

POETRY

PALATAKA

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THE REAL THING

I was eight years old,
sitting in the schoolroom, forgetting my lesson.
Through the window could be seen, beside the Mukherjees' house,
a small waste plot, in dry and withered grass —
looking like something fasting.
There the neighbourhood's rubbish
went on gathering, gathering,
until, on one side,
mountain-high rose the neighbour's kitchen-ash;
a few akanda bushes, and no other tree;
ten or twelve mynas
would raise a tremendous quarrel, calling and calling;
and at noon, in cracked voices, a company of crows
would fling some question at the sky, out of what curiosity who knows.

That plot was of no use to anyone in the neighbourhood;
what nobody else needed, the luckless place hoarded for its own —
broken oil-tins, the rims of shattered pots,
one ancient, crumbling cane chair,
a holed enamel tumbler, a torn playbill from some theatre,
a rusted tin lantern,
empty cigarette boxes, opened envelopes —
the freedom of all unwanted things, the deathless heaven of neglect.

I was eight years old then,
and had to learn the shape of the earth by rote.
On the schoolroom walls, all round,
the maps mocked this world with a silent irony —
the mountains like dead caterpillars,
the rivers, all along their frozen, lying lines,
stood bewildered, at a loss;
the oceans empty,

the countries lifeless, drawn in black-lettered gloom.
My spirit would grow breathless at this shackled, chained-up shape of the earth
—

and quietly, quietly,
I would go and sit on the floor beside that window,
there, where the dry plot lay in its dry, withered grass,
scattered and unkempt — and gazing that way,
someone's voice would come, murmuring, close to my ear.

There, where the ash-heap stood,
the Earth herself would come and show her face to this small boy.
Over my head the sky's wide, generous blue robe
shimmered and shone with gold.
Tidings from far beyond seven seas and thirteen rivers
she would bring and set before me.
They matched no map;
they agreed, not by a hair's breadth, with any book —
her shape was not that great and empty blankness,
scratched over with scrawled letters —
she was no mile-measured world;
what could be seen of her was boundless; and boundless, too, what could not.

Now my age has come to sixty,
weighed down with grave concerns and troubles.
Politics has driven me half mad —
what is truth and what is dream I can no longer rightly tell;
dragging out some precedent from history,
we load one nation's due upon another's shoulders;
somewhere society lies forgotten, while frenzied essays on the "social order"
fill the monthly journals.
The more verses I write,
the fouler and more unspeakable the criticism that follows.
Words breed only the fruit of more words;
text matched against text, only text goes on multiplying.

Today, in this sixtieth year of mine,
 in the prison-house of that world which only makes more texts,
 when the spirit grows breathless,
 there is one place left to run to —
 there, beside that Mahesh,
 whom the neighbourhood laughs at and calls mad.
 Behind him, always, at his heels,
 the local boys go trailing.
 In their noise,
 in their thousand small torments,
 he finds not one moment's peace —
 and yet in him there is no weariness at all.
 The work that no one else will touch
 lands, without shame, upon his shoulders.
 Mornings, he lifts his voice in hymns, full-throated —
 and the more he sings, the further out of tune he wanders.
 When someone comes to mock him for it,
 Mahesh only laughs and says:
 "The One I sing this to —
 He hears me out of tune, and laughs,
 and with a full heart I take that laughter as my wages.
 He knows the true note lies deep within the soul;
 it is only in this madman's throat that it goes astray."

Being outside every use, beyond every need,
 his door stands open to everyone.
 There was a mangy dog once, called Bhuto,
 who had wandered, uninvited, onto someone's threshold;
 beaten half to death,
 left lying by the roadside, more dead than alive —
 that lame dog
 Mahesh nursed back to life and kept beside his door.
 He had one more of his own — nicknamed Surmi;
 no one knew what people she was born to — Muslim, or some other, or a Kurmi's
 child, who could say.

That year, having bathed at the Kumbh fair at Prayag,
 coming back along the road, he saw a four-year-old girl
 wandering, crying, at two in the afternoon.
 Her mother, they said, had died of cholera
 that very morning;
 and so the child, in the terror of the enormous crowd,
 was turning circles, lost, out of pure fright —
 and when she caught sight of Mahesh,
 moved by what, who knows,
 she reached out her hand;
 and at once the madman lifted her onto his shoulder,
 like a datura-bud caught in the god Shiva's matted hair.
 Since then, filling one corner of his room,
 Surmi has stayed —
 of that madman's madness, one clear, cold stream,
 like a spring flowing down out of the Himalaya.
 She must be ten years old by now;
 waking, sleeping, eating, at every hour of the day, Mahesh is wholly at her
 command.
 The madman remains her plaything,
 bearing the tyranny of her devoted care.
 In the evening, coming back from his rounds of the neighbourhood,
 the moment Mahesh steps slowly through the door,
 something still wakes, restless, in the breast of that once lost, wandering child —
 she flings herself upon him, arms round his neck, and pours out her babbling
 nonsense.

After this first flood-tide of affection had gone by,
 I used to go to their house at night.
 Only some small, ordinary talk would pass between us, this madman and I.
 No books there, no pictures, no furniture at all;
 but in that room dwelt the presence of the Eternal Man.
 Carrying his own light, like a star, deep in his breast —
 that man who passes from age into age,
 whose life, like a flute in the hands of the Boundless,

plays its simple air, day and night,
at whose footfall's touch
the earth, in dust upon dust, trembled with joy —
it was he, I felt, that I glimpsed there,
in that poor dwelling, at the broken door of a madman's house.
Politics, and the theory of society, and all the jargon of the books —
all of it I would forget entirely.
I would forget the king's great deputies,
building their empire on lines drawn in sand,
writing law upon law.

THE DARK GIRL

There, behind rusted bars, a broken window;
beside it sits the neighbour's dark girl, Nandarani,
alone, all day,
like an idle boat moored at a dried-up river's landing.

Year by year, slowly, her age piles up.
No husband is found; her father frets.
The whole household's constant grief,
like a whirlwind of long sighs,
seems to circle, day and night, round that dark girl alone.

I live on the ground floor of the house across the way, in lodgings.
With great difficulty I have finally passed one examination in college.
How much longer can I go on this way,
pushing forward the long pole of exams?
Tutoring boys morning and evening,
I have managed one half-meal a day,
and even that begging was more than I could bear —
yet I went, all the same, to the Principal's door,
asking, at the very least, for half my fees to be waived, so I might be admitted.
There was a time I believed
half a kingdom, and a king's daughter, were owed to me by right;
I believed that at my birth, fate had hidden
the golden key to some locked treasure-house of wealth and honour
somewhere deep inside me.
Today I see that in this new Bengal
the power stayed locked away, and the key went with it.
It feels like some myna's cage in which fate,
for its own cruel sport,
makes a peacock dance —
at every step its tail bound round with wire.
What miser devised this drama?

Where now the free forest, where the wild, drunken drum of the monsoon cloud?
What is this bondage that has closed in around me?

Wandering from door to door on the vain hope of work,
I wither away in sun and hunger.
My spirit gasps, my head spins;
I drop onto the wooden bench with a thud.
Fanning myself, taking the air in slow draughts,
suddenly my eyes lift —
there, behind the rusted bars, the broken window,
sits the neighbour's dark girl, Nandarani.

It feels the way it feels when, after rain,
a cloud pauses, heavy, unbroken, holding back its shower —
my tired spirit finds a coolness, touching that dark presence.
I see her heart, clear before my eyes, as though painted there;
she seems a garden of jasmine, hidden under evening shadow;
a sliver of moon on a moonless, silent midnight
at the edge of dark water;
a shy, frightened trickle of spring water
seeping, drop by drop, down some dark stone.
A bird that wakes at night, its soft, grieving cry
lost, again and again, among the stars.
She seems some dawn's dream, brimming with tears,
caught fast in the binding of deep sleep's blue veil.

Sitting once with the herd-boys under a banyan's shade,
I used to play, as a child, a bamboo flute in my village.
That flute's old pull, on a holiday, suddenly stirs my restless heart.
Every other boy from the lodging-house has gone home to his own place;
I stay behind, alone.
Morning and evening, now and then, in a corner of my room,
I play the old village air that has stayed with me.

That dark girl of theirs, Nandarani —

just as her broken window is,
where her dark eyes lose themselves under a dark sky;
where, in the loose layers of her hair,
the wind comes idly to play;
where the silent word of her deep heart
finds, at last, an answering silent word of light —
so, too, is my own bamboo flute, forgetful of itself:
walled in on every side, that flute alone is my one open window.
There, in a few notes,
the whole boundless distance between her and me dissolves away.
In this world, strangers pass each other like shadows, coming and going;
only in the country of the flute's melody
do two unknown people come to know one another.
The word that wanders, mute as tears, in my breast
rises, at last, and blooms upon the flute's lips.
Near the flute there is a little light, a little air —
that gain no eye can see,
a touch beyond all touching,
that small, small gain.

THE EVERLASTING SCAR

From that far shore to this, rowing the ferry-boat,
fate goes on bringing, in crowd after crowd,
boys and girls — its passengers.
All of them alike, like champa flowers heaped in a single basket.
And then, in the darkness, to which house does it deliver each one!
There begins for them the weaving, then, of tale after new tale —
the counting of days and hours, in sorrow and in joy.

After three daughters, one after another,
when Shaila was born into her father's house,
her mother felt only shame; thought:
from where has this unwanted beggar been summoned into our home?
Just as the farmer prayed for rain,
down came a storm of hail instead.

For no fault, for no crime of her own, Shaila's life began;
and at every step the weight of blame upon her only grew heavier.
For neglect, once it wakes unbidden of itself,
goes on gathering its own momentum.
Her mother called her "wretched"; her father corrected her with blows —
what curse is this, luckless girl, that you have brought with you —
only the sin of going on, simply, being alive.
However much abuse they heaped upon her,
they only watched her once-unstained nature grow sullied,
smeared with the very ink of their own words.
What they called "Shaila" was only the distortion of their own minds;
their Shaila was never fate's own Shaila.

