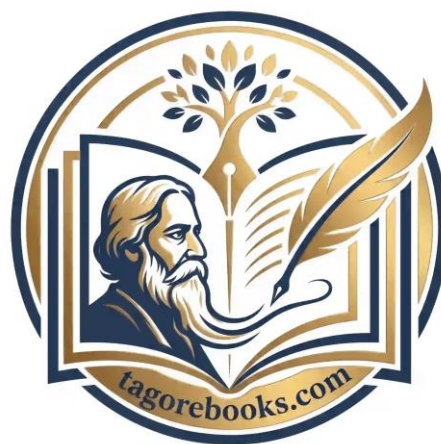


PLAY

THE LAND OF CARDS

Rabindranath Tagore



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The Land of Cards

Tasher Desh — a dance-drama by Rabindranath Tagore

Translated from the Bengali

A TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: *this play (a nrityanatya*, or dance-drama, first published in 1933) is an extended allegory — a prince and a merchant's son are shipwrecked on an island ruled by living Playing Cards, bound hand and foot by meaningless Rule, and their arrival awakens in the Cards a desire to break free and become fully human. Card ranks and suits function here as characters in their own right, so this translation renders them as speaking names — SIX, FIVE, TEN, ACE, JACK, KING, QUEEN; SPADE, DIAMOND, HEART, CLUB — with "Lady" before the feminine forms (LADY SPADE, LADY HEART, and so on), much as English versions of* Alice in Wonderland render its own card-characters. Bengali honorific suffixes are dropped in favour of this scheme; a short glossary of untranslatable wordplay follows at the end.*

DEDICATION

To my dear young Subhash Chandra —

Remembering that you have taken upon yourself the sacred vow of breathing new life into the spirit of our motherland, I dedicate to your name this play, *The Land of Cards*.

Santiniketan

Rabindranath Tagore

PROLOGUE

SONG

*Sharp the wind blows, fast and keen, clouds close in on every side — oh
boatman, row, and steer us on! Grip the rudder fast and firm, I shall hoist and
bind the sail — heave-ho, pull now, heave and ho!*

*Again, and yet again, the chains clash and clang — no cry of fear is this, no
groan of a boat in dread — it is that these unbearable bonds can be borne no
longer, and so today all trembles and sways. Heave-ho, pull now,
heave and ho!*

*Counting the days and the hours, making the heart run restless — say not,
shall we go, or shall we not. The ocean of doubt must be crossed within;
look not outward in anxious dread.*

*If Great Time himself grows wild, his tangled, streaming locks torn loose in
the storm, and the waves rise up in fury — be not then dismayed, but strike your
measure to his, and sing out the song of triumph, of victory! Heave-ho,
pull now, heave and ho!*

SCENE ONE

The PRINCE and the MERCHANT'S SON.

PRINCE. It cannot go on any longer, my friend.

MERCHANT'S SON. What restlessness is this in you, Prince?

PRINCE. How shall I put it? Tell me instead — what restlessness moves that flock of wild geese, that in the spring go flying, flock on flock, toward the Himalaya?

MERCHANT'S SON. Why, that is where their nest is.

PRINCE. If it is their nest, then why do they leave it? No, no — it is the joy of flight. Joy without a reason.

MERCHANT'S SON. You wish to fly?

PRINCE. Indeed I do.

MERCHANT'S SON. I cannot make sense of you at all. For my part, I would say — better a reasoned captivity in a cage than flight without reason.

PRINCE. Why do you call it reasoned?

MERCHANT'S SON. Why, we live in golden cages, chained there by our own greed for food and drink.

PRINCE. You will never understand. Never.

MERCHANT'S SON. That is my own failing too — what cannot be understood, I simply cannot understand. Speak a little more plainly. What is it you cannot bear?

PRINCE. These same unvarying days, one after another, in the palace.

MERCHANT'S SON. You call that tedious? So much arrangement, so much provision, on every side!

PRINCE. I feel myself a stone god in a golden temple. In my ears, forever, the same single note of conch and gong and bell. The offerings come in their fixed allotment, but I have no taste left for them. How can this be borne?

MERCHANT'S SON. For men like me it is borne easily enough. Thank heaven for a fixed allotment! Let the bond once snap, and a man must sit with his head in his

hands. Whatever I am given, my hunger is satisfied by it. But you — it is with what you do *not* have that you go on, in your own mind, trying to satisfy a hunger.

PRINCE. And then, day after day, having to listen to the bards' hymns of praise, always in the same fixed metre — always that same Shardulavikridita.*

MERCHANT'S SON. As for me, I find a hymn only grows sweeter the more often it is heard. It never grows old at all!

PRINCE. The moment sleep breaks, that same band of dawn-singers. And every morning that same old priest with his blessing of rice and durva-grass. And coming and going, always I see that same old chamberlain standing stiff as a wooden doll beside the door. Let me but lift one foot to go anywhere, and at once, from somewhere, a doorkeeper appears, chanting — *this way, this way, this way*. Between them all, it is as though they have clapped a muzzle over my very mind.

MERCHANT'S SON. But surely, now and then, when you go out hunting, there at least no trouble troubles you but the wild beast itself?

PRINCE. Call them wild beasts, do you! I begin to suspect the royal huntsmen dose the tigers with opium. They seem to have taken some vow of non-violence. Not once yet have I seen a single one of them spring a decent leap.

MERCHANT'S SON. Say what you will, I for one do not count this conduct in the tigers as any want of courtesy. All the pomp and ceremony of the hunt remains entirely intact — only the heart no longer goes thump-thump with fear.

PRINCE. That day I shot my arrow into the bear from a great distance, and on every side went up cries of praise — they said, what mastery in the Prince's aim! And afterward, in whispers, I learned it was a dead bear's hide, stuffed with straw and chaff, dressed up and set in place. Such a jest as that I could not bear. I had the huntsman sentenced to prison.

MERCHANT'S SON. You did him a kindness. His cell adjoins the Queen Mother's own apartments — he lives there quite at his ease. Why, only the other day I sent him, from our own stores, three maunds of ghee and thirty-three goats.

PRINCE. What does this mean?

MERCHANT'S SON. It means the making of that bear was the Queen Mother's own order.

PRINCE. There it is! We have fallen into a web of falsehood. Kept too long in the cage of safety, our wings have grown stiff. From beginning to end, it is all a performance. They have made a puppet-show of my princehood. I feel like tearing this royal costume from my body. Look — I see them out there tilling the fields, and I think: blessed by the merit of their forefathers, they were born as farmers.

