POETRY

PARISHESH

THE ENDING

Rabindranath Tagore

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BLESSING

into the lotus-hands of Shrimaan Atulprasad Sen

Over Bengal's horizon spreads a monsoon of song,
pouring in a hundred streams, swollen with the flood of feeling;
now the fire of the thunderbolt, now the soft fall of tears,
sounding in music, in rhythm, through his gathering clouds.
The curved crescent kisses his cloud-dark, matted locks
with a blessing-chant, and builds, layer upon layer,
a magic web of beauty; and how many shafts of light
he lays upon it at dawn, and again when the day closes —
light's own touchstone. Today, on the east wind,
out of Bengal's sky, to every rim of the horizon,
a glad rain has scattered itself abroad,
carried on the joy of life, into the west, into the north —
and given, O Atulprasad, Bengal's own vina-bearer,
unto your waking songs, its blessing without end.

Notes — করকমলে, "into the lotus-hands," is a standing Bengali dedication formula. বঙ্গবীণাপাণি ("Bengal's vina-bearer") plays on বীণাপাণি, a standing epithet of the goddess Saraswati — Tagore is quietly naming Atulprasad Bengal's living Saraswati. The geography is not incidental: Sen practiced law in Lucknow from 1902 until his death in 1934, which is why the poem sends its monsoon "into the west, into the north" to find him. The Bengali is a strict fourteen-line চতুর্দশপদী (sonnet), rhymed ABAB CDCD EFEF GG — I kept the shape, not the rhyme.

SALUTATION

I never understood its meaning — I found it, picked it up, some day I no longer remember,
this many-coloured, many-painted flute of wondrous play,
upon the road. In that dawn, in the light and dark of dusk,
at the first moment of meeting, we both took our delight,
in the shadow of a red veil. In the ocean of the great silence
morning's flood of speech, restless, gathered into a hundred streams
and raised a rippling swell. So many travellers went by so many roads
for treasure hard to find, to cloud-piercing, unreachable mountains,
crossing seas that cannot be crossed. Only my own days and nights,
only my own absent-minded wandering, came to nothing.
I have gone seeking the touch of the deep, and turned back; nothing more
have I gathered — I have only followed, and followed, after what cannot be held.
I have only filled my flute with the breath of life,
have tried, again and again, to knot the manifold melodies
onto the strings of my own instrument. Before the flower opens,
in the month when spring first stirs, the ache that wakes in the tree's marrow
I invited into my own entranced tune,
into a cadence trembling with longing. The fallen leaf,
in my song, has left behind its last long sigh.
In the inner chamber of the earth, when the sun's rays come down,
in blade after blade of grass, in bud after bud,
that silent, ululating joy which spreads and spreads
behind the grey veil of morning — that I have let rise
through every hole of this flute; in what vast, secret feeling
night's fingers turn, in silence, a rosary,
chanting a litany in praise of light —
I have kept it inside my flute, held against my own breast,
and found it there alone, in the trembling of my own heart;
the imprisoned, secret fragrance
that wanders through a young bud, searching a dream-heaven
for its tray of offering — its uncertain ache

my flute has gathered into song, in its soft, murmuring voice.
In the drum-thunder of consciousness's troubled waves
the Lord of the Dance is dancing, on a seat of tumultuous laughter,
the play of bottomless tears has mingled into a babbling roar,
rising, resounding, resounding — shadow and sun swing on that same swing
in a tireless surge. I, sitting on the shore, to its wild rhythm,
have bound my songs, and found, hidden inside my own measure,
the joy-and-sorrow of the infinite. The feeling of the whole world
has composed, within the discipline of music, its countless unspoken prayers.
At this last edge of the road of song, O mankind, at your temple
I have come, at day's end, to the shore of night's silence,
at the evening hour of the lamps; and at the feet of the One
I have laid down this wondrous flute of play — this alone remains my salutation.

Notes — নর্মবাঁশি, "flute of play," a flute given in jest that becomes a whole vocation. নটরাজ, Nataraja, Shiva's cosmic-dance form, kept in English translation as "the Lord of the Dance." আরতি, the evening ritual of waving lit lamps before a deity — rendered as "the hour of the lamps." The poem's closing gesture (laying the flute at "the feet of the One") is a প্রণাম itself — a bow performed by the whole poem, not just described by it.

BICHITRA

While I was still in my mother's lap,
saying you would teach me to play the flute,
you stole me away,
O Bichitra, Bichitra,
to where your bright playhouse of colours stands.

Under the open sky, your hair let loose,
you played your flute in secret,
and that enchanted air unveiled
a dream-picture in a hundred shapes;
the lost ones found each other
on the road of fable,
and passed beyond the edge of dust
into the endless field of story.

At noon, in the coconut fronds overhead,
a trembling stirs —
its signal used to reach my heart,
O Bichitra, Bichitra,
who knows what it is they say.
Day after day you turned me back
into the country of meaningless tune;
strange words shimmered in my mind
like dew upon the grass.
Morning light would rise, trembling,
in a breast that shook with joy;
my heart danced, without leave,
for no reason, in unreasoning delight.

The stream of life runs to no shore,
storms rise in joy and sorrow —
you set me adrift on it,

O Bichitra, Bichitra,
where in the dark sky the thick clouds have called.
To the beat of that same wave
you played your lyre,
waking my pain, plucking
the trembling strings.
Upon my sail you drove
a sudden wind of song,
and swept my little boat
all at once to an unheard-of shore.

Chaitra's moonlit night,
mixed with the scent of jasmine and Arabian jessamine;
the sound of water, along the riverbank,
O Bichitra, Bichitra,
would make my sleeplessness restless.
In youth, on such wild nights,
into whose sorrowful eyes,
in the moon's faint light,
did I try to fit the Sohini raga?
At whose shy smile,
brimming with sweet hesitation,
did the shamefaced tears
tremble and quiver?

Then, suddenly waking,
you tore away
the mute curtain of night,
O Bichitra, Bichitra,
and struck it with a bolt of fire.
In a deep voice you called out,
"Do not stay idle."
In the dead of night you shook me,
and said, "Wake, wake."
In the bridal chamber you put out the lamp,

you undid the wedding-garland,
and the earth, shaking her dust-covered veil,
raised a cry of lamentation.

Tearing the very veins of my breast
I have paid you a fearsome worship —
sometimes worship in a fair lotus,
O Bichitra, Bichitra,
sometimes in laughter, sometimes in welling tears.
Whatever harvest has ripened,
splitting open my chest,
grain by grain, at your feet,
I have laid it down as offering.
And still, why have you brought your basket
now, as the day comes to its close —
will you fill it to the brim
only by making me utterly empty?

Notes — Bichitra (kept untransliterated, like a proper name) means roughly "the wondrous, many-coloured one" — Tagore's muse-figure for the sheer strangeness of being alive. চৈত্রমাসে, Chaitra, the last month of the Bengali calendar (mid-March–mid-April). সোহিনী রাগ, Sohini, a Hindustani classical raga traditionally sung late at night. ভীষণ পূজা, "fierce worship" — a deliberate oxymoron; worship is not supposed to be ভীষণ (terrible, dreadful).

BIRTHDAY

Along the sun's circling path, the birthday's turning
comes now to its close.
My garland of fierce discipline,
of ascetic's beads,
reaches its final knot,
threading, one by one, these sun-scorched days.
O ascetic, stretch out your hand,
receive this garland.

Fierce was the seat of your penance;
there, day after day, I hailed you
in hard hymns of praise,
sometimes in noon's blaze, sometimes in the storm-wind's breath.
Now come down from that penance —
show me where your forest home lies,
shadow-deep, where your sky is red
and grieving with the hint of monsoon rains.
There, the afternoon in its tired leisure
spreads across sky after sky
a wonder of many colours; there the evening star,
speechless,
lighting a flame of speech,
quietly arranges, seated,
a tray for the endless one's evening worship.
Green with her gift of the south wind,
the earth's easy hospitality
lies there, tender, at peace,
her boundless treasury of sweetness
brings, into every life,
manifold delight in shape, in flavour, in song.

Let there be a holiday for me today,

in the courtyard of this world —
sever the cord of my labour.
I would go back today and gather up
the flowers the reckless wind has blown down
carelessly, into the dust,
the birds' nests filling, day by day,
with such easy song,
touched by light, in the strumming
of the green world's own tanpura.
This touch of the being of the world,
this hidden delight of life
in the depths of land and water,
let me gather into myself, inward, inward —
into the whole body, into the bloodstream,
into the sight of the eyes, into the voice,
into waking, into meditation, into half-sleep,
on the shore of life's last, resting sea.
In the grey hour of this life's dusk,
in the lake of the world's flavour
let me fill, one last time, my heart, my mind, my body,
casting away all labour, all argument, all doubt,
all fame, all vain desire,
and say, as I go: I go, I leave behind — my love.

Notes — তপস্বী, the ascetic, addressed here as both an outside figure and a mirror of the poet's own disciplined life. The closing line, "রেখে যাই, মোর ভালোবাসা" ("I leave behind — my love"), is one of Tagore's most-quoted lines on legacy; I kept its bareness rather than smoothing it into a fuller sentence.

THE WAYFARER

Do not ask me where freedom is, to whom I preach freedom —
I am no seeker, no guru.
I am a poet; I stay
very close to the earth,
at the ferry-landing on this shore.
Before me the river of life, in ebb and flood,
carries on, forever, shade and light,
the bad, the good,
so much that drifts away, so much, in heaps, that is forgotten,
gain and loss, tears and laughter —
one bank is built up by the wearing away of the other;
over that current the dawn rises, reddening, reddening,
and a line of moonlight falls like a mother's finger;
in the black night, all the stars
tell their beads in silent meditation; the setting sun
trails its crimson shawl and departs, and on that ripple
the madhavi-blossom sets afloat
its tray of sweetness,
and the bird pours out its song.

When, to that dance-rhythm of the waves, in that strange, shifting motion,
the heart itself dances to its own music
within this flowing of the world —
in that rhythm is my bondage, and in it, too, my freedom.
I wish to keep nothing, I do not wish to cling and stay;
I wish to go on floating, together with everyone,
untying, again and again, the knot of parting and meeting,
lifting my small boat's sail into the runaway wind.

O great Wayfarer,
your ten directions lie open before you.
You have no temple, no heaven's home,

no final destination;
your pilgrimage is at every step;
walking with you, I find my freedom in the wealth of walking itself,
in the dance of the restless, in the song of the restless,
in the all-forgetting gift of the restless —
in darkness, in light,
at every turn of creation, in every flicker of its dissolution.

Notes — সাধক and গুরু, "seeker" and "guru" — I kept "guru" as itself, now common in English. মহাপথিক, "Great Wayfarer," addresses the same restless principle named in the title, now grown cosmic. The closing pair, "সৃজনের পর্বে পর্বে, প্রলয়ের পলকে পলকে" — creation measured in stages, dissolution in instants — sets up a scale contrast I tried to keep audible in English.

UNFULFILLED

The hunger that lives in the eyes, the hunger in the ears,
the hunger of touch that turns, on every side, to the world's own call,
the hunger for material things, hunger of the beggar soul —
whose vow is only the search for substance;
the mind's hunger that longs for language,
the hunger for company that waits, always, on the road, hoping for someone;
the hunger with no object, that lives on
secretly, inward, for the unknown —
all of these together, day after day,
in a thousand pulls of attraction, build up the shape of a mind.
How much truth, how much falsehood, how much hope, how much desire,
how much doubt, how much argument, how much belief,
how much self-inflicted pain from fears of our own making,
how much comfort, imagined in how many forms —
the days pass with self-made gods,
the next day breaks them into clay again;
how much rubbish, from the burden of the past,
turned, through tangled habit, into custom;
how many wordless commands float on the wind,
pointing with a bodiless finger;
how many dream-shapes the heart's hidden desire
draws, and then wipes away again;
how much love, how much renunciation, for the impossible,
how many flights of fancy on borrowed wings,
how much worship of greatness, how much prayer to the unworthy,
how much true striving, how much wasted self-deception,
how much victory, how much defeat —
binding all of this together,
in good and bad, in black and white,
in matter and shadow, a figure is made, and you stand there, in the light.

Birthday after birthday, this work of weaving comes to its end —

joy, sorrow, fear, shame, suffering,
work begun and unbegun, finished and unfinished,
desires fulfilled, and the wreckage of what has decayed —
gathered into the shape of you, at last,
melts, in the end, into — where?
This stream of consciousness,
suddenly arisen, suddenly, one day, to lose its motion —
for what, this?
Sometimes clouded in sleep, sometimes waking,
in the real and in imagination it drew its own boundary,
it built its own image.
In this vast history, unfolding through countless such makings,
whose is this play, from age to age, from era to era?

