

POETRY

SHARPS AND FLATS

KARI O KOMAL

Rabindranath Tagore



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INCAPACITY

অক্ষমতা

This is like the accursed thirst of a hungry ghost —
 the water lies right there, yet there is no body to drink it with.
 This is only the heart's own feeble, futile longing,
 crying "I want, I want," in the very midst of all it desires.
 Binding both my feet with a chain of flowers,
 only sitting, gazing down the road!
 Human life seems entirely fruitless —
 the world seems a painted canvas, and I seem painted upon it!
 The ever-hungry fire of life
 turns me to ash, moment by moment;
 the mere hope of greatness, like a burden,
 drags me down and drowns me beneath my own inertia.
 Where is the heart that wakes to the work of this world!
 Where is my courage, that should run through bone and marrow!

Notes. The opening image is of a preta — a hungry ghost cursed, in Hindu and Buddhist lore, to starve forever in the presence of food or water it cannot physically consume (much as Tantalus is cursed in Greek myth). I kept "hungry ghost" over a more clinical "preta" so the curse reads immediately. জড়ত্ব ("inertia," in the closing lines) is a word that means both physical torpor and a kind of spiritual deadness — English "inertia" catches the first sense well but loses the moral weight the Bengali carries.

THE WIND OF HER VEIL

অঞ্চলের বাতাস

She passed close by me, swift as a sudden glance,
 the hem of her veil brushed lightly against my body,
 I glimpsed of her only the half of one profile —
 and, trembling, the wind off her veil touched me as it passed.
 Within some unknown forest of the heart a wave of feeling rose,
 a south wind came blowing, borne upon her veil,
 and there — I could hear it — a flute was playing,
 and there the fragrance of flowers rose up as if weeping.
 From whose life, alas, alas,
 did this faint hint of a touch come flying on the wind!
 Oh, whose body has gone so restless, so far away,
 oh, who is it that longs to tell some secret message!
 It left, upon my whole body, its own restless breath,
 it spoke, into the ear of my whole body, its quiet word.

Notes. অঞ্চল is the end of a sari, often drawn up over the head or shoulder as an informal veil — there is no single English word for it, so "veil" stands in, though it loses the specifically textile, everyday intimacy of the original. হৃদয়বন, "heart-forest," is Tagore's own compound and I have kept it uncollapsed, since the strangeness of an inner forest — wild, unmapped — is exactly the point. The whole poem builds its eroticism entirely out of touch that never quite happens — a hem, a breath of wind, a breath of sound — and I tried to keep every verb as glancing and provisional as the Bengali's.

THE SETTING SUN

অস্তমান রবি

Today, O sun, will you go down behind the western hills
without hearing even a single song from my lips!

Wait, stay a moment — let us speak a word of farewell,
and let me bring this day of mine to its close.

Pause there, upon the far horizon of the sea,
and rest your one, single eye upon my face.

In this last moment of the day, for the space of an instant,
let you go on gazing, and let me go on gazing too.

Over both our eyes let the darkness of evening
come, closing softly, like the falling of an eyelid;
let the deep, dusk-cooled ocean of peace
put out, today, our two bright and burning hearts.

The bird has ended its last song and fallen silent —
this song of mine alone was left still to be sung.

Notes. অস্তাচল, "the mountain of setting," is a fixture of classical Sanskrit and Bengali cosmology — a mythic peak in the west behind which the sun is imagined to descend each evening, paired with an উদ্যাচল, a mountain of rising, in the east. "Western hills" translates the function rather than the myth, since English has no equivalent mountain-of-sunset. The sun's "একমাত্র আঁখি," its "one, single eye," is a lovely, slightly uncanny personification I kept intact — the whole poem stages a

wordless, mutual gaze between the poet and a vast, single-eyed sky-god going out of sight.

BEYOND THE WESTERN HILLS

অস্তাচলের পরপারে — To the Evening Sun

Take this song of mine along with you,
to some new shore of the sea, toward the waiting day.
If, from the shore of evening, through the trance of sleep,
this song should steal into someone's ear on the shore of dawn!
If, sailing all night long across the sea of darkness,
it should drift away to the far side of dream,
and if, when the birds of morning rise up singing,
they should chance to find this song of mine.
He who sat weeping on the shore of twilight,
who let fall so many tears, gazing up at the sky —
will his tears fall again, made new,
like dew, within the newborn morning?
Do not the buds of evening, breaking themselves open,
rise transformed to flowers, blossoming, by the morning?

Notes. A direct companion to the previous sonnet, and it turns on the simple, almost scientific fact that Tagore trusts entirely as metaphor: while it grows dark here, morning is breaking somewhere else on the same round earth. The poem asks its own grief to travel with the sun and arrive, transfigured, as someone else's dawn. I have kept the closing line as a question, as in the original, rather than flattening it into a statement — its hope is offered tentatively, not guaranteed.

LONGING

আকাঙ্ক্ষা

Today, in the autumn sunlight, in a morning dream,
 who knows what it is my heart desires!
There, on the shefali branch, calling — what is it saying?
 what is it the birds, paired male and female, are singing!
Today, in this sweet wind, my heart grows listless,
 it will not stay at home, alas, my mind!
For what flower's hope, for what blossom's fragrance,
 does my mind go racing into the deep blue sky!

Today, someone, it seems, is missing — and so, this morning,
 my life feels entirely in vain!
And so it looks about, on every side, my heart weeping, singing —
 "not this, not this, this is not it!"
In what land of dream does she dwell, her hair unbound,
 what shadowy, deathless one is she!
In what grove today, in the pain of separation,
 does she weep, on my account alone!

If I, with restless heart, should string together a song,
 to whom, then, shall I ever sing it!
If I, gathering armfuls of flowers, should weave a garland,
 on whom, then, shall I place this wreath!

If I should offer up this life of mine as a gift,
at whose feet, then, shall I lay my life down!
Always I fear, in my heart, that somewhere, unknowingly,
someone, deep within, is made to suffer!

Notes. এলোকেশে, "hair unbound," is a stock image for a woman appearing in dream or vision, uncontained by the ordinary decorum of a braided or covered head — wildness and unreality in a single detail. The word I have rendered "birds, paired male and female" is বিহগবিহগী, literally "bird-and-she-bird," a compound that insists on the pair rather than a generic flock — the poet's own solitude is thrown into relief by every other creature having a mate. The poem's real turn comes in its last four lines: what begins as romantic yearning for an unknown "someone" ends in an ethical worry — that giving his heart so indiscriminately might wound someone in particular without his knowing it.

SELF-INSULT

আত্ম-অপমান

Wipe away your tears, then, and look, with a smiling face,
upon all the people of this strange and various world.
In honor and dishonor, in joy and in sorrow,
call the whole world to yourself, with a heart at peace.
Some will love you, some will not love you at all,
some will go far away, some will draw near —
if you wish to make a home within yourself,
then you must learn to forget yourself, always.
I am a rich man's child, I am no beggar —
hidden in my heart there lies a treasury of love —
if only I wish it, I am able to give away, freely,
the deep and joyous fountain that is my heart.
Then why do I go from door to door, begging for food and drink —
why do I bring upon myself such self-abasement!

Notes. This poem and the next form a deliberate pair, opposite answers to the same wound. অভিমান, the wounded, sulking pride that runs through both, has no single English word — part hurt feeling, part proud withdrawal. Here the cure offered is generosity: recognizing oneself as inwardly wealthy ("a rich man's child") and choosing to give rather than beg for others' love.

WOUNDED PRIDE

আত্মাভিমান

I am my own thorn, I am torn by my own self.
Within myself alone, I find nothing but pain.
Why do I go begging everyone else for support —
I have no home, no home, I have no home at all!
This sharp, this small and brittle pride of mine
cannot bear, alas, the slightest touch of disrespect.
It goes ahead and pricks at everyone's feet,
for fear someone might find it too small, too slight.
Better, then, that I remain in darkness, soiled with dust —
I do not want, I do not want, this beggarly, wretched pride —
in my own poverty let me simply disappear,
I will not wander about, begging everyone's favor with pleading eyes.
If, within myself, my mind can find its peace,
then even a humble bed of dust becomes a joyful resting place.

Notes. Read against "Self-Insult," this poem answers the same isolation with withdrawal rather than generosity: not "give freely" but "want nothing, and let even dust be enough." Both poems end on the same paradoxical formula — self-forgetting as the only route to a self at peace — but this one is far more defensive in tone, its pride described as a thorn that wounds others pre-emptively, out of fear of being thought small.

SONG OF THE CALL

আহ্বানগীত

Across the whole earth the war-horn has sounded,

I have heard it there —

everyone else has come, banners in hand,

where, oh where, is the Bengali!

A deep, deep voice goes weeping about

along the shore of the Bengal sea,

"Whoever you are, in the house of the Bengali, come!" —

it calls out, again and again.

Why are the doors of every house pulled shut,

why is there no one on the road,

as though someone, across the whole country, had died —

and only grief remains alive.

The Ganges flows on, alone, lost in its own thoughts,

the Himalayas simply stand and gaze,

the sun and moon rise in the endless sky

and come and go, turning, turning.

How much crisis, how much anguish

for the children of mankind,

how much quarrel, how much lamenting
in the house of the children of man!

How much distrust between brother and brother,
no one accepts anyone else,
envy, that creature of the night, breathes out its breath
in the very center of the heart.

Hidden within the heart, the heart's own pain
wrestles in the darkness of doubt,
who, today, shall give comfort to whom —
who will go and find a home for another!

Grief, torment, and dread must be brought to an end,
the battle must be fought,
from the whole earth a great swelling cry has arisen —
listen, listen, O soldiers all!

The earth is calling out to her own children,
and so the very wind goes rushing on —
leaving their homes, in search of their brothers,
how many brothers have set out.

To the cottages of Bengal the message has come —
has everyone heard it?

Has the poet awakened, to make that message heard,
in a voice as deep as thunderclouds?

Has anyone's heart surged up and overflowed?

Has anyone opened their eyes?

Has anyone broken their cherished doll,
left behind the house of play?

Why this whispering, why this doubt?

Why do you die of fear and shame?

Throw open the door, break down your fear,
come out into the midst of the world.

At the far edge of the earth, rolling in the dust,
its body bound up in torpor,
curled inward, folded into itself,
the tiny worm-mite sleeps on.

All around it, in its own rejoicing,
the world rushes on to its labor,
all around it, in the endless sky,
the music of the heavens is sounding!

All around it, the majesty of humankind
rises up toward the sky,

mankind goes searching for its own boundary
in the very midst of the boundless!

It believes in none of this,
it thinks only of itself as great —
it counts, alone, its own breaths,
gathering up its little heap of dust.

Taking up joy and sorrow, an endless struggle —
this is the great stage of the world —
who here has need of a coward's rest?
Why, then, do you go on sleeping?

You sink and you float on waves of your own tears,
you go on hearing only lamentation —
lift up your face, and see where the shore lies,
and cross over this ocean.

With a mighty clamor, everyone is building a bridge together,
come, you too, and lend a hand —
instead you entangle your own feet like an obstacle —
what wretched fate is this, to suffer so!

If you cannot do even that, then step aside, step aside,
leave the place open for others,

if you must fall and die in the dust, then die —
but why this endless song of lament!

Look, then, upon your own face,
stop and think, who you are,
you who bear the very form of man,
why do you act like insects, like worms?

You have a history, you have lineage and honor,
you have a whole mine of greatness —
listen to the echo
of the song your fathers and forefathers sang.

They searched, gazing up into the sky,
for the paths of the planets and the stars,
leaving this world behind, hoping for the boundless,
they used to send their chariot of thought soaring.

Like the chataka bird, thirsting for truth alone,
with a life athirst and restless,
they remained awake through day and night,
gazing out toward the whole world.