I was an old man, their neighbour.
In the whole street, it was only with me that the naughty girl made free.
"Dada," she'd call me, and wind her arms round my neck, and settle into my lap.
Asked her name, Shaila would answer, laughing:

"My name is Naughty — Little Ruin!"
When I would ask her, tilting her chin up to me,
"Tell me, then, who am I to you, sister?"
she'd say: "Dada, you are my bridegroom!" —
and back and forth, just so, the laughter would run between us.

Marriageable age came, and still, somehow, no marriage came for her —
which only added to the weight of her guilt.
At last a match was found, all the way from Burma.
Little time to spare; the rites hastily done,
she was to be taken along at once, sailing for Rangoon.
When I went to her, smiling, to say —
"So you have spurned the old bridegroom, sister, and chosen the young one after
all?" —
at once her two eyes overflowed and streamed with tears.
I said, "For shame, Shaila, why cry for nothing — you'll bring bad luck on yourself."
Even as I said it, I could not keep the tears from my own eyes.

The wedding-flutes played;
leaving the house that had never made room for her,
the naughty one, the little ruin, went away at last.
At the moment of leaving she said:
"Dada — remember, you're invited. Thrice-promised — you must come, you
must."
"I'll come, I'll come, I'll come, sister, of course I will."
And without another word,
I hung a garland of pearls round her neck, for a blessing.

On the morning of the fourth day, word came:
at the mouth of the Irrawaddy, where it meets the sea,
their ship had struck something and gone down.
Once more fate rowed its ferry,
and carrying Shaila away with it,
went off to some far shore — why it came, why it left, who can ever say.
Only the invitation she left behind, lodged in my heart.

I'll come, I'll come, I'll come, sister — there's no more waiting now;
that thrice-given promise — how could I ever forget it, sister?

One more trace of her she left behind in that house;
I learned of it only afterward.
Melting the old ache in my chest, I set the story down here —

Day follows day; I no longer go to that house.
Carrying the weight of my own solitary life,
I keep, these days, to my own corner.
Then one evening, out of nowhere, her father came to my room, on some errand.
He said: "Uncle, there's a thing I must tell you.
When Shaila was small, I opened my account-box one day and found,
scrawled across the pages of the ledger,
some scribbled, meaningless scratch of ink.
Fury struck my head like lightning.
It was plain enough — this was Shaila's doing.
Beating, scolding — none of it worked on her.
Then, suddenly, a punishment came to mind.
I forbade her, absolutely, ever to visit your house again.
The hardest sentence of all!
She stood silent, wordless, in fierce, rebellious anger.
At last, on the twelfth day, her pride broke, and she came and said:
'I will never be naughty again.'
That scratched, scribbled ledger, those very pages —
today they look up at my face like her own eyes.
The reckoning of those old sums is long past;
that punishment is gone, that naughty one is gone;
only this remains —
an everlasting scar,
a few scratches of a child's small hand,
touching, forever, upon my breast."

THE TORN LETTER

When Work turns into a god and settles itself upon the altar of worship,
its temple's stone walls, sky-piercing, close in on every side;
and within them life, slowly, withers away —
gets no light, no air, no open space, no living sap of anything,
only money, only, in the end, some fame —
then under what spell does it forget
that this very thing, happening to it, is its own death?

I too had been caught, tangled, in that same snare;
in that vast self-ruin I had lost the whole world.
The golden word of the blue sky,
on the vina-strings of morning and evening,
never once reached the door of my window.
Season followed season only across the pages of the calendar;
none of them brought, to my own courtyard,
the invitation of their coloured leaves, their flowers.
What weeping was hidden inside me
I never once found the leisure to discover.
Bearing my spirit's secret fast upon the chariot of work,
I went in state along the desert road of futility.
Three or four committees rode my shoulders;
in the dailies and the weeklies I had to raise up mock lions' roars;
when there was a meeting at Beadon Square, I was its speaker;
reports had to be written, plank by plank;
there were wars fought out in senate and syndicate;
and besides all that, there was the office —
so, only labouring, labouring, the days and nights went by, down what channel
who can say.
My friends would say, "What are you doing to yourself? You'll die of it in the
end!"
And I would answer, laughing: "What else can I do, friend — must a man not
work, of his own will?"

The moment I slacken, even a little, at once something goes wrong —
 the work only grows the heavier — tell me, what remedy do you propose?"
 It seemed the whole chief office of the World's Engineer
 had been entrusted to me alone —
 day and night, that was my state, harried past all rest.

That day, then, for two or three nights running,
 I had been writing out the past year's report at furious speed.
 The new secretary was to be chosen;
 three weeks I would have to spend nearly killing myself gathering votes.
 As in winter the trees shed the whole burden of their leaves,
 leaving only the bare stalk and branch,
 so, too, was my own state;
 from morning until evening, seated always at one table,
 only sending off letters, only withering, only dying by inches.
 Word would come, "The food is ready" — I would not take it in;
 and if the word came twice, I would answer, in a fit of temper,
 "I have no such leisure — let the food wait."

It must have been about half past two, the whole neighbourhood fallen silent,
 all still, except for some five sparrows;
 at just that hour the bearer brought the post
 and laid a letter in my hand.
 Thinking it some urgent business,
 I tore it open and found crooked lines,
 an unformed hand climbing and dipping across the page,
 not one mark of punctuation anywhere —
 and, in the last line, a name: Manorama.
 I did not read on;
 it seemed to me some widow's begging-letter, built out of lies,
 and I tore it up and returned to my work.
 And so, into what abyss, three weeks went by, sunk without trace.
 Whether the sun rose in the east or the west
 I had quite forgotten, going at such a pace.

It was then that I lost the vote;
my rival's party took the seat that had been mine;
and after that, only in the newspapers, the abuse kept coming.

Amid the work, quite suddenly, a gap fell open in my hands;
sitting in the easy-chair, wondering what to do with it —
just then, on a current of the south wind,
a torn scrap of that letter came drifting down and settled on my lap.
Idly I picked it up, and my eye fell on these words:
"Have you, then, forgotten Manu?"
Manu? My Manorama? Could this be the Manu of my childhood?
And at once, in that single instant,
the whole emptiness filled itself up —
my lost springtime came flooding back and drowned me over.

She indeed had been my old neighbour, in those years —
whose anklets used to ring, jingling, step after step.
She indeed had been the star of my life's first daybreak,
come, lost, out of the boundless.
She indeed had been, in my childhood, in the lap of the night-flowering jasmine,
where the pure dew swayed and trembled.
She indeed had been the first light my dazzled eyes ever opened on,
the first of all the good things in this whole world.
I remember — the very moment of waking, and at once, running toward their
house.
With her the day's first game would always begin;
I remember her hair, loose down her back,
that whole glad figure of her, those soft, wide eyes,
her voice, steeped through and through in sweetness.
With an endless patience she bore my thousand small tyrannies;
in everything, always, Manu was the one who gave way, who lost.
Climbing to the topmost branch of some tree,
I would swing there hard, and threaten, in play, to fall —
her frightened, tearful pleading — how could I ever forget it?
I remember her silent grief, whenever I took a beating from my father;

how many tears she shed, hunting for some trick to hide my fault.
 Grown a little older, she would come to me to recite her Bengali lesson.
 Her multiplication tables would only ever get tangled,
 and she could not bear the smallest laugh of mine at that — she would weep from
 shame.
 Seeing the thick English volumes in my hands,
 she believed the whole load of my learning had reached clear up into some sky;
 whatever seemed hardest of all to her
 seemed, in her eyes, the simplest thing in all the world to me.
 Then, quite suddenly, one year, on the day of the idol's immersion,
 over the right of way through the lane at Dwarigram,
 between the two households' servants and gatekeepers,
 a quarrel broke out, and blows, in the middle of the street.
 Over that, at last, my father and hers fell into a lawsuit;
 neither would forgive the other.
 Our doors were shut, between the two houses;
 the sky itself seemed to go blind with black cloud.
 Suddenly some autumn came, bringing with it the roar of storm —
 and my own image of the goddess went down into the water for good.
 When we no longer saw each other, when I had gone far away,
 then, for the first time, I heard, in what dawn-melody, on whose hand,
 the vina of my life had all along been playing.
 In deep pain, her face rose up before me, blooming, on the dark canvas, like the
 evening star;
 in that same instant she made known to me how much she had been to me —
 how very far from nothing she had been!
 The flame of love was lit in me only then, when its recognition, in the eyes, had
 already gone dark.

How many years went by. I went back to the village once again, after passing my
 examination.
 Going there, I found — some jute-mill owner had bought their house;
 much time had passed.
 Manu's husband, after the wedding, had carried her off to some country or other;
 search as I might, I could find no trace of her address.

That same Manu, today, breaking so many years of unknown exile,
has sent me this one word, folded into her letter.
What pain has cruel fortune dealt her — is it death? Is it loss? Is it cruelty?
Does she have, in her heart's pain, no comfort left
but this — her one childhood companion?
The rest of that torn letter —
where in this wide world am I to find it now?
"Have you, then, forgotten Manu?" —
must this one question go on swinging, forever,
like a single drop of tear caught on my whole world's eyelid?
However many letters' answers I may go on writing,
to this one word there is only this reply:
a flame that will burn on, eternally, in my breast —
and never, in any letters, will it ever be set down.

GRANDFATHER'S HOLIDAY

Your holiday is in the blue sky,
your holiday is in the fields,
your holiday is at the endless
edges of the pond, ghat after ghat.
Your holiday is under the tamarind tree,
in the corner of the granary,
your holiday is in the thickets
of Parul-danga's wood.
Your holiday's hope trembles
in the young green paddy-fields,
your holiday's joy dances
in the ripples of the river.