Birthday, deathday — and between them, filling this field of life —
who are you?
Where is your address to be found?
By whom are you known, intimately, as truth?
Being and not-being mingled, your unfinished self
cannot make its own broken cry
heard; in the cruel rebellion of its own weakness
it is blocked, even in its wish to be revealed,
and stops, midway, under the rule of death.
The word by which you wished to announce yourself to the universe —
is its ending so sudden,
is there, nowhere, its final fulfilment?
If incompleteness, in its own pain,
finds no assurance of the whole,
then why, day and night,
this endless quarrel with itself?
A small seed, struggling with the soil,
wants to sprout upward, seeking freedom in the light.
If that freedom is not true,
must its blind, mute sorrow end in eternal defeat?

Notes — মানস-আকৃতি, "the shape of a mind," the poem's governing image: a self built entirely out of want. The closing question about the seed directly answers back to a metaphor Tagore returns to across his work — the soul's blind push toward light — but here, unusually, he lets the question stay open rather than resolving it.

I

Today I think to myself: do I even know
the one whose speaking is my own voice,
whose walking is my own walking,
whose art shows in my pictures,
whose melody sounds in song after song of mine,
who, in joy and sorrow, day after day, is the wondrous one within my own life?
I had thought he was bound within me,
that all this laughter and weeping of this life,
drawing a circle around me,
had enclosed him in all my play, in all my work.
I had thought he was my own self,
that he would walk the length of my birth and stop still at my death.

But then why does it come back to me, that in deep delight,
in the sight and touch of my beloved,
again and again
I found him,
on the shore of a boundless sea of sweetness,
that self of mine from long before?
So I know: that self is not a prisoner within my own boundary;
in the greatness of a legendary hero,
losing myself,
I find him in myself, crossing time and space in an instant.
The self that lies hidden, shadowed, in my own corner,
lost to view,
I come to know it, luminous, in the history of the saint.
Age after age, in the words of poets,
that same self has learned to know itself.

Along the horizon, in the wind and speed of the monsoon,
in the blue clouds
the rains come descending.

I sit and think:
this same self, across age after age,
takes on how many forms,
how many names, how many births, how many deaths, crosses back and forth,
how many times over.
The vast, unbroken whole that reigns, holding past and future together,
within that humanity
I shall see, today, quietly, this self of mine —
the one that goes everywhere.

Notes — The poem's engine is Bengali's plain, unemphatic আমি ("I"), repeated until it stops meaning the everyday grammatical subject and starts meaning something closer to the Upanishadic Self. English capitalizes such things by reflex; I kept it lowercase throughout and let the repetition do the work instead.

YOU

When the sun raised its banner
at the edge of the dark,
you and I came to know
the sound of its chariot-wheel.
That sound ran to the bakul branches,
into the restless wings of the morning wind,
and went waking, as it passed,
the sleeping nests, the wayfarers of the sky's road.
The dawn-chariot's sound
taught the road its own mantra,
so that, step by step, the walking of us both
came into a single rhythm.
The wound of light, piercing the dark,
touched the breast of the forest;
a new awakening, a fresh anointing,
came invisibly into the sky.
The young leaves grew restless,
trembling and shimmering in the dew;
the golden lotus of the goddess of music
swayed before the eyes of the world.
Amid the crimson blooming of the flame-of-the-forest
a great clamour rose,
and you and I, our voices joined together,
sang out the victory of light.

Filling this boat of life with music
we set out afloat into the boundless, with delight —
knowing you, not knowing you, my eternal companion,
you walked on beside me.
In your eyes rose the dawning sun,
a hymn of welcome, silent, deep;
in the sorrowful poet of the setting west

your dress trailed in cadence.
From the reddening dawn to the tender dusk,
toward the far horizon,
the morning song of welcome came to its end
in the sad tune of evening.
In my eyes, with your collyrium,
the picture of the world has bloomed;
by your mantra, on these strings of mine,
a sacred hymn has been sung.
Your inner heart is deep beyond me,
my days are a foaming dance;
you are the eternal, I am the new,
I am transient, you abide.
When my own spring is lost,
in autumn you bring it back to me.
In your own unearthly beauty
you keep swaying my new-made form, day after day.

Night comes, the nurse of dreams,
the voice of the forest turns quiet.
Carrying her pot filled with water,
along the riverbank, the young wife's tired feet return home.
Over the whole world the grief of day gathers dark,
outside, in the sky, the light goes out;
lighting up my inner world instead,
you came, entire, into my heart.
In your hidden light, your dark eyes
sent, from the country of the evening star,
a secret sign — to what end,
I do not know.
I have seen your delicate eyes
in a world newly wakened.
I have seen the gleam of your golden laughter
in the daybreak-brightened scene.
When the day's journey comes to its close

you have washed my life clean in the pure dark,
I have seen you open your eyes
onto the boundless, distant future.
Your song plays in unknown stars,
and is lost across the sky.
My breast trembles, again and again,
my eyes have filled with tears.

You lit the lamps of love,
and it was your own light's radiance;
in my music you always offered
your own silent contentment.
Hiding me from myself, you gave
into my own language a deep, hidden word;
in the painted patterns of my art, I know, I know,
was your own silent brushwork.
On the thousand-petalled lotus of my heart, you,
the goddess of the vina, laying out
your seat of music,
have kept the hours of day speaking —
and now this night has come.

I no longer know that familiar face,
it is growing hidden in the dark.
Why has your voice, your shape, fallen silent today —
where, alas, does it lie sleeping?
On every side you are veiled,
I cannot find the shore of your great silence,
the rhythm of your laughter and tears
has grown lost in some deep place.
Only the dense ringing of the cricket
sounds within the breast of the silence.
You are near, and yet you are lost,
astray in this directionless night.

Will your presence, filling this whole life,
turn empty here?
Will the string of that vina you once strung
be broken here?
On the road where you were once my companion,
do not, on that road, put out your lamp;
in this night of mine, let the arati-flame
still keep it sacred.
Even today the glow of your eyes still burns
inside my own eyes;
in death's own gathering, you and I together
will sing the victory of light.

Notes — The addressee shifts and layers across the poem's five movements — companion, muse, nature, the divine — deliberately never named. বীণাপাণি recurs (see poem 1): "the goddess of the vina" is Saraswati again, now cast as the speaker's own inward music-maker. আরতি, the lamp-ritual, threads through the whole book as its recurring image of devotion.

I AM

In Baishakh, the hot wind grows wild
at leaf after torn leaf of the banana tree by the well;
along the village road, now and then, it raises dust,
and calls out, as it passes, to the flame-of-the-forest by the roadside;
the impatient bel-flowers, all of them, grow withered,
their faint scent gathered up and scattered on a long sigh;
it flings the dried togor blossoms away,
plays whatever game it likes with the tender young ashath leaves;
in the bamboo grove, something is being tugged and fought over;
on the branches of the date-palm, a shaking, a rustling;
in the shade-thick, bird-crowded quarter of the banyan branch
it rushes through and startles two sleeping doves from their rest;
the hard red earth rolls away in waves, and vanishes in the distance,
and there, from time to time, a dance turns and turns;
suddenly it breaks off and races north into the palm grove
at that faint blue haze on the horizon;
along the telegraph wires
it tunes a note, string after string, in mocking ripples;
so the hours pass,
and I sit alone at the window in this same wind.
I am like that chatim tree, just as it is,
carrying the simple stir of a living being, close to the earth;
as it has this trembling of leaves, this same greenness,
so, in rhythm, wakes this small thing I say today.
Let there be no fame, let there be no weight of great deeds,
no heap of others' burdens, no heavy load of vain desire —
today, that I lived, mingled among everyone, in everyone's heart,
that message alone remains, in my song.

Notes — চাতিম, the chatim tree (Alstonia scholaris), a common, unglamorous Bengal shade tree — I kept the name rather than substituting a generic "tree," since the poem's entire claim rests on choosing something ordinary. বৈশাখ, Baishakh, the fierce, hot first month of the Bengali year.

THE BOY

When I was a boy, in the room at the top of the stairs,
in the hushed hours of noon,
leaning my head against the door,
a mat spread on the floor,
alone, alone, I would pass the sunlit hours —
I obeyed no rule of study, I played at no game.
Far off in the sky a kite would cry;
the branches of the sissoo tree shimmered in the wind.
In burning thirst, its beak parted,
a crow would come, now and then, to perch on the wall.
The chatter and coming-and-going of sparrows filled the air —
their nest was there, in a corner of the rafters.
A peddler's call would drift from beyond the lane —
who is that, flying a kite from some far roof?
Sometimes, now and then,
in what house does a clock-bell ring.
Ahead lay the vast unknown, the far country past all sight,
sounding some tune that made me forget my own house.
For what recognition
did that sky-caught, absent mind stay always awake?
A liking for no reason,
a sorrow for no reason, wove together a dream with no beginning, no end.
Companionless, yet not alone —
it seemed I could see a blue seat spread out along the horizon.

Now I have set my foot at seventy, on the shore where life runs out,
and today I have opened a window, inward.
Again, just as in my boyhood days,
my eyes turn open toward that same far horizon, the hours passing without a task.
It is the season of fierce heat,

the shirish branches shiver and tremble;
by the well, under the tamarind shade,
the neighbourhood dog has fallen asleep, in the sweet touch of the damp earth.
The bullocks are freed a while from the cart, and lie exhausted
on the grassless ground in the jamun's shade.
Beside the gravel path
the withered leaves gather, poor, at the foot of the gardenia.
I watch, my two eyes touching everything,
my thoughts laid down among everyone.
As a boy is bare of covering,
so is my own mind;
in the green shade of that garden, in the blue of this sky,
it merges, unresisted, into one.
In the midst of all that is known
sounds the conch-call of some unknown thing, forever.
In all the boundaries of this earth
the hidden coming and going of the boundless
has made me lose myself, absent, unmindful.

Notes — "সত্তরে আজ পা দিয়েছি", "I have set foot today at seventy," anchors this poem — and, by extension, the whole book — to 1931, the year Tagore turned seventy. It's the single clearest internal date-marker in the collection.

YEAR'S END

The journey nears its end; at the far western edge of my life's road
the shadow of death now gathers, drawing close.
The setting sun, breaking the last clasp of its own generosity,
scatters its treasure, both hands full.
In this glory of colour, blazing at the very rim of death,
I have beheld the majesty of life.

With these last words my breath, at last, will come to rest —
how much I have loved, in this life.
Its endless mystery, brimming over on every side,
has made life and death into a single thing;
this cup of sorrow, again and again, by day and in the night,
it has filled, instead, with a wonder past all telling.

Alone, I have made my pilgrimage along sorrow's impassable road,
the fierce storm of Baishakh has struck me down.
So many days without a companion, so many nights bereft of any lamp —
in the midst of them, deep within, I have found a sign.
The garland of thorns that slander wove has pierced my breast, again, again,
and I have known it, too, for a wreath of honour.

Gazing, unblinking, into the face of this world of light,
I have found no end to my own wonder.
That Goddess of Fortune who dwells forever in her lotus-garden of sweetness —
I have felt her touch, in every limb, in my own mind.
That breath which ripples on, through all the universe, in tears and in laughter —
that breath I have caught, and held, inside my flute.

Those who wore, in human shape, a divine word beyond all telling —
I have come to know them as my own.
How many times defeated, how many times ashamed, how many times afraid,
and still, in my throat, the victory of the boundless has sounded.

Through my unfinished striving, moment by moment, from a weeping soul,
the barred door, again, has come open.

I have received, in this world of the living, the birthright of a human life —
this good fortune of mine is blessed indeed.
Wherever, through age after age, some stream of nectar has sprung up,
in knowledge, in labour, in feeling — I know that it was meant for me.
Whatever picture of wholeness has ever risen, shining, in my own life,
I know it belongs, then, to everyone.

Sitting on a seat of dust, I have seen the Vast, with meditation's eye,
in a light beyond all light.
Subtler than the subtlest atom, greater than the greatest,
beyond the senses' reach — that, too, I have found, and sought.
Moment by moment I have seen, piercing through the body's veil,
a flame that never goes out, forever shining.

Wherever any ascetic has performed some hard and arduous rite,
I have received my portion of it, too.
Whoever, freed from the bondage of delusion, has conquered their own self,
in that one I have found my own true likeness.
Wherever some fearless hero has crossed over death with ease,
there, too, is my place, in that same history.

Whoever is the greatest of the great, however many times I forget the name,
still I have bowed before that one, in salutation.
Deep in my heart the silent sky's own blessing has touched me;
in the light of dawn I have received the grace of joy.
In this wondrous world, in the manifold glory of a life well lived,
my death, too, will come to its fullness.

Today, this is the year's last arrangement of farewell —
Death, unveil now your own face.
So much, I know, I know, has fallen and been lost — so much of tenderness, of love,
has gone out like a lamp, and left behind no memory.

Death, your hands are full of life's own deathless moment,
O final one, in the wealth of the unending.