Then why is everyone here so deaf,
why so lifeless and unconscious —

why does the world's own song of calling
turn back, its swelling cry all in vain!

The epic of greatness is entering our ears,
why is it we do not understand its language?
In the songs of all the traveling pilgrims of the road,
why does no hope awaken in us?

The banner of progress flies out in the wind,
why does our life not dance to see it?
A new ray of light has broken in the sky,
why does no song awaken in us?

Why do we lie here, why do we just gaze on,
lying about, face to face with one another —
while the river of mankind flows on, singing its song,
rejoicing in the joy of the world!

Come, into the light of day, come, into the dwellings of men,
come, into the clamor of the crowd —
let us mingle our hearts with the hearts of all mankind
beneath the boundless sky.

We will raise wave upon wave,
ever new dance and song —

the story of the whole world, in a million voices,
we will speak as with a single voice.

The joy of mankind, the hope of mankind,
shall resound within my very life,
the language of hundreds and thousands and millions of men
shall blossom forth within my song.

In the work of mankind, in the midst of mankind,
we too shall find our place,
and so, at the door of Bengal, the war-horn sounds —
I have heard it, brother!

Wipe away the dust, wipe away your tears,
cast off the beggar's rags —
put on new attire, take up new strength,
lift up, lift up your bowed head.

To you, today, there has come
an invitation from the whole world —
take care to cast off your wretched, threadbare dress,
the very ornaments of your servitude.

When you shall stand in the midst of the great assembly,
and look about you, slowly, smiling,

the golden rays of the ancient, glorious sun
will fall upon your very head.

Breaking every bond, there shall rise, in bloom,
the hundred-petaled lotus of the heart,
and out into the midst of the world shall spill
the fragrance of the morning.

Rise, O poet of Bengal, and in the mother tongue
breathe life into the dying —
and the people of the whole world, hoping for nectar,
shall come to drink of that language.

They shall look upon the face of our own mother,
their eyes shall swim with tears —
and the whole world shall be bound, in the binding of song,
at the very feet of our mother.

Because she has no place in all the world,
the land of Bengal is weeping —
sing, O poet, and with your song
go and win her a place beneath the whole sky.

Just once, O poet, in the mother tongue,
sing out the song of the world —

and all the world shall become one brotherhood,
and every dishonor shall vanish away.

Notes. This is a public, oratorical poem in a very different register from the private sonnets around it — closer to a call-to-arms than a lyric. **বিষাণ** (a horn or conch sounded before battle) and **নিশান** (a banner) set a martial frame at once, though the "war" the poem calls for turns out, by its end, to be entry into a shared world civilization through language and song, not conquest — a nationalism that resolves into internationalism. **চাতক**, the mythical bird believed in Sanskrit and Bengali poetic convention to drink only raindrops and no other water, is the classical figure for a single-minded, unquenchable thirst — here applied to the ancestors' thirst for truth. The recurring "worm" or "insect" (**কীট**) that curls up and sleeps while the cosmos rushes on around it is the poem's central rebuke: a call to Bengal not to remain that curled, self-satisfied thing.

FABLE

উপকথা

Behind the clouds, I know not when the day has slipped away.
The rain falls all day long, unwilling to cease.
The birds, their wings wet through,
 have quite forgotten how to sing,
silently the trees and creepers stand, drenched through.
Sitting here, in this darkened room,
 to the ceaseless patter of the rain,
how many old tales come back to my mind.

At times it seems to me
 as though all these old stories
were once true, in some young and newborn world.
Like flying clouds,
 how many things would happen there,
the whole world would go soaring on the chariot of the mind.

Some prince, quite carelessly,
 would set off for some far country,
crossing so many rivers, so many seas.
By some lake's radiant bathing-stair
 a serpent-maiden, jewel in hand,
would sit, gathering up her heavy hair.

Far away, on the shore of some sea,
in the palace of some demon,
a king's daughter would lie fast asleep.
Her laughter was made of tiny jewels,
though no one ever saw it,
and when she wept, her tears fell as scattered pearls.

Seven brothers, all together,
would blossom into champak flowers,
and one sister would blossom into a parul flower.
Whatever was possible, whatever impossible,
all of it existed there, side by side —
truth and falsehood, like two brothers, together.

The world, then, was bound by nothing,
there was no hard and fast obstruction,
there was no fixed decree of fate.
Laughter and tears, weightless as
the play of light and shadow in autumn,
would simply come and touch the soul, and pass on!

Today, that day has come to its end,
the world's own childhood game is over,
gone are those days of light and shadow.

There is no more holiday now,
 the kingdom of clouds has broken apart,
 and at every step, we live bound now by rule and law.

Under the fierce blaze of the noonday sun,
 who can remain outside in such heat —
 and so everyone longs now to build a house, a shelter.
 Yet when, alas, with all one's strength,
 one finally brings that labor to its end,
 it breaks apart all over again, just like a game.

Notes. The "seven brothers who became champak flowers, one sister who became a parul flower" is not Tagore's invention but a direct reference to one of Bengal's best-loved folk tales, Saat Bhai Champa — recognizable to any Bengali child, the way "Cinderella" would be to an English one; I kept it plain rather than explaining it inside the poem itself, as Tagore does. নাগবালা, a "serpent-maiden," draws on the Naga tradition of semi-divine snake-people common to Bengali and wider South and Southeast Asian folklore. The poem's final image is its quietest cruelty: adult "seriousness" — building a house, a shelter, a life — turns out to be just as fragile and just as much a game as the fairy tales of childhood, minus the innocence that once made the breaking painless.

THE POET'S PRIDE

কবির অহংকার

Why should I take pride, only because I sing a song!
 Why do I not weep instead, in shame, for merely singing!
 To sing and die, like a bird trapped in a cage —
 is this, then, mother, the whole beginning and end of human birth!
 There is no joy, no joy at all, only the heart's own ache —
 I only go on dying of thirst, chasing after a mirage.
 Who was it showed me this temptation, this empty immortality —
 can one truly go on living, while dying at heart, on song alone!
 Whoever among you is weary here, whoever is weak,
 call out to me — let me come and join you.
 Let us sit together, just once, and shed our tears,
 and cast far away this base pride, this empty, wounded vanity —
 and after that, let us come together and do the real work,
 casting far from us this endless, mournful song of lament.

Notes. A sonnet that reads almost as a rebuke to "Song of the Call"'s own poet-figure, and to the caged-bird self-pity that runs through several poems here — this time the poet turns the accusation on himself: is singing itself just another form of the sleeping worm-mite's self-satisfaction? "শূন্য অমরতা," "empty immortality," names precisely the vanity being renounced — the old Romantic promise that art alone confers a kind of survival, which the poem calls hollow next to shared, actual work.

THE BEE OF IMAGINATION

কল্পনামধুপ

Every day, every morning, only a low, murmuring song,
wings idle with desire, like a honeybee's.
With a heart gone faint, my restless, maddened soul
goes wandering, searching everywhere for honey.
The day wears on and passes — the daylight grown weary,
beneath the trees the tired shade lies down to rest,
the notes of the flute go faltering, sinking into silence,
the jasmine, its stem gone slack, closes its eyes.
Within a hedge of flower-petals, in its shade,
there I sit, and drink my imagined honey —
in solitude, a fragrant, honeyed enchantment,
and to its spell I give myself entirely —
then, with wings all dusted with pollen, I return back home,
and remain, lost in my own fragrance, adrift within myself.

Notes. কুহক, translated "enchantment" / "spell," specifically means a deceptive, magician's illusion rather than a benign charm — the poem knows its own honey is fake, "imagined" (কল্পমধু), and drinks it anyway. The closing image — coming home dusted in pollen from a flower that was never really visited — is a wry self-portrait of the poet as someone who has been somewhere only in fancy, and returns changed by the visit all the same.

COMPANION OF IMAGINATION

কল্পনার সাথি

When you wander alone through the flower-grove,
when the full-moon night lies spread out, spilling upon the earth,
when, in the southern wind, and in the river's murmuring song,
you listen, and hear the story of your own heart's life —

when, your lap filled full with shefali blossoms,
your two feet stretched before you, your face bowed low,
holding, between two fingers delicate as flower-petals,
you string a garland in the morning, humming softly to yourself —

at midday, when, sitting alone beside your window,
your eyes try to reach and touch the far-off sky,
when, now and then, the end of your veil slips loose and falls,
when, now and then, a long sigh rises from your heart,
when, now and then, a single tear trembles on your eyelash —

in that hour, my friend, am I there with you, at your side?

Notes. The whole sonnet is a single suspended sentence — clause after clause of "when," gathering up a portrait of someone else's solitary hours — before the volta finally resolves into a question rather than an answer. I kept that structure exactly, since the poem's tenderness depends on it: the poet does not claim to be present in

his beloved's private moments, he only wonders, at the very last line, whether he might be.

THE BEGGAR GIRL

কাঙালিনী

At the coming of the Goddess of Joy,
the whole land has been flooded with joy.
See there, at the rich man's door,
stands a poor beggar-girl.

The laughter and clamor of the festival
she has heard, since early morning,
and, leaving behind her joyless home,
she has come out today,
come to the rich man's door,
to watch this game of joy.

The flute of the festival is playing,
and so it comes stealing into her ear,
and so, in her dim, faded eyes, there floats
a hopeless dream of happiness;
all around, the light of morning
falls so sweetly upon her eyes,

and up in the sky, among the clouds,
the golden autumn sun.

So many come, so many go,
some laugh, some sing,
so many colors of dress and finery —
gold and jewels flashing bright,
so many kinsfolk, so many servants,
so many heaps upon heaps of flowers and leaves —
all of it falls before her eyes
like a picture made of mirage.
See, and so she stands there, gazing on,
this empty-hearted beggar-girl.

She has heard: the Mother has come home,
and so the whole world floats in joy —
she who has never known a mother's tenderness
has come to see what a mother looks like.
That, perhaps, is why her eyes are brimming,
the pupils of her eyes veiled in mist!
As though gazing up into the Mother's very face,
the little girl, in sorrowful, wounded pride,
says, "Mother, what manner of way is this?
So much music, so much laughter,
so many jewels, so much of your finery —

if you are truly my mother,
then why is my own dress so soiled and poor!"

The little children, boys and girls together,
arms linked, brother and sister,
are dancing there, in the courtyard;
and the girl, her hand resting on the door,
stands watching them,
and thinks, letting out a sigh —
I am nothing at all to them.

My own mother, out of tenderness,
never once dressed me in fine clothes,
never once, taking me in her lap at dawn,
wiped the tears from my eyes.

Just because she has no brother of her own,
will no one at all call out to her?
Will no other mother ever come
and show her tenderness?

Must she only stand, holding the door,
forever gazing at the festival,
this empty-hearted beggar-girl?

When her whole life is darkness,
 how piteous the great flute sounds to her,
her eyes brimming with tears at the door —
 this heap of laughter is such cruelty to her.

Today, on this very day of festival,
 how many people are shedding streams of tears,
who have no home, no tenderness, alas,
 who have no one at all, in this whole world.

Some go home now with empty hands,
 their children come running up to them,
and they have nothing at all to give them,
 only the tears standing in their eyes.

Take the orphaned child into your lap,
 O mothers, come, all of you.
If the motherless child finds no mother today,
 then what is this festival for at all!

If she must go on standing at the door,
 her face dim, sorrowful, and worn,
then in vain hang the mango-leaf sprigs,
 then in vain stands the sacred water-jar.

Notes. আনন্দময়ী, "the Goddess of Joy," is a name for Durga — the poem is set during Durga Puja, Bengal's great autumn homecoming festival, when the goddess is welcomed as a daughter returning to her father's house, and every household becomes, symbolically, hers. That frame is what gives the poem its edge: if the goddess being celebrated is literally "the Mother," what does it mean that one child, motherless in fact, is left outside every door? সহকার-শাখা (a spray of mango leaves) and মঙ্গল-কলস (an auspicious filled water-vessel) are standard festival-doorway decorations, tokens of welcome and blessing — the poem's last line makes them exactly as empty as the girl finds the festival to be, unless someone opens that door to her.

