmen and oarsmen gathered, and by force they tore the boy away,
snatched him out of his mother's arms. Maitra closed both his eyes,
turned his face away, and covered his ears with his hands, murmuring to himself.
And then, suddenly, something struck through him, blow after blow, like a whip of lightning —
the sting of a scorpion. "Aunt! Aunt! Aunt!" —
that helpless orphan's final cry pierced his shut ears like a burning nail.
The Brahmin cried out, screaming, "Stop! Stop! Stop!"
In that instant he saw, glancing down, Mokshoda fallen senseless at his feet;
and for one moment, amid the boiling waves, the boy's terrified eyes opened wide —
"Aunt!" he cried out once, and vanished into the endless dark;
only, for a moment, his small fist rose desperately toward the sky,
seeking shelter in the empty air, and sank, hopeless.
"I will bring you back!" the Brahmin cried, gasping, and in an instant he leapt into the water —
and did not rise again. The sun went down.

13 Kartik, 1304

5. THE FRUITLESS GIFT

(নিষ্ফল উপহার — Nishphal Upohar)

Below, swirling, the waters of the Yamuna rush on; on either bank, rocky slopes, high walls of stone!
Through a narrow gorge the current, half-lost in its own roar,
rises in a mad, unceasing torrent, raving without end.
Loosened, the tangled braid of the waterfall runs off toward a blue horizon in a line of blue hills.
It seems still; yet, day and night, it seems always to be moving —
as if its motion were held fast on an unmoving chain.
Here and there sal and tal trees stand, the hillside beckoning to the clouds, its gesture outstretched.
Bare of grass, hard and cracked in a hundred places, the ground — a wilderness of sun-scorched wildflowers and thorn.
The earth gives back the heat of day, and the hills stand wrapped in their own shadow —
empty of roads, empty of people, without a sound, without an echo.
The sun sinks, as it sinks every day.

It was here that Raghunath came, arriving just as his guru sat reading the divine sport of God.
Raghu bowed low at his feet and said, "Your humble one has brought, my lord, a poor and unworthy gift."

His guru, stretching out an arm, asked after his welfare,
and blessed him, laying a palm upon his head. Raghu offered, joining both his hands,
at his guru's feet, a pair of bracelets, strung with gold and rubies.
The guru lifted them from the ground, and began, idly, to look at them, turning them on a finger.
The diamond's sharp point, turning round a hundred times, struck off a hundred blades of light.
Smiling a little, the guru set them down beside him, and turned his eyes back once more to his book.
Suddenly, one of the bracelets slipped from the stone ledge, rolled, and fell into the current of the Yamuna.
"Oh! Oh!" Raghunath cried out, and leapt into the water, both arms outstretched.
With his whole heart, his whole mind, his whole body straining,
he went, one arm reaching, to catch it. Not even for a moment did the guru lift his head;
in his own quiet heart, the joy of his reading still burned undisturbed.
The dark water swirled on, glancing sidelong, as though it carried, deep within it, some deceit, some deep and hidden theft.

Daylight followed the day away, and the restless Yamuna gave up nothing at all.
In wet clothes, empty-handed, weary, his head bowed, Raghunath came back to where his guru sat.
"I can still bring it up," he pleaded, hands joined, "only show me where it is."
The guru flung the second bracelet, too, into the water, and said, "It is there — at the bottom of this river."

27 Jyaishtha, 1295

6. THE OLD SERVANT

(পুরাতন ভৃত্য — Purono Bhritto)

He looks like something out of a ghost story, and thick-headed as they come —
whatever goes missing, my wife says, "It's Kesto — thief of all thieves."
Scold him standing, scold him sitting, and still it goes in one ear, out the other.
However much he's beaten, he never earns his wages, and never learns his lesson.
When something's urgently needed, I shout myself hoarse, screaming "Kesto!" —
however hard I chase him down, I get no answer, and search the whole neighborhood through.
Ask for three things — he brings back one, and where the rest went, he has no idea;
ask for one thing — before you can blink, he's brought back three.
Wherever he happens to be, at any hour, even in broad daylight, he can sleep like the dead;
when I roar at him in fury — "You wretched, useless donkey!" — he only stands by the door and grins,
till my blood positively boils. And still, somehow, I cannot bring myself to be rid of him —
my dear old servant.