MERCHANT'S SON. And as for what *they* think of *you* — go ask them that, and see. Prince, you are talking a great deal of nonsense — you are hiding the real matter in your heart. Patralekha! Perhaps you can guess our Prince's secret — go and try, won't you?

PATRALEKHA enters.

SONG

PATRALEKHA. *A secret will not stay a secret — it has risen and broken into flower in the silent eyes —*

PRINCE. *No, no, no — it will not stay a secret. In the enraptured laughter, it sounded in the flute, it stirred upon the lips in a hidden dream —*

PRINCE. *No, no, no — it will not stay a secret.*

PATRALEKHA. *The bee has begun to hum, in sweet pain, thirsting for light, the ashoka tree has burst to bloom. The heart's own hundred-petalled lotus trembles and sways in the crimson dawn, in the tender, grieving sun —*

PRINCE. *No, no, no — it will not stay a secret!*

PRINCE. I do have a secret, and that secret lies hidden far off in the sky. I sit beside the sea, gazing toward the western horizon. There, my destiny has hidden something away, like buried treasure — and it is in search of that I shall go.

SONG

I shall go, oh, I shall go — I shall go out to trade upon the seas. Though I lose my Fortune, I shall find my Misfortune instead.

MERCHANT'S SON. What is this you say! Trade? Why, that is the merchant's own creed you are reciting!

PRINCE.

Having fitted out my ship, having seated my thousand oarsmen, to what city shall I sail, upon what sea shall I set my course? By what star shall I steer, forsaking every shore, in what direction shall I row my boat into the vast black water — I will not go on dying in vain hope upon these golden sands.

MERCHANT'S SON. To turn sailor upon a shoreless sea and vanish without a trace — that is no road of trade. Have you had any word of it?

PRINCE. Indeed I have. I have had it in glimpses, I have had it in dreams.

Green upon blue's bosom lies that island, ringed all about with coral. On the mountain's crest have built their nests the birds of the ocean. In the coconut boughs, branch on branch, only the storm-wind calls, through the gaps of the dense forest runs a river down from the hills. The wealth of seven kings, the jewel — surely I shall win it if I but land upon that shore.

MERCHANT'S SON. From the tune of your song I can tell — this jewel is no merchant's jewel. Tell me its name.

PRINCE. Navina! Navina!†

MERCHANT'S SON. Navina! At last, one plain word out of you.

PRINCE. It is not yet time for it to take on any plain shape.

SONG *O Navina, O Navina, in the dust of every common road you are not to be found. I hear your voice float upon the spring wind; in my first waking I see you, dissolved in a golden cloud.*

MERCHANT'S SON. But this treasure of your dream will be hard indeed to gather in.

PRINCE. *In dream you let yourself be caught — how full of mischief that is.
With what flowers of what fairy-realm do you braid a garland for your
hair, in what unknown strain do you play your vina,
alone?*

The QUEEN MOTHER enters.

MERCHANT'S SON. Queen Mother, he means to cast his net for a mirage — he wishes to seek out the country of a fairy tale.

MOTHER. What is this you say? Do you mean to turn child again?

PRINCE. Yes, Mother — my spirit is stifled in this world hedged round by the good sense of old age.

MOTHER. I understand, my child. In truth, your want is the want of any want at all. What you have, you have grown weary of. You wish to *long* for something — and until today, that chance has never come to you.

PRINCE.

SONG *My heart says, "I want, I want, that which I do not have." In the midst of all I have gained an ache sounds in my heart, "I have not, have not, have not." I must be lost, that I may be found again —*

the evening star goes on its way, only to wake again as the morning star; it says, "I go, I go, I go."

MOTHER. My child, if I try to hold you fast, I shall only lose you. You could not bear the burden of comfort, could not endure the bondage of being served. I will not, in my fear, do you this harm. I shall set upon your brow the mark of white sandal-paste, and upon your white turban fasten a cluster of white oleander. I go now to prepare the worship of our household god. This evening I shall put the kohl of the arati-lamp upon your eyes with my own hand, that every obstacle to your sight may be cleared from your path.

The QUEEN MOTHER goes out.

PRINCE.

SONG *Behold — the sea rises up in waves, the wind blows hard and fast. Where the sun goes down to set, lightning flashes in the clouds. I look to the south, I look to the north, foam upon foam, and nothing else at all — if nowhere I find a shore, I shall find the bottom still. In the corner of my hearth, in hopeless despair, I will stay no more, not ever. Setting my boat afloat on the shoreless sea, I go out toward the unknown. I am but a solitary boatman in my own*

empty craft. On ever new gusts of wind I shall go from isle to isle; I shall bring my vessel home laden with treasures never seen before — and when this beggar heart turns homeward, it shall come home like a king.

SCENE TWO

The PRINCE and the MERCHANT'S SON.

PRINCE. We set sail from one shore; our vessel sank in the midst of the sea; and we have risen again, afloat, upon another shore. After so long, it seems to me that a new chapter of life has begun.

MERCHANT'S SON. Prince, you are forever growing restless over one new thing after another. It is the very word "new" that I fear. Say what you will, my friend — the old was comfortable.

PRINCE. It is a frog's comfort, in a stagnant well. Do you not understand — we have risen up from the floor of death itself? Yama himself has set upon our brows the mark of a new life.

MERCHANT'S SON. Why, you brought the mark of royalty to your brow at the very moment of your birth.

PRINCE. That was only the stamp of fate's almsgiving. The Lord of Death has washed that from my forehead in the waters of the great sea, and given his command: a new kingdom must be won, by new strength, in a new land —

SONG *We have come to a new country; our broken ship went down, and we floated to this shore. What wondrous hope will the unknown language of the mind proclaim to us, what web of joy and sorrow will it weave with threads of colour, what beat of a new song will sound within our hearts, in what new sorrow shall we wander, weeping and laughing by turns. A beloved whose name we do not know, bearing a garland of flowers whose name we do not know, will give heart to heart. In the fresh surge of youth, in the month of spring, anklets will ring out upon every blade of grass, the south wind will grow wild among the flowering clove-vines, and hair will stray loose and restless.*

MERCHANT'S SON. Prince, the words sound well enough set to your tune. But let me ask — where in this country have you seen youth's fresh beauty? I have been once round the whole place myself. It seemed to me nothing but a carpenter's wooden grove. I saw them going about on square wooden soles, flat of chest and back, their feet falling click-clack, click-clack — I daresay they wear square anklets, carved out of tamarind wood. Do you call this dead land a "new country"?

PRINCE. From just that you may understand — the thing is not real, it is manufactured, imposed from above, a husk fashioned by the scholars of this land. And what have we come here to do, but to strip it away? When the raw, living shape breaks out from within, it will astonish you.