WHY

(কেন)

Why, oh why, does your flute cry out in such a strain
that my heart breaks into weeping at its sweetness?
Seeing the honeyed smile curl at the corner of your crimson lips,
why does my youth leap up, trembling, into sudden bloom?

Why does this body long to surrender into the circle of your arms?
Why does my life race, breathless, toward those two dark eyes?
Alas — if there is so much shyness in every word we speak,
alas — if there is so much weariness in every passing moment —

why, then, does it call me close, when a veil still stands between?
Why does it wring tears from the heart, if all of it is only shadow —
what today is lifted fondly into the hand, tomorrow flung away?
For this, such thirst! Whose enchantment can this be?

Such carelessness taken with a human heart —
if this is only play, why must the play cut so deep?

Translator's Notes

- কেন (keno) — "why": the poem's engine, hammered at the head of line after line. I kept the anaphora wherever English would bear it, because the repetition is the poem's logic — a mind circling the same wound.
- মায়া (maya) — nearly untranslatable: "illusion" in the Vedantic sense, but also tenderness, or an enchantment that binds even though you know it's false. I chose "enchantment" to keep both the charm and the trap alive.
- বাহুডোর (bahu-dor) — literally "arm-tether": an embrace figured as a binding cord. "Circle of your arms" softens the original's hint of a snare, which reads as sinister rather than swooning if translated too literally.
- অন্তরাল (antaral) — not just distance but a screen or interval, something interposed. "Veil" keeps both the concealment and the closeness-yet-separation.
- Form — this is one of Tagore's early চতুর্দশপদী কবিতা (fourteen-line poems), his adaptation of the Petrarchan sonnet, complete with an original rhyme scheme I didn't attempt to reproduce — the same choice Tagore made translating his own verse for Gitanjali.

WHERE

(কোথায়)

Alas, where will you go!

To that endless, unknown land, utterly alone as you are,
where will you find the path!

Alas, where will you go!

This vast, hard world —

each must seek out their own path.

You, a darling child of tenderness, suddenly cast into the infinite,
whose face will you turn to?

Alas, where will you go!

None of us will remain at your side,

none of us will speak with you there.

The moment you go, our love
you will find no more.

Alas, where will you go!

We will sit here and weep,

staring into the void, calling your name;

in that vast solitude, perhaps our voice of lament
you will catch, now and then.

Alas, where will you go!

See, here the flower has bloomed,
setting the spring aquiver with longing,
the memory of old happiness the breeze still carries
so tenderly, always —

Alas, where will you go!

Do you not remember our games and play,
so many words held in loving memory?

Through joys and sorrows, turning again and again, those memories bound to you
—

will even those come to an end!

Alas, where will you go!

Forever now you will be a stranger to us,
this house will no longer be your house.

Those who once climbed into your lap — they too, like strangers,
will not turn to look at you, not once.

Alas, where will you go!

Alas, where will you go!

If you must go, then go, go — wipe your tears away as you go,
leave your sorrow here with us.

May you find there the rest you longed for —
sleep now, in peace.

If you must go — go.

Translator's Notes

- পুতলি (putuli) — "doll," used as an endearment for a beloved child; I rendered it "darling child" rather than the more literal "doll," which reads as strange in English.
- পর (por) — "other / stranger," someone no longer one's own. This is the poem's real wound: the beloved becoming "not ours." It appears twice in the sixth stanza, which I kept as the emotional pivot of the poem.
- বিলাপধ্বনি (bilap-dhwoni) — "the sound of lament" — rendered "voice of lament."
- The refrain — repeated seven times in the original — is the poem's structural spine; I kept it exact and unvaried each time, as Tagore does.

A FLEETING MEETING

(ক্ষণিক মিলন)

From two ends of the sky came drifting two clouds,
two clouds astray, lost — who knows from where they came!
Suddenly they paused, halting there, meeting in the middle of the sky,
and gazed at one another in the light of the fourth-day moon.
In that faint glow, it seemed each half-remembered the other, two strangers who
had once been known —
remembered some shadowed isle, some country wrapped in mist,
some shore of an evening sea where once the two of them had wandered.
They meet, and yet do not quite meet; a sliver of parting still lies between —
they long to join as old acquaintances, yet die of shyness as if they were strangers.
Amid the longing for union, the half-moon's glow unfolds —
two kisses brush and touch, and between them, a bashful smile!
Two languid eyelids fall, and between them, the glimmer of a happy dream!
Taking each other's touch, the two drifted on, and said not a word —
they told the story of the evening, and carried away the message of the dawn.

Translator's Notes

- চতুর্থীর চাঁদ (chaturthir chand) — "the fourth-lunar-day moon," a slim crescent. English has no compact equivalent, so I kept it literal rather than substituting the vaguer "crescent moon."

- অচেনার চেনাশোনা — "the knowing of strangers," the poem's central paradox: intimate recognition between two who have never met. I unpacked this into "half-remembered the other, two strangers who had once been known."

- লাজে মরা (laj-e mora) — literally "to die of shame," a common Bengali idiom for intense bashfulness — softened to "die of shyness" for natural English.

SMALL ETERNITY

(ক্ষুদ্র অনন্ত)

Poetic Rendition

Endless day and night, the surge of time overflowing —
and in the midst of it, only a single instant,
one sweet evening, one small breath of wind,
the soft trance where light and darkness meet —
and in the midst of that, only a small jasmine,
only the faintest trace of its smiling fragrance,
its petal-lip barely, barely touched —
it rises into bloom, carrying its own joy,
and falls, broken, carrying its own joy still.
The whole of eternity, within that single instant,
becomes a jasmine at the edge of one small wood.
Within the blink of an eye, the infinite dwells.
The very moment the blink breaks, the flower scatters —
and the infinite folds back into itself.

Translator's Notes

- নিমেষ / পলক — both mean "the blink of an eye"; I varied "instant" / "blink" across the poem's two uses to avoid repetition while keeping the equivalence.
- আবেশ (abesh) — a trance, a rapt or absorbed state — "soft trance."

- মিলায় (milay) — "to dissolve back into" — rendered "folds back into itself," to capture the self-contained, cyclical infinity that is the poem's core idea: eternity fully present within a single vanishing moment.

MY SMALL SELF

(ক্ষুদ্র আমি)

Poetic Rendition

I understand now, friend, I understand why this anguished cry,
why this ceaseless anger I turn upon myself.
I understand now why my life has come to nothing —
I am here, but you are not, and so, this discontent.
In every act I undertake I find only myself —
this small self stays awake, forever hungry,
and with its wasted, clinging arms it encircles me,
leaving me, alas, mere skin stretched over bone.
Where, my Lord, where is your beautiful face —
where, my Lord, is your smile that embraces the whole world?
Seize me away from myself, keep me hidden in you —
make me a stranger to myself, standing between you and me.
This small self has grown so full of pride —
break it, my Lord, break it, break its vanity.

Translator's Notes

- नाथ (nath) — "lord / master," also used for a husband or beloved; capitalized here as "Lord," carrying the same intimacy Tagore later gives the divine Beloved in Gitanjali.

- অভিমান (obhiman) — not simple pride but a wounded, sulking self-love particular to Bengali emotional vocabulary; I settled for "vanity," though "wounded pride" would also serve.

- অস্থিচর্ম সার — "reduced to bone and skin" — rendered "mere skin stretched over bone."

- উদাসী করা — "to make indifferent, estranged" — "make me a stranger to myself," capturing the paradox that the self must become estranged from itself to reach the divine.

PLAY

(খেলা)

Poetic Rendition

Beside the road, under the ashwath tree,
a little girl is playing;
lost in her own small world she stays
the whole day long.
Above her only sky, and before her
only the open field,
autumn sunlight has come to rest
on the sweet, dusty road.
One or two travellers pass by,
talking, laughing as they go.
A shy young bride goes by, drawing
her shadow close beside her.
By the edge of that sky-bound field,
in a vast playhouse of her own,
one small girl, lost in her own small world,
plays and plays and plays.

Shadow falls across her head,
sunlight rests upon her lap,
by her feet a small creeper

sways, caught in the breeze.
A calf wanders in from the field,
spots this unfamiliar creature,
cranes its neck and stares,
with wide, round eyes.
A restless squirrel darts
here and there nearby,
tail flicking up at any sound,
startling at the least alarm.
The girl watches it, and watches,
and how she longs, and longs —
to stroke that soft fur with her hand,
to press a kiss upon it!

How she longs to lift the squirrel
up against her chest,
to break its food into tiny bits
and feed it, piece by piece.
She would call it by some sweet name,
hold it close beside her cheek,
keep it tucked within her breast,
wrapped inside her shawl.
"Come, come," she calls to it —
her voice turned soft and pleading,
"I won't do you any harm at all —

why are you afraid of me!"
She lifts her head and gazes up
toward the high, far branch —
the squirrel darts away and flees,
and her small heart aches with hurt.

A shepherd boy's flute is playing
somewhere far, under the trees' shade,
and lost in her play, the girl now
forgets her play entirely.
Head resting against a tree-root,
she stares away down the road,
who knows to what fairy country
her wandering heart has run.
Alone, she roams far off
into some enchanted isle —
just then a farmer comes along,
leading a pair of oxen.
Startled at the sound, she trembles,
jolted out of her daze.
The spell fades from her eyes,
and the dream breaks apart.

Translator's Notes

- অশথ (ashath / ashwattha) — the sacred fig or peepal tree, culturally central in Bengali village life; I kept "ashwath tree" rather than the vaguer "fig tree," since the specificity matters to the setting.
- লজ্জাবতী বধূ — "the shy young bride," a stock image of a new bride keeping to the shade, modestly avoiding notice — rendered plainly.
- ড্যাবা ড্যাবা চোখ — a colloquial, near-onomatopoeic phrase for wide, blank, staring eyes (typically used of animals) — "wide, round eyes."
- মায়াদ্বীপ — "isle of enchantment" — "enchanted isle."
- This is one of Tagore's tenderest character studies — a whole inner life of longing, tenderness, and rejection compressed into a child watching a squirrel.

SONG

(গান — "Oh, who goes there, playing the flute")

Oh — who goes there, playing the flute!
There is no one now in my house!
I remember the one I long for —
his restless soul, his song of separation,
the flute, it seems, has told it all!
How shall I make known to him my own heart,
that is why my soul weeps so!
The garland of flowers was never strung,
it lies in the dust, withering away!
Night turns to dawn, and the moon of the night
hides away its pale, fading face!
All this long night, for whom have I offered
this altar-tray heaped with the blossoms of my youth!
Oh, that sound of the flute, alas, carries my soul away —
why, oh why, do I still remain!

Translator's Notes

- বিভাবরী (bibhabori) — a Sanskritic, elevated word for "night" — rendered simply "this long night."

- যৌবনডালা — "the tray of youth," an image of an offering-tray heaped with flowers, as in temple worship; here the offering is the poet's own youth. I unpacked this compressed image as "this altar-tray heaped with the blossoms of my youth."

- The scattered vocative particles at the head of each line in the source (ওগো, তরে, আমি, ওই) are musical stress-markers from the song's original tune rather than words with independent meaning — I let the exclamation marks and line breaks carry that emphasis in English instead.

