

POETRY

THE SKYLAMP

Rabindranath Tagore



Contents

THE SKY-LAMP	2
THE MANGO TREE	3
GREEN MANGOES	5
WATER	9
THE KNOWN AND THE UNKNOWN	12
THE DRUMMERS BEAT THEIR DRUMS BY THE MARSHES	15
THE ARGUMENT	18
SOUND	22
THE NAMING	25
THE FIFTH NIGHT	29
THE BIRDS' FEAST	32
THE QUESTION	36
DEPRIVED	37
THE BRIDE	38
THE MONGOOSE	40
PREFACE	42
THE PEACOCK'S GAZE	43
THE VOYAGE	46
THE ROAD OF THE JOURNEY	49
SHYAMA	51
LOST TO TIME	54
PLAYING TRUANT FROM SCHOOL	60

THE SKY-LAMP

Dusk gathered into dark;
the day had spent itself.
Within these walls, the little fair
of familiar faces has closed for the night.

My eyes stray to the far horizon, aimless,
and brim with tears —
come, then — let us carry
the lamp of this house out into the open sky.

The stars that stood witness to our night of meeting
still burn, unaltered, in that very sky tonight.

At the end of that pale, fading night of farewell,
the star that gazed, dew-wet, into the void,
gazes there still, unmoved,
close by that last gate where all things go down to their setting.

So, for no reason I can give, I light this lamp and lift it toward the sky —
that sky from which, even now, dreams come down and enter into our lives.

Santiniketan, 24 September 1938

Notes. The title names a real autumn ritual: a lamp raised on a bamboo pole against the evening sky, popularly understood to help departed souls find their way — which turns a pretty image into an act of mourning. The hardest phrase is *অন্তলোকের প্রান্তদ্বার*, "the threshold-gate of the world of setting" — a compound Tagore builds rather than inherits, naming the boundary between the visible world and whatever lies past the horizon. *অকারণে* ("for no reason") is the poem's hinge: the lamp is lit precisely because it accomplishes nothing — that uselessness is where the poem locates its faith.

THE MANGO TREE

It is a simple thing, I know —
this hushed stillness of Agrahayan
wrapped around the mango tree
that stands before me now;
and yet of all things near me
none is harder to reach.

I sit here in the slant light of afternoon and watch,
trying to find what mystery the tree
keeps hidden — in its trunk, in every branch,
in the tremor that runs, leaf by leaf, to some unheard beat —
what language of light's own tenderness
wanders in that emptiness. I go looking for it.

I cannot make out its meaning clearly,
and yet its unseen restlessness
seems to wake a whispering in my blood,
a finger drawn softly across the mind,
lifting a language made only of touch and hint —
bringing me an indistinct suggestion
of something beyond all speech.

That bark of the tree, look —
it has drawn its curtain close;
and from behind that inward screen,
whatever converse passes, day and night,
with the messenger of the sky,
will never reach me, however much I long to know it —
no more than another's dream reaches the dreamer beside them.
As if a door were shut on a bridal chamber,
where on the secret night of the flower-bed

two voices murmur low —
I only guess; not even a hint of that speech comes to me.

Spring comes from beyond the year's far edge,
and day by day its news arrives at the door.
Something like a hidden smile plays through some quiet ruse
beneath that startled green,
spreading from root to every branch,
unseen, unbroken.
And at the end, all at once,
the door of gladness will fly open
in blossom after blossom.

Santiniketan, 5 December 1938

Notes. সোহাগ (a light's "tenderness" or "endearment") risks sentimentality in English; I leaned toward the plainer "tenderness" to keep it honest. The bark as a shut door on a বাসরঘর (bridal chamber) draws on the wedding-night convention of hushed, excluded intimacy — I kept the image literal rather than softening it, since the eavesdropping-but-shut-out feeling is the poem's emotional core. The closing "blossom after blossom" tries to carry, through repetition, the sense of accumulating, inevitable joy that the Bengali মুকুলে মুকুলে holds in miniature.

GREEN MANGOES

Three raw mangoes lay fallen beneath the tree
one Chaitra morning, in the soft early sun.
When I saw them, some old restless eagerness stirred —
but my hand did not move to gather them.
Then, over my tea, I thought:
the wind that fills the sail has changed its quarter,
the eastern ferry-landing has grown dim and far.
Gone is the day when one or two raw mangoes, found by chance,
were the golden key that opened
the secret chamber of a whole day's joy;
today that lock is gone, and no key is needed.

Let me tell it from the beginning.
In my boyhood, the day the bride first came
into this house from another's home,
that day the mind, which had been a boat lying at anchor,
was seized by a flood-tide and turned upside down.
Overflowing life's fixed and rationed measure
came the sudden largesse of fortune.
The old, worn, everyday days and nights
fell away from the whole house.
For a few days, three times daily, the wedding-band played,
and changed the common language of all four directions;
through every room went a confusion of lights,
in chandeliers, in lanterns.
In the very midst of the utterly familiar
bloomed something utterly astonishing.
Someone came, dressed and adorned in color,
her feet reddened with alta at every step —
telling us, by that alone, that she was no one
of this household's ordinary worth —
that day she stood alone, beyond comparing.

For the first time a boy's eyes learned this:
that in the world there is such a thing as can be seen, and yet not known.
The flute fell silent, but its message did not —
our young bride remained,
girdled round with the invisible rays of wonder.

Her moods, her small quarrels, her games with her sisters-in-law —
with much shyness I wished to draw a little nearer,
her striped sari alone could set my mind spinning in eddies;
but from a single frown I learned soon enough: I was only a boy,
I was not a girl, I was of another kind altogether.
Her age might have been a month or two
more, or a month or two less, than mine.
Let it be so — but I had to grant this much:
we were made of different stuff entirely.
My heart wanted only this: to give her something,
to build, with some small gift, a bridge across.
One day this wretched boy found, from who knows where,
a few gaudy, colored booklets;
thought they would surely dazzle her.
She only laughed, and said,
"What am I to do with these?"
Such small tragedies, overlooked by history,
find sympathy nowhere;
under their weight of shame they bow the head
of all a boy's days and nights.
What judge will ever rule that those little booklets
were worth something after all?

And yet, in the midst of all this, it turned out
that even that high throne could be reached by a modest toll —
that her low stool, after all, was set close to the ground.
She loved to eat raw mango,
mixed with dried greens and green chili.
One small door stood open to earn her favor,

even for a boy like me, for one so much a child.

I was strictly forbidden to climb the tree.
Whenever the wind rose, I would run out to the garden,
and if by chance a single fruit could be had,
won from behind some small veil of scarcity,
I would look at it — how green it was, how smooth, how lovely,
what an astonishing gift of nature!
The greedy one who only slices and eats it
never once sees its unearthly beauty.

One day I gathered mangoes in the middle of a hailstorm;
she said, "Who told you to bring these?"
I said, "No one."
And I flung the whole basket to the ground and walked away.
Another day a bee stung me;
she said, "You needn't fetch fruit like that."
I said nothing at all.

The years went on.
One day I received a gold ring from her hands;
some words worth remembering were engraved on it.
Bathing one day, it slipped from my finger into the waters of the Ganges —
I never found it again.
Even now the raw mangoes go on falling
beneath the tree, year after year.
There is no way left to find her again.

Santiniketan, 8 April 1939

Notes. The "golden key" and the "lock" it once opened is a rare case where Tagore's own metaphor carries straight into English. আলতা-পরা পায়ে ("feet reddened with alta," the red dye brides traditionally wear on their feet) needed a small gloss rather than a flattening "red-footed." The final image — a ring

engraved with her words, lost forever in the Ganges — I left unadorned; the poem's power at the end is in its plainness.

WATER

Upon this earth,
restlessness first came down into the water.
The very first sound to rise and wake
rose in its rushing current.
That water, tumultuous with waves and motion,
brimming and breaking in its own babble and roar,
lay chained and still in the pond of my childhood,
its blank gaze empty of meaning, empty of dance.
No song there; the little boat of sound lay sunk;
life itself was mute there.
On the stage of existence a curtain hung drawn across that place,
a taboo laid there in mourning-black.
No current of events flowed through it —
only a hushed and silent time.