Notes — ভূমা (Bhuma), "the Vast," is a direct borrowing from the Chandogya Upanishad's yo vai bhūmā tat sukham ("the Infinite is bliss") — I capitalized it to flag the shift in register. বৈশাখী, the fierce Nor'wester storm of the month Baishakh, recurs across this book as Tagore's private shorthand for calamity. This is among the most anthologised poems in the collection; its six-line stanzas, each closing on a shorter line, give it the pace of a hymn.

FREEDOM

I

Give me courage, give me strength, O eternally beautiful one,
give me the clear sky of contentment, give me freedom, without end,
from the daily pain of dust that clings about my walking feet;
do not let me sway on the tide of a rippling moment,
in the lashing of distress. In a garden of flowers on a Shravan evening
that shame-free courage that lives in the life of the tender jasmine —
under the pitiless beating of the rain, fearless, glad, and sweet,
fills, in a single moment, its small life with the tune of the eternal,
and falls, in simple, joyful laughter, onto its bed of grass,
weaving, within its own modest heart,
the very image of fulfilment in fragrance; give me that same
unshaken courage, that self-forgetting strength, unrestless, at ease with itself
within its own beautiful limit — let a hesitation-free simplicity
bind, in the rhythm of peace, all my thought, all my speech.

II

To flee far away, even from your own self,
O beautiful one, O unseen one, I beg your grace,
your call inviting me onward. Let your flute sound today,
in the monsoon-flood raga that fills my whole heart — let me forget,
in the scorching whirlwind of what is near, its troubled noise,
the dust's tight grip beneath my feet. I stand unmoving
the whole day at the roadside; evening comes, deepening its shade,
the tired sun searches, at the horizon, for its final peace.
As the day goes on, fearless, a pathless, companionless
pilgrim of the dark, from its own self
toward the endless unknown, lost in the eternal's music — even so,
in that same self-giving, take me too, out of myself,
let emptiness, on emptiness, become filled with music,

and lead me, from road to road, O unseen one, O the far, the vast beyond.

Notes — Two companion sonnets, freer in form than poem 1's strict চতুর্দশপদী. চিরসুন্দর, "the eternally beautiful one," and the unnamed presence addressed in part II, are left unnamed in the Bengali as well — I resisted the urge to supply a "You" or a capital-G God that isn't there.

THE CALL

Where you keep, on my behalf, along the road,
a seat prepared for me — that I keep asking, again and again.
Carried on the wind, I have caught your signal, seeking union,
in dew-washed light, on grass draped with shiuli-flowers,
I have sought your direction in the murmuring, restless babble of water
along the river's eager, unquiet banks.
In the corner of the sky where clouds gather into a fair illusion,
where, beneath the clear water, shadows play at the water's edge,
where the dove calls from the ashath branch — there, the whole day through,
I have heard, again and again, your flute.

How am I to know, in seeking you, where you call from,
your terrible war-drum sounding? Shame overtakes me, my heart does not wake,
I do not run to you, hesitation delays me at the door.
Wherever you have called — where humankind suffers under insult,
where light goes out in a fear-struck life,
it is there your war-drum has sounded, calling out to me,
where the prisoner weeps, there, in the prison-house.
Where the stone foundation trembles, the earth's breast splitting open,
where the dust-buried fire of revolt makes the ground shake,
where, in a moment, the bonds of many ages are cut and cast away —
sound your war-drum there, again and again.

Notes — The imagery of prisoners and shaken foundations here anticipates the Buxa Fort poem later in the book; Tagore's late poetry keeps returning to political imprisonment as the place where the divine "call" presses hardest.

THE DOOR

O door, you stand open, forever, at every moment,
only the blind eye finds you shut.
What lies within, the blind cannot understand, and so
they always hesitate to enter.

O door, awake always, day and night,
your call sounds, deep and grave.
In the sun's rising, open yourself.
In the darkness, open yourself among the stars.

O door, from seed to the ranks of the sprout,
open the road, from flower to fruit.
Make age pass freely into age,
make death pass freely into highest immortality.

O door, all living things, gateway after gateway,
make their journey, death after death.
On the path of freedom's discipline, at your sign,
"Do not fear" sounds, in the midnight of despair.

Notes — A short, hymn-like invocation built entirely on the repeated address "O door" (হে দুয়ার); the poem's whole argument is that the door was never shut, only the eye was.

THE LAMP

Every evening, a new chapter,
light your new lamp.
On the canvas of each dawn, write, day by day,
a fresh manuscript of light.
Against the darkness your unyielding
battle comes, again and again;
day after day comes so much defeat,
day after day the striving toward victory.
Losing the path, and losing it again, you find the path once more,
in that same eagerness you bear the pain of the road;
bound in delusion, caught in the world's contradictions,
even so, worship of the divine is made.

Break the playhouse you have built, and build the playhouse again,
break the game you have played, and play again.
Building a nest, and building it again, the mind breaks its own nest —
nowhere does it find a resting seat.
I know that beyond this road's end lies the ocean,
in every moment the tide-water mingles there;
in moment after moment, still, without end,
the wayfaring river hurries on.
Leaving behind, again and again, one fixed song,
new melodies return, again and again;
in death after death, in a startled stride,
the dancer of life still hurries on.

Notes — The closing phrase, প্রাণনটিনী — literally "life's dancing-girl" — I rendered as "the dancer of life," since a literal nartaki carries performer/courtesan connotations in Bengali that would mislead rather than illuminate here.

WRITING

All writing is lost, in order to be written again, again,
in the letters of a new age. Why do you keep, page after page,
filled with your withered characters. The time has come
to leave the road for the newer artist's brush. Let there be an end
to this fortress of finished lines. Let the new writing come, in pride,
scatter the ruined heap of its broken walls to the far distance,
and clear a path, conquering the boundary of what stands still,
for the procession of the new. Let the unfamiliar
take the place of the unversed. In time's temple, in its house of worship,
when the age's triumphant festival is done,
the day of the old image passes. The dust calls out to it, and says —
"Come back again into me, wear away, wear away, until you become imperishable,
let the sculptor shape, from your clay, a new image,
that will show, again, the boundless one's boundless new boundaries."

Notes — প্রতিমা, the clay image of a deity built fresh for a festival and ritually dissolved back into the river afterward (as at the close of Durga Puja), is the poem's operating metaphor for a poet's own obsolescence — I unpacked it slightly for readers unfamiliar with the ritual.

THE NEW LISTENER

I

The notebook of my last poem —
I read it aloud, page after page,
Amiyanath sits still, and shakes his head, entranced.
Overflowing, he says: "Your deathless poem
is written in the rhythm of eternity, in the language of truth."
Little Nandagopal, with his cart tied on a string,
goes clattering, dragging it round the hall's doorway.
"Stop that, my boy, stop it," I say,
"such mischief —
does anyone push a cart around while poetry is being read?
See how well-behaved your uncle Ami is."

With much effort, playing the good boy,
Nanda comes and sits pressed close beside his uncle.
That restless child
fixes his wide eyes on my face,
sits still a minute or two, then tugs at Ami, saying,
"Listen, uncle,
you promised to fix the cart's broken wheel,
screw it tight, go on."
Ami whispered, low, "Hush, hush, hush."
Once more Nanda sat still a while, listening
to the master poet's deathless rhythm.

A little later, fidgeting, he tipped
ten or twelve cowries out of his cart onto the floor.
Jingling, the cowries roll and chime a rhyme of their own —
after this, there is no more reading poetry.
How long can his rhyme and my rhyme go on competing —
in the end, I shall have to concede defeat.

Ami said, "Naughty boy." Nanda said, "I'm cross with you —
I'll take my cart away,
I'll call brother Din to play trains up on the roof,
the cart will go rattling off to the fair at Baddibati."
So saying, with tearful, wavering eyes,
he ran off with his cart, who knows in which direction.

I said, "Go, Amiya, let today's reading rest,
Nandagopal has brought the call of a newer time.
He paid no attention to my rhythm — its meaning
only I understand, and maybe no one else does.
Even the poet whose poems he'll listen to
is, himself, today, still playing at pushing his own toy cart around the station-platform game.

When my own fair comes to its end and I take the ferry across,
his fair will arrive, and his cart will reach it.
If, in the middle of my reading,
the bell of his arrival should ring,
I hope I can, with an easy heart, leave the gathering,
and hand the new age's flute to a newer life's own song.
I have filled this basket of mine with this same spring's flowers —
no one need string another spring's garland from it."

II

Some twenty years went by; the game with the little cart was over;
Nanda said, "Grandfather, read me what you've written — let's hear it now!"
I went to read, screwing up my courage,
but my voice caught in my throat;
pulling out this notebook and that, I fumbled,
turning page after page, this one, that one.
Fearfully, I look at each poem I've written,
it seems to me there is no juice left in it, only line after line of dry writing.

Secretly, I glance at his face —
there sits judgment, without an ounce of mercy.
This newer age's honed forehead is sharp as a sword,
merciless toward whatever is withered, whatever has grown old.
His eyes are sharp, always alert,
in his glance he catches, at once, wherever a thing rings false.
In the world, wherever there's a hollow, a hidden cave, it peers in everywhere,
face to face, always, with unmixed reality.
Fierce is his laughter,
a commentary on the world's business, steeped in disillusion.

Clearing my throat a little, I began to read
what my own guru had once taught me, in my youth, unknown even to myself —
the story of a first love,
of one who does not know herself, in that deep restlessness,
that same shy, sweet, sharp trembling
in a breast beating fast with fear,
a pair of dark eyebrows curved like a bird's wing in flight,
a silent language in the eyes,
which, in an instant, brims over with the hope of a whole life,
and that hesitation's wound, trembling with pain,
one or two songs.

The joyful noise of running water, laughing and babbling,
the worship-stilled breath of an autumn morning,
the grey, world-renouncing evening on the western sea's shore,
the sleepless peace-message of the eternal in the dark of night,
in the touch of spring nights, the flower-thrilled forest floor,
some unseen, long-desired shadow of a forest path,
wandering, again and again, restless,
its restlessness murmured out — these things,
its echo-laden, one or two rhymed quatrains,
timidly, in haste, I read through to the end.

When my reading was over, after a moment's silence,

Nandagopal, with sudden enthusiasm, burst out —
"Grandfather, bravo!
I got the flavour of your era's history."
He reached his hand out for the notebook; I covered it with my shawl,
and said to him: "Tell me, dear boy, where has your uncle Amiya gone?"

Notes — The book's one comic, domestic poem. ইস্টিশন, the child's phonetic borrowing of English "station," is part of the charm — the pun on old-and-new language doesn't survive translation, but the affection does. Part II's leap of twenty years turns the same grandson into the poem's harshest critic — Tagore's gentlest joke on himself in the whole collection.

BLESSING

an offering by an old poet to a young seeker of blessing, for Shrijukto Dilip Kumar Roy

Below, a lake lies still in the valley beneath the silent snow-peaks.
Above, from the mountain's crown, on the strength of tireless striving,
a young waterfall races toward union with the sea,
along the road of the sunrise. It said: "I beg your blessing,
O ancient lake." The lake replied, smiling:
"My blessing is for you, rising, made bright, into the blue sky
by the morning sun's own hand; from the meditating mountain-ascetic's
melted mercy, the flowing water of blessing
gives you the stream of life. I, from the forest's shade,
sit alone, apart, and watch, in your unhindered current,
how, moment by moment, in the surging dance of your own music, you conquer
the ink-black mass of obstacles, the stone-heaps that block your road,
the hidden, lifeless enemy host. This flowing of your own journey,
by its very motion, wakes its own courage within itself."

Notes — A parable-sonnet: waterfall and lake standing in for young musician and old poet. Note the structural rhyme with poem 1 — Tagore bookends this collection's two dedicatory blessings with two composers, Atulprasad Sen and Dilip Kumar Roy, a generation apart.

THE ESTUARY

At the mouth of the Irrawaddy, why, forgetting yourself,
O sea, has your colour grown so muddy?
Where is that clear blue gaze of yours,
that deep song you once sang, facing the sun?
What letter has the earth sent, through the river's water,
that has clouded your sight with such confusion?
You used to array yourself to match the very colour of the sky —
why, today, this indulgence in the colour of the earth?
When the stars, at night, come to touch you with their light,
they no longer find, in your feeling, any answer;
the morning wishes to see its own pure reflection in the clear water,
and you send it back, defeated, disappointed.

You have taken on, by your own will, this seeming defeat,
you are not afraid to admit the loss.
Your colour turns to grey, you play with your bindings,
carelessly, you let your heart be lost.
This play of yours is only at the shore, a mingling with the edge of things,
just a small taste for the touch of earth.
Above your vast breast lies the boundless blue sky —
where, there, is the earth's embrace?
You have accepted the dust as your own, and yet remain unstained,
you wear your bonds, and still are free, forever.
Great Kali, the pure eternal, is held within your breast,
and no dark net of sin can ever bind her.

Notes — Almost certainly written during Tagore's 1927 travels in Southeast Asia and folded into this book later. The turn to কালী — Kali, named outright — at the close is a startling swerve for what reads, until then, as a nature poem.