MERCHANT'S SON. I am a man of trade — whatever I see plainly, by that I set my price. And you place your faith in what you cannot see at all. Well — let us see whether fire comes out of ashes or not. My own guess is that you will blow and blow till your breath gives out. Look there — this way it comes — like the dance of a ghost in a dead body.

PRINCE. Let us step aside a little. Let us see what this business is.

THE CARDS enter, marching.

MARCHING SONG OF THE CARDS

Rise up, sit down, back and front, left and right, we want none of it, none of it, sit down, rise up, spread out, gather in, topsy-turvy, a whirling turn — enough, enough, enough.

MERCHANT'S SON. Do you see this business! Red coat, black coat, rising, falling, lying down, sitting up, entirely without reason — how very strange. Ha ha ha ha!

SIX. What is this? Laughter!

FIVE. Have you no shame! Laughter!

SIX. You keep no rule at all! Laughter!

PRINCE. Laughter surely has some meaning. But what you were doing just now — that has no meaning at all.

SIX. Meaning? What need is there of meaning? What is wanted is Rule. Can you not understand that? Are you not perhaps mad?

PRINCE. It is no easy thing to recognize true madness. How did you tell?

FIVE. By the manner and the walk.

PRINCE. And how did it look to you?

SIX. It looked to us as though you had only the moving, and none of the manner.

MERCHANT'S SON. And I suppose you have only the manner, and none of the moving?

FIVE. Do you not know — manner is a thing most ancient, while moving is a thing quite modern: unfledged, upstart, still beardless.

SIX. You have not been raised by a proper tutor's hand. No one has taught you: on every road there are ditches, there are pits, there are thorns, there are snags — the thing called moving carries a great deal of danger with it.

PRINCE. Why, this whole country is the tutor's own country. We shall take shelter with your masters.

SIX. Now then — your credentials?

PRINCE. We are foreigners.

FIVE. Enough! Say no more. That is to say — you have no caste, no family, no clan, no lineage, no kinsmen, no ancestry, no class, no rank at table.

PRINCE. Nothing at all, nothing at all — setting all that aside, this much is what we have, as you can plainly see. Now — your own credentials?

SIX. We are of the world-renowned House of Cards. I am Six Sharma.

FIVE. I am Five Varman.

PRINCE. And those two standing shyly apart?

SIX. That dark one is Three Ghosh.

FIVE. And that reddish one is Two Das.

MERCHANT'S SON. And where does your line take its origin?

SIX. Brahma grew weary at his labour of creation. Then, one evening, he gave his first great yawn — and from that sacred yawn came our own origin.

FIVE. For this reason, in certain foreign tongues, we are called not the House of Cards but the House of the Yawn.

MERCHANT'S SON. Astonishing.

SIX. At the blessed hour of twilight, our great forefather gave, from his four mouths at once, four yawns together.

MERCHANT'S SON. Good heavens! And what came of it?

SIX. Out sprang, with a burst — Spade, Diamond, Heart, and Club. All of them are worthy of reverence. *(He bows.)*

PRINCE. All of noble birth, then?

SIX. Noble indeed. Of the highest lineage. Sprung from the very mouth.

FIVE. The founding poet of our House, the divine Lord of Card-Melodies, having slept through all four watches of the day, in the trance of his dream fashioned the first metre — and counting out, foot by foot, the syllables of that metre, arose our thirty-seven-and-a-half varieties of procedure.

PRINCE. At the very least, we ought to know one of them.

FIVE. Very well — then turn your face away.

PRINCE. Why?

FIVE. Rule. Brother Six, recite the Thoong-mantra, and blow a breath into their ears.

PRINCE. Why?

FIVE. Rule.

SONG OF THE CARDS *Ha-ha-aah-aai. Nothing to do with the hand. Day goes by, day goes by. Come, come, come, come. Nothing to do with the hand.*

PRINCE. I can bear no more of this — I had to turn my face back.

FIVE. Ohh! You have broken the spell! You have defiled it!

PRINCE. Defiled it?

FIVE. What else but defiled! A foreigner's gaze fell upon the very middle of the mantra.

PRINCE. What is the remedy now?

SIX. You must burn the seed-stone of a bat-eaten wood-apple, and wear its soot as kohl about your eyes for three days — only then will our ancestors in heaven break their fast.

PRINCE. So I have brought some trouble upon you. We shall have to walk very carefully indeed in your country.

SIX. Best not to walk at all — then you may remain pure.

PRINCE. And what comes of remaining pure?

FIVE. What else should come of it — remaining pure, one *is* pure. Can you not understand that?

PRINCE. For us it is quite impossible to understand. Let me ask one thing — what were you doing in a band, up there on the ridge?

SIX. War.

PRINCE. You call that war?

FIVE. Certainly! By the most perfectly correct rule. According to the ancient custom proper to the House of Cards.

SONG *We are Figures, most curious Figures, most correct, most pure and sacred.*

MERCHANT'S SON. Even so. But a war without a little temper in it has no savour at all.

SIX. Our temper is all in our colour.

Our war — no one grows angry in it, look, there is the Jack, exceedingly mild.

MERCHANT'S SON. Even so — still, a cannon or a musket suits a battlefield rather well.

FIVE. *We carry no weapon at all, only our dust-red cloth.*

No greed, no grief, no leaping, no springing.

PRINCE. Let all that be as it may — still, surely, there must be some grievance, some quarrel, for the two sides to fight over?

SIX.

We know the proper form, and we abide by it just so — who is your friend, who your enemy, who your ally, who your foe.

FIVE. Now tell us, foreigner — surely, according to your own scripture, you too must have had some origin?

MERCHANT'S SON. Certainly. At the very dawn of creation, our forefather Brahma set the sun upon his grindstone, and at once a spark of its fire flew up into his nostril. He let out a sneeze with a report like a cannon — and from that world-shaking sneeze came our own origin.

SIX. Now it is understood! That is why you are all so restless!

PRINCE. We cannot stay still — we go flying off in every direction.

FIVE. That is surely no good thing.

MERCHANT'S SON. Who said it was good? To this day we have not been able to master the rush of that first primordial sneeze.

SIX. Well, here at least is one good result I can foresee — this same rush of sneezing will fling you clean off this island before long; you will never be able to hold your ground here.

MERCHANT'S SON. Holding ground is difficult indeed.

FIVE. And what manner of war do you wage?

MERCHANT'S SON. Ours is measured out in four pairs of sneezes to each of the two sides.

SIX. Measured in sneezes? Good heavens — then heads must go banging together!