And so, from that stillness, my mind
received answers unbound by time —
stories that had fled out of history altogether,
strange creations of every impossible kind.
Gazing down from the upper bank
into that depth I could not see,
I painted in my mind a city of enchantment.
There, before a mirror set with jewels,
a serpent-princess sat braiding her hair,
while ranks of curling little waves
went drifting by in bends and curves
whenever, now and again, the evening wind rose up.
All the trees and creatures on the shore
belonged to another world; this world was utterly alone.
And so every impossible thing
found there the fulfillment of imagination's wish,
and nowhere did anything rise up to contradict it.

Then one day it came to me:
in this world, whoever has learned to swim is free,
and whoever has not remains a prisoner.
Carrying that wound in my heart, I set out then
to cross beyond the boundary the land had drawn.
Slowly the doubt of an estrangement, almost an enmity,
began to wear away,
and between the water and the shore,
with me caught in the middle, some understanding was reached.
Clinging to my earthen swimming-pot,
day by day I crossed the barrier of strangeness,
and came to know the far edge of what was once unknown.
Trembling with a careful joy
I would go down to bathe,
and some hidden liquid touch, unseen,
would close and wind itself around my whole body.
Joy mingled there with fear,
and spread its mystery
through my entire flesh.

On the eastern bank, an old and ancient banyan stood sentinel,
sending its knotted roots down into some lightless place,
as though into the serpent-world below the earth.
On one side, through day and night,
it carried on its conversation of light and shade
with the far heavens;
on the other, it sank beneath the deep silence,
in search of something,
toward some unbroken, hidden thing.
Of that pond
I too was a distant companion,
sitting alone at my window,
each of us a prisoner at a different edge of the world;
but then I saw: this pond, too, was itself a window —

bounded on the one side, and endlessly free upon the other.
And the more times, in the hundreds,
I made my crossing back and forth,
the more, in this water bound by its own banks,
in the depths beneath its breast,
I won, moment by moment, the victory of a freedom that pushed past every
barrier,
and fear went from me, and was gone.

Santiniketan, 26 October 1938

Notes. চঞ্চলতা ("restlessness") descending first into water plays on water's mythic priority in creation, and I tracked the word from the opening line through to the swimming sequence to keep that thread visible. সাঁতারের ঘড়া — the earthen pot Bengali children traditionally held while learning to swim — has no English equivalent, so I glossed it as "earthen swimming-pot" rather than losing the object entirely.

THE KNOWN AND THE UNKNOWN

In this room, before and behind,
whatever dumb, deaf objects there are
lie gathered in clusters here and there —
some catch the eye, some pass the mind's attention by.
The little side-table, bearing its brass flower-vase,
stands hiding its face in one corner.
In the cabinet, how much there is —
as good as unknown to me.
The window is curtained, its two panes cracked;
today, glancing up, I noticed all at once how red the curtain was —
a thing seen, and yet, for all this time, unseen;

the morning light draws its own alpana upon the bedding,
seven strokes of sunlight, morning after morning.
A green striped sari
lies covering the desk; once I had chosen it myself,
its color had leapt and danced before my eyes —
today it is as though that color had burned itself down to ash,
still there, and yet no longer wholly there.
Shelf upon shelf of the drawers
lie crowded, in disorder,
with papers of every kind;
how often I forget even to throw them away,
not knowing what, among them, might still be needed.
The calendar leans on the table;
suddenly I notice — the eighth of the month. A bottle
of lavender stands filled with the color of sunlight. Day and night
the clock goes ticking on; I glance at it, now and then, by pure chance.

Close by the wall
stands a bookcase full of books;
nine parts out of twelve of them

remain unknown, still waiting to be introduced.
And there, on the wall,
the pictures here and there, I hung them once, in some other time;
today they are forgotten,
as though possessed by ghosts.
The carpet's pattern
once spoke in a clear language;
today it wears another face,
and is almost silent.
The earlier days and the present day
lie there together, side by side, with no bond between them.

This small room, no more.
Some of it is my own; much more of it belongs to strangers.
So, by the table's edge,
I go along the path of eyes-closed habit.
The things I see, I do not, for the most part, truly see.
Between the known and the unknown a narrow bridge of consciousness runs,
and my mind, absent moment by moment,
goes back and forth across it.
Beneath the mirror's frame, a photograph from my boyhood —
someone placed it there; its print has faded now.
Shadow and image, side by side.
And I think to myself: I too am that same Rabi,
crammed, like this room, with a mixture
of the clear and the unclear; in a faded, torn, old language
the furniture, too, seems to stand there absent-minded.
Some things lie in front of me; some have hidden themselves away in corner after
corner.

What ought to be thrown away
I no longer remember to throw away. Its meaning wears thin,
even as it goes on piling up.
Little by little
the days of the past

are erased of their claim to exist. They become mere shadows,
lost, astray amid the new;
and the alphabet in which they write and send their letters into the present
no one now knows how to read.

Udayan, Santiniketan, 11 September 1938

Notes. আমি সেই রবি ("I am that same Rabi") puns on his own name, রবি (Rabi),
and রবি ("sun") — wordplay no translation can carry over, so I've simply flagged it
here. ষোলো-আনা / বারো-আনা ("sixteen annas" / "twelve annas," fractions of
the old currency meaning "wholly" and "three-quarters") I rendered as plain
fractions rather than currency terms, to keep the sense legible without a footnote
mid-poem.

THE DRUMMERS BEAT THEIR DRUMS BY THE MARSHES

In the field by the pakur tree,
at the ghat of Bamunmara pool,
some sky-blue disciple of the primordial world's old grandmother-goddess,
at the very stroke of noon,
sits in a corner of the violet-and-gold courtyard of the sky
weaving a mat, wide as the earth itself,
out of yellowed, withered grass.
And from there, into the ear of a hazy memory, there comes,
in the drowsy sunlight,
in a low, humming tune —
"The drummers beat their drums by the marshes and the ponds,
they've married off the lovely girl into the robber-band's fair."

That terrible rhyme from a far-off time
I no longer see clearly today — its picture has grown faint.
Its knife no longer cuts into my mind;
time has stolen away the whole value of its old grief.
A robber came upon a bride on her wedding way and carried the girl off —
this piece of news is, by now, less warm
than a dry leaf fallen in the dust,
no more than rubbish swept away.
Of an unbearable day, wounded through with sorrow,
only these few words happen to remain,
as hollow as ash where the fire has long gone out.
By what pull of some new report has that dead day
come falling into this living present?

Some hawk riding the hot wind swoops again and again today,
striking at that old rhyme,
and in the gaps between my scattered thoughts
scatters the sound of it to pieces.

Some mist of a waking mind spreads itself into dream,
pressing sleep down beneath a smoky blanket,
and in my blood there dances, keeping time with the rhyme —
"The drummers beat their drums by the marshes and the ponds."

The zamindar's old elephant sways and lumbers along beneath the bamboos,
its bell swinging and clanging at its throat.

Touched by the fine light of afternoon
I wake, breaking through a hazy, dull languor.
Suddenly I find a throbbing sound in my chest,
a pain striking deep beneath each rib.
The doze breaks as if pricked by something sharp —
where is she now, that dark girl of our neighborhood
who used to bring baskets full of puffed rice, of ripe black plums,
for so small a price,
who brought sweet raw mangoes from the trees at home,
for which I'd give her four annas where one would do?
And there — I hear the blind oil-presser's old wife weeping —
some days ago, I don't know which brute of a murderer
seized her grown granddaughter
and fled with her, no one knows where.
This morning I heard it from the watchman's own mouth:
her youth has been trampled down, her life is over and done.

Such heart-breaking news winds itself, now,
around that small, trivial rhyme from an older time.
Scripture-bound faith goes flying off into the dust —
"There is no way, there is no remedy" rings out across the whole sky.
And a sound out of many ages past comes, keeping time with the rhyme —
"The drummers beat their drums by the marshes and the ponds."

The zamindar's old elephant sways and lumbers along beneath the bamboos,
its bell swinging and clanging at its throat.

Santiniketan, 28 March 1939

Notes. The nursery-rhyme refrain is kept deliberately sing-song and plain in English, set against the poem's real subject — a local girl's abduction and murder. "There is no way, there is no remedy" is a piece of folk fatalism I left flat rather than elevated, since its flatness is exactly the point.