TO THE POLITICAL PRISONERS OF BUXA FORT

The night has been put to shame by the sun's own worship, offered in the dark.
The bird is caged, but the song did not accept its bondage.
From the mouth of the fountain, in a restless, upward current,
the imprisoned water has proclaimed what welcome of light.

The sprout has pierced the crust of earth and carried into the sky,
by its own risen strength, the deep mantra of freedom.
In that great moment, what boon did the hero win from the goddess of power,
that, through death, he has built an immortal kingdom for mortal man.

"We are the children of the deathless" — who has proclaimed this to the whole world?
Who, offering up the self, has known the self as imperishable?
Who has conquered sorrow with the joy of the dawn?
Who has given the bound their knowledge of the free, in the rhythm of chains?

Notes — Buxa Fort, in the Dooars, was a British colonial detention camp for Indian political prisoners. The poem reaches for no invented imagery beyond what's already there — I kept the diction as plain as the Bengali does.

IN HARD DAYS

When trouble comes and draws the noose tight,
knotting itself into work,
a slow day, without provisions,
a long road's traveller;
the cruelest laugh of blame,
the most merciless fate,
a hopeless wind, in the empty air,
crying out, "never, never" —
suddenly, then, my mind says to me:
"It's false, all of this is false,
if there still lives, in my life, a song undying,
if a melody still lives in my heart."

On every side a war is declared,
the path grows hard to walk,
worry drains the blood
with its sharp claws and teeth,
joylessness surrounds me on every side,
life has no companion,
poverty, in its ugly shape, mocks me
with a sneering face —
my mind says: "There is nothing at all to fear,
it's false, all of this is false,
you are eternally rich, within yourself,
in a wealth that has no end."

Days without language, lost in fog,
the dull gold of a tarnished dawn,
imagination, like a bat,
flies black through the night;
in the fixed heap of rubbish
the road of the journey is blocked,

in the withered, empty garden
Baishakh stands enraged —
my mind says to me: "This is nothing,
it's false, all of this is false,
forget yourself, and sing, with your whole heart open,
dance to the rhythm of the universe."

The world lies shut behind closed doors,
the lamp within has gone dark,
eternally fasting, within my own self
I find no contentment in myself,
at every step lives doubt and fear,
at every step love is wounded,
a useless call, a useless plea,
the friend's seat stands empty —
my mind cries out: "Sink down into the depths,
it's false, all of this is false,
in deep meditation find the whole universe
within your own solitude."

Notes — Structured as the same argument, four times over, between despair and the mind's rebuttal. I kept the refrain — "মিথ্যে, এ-সব মিথ্যে", "it's false, all of this is false" — identical each time, since its repetition is the poem's whole mechanism.

QUESTION

O God, age after age you have sent your messengers, again and again,
into a merciless world,
and they said, as they went: "Forgive everyone," they said: "Love one another —
root out, from within, the poison of hatred."
They are worthy of reverence, worthy of remembrance — and yet, at the outer door,
today, in this hour of evil days, I turn back their salutation, unanswered.

For I have seen secret malice, under night's deceiving shadow,
strike down the helpless;
I have seen, in the unpunished crime of the strong,
the voice of justice weep, silent, in some hidden place.
I have seen a young boy, running, driven half-mad,
die, in what agony, beating his head, uselessly, against a stone.

My voice is choked today, my flute has lost its music,
a prison of moonless dark
has swallowed up my whole world beneath a nightmare's weight,
and so I ask you now, in tears —
those who poison your own air, who put out your own light —
have you forgiven them? Have you loved them, even them?

Notes — Perhaps the most quoted poem in the book. Its force rests entirely on the final, unanswered question, which I've left exactly that — a genuine question, not a rhetorical one softened into resolution.

THE MENDICANT

Ah, mendicant, ah,
your poverty is a false and terrible thing —
give it up, once and for all, ah.
By begging, the ruin of your own blessed moment —
in what forgetfulness have you forgotten this,
your own treasury lies useless,
you have not opened its bolt.
Wrapping yourself in your own covering,
what ugly self-deception is this;
this tattered cloth is the imposter's own,
why not say this, to yourself.
Ah, mendicant, ah,
who will come, who will take up the mantra
that dispels this shadow of illusion.

The poor man never gets the true wealth,
he receives, only, alms.
An eternally fasting, false mendicant
has given him this initiation.
In your own striving, jewels and gems
you scatter, carelessly, along the road —
your begging-bag — shame, shame upon it —
do not carry it, raised high upon your head.
Ah, mendicant, ah,
break, break this bond
of the destitute's own nightmare.

In the fold of her garment, night gathers, grain by grain,
the alms of begging into the stars,
yet, taking this offering, she still could not
cross the sea of darkness.
When the eastern sky scattered its own gold

across the heavens,
in the gift of the Full One, desire found its fulfilment,
and the dawn was filled with delight.
Ah, mendicant, ah,
may your own mind find
the hidden king who sits within you.

Notes — An argument against spiritual self-pity, addressed to a "you" who is really the poet's own self. The touchstone imagery from poem 1 returns quietly here, in a lower key: "jewels and gems... scattered along the road."

BENEDICTION

on the first birthday of the beloved child Amalina

The mother-earth gave you
life's very first vessel,
filled with form and flavour;
and so this stirring, this scattering,
this dropping and gathering up again —
none of it, I know, has any meaning.
In what great dancing-hall
does the dance go on, beat after beat,
its rhythm lives in your very blood.
For no reason, in the noise and clamour,
your body sways;
its motion is forever new, new again.
Your mind, all day, wrapped in no thought,
lies bare, and rolls
in the courtyard of the world;
in a wordless gesture, touching, touching,
you pass by
everything you see and hear.
Your unspoken thoughts, all of them,
like ashath leaves,
are only a shimmer, a glimmer, in the light.
What laughter, drifting on the air,
comes to reach you,
and your laughter rings out, tinkling, in answer.
Planets, stars, the moon, the sun,
hold their picture out before you,
their own vast identity.
With your two small hands
you play with them all,
no question, and no fear at all.

You, in your whole body and mind,
gather in, every moment,
that easy joy of being;
which you, so effortlessly,
scatter all around you,
a delighted touch, wherever it falls.
I, a poet, for its sake,
stay awake within myself,
sitting here, beside the window.
The messengers of the immortal realm,
opening an unseen door,
come and go, beyond the sky.
The blue shadow on the horizon
weaves a distant enchantment,
where some unheard flute is playing.
The drowsy noon
listens to the sound of sunlight,
the tired cattle lie resting in the field.
This sight my eyes have touched —
what does it give my body?
My mind remains struck dumb.
Everything is, I am —
in the two of these, mingling, close together,
everything of mine lies hidden.

By the assurance through which this mortal earth
is wakened, O child, by you —
that same pure, that same simple life,
may it, in the poet's own life,
sound forever, in every song of mine,
its message alone.
Tireless, ever-new hope —
that is the child's own language,
that is the language of the god of life.

Casting off the dullness of age,
in birth after new birth,
it finds new life, again and again.
The fog of despair
wishes, moment by moment, to wipe away
the small lamp of the dawn;
behind every obstacle, the poet
sees the eternal sun,
that same seeing shines in a child's eyes.
Bearing the child's own wealth,
you have come into this world;
Amalina, may that wealth remain, unstained, always.
That faith, without a doubt,
may it, forever, in that same tune,
sound as the music of your life.

Notes — Mirrors and closes the book's opening blessing: পরিশেষ began by blessing a grown composer and ends blessing an infant. প্রাণদেবতা, "the god of life," is a private, recurring deity in Tagore's own vocabulary, distinct from any single mythological figure — here it names whatever it is in a child that the poet spends the whole book trying to keep faith with.

THE HEEDLESS MIND

At the dim window of a child's uncomprehending eyes,
its own self-forgetting mind peers out, restless.
What a crooked, wordless play of thought it plays —
suddenly grasping, suddenly flinging away,
suddenly, for no reason at all,
waving its arms in some wild enthusiasm, some untamed roar.
Suddenly it sways to and fro,
its aim running toward no meaning anywhere.
From the outer world, through the play of light, on streams of sound,
whatever message comes to its life —
in trying to answer it, what it means to say,
no one can know.

This uncomprehending mind, this mute mind,
forever stirring up waves of curious, restless play upon its own life —
eager in every direction, at every moment,
and curious even about its own restlessness —
this is no new invention of the Creator's.
Its voyage set out in a boat from the primal age.
In the World-Poet's own lake of mind, after the morning bath,
it came out together with life, when it was still dark,
and carried with it its own faint small light.
Its very first wordless warbling rose awake, in rhythm and melody,
through forest after forest, in branch and leaf,
in blossom, fruit, and seed, in sprout after sprout.
Opening its wide, astonished eyes toward the sun —
how loud, how overflowing its play.
It paints its many-shaped toys in many colors,
opens them once, and once again covers them over.
In sunshine and in rain, its pitiful weeping and its laughter.
Always it rises, hinting, brimming over.

That same heedless, forgetting mind of a child —
sitting here in the corner of this ship,

I watch its restless agitation.
Now and again, looking out toward the sea, I think:
it is as though this too were like a child's eyes —
its hazy gaze cast toward the sky, caught by some dream;
as though within it, too, some heedless, forgetting mind swayed,
moment after moment, from this shore toward that.
In what a babbling voice it weeps a weeping fit to end the world,
and laughs, too, a tremendous laugh —
itself forgetting its own meaning even as it laughs —
only swelling, wave on wave, moment to moment,
roaring for no cause at all,
lifting its foolish arms into the empty air.

This vast, uncomprehending, primal mind —
in the midst of the history of humankind,
its restless search for its own self.
It runs from the house toward the courtyard, from the courtyard to the road;
from the road it runs on toward the terrible, obstacle-strewn
forests and mountains of the wilderness;
this it builds, this it breaks,
this — in what strange regret —
strikes the earth beneath its own feet, spreading dust across the sky;
suddenly flying into a fury,
it wanders about, beating its head against some locked wall of stone.
Creation and uncreation, both of its own making —
over these alone it fights,
on these alone it rises and falls.
Suddenly, with a start, it leaps up and runs off,
having glimpsed some radiant color,
toward some far, invisible horizon;
in some hazy evening light it gazes, like a child, guessing at what it cannot see —
and its own restlessness weaves dream together with truth
into some strange, wandering fairy tale.

PARINAY

It lived till now in painted fancy, lived in song after song —
and now that very wonder has come, taking form, into your two lives.
It is the very image divine of joy itself,
and with shining, heroic splendor,
crossing over every obstacle, driving fear away,
it called out at your threshold:
"A guest has come."

Light the lamp of blessing, offer up your gift —
body, mind, and soul together.
For this is she who dwells in the lotus-grove of Rama in the halls of the gods,
come down to earth to sound, on the shehnai, the very flute of paradise.
Upon the dust of this earth,
with what tenderness she has mingled
the pollen of the paradise-tree.
Into the poverty of this human house
the wish-granting cow of heaven grants her unseen nectar,
deep within each heart.
Eternal love has come,
and brought to you both
a blessing bright as the rays of the sun.

ETERNAL

Down this foreign road, hiding the sky in dust,
my carriage went rattling on.
Just then, in the cool shade of a lemon branch,
a cuckoo rose calling
from the dense wood at the corner of the path.

In the voice of this one bird,
it was as if the melody of all my days
fell, drop by drop, upon this single day.
As a boy, on the banks of the Ganges,
gazing lost in thought at the water,
I had heard, in a cuckoo's song like this one, in some village,
the unutterable word of unbounded time
speak into my life:
"You are my beloved."

That same sound, spreading through the wood from leaf to leaf,
mingling with the murmur of water,
would fade away toward the far bank, into the distant blue sky.
Today, in this foreign land,
that same sound, beside this troubled road,
gave its own word to the flowers hidden on some branch.
The cool peace of the forest shade whispers, close and secret,
together with the morning light,
in that same pure and deeply lovely melody —
"You are my beloved."

And close beside it, always,
is the ceaseless striking of blow upon blow;
the knife of betrayal cuts through the ribs
and steals away simple trust;
crooked laughter brings about complicated ruin.
In despair and sorrow I watch the terror that stalks the whole earth
kindle its apocalyptic flame in the dwellings of humankind,
watch the net of greed close around the whole world,

and I cannot think who will save
blind humanity from its own self-inflicted wounds.

Just then, in the cool shade, the cuckoo suddenly calls again,
from a flowering ashoka branch;
and it touches my life with that peace which comes before all things,
that peace which comes at the end of all things,
that peace in which the unutterable word of unbounded time
speaks to me once more:
"You are my beloved."

KANTIKARI

In Shillong there is a hollow in the hills
where a boulder has broken loose;
hidden, seated upon it,
I used to string, each morning,
a garland of song to the melody of dawn.
It was my turn, then,
to stand face to face with the first sunrise.