I am your bespectacled
old grandfather,
bound fast in the fearsome web
of the business of living.
My holiday dresses itself
in the very costume of yours,
in your throat plays
my holiday's own sweet flute.
My holiday is in that very
restless dance of your eyes;
in the very heart of your holiday
my own holiday lies hidden.
On the ferry of your holiday
came the boatman, Autumn.
The shiuli grove decks out
your pure holiday's basket.
The dew-cold wind, shivering,
comes, who knows how, night after night,
down from the Himalaya,

your holiday's own companion.
This light of autumn has arrived
on a flower-opening dawn,
wearing a shawl coloured
in the very hue of your holiday.

In my house floods
your holiday, in your leaping and your bounding;
work, accounts, all my reckoning,
tremble and shake at it.
Wind your arms around my neck,
leap into my lap —
that alone is my boundless holiday,
raising its flood-tide in my breast.
Who it is that supplies your holiday
I do not know that secret;
you are the one who supplies mine —
there — there is my whole triumph.

DELIVERANCE

The mother weeps and says: "My Manjuli — still my tender little girl —
will you give her, then, to him? He is five times her age;
just the sight of him leaves my child shrinking with fright.
I will not let such a marriage happen."

The father says: "Enough of your weeping!
Panchanan has been found, after long searching — don't you know
what a great and pedigreed house he comes from?
Someone must think of how we are to rise in this world.
If we let Panchanan slip, where else will we find such a match?"

The mother says: "But there is Chatterjee's Pulin, close by —
never mind that he is not of the high lineage —
in looks, in nature, every bit as fine;
he has passed his examinations, even won his stipend,
a golden boy through and through.
In the same street, laughing, playing at his side,
our daughter has grown up into womanhood.
If I speak to him today, he'll say yes this very hour."

The father says: "Stop — for shame, woman!
They stand at the very lowest rung of society.
Does wearing the sacred thread make any man a Brahmin?
Just because he is fair to look upon, you'd call him a match!
Ah, the wits of women — no wonder the scriptures say what they say."

From the day the family came bearing gold to look upon the bride's face,
from that day on, Manjulika's heart, at every hidden hour,
lay pricked and bleeding with thorns.
A mother's love misses nothing; before her, nothing stays hidden.
The mother's grief, the daughter's grief — walking, eating, sleeping —

at every moment the sky of that house seemed struck through with lightning-bolts of sorrow.

A stern, unbending pride had woken in the father's heart —
in joy or grief, in hate or anger,
he would not swerve an inch from what he called righteousness — such was his strength, that had no weakness in it.

The wheel of his life's chariot ran always along its iron track;
not one inch, ever, could it be made to turn, to either side.
He said his own discipline was the hardest kind there was —
nothing else, only the will's own strength,
the equal of the sages, of Ashtavakra, of Jamadagni —
womankind could never grasp its worth.

Through the silent, hidden river of unshed tears
the two women's days went flowing slowly by.

At last, one night in the month of Baisakh,
Manjulika was married to Panchanan.

At the moment of parting, the father laid his hand upon his daughter's head and said:

"May you be like Savitri — this is my prayer for you."

How strange what followed — by the very power of the father's discipline,
the first half of that blessing came true within two months:
death came, and took Panchanan.

But by the girl's own fortune,
the second half did not come true; death did not turn back for her.
Manjulika came home to her father's house,
the vermilion wiped clean from the parting of her hair.

In sorrow and in joy the days went on,
like flowers fallen, drifting on the current of a stream;
until, at last, Manjulika's age came round to sixteen.
Once, in her childhood, hidden behind the leaves of the heart's own creeper,
a single bud had shown itself, piercing through life's secret, hidden depth;
she had not known herself then;

no wandering wind from outside had ever asked its name.
 That same bud, today, is breaking open inside her,
 filling itself with sweetness.
 It is love's own flower,
 overflowing with the weight of its own crimson petals.
 She has no more doubt left in the knowing of herself —
 and so, again and again, she startles, catching herself unawares.
 The call of the sky beyond comes down to her, in a cascade of light;
 in the dark of night, some boundless, weeping sorrow reaches her.
 Outwardly, every ornament has fallen from her;
 inwardly, she deepens in colour, layer on layer,
 and seeing it, she wonders at herself, and nearly dies of wondering.
 Sometimes, in the midst of her work, she stands at the window,
 gazing out in silence — to where the drumstick tree's garlands of flowers
 hang along the fence, filling the whole sky, day and night,
 with a rain of laughing blossom.
 He who had been her playmate, once, in the playhouse of her childhood —
 how has he, today, filled the whole heart of earth and water?
 Formless now, he seems to have melted, quietly, into every shape there is.
 His very footstep seems to have gone rustling through every leaf.
 His tender voice seems folded into the humming of the bees' wings.

On her daughter's silent face, what is it the mother sees,
 that makes a spear go through her heart?
 Some unspoken secret's spell gathers, in Manjulika's dark eyes,
 a shadow heavy with unshed tears;
 a deep, tear-wet sorrow of the spirit
 brings to her lips the hushed restlessness of an autumn evening.
 The mother has no taste left for food; she weeps, and says:
 "Oh God — where have you left this poor, luckless girl?"

One day the father, his midday meal finished,
 the stem of his hookah at his lips,
 was reading, as always, before his sleep, some English love-story.
 The mother said, fanning him, now and then stroking his feet:

"Let whoever wishes speak ill of it, let them die of fever and poison for all I care — I mean, however I can manage it, to see Manjulika married."

The father said, with a hard smile: "The two of you, mother and daughter, may arrange the wedding —

after I am dead. Only be patient till then, a few days more."

And, saying this, he drew gently on his hookah.

The mother said: "How stony a heart you have — is there no tenderness in you at all, no love?"

The father said: "I am, indeed, made of stone.

The path of righteousness is a hard one; had I been made of soft butter, I would have melted into tears long before now."

The mother said: "What ill fortune is this. To whom shall I ever explain it?

In this house of yours, in the midst of such plenty, shutting fast the door, drying up moment by moment, her chest fit to burst, all alone — this one girl —

in all the three worlds there is no greater wrong than this.

In those dry pages of your scripture there is no life anywhere; only the Knower of every heart, only God, knows where true feeling truly beats."

The father only smiled a little, and thought: womankind — a balloon, blown up on the vapour of its own heart's heat.

Life is a hard discipline; of that they have no notion at all.

And, so thinking, he went back to his English love-story.

Through grief upon grief, at last, the mother's own fever burned itself out; alone in the household, the father remained.

His elder son lived far off, in Patna, with wife and children.

Of the two daughters, neither lived close by; both had their husbands' homes — one in Faridpur, the other further still, in Madras, beyond the Vindhya hills.

Upon Manjulika, then, fell the whole burden of her father's care.

He would not touch food cooked by a hired Brahmin cook; without his wife's own cooking his appetite would not settle.

Mornings, a meal of rice; evenings, roti or luchi;

with the rice, a grand array of fish; five or six kinds of things fried; mutton, to go with the roti and the luchi.

Twice each day, Manjulika cooked it all, start to finish, with her own hands.

On every fast-day, every eleventh of the moon, the same long list.
 She swept and cleaned her father's room herself;
 aired and folded away the winter clothes herself, in the sun.
 She kept his papers filed away in desk and box, shelf by shelf;
 kept the washerman's accounts; tried to keep straight the milkman's, the grocer's
 —

and when some figure went wrong, took the scolding for it herself.
 Her pickle never came out quite like her mother's — there was no end of
 complaint for that;
 nor was her way with the betel-leaf to his taste, either.
 At every step she fell short, measured against her mother.
 On the whole — the girls of today, none of them are like the girls of the old days.
 Silent, bowed, Manjulika bore it all, patient always, tireless in her work.
 As a mother, again and again, forgives, smiling, a thousand demands of her small
 child,
 carrying them all in the fond amusement of love —
 so, with a face always at ease, Manjulika listened, hour after hour, to her father's
 complaints,
 and smiled to herself within.
 How precious, to her father, was the memory of her mother —
 thinking of this filled her whole heart with a quiet, private pride.
 "One who has known my mother's care, even once — what else could ever please
 him after that?"

That year, at Holi, the father was seized badly with rheumatism.
 In the neighbourhood, Pulin was practising medicine now; he had to be called.
 There was fear, even, for the heart itself.
 So Pulin had to come and go, many times a day.
 However simply, however naturally, Manjulika tried to speak with him,
 the more the words caught in her throat.
 Has such trouble ever befallen anyone before?
 Why does her voice tremble so, why does it grow so faint,
 why do her own eyelids feel weighted down by something she cannot name?
 In fear, the lovesick girl feels nearly ready to die —

as if someone might overhear how the blood rings, faint and constant, through her.

Like dew upon a lotus leaf, her heart trembles, day and night,
forever on the very edge of being found out.

The illness, slowly, was mending; the pain in the joints had eased a great deal.
The patient, leaving his bed now, moves a little, hand and foot.
Then, one evening, when the breeze had thrown wide open the whole soul of the
jasmine grove,
when the darkness, going to speak with the moon,
falls silent at the last, only gazing —
Pulin, on the pretext of some word about the patient's care,
calls Manjulika into the next room, and says:
"Do you know — it was your mother's own wish, in her heart,
to see the two of us wed. That wish of hers I mean, however I can, to fulfil.
Why go on, any longer, wasting these days for nothing?"

"No — no — shame, shame!"
And so saying, Manjulika, covering her face with both hands,
fled from the room.
Shutting herself into her own room, she fell upon the floor —
sobbing, sobbing, her heart breaking, the tears pouring out of her.
She thought: "My wretched heart's own secret — it has not escaped his eyes,
after all.
Why go on, then, any longer? Let death come now, if it will."