THE ARGUMENT

Meaning to give woman into the very heart of man,
with just that intent
the Maker fashioned a form of intricate, delicate craft —
and joined to it some enchantment beyond the body,
something that can never quite be grasped,
filled with nothing but pure incantation,
visible only to eyes lost in contemplation,
by the invisible light of the innermost heart —
whose image the poet binds fast in a net of rhythm
using the ache of all he has never possessed.
Its shadow plays out its melody
trembling like light upon the restless water of a pond.

Whoever, thinking "I have surely won her," clutches her, unwise,
as merely his own to possess and enjoy,
holds only an earthen vessel, cheated of the taste of nectar,
and drowns, in his weary exhaustion,
a golden lamp whose flame has already gone out.
But whoever, from a distance, attains what can never quite be held,
he alone fulfills the thing that is near at hand,
and makes it whole.

I recited this hymn to woman. I had hoped
that this speech, so full of lofty philosophy,
would move Lalita's heart, and win me
some reward for it.
But alas — by the malice of some evil star,
having heard the poem,
she laughed a bright, ringing laugh and said,
"At the end of all your poetry
you've set down these grand, exalted lines,
false from beginning to end.

Every one of them
is nothing but a great show of invented words —
as large in the front hall as it is hollow within.
Don't I know it —
this is a vegetarian, saintly hunt carried on from a safe distance;
there's no such gentle, unmixed kindness in the bones of any man."

I asked her, "And what of you women?"
She said, "Around us stands a strong fence, always,
guarding us from any touch —
that much, surely, you already know."
I asked, "And what does that mean?"
She said, "We do not nurse illusion in our hearts —
we only love, purely and simply."
I said, laughing,
"What I said may have all been grand indeed,
but even so, it comes nowhere near this audacity of yours.
Is there truly no illusion at all in a woman's love?"

She said, pausing a moment,
"It's enough simply to say there is none. This much is certain —
I'll insist on it —
we are never beggars in love."
I said, "Then, dear lady, the victory is man's after all."
"And why is that, I'd like to know,"
said the young woman, tossing her head.
I said, "If love is a vessel brimming with nectar,
then illusion is the very savor on the tongue.
Tell me — who has cheated the woman without illusion
out of the full taste of that nectar?"

I take joy in beholding your form, full of grace —
and nine parts in twelve of that joy is illusion dwelling within me alone.
Are love and illusion, then,
utterly opposed to one another?

Is the light of the sky
divided into simple black and white?
That very light shatters its own wholeness
across every quarter and horizon,
into color after color,
into grass, grain, flower, leaf,
into a bird's wing and the blue of the sky itself,
scattering everywhere throughout the universe
the illusion that dazzles the eye.

Wherever this power to enchant the mind is lacking,
there, in that very place, the Creator himself has lost the game.
It's almost too shameful a thing to say —
it isn't that you women are never enchanted; it's only we who forget that we are.
Let me say this plainly, once and for all:
creation never comes into being through purity alone.
Fullness, left entirely to itself, remains still at its own center,
calling out to no one, anywhere.
It is only in its conflict with the incomplete that it gains the power of restlessness,
taking shape in a hundred forms of savor and beauty.
Whoever names this thing illusion, and rises up in revolt against it,
wants the river while refusing the river's very pull,
and is left stranded on the bank.

Man is a lover of feeling and imagining,
and so, rowing the boat of illusion, arriving at the edge of the ocean of nectar,
he catches a glimpse, on the farther shore, of the enchantment of the formless,
the shadow of the infinite.
His cup of nectar fills to the very brim
with a little that is known, and so much more that is not."

Without another word,
the beautiful girl turned her face away and swiftly left.
The next day, on a banyan leaf,
she left a few freshly-opened jasmine flowers at my feet,

and said, in leaving, "Forgive me — like a fool
I chattered on so pointlessly, for nothing."

I had thrown a clod at a branch of kanchan flowering in Chaitra;
in protest, its blossoms came showering down upon this presumptuous head of
mine.
And carrying this small gift of our quarrel,
my own Chaitra came, that spring, to its end.

April 1939

Notes. The poem turns on মোহ (moha) — usually "illusion" or "infatuation" in a quasi-philosophical sense — against প্রেম (prem, love). "Illusion" is the least-bad English option, but it loses moha's warmth: it isn't delusion so much as the enchantment that makes love possible in the first place. বারো-আনা ("twelve annas," three-quarters) reappears here to measure how much of desire is really the lover's own projection.

SOUND

I was born with a mind strung on a fine, sensitive wire,
and from every side sounds rose up, resounding,
in a hundred vibrations, a hundred tones,
turning and turning through the tangled web of my nerves.
Into the depths of a boy's mind they brought
the message of a wan, pale-blue sky,
in the shrill, piercing cry of a kite-hawk
through a lonely noon,
when, in a flood of sunlight, on every side,
time was made all one single thing,
beneath an idle drowsiness.

The distant clamor of dogs barking from the next neighborhood
would wake in my mind, beyond all defined thought,
some hazy, half-glimpsed world.
The calls of hawkers, growing thin, went traveling off somewhere,
into lanes and alleys
I had never known;
they seemed to carry with them, from Baghdad,
from Basra,
the dream of foreign wares from some far country.

Again and again, from the road, came the groom's high call, echoing,
carrying deep into the heart
some announcement of a vague, unfinished message,
of a journey begun but never completed, already vanished.
A flock of ducks
would come tottering down, loud and chattering,
to float upon the pond.
From the banyan tree a slanting shaft of sunlight
fell across the water where they swam,
and beneath the green shade,

side by side, like slender snakes,
the light would play in flickering ripples.

As the day wore on,
someone, a yellow towel over his shoulder, swinging his arms,
would go walking off, no one knew where.
At school, the bell would rise and ring.
The sound of that bell
would set my veins trembling with its meaningless, summoning blow.
In the sun-wearied hours of the school holidays,
a lazy, loosened peace lay over every house;
and from the Ganges ghat to the south
came a deep, resounding call,
as the steam-breathing ferry-boats bound for the sea
sounded their horns,
and, sweeping across the sunlit plain,
a horseman made of sound went racing off toward the horizon.

At my window's corner,
in a kind of exile,
as the days went passing by,
messengers, carrying wordless sounds out of unknown worlds,
returned again and again, hour after hour,
and closed themselves around me.
The feeling of a life crowded with people, upon the stage of this earth,
would set its foot down,
sometimes in rhythm, sometimes out of it —
now all at once,
now slow, in a gentle wave —
and, taking the shape of sound, would touch my head
and wake my awareness into a hazy thinking,
carrying me back to creation's first beginnings.

In the deep distance of this world seen by the eye,
in the unseen inner chamber of form,

sitting in the temple of rhythm, time, that magician of lines,
spreads out, sky after sky, the endless enchantment of things.
Not by logic, not by reason,
but only there, where so much simply happens —
to the question of why it happens, or by what,
no answer is ever found.
Where the primordial grandmother recites the rhyme of the world's own old
fable,
woven out of nothing but the alliteration of suggestion —
there, only by the beat of sound, rocking the pulse of the heart, deceiving the
mind,
it carries us to that very center
where existence weaves its enchantment,
to that dawn of awareness where the lamp of reason has not yet been lit.

Santiniketan, 21 October 1938

Notes. A poem almost impossible to translate without losing music, since it is built from words that are as much about their own sound as their sense (কলকোলাহলে, ঝিম্‌ঝিমিনি). Rather than force an English onomatopoeia that would ring false, I aimed for cumulative rhythm and sensory build instead.

THE NAMING

One day this new name came to my lips —
if you ask me why I called you Chaitali-purnima,
the full moon of Chaitra,
I have no power
to explain it to you
in any clear way.
It simply tasted right upon the tongue; what other meaning
it might hold, who can say?

At the boundary of life
to which you have come, in a grave and quiet majesty,
you stand there, unshaken, undistracted;
you have crossed beyond the broken vessels and leavings of Falgun,
and arrived at the side of Baishakh, pure with austerity, detached from all desire
—
this, I think, is what came to my mind,
without weighing it forward or back.