To the right, a barren peach branch, laden —
flowers blooming there, and flowers falling away.
Black-winged, with a hint of yellow,
some bird, in its song without cause,
never knew weariness.

Just so, a rose-vine, covering its bower,
called out endlessly, without purpose,
in the boundless language of its flowers.
The ancient trees of the pine wood gazed into the face of the clouds,
their branches, like green fountains, bending down toward the earth,
as though held still, spellbound, by some incantation.
On two pomegranate trees,
cradled in the lap of dense green leaves,
clusters of deep-red blossom swayed.

Near my feet, a single kantikari flower —
its companionship was intimate, near;
it made no proclamation of itself into the distant emptiness.
Yet when I bent down close to the earth,
it answered me, gently, slowly, from its bed of dust,
drawing a small point of gold
upon the breast of its blue-colored petals.

Whatever songs I composed in those days
carry, within their melody,
an acknowledgment of the kantikari's gift.

Today, when my heart begs for a moment's peace
under the terrible weight of these sorrowful, anxious days,
why does there suddenly rise in my mind
that small fragment of that morning —
the blue-and-gold word of the kantikari, so close to the earth.

ANOTHER DAY

It comes back to me clearly: thirty years ago,
when I was twenty-five,
I had come for a time to this same country,
to this same house in the garden.
When the sun went down, at day's end,
behind the pine-branches on that hill,
on the tips of the blue peaks, cloud upon cloud,
a fire-colored light would linger;
long shadows would stretch out from wood to wood,
over mountain after mountain —
and on that gravel road before me, day after day,
I would come to know, unfailingly,
the sound of the postman's footsteps.
Month after month went by, and yet not once,
not a single time, did he ever fail to come.

Even today the sun sets in that same place, beyond the pine wood,
and at the foot of that far mountain
the rhythm of the evening shadows plays out in the falling water of the stream,
just as it did then;
star after star, just as before,
whispers its secret spell of light
into the ear of mountain after mountain.
Only, on my gravel road, that long-familiar sound
of the postman's footsteps
will never sound again — not once, not ever.

And yet today some hope rose in my mind —
I found myself walking, for no reason,
all the way to that post office, some three miles off.
Hesitating, wandering this way and that for twenty minutes,
I went at last to the postmasters and asked,
"Is there any letter in my name?"

The answer came: "No — there's nothing at all."
Hearing this, head bowed, lost in my own thoughts,
walking slowly back through the dark toward my empty house,
I heard, from somewhere behind me,
some unknown voice say, suddenly, in a plaintive tone, to some passerby:
"Mind your head — don't be late tomorrow."
The rest of that story the darkness kept hidden from me.
But it struck, deep in my chest, a single long sigh
out of that whole world of my twenty-fifth year —
that world in which the evening star used to tremble,
far off above that mountain,
to the rhythm of the postman's footsteps upon that gravel road.

TE HI NO DIVASAH

On this unfamiliar sea,
the light of afternoon pleased me well.
Whether anyone sees it or not, no one will remember it —
who keeps account, after all,
of such small, scattered, wasted things?

Seeing this, some corner of my heart filled up;
and from where, I wonder, did that old wild-headed mood of mine
come down again —
those days when, for no reason, suddenly, on some breeze,
a wave of youth would come welling up in my life,
and no one ever knew it.
I would fall under the spell, then, of my own songs,
mixed through with the ache
of some unarrived spring not yet come.

Those who happened to hear that singing
would come out from some hiding place,
and slip back again into hiding, smiling.
Perhaps they had something to give;
no one ever said so, even by a hint, eyes lowered.
Perhaps, in the midst of their whole day,
some hour's work stood in the way.
Those startled, fleeting moments —
perhaps someone still remembers them, perhaps not.
On moonlit nights, alone upon the roof,
in a kind of open, careless neglect,
the hours would pass, with no aim to my life,
in songs worth nothing at all.

That day, unknown to all the world, in my own life —
some whimsical, unaccountable lyre
played on within its heart —
much as, on this very sea, gold and blue mingle always
in the swinging together, the shape lost,

of Radha and Shyam;
much as, on a holiday, in an afternoon like this,
with no debt of giving or of taking, only the play of the wind,
a raft of light and shadow
set adrift toward the unknown.

THE LAMP-MAKER

O beautiful one, O great flame —
    your formless radiance shall take form in my life;
for that alone, with a single mind,
    I have made this lamp:
        this is my very shaped and embodied word of welcome to you.

Come, come, and take your seat within it;
    grant my long life its final, crowning gift.
It has never been worthy of you —
    how many times have I broken it,
        and built it again, always anew —
my own strength has cursed itself, again and again.
There is no more time now;
    the sleepless hours, one by one, are passing away;
        and so, today, I bring my vow to its close.
Take up this, the one work of my whole life;
    touch it, if only for a single moment.
After that, I shall leave behind one fulfillment of this birth —
    my eternal joy, and this, my eternal sorrow,
        both together.

THE PROUD ONE

Shut in behind high walls is your small world,
O proud one, O wounded pride.
Like a god housed in a temple, you remain a prisoner,
bound in chains of honor,
beneath your own seat of worship.
Avoiding the touch of common people, setting yourself apart,
you stand day and night, heavy with your own glory,
wearing a hard and rigid form.
Where there is room for everyone,
there, weighed down with your own vast dignity,
you may not enter.
You have many titles —
only the one title of "human being" have you lost;
to whom shall I tell of that loss?

The devotees, in the temple, buy the priest's favor at great cost,
offer their worship, and turn back home,
into the shade of their own bamboo groves loud with crickets,
to their own quiet village.
Then, alone, absurdly strange, in the midst of stone walls,
you know what pain rings out within the god's own breast.
Turning the altar's binding into dust,
shaking the very immovable stone,
it — the god — longs only to be set free,
to be among human beings.

O king, your mind, walled round with worship,
does not know itself.
In lifeless honor you stand,
a lump of clay painted in bright colors —
your life a decorated doll,
a game of gross falsehood.
You remain rigid, of your own doing, under your own curse,
motionless beneath the weight of your own pride.

May those who carry the plain dignity of an ordinary life,
who move freely through the open world —
may their touch, before you die,
fall at last upon your head.

THE PRINCE

Dwelling in some fairy-tale land of dream,
a prince, coming from I know not where,
shows himself in form at the blessed hour, quietly, quietly —
within the very one I thought I already knew,
in my own ordinary household.
In my breast the footfall of his coming rings out,
as though arriving from very far away.
His language brings into my life
some new, unheard-of word of youth from beyond the sea.
That day my mind came to understand
it had been unconscious, hidden away behind its own triviality,
caught all this while in a web of illusion's sleep.
At his one glance, I feel the touch of a new creation;
my spirit wakes. —
I say, kissing his two feet,
"You are the prince."

All this while, without knowledge of my own self,
I had been kept, within a fortress
ringed round by the stone wall of inertia,
by the daily demons of habit and custom.
By what power of spell did you burn away that impassable barrier as if with fire,
rescue the prisoner, take her for your own,
and lead her out into the light of freedom?
Today I see you with what new eyes.
The bud has opened now into bloom;
again and again my heart says,
"You are the prince."

THE FORERUNNER

O traveler, you are alone.
In your own mind, I know not how,
you have found sight of what cannot be seen.
Down a road where no footprint has ever fallen,
you walked by night;
what sign did you see in the sky,
that you took no one else along?
You climb toward the peak of the towering mountain,
where the morning star completes its own journey of light
in boundless radiance.

The first day the new spring-fed stream awakens in the heat of Falgun,
it is the first to glimpse the strange, unearthly beauty
of that vast far distance.
"It is there, it is there, it is there" — that message
blooms in it in a single instant,
and, hearing the call of an unknown road,
it rushes on toward the unknown.
Just so, some unspoken language has sounded within you:
"It is there, it is there, it is there" —
this great incantation rings in your every breath.

A heap of unmoving rock has blocked the road, making it treacherous.
"No, no, no" — this word of refusal
has taken the very shape of stone.
That is the law of dead matter, roaring out;
the timid soul trembles and dies at it.
Along the empty road, doubt and delusion stand
with a warning finger raised.
The idle mind's own shadow takes on a fearful shape;
seeking safety, wanting only to live,
it dies instead beneath the weight of its own too-cautious ruin.

On this perilous road of new life, you go before all others.
Your journey will accept no limit;

nowhere will you come to a stop.
From peak to peak you will leave your banner, ever new;
through what is impassable you will carve a road —
this is your life's own vow.
The further you go, doubt and hesitation
will vanish behind you, step by step;
and beneath your very feet there will ring out the great word:
"It is there, it is there."

THE VIGIL

At the door of your dream I sit and wait,
    at the very edge of your sleep, in this hushed twilight before dawn —
        since the first morning star showed itself at the window.
I keep my gaze, single-minded, upon your face.
In the stilled air, at the last watch of the night, upon the shore of the sea,
    as a hermit sits with eyes rapt in meditation,
        gazing toward the eastern shore,
    holding to the hope that the first light will come and bathe him with its touch —
so, in sleepless joy, the long night passes for me.
That first smile of your new awakening,
    which will open like a golden champak blossom
        upon your half-parted lips, at the corner of your eyes —
that is what I mean to gather;
    this alone is in my mind.

SPEECHLESS

I had meant to say something to you —
a thing I have said to no one else —
that day in the wood, where the madhavi branches hung low,
laden with flower after flower.
I took up on my flute the words of my heart,
broken off from the very stem of the ache of separation;
and, in that secret night,
they rose swaying, colored with the color of melody.

The shirish wood, roofed over with new leaves,
rustled and said, "Sing, sing."
The wind, full of the fragrance of madhu-malati blossom,
gave me courage.
In the full-moon tide, the river's water
rose brimming, rippling.
Kamini blossoms fell, stirred by the wind,
and lay scattered upon the grass.

On that sweet night, in the sky and on the earth,
there was no stinting anywhere.
The moonlight spoke, on behalf of everyone,
all that lay in every heart.
It seemed to me that all that surrounded you
was silently begging for grace.
I gathered my courage and went to your side
and gazed at you unblinking.
Suddenly my mind gave a start —
the flute no longer sounded any word at all.
I stood still in the deep shade
and looked upon your face.

I have seen, once, at the ocean's edge,
where many rivers' currents come together —
foaming water lost at the horizon,
wandering without direction into the boundless deep.

My own small boat, pulled by so many currents,
trembled like a bewildered thing,
and I could not think how, or where,
to moor it.

Just so, today, gazing at your face,
my eyes seem to search and find no shore;
plunging into some unimaginable feeling,
I cannot understand you at all.
What is this weary hope upon your face, what is this peace,
what is this secret tenderness,
what wordless language of meditation is this,
what far-off memory?
Your still, silent depth came down, close and heavy, upon my mind —
and I remained sitting there, in the corner of the flowering bower,
and said not a single word.

SALUTATION

Your own salutation is itself the ornament
of the one you have chosen to honor.
You are the one who gave it its worth,
decked it in the rare jewels of your worship.
In eyes made bright with devotion,
you looked upon it in that pure light —
and that very light gave it its bathing;
it was you who set that shining gift of glory upon its brow.
Whether it be a god or a mortal man,
it is from the rays scattered out of your own heart
that its divine appearance comes to be revealed.
Its whole identity has won its victory-word only in you.
It is the sweetness of this very love of yours
that has built for it its true palace in heaven;
the nectar that this palace drinks
is poured out by nothing other than your own overflowing spirit.
Your bowed head is like the reddening dawn along the horizon —
and upon it, the rising of the god takes shape,
gracious, sacred, radiant with light.

THE EMPTY HOUSE

In the darkness of twilight, I came, a guest,
to the door at the edge of that great house.
I called out: "Is anyone there?
Answer me, answer me."
A single, shapeless emptiness, filling the whole house,
said not a word in reply.

Outside, in the garden, the flowering branches —
who knows to whom they signal, with their invitation of fragrance?
Some unlucky cuckoo was calling, uselessly, into the air,
deepening the desolation;
the gardener stood there, silent.
The staircase, quite unmoved, said:
"Come, or don't come — it comes to the very same thing."

The rooms spoke up in the voice of a Philosopher:
"Dive down to the bottom of the ocean of being,
and you will understand —
being and not-being, coming and going far away,
it is all one and the same thing,
nothing but the empty wind of whim."
No one was in any hurry to bring forward a chair;
the old family servant had taken his leave
and gone from the house for good.
When one's own allotted time runs out, alas,
who is there left, then, to serve whom?
A touch of world-weariness came over my mind;
I saw everything as mere smoke.
I thought: this boat of fortune, it seems, has no rudder at all —
adrift on some haphazard current,
here today and gone tomorrow.
A drop of water on a lotus petal is exceedingly fickle —
and knowing this, and arguing over it,
only brings loss upon oneself.

And so — ah, well, enough of the "and so's" —
let us simply turn back for now.