MERCHANT'S SON. Yes indeed — a proper drubbing, blow for blow.

SIX. You too have some mantra of your founding poet, I suppose?

MERCHANT'S SON. Indeed we do.

SONG *Ah-choo! What terror do you think to show me? I seize you by the throat, I strike you in the mouth with my fist — now tell me, what pleasure do you take in that?*

SIX. I say, brother Five, they are utterly unlike our own kind — what caste are you, then?

MERCHANT'S SON. We are the Nashaks§ — born of the nose.

FIVE. I have never heard of any high-born race with so strange a name.

MERCHANT'S SON. In the vapour of the yawn, you were carried aloft, into the world beyond; in the violence of the sneeze, we were flung down below, upon the shores of this present world.

SIX. It is our forefather's own want of restraint in his nose that has made you so very strange.

PRINCE. Now at last, at last, the true word has come from your own mouth: we are strange indeed.

SONG *We are the messengers of a new-born youth, we are restless, we are strange. We break down every fence, we grow flushed with the crimson intoxication of the ashoka grove, we tear apart the storm's own bondage, we are the lightning. We make mistakes. Leaping into fathomless waters, we struggle, and win the shore. Wherever the call comes, in the storm of life and death, we stand ready.*

SIX and FIVE (*looking at one another*). This will not do, this will not do at all.

PRINCE. What will not do — that is exactly what we set going.

SIX. But — the Rule!

PRINCE. Break the rule of the fence, and the rule of the road reveals itself of its own accord — otherwise how am I to go forward?

FIVE. Brother, only listen to what they say! Bald-faced, he says it outright — "go forward"!

PRINCE. What else is walking for?

SIX. Walking! Why should *you* walk at all! It is the Rule that shall walk.

SONG *Walk to the rule's own measure. Look not far away, turn not your neck aside, walk the level road.*

PRINCE. *Behold, over there, the forest — is there any order there? the mad waterfalls on the southern mountainside.*

THE CARDS. *Look not that way, look not that way, go not there, go not there — walk the level road!*

FIVE. No more of this — there, the King himself is coming, and the Queen. There is to be an assembly here today. Here, take a branch of the wild gourd-vine, one each.

PRINCE. A branch of wild gourd-vine? Ha ha ha ha — whatever for?

FIVE. Hush! Do not laugh — it is the Rule. Sit facing the north-east corner, and mind you never turn your face toward the north-west.

PRINCE. Why?

SIX. Rule.

The KING, the QUEEN, the ACES, the JACK, and the rest enter, in due order and due form.

PRINCE. I say, friend, let us sing a hymn of praise and please the King. You wave the gourd-vine branch about.

SONG *Victory, victory to the crown of the House of Cards, dweller upon the shore of slumber, destroyer of every leisure hour.*

THE CARDS. Vasta, vasta, vasta! To break up an assembly out of season — how barbarous!

KING. Be calm — who are these?

SIX. Foreigners.

KING. Foreigners! Then the rule does not apply. Let everyone once exchange places, and the fault shall be cleared away. First of all, the national anthem of the Great Assembly of Cards.

ALL. *(Song)*

Club, Heart, Spade — in a rhythm most ancient they go dancing, Club and Heart. Some rise, some fall, some do not stir at all, some, lying flat upon the ground, pass their appointed hour.

They speak no word at all, they never smile the least, whoever comes before them, they follow close behind. Fixed is their pattern, old and set, no turning it topsy-turvy, no change in it at all.

KING. I say, foreigner —

PRINCE. Yes, Your Majesty?

KING. Who are you?

PRINCE. I am an envoy from beyond the sea.

JACK. What tribute have you brought?

PRINCE. I have brought what is rarest of all in this land.

JACK. And what, pray, is that?

PRINCE. Disturbance.

SIX. You heard that, Your Majesty — did you hear what he said? The fellow wants to go forward; tell him you do not believe it, and the fellow laughs. In two days he will make the very air here light and unsteady.

JACK. On no planet is there air so still, so heavy, as ours. Not even Indra's own lightning could stir it — how much less anyone else.

ALL. *(with one voice)* How much less anyone else.

JACK. And if this light-headed foreigner should make this air of ours light too — what then?

KING. That is a matter for thought.

ALL. That is a matter for thought.

JACK. In a light air, storms are born. Let a storm come, and the Rule goes flying off. Then even our own priest, old Nine Goswami himself, will begin to say — we too shall go forward.

FIVE. Indeed — and Heaven forbid, but perhaps even laughter itself will grow contagious here.

KING. I say, Jack of Spades —

JACK. Yes, Your Majesty?

KING. You are the editor, are you not?

JACK. I am the editor of the *Card-Island Lamp*. I am the guardian of Card-Island's Culture.

KING. Culture! What sort of thing is that? It does not sound quite proper, does it?

JACK. No, Your Majesty, it is neither proper nor improper — but it is what is called new, the very latest contribution. And today this Culture is in peril.

ALL. Culture, Culture, Culture!

KING. You have an editorial column in your paper, do you not?

JACK. Two great columns.

KING. Then the roar of those columns must strike everyone dumb with astonishment. I will not tolerate this lightening of the air here.

JACK. We must have a Compulsory Law.

KING. What is this you say now! A Compulsory Law!

JACK. It is the new modern name for the old Law of the Twisted Ear. This too is our latest contribution.

KING. Very well, that can wait. Foreigner — have you any petition to make?

PRINCE. I have — but not to you.

KING. To whom, then?

PRINCE. To these princesses here.

KING. Very well — speak.

PRINCE.

SONG *O still and stone-carved beauty, take the restless one into the depths of your heart, and wed him. Come alone into the flowering grove, let a tear show itself in your eye, let the dawn's crimson glow colour the opening bud of your sorrow.*

QUEEN. What disorder is this, what injustice!

FIVE. Your Majesty — banishment! Banish him!

KING. Banishment! Queen, what say you? Why do you stand silent? Do you hear me? Give me an answer. What say you — banishment, is it not?

QUEEN. No. Not banishment.

THE ACE-PRINCESSES (*one after another*). No. Not banishment.

KING. Queen, something about you seems — strange to me.

QUEEN. It seems strange to myself as well.

JACK. Princess of Aces, fair one — remember, the editorial column is in my hands.

ALL. Culture, culture — the Culture of Card-Island! Save that Culture!

JACK. Proclaim the Compulsory Law!

KING. Meaning?

JACK. The Law of the Twisted, Wrung Ear.

KING. I understand. Queen, what say you — shall I now put the Compulsory Law into force?

QUEEN. We too keep a Compulsory Law of our own, in the inner apartments — let us see who banishes whom.