Or perhaps some unknown enchantment lies hidden within this very sound.
Perhaps, in the month when the blossoms fall,
that ripened, fruit-bent, quiet dignity that comes
to the mango bough,
I saw, too, upon your brow —
that fullness, slow and still with silence,
in whose hush there sounds the forest's final murmur.

In the last remaining champa flower of a spring already grown weary,
which sets the bee's wings trembling
with the pale, faint fragrance of the grove —
that very fragrance, one day, you sent into my heart,
and so this name, in my longing,
rose of itself to my restless voice.

That name, again and again,
comes murmuring, circling around you
on every side,
writing, in its own script of sound, its signature of farewell.
You are like the night sky's last-known star,
the morning star, whose very rising
comes riding the ferry-boat of setting,
carrying, even in meeting, the language of farewell.

And so, sitting here alone,
I fill this last of all my seeings with the rhythm of a first seeing.
That seeing, of all seeings I have known,
is the most fully bloomed.
In spring's last month, on its last bright lunar day,
you came as its guest,
and, in that final gift given so completely, unstintingly,
the generosity of feeling in me knows no end.

Falgun's over-fullness grows weary at last,
and in Chaitra, in its sparer savor, finds a new intensity;
those dense, thick days of Chaitra take on shape in your grace,
and merge with the calm tone of Sarang's raga of renunciation,
and the full, sufficient majesty of a ripened youth
comes, there, to the very edge of glory.

Perhaps all this explaining is only thought up afterward, once the dream has
ended,
a mere trick played on a proud intellect —
perhaps, after all, there is no meaning in it at all.
As on the last day of Jyaishta a sudden jasmine
starts suddenly into bloom,
so too, for no reason at all, this name rose and flowered;
and upon that image its own writing fell,
there where the brush of language reaches to touch the line of the unspoken.

Man is himself a shaper of forms,
and goes searching, through the mystery-realm of the world,
for the rare material
with which to bewilder and enchant himself with his own creation.
That very mystery is woman —
with names, with feelings, he builds of her a figure entirely his own invention;
and whatever he attains in her, he fuses together
with all that he can never attain.

As many similes and comparisons crowd in, one after another,
around the very center of that rhythm,
just as, in the spinning momentum of the potter's turning wheel,
form after strange form keeps rising into being.
Drunk, in spring, on the fragrance of the nagkeshar blossom,
he builds, on the magic stage of the world, his own private enchantment.
Beneath the trees the golden shower-tree trembles, murmuring;
along the moonlight's path the cunning of shadow plays its games;
in the deep realm of consciousness
he writes a red invitation-letter upon the kingshuk, upon the ashoka;
in the wind he trails, across the body, the invisible shawl of the nameless one,
and in his veins a sitar rises, murmuring on and on.

This very thing that draws a man's heart onto the chariot of illusion —
does it, itself, in truth, ever know
whether it is true or false,
or from where the mantra of this whole devotion comes?
Waking in the surge of the bloodstream,
sound wells up and overflows in a rush without meaning;
and, as if struck loose by a sudden storm from some hidden grove,
like a broken spray of blossom,
the name came, whirling round and round on a gust of wind,
and scattered its sweetness through my heart, mingled with the fragrance of
champa.

Santiniketan, Chaitra full moon, 1345 (April 1939)

Notes. Built around a private nickname — চৈতালিপূর্ণিমা, "the full moon of Chaitra" — whose resonance depends on knowing Chaitra as the last, driest month of the Bengali spring, poised between fullness and ending. I kept the name transliterated with its meaning built into the second stanza rather than translating it outright as a running epithet, since it functions as a proper name throughout.

THE FIFTH NIGHT

Sitting here, I think back
on the story of a life gone by —
what terrible foolishness
my raw, unripe mind once held.
At last, with a wave of the hand, I say in self-reproach:
let it go, let all of that be.
In the game we played in our young days,
there was always the fear of losing;
and for that very fear, my love, in your doubt
you turned me away, again and again.
Even one small, broken grain of grudging pity
never once gave my heart any joy.
Now, at the end of that age, I say, laughing,
was it so small a jest, after all —
whatever little was granted us by fortune?
Let the sorrow of it rest, and be still.

On the fifth night of the moon
you showed yourself
from behind the shelter of the forest,
your face half-hidden in shadow.
That day, in great vexation, I asked:
what was the purpose of such a trick?
Today, burning with regret, I say instead:
even a quarter of the moon's light
is far, far better
than the pitch dark of a moonless, ruined night.
I say it again: come, fifth night, come,
laugh that hidden, half-suppressed laugh of yours,
bend a little sideways, veiled in your own pretense,
and love me without ever letting me know it.
Let even kindness, counted merely as deceit,

still make me blessed.

Today I have opened
the old bundle of memory,
and turning it over, I see
the small sorrows of my own past mistakes.
Alas, alas, what is this — everything I see now
seems nothing but a joke.
Making sport of fortune's own laughter,
by what trick, that day,
did it wish to see its own reflection
in the tears in my eyes?
Come back, come back, that hidden, sidelong smile of yours,
come and bring this whole drama to its close.
Calling me a fool, clapping your hands,
come and take your leave of me.
Give voice today to all
that once seemed too impossible to believe.

The years have gone by now;
the power to laugh
the Maker has given me in their place,
and the old mist has lifted and cleared.
The dark-colored mask of hard, sorrowful days
has been torn away at last.
To the last ridge of the long road
the poet has climbed today,
and from there sees all his past and future
as though they were merely a picture.
The very shape of fear seems only a clown in a village drama,
smeared in its own ugly paint.
The days go by like a herd of cattle,
bells ringing at their throats —
each one different from the next
only in its black-and-white markings.

Santiniketan, 29 November 1938

Notes. Panchami is the fifth night of the lunar fortnight — a night with a slim, half-grown moon, which the poem takes as its central image of partial, teasing love. I addressed the day as "fifth night" in the body of the poem rather than leaving "Panchami" untranslated as a refrain, so the astronomical image stays legible to an English reader.

THE BIRDS' FEAST

The moment I rise at dawn, I remember —
the mynahs will be coming,
invited to their breakfast of puffed rice.
I sit in the corner of the terrace,
and it is a pleasure simply to watch their happiness.
In the gentle light
of this dew-touched Agrahayan morning,
with the light-hearted greed and the quick, fickle dance of the birds,
a child's first, sweetest laughter seems to open all over again —
and I set every task aside, only to watch.

Puffing out their wings against the cold winter air,
their faces a little hidden,
the guests keep arriving, again and again,
in their neat dress of reddish black and white.

Soon after, the pigeons gather in, one by one,
 chests puffed out, swaying and rolling, pecking through the dust
at the scattered grain.
Between them and the ranks of the mynahs
there is not the smallest line of division.
Together, as equals,
they wander about on busy feet through their breakfast.
Now and then, in some causeless fright,
they fling open startled wings
and in a single moment go flying up, leaving the grain behind —
only to come back again
on some equally causeless reassurance.

At just this moment the crows arrive,
pecking at the grains to see what comes of it —
drawing back a little, then approaching again,

flying up to perch in the tamarind tree.
Craning their necks, they turn the question over, again and again,
of just where the boundary of safety lies.
And now, it seems,
the harmony among them all has finally broken.
The crows' whole flock, with its factional, politician's mind,
sways constantly between suspicion and caution.

My first thought was to chase them off;
but the very next moment I felt ashamed —
it came to me that, in this sacrifice of life,
they had every bit as equal a claim as I did.
And then I saw that, after all, it did not seem so bad,
in this morning gathering of the feast,
the rhythm of the crows' own dance.

This mad, rushing torrent of life
that they carry, flowing on —
I only wonder where it comes from, descending, endlessly, hour after hour.
What is the true nature of this happiness — its very
mystery I am unable to grasp.
The joy that these light, quick bodies, flock upon flock,
stir up under the pretext of feeding —
this is not some fresh restlessness born only of this instant;
it is a story more ancient than we can count, out of numberless ages past.

Just as the wind plays its music through hole after hole of a flute,
so too, through the openings of time's flute, even through the very hole of death,
the stream of life comes surging and welling up.
Carried on that same life, this endless truth of joy
is finding its expression on every side.
Break follows break upon its path, and yet it is never destroyed.