Heavy with failed hope, in that moment, I turned my chariot round;
and the road back seemed, in my mind, to grow longer than before.
On the way there, I had easily forgotten
the dry road's dust that filled the whole sky.
On the way back, a handkerchief over my mouth, my glasses fogged over,
it seemed to me whole battalions of microbes
were pouring into my nose and mouth.
And so I understood: a Philosopher's wisdom
is no easy thing to come by.
It requires, in fact, a very great deal of purification of the spirit.

The motor-car sped on,
and in a little while I burst out laughing, ha-ha.
Right in the face of undoubting hope, a door had suddenly slammed shut —
really, the whole rhythm of it was nothing but a joke.
I smoothed over my own foolishly solemn face with a good loud laugh,
and turned back to my own door.

Since there was no one, today, in my own house either,
the philosophy of Not-Being took hold and pressed down upon my mind.
Being is a mere accident;
it is Not-Being that spreads, unblinking,
over the whole of space and time.
In the evening, putting out the light, sitting in a corner of my room,
I set about sketching, in my mind,
the vast true nature of Not-Being.
Looking to the furthest edge of time, I see:
that whole house, from beginning to end, is nothing at all.
Its flower garden — where has it gone?
That very easy-chair one used to sit in —
entirely used up, entirely gone.
As for the account-book of monthly wages —
its two gardeners have become, altogether, nothing but falsehood.

The chrysanthemums, the carnations, flowerbeds and all,
are lost in the abyss of Non-Being.

Looking off into the distance, I see:
whatever exists, in this small boundary of the present,
in that vast future time, is a very trifling thing indeed —
here and there, a mere cluster of bubbles.
But whatever does not exist — that is vast, immense, tremendous.
Countless treasures, flowing down from beginningless, bygone ages —
of these, not one single particle, alas, remains;
not one, nowhere, anymore.

"Enough of this rubbish," I said at last —
and no sooner had I lit the lamp
than the whole fog of that philosophy vanished, I know not where.
I understood clearly then: whatever lies before me,
whatever is close to my eyes, close to my heart —
that alone is endless, moment after moment, day after day.
Within whatever exists,
whatever does not exist lies hidden, deep and secret,
ruling as the only truth.
Whoever I was in some bygone time,
that very same I am today, in every single instant.
This net of the present moment
holds bound within it the whole of the time yet to come.

And so — that same easy-chair, drawn up close to the window —
I shall sit in it in comfort,
and know that very moment as belonging to all eternity.
And so, understand this: I shall not become a hermit after all.
If you should call me again,
I shall once more take that same motor-chariot,
down that same microbe-flying road.
And if there is someone in the house,
I will feel no Philosopher's doubt about calling them "not there."
If, pushing open the door and opening my eyes,

I should happen to see some friend —
then, and only then, will the poet say:
"This world of ours is a very strange thing indeed."

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.

"গঙ্গাযমুনায়" — 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.

DAY'S END

When the flute falls silent in the house,
   when the lamp's flame dies,
when, over this whole play of my one life,
   the curtain comes down —
let no crowd gather, on that day,
   in any hall, for the poet's sake;
let there be no loud
   parade of grief.
Let the chairman of the day stay home,
   pass his hours at cards and dice;
no need, then, for so many tongues
   to sigh their oh, and ah, and oh.
Let no excited crowd of factions
   thicken into noise.

I know, within myself,
   the white jasmine, the seuti, the hibiscus,
will call, again and again,
   a small memorial for the poet.
In the courtyard of the rains, of autumn, of spring,
   all around me,
wherever the vina, wherever the drum,
   has sounded, once, in festival —
there, upon my seat,
   in a tender, welcoming green,
layer on layer, in alpana-patterns,
   something will be traced and drawn.
My silence they will fill
   with the clamour of birds.

I know this one message
   will go on living in the forest —

I have strung the poet's word
   into their very tunes.
In the wind of spring, in the rain of Shravan,
   this same message, again and again,
will suddenly ring out
   at the doors of the four directions' maidens;
sometimes in a grieving evening cloud,
   sometimes touched by the red light of dawn,
this message will rise, awake,
   dressed in its many colours.
The seat of my memory
   they will polish bright with gold.

Let my memory stay, only, woven
   into the midst of my own songs —
there, where that casuarina leaf
   rustles and murmurs;
there, where, under that shiuli tree,
   the dew burns with its brief laughter,
where shadow sinks into sleep,
   garlanded round with rays of light;
there, where my working hours
   play, dressed in the very clothes of work,
where the neglect of work
   lights, in secret, its own small lamp,
filling, with dreams of many colours,
   the whole basket of form.

FELLOW TRAVELLER

To Kedarnath Chattopadhyay

You were my companion on the road —
by day you brought me water for my thirst,
by night you lit the lamp for me.
Now evening deepens over my life,
now the road comes to its end;
for you I leave behind, instead,
this one gift — my goodwill.
May the road of the world lie open before you, unhindered,
may it lead you on, always, toward grace;
may it bring you, ever new,
riches of knowledge, of work, of contemplation.
If ever you keep my memory,
keep, too, this thought in mind —
I made the flowers open, though the fruit,
in this one life, may not have fully formed.

To Amiyachandra Chakravarty

Whatever service I received from you, outwardly,
I keep, still, within me;
in action it never comes to an end,
in love, there always remains something still owing.
To ease the failing of my own light,
you filled my lamp with oil.
Your heart, and my heart —
in that one light, they meet, and are made one.

SHE WHO VANISHED

You never once turned to look her way —
that much, within herself, she knew;
a shadow of pain lay spread, always,
in the corner of her dark eyes.

The flame of her life went out,
and with it sank, too,
the weight of her slighted grief,
into a night of neglect.

On the tray of festival lights
her own dim heart found no place;
that is why, instead, among the stars,
her small light rose, and shone.

She had held a word of welcome ready,
upon lips that never said it aloud —
pushing past the voices of so many others,
does it ring, even once, within your breast?

That she had come so near to you —
to make you understand this, even now,
she has gone off into the infinite distance,
to go on searching, there, in the emptiness.

Having gone there, she has fallen silent;
her begging, too, has come to an end —
is it only now, perhaps, that her true self
has descended, at last, into your heart?

THE ASHRAM GIRL

on the occasion of the marriage of Srimati Mamata Sen

O girl of the ashram —
Ashwin's shefali blossom,
   Phalgun's clustered sal-flower —
from your earliest childhood
   filled your body, your mind, again and again,
      with ever new sweetness;
in Magh's parting hour,
   in the mango-grove breaking into bud,
      spring's own young herald;
Ashadh's heaped-up
   white smiling malati,
      Shravan's rain-wet jasmine —
all of it stood around you,
   day and night, without a break;
      the open, generous peace of the fields,
in the waking hour before dawn
   you tasted, astonished,
      the nectar of light itself;
when, in Ashadh's massed cloud,
   the sky's own deep weeping woke and rose,
      in the murmured song
along the row of saptaparni trees
   you saw, there, the pulse of life itself;
      at the close of a day in Baisakh,
in the fierce red guise of dusk,
   the wild frenzy of the storm —
      in that storm's own tumult of joy,
in the crashing laughter of the lightning,
   you heard the message of freedom;
      at Poush's great festival,
in the unstruck sounding of the vina,

the song of light, world upon world,
brought, again and again, to your heart's door,
the call of a new life;
the new year's sun
drew its bright, sacred image
across the clear sky;
the triumph of the ever-new
rang out through the void,
and rang, too, in the courtyard of your own heart —
so many songs, so many games,
so many gatherings of friends,
morning and evening worship,
with the birds' own murmuring, beneath the trees, each dawn,
the quiet discipline of your days —

may that memory, in its blessed hour,
fill your whole life through, and go with you as you leave;
may it keep your heart brimming,
and give it tune, forever, amid the world's harsh clamour.
I know a new household must now be built,
mingling sweetness with true good;
with love, with life itself, with work, with song,
with patience, and with all your meditation given whole —
in that whole making of it, in every thought, in every deed,
may they all take shape and rise;
may they bring word to your word,
and fill your life with life.
Be happy; remain happy;
fill, day upon day, the basket of your life with gracious deeds;
string your days, one after another,
on a thread of merit,
and go on making, and receiving,
a garland fit to offer.
From beyond the sea,
on the current of the eastern wind,

filling this small boat of verse,
this very morning, remembering this day of your fulfilment,
I send you my blessing.

THE BRIDE

on the occasion of the marriage of Srimati Amita Sen

In the history of humankind a foaming, restless striving
roars up; out of the dark womb of the past, cavalcades
of waves go racing into the void; the great future
unfolds and opens. On the shore of the present hour
a fire-hearted, unheard-of mountain, in the pride
of its own new birth, flies its bright banner out
toward some new sunrise. That unseen fate, that thing beyond all thought,
which writes, in letters no one knows, the destiny of mankind,
taking the shape of some proud, heroic form — I have seen it;
in its very voice I have heard, in the Deepak raga, the death-conquering
word of creation, in the mantra of life.

In the midst of this troubled turning of the age, my child,
I saw you, there, in your bridal dress — a mountain stream,
dancing, suddenly meeting the still lake, plunging your own
restless, quicksilver play into its depths; fearlessly,
staking the whole world on it, you are unveiling
the hidden mystery of new life's own creation.
The magic-web that History's maker weaves, through the world's own
sorrow and joy, spreads out, from land to land, in vast
and playful wonder, age after age, across the very sky
of every man's and every woman's heart —
this too is that same play of creation, within the shining history of the world.

UNION

on the occasion of the marriage of Srimati Indira Maitra

That day, in the new vina-chime of dawn,
grains of golden music scattered, cloud on cloud.
You two went racing on, toward the far shore beyond childhood,
two restless birds.
In the south wind's headlong flight
some enchantment of the unknown woke in your blood,
veiled in the shadow of dream.
Touched by the mantra of union, from the house of music —
when did your two wings first come to touch?

Your days went by with your hearts spread wide across the sky,
both your wings dyed in the colours of the clouds.
You were, the two of you, companions in that boundless flight;
nowhere, for you, was there any forbidding.
From far off, this one picture of the earth
brought nectar down into both your eyes —
the green, flowering world.
From every side, the great utterance of the Vast
let you both hear a word beyond all language.

In that silent meeting-place, up among the clouds,
what unspeakable ache it brought!
In both your hearts a sound rose, and broke free —
"Beloved — oh, my beloved."
The meeting of your wings had voyaged into the boundless;
in the meeting of your music it took on, at last, a bounded shape,
and you came down, descending, toward the earth.
Leaving the shoreless emptiness, you settled into your one nest,
soul folded into soul, song mingled into song.

THE SPY

The illness had turned serious;
five whole weeks I went on suffering under it.
The moment I was a little better,
the house would not hold the crowd of visitors —
far worse trouble than the sickness itself.
Bhabesh came, Palit came, my friend Ishan came,
the politician came,
Gokul, the newspaper man, came too —
he keeps track of everyone's business, up and down the street.
Some said, "Change the air, go somewhere";
some said, "Eat well, and properly";
some said, "Dr. Mahendra — no one's his equal
for this particular illness."
There, against the wall, behind everyone else,
sits Satish.
He lives in this same neighbourhood;
his hair swept up with a raking of five fingers.
Spectacles on his face,
one corner of the left lens cracked.
His collar-button undone,
his gaze calm, and faraway, lost in thought.
Always, in his hand, a bound notebook;
suddenly he opens a page,
and writes something, secretly — perhaps he is a poet,
or perhaps he only draws.
Nabin whispers in my ear:
that boy surely knows something private about someone —
what they call a "spy" —
there's no doubt of it, he says.
I say, maybe so — but with that humble, devout,

harmless-looking face,
he's only gathering, in the corner of his notebook,
material for some report.
If the man is really as low as that,
I ought to feel contempt for him — why should I feel afraid?

That year I went off travelling, a year in all,
through the Punjab, through Kashmir.
When I came home again —
Ganesh came, Paltu came, Nabin Pal came,
Makhanlal came too.
Panchu came with a small parcel in his hands, and bowed,
his face gone crestfallen.
"Where is your master?" I ask him —
"Where is Satish, then?"
Nabin said: "Haven't you heard? It's been a fortnight now —
he died, fasting, that golden boy of a son,
preaching non-violence, in the Alipore jail."
Panchu put the notebook into my hands;
I open it, and find, page after page,
whatever I had once said about my country,
written down there, in deep devotion —
he had sent it before he went off to prison.
Today, sitting here, I think —
those spoken words of mine
would have turned, like fallen leaves, to nothing but dust in the dust.
Will this, instead, keep them alive, and make them true,
with the undying touch of one boy's death?