Manjulika threw herself, twice over, into her father's care, day and night, without
pause.

When the necessary work was done, she turned to what was not necessary at all;
a vessel already washed, she washed again.

A room swept two or three hours before, she swept once more.

When she bathed, when she ate — there was no fixed hour to any of it any
longer.

There was no rest for her at all, until, at eleven at night, worn through,
she fell asleep of herself upon the floor.

Whoever saw it stood amazed, and said: "What a blessed girl."

Hearing this, the father says, puffing out his chest:

"I do not boast of it, but remember, all the same — she is my daughter.
The discipline of a life kept pure — she learned that from no one but me.
Otherwise she would have turned out quite differently.
In these days, without the hard discipline of restraint,
no dam holds fast in society any longer;
girls today learn nothing but the fashions of memsahibs."

When barely eleven months had passed since the mother's death,
a rumour began to travel — that a match-maker was coming and going at this house.

At first Manjulika would not believe it;
but then, seeing it all for herself, she let out a long, slow breath.
Everyone bustling about; some strange new mood abroad in the house;
all manner of foreign furnishings arriving.
She saw her father newly got up —
his brows, once dark as a bee's wing, suddenly dark again;
all his grey hair, when had it turned so black?
His shawl, now, at every hour, gave off the smell of scent.

Today, thinking of her mother, Manjulika's heart broke afresh, past all bearing.
Even in death, that parting from the very air of this house had, until now, never truly come to pass.

That gracious figure, steeped in sweetness, had been etched into the very heart of this household;

her devotion, the merit of her whole faithful life, had lived on within these walls, her touch upon every task done here.

Today, in this house, would come her final death — a monstrous insult — and thinking this, Manjulika's spirit broke apart within her.

Casting off all shame, all fear, the daughter went, without hesitation, to her father, and said:

"They say you mean to marry again.

We — your children, your grandchildren, all of us — will you make us all bow our heads in shame?

Will you forget my mother, then? Can your heart be so hard as that?"

The father answered with a dry laugh:

"Who does not know that I am hard?

For me, to marry again is indeed the bitterest task there could be;
but a householder's duty stands incomplete without a wife —
from Manu down to the Mahabharata, every scripture says as much.
It is no easy road, this path of righteousness;
it is not merely a matter of the heart, of weeping and wailing.
Whoever fears to give pain, or to take it —
why should such a coward ever have come into this world at all?"

The bride's people lived in Barisal.

The groom went there some days ahead of the wedding, and at last brought his bride home.

When he returned, Manjulika was nowhere in the house.

He learned the news only by reading a letter:

Pulin had married her, and the two of them had gone off together to Farrukhabad,

meaning to make their home there.

The father, blazing like fire, hurled curse after curse after them.

THE FUGITIVE

There, where beneath the shirish tree
the young leaves' trembling shade
quivers, thin and restless, on the grass,
brimming with the scent of fallen flowers —
there my tame deer used to graze, lost in her own thoughts,
by the corner of the henna hedge,
all through the winter mornings, in the sun.
With her played a puppy,
brought down once from the hills,
wrapped in deep, dense, reddish fur.
As if two children from two far countries
had met, by chance, in a single schoolroom,
so the two of them went wandering together, laughing, at play.
On market-days, many a passer-by
would stop beside the hedge and stand, staring, amazed.

In the month of Phalgun the mad south wind woke;
the sky shivered, as though it had just received
some love-letter, coloured through with love.
In the sal forest the flowers broke into their frenzy;
in every leaf, in every blade of grass, a trembling stirred.
What far, sorrowing message the deer heard then, and when, and how,
none of us could ever say.
That is why, in the corner of her dark eyes,
a restlessness woke, for no cause at all;
that is why, again and again,
catching sight, all of a sudden, of her own shadow,
she startled, and swerved away.

Then, one evening,
when the amloki grove grew restless
in the flicker and shimmer of failing light,

when the hot wind ached with the scent of the mango's first blossom,
the deer ran on and on, field after field,
toward the hope of the trackless unknown.
Before her, life and death had become one and the same thing;
no fear of the unknown remained in her at all.

I had thought, once darkness fell,
she would come home again,
for the sake of a familiar hand's caress.
The puppy, again and again,
came close, and closer still,
and asked, with weeping eyes, of everyone he met:
"Where has she gone, where has she gone,
why do I not see her here in the yard?"
Forsaking food, he wandered, restless; his companion did not come.
Darkness fell; the lamps were lit inside the house;
the stars rose; over field after field
the silent night came down.
With that anguished question still in his eyes
the dog roams, in and out of doors:
"Why is she not here, why has she gone, and for whom?"

Why — even the deer herself did not know.
She went at the call of one
she had never, in any life, once laid eyes on.
From the sky, from the light,
from the raw green of the new leaves,
on the lost currents of the south wind,
some tiding came, running wild
through her blood, from none knew where.
In her breast a flute sang out
in the tune of some Phalgun of ages past —
somewhere, far off,
there lived one nearer to her than her very own.
That one alone she sought.

As if, from the moment of her birth,
it had clung fast to the very core of her heart;
as if it lived in the urge of her own endless running;
as if it woke, restless and flickering,
in the very corner of her wandering eye.
The one she had never known, in any age of the world —
that very one, at the last, dissolved
her whole world of the known, entirely, and for good.
The darkness called to her, weeping;
the light no longer had the power to hold her.

THE SHORTCHANGING

Binu was twenty-three then, when the illness took hold of her.
Under medicine and doctor, the cure grew worse than the disease.
Bottles of every label gathered on the shelf; boxes of every size piled up.
After a year and a half of treatment had worn her bones down to nothing,
they said, at last: "Try a change of air."
On this account Binu, for the first time, boarded a train;
for the first time since her wedding, she left her father-in-law's house.

Hedged all round, deep within the close-knit joint family,
our meetings had gone on, till then, only in broken measure —
stolen moments, half-smothered laughter, snatches of talk, pieced together
anyhow.
Today, quite suddenly, the earth, holding out the whole light that filled her sky,
took the bride and the groom into her welcome.
In those sick, wide, thin eyes, in that thin face,
it seemed the wedding-night's first ceremonial gaze
was being held, for Binu, all over again, in some new place.

From beyond the railway line, when some beggar comes crying out for alms,
Binu opens her own small box, gathers whatever coins and rupees come to hand,
wraps them in a scrap of paper, and flings them out, one after another.
Unless every other sorrow is first taken away,
how is her own joy to bear even the weight of itself?
From this household's broken landing, our setting-out today
seems, as it were, launched on love's own eternal current —
as though this one journey now must be filled, brimful, with giving, with the
mind's whole devotion,
for the good of the whole world.
Again and again it rises in Binu's mind:
in all this world, today, there is only me — mine alone;
no one else stands anywhere near — no father-in-law, no husband's brother,
before or behind, to left or right.

That thought alone filled her through and through with a thrill of joy.

At Bilaspur station the train was to be changed; we had to get down in haste. Six hours we would have to wait, in the travellers' rest-house; it struck me, I confess, as a considerable nuisance.

Binu said: "Why — this is rather nice."

That day there seemed no end to the gladness in her heart.

The road's own music had, step by step, made her restless, so that, in her joy, the arriving and the travelling had become one and the same thing.

Throwing open the door of the rest-house, she said to me:

"Look, look, how that little pony-cart runs!

And look at that calf there — oh, I could eat it up, such a sleek, soft little thing — and see how deep the love is, in its mother's eyes.

Over there, on the high bank of the tank — under that shisham tree, that little walled house, just by the rail-line — that's where the station-master lives, isn't it?

Ah, how happy they must be, living there."

In the travellers' room I spread out the bedding, and told her:

"Now, Binu — lie quietly, and rest."

On the platform I drew up a chair and started reading an English novel I had brought along.

Goods trains went by; passenger trains went by; some three hours passed.

Then, from the door of the rest-house, Binu came out and said:

"There's something — I have to tell you something."

Going in, I found a Hindustani woman there, who, at the sight of my face, made a salaam and stood outside, holding the veranda pillar.

Binu said: "Her name is Rukmini.

Over there, by the well, where those rooms stand in a row, that's where she lives; her husband is a coolie on the railway.

In such-and-such a year, famine struck their village —

husband and wife, the two of them, fled here, from the landlord's cruelty.

They had seven bighas of land, in some village, on the bank of some river—" I broke in, laughing: "This whole life-story of Rukmini's won't be finished before our train comes.

In my opinion, if you'd cut it a little short,
no great harm would come to anyone by it."

Arching her brows, narrowing her eyes, Binu flared up:

"No — absolutely not — I will not cut it short.

There's no office-train to catch, is there? So what's the hurry?

You'll have to hear it all, start to finish."

Whatever taste I had left for the novel vanished entirely.

I sat and heard out, in full, the long tale of the railway coolie's wife.

At the very end came the real matter — and that part, it seemed, carried some real weight.

The coolie's daughter was to be married, and so amulets and bangles had to be made and given;

however they stretched it, it would still come to twenty-five rupees;

and that worry weighed heavily on Rukmini.

So this once, the charge fell to me —

to lift the coolie-woman's worry from her.

Before we boarded the train today, I must give her, straight out, twenty-five rupees.

What an astonishing thing. Has anyone, anywhere, ever heard the like of it?

By caste she might be a sweeper, or something quite as low, for all I knew, who swept and cleaned the travellers' rooms —

and twenty-five rupees must be handed to her, just like that!

At this rate, how many days before ruin came knocking?

"All right, all right — it shall be done, it shall be done. Let me see — I've a hundred-rupee note, that's all I have — and it can't be broken here!"

Binu said: "It can be broken right here, at the station."

"Very well, then, I'll give it" —

and, saying this, I took the woman aside, and gave her a thorough scolding —

"Is this how you hold your post here — cheating passengers this way?