Just as light, from some unseen and far-off center,
in an unceasing stream,

goes on expressing itself, forever,
within the varied boundaries of countless forms, in countless shapes, in countless
colors —
so too does this welling-up of being
scatter its deep exultation on every side —
and though age follows age, it never once loses its motion,
that beginningless stream never once grows weary.

Does that same age-old, unutterable thing
show itself, every single morning,
before my very eyes,
in the dance of that crowding flock of mynahs?
That primordial joy, in the swiftness of their dancing,
takes on shape and wakes within my own blood.

And yet, now and then, rarely, I see
the very opposite, the contrary of all this —
the easy grace of life dissolves away,
and beak jabs against beak in vicious spite;
some wretched, beaten creature comes to my very door,
its body wounded, begging for shelter.
I have seen that same enmity against life,
the fury of violence —
just as I see the mist's own ugly wrongdoing,
the slander that darkness casts upon the light of a winter morning —
the false, self-important claim of a passing moment,
the infinite's own illusory defeat.

And yet, after that, once again, the eternal and effortless
binds back together all that had been torn apart.
And the guests, side by side once more, come again
to dance, in this festival of life, upon the courtyard of eternity.

Santiniketan, 6 December 1938

Notes. The crows' সাম্প্রদায়িক রাজনীতিবিৎ মন — a wry, needling phrase, "a factional, politically-savvy mind" — I kept close to the original's humor rather than softening it. The image of time as a flute with death itself as one of its finger-holes is among the most striking in the whole collection, and I rendered it as literally as English allows.

THE QUESTION

Along the bamboo grove's narrow path, out into the field,
I was walking on my way to the market.
You, just then, were coming to draw water,
and from my basket there fell
a single reddened fruit.
Quite by accident, it rolled
right up to your feet —
and I did not turn back to pick it up.
At the end of the day, at the pond's edge,
when you came again to draw your water,
did you, in the dark, stoop down
and gather up that fruit?
This very question, strung now into a song,
I sit here, alone, and sing —
I have nothing more left to say.

Santiniketan, 3 December 1938

Notes. The simplest poem in the collection, and the easiest to over-translate. I resisted adding any interpretive weight the original doesn't supply — the unanswered question is the whole poem.

DEPRIVED

In the royal court sat the wise,
and many of true accomplishment.
Hearing the words of poetry from the poet's own mouth,
the dam of all doubt broke,
and praise rose up, in a single voice, together.
Around his turban was wound
the honor of a jeweled garland,
a gift from the king's own hand.
And through the whole capital, in a flooding tide of fame,
his name rose and woke to glory.

The day drew to its end. His mind grown weary with all that glory,
he was going along the roadside
when, at a window, he saw
a young woman, a mark of vermilion
upon her brow,
a freshly-opened ashoka flower in her hair.
Before her lay a lotus leaf,
and upon it a garland of champa flowers, strung and waiting,
while the evening air grew full of their fragrance.
The poet sighed, and said:
this garland, at least, was never meant for me.

Santiniketan, 3 December 1938

Notes. উষ্ণীষ (a ceremonial turban) I rendered simply as "turban" to keep the register plain. The poem's irony — public honor set against private exclusion — needs no ornamentation, so I translated it almost flatly, the way it's written.

THE BRIDE

Grandmother used to recite the rhyme in its quick, rushing beat —
I still remember its sense: "The bride comes riding in her palanquin,
under the shade of mango and jackfruit trees,
a pearl necklace at her throat, golden anklets on her feet."

In a boy's heart,
that was the first invocation of woman, that song of her coming,
which set a rhythm rocking through the half-woken shiver of imagination,
in that twilight where the contest of dark and light bewilders the mind,
where the boundary between the true and the untrue is erased,
and the shadow's own image comes forth to show itself.

The lane through which that rhyme-bound palanquin once traveled
has left its mark on my own heart,
tracing an unseen line, winding, along the path of its deepest nerve.
From its farthest edge
an unheard shehnai still plays, in the tune of an uncertain hope,
far away, in some inaccessible reach of thought.
That day, in that realm of imagination, at every footfall of the bearers
my chest would rise and tremble, again and again,
moment by moment, beat by beat, they seemed to come and yet never arrive —
as though that road would never, ever come to its end.

That old time faded away. And after it, the story of the bride's coming
was sung by the young, red, rustling leaves of the ashoka tree, in their own
murmuring rhythm;
it rang out through the sleepless nights of a Shravan heavy with rain;
in the noon hour it sounded in a plaintive raga,
in the weary tune of some traveler from a foreign land.
In the anklets of that bride, magical, unreachably far,
there woke, at the outermost edge of my drowsiness,
a faint, ringing chime.

I woke, breaking out of sleep,
and in the eastern sky, in the red clouds,
there showed itself
the alta-red mark of a footstep not yet come.
Close to my ear, someone called me,
a stranger's voice, calling me gently by name —
and, startled,
I looked, and yet could not see who it was.

Then, all at once, one day, someone's touch,
with the sharp intensity of mystery, woke a rapture in body and mind;
and in that overwhelmed instant I asked it,
"Are you the one,
who has come, out of some far shore of darkness,
into the light?"
In answer it struck out a sudden flash of lightning;
and, in that flash, it made known to me: "I am only her messenger.
She herself stands behind everything visible;
through all eternity, she is only, forever, coming.

On the page of the stars' own writing, close beside your own name,
her name too stands written;
in some beginningless, unknown age she mounted her palanquin,
and she wanders still, forever losing her way, forever astray,
through the light and shadow of the stars,
a pearl necklace at her throat, golden anklets on her feet."

Santiniketan, 25 October 1938

Notes. চতুর্দোলা, a four-bearer palanquin, recurs as the vehicle of a bride who is always arriving and never arrives; I kept "palanquin" throughout rather than varying the word, since its repetition is structural, not incidental. The grandmother's nursery rhyme that opens the poem is kept deliberately sing-song in translation, to mark it as a distinct, remembered voice within the poem.

THE MONGOOSE

This old, long-used desk of mine —
an absent-minded pen has left, in ink, a whole fresco
of countless ghostly, wandering lines and stains.
These are the twin siblings of all that writing
which found its respectable place, dressed up, in printed lines;
but of them, no one keeps any memory at all.

The Oxford Dictionary, the Padakalpataru,
an Englishwoman's book, "The Sahara Desert,"
a travel-book, an illustrated one —
beside these a cup of tea sits covered over,
buried under a copy of the Modern Review.
Freshly-printed proofs lie about,
neglected in pure laziness.
The hour goes on;
the clock has just struck half-past five;
the dance of the evening shadows
has begun upon the floor, and the curtain sways, caught by the wind.
My notebook lies open before me —
for half an hour now I've been racking my brains,
trying to find what to make, in Bengali, of the word "pantheism."

Just then the pet mongoose came darting quickly, here and there,
under the table, under the chair, searching for who knows what —
its two eyes bright and burning with curiosity,
hurrying to check beneath the almirah
in case there was something of value there;
but its sharp nose caught no scent at all
of whatever it was after. It went round and round, and then walked off in disdain
—
as if to say the whole room was useless, since no cockroach was to be found in it.

And here is my own hard problem, still:
it seems there is, after all, no Bengali for the word "pantheism."

Santiniketan, 4 October 1938

Notes. A rare comic poem in the collection. "Pantheism" is Tagore simply transliterating the English word into Bengali script — the joke is that this famously prolific coiner of Bengali philosophical vocabulary is stumped by one particular word, so of course "pantheism" stays in English in translation too, since that's the very word he's using.

PREFACE

Giving memory its shape, drawing it out,
gathering up in language whatever mark it leaves upon the mind and keeping it
there —
what is the meaning of this, I wonder to myself.
This whole claim
is only life's own childishness,
a pleasure taken in pretending to cheat death,
a fond wish to win at this game of living and dying;
and so it recites its own spell and calls up imagination's strange enchantment.