SONG-MAKING

(গান-রচনা)

This is only idle enchantment, only a play of clouds,
only a longing of the mind surrendered to the wind —
only a garland strung in solitude and torn apart again,
a fleeting laughter and weeping, ended in a song.
All day long, in the green leaves, in the sun's rays,
the flowers play their game with their own shadows,
and this too is that same shadow-play, in the spring breeze.
As if by choice I lose my way in some land of enchantment,
wandering here and there, absent-minded, the whole day through.
As if to give to someone, I gather a flower from somewhere,
and by evening the faded flower drifts away, from grove to grove.
Who is there to play this game with me, alas — what companion have I?
Forgetting and forgetting, I go on singing — who listens, who does not —
if only something might be remembered, if only someone might draw near!

Translator's Notes

- অলস মায়ী (olosh maya) — "idle enchantment" — a different shade of maya than in poem 1: here lazier, dreamier, closer to daydream than fate.
- কুহক (kuhok) — magic or sorcery, stronger than maya — "land of enchantment."

- ছায়া-খেলা — "shadow-play," flowers playing with their own shadows in sunlight — a self-portrait of the poet's own aimless song-making, kept literal since the image works as well in English.

THE SONG'S OVERFLOW

(গীতোচ্ছ্বাস)

The silent flute has begun to play once more.
It must be that news of my beloved has reached me,
here in the spring garden, on the spring breeze!
That must be why all my forgotten songs come back to me!
That must be why, in the flowering grove along the river's bank,
hundreds upon hundreds of old, half-remembered smiles bloom again!
That must be why the heart's forgotten longings
wake up new, like fresh young leaves!
She who sits enthroned on the lotus of this lotus-world —
after so long, it seems, has come back at last!
No — she herself has not come, only her sweet union has come!
Her voice has come, turned into a song of spring!
Her gaze has returned — but where are those eyes?
Her kiss has arrived — but where are those lips?

Translator's Notes

- কমল-আসনা — "she whose throne is the lotus," an epithet usually reserved for the goddess Lakshmi. Tagore lifts it to describe the beloved rising, godlike, from "the lotus-grove of the world" — I kept the elevation intact: "she who sits enthroned on the lotus of this lotus-world."

- জাহ্নবী (Jahnabi) — a classical epithet for the river Ganges — rendered plainly as "the river."

- The poem's closing paradox — an essence arriving without its body ("her kiss has come, but where are those lips?") — is the philosophical hinge: presence that outruns its physical vessel.

FEET

(চরণ)

Two feet rest upon the body of the earth —
two languid, rose-red, tender feet.
The memory of a hundred springs wakes in the ground beneath them,
the touch-dream of a hundred thousand blossoms.
As though a hundred springs' worth of blooming ashoka flowers
had scattered and melted together into two rose-red feet.
Two suns of morning and of evening twilight
seem to have set into the shadow cast by those two feet.
The music of youth goes scattering itself along the path,
the anklets weep and die, wound about those feet,
the dance forever bound in some sweet enchantment.
There the earth is only harsh, only dry, barren ground —
come instead into this heart, come — for here it aches and yearns,
a red hundred-petalled lotus, blushing with desire.

Translator's Notes

- অশোক (ashoka) — the ashoka tree, whose brilliant red-orange blossoms are, in folklore, said to open at a woman's touch — kept as "ashoka," its color association carried through in "rose-red."
- শতদল (shatadal) — "hundred-petalled," a classical epithet for the lotus.

- নূপুর কাঁদিয়া মরে — "the anklet weeps and dies" — kept literal for its striking personification of the anklet-bells' sound as a kind of grief.

- This poem belongs to a small genre in Sanskrit-influenced poetry that praises a single body part as a microcosm of the cosmos — the feet here draw in sunsets, seasons, and flowers all at once.

A LETTER

(চিঠি)

To Smt. Indira, dearer to me than life — Steamer "Rajahangsa," on the Ganges

I'd promised I would write you a letter,
turns out that's no easy task.

If only I had real news to report
I could write it out solid as a board.

News gets carried around on the backs
of news-porters with their baskets.
Me, I'm a devotee of feeling, not fact —
I don't go about picking up gossip.

So much dust, so much news
choking the lanes of Calcutta!
News gets into your nose and eyes
before you've gone three steps down the street.

I can't stand so much news —
it leaves me quite out of breath.
The moment I get home I wipe it all off,
like mud, on the doormat.

You know me well enough, my dear —
I'm a man of whims and fancies.
Most of what I say, when I say it,
turns out to be riddles.

Whatever news comes to me
arrives at dawn, out of the east.
I fish up whatever's on my mind
by diving deep into my own belly.

My trade is casting nets
across the sky, to catch the stars.
Leave the jute-market business
to the likes of Mathur Kundu and Shibu the merchant.

I live beneath the wishing-tree,
no newshound, I.
I sit there with my mouth wide open,
waiting patiently for the sweet fruit to fall.

But if you really insist
on tugging some news out of me —
well, my dear, there's just one thing I know:
news of one particularly naughty girl!

If you heard about her mischief
you'd truly be amazed!
Such big, grand words come out
of that tiny little face of hers.

In her own mind, she believes
she's someone terribly important.
Her one great inclination is
to pick fights with people for no reason at all.

All her quarrels are with me alone,
sulking off at every other word.
Is this what you call good manners?
It's really going much too far.

I've resolved, more than once,
to stop speaking to her altogether.
But I strongly suspect
that resolution won't last long at all.

Without her, would the jasmine
even bother to bloom of a morning?
Without her, would the evening star
even bother to rise at dusk?

Without her the whole day feels cheated,
a sham from start to end.
The wretched girl knows this perfectly well —
that's exactly why she gets so spoiled.

Those two bangled hands of hers
know every trick in the book.
So somehow or other I've had to make
a kind of truce with her.

If you ask me for her name,
I won't be telling you that.
Who knows — if she ever heard I'd said it,
I wouldn't have a life left to live.

Who bothers keeping track of her real name —
I call her whatever I please.
Call her Naughty, call her Little Terror,
Wretch, or even Little She-Demon!

Whatever name her parents gave her,
let it stay with her parents.
Let them go hunting the whole wide world
for some sweet name to lock away in a box!

Just because one person gave her a name
at her rice-feeding ceremony,
must the whole world be forced to use it?
What a tyranny that would be!

Let everyone name her
however their own heart pleases.
Let her father call her "Moon-Prince,"
let her uncle call her "Ramcharan"!

Why should I go borrowing someone else's name —
that would hardly cause a stir.
You know perfectly well that in everything I do
there's always Originality.

What business has a homely girl like her
with some grand Sanskrit name?
All that does is drive up
the price of the dictionary.

Me, I just call her
whatever comes to mind —
the one I'm calling understands well enough,
and everyone else just laughs!

The naughty girl's mischief — where, oh where
could I even put a full stop to it!
Seeing that shoreless ocean before me,
I finally let go of my pen's rudder!

Listen, my dear, let me tell you
the plain and honest truth —
in all the three worlds, a girl like that
there is only ever the one!

If this little description of mine
should happen to match someone else —
oh, what an uproar that would cause,
what a terrible mess that would be!

A whole week of scolding,
round after round of quarreling —
just from writing one small letter,
and in the end my whole soul's worn ragged.

Me, I'm a good, quiet sort,
not a word out of my mouth.
I just sit in a corner of the room,
twirling my moustache and biding my time.

However much trouble I fall into,
 I hear all sorts of remarks about it.
 When a lame man's foot lands in a ditch,
 I'm always the one who ends up as witness.

I haven't named a single soul,
 and yet I'm dying of fright —
 that you might take it all to heart,
 that's exactly what I dread!

The moment some remark comes to mind,
 you lot give me such grief over it.
 So I'll say my piece now, ahead of time,
 and consider myself let off the hook!

Translator's Notes

- This whole poem is addressed to Tagore's young niece Indira Devi, teasingly disguised throughout as "one naughty girl" whose name he theatrically refuses to give — the joke depends on it being obvious to her exactly who is meant.
- The register here is a light, skipping chhora (nursery-rhyme) rhythm, entirely different from the meditative poems elsewhere in this collection. I chose a bouncy, colloquial English voice rather than the solemn "Gitanjali" register used for poems 1–5, since matching register is truer to the spirit than uniform tone.
- সবুরে মেওয়া ফলে — "patience bears sweet fruit," a standard Bengali proverb — preserved as an image rather than swapped for an English equivalent, to keep its flavor.

- বাপু(bapu) — a colloquial, self-deprecating address particle ("look here," "my dear fellow") the poet applies to himself throughout — rendered variably as "Me, I'm..." to keep the chatty first-person voice.

- The mock-formal names (চন্দ্রকুমার, রামচরণ) are comic precisely because they sound like a boy's name given to a girl — I kept them transliterated rather than substituting English names, since the mismatch is the joke.

A BIRTHDAY GIFT

(জন্মতিথির উপহার)

A Wooden Box — To Smt. Indira, dearer to me than life

I've brought a gift of affection to give you,
and along with it a few lines I've written too.
So much I long to give you, my dear —
but I haven't a single thing worth giving!

All my money's sitting in the mint,
all of it banked away.
In my pocket there's just two or three coins left —
so this time, my dear, you'll have to forgive me!

Whatever diamonds and jewels I had
were all buried away in the earth,
and every jeweler who caught wind of it
has carried them off to his own house!

My whole estate is this wide world and its cities,
and every stray spirit fights over the scraps of it;
whatever I could lay my hands on nearby,
I've brought that along in a hurry!

If only affection could be kept close at hand,
if only it could be seen with the eye —
then tell me, who on earth would bother
buying you some trinket from the market instead!

The thing itself is a very small matter,
keep it tucked away in some corner of the house —
I've filled this little box with my affection for you,
just let that much stay in your mind!

You'll grow up big, and slip away from us,
who knows where you'll go and hide,
you'll wash and wipe away every trace of your
uncles and all, and be done with us entirely.

But then, if this small piece of wood
should stir even a small ripple in your heart —
if just once you should happen to remember
that someone once called himself your "Buji"!

This world we all live in together,
what a strange and difficult country it is!
Everyone slipping away, one by one, in the end,
everyone straining to be forgotten by everyone else!

That's why, out of fear, we all
keep bringing each other so many things,
this and that, trying to stir up remembrance,
trying to bind one another close!

To remember takes so much scaffolding, so much timber and straw —
while forgetting comes so easily, so conveniently.
So whoever you love, keep them close,
and give them whatever you can, generously, while you may!

No need to work out all these hundreds of words of meaning —
to the devil with philosophy!
Just live on, my dear, live happily —
and let me carry off all your troubles when I go!

Translator's Notes

- বুজি (Buji) — a pet nickname the poet used for himself when addressing young Indira — kept transliterated as a proper name, since it's untranslatable and personal.
- বলাই নিয়ে মরে যাই — an affectionate Bengali idiom (common among elders toward children), roughly "may I take on your troubles when I die" — a tender, self-sacrificing blessing, not a literal statement about death. I softened "die" to "go" to keep the warmth without it reading as morbid in English.
- The comic self-deprecation ("my jewels are all buried," "spirits fight over the world's scraps") is Tagore's mock-grandiose humor, undercutting his own modest

means by claiming absurd, unreachable wealth — I kept the specific cultural images (জহুরি/jeweler, জমিদারি/estate) concrete rather than generalizing them.

- The poem pivots without warning from comedy into a genuinely unguarded meditation on mortality and forgetting ("everyone straining to be forgotten by everyone else"), before snapping back to a joke in the last two lines. That tonal whiplash is deliberate and very characteristic of Tagore's occasional verse — I preserved it rather than smoothing it into one consistent mood.

FOREVER

(চিরদিন)

A sequence in four parts

I

Where is the night, where the day, where do moon and sun and stars come into bloom,

who comes and who goes, where does life's great fairground gather,

who laughs and who sings, where does the heart's own game play out,

where the road, where the house, where the traveller, where the one who has lost the way!

Where does that leaf fall, loosened from the great World-Tree,

turning, tumbling, drifting lost through the infinite, finding no shore,

while the wind of time flows on, unresting, down the roads of the sky,

rustling, withering, the dry leaf mingling with the green!