RUSHING ONWARD

"Do not go, do not go" — to whom does this weeping call, in vain?
Where is that bond that could ever hold the boundless within a limit?
This world is only a flood of leave-taking, rushing, with fierce speed,
toward the farther shore — sweeping away, entire, in great heaps,
all that belongs to this shore,
making us weep, making us laugh.
The shape of restless being blooms, and breaks;
the cry "not this, not this" foams up, and speaks aloud,
over the ocean of the great Time.
In that very voice Rudra's drum sounds out,
across the boundless sky —
"not this, not this, not this."
O mind, let go your greed, let go your grief, let go your fear.
Creation is a river; its current is unending dissolution.

All will go, all will pass away — and still, I love.
Even in the midst of ruin, existence's own smile flashes out,
in the surge of joy.
Upon the vina-string of death, the song of life
wakes, and rises;
rushing on, without end, a restless sweetness.
Moment by moment, the eternal lamp-flame flares,
lighting the mirage of the instant.
The bottomless stream of tears; a mother's tender sorrow, flowing;
the exchange of heart with heart, between the beloved and the loved.
On destruction's own playing-field, the hero's vast wine of valour;
the earth's own treasure of beauty.
It is the gift of the boundless, laid in the cupped hands of the moment —
its worth is not to be measured by the measure of time.
Whether it lasts through all of time, or does not last,
still, it is great;
as long as it is here, give it its due, staking your very life on it.

When the chariot of departure comes rushing on,
cry out in triumph, and give it the road, forgetting yourself.
However small the dust that, today, you call your own —
within it, is there not something that does not also pass? — that dispute is a trifling one.
Within the Vast, whatever ceases to be, in one shape,
goes on abiding, still, in another.
Come out, now, from your own dark well;
look, with open eyes, on the joyous, true shape that ruin itself is.
O grief-worn one — in the end, the bubble of your own grief, too,
will float away, upon that shoreless sea beyond all grief.

THE TIMID ONE

Looking back, I see —
that day, I had loved;
before the day had even passed, it had already come to nothing.
I could not find the words that needed saying;
I do not know, even now, why she never simply understood it, of herself.
I had brought something with me, meant as a gift —
it slipped, and fell, unnoticed, from the basket.
I had no confidence left in it,
and so, alas, I never once thought to wonder
what lay hidden in the hesitation of her smile.
The secret vina had been tuned, and was ready;
its ringing note went out only half-way, and no further —
into what doubt has it sunk now — shall I ever find it again,
though I wring dry the whole ocean of my sorrow?

Ah, proud one that you were —
once, in a single glance of your tender look,
why did you not simply take, and conquer, this timidity of mine?
That one jewel that had lain, once, in the necklace of your breast —
in what regret did you let it slip and fall?
Now, instead, upon that same breast of yours,
glitters a garland strung from the wasted tears of that lost night.

JUDGMENT

Do not judge.
Where you stand is only one small corner of the world.
However far your own sight reaches —
how much, after all, is that?
Whatever you hear, along with it,
you mix in your own voice, too.
Good and bad, white and black —
you keep them sorted, portioned out.
You draw false borders,
with lines of your own making.

If the flute of melody
lives, still, within your own mind,
then, walking your road, lost in your own thought,
wake it, and let it play.
In a song there is no arguing;
in it, there is no hurry of business.
Let whoever wishes go their own way;
let whoever wishes answer its call.
Let some of them be good,
and some of them not so good —
take them all, all the same,
as fellow travellers on one single road.

Do not judge.
Alas, alas — time goes on passing; this whole debate is wasted breath.
In the flower-grove, in the corner by the fence,
look — there is the Aparajita;
it has brought a message down out of the sky;
it is the earth's own dear companion.
Look — there, in the grass, in the month of Ashadh,
a flood is rising, green on green —

filling the whole earth
   with its plain and simple gift.
Forgetting yourself, in that plain, simple joy,
   let your own heart fill up;
traveller — give to the road
   the wealth that belongs, after all, to the road.

THE OLD BOOK

I know this old book well.
Unread now, and yet it keeps
an honoured place in my house.
On its torn pages, still,
some faint, tear-blurred touch of an old compassion
seems to linger on — how long ago it was, now, even I could hardly say.

Simple eyes, welling and overflowing,
brimming with the barest hint of some old sorrow;
a black-bordered sari drawn up over her head,
two hands ringed round with bangles, and with comfort.
In the empty hour of afternoon,
her hair let loose across the pillow,
this book held close against her breast,
with a calm face, and an undivided mind,
she reads on, through some tale of parting.
Outside the window, in the empty sky, a flock of pigeons wheels;
down the lane, a hawker's call goes by;
on the doormat, dozing, lies Bhola, the faithful dog,
letting out, in his sleep, some small, plaintive whimper.
Time slips her mind entirely;
across the lane there is a school,
and when, from there, the brass gong
rings out the closing bell,
at once, with a long sigh,
she rises, hurriedly, from where she lay,
and goes off, startled, to her household work,
leaving this book behind, upon the shelf.

From one inner room to another,
this book has travelled on, far and farther still.
From house to house, from village to village,

its fame has spread, to left and right.

And then that whole age passed away;
it tore, and carried off with it, the enchanted web of its own making.
This book, grown shy of itself now,
finds no place, any longer, in any house.
Today's young reader, sitting in his chair,
cannot, however he thinks it over, understand
by what spell even this writing once
conquered so many countless hearts, in that vanished day.
Below the window, outside, a tram goes rattling by.
The lane has grown wide.
The hawker is gone now; his old wares
no longer sell.
His call, in its tired, fading tune,
died away, into some farther distance still.
Where the hours went, unnoticed, who can say —
the closing bell now rings, from some far schoolyard, across the neighbourhood.

WONDER

Again I have woken. The night has worn away.
The world has opened its petals. This, indeed,
  is wonder without end.

How many great continents have sunk beneath the waves,
how many stars gone dark, and spent to nothing,
  how many ages, and ages beyond ages.
The world-conquering hero, having erased himself entirely,
  remains now only a shadow, at the very edge of some story's closing sentence.
How many nations raised their towers of glory,
  mortared in blood, to satisfy the vast hunger of the dust.
In the midst of that great river of ruin, today,
  my own forehead has received, once more, the crimson mark of dawn,
    after sleep — this, indeed, is wonder without end.

Today I stand in the great assembly-hall
  of all the universe's stars. I stand with the high Himalaya,
I stand with the Seven Sages of the northern sky, I stand
  where, in the sea, the wave breaks and rises, in the mad,
    roaring laughter of furious Rudra's own dance and drama.
On the bark of this great forest-tree
  are the signatures of many hundred years;
it has watched a great many royal crowns come loose, and fall.
  In the shade of that very tree, I have been given,
once more, a place to sit, for one day more —
  I know that, within this one day,
    Time's own invisible wheel turns on, without a sound.

THE UNSEEN

I look toward the crowd, there, at the marketplace:
a thousand faces, a thousand histories,
come, and go, covered over, in the light of day,
in the dark of night.
All of their story
no one, in any age, will ever come to know —
not even they themselves know it.
Their loud talk, their high-voiced arguing over this and that —
and yet, deep within them,
a whole vast and various creation
of remembering and forgetting.
There, there is no sound, no light,
no outward gaze can reach that place,
no path of entry there, for anyone at all.
This hidden word, this unheard story, of so many
numberless people — from what first beginning,
in what countless, inward-running streams,
mingling, day and night, into a dark death —
what has become of them?
What, even, was their purpose here?

O beloved — whatever small part of you
I have seen, and heard, and come to know, and touched, and received —
its mystery, a hundred times, a thousand times over,
stays closed, unseen, unheard — for what reason,
and waiting for whom?
The key to that secluded house
is not in your own keeping.
In whose keeping, then, is it?
Who is that great Stranger, in whose unseen court,
O you who are, to me, both known and unknown, your true seat is set?
Is it he alone, then, who knows,

better than anyone, the unknown depths within us?
Is his love greater than any other love —
he, before whose one kind, welcoming gaze
the unspoken, in us, lifts, of itself, its veil?

CONSOLATION

That mute weight of sorrow you carry, O sorrowing one —
for it, there is no remedy.
Nowhere is there any help; in a prayer that goes unanswered,
only the heart's own poverty goes on increasing.

O mute earth —
does your breast never split, bearing,
within your own breast, the whole world's burden
of grief and pain, held there for age after age?
O mute trees —
how easily you bear, upon your heads,
Baisakh's pitiless burning heat —
you are the all-enduring bearers
of Shravan's world-wide flood.

And so I think to myself:
all sorrow, all anguish, will go down, at last, entirely,
into the earth's own generous breast —
into that deep, cool, silent, darkened depth
which endlessly gathers in, and dissolves,
the churned-up poison of Time.
Above that very oblivion,
the green grass sways, in its own quiet beauty,
through every day and night.
There, where every wound of the centuries,
every scar left by death,
lies wholly gone, and wholly departed —
there the great forest-tree, calm, and grave,
lifts up its head, toward the sunrise;
its flowers, cradled in the cup of their own leaves,
adorn the crowning glory of the earth.

O mute earth, O mute company of trees —
  the whole unbearable, restless clamour
of humankind's impatient world,
  you dissolve, moment by moment, into your own stillness;
that silent consolation of yours,
  in your own calm and steady form, I have seen —
    and to it, I bow.

Translator's Notes

On this final period. These poems come from the very end of Tagore's life — composed at Santiniketan through 1940 and into 1941, much of it dictated or written in a shaking hand from a sickbed, in the books রোগশয্যায় (Rogshajyay) and আরোগ্য (Arogya), alongside a scatter of occasional poems for weddings and for the friends nursing him. Scholars of this period have called its style গদ্যিকা রীতি — a "prose-verse manner" — plainer and more direct than almost anything he had written before, though a few of the poems here (written for formal occasions, like the two wedding poems) still reach for his older, grander, more Sanskritic register. I have tried to let the translation register that shift: shorter, barer lines for the sickbed poems; longer, more ornate sentences for "The Bride" and "The Ashram Girl."

দিনাবসান — "Day's End." A quietly startling poem to find near the end of a life: instructions, almost, for how not to be mourned. দিনাবসান literally means "the ending of the day," a common Bengali euphemism for death; I kept "Day's End" rather than a more explicit "Death" to preserve that same soft indirection.

আলিপনা (alpana). The decorative patterns — usually white rice-paste on a swept mud or stone floor — drawn at thresholds and courtyards for festivals, weddings, and worship in Bengal. There is no single English word for it; I left it transliterated, since "pattern" or "decoration" alone loses the specifically ceremonial, threshold-marking sense that makes it the right image for a memorial.

দিক্‌বালা (dik-bala, "maidens of the directions"). A classical Sanskritic personification — the four (or ten) cardinal directions imagined as young women. English has no equivalent figure, so I translated it literally ("the four directions' maidens") rather than flattening it to "the winds" or "the world," trusting the image to carry its own strangeness.

অনাহত বীণারবে ("in the unstruck sounding of the vina"). Anahata is a precise term from yogic and tantric thought: the "unstruck" sound, the cosmic music that is said to resound without being produced by any physical contact — as opposed to ahata, ordinary struck sound. It is a genuinely difficult phrase, because the whole force of it depends on that technical distinction; I rendered it as "the unstruck sounding of the vina" rather than simply "silent music," to keep at least a trace of the paradox (a stringed instrument playing without being struck) that a Bengali reader would recognise immediately as pointing toward the divine.

কালবৈশাখী (Kalbaishakhi). The violent, sudden nor'wester storm that breaks over Bengal at the end of the hot season, in the month of Baisakh — dramatic, destructive, and, in Bengali poetry, often read as a figure for necessary upheaval or liberation rather than pure disaster, which is exactly its role in "The Ashram Girl," where the storm's "frenzy" becomes a "message of freedom." I kept the name transliterated with a brief gloss rather than substituting a generic "storm," since the specific violence and seasonality of a Kalbaishakhi is part of the image.

রুদ্র (Rudra), his damaru. Rudra is an older, fiercer name for Shiva, particularly in his aspect as destroyer; the damaru is his small two-headed hand-drum, whose beat, in myth, both destroys the old universe and sounds out the first rhythm of a new one. In "Rushing Onward," the refrain "not this, not this" (a translation of the Upanishadic neti neti, the classical formula for describing the Absolute by negating every finite thing) is said to ring out in that same drumbeat — I kept "Rudra's drum" rather than softening it to a generic "the drum of destruction," since the Shaivite, cosmic-dissolution resonance is exactly the point.

"নয় নয়" ("not this, not this"). This is a direct echo of the Sanskrit neti neti from the Upanishads — the method of approaching the ultimate reality by negating every partial description of it. I translated it plainly, without gloss inside the poem itself, since the phrase's plainness is part of its power; the philosophical weight is better carried by a translator's note than by an intrusive word choice in the poem.