THE ACE-PRINCESSES (*all together*). We shall put into force an Un-Compulsory Un-Law of our own!

JACK. What has happened here? Alas, Culture — alas, Culture — alas, Culture!

KING. I dissolve this assembly. Come away, all of you, at once. It is not safe to remain here any longer.

THE CARDS go out.

MERCHANT'S SON. My friend and comrade, this is more than I can bear here any longer. These people are a mockery made by fate itself. If we stay among them we shall be turned to dust ourselves.

PRINCE. Do you not see what is happening beneath the surface? Do you not feel life's first stirring within these puppets? I, for one, will not go without seeing this through to its end.

MERCHANT'S SON. But this is a cage of the living dead — their minds are rotted through with the acid of Rule.

PRINCE. Look over there, look.

MERCHANT'S SON. So it is, friend — the spell from beyond the sea has taken hold. There, beneath the Nine of Spades' tree, legs stretched out, gazing up at the sky — I see the rule of this place has flown clean away.

PRINCE. The Lady of Clubs's footsteps are listening to the sky itself. At such a time, I doubt our company will be welcome to her. Come, let us withdraw.

They go out.

SCENE THREE

LADY SPADE, absorbed in adorning herself. LADY ACE enters.

LADY ACE.

SONG *Tell me, friend, tell it to me, whisper it in my ear — his name — the name that rings in the strains of your vina. In the spring breeze, in the forest path, that name shall be found again; in the plaintive song of the lonely, longing bird, that name shall grow heady with the scent of bakul blossom.*

Let that name, on my friends' lips, one to another, sway back and forth in merry play. When alone, on a night of the full moon, my heart grows restless for no reason at all, I shall sing that name to myself, again and again.

LADY SPADE. Tell me, sister, what has come over this land of cards? What madness have these foreigners brought with them on the wind? My heart will not stop trembling.

LADY ACE. Yes, Lady Spade — who would have thought, only two days ago, that the very cards would lose their own kind, and take up manners exactly like human beings? For shame, what a disgrace.

LADY SPADE. Tell me, sister — this human-ness, is it not itself a kind of transgression? But it is your own Lady Heart who began it all. Have you not noticed? These days her very walk is out of order — the very image of a human being's gait. She forgets entirely whom she is meant to stand beside, and when. The whole neighbourhood is buzzing with it. She has brought disgrace on the very name of Card-Island.

LADY CLUB enters.

LADY CLUB. What is this, Lady Ace? I hear you have been spreading slander of us — saying that we have lost all propriety, sitting down when we ought to rise, rising when we ought to sit.

LADY ACE. Well, I have only spoken the truth — where is the fault in that? Those cheeks of yours, glowing so bright, my pretty one — from what shade of rouge do they glow? And that arch of your eyebrow — from what foreign, moonless night's kohl-vine did you borrow it? Not in seven lifetimes has such a thing been written in the scripture of Card-Island. Do you imagine no one's eye falls upon it?

LADY CLUB. I could die of it! And you, who sit with that friend of yours beneath the bakul tree, whispering into each other's ears the whole day and night — is *that* written in the scripture of Card-Island? And meanwhile that poor Jack of yours can find no partner at all, and goes about crying alas, alas.

LADY SPADE. Ah, worthy elder sister, spare us your lecturing. That red ribbon you have wound in your hair — by that ribbon the very custom and law of Card-Island will go and hang itself by the neck. Such shamelessness, in a card-born woman!

LADY CLUB. And what of it? I fear no one. Sneaking about and hiding, as is *your* habit, is not in my nature. That Lady Ten of yours came the other day to taunt me, calling me "a mortal woman" — and I gave her a plain answer to her face: better to become a mortal woman than to go on dying, a card-woman, all my life.

LADY SPADE. Do not put on such airs, do not — do you know? There is talk already of expelling you from your caste.

LADY CLUB. The caste of cards, is it? That I have already offered up with my own hands, into the water. What can you frighten me with now?

LADY SPADE. Heaven help us! Never in seven lifetimes have I heard such brazenness. She means, with drums beating, to go and become a human being! Come, sister, Lady Ace — who knows who may be watching, seeing us speak with her — she will drag us all down into her folly along with her.

They go out.

SCENE FOUR

LADY HEART — the Ace of Hearts — enters.

LADY HEART.

SONG *I came into the wood to gather flowers, I knew not what was in my heart.
This is no gathering of flowers, no, this is no gathering of flowers, I cannot tell
what has come over my mind, my two eyes fill with tears.*

Mister DIAMOND enters.

DIAMOND. What, Lady Heart, you are here? I have searched half the day for you.

LADY HEART. Why, what has happened, what do you want?

DIAMOND. You have been summoned to the royal assembly, to the circle of noble matrons.

LADY HEART. Tell them I am lost.

DIAMOND. Lost?

LADY HEART. Yes, lost — whoever it is you are searching for, you will never find her again. Not ever.

DIAMOND. What is this? What recklessness! You have come into this forest? Do you not know — there is no rule for it.

LADY HEART. There is no rule, true — but by whose rule is it that such a gathering of clouds has come, this day, to our rainless land of cards? I woke this morning of a

sudden and saw the whole sky filled with dark blue cloud. All this while your country's peacocks have stepped so carefully, counting each footfall, dancing so cautiously — and today, why did they dance this dance so out of all order, spreading their whole tail to the full?

DIAMOND. But you, whose own courtyard has till now been a foreign country to you — you too, today, have come out to gather flowers. However did so strange a notion come into your head?

LADY HEART. It came to me of a sudden that I was a garland-maker; that in some other life I used to gather flowers. Today, on the east wind, there came the scent of that lifetime's flower-garden. From that lifetime's grove of madhavi vine, a bee has come flying into my heart.

SONG *Into my house has come a bee, humming — whose story does it come to tell me? In what sky, in what light, has the madhavi vine wakened in the wood — that bee has come, bringing word of flowers newly woken, all day long it goes on telling me that same tale. How shall I stay within my house, when my heart behaves so strangely, how shall the days be counted as they pass? What spell has it cast over me, making me forget every task, while the hours go by, weaving a net of song.*

DIAMOND. But then — I have been searching everywhere for the noble ladies, for the circle of matrons — can it be that they, too —

LADY HEART. Yes, they too are here, all of them, along the riverbank, beneath every tree.

DIAMOND. What are they doing?

LADY HEART. Changing their attire, just as I am. How does it look? Do you like it?

DIAMOND. It seems to me the curtain has been drawn back, the cloud has passed from the moon — altogether a new people.

LADY HEART. Your own Six and Five came here to threaten and scold us — go and see what state they are in now.