The lady of the house, her face gone hard, says, "I can't take this anymore —
keep your household, keep your Kesto, and good luck to the both of you.
He minds no rule — clothes, dishes, food, furniture, whatever it may be, who knows where it all goes,
only the money keeps flowing away like water. He goes to market and vanishes for the whole day,
hardly to be found again — try as you like, is Kesto the only servant left in the world?"
Hearing this, in a towering rage, I rush at him and seize him by his topknot,
and tell him, "You wretch — get out this instant, I'm done with you for good."
Slowly, he goes; I think, well, that's over. But the very next morning I find him,
standing right there, hookah in hand, that thick-headed fool —
his face perfectly content, not a trouble in the world, utterly untroubled at heart!
Try as I might, he simply won't leave — what am I to do with him, my dear old servant!

That year I'd made a little money on the side, brokering some deal,
and made up my mind to make a trip, at last, to holy Vrindavan.
My wife wanted to come along too; I explained to her, reasoning —
a wife's merit comes only through her husband's, and besides, it would cost too much.
So, bargaining over the ropes, tying up our bundles, jingling her bangles as she packed the trunk,
my wife said, weeping, "Taking Kesto to a foreign land, you'll suffer no end of trouble."
I said, "Good heavens, no — Nibaran will go along with you instead."
The train rushed on; and there — imagine my dismay — getting down at Burdwan, who should appear,
perfectly composed, but Krishnakanta himself, calmly preparing my tobacco!
How much more of this insolence was I meant to bear, day after day!
However much I scolded him, still, somehow, I was glad to see him — my dear old servant!

We arrived at the holy town — and from every side, left and right, behind, before,
a great crowd pressed in, till my heart nearly leapt into my throat.
Six or seven of us banded together, like the closest of friends, and took lodgings;
I thought, now, at last, my days would pass in peace.
But where was the Braja of old, the forest of flowers, where was Hari, garlanded with wildwood

blooms!
Where was that eternal springtime — alas, I was dying, even in the midst of spring!
My friends, as if it had all been a dream, broke up the lodging and scattered;
I was left alone, and every limb of me filled with the sharp arrows of disease.
Night and day I called, weak and pitiful, "Kesto, come here to me —
after all this, so far from home, in a foreign land, I don't think I will live."
The sight of his face made my heart swell — he seemed to me then like the greatest of treasures —
day and night he stood there at my bedside, my dear old servant.
He brought water to my lips, asked after my health, laid his hand upon my head;
he stood there unmoving, sleepless, and would not eat.
Again and again he said, "Master, you have nothing to fear, listen to me —
you will go home again, and see the mistress once more."
Regaining my strength, I rose again — and then the fever seized him;
he took my own mortal illness upon his own body.
He lost his senses, lay unconscious two days, and his pulse stopped;
so many times I had tried to be rid of him — and now, at last, he had gone, and left me.
Long after, having finished my pilgrimage, I returned to my own home;
but today, my constant companion is not with me — my dear old servant.

22 Falgun, 1301

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7. THE SURRENDER

(বিসর্জন — Bisarjan)

Two children, born to her arms, had died, one after the other,
before either had reached a full two years of age.
This time, when her child was born, Mallika lost her husband too.
Her friends tried to console her — she must have committed some great sin, they said, in an earlier life;
that was why, in this life, such terrible grief had come to her.
The grief-burned woman, in utter humility, took upon her own head the burden of some unknown, unremembered sin,
and gave her whole mind to penance. From temple to temple, village to village,
wherever she went, she went making offerings.
In vows and meditation, in fasting, in daily rites and libations,
her days passed among incense and lamps, offerings and sandal-paste, in the shrine-room;
she bound an amulet into her hair, and gathered the dust from the feet of a hundred Brahmins;
she listened to the tales of the Ramayana; she brought wandering holy men and ascetics into her house to bless her child.
Setting herself lower than everyone else in this world, the luckless woman begged the kindly notice of every living thing for her child's sake;
from the sun and moon down to the beasts, the birds, the very insects —
in whatever way she could, she lived in terror that someone, somewhere, might take offense at her,
that someone might feel some resentment, for some unknown reason, that anyone at all might be hurt by her —
before the whole world she abased herself, filled with a restless, aching anxiety.

When the child was a year and a half old, his liver failed;
burning with fever, his small body began to waste away.
At the temple his mother made her vow, and gave him holy water brought from the god's own feet to drink;
the courtyard shook with the singing of Hari's name.
But the sickness would not be calmed. Weeping, the woman asked the Brahmin priest,
"For all this suffering, is my sin still not washed away?
Day and night I have called upon god as my witness, I have offered so much worship, and still there is no protection!
Will they still take my child from me! How hungry the gods must be!
Layer upon layer I have offered up food, selling my own jewelry, I have given everything,
and still that hunger is not satisfied!" The Brahmin said, "My child, this is indeed a dark and fallen age.
You have done a very great deal, and yet let me say this too —
does anyone, these days, have such devotion as once there was?
What was possible in the age of truth — can you do the same, today?
When Dharma himself, disguised as a Brahmin, came to the great and generous Karna
and asked to eat his own son, Karna cut the child down with his own hand —
and in that very instant he received his son back again, in the blink of an eye.