In the current of time, the shape of every thing keeps breaking, falling apart;
and so life fashions, out of shadow, a second form of itself.
Saying "I remain," it goes on into the unseen;
and if death raises any protest against this, that protest never reaches our ears.
I myself am bound within the net of a fleeting, momentary existence;
yet my own self-made image of imagination spreads itself out across space and
time —
and though, on the day of my own dissolution, I will not know this myself,
if anyone else should come to know it, I will call that, still, a kind of living on.

Santiniketan, 16 March 1939

Notes. প্রাণ and ছায়া ("life-force" and "shadow") work together here as a small
theory of art: the artwork as a shadow-self that might outlast the mortal one. I
kept "shadow" rather than "image" or "reflection," to preserve the word's slight
melancholy.

THE PEACOCK'S GAZE

Screening off the southward-leaning morning sun,
I sit on the terrace.

The leisure here is kind to me;
the day's demands have not yet hardened into their full weight,
no crowd of people has yet come pressing in
to trample time underfoot, step by step.
I sit down to write;
and, like a felled date-palm's stump,
this morning of holiday lets a little sap of its own
seep, drop by drop, from the tip of my pen.

Our peacock comes and settles, his long tail folded down,
on the railing close beside me.
My little shelter here feels safe to him;
his hard-hearted keeper, leash in hand, never comes this way.
Outside, raw mangoes hang, branch after branch;
lemons have set on the lemon tree;
and a single, solitary kurchi tree
stands astonished, all on its own, in the sheer excess of its own blossoming.

In some pointless restlessness of his own life
the peacock bends his neck, this way and that.
His indifferent gaze
takes not the least notice of my writing in this notebook;
he would, perhaps, if my letters were insects instead —
then he would not think so little of the poet.
His grave disregard made me smile,
and, through his very eyes, I looked, for a moment, at my own writing here.

I saw the same indifference in the peacock's eyes
spread across the whole blue sky,
in leaf after leaf of the tree hung with its raw mangoes,

in the humming, murmuring beehive of the tamarind tree.
And I thought: at Mohenjo-daro, too,
on some equally idle morning at the close of some equally forgotten Chaitra,
a poet once sat and wrote his poetry,
and the great nature of the world kept no account of him at all.

And yet, the peacock is still here today, still within life's own account of debts and
dues,
and the raw mango still hangs from the bough.
From the blue of the sky to the green of the earth,
their worth will never diminish, anywhere.
But the poet of Mohenjo-daro — nature never even took notice of him at all,
any more than of the grass by the roadside, or the firefly in a dark night.

Across endless time and this vast earth
I let my awareness spread itself wide,
and drew out from nature's own meditation a great renunciation
into my own mind;
and I saw the letters on my page
as no more than a swarm of insects
against the great almanac-wall of eternity.
I thought: if I were to tear up these pages today,
I would only be moving forward, by a day or two, my own last rites.

Just then a voice reached my ear:
"Grandfather, have you written something?"
There she was — not the peacock this time,
but the one called Sunayani at home,
whom I myself call Shunayani — "she who listens."
Her claim to hear my poetry comes before anyone else's.
I said, "My dear connoisseur, you won't be pleased —
this is a poem in prose."

With a little wave of a frown crossing her brow,
she said, "All right then, so be it."

And along with that she added a small word of flattery, saying,
"When you read it in your own voice,
even prose takes on the color of poetry."
And, saying this, she wound her arms around my neck.
I said, "Are you taking the color of poetry
from the poet's own voice, onto your own arm?"
She said, "That was an unpoetic thing to say;
I was only giving the touch of poetry to your voice —
perhaps waking a song in it."

I listened in silence, and was glad, and gave no answer.
To myself I said: the indifference of nature stands unmoving,
fixed atop numberless mountain-peaks of passing years,
and upon that very summit, setting her foot down only once, in passing,
my own Shunayani will go by,
the morning star at daybreak.
And before that one brief instant, the great renunciation of vast, immeasurable
time
will have to own defeat.

Poet of Mohenjo-daro, your evening star,
having crossed beyond its own mountain of setting,
has risen today, once more,
upon the sunrise peak of my own life.

Santiniketan, April 1939

Notes. The poem's tenderest joke is untranslatable wordplay: the poet's granddaughter is named সুনয়নী (Sunayani, "lovely-eyed"), but he calls her শুনায়নী (Shunayani), punning on শোনা, "to listen." I built the pun directly into the English ("Shunayani — 'she who listens'") rather than let it vanish with the name. Mohenjo-daro roots the poem in a very 1920s–30s awareness — the Indus Valley excavations were recent news in Tagore's own lifetime, not ancient history to him the way they might read to us.

THE VOYAGE

When exactly I took my place in this steamer cabin,
I no longer clearly recall.
Along the upper deck's row
my own small room stands, to one side.
Beside it, side by side,
run more cabins, row upon row,
each one marked by its number,
each an identical little cell, distinguished from the rest only by its walls.

The rules of the company remain exact and unbroken,
and yet each passenger's own separate particularity
lies hidden behind the shut door of each cabin;
within a single motion, a thousand different wheels are turning,
a thousand different courses being steered.
Each has an unseen rudder of its own,
an unknown destination among a thousand possible paths,
and in that, no one's seat can ever, in any way, be shared with another.
Each little berth, reserved, is small, so very small;
and yet, the moment the door is opened, the sea lies there before it,
equal for every unguarded eye,
the same for everyone alike —
and still it remains, in its deepest sense, entirely unknown,
its law unbreakable, enforced by the raised, warning finger of every wave.

Now and then a bell rings. At the dinner table
the smell of food, the smell of wine, the fragrance of perfume, all mingle together
—
and with them, in every color of dress,
under the electric lights burning in the hall,
a little knowledge mixed in with so much that remains unknown,
a single, combined intoxication of eye and ear, of taste and scent,

for a little while
gathers everyone up into its own enchantment, and holds them fast.
The familiar laughter and talk, like the foam upon wine,
comes bubbling up, and then, once more, subsides into the depths.
Outside, the night is thick with stars,
and, across the foaming, deep-blue wilderness of water, a fear ringed round with death.

Suddenly, for no reason, some idle whim took hold of me,
to go wandering through the whole ship, from top to bottom.
I hadn't gone far before I lost my way, in the winding turns of its corridors,
not knowing where any of the officers might be found.
Somewhere I found myself stepping into a saloon,
where a barber was running his razor over some lathered, half-hidden face.
There, the kitchen;
the cooks stood ranged in a row, their bodies broad and heavy.
Someone brushed past me, wrapped in a dressing-gown,
hurrying to claim a place in the bathing-room.

On the lower deck someone was playing some game,
someone else lay stretched out in a deck-chair,
someone slept with a book resting on his chest,
and someone else paced quickly back and forth.
A steward went about there, serving out iced sherbet.
Quite flustered, I asked him the way
to my own cabin.
He asked, what was its number?
And the moment I tried to answer,
I found I could not remember the number at all —
he only smiled a little, and, without another word, went back to his own work,
while I broke out in a sweat of anxiety and shame.

Once more I wander about, here and there,
peering to see which cabin bears which number.
Whichever one I look at, I think, perhaps this could be mine —

and yet I have no courage to knock upon the door.
I keep thinking only: what am I to do, what has become of me —
and just then, with a sudden start, I see:
this was nothing but a dream, after all,
and of all the fellow-passengers of this one journey, who knows where any of
them have gone.
It is deep night; the window-frame trembles, caught by the wind;
and far away, on the railway line, a train sounds its whistle, and passes on.

Santiniketan, 26 February 1939

Notes. An extended allegory of the ship as separate, sealed human destinies — I kept "cabin" throughout rather than varying it with "room," to preserve the vehicle of the metaphor intact. The final swerve — realizing the whole thing was a dream — I left exactly as abrupt in English as in the Bengali; the anticlimax is the point, not a flaw to be smoothed over.

THE ROAD OF THE JOURNEY

I remember how, in my boyhood, whatever book came into my hands,
I would bend over it and read on, page after page.
Whether I understood something, or understood nothing at all,
whether or not it left me any real gain,
whatever the account of profit or loss might come to,
its meaning was little — what mattered was its motion, its onward flow.