DIAMOND. Why, what has happened to them?

LADY HEART. They wander about like madmen. They sigh. They even hum little songs to themselves.

DIAMOND. Songs! Six and Five, singing songs!

LADY HEART. Not quite in tune, perhaps, but songs all the same. I was braiding my hair just then. I could not stay still — I had to come away.

DIAMOND. You astonish me. Braiding your hair! Who taught you that art?

LADY HEART. No one at all. Look there, look — see how, of a sudden, the rains have come down into the dry waterfall. In every stream of falling water the plaiting of braids has begun. Who taught that to the water? Come with me — let me have you hear Six and Five's song for yourself.

They go out.

THE LADIES enter.

THE LADIES. (*Dance and Song*)

Some unknown melody someone goes on whispering into my ear, my every thought goes floating, floating away on song after song. In the shadowed light of a forgotten birth, in grief for a lost vina, a melody wanders weeping, having lost its way. On what night of spring's meeting, gazing up at the stars, my every thought goes floating, floating away on song after song.

They go out.

DIAMOND and LADY HEART re-enter.

DIAMOND. Whom shall I blame? It is my own heart that longs to sing.

LADY HEART. Take care the editor does not hear you — he will have you up on his column. I saw him just now, wandering about, gathering news of this wood.

DIAMOND. Listen, Lady Heart — my fear, I know not why, has quite left me. Give me some command — I wish to do something for you, some impossible thing.

LADY HEART. Whatever else you do, do not sing. There are hibiscus flowers blooming in the wood — go and gather them for me. I shall stain the soles of my feet red with their juice.

DIAMOND. Listen, beautiful one — this very morning, the moment I woke, I understood: this whole life of ours as cards is nothing but a dream. It has broken, of a sudden. Some other life of ours is floating on the wind. Its message is coming to my very lips, its song is sounding in my ears. Listen, listen — that very song, composed once in that other age of ours, someone out of the sky is carrying to me even now.

SONG *Upon your feet, it seems, a colour has come to rest, born of the crimson passion of the flowers in my heart's own wood. As though, in the strain of my song, I were fastening an ornament in your ear, as though I were stringing you a necklace of red gems, threaded with my heart's own devotion.*

LADY HEART. This song — did you yourself once compose it, and for me? How did you come to make it?

DIAMOND. In the same way that you came to know how to braid your hair.

LADY HEART. Tell me — does it come back to you, that once, in some other age, I danced to your song?

DIAMOND. It comes back, it comes back to me. I wonder now how I could have forgotten it so long.

SONG *A restless wind has caught the little boat of my song. It rocks, it rocks to the swaying rhythm of your restless dance. If the rope should break, if the rudder should slip loose, if the waves should rise up in foam, if death itself should wake before us — I fear it not: I shall win her yet, I shall win her yet, and claim the victory.*

DIAMOND. Listen, Lady Heart — my heart is grown restless to try its strength against the Lord of Death himself. I can see it before my very eyes, like a picture: you set upon my brow the mark of victory, and I set out to rescue the captive maiden, and at the gate of the locked fortress I sound my war-horn. I can hear, even now, the song you sang at our parting.

SONG *Bring me home the garland of victory. Through the long night I shall stay awake, watching for you. The moment your foot falls upon the shore of death, my very heart, within my breast, shall rise and sway; though all else should be lost, I shall share the ruin of your fall.*

LADY HEART. Come, come, my hero — let us go forth together, staking our lives upon it. I can see, ahead of us, some dark stone brow of rock, scowling — it must be broken, shattered utterly. Let it fall upon my head if it must fall. A path must be cut, though it split the very heart of the mountain. What have we come here to do? For shame, for shame — why do I go on living here at all? What meaningless days these are, what lifeless nights! What a whirl of futility, moment upon moment.

DIAMOND. Have you the courage, my beauty?

LADY HEART. I have, I have.

DIAMOND. You will not fear the unknown?

LADY HEART. No, I will not.

DIAMOND. Your feet will be torn and bleeding; the road will seem as though it will never end.

LADY HEART. In what age was it that we once travelled together through that very wilderness? By night I held the torch before you; by day I carried your banner of victory, going before you. Rise up once more today — this fence of idleness must be broken here, this circle of the lifeless, all this rubbish of meaninglessness must be flung aside.

DIAMOND. Tear away the veil — tear it to pieces and cast it off. Be free. Be pure. Be whole.

They go out.

SIX and FIVE enter.

SIX. I say, Five, what has happened, tell me?

FIVE. I feel great shame, looking at my own self. Fool, fool that I have been! What was I doing, all this while?

SIX. Why, after all this time, does the question rise in my mind — what is the meaning of all this?

FIVE. There goes Pandit Ten — let us ask him.

TEN enters.

SIX. All this while we have spent our days on this rising and falling, this lying down and sitting up, buying and selling by rote — what is the meaning of it?

TEN. Silence.

SIX and FIVE (*together*). We will not be silent.

TEN. Have you no fear?

SIX and FIVE (*together*). We have no fear — you must tell us what it means.

TEN. There is no meaning — there is Rule.

SIX. And if I no longer keep the Rule?

TEN. You will fall to ruin.

SIX. Then let me fall to that very ruin.

TEN. To do what, there?

FIVE. To fight, if there is dishonour to be found there, against that dishonour.

TEN. What manner of stubborn, unruly talk is this, in a land that loves its peace!

FIVE. I have vowed to break that peace.

LADY HEART enters.

TEN. Do you hear, gracious Lady Heart? These fellows mean to break the peace, here on the very shore of our own fathomless, tranquil ocean.

LADY HEART. This peace of ours is like an old tree — worms have eaten it through and through, from within; it is lifeless; it must be cut down.

TEN. For shame, for shame, for shame! Such words, from your own mouth! You are a woman — it is yours to guard our peace; we are men, and it is ours to guard our Culture.

LADY HEART. Long enough, Pandit, have you led us astray with such talk. No more of it — our blood has grown cold and frozen in this sap of your peace; deceive us no longer.

TEN. Heaven help us! From whom have you learned such things as these?

LADY HEART. It is he himself I am calling to, in my own heart. I can hear his song, even now, in the sky.

TEN. Heaven help us. A song in the sky! Now Card-Island is truly lost. I will stay here no longer.

He goes out.

SIX. Beautiful one, show us the way yourself.

FIVE. You have found the mantra of unrest — give that same mantra to us.

LADY HEART. We live under the Creator's own curse, in the shame of our own folly. Come, let us go forth.

SIX. The moment we so much as stir, they find fault with us, calling it "defilement."

