

POETRY

VAISHNAVA SONGS

Rabindranath Tagore



I

1

Oh Sakhi,³ my sorrow knows no bounds.

3. The woman friend of a woman.

August comes laden with rain clouds and my house is desolate.

*The stormy sky growls, the earth is flooded with rain, my love is far away, and
my heart is torn with anguish.*

The peacocks dance, for the clouds rumble and frogs croak.

The night brims with darkness flicked with lightning.

*Vidyapati⁴ asks, "Maiden, how are you to spend your days and nights without
your lord?"*

4. The name of the poet.

2

Lucky was my awakening this morning, for I saw my beloved.

The sky was one piece of joy, and my life and youth were fulfilled.

To-day my house becomes my house in truth, and my body my body.

Fortune has proved a friend, and my doubts are dispelled.

Birds, sing your best; moon, shed your fairest light!

Let fly your darts, Love-God, in millions!

I wait for the moment when my body will grow golden at his touch.

Vidyapati says, "Immense is your good fortune, and blessed is your love."

3

*I feel my body vanishing into the dust whereon my beloved walks.
I feel one with the water of the lake where he bathes.
Oh Sakhi, my love crosses death's boundary when I meet him.
My heart melts in the light and merges in the mirror whereby he views his face.
I move with the air to kiss him when he waves his fan, and wherever he wanders
I enclose him like the sky.
Govindadas says, "You are the gold-setting, fair maiden, he is the emerald."*

4

*My love, I will keep you hidden in my eyes; I will thread your image like a gem
on my joy and hang it on my bosom.
You have been in my heart ever since I was a child, throughout my youth,
throughout my life, even through all my dreams.
You dwell in my being when I sleep and when I wake.
Know that I am a woman, and bear with me when you find me wanting.
For I have thought and thought and know for certain that all that is left for me
in this world is your love, and if I lose you for a moment I die.
Chandidas says, "Be tender to her who is yours in life and death."*

5

*"Fruit to sell, Fruit to sell," cried the woman at the door.
The Child came out of the house.
"Give me some fruit," said he, putting a handful of rice in her basket.
The fruit-seller gazed at his face and her eyes swam with tears.
"Who is the fortunate mother," she cried, "that has clasped you in her arms and
fed you at her breast, and whom your dear voice called 'Mother'?"*

“Offer your fruit to him,” says the poet, “and with it your life.”

II

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1

Endlessly varied art thou in the exuberant world, Lady of Manifold Magnificence. Thy path is strewn with lights, thy touch thrills into flowers; that trailing skirt of thine sweeps the whirl of a dance among the stars, and thy many-toned music is echoed from innumerable worlds through signs and colours.

Single and alone in the unfathomed stillness of the soul, art thou, Lady of Silence and Solitude, a vision thrilled with light, a lonely lotus blossoming on the stem of love.

2

Behind the rusty iron gratings of the opposite window sits a girl, dark and plain of face, like a boat stranded on a sand-bank when the river is shallow in the summer.

I come back to my room after my day's work, and my tired eyes are lured to her.

She seems to me like a lake with its dark lonely waters edged by moonlight.

She has only her window for freedom: there the morning light meets her musings, and through it her dark eyes like lost stars travel back to their sky.

3

I remember the day.

*The heavy shower of rain is slackening into fitful pauses, renewed gusts of wind
startle it from a first lull.*

*I take up my instrument. Idly I touch the strings, till, without my knowing, the
music borrows the mad cadence of that storm.*

*I see her figure as she steals from her work, stops at my door, and retreats with
hesitating steps. She comes again, stands outside leaning against the wall,
then slowly enters the room and sits down. With head bent, she plies her
needle in silence; but soon stops her work, and looks out of the window
through the rain at the blurred line of trees.*

Only this—one hour of a rainy noon filled with shadows and song and silence.

4

*While stepping into the carriage she turned her head and threw me a swift
glance of farewell.*

*This was her last gift to me. But where can I keep it safe from the trampling
hours?*

*Must evening sweep this gleam of anguish away, as it will the last flicker of fire
from the sunset?*

*Ought it to be washed off by the rain, as treasured pollens are from heart-
broken flowers?*

*Leave kingly glory and the wealth of the rich to death. But may not tears keep
ever fresh the memory of a glance flung through a passionate moment?*

*“Give it to me to keep,” said my song; “I never touch kings’ glory or the wealth
of the rich, but these small things are mine forever.”*

5

You give yourself to me, like a flower that blossoms at night, whose presence is known by the dew that drips from it, by the odour shed through the darkness, as the first steps of Spring are by the buds that thicken the twigs.

You break upon my thought like waves at the high tide, and my heart is drowned under surging songs.

My heart knew of your coming, as the night feels the approach of dawn. The clouds are aflame and my sky fills with a great revealing flood.

6

I was to go away; still she did not speak. But I felt, from a slight quiver, her yearning arms would say: "Ah no, not yet."

I have often heard her pleading hands vocal in a touch, though they knew not what they said.

I have known those arms to stammer when, had they not, they would have become youth's garland round my neck.

Their little gestures return to remembrance in the covert of still hours, like truants they playfully reveal things she had kept secret from me.