When Indra, disguised as a hawk, came to King Shibi, Shibi cut the flesh from his own breast to feed him —
and gained, in return, a body that could never perish.
That is what devotion means. Is there anything like that, anywhere on this earth, in this age?
I remember, as a boy, hearing a story from my mother —
near their own village there lived a barren woman, who, seeing no other way,
made a vow, when her firstborn child was still in her womb, to Mother Ganga herself.
Afterward, once the son was born, the poor woman became a widow;
she went down to the river, and called out to Mother Ganga, in perfect faith:
'Mother, into your own lap I give this child — this is my first son, and my last;
I will hope for no other son in this life.' The moment he was thrown into the water,
Mother Bhagirathi took shape before her, riding upon her crocodile,
and, gathering the child into her own lotus hands, laid him in her own lap. —
That is what devotion means."

Mallika turned back home, her head bowed low, and cursed herself —
"All this time, my vows were useless, my worship of god was in vain —
faithless sinner that I am, no fruit has come of it."
She came home and found her child unconscious, in the grip of fever; his body was as if on fire.
However many times she tried to make him swallow medicine, it fell from his lips — nothing would pass down his throat.
His teeth were clenched fast together. The physician shook his head, and slowly left the sickroom.
In the darkness of evening, in the widow's empty house, a single dim lamp burned at the head of the bed,
and one grieving woman, alone. Once, the child opened his light-drained eyes,
as if searching all around him, looking for someone.
The woman cried out, desperate — "O my darling, my treasure,
here is your mother, here is your mother's lap, what is there to fear, my child?"
Pressing him to her breast, feeling the fever's heat, she longed, with all her strength, to draw his whole illness into her own body.
Suddenly the bedroom door blew open in the wind; the small lamp went out at once;
suddenly, from outside, the sound of rushing water came into the room.
The woman started, rose swiftly, leaving the bed behind her, and said, "That — that is my mother's call I hear —
O my poor darling, I have found the way — a lap cooler than even your own mother's lap awaits you, my child."
Outside, not far away, in the waters of the Ganges, the tide had risen, full and roaring, under the full moon.
Carrying her child's fevered body against her breast, the mother went out toward the empty ghat.
She said, "Mother, if a mother's pain ever moves your heart, then take this child's fever from him, Mother, and cool it.
I give you the only treasure I have, at your feet, with my whole heart."
So saying, she gave to the water her unconscious child, cradled in her own two hands, and closed her eyes.
For a long time she did not open them again. In that trance she saw, seated before her,

the goddess riding her crocodile, radiant, a mother's form,
who had come, cradling the small child in her arms, and had laid upon his head a single lotus petal.
Smiling, the boy, his face untouched by any grief, left the goddess's lap and stretched out his hands,
reaching to come back into his own mother's arms.
The goddess said, "Take him, poor woman — I give you back what is yours."
Her whole body trembling, she opened her eyes and said, "But where — Mother — where is he!"...
The night lay dazed under a moon grown full; the Ganges flowed on, murmuring its endless song.
The woman rose, screaming, "You will not give him back!" And the forest, in the south wind, rustled its answer.

24 Ashwin, 1306

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8. THE ENVOI

(সূচনা — Suchona)

How much comes, and how much goes, borne along the river of consciousness!
In the dark, in hidden corners, endlessly, here and there, so much of it is left lying —
broken threads, chosen out, hundreds upon hundreds, and you sit, weaving them into tales.

O single-minded one, O unseen one, O you who dive deep into memory!
Nothing, in your house, is ever truly lost, O mistress of the heart's own household!

So much joy and sorrow arrives each day, so much is forgotten, so much grows faint and dim —
and yet, taking it all, without rest, you go on composing the tale of a life.

Sitting in darkness, what is it you are doing, O you who dive deep into memory?
For how many ages have you gone on weaving this, you who lie upon the heart's thousand-petaled bed!

In the deep, secret place within me, who knows what is there, and what is not —
who can say what tale of how many ages you have woven into my own soul —

how many lifetimes, how much forgetting, O you who dive deep into memory.