So much breaking, so much building, this constant coming and going in the living universe,

so many songs, so many melodies, so much weeping, so much clamor —

where is the who, where the ocean, where the wave, where its shore —

all of it exiled, all of it extinguished, into the deep, boundless womb!

Crowded with beings, yet utterly solitary, dissolved into a darkness pierced through with light,

under the dome of the sky sits only the one, eternal — Forever.

II

For what do you sit and wait, for whom do you keep watching,
 whose arrival do you strain to see beyond the far shore of dissolution,
 whose distant footstep do you listen for, forever,
 staying awake through an endless night, like one eternally forsaken!
 Carrying an infinite, unsatisfied longing, now and then you let out a sigh,
 and so the wind of dissolution rises weeping across the open reaches of sky,
 tearing loose the world's woven web, fleeing off to who knows where!
 In that endless dark, you have no companion at all,
 our hearts' hope does not enter into your soul,
 the voices of our birds do not reach your ear.
 A thousand worlds together compose your solitary exile,
 a thousand sounds together build the house of your silence —
 we laugh, we weep, we love — but you have no laughter, no tears, no enchantment
 —
 we come, we stay, we pass away — so many shadows, so many shadows of
 shadows!

III

Is that so, then? Is everything only shadow? Coming, staying, and melting away?
 Are you alone the one who remains, while all else both is and is not?
 Is it only for this that flowers bloom, age after age, and flowers fall?
 Do we receive life only to give it back, only into the hands of death?

Does no one desire this flower? Does no one accept this offering, this gift of worship?

Does this life, this hope of life, break apart into an infinite emptiness?

Does the world's song rise up only to reach a deafness enthroned on high?

Does the world's soul weep, its rain of tears falling into the void?

Is there no one, in all three worlds, to receive this love spanning ages upon ages?

All creation lies immersed, day and night, in the dream of hope —

following the sound of a flute — is that, alas, only a journey made in vain!

Do not tell me it is all a dream, all only the deception of illusion —

for if the world is dreaming, then whose dream is that dream?

Can it truly be this lifeless, loveless, blind darkness?

IV

Sound seeks its echo, life seeks, dying, its answering life.

The world, by giving of itself, seeks its own repayment.

Into the infinite, love rises to settle the infinite's debt —

the more it gives, the more it receives, and nothing ever comes to an end.

As many flowers as the earth gives, so many flowers it receives each day —

the more life it brings to bloom, the more life grows and swells.

Giving away whatever it has, the destitute earth grows rich,

what a boundless exchange of love, across this infinite world!

Whom does the earth worship, with the gift of its green, blossoming youth,

that moment upon moment it wins back its own youth made new?

Love draws love toward itself — where, then, is the shore of that ocean of love!

Give life, and life comes back to you — where, then, is that endless life!

Give away this small self of mine, and where do I find my boundless self —
can it be there, in that lifeless, loveless, blind darkness!

Translator's Notes

- চিরদিন — "Forever" / "eternal day," also personified as a solitary figure sitting alone beneath the sky. I capitalized it in Part I's closing line to mark this personification.

- জগতের মহাবৃক্ষ — "the great World-Tree," echoing the Upanishadic image of the cosmos as a great tree whose leaves are transient forms of being.

- জ্যোতির্বিদ্বা অঁধার — "darkness pierced through with light," a striking oxymoron kept intact rather than resolved into plainer language.

- Part III's cascade of rhetorical questions ("is it...? is it...?") builds directly toward Part IV's answer; I preserved the interrogative structure to keep that architecture visible.

- Of all nineteen poems here, this sequence sits closest in vocabulary and concern to what Tagore would write decades later in Gitanjali — which is why it, more than any other poem in this set, rewards the spare, meditative English register the whole project takes as its model.

THE KISS

(চুশন)

Lips speaking into the ear of lips, in the language only lips can speak.

Each heart seems to drink deep of the other.

Two loves, leaving their homes behind, gone missing from the world,
have made their pilgrimage, and met at last, at the meeting-place of lips.

Two waves rise, by love's own law,
and break and merge together into two lips.

Two restless longings turn, each toward the other,
and meet at last at the very border of the body.

Love is writing its song in the softest letters,
line upon trembling line, the script of kisses, upon the lips.

Plucking flowers from two lips,
love, it seems, will go home and weave them into a garland.

This sweet meeting of two lips
is the rose-red wedding-bed of two smiles.

Translator's Notes

- অধর (odhor) — a literary word for "lips" (as against the plain ঠোঁট) — the elevated register is somewhat flattened in English, which has no equally poetic alternative to "lips."

- তীর্থযাত্রা — "pilgrimage to a holy site" — kept literal, since the sacred-erotic fusion (a kiss as pilgrimage) is exactly the poem's conceit.

- বাসরশয়ন — the ritual nuptial bed of a couple's wedding night — rendered "wedding-bed," carrying over as much of the specific cultural resonance as English allows.
- The poem moves through a sequence of distinct metaphors (speech, drinking, pilgrimage, colliding waves, calligraphy, flower-gathering, marriage-bed) — I kept each confined to its own couplet, as in the original, rather than blending them.

THE LITTLE FLOWER

(ছোটো ফুল)

I only string garlands out of small, small flowers,
and those flowers wither away at every word!
If that is how it must be, then so be it, I do not grieve for that —
I will go on gathering blossoms on the shore of the infinite.
For those who dwell in darkness, shut inside walls of stone,
if they should take up this garland of mine and wear it round their neck,
if for one single instant they should find some happiness,
if they should forget, even briefly, the cruel ache of their bondage!
The small flower, together with its own fragrance,
brings with it freedom, and a deep, quiet assurance —
it calls to mind, in a fleeting dream, the light of the sun,
it calls to mind the wide, open wind of the sea.
Seeing this small flower, if it should bring to someone's mind
the vast world, and the vast sky beyond it!

Translator's Notes

- পাষাণকারা — "a prison of stone" — rendered "shut inside walls of stone," keeping both the literal image and its figurative reach toward any hard confinement or sorrow.

- The poem works almost as a miniature ars poetica: the "small flower" stands in for the small lyric poem itself, hoping to bring a moment's freedom to someone

confined. Bengali varies the word for "small" (ছোটো / ক্ষুদ্র) across the poem for meter; English doesn't need the variation, so I kept "small flower" consistent throughout.

THE EFFORT TO AWAKEN

(জাগিবার চেষ্টা)

Mother — is there anyone who is truly mine? Then come close,
sit beside me, and wake me, tenderly.
What use is there in living, buried in the grave of dreams,
I am struggling to wake — my eyes, alas, still will not open.
Do not call me back into smallness,
do not keep me bound in loving idleness,
give me your blessing, and send me instead out into the work of the world —
do not call me back again, weeping behind me, in sorrow.
Shall I never say of anything, "this is mine to give"?
Will no one ever find, in this life of mine, a new life kindled?
Is compassion nothing more than tears shed from the eyes,
is love nothing more than a song sung alone, in some corner of the house!
Only then will the shame of my life be washed away,
if, Mother, I am able to do some work, however small, for someone.

Translator's Notes

- মা (ma) — "Mother": left deliberately unglossed, as the original is. It could be his own mother, the divine Mother, or Mother India / the motherland — all live options in Bengali poetry of this era, and the poem doesn't choose between them.
- স্বপ্নের সমাধি — "the grave of dreams" — a striking image of dream-life as death-in-life, kept literal.

- ক্ষুদ্রতা — "smallness," echoing the "small self" (ক্ষুদ্র আমি) theme of poem 5: the anxiety of being trapped in a narrow, self-enclosed existence rather than active, outward life.
- The final couplet turns private "shame" into something redeemable only through service to others — an early, plain-spoken statement of the ethical thread running through much of Tagore's later work.

THE BODY

(তনু)

Poetic Rendition

That body of yours — I love it.
This soul of mine has grown enraptured, lost, in your form.
Like a flower, trembling, brimming with dew,
falling open, petal by petal, unfolding into full bloom.
All around, the restless world hums and murmurs,
day and night, a thirsting bee.
The wind comes, in love, to sway your earrings,
the moon's full smile falls, enchanted, upon your face.
From your whole, ripe body a fragrance rises.
Ah — where, where is that secret, hidden chamber,
where, upon some soft bed, that solitary, honey-steeped heart,
wrapped within its body, lets fall its breath?
That body — I will lift it up against my chest, my girl,
a single garland strung of fifteen springs.

Translator's Notes

- তনু / দেহ — Bengali distinguishes a more delicate, poetic word for "body" (তনু) from the plain one (দেহ); English has no equally graded pair, so both are rendered "body."

- পঞ্চদশ বসন্তের একগাছি মালা — "a single strand of garland of fifteen springs," the poem's closing image, comparing the fifteen-year-old girl's body to a garland strung of years. I kept the compression intact rather than unpacking it, since its strangeness is part of its force.

- This poem, along with "The Kiss" and "Union of Bodies" below, belongs to the frankly physical vein of Kori o Komol that drew criticism from contemporary reviewers as indecorous. I translated its physicality plainly rather than softening it, since euphemism would falsify the register Tagore was deliberately working in.

YOU

(তুমি)

Poetic Rendition

You — flower of what garden are you,
you — star of what heaven are you!
Where have I seen you before,
as if in the depths of some half-remembered dream!
When was it you sang to me,
when did you gaze into my eyes —
I have forgotten it all.
Only this stays awake within my heart:
the light in those eyes of yours.
You — do not speak,
you — only gaze, and drift away.
Here, in this moonlight,
melt away from me, smiling.
I, lost in the haze of sleep, keep gazing
at the moon, my soul turned sweet and faint,
let two stars, like your two eyes,
pour down their stream of light upon me.

Translator's Notes

- This is a gaan — a lyric written for singing, not recitation — and the broken, staggered line placement in the original (তুমি... কোন্ কাননের ফুল...) marks the beats of its melody rather than adding meaning. I smoothed these into continuous lines, since the fragmentation doesn't do the same work in English that it does as a musical score.

- তারা (tara) — "star," which in Bengali is also the word used for the pupil of the eye (নয়নের তারা, literally "the star of the eye"). The poem plays on this — the beloved's eyes are themselves called stars — but English has no equivalent pun, so the wordplay is necessarily lost rather than forced.

- I kept the parallel structure of "gaze, and drift away" / "melt away... smiling," to preserve the dreamlike, dissolving quality of the beloved's appearance in the poem.

UNION OF BODIES

(দেহের মিলন)

Every limb of mine weeps for every limb of yours.
The union of souls asks, still, for the union of bodies.
This body of mine, overwhelmed by the heart, weighed down
by the heart's own fullness, longs to fall fainting upon your body.
My eyes race toward your eyes,
my lips long to die into your lips.
This thirsting soul weeps, wretched, today,
longing to behold you with the whole of its body.
The heart lies hidden deep in the sea of the body,
and forever I have sat weeping upon its shore.
Today, pouring my whole body into a restless, longing heart,
I will go down, sink deep, into the mystery of the body.
This body and mind of mine, through endless nights and days,
will go, and dissolve, entirely, into every part of you!

Translator's Notes

- সায়র (sayar) — a poetic word for "sea." The image of "the heart hidden in the sea of the body" is one of the collection's boldest conceits: the body as a vast ocean, the heart as a depth hidden within it, the poet as an eternal mourner sitting on its shore — I kept this fully intact.

- বিলীন হওয়া — "to dissolve, to merge entirely" — a verb usually reserved in Bengali devotional poetry for the soul's merging with the divine. Its use here for physical union is a deliberate borrowing, blurring the erotic and the mystical — I kept "dissolve" for exactly that reason.