7

My songs are like bees; they follow through the air some fragrant trace—some memory—of you, to hum around your shyness, eager for its hidden store.

When the freshness of dawn droops in the sun, when in the noon the air hangs low with heaviness and the forest is silent, my songs return home, their languid wings dusted with gold.

8

I believe you had visited me in a vision before we ever met, like some foretaste of April before the spring broke into flower.

That vision must have come when all was bathed in the odour of sal blossom; when the twilight twinkle of the river fringed its yellow sands, and the vague sounds of a summer afternoon were blended; yes, and had it not laughed and evaded me in many a nameless gleam at other moments?

9

I think I shall stop startled if ever we meet after our next birth, walking in the light of a far-away world.

I shall know those dark eyes then as morning stars, and yet feel that they have belonged to some unremembered evening sky of a former life.

I shall know that the magic of your face is not all its own, but has stolen the passionate light that was in my eyes at some immemorial meeting, and then gathered from my love a mystery that has now forgotten its origin.

10

Lay down your lute, my love, leave your arms free to embrace me.

Let your touch bring my overflowing heart to my body's utmost brink.

Do not bend your neck and turn away your face, but offer up a kiss to me, which has been like some perfume long closed in a bud.

Do not smother this moment under vain words, but let our hearts quake in a rush of silence sweeping all thoughts to the shoreless delight.

11

*You have made me great with your love, though I am but one among the many,
drifting in the common tide, rocking in the fluctuant favour of the world.
You have given me a seat where poets of all time bring their tribute, and lovers
with deathless names greet one another across the ages.
Men hastily pass me in the market,—never noting how my body has grown
precious with your caress, how I carry your kiss within, as the sun carries in
its orb the fire of the divine touch and shines forever.*

12

*Like a child that frets and pushes away its toys, my heart to-day shakes its head
at every phrase I suggest, and says, "No, not this."
Yet words, in the agony of their vagueness, haunt my mind, like vagrant clouds
hovering over hills, waiting for some chance wind to relieve them of their rain.
But leave these vain efforts, my soul, for the stillness will ripen its own music
in the dark.
My life to-day is like a cloister during some penance, where the spring is afraid
to stir or to whisper.
This is not the time, my love, for you to pass the gate; at the mere thought of
your anklet bells tinkling down the path, the garden echoes are ashamed.
Know that to-morrow's songs are in bud to-day, and should they see you walk
by they would strain to breaking their immature hearts.*

13

*Whence do you bring this disquiet, my love?
Let my heart touch yours and kiss the pain out of your silence.
The night has thrown up from its depth this little hour, that love may build a
new world within these shut doors, to be lighted by this solitary lamp.*

We have for music but a single reed which our two pairs of lips must play on by turns—for crown, only one garland to bind my hair after I have put it on your forehead.

Tearing the veil from my breast I shall make our bed on the floor; and one kiss and one sleep of delight shall fill our small boundless world.

14

All that I had I gave to you, keeping but the barest veil of reserve.

It is so thin that you secretly smile at it and I feel ashamed.

The gust of the spring breeze sweeps it away unawares, and the flutter of my own heart moves it as the waves move their foam.

My love, do not grieve if I keep this flimsy mist of distance round me.

This frail reserve of mine is no mere woman's coyness, but a slender stem on which the flower of my self-surrender bends towards you with reticent grace.

15

I have donned this new robe to-day because my body feels like singing.

It is not enough that I am given to my love once and for ever, but out of that I must fashion new gifts every day; and shall I not seem a fresh offering, dressed in a new robe?

My heart, like the evening sky, has its endless passion for colour, and therefore I change my veils, which have now the green of the cool young grass and now that of the winter rice.

To-day my robe is tinted with the rain-rimmed blue of the sky. It brings to my limbs the colour of the boundless, the colour of the oversea hills; and it carries in its folds the delight of summer clouds flying in the wind.

16

I thought I would write love's words in their own colour; but that lies deep in the heart, and tears are pale.

Would you know them, friend, if the words were colourless?

I thought I would sing love's words to their own tune, but that sounds only in my heart, and my eyes are silent.

Would you know them, friend, if there were no tune?

17

In the night the song came to me; but you were not there.

It found the words for which I had been seeking all day. Yes, in the stillness a moment after dark they throbbed into music, even as the stars then began to pulse with light; but you were not there. My hope was to sing it to you in the morning; but, try as I might, though the music came, the words hung back, when you were beside me.

18

The night deepens and the dying flame flickers in the lamp.

I forgot to notice when the evening—like a village girl who has filled her pitcher at the river a last time for that day—closed the door on her cabin.

I was speaking to you, my love, with mind barely conscious of my voice—tell me, had it any meaning? Did it bring you any message from beyond life's borders?

For now, since my voice has ceased, I feel the night throbbing with thoughts that gaze in awe at the abyss of their dumbness.