LADY HEART. Let the fault be what it will — there is no defilement so great as this: the defilement of lying dead while yet alive.

They go out.

LADY SPADE and LADY ACE are gathering flowers.

LADY ACE. Oh no — there comes Lady Ten. Now we are lost.

LADY TEN enters.

LADY TEN. Where are you two hiding? Why — I hardly know you! Why, this is our own Lady Ace. And who is that — why, it is our own Lady Spade! I could die of it. What a state you have made of yourselves! Have you dressed up as human beings? Have you no shame at all?

LADY ACE. We have not dressed up so — our attire simply fell away of itself, by chance.

LADY TEN. The bonds of Card-Island are the tightest of bonds — a thousand years' worth of a thousand knots, fallen away of themselves? How did such a thing come to happen?

LADY SPADE. A wind blew.

LADY TEN. Good heavens, what are you saying! That the bonds of Card-Island should snap in a mere wind! Such slander upon the name of our own Wind-god! I

ask you — have you mistaken this for some barbarian country, where the merest breath of wind sends the dry leaves flying off the trees?

LADY ACE. See for yourself, elder sister, with your own eyes, what change our Wind-god has wrought!

LADY TEN. Now, now — it is not well for small mouths to speak such large words. Our own ancient, eternal Wind-god! Though, to be sure, it is written in the scriptures that he has a mighty son who goes about taking great leaping bounds. Perhaps it is he who has possessed you all.

LADY SPADE. Why do you keep taunting only us? Have you not seen it with your own eyes yet? It is he who has set his leaping loose over the whole of Card-Island. He goes about setting fire in the heart of every card-woman here.

LADY ACE. The men from beyond the sea say that he is their own ancestor.

LADY TEN. That may well be — they are, after all, children of a leaping race.

LADY SPADE. Come now, tell us the truth, elder sister — has your own heart not grown restless too, deep within? You must not keep silent about it.

LADY TEN. You will not tell anyone?

LADY SPADE. I swear it, by your very person — I will tell no one.

LADY TEN. Last night, toward dawn, in my sleep, I dreamed that I had suddenly become a human being, and was moving about, stirring, walking, exactly like them. Waking, I very nearly died of shame. But even so —

LADY SPADE. But what?

LADY TEN. Let that be. Let it rest.

LADY ACE. I understand, I understand — the bird that is bound fast by day found itself set free, in dream.

LADY TEN. Hush, hush, hush — if old Pandit Nine should hear of it, he will set a penance even upon a dream. It is a sin, you know. But oh, what delight there was in it!

LADY SPADE. Say what you will, sister — the wind from beyond the sea has blown very hard indeed over this land of cards. I can hold on to nothing any longer; it is all being blown away.

LADY TEN. Even so — something has flown off already, but something still remains. The veil over the head may have slipped away, but the crook in our anklet — that, at least, we have not yet been able to set straight.

LADY SPADE. You have spoken the truth — my heart, too, sways back and forth between this shore and that. Look there, look — Lady Club's unbearable longing to become human — since she cannot, she has taken to wearing a human mask instead, made in the very workshop of Card-Hall itself. How strange she looks!

LADY TEN. We ourselves cannot tell any longer how strange we look to others. Hidden behind a tree yesterday, I overheard the Merchant's Son saying — these creatures are only playing at dressing up as human beings.

LADY ACE. Oh, what shame! And what did the Prince say?

LADY TEN. He grew angry, and said — that is well enough; through their dressing-up, at least, some taste has shown itself. Do not laugh at this, he said; if you wish to laugh, go instead to those among mankind who go about dressed up as cards.

LADY SPADE. Oh — does such a thing happen too? Human beings, imitating cards! Tell me, how do they do it?

LADY TEN. The Prince was saying — they rub colour-sticks upon their lips, they paint their brows with black soot, and heaven knows what else, exactly like us painted cards. And the funniest thing of all — they fasten hooped leather to the soles of their feet.

LADY ACE. Whatever for?

LADY TEN. So that they may rise in station, and their feet not touch the bare earth. All of it — every bit — is the very manner of cards: to be painted on, to be dressed up, decked out by design.

LADY SPADE. Why, this is the Wind-god's own game turned upside-down — the card-women wish, by shedding their paint, to become human, while the human

beings wish, by putting on paint, to become card-folk. But I, sister, have made up my mind — I shall take the human incantation from the Prince himself.

LADY ACE. And I as well.

LADY TEN. I wish it too — but I am afraid, as well. I have heard that human beings have a great deal of sorrow, while we cards have none of that affliction at all.

LADY SPADE. You speak of sorrow, sister? Why, sorrow has already begun its own dance within my breast, even now.

LADY ACE. And yet I have no wish to give up that same intoxication of sorrow. Again and again my eyes fill and overflow with tears, and I cannot think why.

SONG

Why do my eyes fill of themselves and overflow, why does my heart behave so strangely — it is as though some word, suddenly, comes back to memory, it does not come back, and yet, still, it comes back. It is as though someone's speech has given me this ache, as though someone has gone away, uncared-for, unregarded — and it is that very neglect that sounds now upon my heart. It is as though some word, suddenly, comes back to memory, it does not come back, and yet, still, it comes back.

LADY SPADE. Run, run — the editor is coming. If it gets into the papers we shall never be able to show our faces again.

LADY TEN. There — the whole company is coming now. There is to be an assembly today beneath the old nim tree. We must not stay here any longer.

They go out.

THE KING and his company enter.

KING. There is something strange in the feel of this place. What is that scent?

JACK. Of kadamba blossom.||

KING. Kadamba! What a curious name. And what bird is that, calling?

JACK. They call it, I am told, the ghughu — the dove.

KING. Ghughu! Give it a more respectable name, in the language proper to cards — call it "Binti."[¶] It has become hard indeed to do any work today. Today there are voices to be heard in the sky, and there is a note risen upon the wind. Only with great difficulty have I kept my own mind calm. As for the Queen — it has become almost impossible to keep her within doors; she dances about like one possessed. Gentlemen, I hardly know you today — there is no dignity of assembly left in you at all; you are behaving in a most unseemly fashion.

ALL. No fault of ours. Our attire has grown loose and slack, and fallen away of itself — it lies scattered now, here and there, along every road.

KING. Editor, it seems to me that even your gravity has suffered some injury.

JACK. Since morning I have been in the wood, gathering the names of the runaways. This air here has got into me too. Sitting down to fill my editorial column, I find, of a sudden, that metre is pouring out of my pen instead. I understand the modern doctors call such a discharge Influenza.

KING. Indeed? Let me hear a sample of it.