- Read alongside poems 14 and 17, this closes an implicit arc across the collection: physical union treated, again and again, as a form of transcendence, using a nearly identical vocabulary of pilgrimage, union, and dissolution.

PICTURE OF A SLEEPING WOMAN

নিদ্রিতার চিত্র

The dusk-dark twilight lies bound fast in enchantment;
upon the canvas the evening star will never set.
Her heavy hair let loose and scattered wide,
her head upon her arm, the woman sleeps.

All about her the world keeps its endless waking —
who is it that has laid this sleep upon her, here, in the midst of it all?
From some far place, gathering a silent murmuring,
it has whispered, forever, into her ear alone.

Behind the picture, somewhere, an endless fountain
falls in a hushed and rippling song.
Forever the quiet rustle of the grove,
and modesty stands forever before her, keeping watch —

so that the instant sleep should break, dying into the heart,
she will draw the veil back up, over her breast.

Translator's Notes

This is one of Tagore's ekphrastic sonnets — written about a painting, which is why the poem announces its own frame in line two ("upon the canvas"). The central difficulty is লজ্জা (lajja), which I render as "modesty." Lajja is not shame in the guilty sense; it is closer to an instinctive, protective bashfulness — almost a guardian spirit in its own right, which is exactly how Tagore personifies it here, standing sentinel before the sleeping woman. English has no single word that carries both the tenderness and the watchfulness of lajja.

The phrase মরমে মরিয়া ("dying into the marrow/heart") is a Bengali intensifier — literally "dying into the innermost self" — used to describe an instinctive, involuntary flinch or swoon. I softened it to "dying into the heart" rather than the more literal but clunkier "dying into the marrow," to keep the line's hush intact.

THE NEW

নূতন

Even here the sun's rays enter.

In the terrible night of storm, at the fierce fall of thunder,
the mountain-peak was riven —
cutting through the great height, splitting its stony heart,
laying bare a dark and dreadful cavern —
and at dawn, afloat in joy, bearing a fresh new smile,
even here the sun's rays enter!

Peeping in at the door, it does not turn back,
it does not shudder in fear —
on the broken rock's own breast it plays, in what gladness,
it comes laughing, and laughing it departs.

Look, look, alas — as day follows day,
who is it that weaves this net of grass?
The creepers, creeping, spreading wide their arms,
cover over the shattered skeleton.

Of the thunder-scorched past, guest of despair,
the dark and silent dwelling of the tomb —

flowers come, leaves come, and laughing they seize it away,
they make their mockery of the dark.

Where were all these? who brought them the news? —
this homeless company of joy —
wherever in the world one hair's-breadth stands empty,
uninvited they come, and build their nest amid tumult.

They bring laughter, they bring song, they bring new life,
and with them they bring the rays of the sun —
griefless as a child, so much they laugh, so much they sing,
they leave no leisure at all for weeping.

Sorrow, vast of shape, has cast its shadow of darkness,
but of it they have no fear —
from every side they strike it with small, small laughters,
until at the last they win.

This very waste, this earth scorched by fire —
here once stood "the Old."
Once it carried its burden of green youth,
once it had its own southern wind.

If it has gone, if it has taken with it
song and laughter, flower and fruit —

why then has it left behind, in vain, this withered memory,
these dry branches, this dry cluster of blossom?

Does it wish that in the withered wood the birds should sing
as once, before, they used to sing?

That, tender as before, calling still its name,
the spring wind should rise and sigh?

No, no, how could that be! The world is full of life;
here there is no place for death.

Come, O New, come — bring with you
your joy, your laughter, your song.
Blooming clusters of new flowers, new shoots climbing green,
come, bringing the young spring with you.

Let whoever goes, go; let them take all that was theirs;
let even their name be wiped away.

What is this play of waves, alas — one comes, another goes,
weeping, weeping, and laughter comes;
before the last note of lament has died away,
from somewhere a flute strikes up.

Come, let us weep it out — in a day or two will dry

this sacred stream of tears.

We shall turn back to the world and forget; small, small joys
will build for us their prison-house of gladness.

No — I will not grieve. A new being has come;
who could turn away and neglect it?
It too will go, one day; the song will come to its end;
this brief two-day play will be over.

Translator's Notes

This poem is a companion piece to পুরাতন ("The Old," below) — read together they form a diptych on grief and renewal. Bengali gives Tagore a tight, chiming meter here (rhymed couplets nested inside each longer line) that simply cannot survive translation without mangling the sense, so I chose to keep the images — the storm-split mountain, the grass reclaiming a skeleton — sharp, and let the music come from repetition and momentum instead of rhyme.

রবিকর ("the sun's rays") uses the classical/Sanskritic name Rabi for the sun rather than the everyday shurjo — a register-lift that early Bengali readers would feel as slightly elevated, hymn-like diction; there's no clean way to mark that shift in English without sounding archaic, so I let the repetition of the refrain itself carry the weight instead.

LETTER

পত্র — written after returning from a boat journey, addressed to his friend Priyanath Sen

To my good friend Priyanath Sen, greatest of land-creatures.

I had built my nest upon the water — ashore, what a chattering!
Everyone shows off his throat, shouting only to be shouting.
The cut-rate writer wails himself hoarse, beating only his own drum,
falls upon respectable folk, waving his pen, splattering ink.
It's hard to live at all here, in this marketplace of buzzing —
my very soul churns and sickens in the midst of the uproar.
When my ears go deaf, when I rise up gasping for air,
where shall I flee, where shall I flee — I leap and plunge into the water.
Hoping to reach the Ganges, I set out on my journey to the Ganges;
without a word to any of you, I slipped quietly away.

Into this gathering of the world I had come to hear music,
to hum to myself, weaving a web of melody and mode.
But who has the patience to listen to song? — these young fellows bang their
instruments,
they burst their learning at the seams, forever carding cotton.
They call out, they cry out, twisting themselves as they declare —
"Listen to my words, all of you, whether or not you listen to the song.
I myself will explain to you just what song truly is — listen to that instead."

He writes his commentaries, he writes his explanations, he swells in his oratory —
 who is there to watch the waving of his hands and feet, the red of his two eyes!
 The moon and sun burn in vain on the roof of the sky —
 he declares, "It is I alone who am here to burn, and to set aflame."
 On the tanpura of the flowering grove, spring has tuned its note,
 hearing which he only wags an ear — it is not to his taste.
 Let all the world sing only in his key — topa, khayal, dhrupad —
 no one sings, for the plain truth is: no one has any ear at all!

The newspapermen, row on row, wave their papers in hand —
 peace has taken its leave of Bengal, fanned off by three hundred winnowing-fans.
 Out of paper, idle children fold themselves paper boats;
 he will ferry you across, holding your ear, for a penny or two's fare.
 Hearing it's cheap, all the long-eared ones come running —
 that is why so much dust flies up on every side of Bengal.
 Tiny little "Aryans" spring up everywhere like grass,
 their sharp tongue-tips prick the foot like thorns.
 They declare, "I myself am Kalki" — the bowl of a hash-pipe is more like it!
 Every lane and alley of the land has filled up now with avatars.

How many such are in the neighborhood, how many can I even tell!
 A whole fair of "great avatars" has come to Bengal.
 By the strength of their own teeth they'll haul up Hindu scripture from the mire —
 one's jaw locks just to see the grimace of their bared teeth.

Lies from beginning to end, the uproar of liars,
 this troupe of tongue-wagging clowns dances its tongues about.
 A flood of words comes foaming, sweeping all away in its current —
 somehow I found my rescue, in the very lap of Mother Ganges.

Here, oh, what peace is poured out in the murmuring tune!
 It carries the mountain-king's own song onward toward the sea.
 Softly, softly the wind raises its gooseflesh on the water's skin.
 In the sky, light and shadow play their tide of ebb and flow.
 Along each bank, a row of trees, a wave of leaves,
 swaying and rocking all day long, and no one watching them.
 On the eastern bank, over the treetops, the dawn looks down and smiles;
 in the west, into the thicket, the evening comes down.
 From the shore rises the sound of the conch, reaching the ear slowly;
 the evening star gazes down upon the earth.
 Behind the casuarina grove the moon climbs, slow;
 evening lamps bloom open along the darkened bank.
 In these waters of peace I had plunged deep,
 I had forgotten the whole uproar, and was happy — truly happy.

You know well, friend, I am of the tribe of water-creatures,
 I swim about after my own heart, I float there, day and night.
 To sun myself I climb the bank, I drink the air with my eyes closed,
 fearfully I edge close, only once I've judged the sort of person near.
 If the signs look bad, I dive again into the fathomless water —

and so, in just this way, I pass my days, at this game of hide-and-seek.
 Why have you cast your line, then, sitting there on the dry bank?
 You have hooked me clean through the breast, and pulled hard on the line.
 I pull you toward the water, you pull toward the land —
 you sit unmoved, immovable, you will not own defeat.
 It is not I who have lost, nor is it you who have won —
 I only gasp for breath, fallen on the shore, flat on my back.

No use, friend — come, let's go home; reel your fishing-line in;
 Rabindranath has been caught — go on, beat the drum and announce it.

Translator's Notes

The poem opens with a mock-Sanskritic honorific, *স্থলচরবরেষু* — "to the excellent land-creature" — a joke: Tagore, writing from his boat, addresses his land-bound friend as if he were another species entirely. That amphibious self-image (fish vs. fisherman) becomes the poem's closing extended metaphor.

গঙ্গাযাত্রা ("journey to the Ganges") carries a grim double meaning in Bengali: idiomatically it means being carried to the Ganges to die. Tagore means it literally here — he really did take a boat trip — but the phrase can't help but flicker with its other sense, as if the city's noise were killing him. I kept the literal wording and flag the pun here rather than trying to force both meanings into English at once.

তুলো ধুনতে ("carding cotton") is a Bengali idiom for noisy, showy busywork that produces nothing — the perfect image for the self-important critics Tagore is mocking, since carding cotton is loud, repetitive, fluffy, and empty.

The pun on কল্কি is the poem's sharpest joke and the hardest to preserve: Kalki is the promised final avatar of Vishnu, but kalke (near-homophone) is also the clay bowl of a hookah or chillum used for smoking cannabis. A self-declared "avatar," Tagore suggests, might just be high. English has no equivalent pun, so I rendered the joke by paraphrase rather than trying to force a false English pun.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

পত্ৰ (সম্পাদক সমীপেষু) — to "Damu Bose" and "Chamu Bose"

To Messrs Damu Bose and Chamu Bose — addressed to the editor.

Damu Bose and Chamu Bose
have gone and started up a paper —
my, how their learning has frothed and foamed!
(My Damu, my Chamu!)

Where has your father gone, my dears,
and where's your mother now?
Out of the mouths of these priceless boys
puffed rice comes popping out!
(My Damu, my Chamu!)

Damu was a mere mite of a thing,
and Chamu just the same —
wherever did they learn to make
such an almighty din!
(My Damu, my Chamu!)

Damu says "my elder brother,"
Chamu says "my brother dear" —
"the like of us two, in all three worlds,

is nowhere else to be found!"

(My Damu, my Chamu!)

Picking quarrels unprovoked, hurling abuse,

the marketplace in an uproar —

by the fishwives' own scripture, no less,

they expound the Hindu faith!

(Damu mine, Chamu mine!)

Damuchandra, most Hindu of all,

and Chamu even more so —

and sprouting right along with them,

Hindu Ramu, Bamu, Shamu too!

(Damu mine, Chamu mine!)

The cry's gone up, in the land of India,

that Hindus are hard to find —

but Damu and Chamu have shown their faces,

so there's nothing to fear now!

(O Damu, O Chamu!)

Gautama and Atri, true, are no more,

each has gone his own way —

but Hindu Damu and Chamu have come,

newspaper in hand!

(Ah, Damu, ah, Chamu!)