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On the dedicatees. "Fellow Traveller," "The Ashram Girl," "The Bride," and "Union" are occasional poems for real people in Tagore's own circle in his last years — Kedarnath Chattopadhyay and Amiya Chakravarty were close associates who helped care for him and manage his affairs in this period, and Mamata Sen, Amita Sen, and Indira Maitra were former students of his school at Santiniketan, married in these years. I have kept their names exactly as Tagore wrote them, as the poems are historical documents of specific, real occasions, not fictionalised addresses.

SMALL LIFE

I had been sleeping;
suddenly, a storm-battered night
wept out in a cry of anguish.
Waking, I saw, beside me,
a small, tender face,
laughing, in its sleep, deep in a happy dream.
This trust laid upon the world,
bound fast with the cord of love —
how does a thunderbolt's blow
ever break a thing like that?

Armies go on writing their tales of conquest
across the whole span of history.
The pride of power, its pillars of victory,
rise up, and pierce the sky.
The pageantry of wealth
spreads out, from heaven to heaven,
in a golden, dazzling mirage.
There, in the shock and clash of arms,
whatever gets broken, whatever destroyed —
for that, grief is only wasted.

But here — these ones asked for nothing.
Their small dwelling, in a corner of the earth,
is hedged round with such small, humble wishes;
just as, easily, a bird's own nest,
with its soft-voiced song,
stays filled, in its quiet shade, with sweetness.
O Rudra — why do you loose your arrow, even here?
Why do you not know
that, without fear, these ones loved you;
that, with wondering eyes, in this very world of yours,

they looked upon your light?

UNVEILED

Behind the curtain, here, in this mortal world,
this mind of hers lay hidden from me. By hints, by traces,
by proof, by guesswork, in the light and in the dark,
piecing together broken fragments, she had seen me —
mingling into it her own desires, her hopes, her thirst.
Again and again she wiped away
its lines; and now and then, revising it,
she saw me new. How many times
doubt overtook her. This very image of me,
built up of truth and error both — upon the shore
of this our world, she spent so long a time with it.
She loved it; and, her whole game finished, played
out to its end with it, she has gone away.

Sitting alone, here, in this room,
I think to myself, today — if, in that other world,
her clear, unearthly eyes should, all at once,
grow free of every veil of Maya, and she should come
to know me new — would that one, then, be me?
However plainly she may come to know me there,
will she still love, as her own making, one
who was, to her, as unclear as before?
Ah — this, this is what it is to be human.
Perfect light belongs only to the hour
of the world's undoing; creation's own sweet cunning
plays, forever, its hide-and-seek, in shadow and in light.
In that same spell we two had bound ourselves, here,
in this mortal life — our small playhouse; and, charmed
by the enchantment of the unfinished thing, we stayed
entranced; in a mortal vessel, we were given nectar to drink.
But wholeness is a merciless thing — it is silent; it is bare, uncovered.

VICTOR OVER DEATH

From far off, I had thought to myself:
you are unconquerable, merciless;
the whole earth trembles beneath your rule.
You are the terror; in the torn breast of the suffering
your leaping flame burns on.
The spear in your right hand rises toward the storm-cloud;
from there you draw the lightning down.
Fearful, my heart pounding, I came
before you; at the frown of your brow
the coming ruin surged and swelled —
    the blow fell.
My ribs shook; pressing my hand against my chest,
I asked: "Is there more, still?
Is there, left, one final thunderbolt to fall?"
    The blow fell.
Only this? Nothing more than this?
My fear broke apart.

While your lightning stood raised, ready to strike,
I had reckoned you greater than myself.
With your own blow, you came down, at last,
right to where my own ground, my own home, is.
Today you have grown small.
All my shame has broken apart.
However great you are —
you are not greater than death.
I am greater than death — with this,
my last word, I will go, now, and take my leave.

UNHINDERED

Move aside; give up the road.
Your mind is heavy, stone-like, with an unbearable doubt.
The light stream of life
rushes on, in every direction,
with a tumult of noise,
in reckless, headlong joy.
It is they who lighten
the old, ancient burden of the past.
It is they who straighten out
the crooked bends of the world,
with their own restless collisions.
Beneath their footfall,
every knot of the tangled net
comes loose, and falls away.
They scour the grime clean;
with untiring vigour they drive weariness off.
They are like clouds, drinking the morning light —
the sea's own numberless waves;
they are like the enthusiasm of some wind that has lost its way,
the earth-conquering, unceasing flow of trees;
at the edge of the old night, they are the first light.
They are children, they are girls and boys,
they are women overflowing with youth.
They are that fearless band of heroes
who, in the reckless daring of their youth,
storm the very fortress of danger,
and carry its treasure back to safety.
The chains upon their feet ring out, as they walk,
carrying within them a strong, unbroken freedom.
For tomorrow, they have no worry, no fear in their minds —

they conquer tomorrow, instead.
On they go, on they go, from every side,
through darkness and through light,
facing forward, drawn on by the unknown.
Get out of the way, then, you —
O timid one, weighed down beneath the burden of your doubt.

THE TRAVELLER

The very Time that carries wealth away
carries off, too, the loss of that same wealth.
That is why the earth remains,
always, the same abundant, ever-giving Earth.
One by one the birds go, taking their store of songs with them.
Nowhere does it grow empty;
there is no end to the blows that fall, and yet, unbroken,
the whole vast household of the world goes on.
Sorrow belongs only to you, only to me —
a moment, fenced about, here and there.
Cross over that fence, and it does not reach
as far as the whole universe.
O you, o I — where your own journey, one day,
comes to its stop, there you will see
that gain and loss, the rise and fall of the wave,
are one same game, the motion of one same string.
Weeping, and laughter — upon one same vina-string
the same song rises, overflowing, and,
arriving at the same last beat, merges, at the end,
into the Great Silence.
Let the burning of your heart, your own lament,
stay hidden, beneath your own smallness.
Where the whole procession of humankind moves on,
walk there, evenly, undisturbed, alongside all the rest;
show yourself as that grave and tranquil peace —
the peace that, at the very edge of death,
withdrawn, apart, is gathered wholly into itself;
the peace in which all the day's dust-marks,
all its wounds, are put out, in that peace's own last dark;
at the world's furthest shore, in the meditative,
sacred night of the Seven Sages, that ocean of peace
loses its own end, within itself;

the peace that stands, hushed, and stilled, in a deep love —
the love that, passing beyond body, beyond mind, into the far distance,
has gained, in its own utter sweetness, its final forgetting of itself.
In that supreme peace, may your own unshaken stillness rest.

UNION (II)

I will not lay the blame on you.
I know the frown of my own fate;
all the wounds of this small world, all its flaws,
all the pain that strikes, without end,
against your own high being.
I know you have not stood apart from me,
untouched, in some far and distant heaven.
I dwell in you; you dwell in me;
a ceaseless current of giving and taking flows
between the two of us — you, and I —
crossing every hard obstacle.
All my burden rests, day and night,
upon you; my own life is not mine alone.
And so I think — may I, by my own strength,
make this burden of mine lighter;
may I, one by one, cut through
the tangled cords that hold me bound;
joined, in easy union, may I move
through this whole universe, without conflict, without chain,
never looking back toward myself.
Having driven every unrest far away,
you and I, meeting, will ring out, together,
in a single note.

Translator's Notes

On this final period. These poems come from the very end of Tagore's life — composed at Santiniketan through 1940 and into 1941, much of it dictated or written in a shaking hand from a sickbed, in the books রোগশয্যায় (Rogshajyay) and আরোগ্য (Arogya), alongside a scatter of occasional poems for weddings and for

the friends nursing him. Scholars of this period have called its style গদ্যিকা রীতি — a "prose-verse manner" — plainer and more direct than almost anything he had written before, though a few of the poems here (written for formal occasions, like the two wedding poems) still reach for his older, grander, more Sanskritic register. I have tried to let the translation register that shift: shorter, barer lines for the sickbed poems; longer, more ornate sentences for "The Bride" and "The Ashram Girl."

দিনাবসান — "Day's End." A quietly startling poem to find near the end of a life: instructions, almost, for how not to be mourned. দিনাবসান literally means "the ending of the day," a common Bengali euphemism for death; I kept "Day's End" rather than a more explicit "Death" to preserve that same soft indirection.

আলিপনা (alpana). The decorative patterns — usually white rice-paste on a swept mud or stone floor — drawn at thresholds and courtyards for festivals, weddings, and worship in Bengal. There is no single English word for it; I left it transliterated, since "pattern" or "decoration" alone loses the specifically ceremonial, threshold-marking sense that makes it the right image for a memorial.

দিক্‌বালা (dik-bala, "maidens of the directions"). A classical Sanskritic personification — the four (or ten) cardinal directions imagined as young women. English has no equivalent figure, so I translated it literally ("the four directions' maidens") rather than flattening it to "the winds" or "the world," trusting the image to carry its own strangeness.

অনাহত বীণারবে ("in the unstruck sounding of the vina"). Anahata is a precise term from yogic and tantric thought: the "unstruck" sound, the cosmic music that is said to resound without being produced by any physical contact — as opposed to ahata, ordinary struck sound. It is a genuinely difficult phrase, because the whole force of it depends on that technical distinction; I rendered it as "the unstruck sounding of the vina" rather than simply "silent music," to keep at least a trace of the paradox (a stringed instrument playing without being struck) that a Bengali reader would recognise immediately as pointing toward the divine.

কালবৈশাখী (Kalbaishakhi). The violent, sudden nor'wester storm that breaks over Bengal at the end of the hot season, in the month of Baisakh — dramatic, destructive, and, in Bengali poetry, often read as a figure for necessary upheaval or liberation rather than pure disaster, which is exactly its role in "The Ashram Girl," where the storm's "frenzy" becomes a "message of freedom." I kept the name transliterated with a brief gloss rather than substituting a generic "storm," since the specific violence and seasonality of a Kalbaishakhi is part of the image.

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রুদ্র (Rudra), again — in "Small Life." Here the same fierce name for Shiva-the-destroyer used elsewhere in this cycle is aimed at something much more immediate and topical: these poems were written as the Second World War was closing in on India, and the "thunderbolt" that breaks a sleeping child's trust reads as much like an air raid as a mythological weapon. I kept "Rudra" rather than

softening him into an abstract "Death" or "Fate," because the poem's real charge is in holding a war god and an actual falling bomb in the same word at once.

মায়া (Maya) and প্রলয় (pralaya), in "Unveiled." This poem turns on a genuinely difficult piece of Vedantic thought: that Maya — usually translated flatly as "illusion" — is not a flaw in love but its very condition. A person can only ever be partly, provisionally known; it is that incompleteness, that "hide-and-seek in shadow and light," which makes loving another person possible at all. Pralaya, by contrast, is the periodic total dissolution of the universe in Hindu cosmology — the one condition under which everything would, at last, be seen whole and "unveiled." The poem's final, startling claim — that such total, veil-less knowledge would be "merciless" — only lands if both words keep their full cosmological weight, so I avoided translating either as a vaguer English synonym.

মৃত্যুঞ্জয় (Mrityunjay, "Victor over Death"). This title is itself a classical epithet of Shiva and the name of one of the most famous protective mantras in the Hindu tradition (the Mahamrityunjaya Mantra, chanted for healing and for warding off death). Naming a poem this way, from a man in his last year of life, is almost a small act of defiance in itself — and the poem does something bolder still with the title: rather than showing some god named Mrityunjay rescuing the speaker from death, it ends with the speaker claiming that title for himself — "I am greater than death." I kept the title in its more transparent English sense ("Victor Over Death") rather than leaving it untranslated, since the whole poem is built to earn that claim by its final line, and an untranslated Sanskrit title would have hidden the poem's own argument from an English reader until too late.

একই শমে ("arriving at the same beat"), in "The Traveller." Sam is a technical term from Hindustani classical music: the first, "landing" beat of a rhythmic cycle (tala), the point every rhythmic line — however far it has wandered — must eventually circle back to and resolve on together. When the poem says that weeping and laughter, on the same vina-string, "arrive at the same sam," it is making a precise musical claim, not just a vague one about harmony: however different the melodies of joy and grief, they are built on the same underlying cycle and must resolve at the

same point. I translated it as "the same last beat" to keep that rhythmic, rather than purely melodic, sense.

বসুন্ধরা / বসুমতী, again — in "The Traveller." As in "The Real Thing" earlier in this collection, Tagore reaches for one of the classical epithets of the Earth as "wealth-bearer" — here two different ones, used almost interchangeably, to make the point that the Earth's abundance is never actually depleted by any single loss. I have simply rendered both as "the Earth," since English has no equivalent double vocabulary, but a Bengali reader would feel the poem reaching, twice, for the same grand, ancient name.

On the repeated title "মিলন" ("Union"). Tagore gives this same title to two entirely unrelated poems in this collection — the wedding poem for Indira Maitra, and this later, purely devotional meditation on mutual indwelling with the divine. This is not a translation choice so much as a fact about the original: he simply reused the word, confident that context alone would keep the two poems apart. I have marked the second occurrence "Union (II)" only to avoid confusion in this English collection; no such marker exists in the Bengali.

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