Upon the mind it seemed a stream went on, carving out its own path —
part of it running water, part of it only stone and pebble.
Winding all of it together, little by little, in the force of its own motion,
it rises and wakes into a full-grown river.
This world, hard and simple both at once, whose book was ever written
in a way that made its meaning light and easy to grasp?
The more I understand, the more I search — and yet the more I search, the less I
understand;
partly yes, partly no — life simply goes on, of its own accord.

Krittibas's Ramayana, printed there at the old Bat-tala press,
lay tucked away beneath my grandmother's pillow.
Its pages loose and faded, its cover marked and stained,
wrinkled like my grandmother's own furrowed brow.
At my mother's doorway, in one corner of the veranda,
in the day's last thin and failing light, I read it, wholly absorbed.
Much of it I could not understand then;
but the little I did grasp, the whole gist of it, was simple enough —
an endless war between good and evil,
a vast, immense love, and an equally fierce, burning hatred.
The wrestling-match of opposites, in the very shape of history,
came before me then, and I sat there, silent, and watched.

From the very start, this much I came to understand:
that perhaps somewhere there is a straight, well-marked road,

but at any moment, without warning, it comes to a sudden stop,
and one has to guess one's own address, through terrible twists and turns.
This world was never a land wholly known, and that is why, across its wilderness,
the prince rides his horse, spurring toward some unknown destiny.
The merchant's son, too, crosses beyond all that is known,
searching for some hidden jewel worth seven kingdoms' wealth.
The magistrate's son goes searching for some thief hidden away in a cave,
whom, once caught, will cut, at last, the binding cord of every theft in the world.

Almora, 9 June 1937

Notes. References Krittibas's Ramayana, the classic Bengali verse translation still read aloud in village households in Tagore's own boyhood, and Bat-tala, the old Calcutta printing-and-bookselling district known for cheap popular editions. I kept both proper nouns rather than generalizing them into "an old scripture" or "a cheap press," since the specificity is part of the nostalgia.

SHYAMA

Her complexion a bright, dark green-brown, a coral necklace at her throat —
I remember looking at her, in open wonder,
unable to look away.

With her wide, kohl-darkened eyes
she looked back, without any hesitation at all,
a girl just entering her early youth,
whose age was very near to my own.

I remember the picture clearly still. The door of the house stood open to the
south;

in the morning sun the crown of the almond tree
spread its dense, glossy leaves against the pale blue of the sky.

A single white sari on her young, unripened body,
its black border winding round and falling to her feet.

Two gold bangles on her smooth, rounded arms —
that very figure stood, in the pages of the story I read
through some idle holiday noon.

She called out to me, now and then,
in that place where the Maker's own whim
weaves, in a hundred different forms, its mirage of light beyond all reach,
at the very edge of a boy's dreaming.

Taking on a bodily form, that enchantment
cast an unseen shadow over my body and mind,
a shadow woven of the subtlest touch.

I had no courage to speak a word to her.

My heart ached, in a tune so faint it barely hummed —
she was so far, so very far away,
as far as the highest branch of the shirish tree, from which, slowly,
a faint fragrance comes drifting down into the depths of the soul.

One day there was a doll's wedding,

and invitations went out.
The invited children made a great commotion, laughing, playing;
and I, a tongue-tied boy,
sat off to one side, tormented by my own shyness. The evening passed for
nothing;
whatever I was given, in the serving of the feast, I no longer remember.
I saw her feet come and go, quick and light,
her black-bordered sari dancing about her.
I caught a glimpse, in passing, of the solid sunlight
that seemed bound fast, like a bracelet, on both her hands. I heard
her requests, her gentle insistences, in her own soft voice.
Returning home
that night, its echo went on ringing in my mind
for half the night through.

Then, one day,
our acquaintance became easy, unhindered.
One day I took up her pet name
and called her by it.
One day all my fear dissolved,
and, in jest after jest, we began to exchange our words.
Sometimes some invented fault of mine
brought on a mock anger, staged just for show.
Sometimes a cruel, teasing word, sharp with mockery,
struck me with real hurt.
Sometimes she accused me
of the crime of simple carelessness.
Sometimes I saw her in her careless, unadorned dress —
busy with cooking, unashamed of how she looked.
With the fierce pride of her own woman's wit
she scolded, again and again, my foolishness, so typical of any man.

One day she said, "I know how to read palms."
Taking my hand into hers, head bowed, she read the lines on it,
and said, "Your nature

is poor in the signs of love." I gave her no answer at all.
The true reward of that touch alone
was enough to disprove the falseness of her small accusation.

And yet, even so, it never faded away —
the ache of an incomplete knowing.
The distance within beauty is never worn away, never diminished;
even in having it near, it goes on giving, endlessly, the sense of never quite having
had it at all.

Days mingled with joy and sorrow both, one after another,
melted into the western horizon.
Beneath Chaitra's sky the blue deepened into its own grace,
and the light of Ashwin
played, on the golden ripening rice, the shehnai-song of harvest and holiday.
And the slow boat goes on, laden with dreams, toward no known destination.

Santiniketan, 31 October 1938

Notes. Shyama as a name means roughly "the dark, lovely one" — traditionally used for a beautiful dark or olive complexion — and I kept it as her proper name rather than translating its meaning into a running epithet. The palm-reading scene, where she tells him his nature is "poor in the signs of love," is one of the collection's sharpest small ironies, given everything that surrounds it.

LOST TO TIME

Word came that my time was over —
that there is, these days, no dealer left at all
who sells the dolls that my own hands once made.
In the back corner of some old, decaying mansion,
little by little,
they have gone on piling up,
these toys made by my own hand,
gathering their dust.

Without any license from this new age,
this pauper spends his makeshift, patched-together days in hiding.
I hang a torn curtain to cover a broken wall;
I try, uselessly, to break the force of the Poush wind;
when I sleep, it goes on flapping and fluttering loose,
utterly ghost-like.
I eat, half-fed, on burnt water-lily root; alone, on the hard bare ground,
lying on a spread mat,
losing sleep, moment by moment,
I only go on murmuring to myself, over and over —
"I'll give you sweets of parched udki rice, puffed rice of binni paddy,
I'll give you flattened rice of the finest grain, and curd from Kagmari."

A whole tribe of night-creatures, who sleep even less than I do,
come nosing into my house — and, alas, how fruitless a search it is.
Sometimes, forgetting to reckon first, a drunken thief
looks about at my empty room, and says, "Friend of mine,
have you got anything in the house that polite folk call 'medicine'?"
There's nothing at all; I only fill a pipe or two with tobacco and let him smoke.
And when a little drowsiness finally comes over me,
the cockroaches come tickling under the soles of my feet.

Through the afternoon I sit idle, my mind wandering elsewhere;

lizards and squirrels go about their comings and goings
in the bushes outside that old mansion;
in nook after nook, atop the pillars,
the pigeons coo, all day long, bokom-bokom.
The courtyard's broken wall, its cracks full of every sort
of creeping vine hanging loose,
peeping up toward the sky
in yellow, white, and violet flowers.

The dead branch of the chatim tree leans, drooping,
over the Shankhamani canal,
and the kingfishers, through the drowsy hush of noon,
sit staring down, like scientists
absorbed in unravelling the deep water's mystery.
A weed-choked pond, a crumbling ghat,
and a fruitless chalta tree performs its own shadow-play.
Closing my eyes I see the pictures — a catla fish surfacing,
the wives of some great English sahib come down to bathe.

On the trunk of the casuarina tree
a woodpecker knocks, and knocks, as if only asking questions.
Once, the cricket's call never used to reach my ears at all;
but now, as the ruined house stands there, struck dumb,
the tanpura-drone of the cicadas keeps up, endlessly,
its monotone note within the music of that silence.

Almost before dark has fully fallen, all the jackals begin their cry
from the high bank of the Kalmi pool.
At the owl's hoot the bamboo grove wakes suddenly in fright,
breaking its doze, a shudder striking the heart.
In the tamarind tree hung thick with bats, it seems truly to be believed
that some bearded, restless ghost must be living there.
At night, in the Dom quarter, for some reason or other,
drums go pounding, tak-dhuma-dhum.
And then I think, sitting alone in the corner of my porch,

to myself, quietly,
how, on the storm-bent branches of the jarul tree,
some sprite dances on, keeping time with the wind.