I'll see this rascality stopped!"

When she fell weeping at my feet, I put two rupees into her hand, and sent her off.

The lamp of life's own temple went dark, all at once, its light quenched.

I came back when two months had passed.

This time, arriving again at Bilaspur, I came alone.

In her last moments, taking the dust of my feet upon her forehead, Binu had said to me:

"Whatever else, in this life, I may forget —

these last two months will stay with me forever,

like the eternal vermilion in Narayani's parted hair, in heaven.

These two months filled me, brimful, with nectar" —

remembering only that one word, I took my leave of her.

Oh Thou who dwellest in every heart —

I want, today, to tell Binu this:

of that gift, those two months, I remain terribly, permanently in her debt —

the twenty-five-rupee shortchanging.

Even if I gave Rukmini, today, a hundred thousand rupees,

still that emptiness would not be filled.

Binu has carried those two months away with her;

she never knew that, cheat and all, I had placed them, whole, into her very hand.

At Bilaspur, stepping down from the train, I asked everyone I met:

"Where is Rukmini now?"

Hearing the question, they only stared, astonished —

who, indeed, was Rukmini — how many of them even knew the name?

After much thought, when I said, "Jhamru the coolie's wife" —

they all said: "They're not here any more now."

I asked: "Where, then, can I find her?"

The station-master, irritated, said: "Who keeps track of such things?"

The ticket-clerk said, smiling: "They left a month ago now —

for Darjeeling, maybe, or Khasrubagh, or maybe Arakan."

I asked everyone: "Does anyone know her address?"

They only grew impatient — what business could anyone have with her address?

How was I to explain to them —
 that she who, to everyone else, is the least of all things,
 is, to me, the one thing most needed of all;
 that it is to her alone I owe the unburdening of my cheat.
 "These two months filled me, brimful, with nectar" —
 that last word of Binu's — how am I ever to carry it?
 I remain, forever, the debtor;
 my lie has become the one thing in me that will never change.

Translator's Notes

On the collection and its form. Palataka (1918) sits at the edge of Tagore's so-called "Balaka period," when he broke from the rhymed, sung lyricism of his earlier work toward অমিত্রাক্ষর ছন্দ — long, unrhymed, run-on lines closer to speech than to song, letting a sentence uncoil across many verse-lines before it comes to rest. English cannot reproduce the Bengali metre (a matra-counted rhythm with no equivalent in a stress-timed language), so I have followed Tagore's own practice when he translated himself into English — abandoning metre and rhyme altogether in favour of a cadenced free verse, trusting repetition, parallelism, and the shape of the sentence to carry the music instead.

আসল — "The real thing" / "genuineness." The title is almost untranslatable in one word: it means something like "the authentic," as opposed to the artificial, the merely nominal. I rendered it as The Real Thing to keep the plain, almost blunt register of the Bengali word, and to preserve its irony — the poem asks what in a grown man's busy, "important" life is actually real, against a child's unmediated wonder.

বসুন্ধরা (Vasundhara). One of the classical Sanskrit-derived names for the Earth, personified as a goddess ("she who bears wealth"). I simply translated it as "the Earth," capitalized, to signal the personification without importing an unfamiliar proper name that would stop an English reader short.

পাগল (pagol, "madman"). Bengali literature has a long tradition — Tagore drew on it often — of the pagol or baul-adjacent holy fool: someone the world calls mad because he is unbothered by worldly calculation, and who is thereby closer to God than the sane. "Madman" in English risks sounding clinical or cruel in a way the Bengali doesn't quite intend; I kept the word but let Mahesh's own speech (about singing out of tune for a listener who delights in it anyway) carry the tenderness the label alone can't.

কালো (kalo, "dark/black"). In কালো মেয়ে, I chose "dark" over "black" throughout. Bengali colourism prizes fair skin, and kalo here functions the way "plain" or "unmarriageable" might in an English-language novel of the same period — a social judgment on a young woman's prospects, not a racial descriptor. "Dark" keeps that social meaning legible without importing the different set of associations "Black" carries in English.

চিরদিনের দাগা — "dagha" (scar/mark/wound). Dagha is stronger than the neutral "chihno" (mark, sign) — it implies a wound, a scald, something that leaves a permanent, faintly painful trace. "Everlasting scar" tries to hold both the permanence and the ache; a plainer "mark" would lose the wound underneath it.

ছুটি (chhuti). This word does heavy double duty in ঠাকুরদাদার ছুটি: it means both a child's "holiday, playtime, freedom from lessons" and, more darkly (a sense Tagore uses elsewhere), "release" — even, euphemistically, death's release from the world. The poem plays the child's literal holiday against the grandfather's longed-for release from "the business of living," and I kept "holiday" throughout

rather than switching words, so that an English reader can feel both senses gathering under the one word, as a Bengali reader would.

নিষ্কৃতি — "Nishkriti" (deliverance). A word with a Sanskritic, almost theological weight — closer to moksha-adjacent "release from bondage" than to a secular "escape." I translated it as "Deliverance" to keep that religious undertone, since the poem's final elopement is framed, structurally, as a kind of salvation from her father's righteousness.

কুলীন (kulin). A specific, historically loaded term for the highest sub-rank of Bengali Brahmin lineage — families who could, in theory, marry only among themselves, which in practice often meant daughters married off to elderly kulin men purely for the honour of the match. There is no real English equivalent; I left the social logic to unfold through the father's own dialogue ("a great and pedigreed house") rather than trying to gloss the caste term itself mid-poem.

পলাতকা — "Palataka" (the female fugitive). The title is grammatically feminine — "she who has fled" — which is easy to lose in English, where "the fugitive" reads as gender-neutral by default. I made sure to render the deer consistently as "she" throughout the translation to preserve that grammatical, and thematic, femininity; many readers take the poem as an oblique image of a young woman's own unnameable restlessness, answering a call the household around her cannot hear.

ফাঁকি (phanki). A wonderfully specific colloquial word: not "cheat" in the abstract, but the particular, petty act of short-changing someone — giving less than was owed, especially in a small cash transaction. It also carries a shadow of ফাঁকা ("empty, hollow"). The poem's tragedy is built on that double sense: the narrator literally short-changes a coolie's wife by twenty-three rupees, and in doing so unknowingly hollows out his dying wife's last wish. I translated it as "The

Shortchanging" rather than the more common "The Cheat," to keep the transactional, money-in-hand specificity of the original word.

অন্তর্যামী (Antaryami, "the Inner Knower"). A classical epithet for God as the one who dwells within and knows every heart from inside. Both ছিন্ন পত্র and ফাঁকি end by addressing this figure directly — I translated it as "Thou who dwellest in every heart" in both places, using the one archaism ("Thou") deliberately, and only there, to mark it as the poems' single moment of direct, devotional address, distinct from their otherwise plain, narrative diction.

On repeated character-echoes. Readers familiar with Tagore's short stories will notice that "Mahesh" and "নিষ্কৃতি" (Nishkriti) are also the names/titles of two of his most famous prose works — a poor peasant's beloved bull, and a story of a wronged daughter-in-law, respectively. The echoes here seem deliberate: Tagore was, in this period, returning in verse to figures and social wounds he had already explored in fiction, so a reader of both forms will hear these poems answering, or extending, stories told elsewhere in his work.

BHOLA

Suddenly it seemed to me
that the Ganges in Shiva's matted hair
had dried up without cause;
her laughter-brimming voice fell still;
her anklets' dancing chime fell still;
the embrace of foam with sunlight,
the swaying of wave with wind—
all grew silent in a single breath
when Biju went away to the land beyond death,
breaking free of his father's encircling arms.
It seemed to me the morning of my house had died,
its heart burst open.

No more does his tremendous morning uproar
raise such a storm in the sea of waking.
No more does everyone rush about, harried
by his stampeding mischief,
crying, "Now then — what are you up to!" —
the whole household trembling as if in an earthquake.
Today all his brigandry, all his shouting and calling,
have flown off like bees that have emptied their hive.
In this household of mine
the sweet fountainhead of his tyranny has stopped completely;
and so the life of this house
lies listless, drooping,
like a lotus in a pond whose water has fled.
The bedstead stares into emptiness, asking only,
"Why — why is he not here?"

Everyone called him naughty, and blamed me for it,
thinking a boy raised without discipline
comes only to grief.
Just as the ocean wave breaks its bonds
and comes foaming, rolling, roaring on,

swelling along every shore, tumbling, flinging itself down
 upon the breast of the earth—
 so his unruly mischief, with that same tremendous force,
 a thousand times a day
 filled his father's heart with boundless restlessness.
 In this quiet room curtained round by age,
 some eternal boy still hides in me and plays;
 whenever Biju's hand gave it a shake,
 that boy would answer, alive.
 Wherever in me his age still lingered,
 there I was his playmate, with my whole heart and soul.
 There my chest, in that same rhythm,
 would ring out to the restless riot of his play.

 Whenever a storm came pounding at our door with rain,
 defying his mother's forbidding,
 the two of us, laughing aloud,
 ran out into the field in wild rebellion.
 In the season of ripe mangoes
 I sat with him up in the branches,
 and at noon we ate our fill, snatching them from each other,
 till all the neighbors said, watching us,
 "What outrageous excess!"
 Again and again
 my writing would be interrupted,
 and his mother, angry, would scold him—
 "Can't you see your father is at his work?"
 and Biju, ashamed, would go outside.
 But my writing was twice as disturbed by his absence;
 I would think, "Why doesn't someone
 come and shake this table?"

 That day, before night could give way to another dawn,
 when Biju left off his play, left his playmate behind,
 it seemed to me that at last my old age
 had come into its full measure —

all sixteen annas of it.
 No more would my work be troubled, in any way;
 now I would walk the well-worn road of seniority,
 my eyes fixed on the far ghat of the river of death,
 my life turned to wood, bearing the frozen weight of gravity.
 No more time would be wasted, day or night;
 my mind would go racing down the dry pages of the writing-book —
 no more idle talk at gatherings,
 only sound counsel, only wise deliberation.