The two of them write their editorials
on the holy Hindu texts —
Damu speaks the lies of it,
and Chamu does the shouting.
(Alas, Damu, alas, Chamu!)

Such Hindus you won't find elsewhere,
the very best of the lot —
of the Bose line, the Aryan line,
of that very stock are these!
(Bose Damu, Bose Chamu!)

At the close of the Kali age, the Creator
gave a great, weary yawn —
and out, ticklish, crept
these two Aryan brothers.
(Aryan Damu, Chamu!)

With their very teeth they dig up
the roots of the Hindu texts —
cartloads of worthless rubbish imported,
the whole market's in chaos.
(Damu, Chamu — the avatars!)

Manu declares, "I myself am Manu" —
the Vedas split clean in two —
Damu and Chamu let loose their scripture,
and only sorrow's left in the heart!
(O Damu, O Chamu!)

They fight it out like two rams,
fat about the hindquarters,
and trembling, quaking beneath the blow,
falls the whole pillar of Hindu pride!
(My own Hindu Damu, Chamu!)

Damu and Chamu weep in distress —
"wherever has our Hindu-ness gone?"
tucked in the waistband, wedged in tight,
sit a quarter-rupee and two annas.
(Hindu-ness, kept in the money-purse!)

Damu and Chamu have swelled up fat
selling off their Hindu-ness —
done now with crawling on all fours,
they go about dancing instead!
(Darling boys, Damu, Chamu!)

Pampered, plump as dumplings,
they eat their fill with gusto —
they never learned their manners,
their fathers failed to teach them!
(O Damu, Chamu!)

Come here, my lad, bring your ear this way,
and you shall learn good conduct —
though if it happens you're short of an ear,
well then — there's nothing to be done!
(Alas, Damu, alas, Chamu!)

Go and study your lessons; leave off
your tall tales dressed up as scripture;
scrub yourself, polish yourself, my lad,
and shed your rustic ways.
(O Damu, O Chamu!)

Carry yourself with a gentleman's dignity
and folk will call you a gentleman —
let your tongue run loose, though, and everyone
will learn just what stock you're from!
(Alas, Damu, alas, Chamu!)

Want money? Money I'll give you —

only keep to the honest path;
 for, as the old saying goes: a fool shows well enough,
 only so long as he doesn't speak!
 (O Damu, O Chamu!)

Translator's Notes

This is occasional, topical satire, almost certainly aimed at real self-styled defenders of "Hindu orthodoxy" active in the Calcutta press of Tagore's day — likely a specific newspaper editor or editors he found pompous and hypocritical. I cannot identify "Damu" and "Chamu" with certainty as historical individuals (they read like mocking nicknames or pseudonyms, possibly for Bosu-surnamed rivals), so I have not guessed at real names — the satire works perfectly well as a type, even without the exact target.

The refrain "(আমার দামু আমার চামু!)" apes the singsong coo of a nursery rhyme or a mother's endearment for her children — precisely the register Tagore weaponizes against grown men behaving like blustering infants. I kept it literal throughout ("My Damu, my Chamu!") to preserve that mock-lullaby cruelty.

মেছুনি-সংহিতা — "the fishwife's Samhita [scripture]" — is a vivid class-inflected insult: their scholarship, Tagore says, has the authority of marketplace gossip among fishmongers, not of real Sanskrit learning.

কচু (literally "taro root") is still, in colloquial Bengali today, a dismissive word for worthless nonsense — I rendered the line's spirit as "cartloads of worthless rubbish" rather than trying to keep the vegetable image, which doesn't carry the same contempt in English.

The closing line is Tagore quoting — and lightly adapting — a well-known Sanskrit subhashita: *tāvac chobhate mūrkhō yāvat kiñcin na bhāṣate* ("a fool looks fine only so long as he says nothing"). I translated the sense of the proverb directly rather than leaving it in untranslated Sanskrit, since the whole joke depends on the reader understanding it.

SACRED LIFE

পবিত্র জীবন

Vain is laughter, vain the flute, vain this youth,
vain this play of glances and of touch.

Look, and see — this human life is sacred;
who is it that so carelessly neglects it!

Adrift, adrift on this great tide of all that moves and does not move,
who knows, ah, from what place it has come,
from where it has carried this glimmer of love,
through what darkness it has risen into light!

This is no plaything, this hope of youth —
speak no word of rapture into its ear!
No, no — this is not the slave of your desire,
do not drag it down into your hunger!

This is your God's own promise of grace;
this face of yours is heaven's own light.

Translator's Notes

চরাস্রোতে ("the stream of char-achar") uses a classical Sanskrit pairing — chara (that which moves) and achara (that which does not) — a single compact term for "the entire animate and inanimate universe." English has no one-word equivalent, so I unpacked it as "this great tide of all that moves and does not move," trading compactness for completeness.

আবেশ, which I render "rapture," sits somewhere between intoxication, possession, and rapturous absorption — stronger and stranger than simple "passion," closer to being swept out of oneself.

SACRED LOVE

পবিত্র প্রেম

Touch it not, touch it not, I say — stand back, stand away.

Do not dim it further with a soiling touch.

See there, little by little, it is dying;

your breath of desire rains down as poison.

Do you not know the flower that has bloomed within the heart,

once cast down into the dust, will never bloom again?

Do you not know the world's own sea is shoreless,

do you not know that life's road runs through dark?

Of itself has risen your own steadfast star,

of itself has bloomed the flower, by the Maker's grace —

who, of his own wish, would choose today to lose the way?

who, of his own wish, would trample this blossom underfoot?

On the lamp that would give you light, you blow your breath —

the very thing you love, you lay to waste.

Translator's Notes

ধ্রুবতারা, "the pole star," is literally "Dhruva's star" — carrying the myth of Dhruva, the child-devotee whose unwavering faith fixed him in the sky forever. "Pole star" in English gives the astronomy but loses the myth of constancy earned through

devotion, which is really the word's emotional charge here; I could only gesture at it by calling it "steadfast."

The verb in গরল বরষে ("rains down poison") is unusually violent for so quiet a poem — barashe, "to rain down," is the same verb used for monsoon downpour, applied here to a slow poisoning. I kept the verb's force rather than softening it to something like "seeps" or "spreads."

STONE-HEARTED MOTHER

পাষাণী মা

O Earth, mother of every living thing,
I have heard them call you "Mother" —
then why does everyone, in your lap,
come weeping, and go away weeping still?

Then why, having come into your lap,
does the thirst of your children never end?
Why do they long, why do they weep, all of them,
why, for all their weeping, do they never find love?

Why, here, are hearts of stone,
why is everyone so parched and cruel —
he who comes weeping, weeping to the door,
why is he driven far away?

For the one who turns and goes off weeping,
let no one weep in his place —
is this, O Mother, a mother's heart?
is this, O Mother, a mother's tenderness?

Translator's Notes

The power of this short poem is almost entirely in its repeated কেন ("why") — six times in fourteen lines — building an incantatory, almost accusatory rhythm against the silence of the Earth/Mother it addresses. I preserved every repetition rather than varying the English for elegance, since the insistence itself is the point: a child demanding an answer a mother figure will not give.

THE OLD

পুরাতন

Go from here, O Old One.
Here a new game has begun.

Again the flute is playing, again laughter is rising,
the wind of spring is blowing.
Upon the deep blue sky, white clouds lie in rows,
weary, it seems, in the sun's own light;
the birds are shaking out their wings, the branches tremble,
girls and boys are playing together.

On the lake before us, light glimmers and glitters,
shadow trembles and shakes;
gazing at the water, a girl sits at the ghat,
listening to the rustle of leaves.

Who knows with what hopes, on every side,
so many people go their way, in so much joy and grief —
everyone has forgotten; someone laughs, someone dances —
why do you stand there before them all?

The wind goes blowing by — why do you, again and again,
breathe your long sighs into its midst?

Far off the flute is playing — why do you come pouring
your outburst of lament into it?

The morning sun has risen, painting its picture of gold —
why do you throw your shadow across it?

The one who has gone once, gone for good — no one wants him back;
then why this endless longing for him still?

Then why, at evening, from behind the clouds,
does it hide, and gaze down upon the earth —
in the dark of midnight, at the door of the old house,
why does it come again, and turn away again?

What have you come to see? whatever you left behind,
who is there now to tend and cherish it!
Every mark of memory that lay scattered these many days,
like fallen, scattered leaves —
today the wind of spring, one by one, alas,
blows them all away, day after day —
lying in the dust, in the earth, scorched by rays of laughter,
moment by moment growing dim and soiled.

Cover, then, cover your face; take your sorrow and your joy with you;
look not, look not back again and again.
Here there is no dwelling left for you — turn your gaze toward the infinite,
and slowly, slowly, dissolve into the dark.

Translator's Notes

Read against নূতন ("The New," above), this poem completes the diptych: there, joy arrives uninvited into ruin; here, grief itself is gently, firmly told to let go and vanish. The repeated address to "তুমি" (you/the Old) throughout — half tender, half impatient — is the emotional engine of the piece; I tried to keep that same double register in English rather than making the speaker either purely cruel or purely gentle.

COMPLETE UNION

পূর্ণ মিলন

Night and day I weep, beloved, for union —
a union hungry as death itself.

Take me, take me, bind me, seize and take me —
take my modesty, my raiment, every covering I have.

Steal away this young body of mine —
take the sleep from my eyes, and sleep's own dream.
Take from me this vast and wakeful world entire,
take my life and death across eternity.

In the midst of a solitary world, on the burning-ground of union,
the sunlight quenched, all that moves and does not move gone out —
two naked souls, free of shame, free of raiment,
in you and in me, become an infinite beauty.

What impossible dream is this, alas, O God —
without You, in what place does such union even exist!

Translator's Notes

The poem's boldest and strangest stroke is মিলনশ্মশানে — literally "the cremation-ground of union," fusing milan (union, meeting) with shôshan (the burning ghat where bodies are cremated). It is a genuinely shocking compound in Bengali too:

union so complete it consumes the self the way death does. I rendered it as "the burning-ground of union" to keep that violence intact rather than softening it to something like "the altar of union."

The poem is built to read as an erotic love-lyric until its final couplet turns and reveals — as so often in Tagore — that the "you" addressed throughout has, all along, been God. I left that turn exactly where Tagore places it, unflagged, so the reader arrives at the same recognition the poem intends.

EXPECTATION

প্রত্যাশা

Whatever everyone asks of me,
have I been able to give it to them all?
Have I not, alas, cheated so many of them —
how much debt have I left owing in this world?

Then why do I babble a thousand ravings,
begging alms of everyone I meet?
If I do not get even a grain, I fling a curse;
why, at once, do I sit down and weep in misery!

O God, I ask for nothing more —
take from me this beggar's craving.
Carrying on my head this eternal weight of debt,
I will weep no more, crying, "I have not received, I have not received."

Nor will I beg even of You, this idle weeping —
if I give of myself, You will come of Yourself.

Translator's Notes

The poem's turn hinges on ঋণ ("debt") — a word carrying real moral and even cosmic weight in Bengali (as in the Sanskritic idea of rin, debts owed to gods, ancestors, and fellow beings), not merely financial. The closing paradox — stop begging even God, and self-surrender alone will bring God near — is stated as

tersely in the Bengali as I've kept it in English; I resisted the urge to explain it further, since the flatness of the final line is where its force lies.

LIFE

প্রাণ

I do not wish to die in this beautiful world;
I wish to go on living among mankind.
In these rays of the sun, in this flowering garden,
if only I might find a place within some living heart.

On earth the play of life is a wave forever rising —
so much of parting, of union, of laughter, of tears —
if, threading song through all of mankind's joy and grief,
I might build for it a home that does not die.

And if I cannot do so, then, for as long as I live,
let me find my place right there among you all,
so that you, morning and evening, might go on gathering
the ever-new blossoms of song I bring to bloom.