JACK.

*In a land where the wind obeys no compulsory law, in that land, how shall
Ten the Scholar preserve our Culture at all — in that land, ruin is sure to
follow.*

KING. Enough, no more of that. We shall have that printed as a set text for the fourth-form primer. Let the children of the House of Cards learn it by rote.

SIX. Your Majesty, we are no longer students of your fourth-form children's class. Today, of a sudden, it seems to us that we have grown to manhood. That metre does not touch our hearts at all.

JACK. O foreigner — can you give our ears the metre of the far shore, beyond the sea?

PRINCE. I can — then listen.

SONG

*Across the sky, calling, calling, goes the lightning-voiced, thunder-bearing month
of Baisakh,** the rhythm of daring, of fierce desire, it wakens in the branches of*

the forest trees. Drunk on the wine of open sky, the bird flies mad and reckless, the rhythm of the unknown road it flings upon the wings of a freedom unconfined. It churns the depths within, this rhythm, in the war of white and black, in a thousand things good and a thousand things ill, in the crooked and the straight alike. This rhythm danced in the surging flame of the sacrificial fire, in the flash of the warrior's brow, upon the battlefield of freedom, this rhythm ran on in the wheels of the chariot of destruction's own dread lord.

KING. Did you understand any of that?

THE CARDS. Not a word.

KING. Then?

THE CARDS. Our hearts were stirred, and grew wild.

KING. That is no good thing at all. Listen instead to a verse from our own eternal scripture —

Whoever grows still, Death comes, and shoves him, and shoves him again, turns him over, and casts him aside; says, "I have no more need of him."

Listen to that, foreigner.

PRINCE. Command me.

KING. You go wandering restlessly all over this island of cards — diving into the water, climbing to the mountain-top, cutting your way through the forest, axe in hand — why do you do all this?

PRINCE. Your Majesty, and why is it that you are forever rising and sitting, turning over, showing your back, rolling upon the ground?

KING. That is our Rule.

PRINCE. This is our Wish.

KING. Wish? Good heavens! A Wish, in this land of cards! Friends, what say all of you to this?

SIX and FIVE. We have taken the incantation of Wish from him.

KING. What incantation is this!

SIX and FIVE.

SONG *The Wish* —

it is that which breaks, it is that which builds, it is that which gives, and that which takes. It is that which strikes against the lock, it is that which tears its bonds and flees, and it is that very one which comes back again, to put the bonds on once more.

KING. Go, go, away from here, go quickly. Lady Diamond, has this not reached your ears? Lady Club, do you see how he behaves? Why has this come upon him so suddenly?

(various ladies) Wish.

(the other Aces) Wish.

KING. What, Queen — you too have risen so suddenly!

QUEEN. I can bear to sit no longer.

KING. Queen, I begin to suspect that your own heart has grown unsettled.

QUEEN. There is no doubt of it — it has grown unsettled.

KING. Do you know? Restlessness is the very gravest crime in the land of cards.

QUEEN. I know it — and I know this too: that this very crime is the greatest of all pleasures.

KING. What is meant for punishment, you call a pleasure! Have you forgotten even the language of Card-Island?

QUEEN. In our card-island tongue we call a chain an ornament — and the time has come to forget that tongue.

DIAMOND. Yes, my Queen — in their language, they call a prison a father-in-law's house.

KING. Silence!

LADY HEART. They call a riddle a scripture.

KING. Silence!

LADY HEART. They call the dumb a saint.

KING. Silence!

LADY HEART. They call the fool a sage.

KING. Silence!

FIVE. They call the dead, alive.

KING. Silence!

QUEEN. And heaven, they call a crime. Say it, all of you — victory, victory to the Wish!

ALL. Victory, victory to the Wish!

KING. Queen — you are banished!

QUEEN. Then I am saved.

KING. Exile! — What is this, you are going! Where are you going?

QUEEN. Into exile.

KING. Will you leave me here, and go?

QUEEN. Why should I leave you here?

KING. Then?

QUEEN. I shall take you with me.

KING. Where to?

QUEEN. Into exile.

KING. And these — my own subjects?

ALL. We shall go into exile too.

KING. Pandit Ten, what say you to this?

TEN. I think exile a very good thing indeed.

KING. And your books, your scriptures?

TEN. I shall set them afloat upon the water.

KING. And the Compulsory Law?

TEN. It shall serve no longer.

ALL. It shall serve no longer, it shall serve no longer.

QUEEN. Where have those men from beyond the sea gone?

PRINCE. Here we are, we are here.

QUEEN. Can we, too, become human?

PRINCE. You can — you surely can.

KING. O man from beyond the sea — can I too become one?

PRINCE. That, I doubt. But the Queen stands at your side to help you. Victory to the Queen!

SONG OF ALL

Break the dam, break the dam, break the dam! Let the bound heart and mind go free!

Let there come, into the dry riverbed, the wild and reckless flood of life's own play; sing out the song of triumph of the breaking!

Let the worn and the old be swept away, be swept away, be swept away, be swept away.

We have heard it, that call — "Fear not, fear not, fear not" — the call of something new.

We fear not the unknown; at its bolted door we rush, with a furious, unbroken speed!

NOTES

* *Shardulavikridita* ("the tiger's play") — an ornate, demanding classical Sanskrit metre, traditionally used for formal courtly hymns of praise; invoked here as a byword for rigid, unchanging formality.

† *Navina* — literally "the new one," "she who is ever new"; the name the Prince gives to the ideal, as-yet-formless object of his longing.

‡ *Yama* — the Hindu god of death.

§ A pun that does not survive translation: the Merchant's Son calls his people *Nashak* ("Destroyers"), a fanciful mock-genealogical name that echoes, in sound, *nasa* ("nose") — playing on the House of Cards' own descent from a yawn.

|| *Kadamba* — a fragrant, round-blossomed tree associated with the monsoon and with Krishna.

¶ "Binti" appears to be a nonsense name the King improvises on the spot, groping for something that sounds more refined than the plain, common word for "dove" — part of the play's running joke about empty, self-important formality.

** *Baisakh* — the first month of the Bengali calendar (mid-April to mid-May), notorious for sudden, violent nor'wester storms; the song quoted here ("Across the sky, calling, calling...") is itself one of Tagore's independently celebrated songs, in which Baisakh is invoked as a herald of destruction that clears the way for new life.

A note on the dedication: Subhas Chandra Bose (1897–1945) was, at the time of this play's writing, a rising leader of the Indian independence movement, twice president of the Indian National Congress. The play's allegory of a bound, rule-bound people learning to break free — Cards becoming human — is generally read against this backdrop.