A terrible emptiness spread across the whole sky of my room,
 pressing down upon my chair and table.
 I could not bear to stay there;
 my heart grew heavy with renunciation,
 and I walked pacing in the courtyard.
 Just then the earth seemed to tremble —
 suddenly someone, like a storm,
 came crashing upon my chest.

A thrill ran through me, through every nerve;
 it seemed, suddenly, that my own Biju had come back again.
 I asked, "Who are you — what is it?"
 "I am Bhola," he said, only that,
 as though that were his whole identity,
 and nothing more remained to tell.

I pressed the stranger to my chest with both hands.
 He said, "Out there, in the tamarind tree,
 my kite is caught —
 come and set it free."
 And saying this,
 he took my hand and pulled me, leading me away.

O, so it was — the one whose thousand commands I obeyed
 for nine years:
 his rule still wanders this earth today,
 disguised in other forms.
 O, now I understand —

my work is not yet finished.
My king, my friend, my darling child, even now
you come dressed in ever new disguises.
You came into my heart again, made new,
and found for yourself, unaided, the same old easy path.
Again, as I write, the table gets shaken;
again the inkpot tips over all at once and spills,
and ink scatters across the pages of my book.
Again I gather shells and pebbles;
again there is throwing and catching of marbles.
Again, amid my wasted hours and ruined work,
amid the upturned chaos,
upon all that lies scattered and broken,
the eternal boy of my soul has built his playhouse anew,
finding this door of old age standing open.
Again, setting my chest a-swinging,
he has come with all his tyranny —
the world's eternal Bhola, the forgetful one, forever here.

MALA

The day I went to the court at dawn,
in the queen's hand upon her throne
there lay a golden platter,
and on it rested a single jeweled garland.

From Kashi, Kanchi, Kanauj, Kosala,
Anga, Banga, Madra, Magadha,
in a thousand-branching river of people,
crowds upon crowds of travelers came,
eager, their voices surging.

Whomever I asked, "Where are you going?"
answered at once, "To the queen's court."
Whomever I asked, "Why do you go?"
spoke with fire, eyes ablaze with light:
"I shall win the garland of victory."

Some rode horses, some rode chariots,
racing on, wanting no rest along the way.
A fire seemed to rise wild in my mind,
and my youth trembled, string by string, like a restless lyre.
I said to myself, in joy:
"O radiant one, in your court I shall be the victor.
I shall empty that platter
and take the garland of victory."

There was one young traveler among them, his face full of sorrow,
whose eyes, like the morning star, were eager for I knew not what.
While everyone else rushed on,
he sat beneath a tree,
lost in his own thoughts;
the sky itself seemed to ask him
the name of the one he was thinking of.
When I asked him, "Do you go, then, hoping for the garland,
carrying that empty basket in your hand?" —
he said, "Brother, I do not want the garland of victory."

Everyone laughed to see him.
 They thought, "Why does even this one come with us —
 who has no hope, no confidence even to try,
 who marches into battle already conceding defeat?"
 He made way for everyone else,
 never pushing past the others to arrive first.
 And yet he was always alert,
 walking as though called by the restless summons of some unseen flute,
 carrying his own empty platter in his hand —
 and still he said he did not want the garland of victory.

Alone upon her throne sat the queen,
 the very form of the spoken word.
 Ringing, murmuring through the assembly,
 my lyre played on.
 Sometimes in the raga Dipak
 a shiver ran through the hall,
 a rain of stars fell;
 sometimes in Mallar
 its wild cascade of tears came streaming down.
 All the others, having heard the song,
 slipped away slowly, heads bowed,
 back home through the evening dark.
 They knew that when my turn was over,
 I should win the queen's garland of victory.
 That young companion of ours sat on in the dust beneath the throne,
 saying not a word.
 If, by chance, one small champak bud
 should slip and fall
 from the queen's garment to the ground,
 unseen by all,
 he would lift it up with care
 and wear it behind his ear.
 When the court broke up, at the day's end,
 if I said to him, laughing,

"It is time now to light the evening lamps —
will you still stay on here?" —
he would laugh and say,
"My turn is always now;
I, brother, do not want the garland of victory."

Ashadh and Shravan at last drifted away
on their fleets of torn cloud,
sounding their deep drumbeats to the rhythm of my song.
Autumn came, and autumn passed;
in the lap of the blue sky
the weeping and laughing of sun and rain came to their end,
and tier upon tier of my melody
scattered like a shower of shiuli blossoms.
Phalgun and Chaitra, restless with the fragrance of mango blossom,
carried off the tune of my song,
its skirts filled with the southern wind.
One by one, in my throat,
the songs of every season came to their close.
Then the queen rose from her seat,
and into the cup of my two hands
she placed, emptying the platter,
her own garland of victory.

When I stepped out onto the road, the garland set upon my head,
it seemed to me the whole world was whirling round me
like a storm of dust.
Hundreds upon hundreds of people
closed in around me, crowd upon crowd —
some out of curiosity,
some feigning praise,
some coming to smear me with the mud of envy.
Alas —
in a single moment the clear sky turned to grey.
All the shy small joys of this earth,
the simple smiles of small, modest happiness,

vanished like a timid flock of swans on a river sandbank,
I knew not where.
I thought to myself:
"Is this, then, a burning flame —
this garland of my victory?"

O queen, is there nothing else in your hand —
only this garland of victory?
My life is not soothed by it;
upon my breast weighs the burden of your garland.
This prize I wear only outwardly,
upon my neck and head;
what I might fill my heart with —
that is what I go on searching for, dying for.
My thirst only grows in the heat of this garland.
Under what curse, O queen,
did I empty your golden platter
only to receive this garland of victory?

It seemed to me, somehow, that much still remained —
that without it, all this was mere deception.
This is only half of it;
some jewel is missing,
and for its lack this garland is blind.
Why does that unattained thing
ring so within my heart?
Go back, humiliated one, go back again —
go search the emptied hall of assembly.
Perhaps, by some fault of your fortune,
something still lies fallen, unnoticed, in the dust.
Perhaps the golden platter
still hides, in secret, one more garland.

By evening the wind in the sky had grown calm.
I saw the doors of the hall shut,
all wanting and having stilled.

No more clamor, no more jostling crowd;
the rows of trees stood silent,
as if seated in Shiva's own posture of meditation.
On the lonely road, beneath the darkened sky,
the jewels of my garland no longer burned as they had.
Before the stars it hid its face, ashamed —
it had deceived my dazzled eyes by daylight,
and in the dark its deception stood revealed.
Was it for this — all that striving,
this whole day's chapter of grief?
Take it back —
take back your garland of victory.
Night was drawing on.
Suddenly, by starlight, I saw that same young companion of the road,
lost in himself,
singing on in the queen's grove.
I asked him softly, "What are you doing here,
alone in this solitude?"
He said, smiling, "When the court's session is over,
when the garland of victory is given away,
then the queen's throne stands empty in the bakul-lined walk,
and I alone play my lyre through the night."
I asked him, "What have you gained from her?"
He answered, "This — this light that fills my heart.
No one has seen, in the queen's lap, a basket of lotus leaves;
hidden within it lay something —
not a garland of victory,
but a garland of choosing: a bride's own garland."

THE MOTHER'S HONOR

In Apurva's household

there were chairs and tables in plenty, five or seven carriages;
there were dogs, there were cats, horses of every color,
six or seven pairs at the least;
the gatehouse was full of doorkeepers and stewards,
there were manservants and maids,
grooms, bearers, liveried footmen —
and there was also an aunt.

Her husband, a renunciate at heart even within the household,
had gone off, no one knew where, in search of liberation,
leaving in his wife's hands their two young boys.

For fear that going to live among strangers
would bring disgrace upon her husband's family,
she stayed on instead
at the door of her wealthy sister-in-law's house.

Her one endeavor was only this:
how to erase herself completely.

For fear of catching anyone's eye,
for fear that someone, seeing her, might say,
"Where did this nuisance come from" —
she walked softly, spoke softly,
took up less room than anyone,
and worked harder than anyone else.

But her sons, Kanai and Balai, were only small children still,
and for them the Creator had laid open this whole vast earth;
their limbs were full of unruly life,
their throats full of clamor.

To have to dam up the very spring of a child's heart
struck a terrible pain into their mother's breast.

With pleading eyes, in a sorrowful voice,
she would say, "Hush, hush —"
at even the smallest sign of restlessness.

Crying from hunger was, for them, mere savagery;

loud speech did not become their mouths;
 even when happy, they must hold it in,
 must never on any account go leaping about.
 Apurva and Purna, the same age as the two boys,
 would strike them hard whenever they played together and found some fault;
 and if ever Kanai or Balai struck back,
 there was no limit to the uproar that followed —
 both mothers alike would descend on the two brothers like a storm,
 blow upon blow, from left and right at once.
 Punishing her darlings for faults not theirs,
 the aunt would shut the door of their room
 and go without food herself,
 her breast flooding with tears.

At last the two boys accepted this, their lot in life.
 From then on their walking, their rising and sitting,
 grew hushed, grew quiet — alas,
 like a bird's nest that has lost its bird.
 Their claim upon this household
 sank away, ebb by ebb, to nothing;
 gone was any hope of fair judgment,
 sealed shut was the very language of complaint.
 All their sorrow the two brothers swallowed down,
 in silence, without a word.
 Darkness swam before their eyes with the pangs of hunger,
 yet for fear there might be no food to spare,
 and for fear their mother's eyes might fill with tears,
 they would hide away somewhere and say, "I am not hungry."
 If they fell ill, they hid that too;
 before god or man they gave up, entirely,
 even the smallest word of complaint.
 The first time they won a prize at school,
 the very best in their class,
 Apurva and Purna came home empty-handed.
 Sensing the danger, letting out a long sigh,

their mother called Kanai and Balai and said:

"My dears, hand over your two prizes to them.
Then run off, go play at the Chowdhurys' house.
When evening comes, come back —
and let no one hear that you won a prize."