19

*When we two first met my heart rang out in music, "She who is eternally afar
is beside you forever."*

*That music is silent, because I have grown to believe that my love is only near,
and have forgotten that she is also far, far away.*

*Music fills the infinite between two souls. This has been muffled by the mist of
our daily habits.*

*On shy summer nights, when the breeze brings a vast murmur out of the silence,
I sit up in my bed and mourn the great loss of her who is beside me. I ask
myself, "When shall I have another chance to whisper to her words with the
rhythm of eternity in them?"*

*Wake up, my song, from thy languor, rend this screen of the familiar, and fly to
my beloved there, in the endless surprise of our first meeting!*

20

*Lovers come to you, my Queen, and proudly lay their riches at your feet: but my
tribute is made up of unfulfilled hopes.*

*Shadows have stolen across the heart of my world and the best in me has lost
light.*

*While the fortunate laugh at my penury, I ask you to lend my failings your tears,
and so make them precious.*

I bring you a voiceless instrument.

I strained to reach a note which was too high in my heart, and the string broke.

*While masters laugh at the snapped cord, I ask you to take my lute in your
hands and fill its hollowness with your songs.*

21

The father came back from the funeral rites.

His boy of seven stood at the window, with eyes wide open and a golden amulet hanging from his neck, full of thoughts too difficult for his age.
His father took him in his arms and the boy asked him, "Where is mother?"
"In heaven," answered his father, pointing to the sky.
At night the father groaned in slumber, weary with grief.
A lamp dimly burned near the bedroom door, and a lizard chased moths on the wall.
The boy woke up from sleep, felt with his hands the emptiness in the bed, and stole out to the open terrace.
The boy raised his eyes to the sky and long gazed in silence. His bewildered mind sent abroad into the night the question, "Where is heaven?"
No answer came: and the stars seemed like the burning tears of that ignorant darkness.

22

She went away when the night was about to wane.
My mind tried to console me by saying, "All is vanity."
I felt angry and said, "That unopened letter with her name on it, and this palm-leaf fan bordered with red silk by her own hands, are they not real?"
The day passed, and my friend came and said to me, "Whatever is good is true, and can never perish."
"How do you know?" I asked impatiently; "was not this body good which is now lost to the world?"
As a fretful child hurting its own mother, I tried to wreck all the shelters that ever I had, in and about me, and cried, "This world is treacherous."
Suddenly I felt a voice saying—"Ungrateful!"
I looked out of the window, and a reproach seemed to come from the star-sprinkled night,— "You pour out into the void of my absence your faith in the truth that I came!"

23

*The river is grey and the air dazed with blown sand.
On a morning of dark disquiet, when the birds are mute and their nests shake
in the gust, I sit alone and ask myself, "Where is she?"
The days have flown wherein we sat too near each other; we laughed and
jested, and the awe of love's majesty found no words at our meetings.
I made myself small, and she trifled away every moment with pelting talk.
To-day I wish in vain that she were by me, in the gloom of the coming storm, to
sit in the soul's solitude.*

24

*The name she called me by, like a flourishing jasmine, covered the whole
seventeen years of our love. With its sound mingled the quiver of the light
through the leaves, the scent of the grass in the rainy night, and the sad
silence of the last hour of many an idle day.
Not the work of God alone was he who answered to that name; she created
him again for herself during those seventeen swift years.
Other years were to follow, but their vagrant days, no longer gathered within
the fold of that name uttered in her voice, stray and are scattered.
They ask me, "Who should fold us?"
I find no answer and sit silent, and they cry to me while dispersing, "We seek a
shepherdess!"
Whom should they seek?
That they do not know. And like derelict evening clouds they drift in the
trackless dark, and are lost and forgotten.*

25

I feel that your brief days of love have not been left behind in those scanty years of your life.

I seek to know in what place, away from the slow-thieving dust, you keep them now. I find in my solitude some song of your evening that died, yet left a deathless echo; and the sighs of your unsatisfied hours I find nestled in the warm quiet of the autumn noon.

Your desires come from the hive of the past to haunt my heart, and I sit still to listen to their wings.

26

You have taken a bath in the dark sea. You are once again veiled in a bride's robe, and through death's arch you come back to repeat our wedding in the soul.

Neither lute nor drum is struck, no crowd has gathered, not a wreath is hung on the gate.

Your unuttered words meet mine in a ritual unilluminated by lamps.

27

I was walking along a path overgrown with grass, when suddenly I heard from someone behind, "See if you know me?"

I turned round and looked at her and said, "I cannot remember your name."

She said, "I am that first great Sorrow whom you met when you were young."

Her eyes looked like a morning whose dew is still in the air.

I stood silent for some time till I said, "Have you lost all the great burden of your tears?"

She smiled and said nothing. I felt that her tears had had time to learn the language of smiles.

*"Once you said," she whispered, "that you would cherish your grief forever."
I blushed and said, "Yes, but years have passed and I forget."
Then I took her hand in mine and said, "But you have changed."
"What was sorrow once has now become peace," she said.*

28

*Our life sails on the uncrossed sea whose waves chase each other in an eternal
hide-and-seek.
It is the restless sea of change, feeding its foaming flocks to lose them over and
over again, beating its hands against the calm of the sky.
Love, in the centre of this circling war-dance of light and dark, yours is that
green island, where the sun kisses the shy forest shade and silence is wooed
by birds' singing.*