My name once carried through the whole city; the day it drifted away,
I became a mere villager, a man of the backwoods.
Only because my time is gone, does time itself remain, waiting, left over;
I pass my empty toy-making hours simply spinning idle fancies.
Suddenly, on the drumstick tree, I spy an orange-billed parakeet —
it is Uncle Sun's own wedding, out there in the twilight;
and the bride sits waiting, her golden-colored face veiled beneath her covering,
alta painted on her feet.
Here, if one goes down beneath the jujube trees,
one gets the truest news of Ghughudanga village, straight from the source.

Only because my time is gone did I ever get the chance to learn
what people mean by "kalud flower" — that flower blooming in clusters,
there in the wild undergrowth,
like scraps of sunlight burning in a green darkness.
All my fences have long since fallen apart;
other people's cattle come wandering, whenever they please, from wherever
they please,
straight into my yard;
they find nothing else there, and so they satisfy their hunger on dry grass.
Once there was foreign, imported seed here, sown in season;
now there is only a wasteland.

In all seven neighborhoods, in all seven clans, there is no one anywhere
who claims this dog as his own; it only keeps up its barking
at my door; and I try, again and again, to explain to it
that in my house there is nothing at all
worth chasing away, except sleep itself —
hearing this, it wags its tail, and goes on wandering along behind me.
Bearing on its own back the wound-marks of pure neglect,
it seems to declare, of its own accord, that upon this ruined, luckless homestead

the very deed of ownership is written on its own body.
Where else, after all, could misfortune find so fitting a place
to take its own change of air? Its time, too, has clearly gone —
of that there can be no doubt at all.

My time is gone, and so I graze the village goats now;
the granary was once full with the winter harvest, and now stands empty.
Whatever broken grain and husk remained, the rats crept in
and blew away, who knows when.

Pushed by the wind, the door with its broken latch keeps knocking;
in the whole day, not a single customer comes.
Under time's own slow, idle footstep,
grass has grown up over the winding lane that leads to my house.
There, at its edge, beneath the banyan tree, with a plate of flattened rice set out,
I keep my own open guest-house — for the sparrows alone.

Evening comes down upon the bare-leaved crown of the silk-cotton tree,
and, half-asleep, half-waking,
my mind wanders off along the trackless road of posterity,
on the chariot of a dream;
and from beyond the great lion-gate of Time itself
I hear someone calling out to me —

"O toy-maker,
in your own house stands a doorway open onto the turning of the ages;
there, all the toys already spoken for, ordered and paid for in advance,
have lain hidden behind the eclipse of this one passing moment;
look now, and you will see:
our own claim
stands stamped upon their brow.
What was old has woken, in a new light, into a new age.

Not everyone's eyes have the vision to see
whether time is still here, or has already gone —

keep this in your mind, O toy-maker,
and remain, in the very midst of your own creation, forgetful of your own self.
That bed of yours, you say, is only a mat spread on the bare ground,
a torn and dirty quilt —
that all you ever get to eat, you say, is boiled taro root —
but is this really so, or is it, after all, only a dream, and nothing more?

Have you had no word, that fifty-two bearers
are carrying a palanquin — can you not hear its sound?
Racing past Baghnepara it comes,
the king's own daughter, coming now with her companions.
Her play has stood still, all this while, for want of your toys;
this time, at last, she means to buy them.
Who knows — perhaps your fortune, after all, is a good one;
light a new lamp now, in the bridal chamber;
if this new-age princess, together with half a kingdom,
should indeed be won, and if anyone should start a war over it,
the whole affair will rise up, onto history's highest stair,
to the very measure and scale of an epic.

And if some scholar should ever raise a dispute about age,
you may tell him: after one single age has passed,
the age of the eternal itself begins, free of every almanac's reckoning,
and sends even Death himself fleeing."

All that has been rambled on so long, until now, is nothing but delirium —
O new young judge, I am, indeed, deserving of your pardon;
but those who go on living past their own allotted season, lost, out of time —
where else, but in a dream, could they ever find their consolation?

Santiniketan, 1 January 1939

Notes. By far the longest and most dialect-rich poem in the collection — full of specific rice and grain names (udki rice, binni paddy), place names (Baghnepara, Ghughudanga, the Kalmi pool), and rural social geography (the Dom quarter — a

named community's part of the village, common in Bengali descriptions of village layout). I kept these untranslated and unsubstituted rather than swapping in generic English equivalents, since the poem's texture depends on a real, named landscape the speaker has been exiled from. The closing address from beyond "Time's gate," with its princess coming at last to buy the old toy-maker's wares, reads as Tagore's own oblique meditation, in his late seventies, on whether his work would outlast changing fashion.

PLAYING TRUANT FROM SCHOOL

A boy who tunneled his way out of the fortress of a schoolmaster's rule,
abandoning all his classroom duties,
I would run — pulled by I know not what —
into the neglected, lonely inner garden.
An old hog-plum tree leaned there,
close by the boundary wall,
carrying its long years
in the piled, silent memory of springs and monsoons gone by.

I never coveted its fruit;
I went there only
to gain that mystery of companionship, whose presence
spreads, unseen, through every water and every land.
Resting my back against its wrinkled bark,
the touch I received there
I cannot give any name to;
perhaps it was only some primal life's
own silent summons
of hospitality —
that same first life
which stirs, with one same force, in its hidden circulation,
through the sap-and-blood-filled stream,
in the veins of man and in the fibers of the tree alike,
the same rhythm of the same single pulse, in every atom of each.

That silent forest-lord,
disguised beneath its own vast, drowsy idleness, moving in ways unseen,
spreads out, endlessly, its own fine web of connection through the sky,
through the earth, through the air,
holding, in millions upon millions of leaves, its own cups
at the drinking-house of light's own feast.
And I, too, doing nothing at all, sit just the same,

alone, in that same shade,
and from that very source of idleness,
along consciousness's own many outward-running streams,
my own kinship with all moving and unmoving things
spreads itself, unseen,
in a net woven of imagination's own thread,
into far lands, into far times.

To join life with life,
at that age, there was no distance at all between them;
no heap of thought stood there to block the way;
the tree's own true nature
touched my inmost self easily, without effort.
That unregarded garden never sought the fame
of the title "garden" at all.
To make it known for what it was
required no skill of any gardener.
It seemed as though some primal bridge
lay ready in my mind
for whatever coming and going the world's unseen paths might ever require.

A jujube tree stood to the south, beside the well;
coconut palms ran in rows to the east;
and the rest was all wild growth, tangled weeds.
A gourd-vine trellis,
tended once, with care, by someone, had left behind only its broken frame.
On a withered golokchampa tree
a leafless branch
stood like the pained, silent gesture of an unheard grievance. There was a paved
terrace, too;
its floor cracked and broken through, and out of it
a poor, humble creeper went on climbing, covering it over with flowers no one
ever noticed.

The wall, mossy and lichen-stained,

seemed, in some childlike whim, built up out of fairy-tale,
in the hint of pictures drawn, every which way, by time's own pen,
in patterns of black and white lines sketched across green and rose.
Newly woken from sleep
each morning brought its own freshly renewed delight,
which never, by any means, wore itself out.
What exactly it was that filled my heart, I never knew.

There was no cuckoo here, no magpie-robin, no parrot in this garden —
only sparrows,
and crows.
Their calling alone
brought to my mind
the sense that time was passing. The sun of ten o'clock in the morning
mingled with that calling, and on the coconut fronds
swung, again and again, in time with the idle wind.
In their dark bodies, a certain restless liveliness, the turn of the neck, a wary
cunning at the corner of the eye,
calling out to one another, moment after moment —
what special worth they gave, after all, to this bare, empty garden!
I would watch them, and, in some half-shadowed thought of my own, I loved
them.

Santiniketan, 14 October 1938

Notes. The poem's philosophical heart is its claim that a boy's unthinking kinship with a tree is realer than any grown, intellectual understanding of nature could be — "no heap of thought stood there to block the way." I let "life" carry both the biological and the larger, ঐশ্বর্য-inflected sense throughout, since English forces a choice between "life" and "spirit" or "soul" that the Bengali doesn't have to make.

End of collection. Twenty-two poems, Santiniketan and Almora, June 1937 – April 1939.