So saying, she spread two seats in a corner of the room
and fed them, with her own hands, puffed-rice sweets to eat.

In this way, beneath the weight of insult,
bearing the burning of sorrow, the two brothers grew into manhood.
The burden of this life they made
as light as it could ever be made.

The sharpest pain of all, for them, was their mother's dishonor —
like the very flame of fire
it burned at the wick of their lamp of life.

That single light the two of them, through sorrow and joy alike,
carried toward one goal:
to make their mother triumphant, with their whole heart and soul.

Kanai and Balai were now in college.

It was then that, secretly, one night,

Apurva broke open his aunt's box with his own hands
and stole a necklace of pearl and emerald —
a passion for the theater had taken hold of him.

The neighborhood shook as if by earthquake with the calling of police;
and when he was on the verge of being caught,

Apurva took the pearl necklace and, quietly, quietly,
hid it under a pillow in Kanai's own bedroom.

When it finally came to light, everyone said:

"This is just why the scriptures forbid
raising a serpent's young on milk and bananas.
They're mere children, what fault is theirs — the mother is behind it.
Do a good turn, and evil comes of it, in this age of Kali."

Kanai and Balai flared up like the fire of the world's ending,
ready to kill.

Their mother said, "There is a God above;
the dishonor of the innocent is His own dishonor."

Taking her two sons with her, the aunt walked out;
the doorkeepers and stewards stood staring after her,
and all the servants and maids,
the grooms, the bearers, the liveried footmen.

With the fierce light of that insult burning ever before them,
the two boys and their mother passed through a dark and grievous time,
down a hard and thorny road.

Kanai and Balai became great pleaders in the high courts.

Wives after their own hearts came to them,
grandchildren began to arrive,
many companions of happy days gathered round.

Their mother said, "Now, at last, my lifelong wish will be fulfilled —
before I die, I shall go live in Kashi."

At last, one day in the holiday season of the autumn Puja,
having found a house to her liking,
the two brothers brought their mother to that holy place
and left her there.

Before even a year had passed, at the end of the month of Shravan,
suddenly their mother came back home.

The whole household stood amazed.

"You are my sons," she said,
"how did such thinking come to you,
that you would let Apurva be put in jail?"

Kanai said: "It is only because you are my mother
that the burning of your dishonor still burns, always, within my heart.
If, having driven you from your own house before everyone's eyes
on a false charge of theft, I should ever forget that —
that would be my gravest sin."

Their mother answered: "Why should you forget it —
but if you still feel that burning,
then how can you lay so terrible a weight of dishonor
on anyone else, stranger or kin?"

Do you not remember that day,
 when I came out through the gate with the two of you beside me —
 it seemed to me then it would be better
 if I were only a dream,
 if, waking, I found I was nothing at all, nowhere.
 It seemed to me the very sky full of light was my enemy,
 the gods themselves my enemies, the whole earth my enemy —
 this vessel of clay filled to its brim with my boundless shame.
 That is why I say: that disgrace which encompasses the whole world —
 may no one else, ever, in that same way, have to bear it.
 This is the prayer I make to fate."

Few people know what had actually happened; let me set it down here.
 Twelve years later, Apurva Ray appeared again at Kanai's door.
 Having built up and ruined, one after another, three theater ventures,
 he had become a cashier at a merchant's office —
 and there, at last, he found himself charged with cooking the books.
 He was about to be handcuffed,
 and so he came running to his lawyer cousin's house
 and beat his head on the floor before him.

Kanai said, "Do you not remember?"
 Apurva answered, head bowed, "That was all settled and done with, long ago."
 "Settled?" Kanai flared up in a terrible rage.
 "After all these years, it seems,
 you had hoped it would simply be settled and done."

On the floor below, Balai kept his office;
 Apurva went in, fearfully, to him instead.
 "Save me," he said.
 Balai shook, trembling from head to foot;
 he said no more, only rang the bell and called the doorman.
 Seeing his temper, Apurva made himself scarce.

Apurva's mother was the mistress of a great household herself;
 for her to come in person to these men's house
 would mean bowing her own head.
 So, hesitating this way and that,

she sent Purna instead, with a letter, off to Kashi.
Purna said, "Save us, aunt."

After this, their mother came back again from Kashi.
Kanai said to her, slowly, gently:

"You know, mother, your word is law to us —
but this is simply not something we can do.
Fate will give them their punishment; we shall give them our protection.
It is not right for anyone, mother, to do both at once."
If Kanai was inclined to soften, Balai stood firm, his face displeased.
"Let their aunt come here herself," he said,
"and fall at your feet — then we shall consider it."

Their mother said: "What is this you are saying?
In trying to remove one sorrow,
you would pierce my own heart with another!
Is this your sense of duty!"

And saying this, she went out hurriedly.

"Where are you going?" they asked.

"To Apurva's house," she said.

"My heart breaks with their sorrow;
I shall stay in their house until their trouble has passed."

"Wait, wait — stop, stop, what are you doing.

Very well, let us think it over.

Since it is your wish — very well then, let it be as you say."

Did she stop, even then?

She went, alone,

to the house of Apurva's people, their aunt.

There were no more doorkeepers now, no liveried footmen.

Bipin's mother, that same old servant woman, fell prostrate at her feet.

MUKTI

Let the doctor say what he will —
 leave them, leave those two windows by my pillow open;
 let the air fall upon my body.
Medicine? I am done now with taking medicine.
So much bitter, so much harsh medicine I have swallowed in this life,
 day after day, hour after hour.
To go on living — that itself has seemed a kind of illness;
 so many remedies, so many folk-cures,
 and at the smallest carelessness, such terrible retribution.
This is good, that is bad — obeying whatever anyone said,
 eyes lowered, veil drawn over my head,
 I have spent twenty-two years in this house of yours.
And so, at home and abroad,
 everyone called me Lakshmi, called me virtuous,
 called me such a very good woman!

I came into this household a girl of nine years old,
 and then, down the long narrow lane of this family,
 dragging this life of mine, laden with the wishes of everyone but myself,
I have come at last to the very edge of the road.
When was there ever time
 to think, even a little, of joy or of sorrow?
Whether this life was good or bad or something else again —
 when was there ever time to understand it,
 to weigh it, before and behind?
In one unbroken, weary rhythm
 the wheel of duty has gone on turning and turning.
Twenty-two years I have stayed bound to that one wheel,
 blind in its whirling turn.
I never knew what I myself was;
 I never knew with what meaning this vast earth is filled.
I never heard what word of humankind
 sounds upon the lyre of eternal time.
I know only this:

cooking, and then eating, and again after eating, cooking —
twenty-two years bound to that one wheel.
It seems to me now that wheel has stopped, at last.
Then let it stop. Why take medicine again.

Twenty-two springs came into the courtyard of the wood.
The southern wind, drunk with fragrance,
set the very heart of earth and water swaying;
it called out, "Open — oh, open the door."
I never knew, though, when it came or when it went.
Perhaps, deep within my mind, it gave a secret stir;
perhaps, in my household work, it made me suddenly err;
perhaps there throbbed within my breast some pain from another birth.
In a joy and sorrow without cause,
perhaps my spirit stood waiting,
listening for the sound of someone's footsteps,
bewildered in the reeling month of spring.
You would come home from your office,
and go out again in the evening,
somewhere in the neighborhood, to play at chess.
Let that rest.
Why does it come to mind today,
all this fleeting restlessness of the soul.

For the first time in my life, after these twenty-two years,
spring has come into my own house.
Looking through the window up toward the sky,
in joy, moment after moment,
my spirit is waking —
I am a woman, I am one greatly blessed;
the sleepless moon has tuned its string to mine,
upon the lyre of moonlight.
Were I not here, the rising of the evening star would be a lie;
the blossoming of flowers in the garden would be a lie.

For twenty-two years

I believed myself a prisoner, for all eternity, in this house of yours.

Yet even that held no sorrow for me;

my days passed in a numbed mind,

and would have passed so, had I lived on longer still.

Wherever my kin might be,

they gave me the name and fame of Lakshmi, the fortunate one;

in this life that seemed to me my highest fulfillment —

to be spoken of, in some corner of the house, by five approving mouths!

Today, sometime, I know not when,

the cord of my bondage has been cut.

Birth and death have become one, there,

in that shoreless, vast river-mouth,

and there, in that fathomless deep,

all the walls of my storeroom

melt away like a little froth upon the water.

After all this time, for the first time, it seems,

there sounds a wedding-flute across the whole sky of the world.

Let those trifling twenty-two years

lie fallen in the dust, in some corner of my house.

He who has called me to the bridal chamber of death,

who stands suitor at my door, is no mere lord and master —

he will never treat me with indifference.

He desires of me that deep, secret nectar hidden within me;

there, in the very assembly of planets and stars,

he stands gazing into my face, unblinking, forever.

Sweet is this world, sweet am I, a woman,

sweet is death, O my endless beggar.

Give me — open the door.

Let these futile twenty-two years

cross over the great sea of time.

THE LAST SONG

Those who lit the lamp of my songs, at evening and at morning,
with light kindled by the touch of their own hearts;
all the light and shadow of this life, all its white and black,
is their play;
those whose beloved forms move about outside me —
from the streams of their life's spring
my own spirit has become a thousand branching streams,
flowing on every side.

This span of life is not merely years strung along by time,
not merely a seven-stringed necklace of days and nights,
not merely the breath's coming and going.
The loving union of many lives, drawn close in kin and friend,
fills, moment by moment,
this vessel of my lifetime with the nectar of living.

One life's living loses its own boundary
in the flood-tide of all lives living, far, far beyond itself;
the clusters of its fruit-laden moments
fill with streams of sweetness.

And though they pass into the past,
still they sway on the stem of the present —
just as a child, though its bond with the womb is cut,
still remains a prisoner in its mother's lap and breast,
bound by the deep knot of love.

So it is that when, at the last, one by one,
those who are my own slip away, eluding the reach of my eyes,
into the land hidden behind the sunlight —
then this bereft and withered life of mine
dwindles down, along its thin, wasted course,
like the last trickle of a stream at the end of the rains,
its tired waters spent, abandoned,
upon some bare stretch of empty sand.

So then, you who stay beside me today, in this life's hour of sunset —
take their hands in yours,

and go on singing while the light of day remains.
Say this, my friend: this meeting, this touch —
this is good, this is good.
This is good, today, at this confluence,
in this Ganga-Yamuna of tears and laughter:
I have ridden the wave, I have taken the plunge,
I have filled my pitcher, and taken my leave.
This is good — this waking in the light together with the flowers,
this singing in this tongue;
this falling asleep at night among the stars,
in the hope of a new life to come.

FINAL GROUND

Always I hear this said:

"He is gone." "She has gone away."

And still I go on saying —

do not say, "He is no more."

That saying is a lie,

and so I cannot bear it in any way;

it goes and strikes at the very heart.

To human beings,

coming and going seem divided, kept apart.

And so their language

carries only half a hope.

I long to merge my spirit there, in that place —

in that ocean where "is" and "is not"

lie full and equal, one and the same.

LOST

My little girl, hearing her playmates calling,
was going down the stairs to the floor below,
pausing again and again, timid in the dark.
In her hand she held a small lamp,
sheltering it with the edge of her sari, walking carefully.

I was up on the roof-terrace,
on a night of Chaitra full of stars.
Suddenly, hearing my daughter cry, I rose
and ran to see what had happened.
Somewhere on the stairs, going down,
her little lamp had gone out in the wind.
I asked her, "What is it, Bami?"
She said, crying, from below:
"I am lost."

On that night of Chaitra, full of stars,
going back up to the terrace,
it seemed to me, looking up at the sky,
that just like my own little Bami,
some other girl was walking alone, slowly, carefully,
sheltering her lamp's small flame
with the edge of the blue sky's veil.
If that light went out, if she should suddenly falter and stop,
the whole sky would fill with crying:
"I am lost."

Translator's Notes

The title itself is the poem's central pun. Bhola is an ordinary boy's nickname, but it is also the verb "to forget," and — crucially, given the poem's opening image of Shiva's Ganges — an epithet of Shiva himself (Bholanath, "the guileless lord," the self-forgetting god of ash and abandon). The dead son and the new grandchild are both, in this light, incarnations of the same eternally returning, eternally careless

divine child. No single English word carries all three senses, so I left the name untranslated and let the Shiva imagery in the opening lines do the work.

"ষোলো-আনা" (sixteen annas) is an old idiom from pre-decimal currency (16 annas made one rupee) meaning "the full, complete measure of something." I kept the literal image — "all sixteen annas of it" — rather than flattening it to "completely," since it's exactly the kind of concrete, homely idiom Tagore favors.

"বৈতরণীর ঘাট" — the Baitarani is the mythic river the dead must cross, the Hindu counterpart to the Styx. I rendered it descriptively ("the far ghat of the river of death") rather than leaving the untransliterated name to stand alone, since without the myth's context an English reader would lose the image entirely.

❓ **বিজয়মালা vs. বরণমালা** is the whole poem in two words. *Bijoy-mala* is a "victory-garland," publicly won and publicly displayed. *Barana-mala* is the garland a bride places on the groom of her own choosing at a wedding — freely given, not competed for. There is no single English word that captures *barana*, so rather than force a false equivalence I rendered it descriptively: "a garland of choosing: a bride's own garland." Losing that compression is the one real casualty of translation here.

❓ **The string of place-names** — Kashi, Kanchi, Kanauj, Kosala, Anga, Banga, Madra, Magadha — are ancient Indian kingdoms and cities, evoking the entire subcontinent converging on the court. I left them untranslated, the way an English poet might invoke "from York to Cornwall" without gloss; the sound and sweep matter more than any reader identifying each one.

❓ **The ragas Dipak and Mallar** are classical melodic modes with strong legendary associations — Dipak with fire and (in folklore) the power to kindle flame, Mallar with the monsoon. There's no English equivalent that carries this charge, so I kept them as proper nouns.

❓ **চাঁপা (champak) and বকুল (bakul)** are specific, culturally loaded flowers in Bengali romantic and devotional poetry — not interchangeable with a generic "blossom." I kept their names rather than translating them as simply "flower,"

since Tagore's original readers would feel their particular fragrance and association immediately.

"কলিকালের ফলে" — "a fruit of the Kali Yuga." In Hindu cosmology, the Kali Yuga is the last and most degraded of the four world-ages. Rather than flatten this to something like "these days," I kept "in this age of Kali," preserving the sense that the neighbors are reaching for a whole mythic framework to excuse cruelty, not just shrugging at bad luck.

"দুধে কলায় পুষতে সাপের ছানা" — "raising a serpent's young on milk and bananas" — a live Bengali proverb about nurturing danger through misplaced kindness. It translates almost intact into English, so I kept it literal; the image carries its own force.

The household staff titles (দোবে-চোবে, সহিস, বেহারা, চাপরাসি) name specific colonial-era domestic roles — gatekeepers, grooms, palanquin-bearers, liveried orderlies. I translated by function ("doorkeepers and stewards," "grooms, bearers, liveried footmen") rather than transliterating, since the point is the sheer scale of the household, not the individual job titles.

"শিরোধার্য" — literally "to be borne upon the head." An idiom for treating someone's word as absolute and binding. I rendered it as the natural English idiom "your word is law to us," which loses the physical image but keeps the force.

Kashi and Ashwin/Puja — Kashi (Varanasi) is the holiest of Hindu pilgrimage cities, traditionally where the pious go to spend their final years; Ashwin's Puja holidays are the Durga Puja season, Bengal's largest festival. I kept both as concrete cultural markers rather than generalizing them, since the mother's choice of Kashi specifically as her retirement is meaningful.

"Twenty-two years" repeats like an incantation throughout the poem — I kept the exact repetition every time it recurs, rather than varying the phrasing for elegance, because the obsessive return to that number is clearly deliberate: it's the woman counting her own captivity aloud.

"লক্ষ্মী" and "সতী" — she is praised as Lakshmi (goddess of fortune and domestic prosperity, and by extension the model "good wife") and implicitly as sati (chaste, virtuous). I kept "Lakshmi" as a proper name with light context rather than collapsing it to plain "good," since the poem's entire argument is that this specific, culturally-loaded ideal of womanhood has been her cage.

Death as bridegroom (মরণ-বাসর — "death's bridal chamber," "suitor at my door") is the poem's radical center: dying reimagined as an erotic, liberating union rather than an ending. I translated this as literally and unflinchingly as English allows, resisting any softening, because the boldness of the image is the whole point.

"ভাঁড়ার-ঘরের দেয়াল" — "the walls of the storeroom" — a very concrete, domestic image (the pantry she has managed for twenty-two years) dissolving into "froth" on a cosmic sea. I kept the homely specificity of "storeroom" rather than abstracting it to something like "my house," since the collision of the tiny domestic detail with the vast cosmic image is exactly Tagore's method here.

"সাতনলি হার" — "a seven-stringed necklace" — a real style of traditional multi-strand necklace, used here as a metaphor for the accumulation of ordinary days. I kept the concrete image ("a seven-stringed necklace of days and nights") rather than abstracting it to something like "a chain of days," since the specificity is what makes it Tagore rather than generic elegy.

"গঙ্গাযমুনা" — the Ganga-Yamuna — the sacred confluence of two rivers at Prayag (Allahabad), one of Hinduism's holiest pilgrimage sites, where devotees bathe and fill vessels with the mingled waters. The whole closing passage — "riding the wave," "taking the plunge," "filling the pitcher" — is a pilgrimage image applied to a life of mixed joy and sorrow. I kept the proper noun rather than translating it as merely "a river," since the ritual action only makes sense against that specific holy geography.

The title, "শেষ প্রতিষ্ঠা," literally means something like "final establishment" or "ultimate ground(ing)" — it carries both the sense of a foundation and of a settled, unshakeable conviction. No single English phrase holds both senses at once, so I chose "Final Ground" to suggest both meanings together.

The poem's whole force rests on "আছে" and "নাই" — "is" and "is-not" — which in Bengali function almost as single compact particles rather than full verbs, giving the line "সে নাই" ("he/she is-not") a terrible flatness. I kept "is" and "is not" set off starkly in the closing line to preserve something of that bare, particle-like opposition, rather than expanding it into fuller English phrases like "he exists" and "he does not exist," which would soften the blow.

The title, "হারিয়ে-যাওয়া," is a gerund construction — literally "the going-astray" or "the having-become-lost" — with a gentler, more continuous quality than the flat English adjective "Lost." English doesn't have a clean equivalent for that grammatical shading, so I settled for the plainer, more natural title while trying to preserve the softness in the poem's language itself.

"বামী" (Bami) is a pet name or affectionate nickname for the little girl. I kept it as a proper name rather than translating it, since it functions purely as a term of endearment, the way "sweet pea" or a family nickname would in English.

The closing repetition of "I am lost" — the exact words the child cried out on the stairs — reappear, unchanged, as the imagined cry of the whole sky. I preserved this verbatim repetition deliberately: the poem's final effect depends on the small, literal fear of a child on a dark staircase being mirrored, cosmically, in the last line.