Take the flower with a smiling face — and afterward, alas,
throw the flower away, once that flower has withered.

Translator's Notes

This is one of Tagore's best-loved lyrics, and its wish is deliberately modest for a poet of his stature: not to be remembered as great, but simply to go on living quietly inside other people's ordinary joys and sorrows, "like a flower" that will eventually be discarded without regret. The closing couplet's plainness — almost anticlimactic

after such longing — is the whole point, and I resisted any temptation to make it grander in English than it is in Bengali.

PRAYER

প্রার্থনা

Because You are not near, behold, friend, that is why
everyone goes about crying, "I am great, I am great."
Every one of them stands up tall, right there before us,
declaring, "In this world there is nothing else at all."

Lord, come but once, with a smiling face,
let all of them grow pale, and hide themselves in shame —
let joy and sorrow both be broken in Your great joy,
let light and darkness both dissolve into Your radiance.

Otherwise I have drowned, I have died right here;
otherwise this weeping of the heart will never cease —
I only raise up dry dust, in my thirst for nectar,
and calling it love, I have bound myself in the bonds of death.

Sometimes I fall, sometimes I rise, I laugh and I weep —
my house of play, once broken down, will build itself a tomb.

Translator's Notes

সুধাপিপাসা ("thirst for sudha") uses the classical word for ambrosia or nectar — the drink of the gods — rather than ordinary water, framing spiritual longing as a thirst nothing earthly can satisfy. মরণবন্ধন ("the bonds of death") is a stark compound for what the poem calls, bitterly, mistaking mere craving for love. Both phrases lean

on a register of Sanskritic gravity that plain English can only approximate through word choice, not through any equivalent compound of its own.

TO THE PEOPLE OF BENGAL

বঙ্গবাসীর প্রতি

Do not — do not ask me to sing.

Is this, then, only laughter and play, a fair of amusement,
only empty words, only pretense!

Do not — do not ask me to sing.

This is the water of the eyes, the sighing breath of despair,
words of shame, the hopes of the poor —
this is a grief that splits the breast, that groans within the heart,
a deep and inward pain.

Is this, then, only laughter and play, a fair of amusement,
only empty words, only pretense!

Have I come here as a beggar after fame,
stringing words together only to gather applause,
speaking empty words, taking up empty glory,
spending my nights in empty labor!

Who will wake today, who will do the work,
who wishes to wipe away the Mother's shame —
who will weep in anguish, and lay at the Mother's feet
the longing of his whole soul.

Is this, then, only laughter and play, a fair of amusement,
only empty words, only pretense!

Translator's Notes

The poem works by a sharp register-clash: হাসিখেলা and প্রমোদের মেলা ("laughter-and-play," "a fair of amusement") are words for light, festive entertainment, set directly against কলঙ্ক (shame/stain), দারিদ্র্যের আশা (the hopes of the poor), and মরমবেদনা (deep, inward pain). Tagore is refusing the role of court-entertainer, insisting his songs carry the nation's actual grief. I kept the refrain's insistent repetition exactly, since the poem's whole shape is built on that hammering "no."

TO THE LAND OF BENGAL

বঙ্গভূমির প্রতি

Why, O Mother, do you gaze upon their faces!

They do not want you, they do not want you at all —
they do not even know their own mother!

They will give you nothing, nothing at all —
they only speak lies, in so many false pretenses!

You go on giving, Mother, whatever is yours —
your golden harvest, your Ganges-water,
knowledge, faith, so many sacred tales.

What will they give you back — nothing, nothing at all —
they will only speak falsehood, from base and petty hearts!

Keep the sorrow of your heart within your heart, O Mother,
hold back the water of your eyes within your eyes,
hide your face, Mother, in your bed of dust —
forget, forget all your base and worthless children.

Gazing into emptiness, counting the hours one by one,
see whether the long night ever passes —
what use, Mother, is there in telling your grief
to this pitiless, senseless stone!

Translator's Notes

জাহ্নবীবারি ("Jahnavi-water," i.e. Ganges water) uses a classical epithet for the river as "daughter of the sage Jahnu," from the old myth in which the river, once swallowed by Jahnu in anger, was released again through his ear — a story most Bengali readers of Tagore's day would carry in the background of the word without needing it spelled out. I simplified to "Ganges-water" in the rendition itself and note the myth here rather than breaking the line's momentum with an explanatory aside.

The poem's final image — grief poured out to "senseless stone" — turns the address ambiguous: is the Mother being told to stop confiding in her ungrateful children, or in the land itself, deaf as rock? I left that ambiguity exactly as open as the Bengali does.

SHADE OF THE FOREST

বনের ছায়া

Where now is the shade of trees, the green tenderness of the forest?
Cradled close by trees along the bank, all day long in murmuring sound,
the river flows on, away, toward some far and cherished home;
where now is the shade of trees, the green tenderness of the forest?
Where now, in the deep-blue distance, does the forest's edge lie merged
into the infinite's own unblinking, unwavering eye?

From far away the wind comes, and passes on to lands still farther;
songs go drifting on it — to what country do they go?
Laughter, the flute, light jesting, the breath of unclouded joy,
all year round, companionship along the river's green shore;
one plays, another swings, another sleeps in the lap of shade,
and the hours only pass on, murmuring, with the river's flow.

Someone gathers bakul-blossoms, someone strings a garland;
in the shade, themselves like shadows, they sit and sing;
somewhere, someone is whispering, secretly, into another's ear.
Her hair has come undone, she has forgotten to bind it up,
with her fingers she holds it lifted, lest it fall and cover her eyes;
her bangle has slipped away, she searches for it in the shade of the trees.

Deep in the forest's own heart, in solitude, a flute is playing,
and now and then, to its tune, two doves sing along.

Leaf upon rustling leaf sings the forest's own old song,
 and how many secrets of the heart are mingled into it.
 Hundreds on hundreds of vines and leaves play and tremble, each its own way,
 small patches of light and shadow flickering, covering all the wood,
 and with them, in just the same way, so many children play.

Where now is that humming, that rippling, that rustling murmur,
 where now, overhead, that trembling of vine and leaf?
 Where now that light and shade, that play of children,
 where now, among the flowers, those laughters with hair let loose?
 Where now that simple, guileless heart, that deep song of joy,
 in the midst of boundless peace, the heart's own cherished home,
 the cool shade of trees, the green tenderness of the forest.

Translator's Notes

The poem's whole emotional architecture rests on its refrain, কোথা রে ("where now / where is that"), which opens the poem, closes it, and returns at the final turn to unravel every image built up in between — a technique closer to Wordsworth's Immortality Ode than to anything with an English name of its own. I made that refrain the backbone of the English too, since it does the same elegiac work in both languages even without the original's meter.

Small, concrete images — the girl's slipped bangle, her loosened hair held up with one hand against her eyes — are where the poem's tenderness actually lives, more than in any abstract statement of loss; I kept these as plainly literal as I could, trusting them to carry the feeling without embellishment.

CAPTIVE

বন্দী

Open, open wide, beloved, that noose of your arms —
make me drink no more the wine of your kisses.
This air lies imprisoned in a cage of flowers —
set free, set free this fettered soul of mine.

Where now is the light of dawn, where is the open sky —
let this endless night of the full moon come to its end.
Your loosened tresses have covered me over, entire;
in you I can find no refuge, no deliverance!

Your restless fingers, wound about each other,
weave over my whole body a snare of touch.
In the daze of sleep, lifting my face toward the emptiness,
I see only a moon, its smile unceasing.

Set me free — do not bind me.
Only a free heart is worth the giving.

Translator's Notes

This sonnet's tension is its ambivalence: the imagery of imprisonment — কারাগার (prison), রুদ্ধ (shut in, confined), বদ্ধ (fettered) — is paired throughout with images of overwhelming beauty (flowers, moonlight, loosened hair), so that the "captivity"

being resisted is also plainly, painfully desired. I kept both currents running together rather than resolving the poem toward either pure rejection or pure longing.

The final line, "স্বাধীন হৃদয়খানি দিব তার পায়" ("a free heart I will give at his/her feet"), is ambiguous in Bengali as to whether "his/her" refers back to the beloved being addressed throughout, or gestures toward something larger — a common device in Tagore's love poetry, where the earthly beloved and the divine often blur into one addressee by the poem's end. I preserved that same open ambiguity rather than choosing a reading for the reader.

END OF SPRING

বসন্ত-অবসান

When did spring pass by? — this time there was no song!

When did the fallen blossoms come to cover the foot of the bakul tree,
when did the flowering itself already come to its end!

When did spring pass by — this time there was no song!

This spring, did the jasmine-buds never even wake?

Did the swarms of bees never hum, and drink their honey?

This time did the breeze never rouse the flowering grove,
did it pass by unanswered, did it go by, faint and fading?

When did spring pass by — this time there was no song!

All the birds there were, singing, must have gone their way;

their song has merged into the wind, into the forest's own lament.

The fair of flowers has broken up, laughter and play have gone away,
and only now, at evening, has my heart awakened, and looked about.

When did spring pass by — this time there was no song!

On spring's last night I have come, empty-handed;

this time I have strung no garland — what shall I offer you as gift!

The silent flute is weeping, laughter fades upon the lips,
in your eyes there floats a brimming, wounded reproach.

This time spring has gone — there was none, none, no song!

Translator's Notes

The poem's emotional keyword is অভিমান — the last word of real substance before the closing refrain — one of the most famously untranslatable words in Bengali. It names a particular wounded, sulking reproach that arises specifically from love and closeness (a stranger's neglect doesn't produce abhiman; only someone dear to you can), somewhere between hurt pride, tender resentment, and the silent expectation that the other person should have known better without being told. "Brimming, wounded reproach" is the closest I could bring it into English, but the word deserves to be known and kept in mind by its Bengali name.

The refrain itself shifts almost imperceptibly at the very end — "হল না গান" ("there was no song") becomes, in the last line, "হল না, হল না গান" ("there was none, none, no song") — a small stutter of grief that I kept as a doubled negative in English rather than smoothing it into a single clean phrase.

THE FLUTE

বাঁশি

Oh, listen — who is it that plays!

The scent of the wildflower garland mingles with the flute's own strain.

Touching the lips, the flute steals away a smile —

the beloved's smile floats out on the sweet song, toward the very heart of life.

Oh, listen — who is it that plays!

The bee of the flowering grove, it seems, hums along inside the flute;

the bakul-buds, grown restless, open at the flute's own song.

The murmur of the Yamuna comes to the ear, and the heart weeps;

that sweet moon there in the sky — for whom does it smile so!

Oh, listen — who is it that plays!

Translator's Notes

This lyric draws directly on the padavali tradition of Vaishnava love-poetry — the Yamuna river, the flute, the wandering fragrance of flowers are all stock elements of Radha's longing for Krishna, whose flute famously calls the cowherd women out of their homes. বঁধু, which I render "the beloved," specifically carries the sense of a woman's own chosen lord/husband-figure — the conventional way Radha's poets refer to Krishna without naming him. বিধু, "moon," is a Sanskrit poetic synonym (rather than the everyday chand), lending the closing line a slightly more elevated, hymn-like hush.

WHAT'S LEFT

বাকি

Gone now is the flower's own fragrance,

gone now is the glory of this life.

Whatever remains is nothing now but hollowness —

only the falling, only the dying, is left.

Translator's Notes

The whole poem turns on its own title. বাকি means "what remains" — but in everyday Bengali it just as commonly means "still owed," "on credit," the balance left unpaid on a debt. Read that way, the title quietly reframes the poem: life itself was a loan, and death is simply the outstanding installment. English "what's left" or "the remainder" can't carry both senses at once, so I've kept the ledger-sense alive here in the notes rather than forcing it into the rendition itself.

THE TRAP OF DESIRE

বাসনার ফাঁদ

Whatever I desire, to it I give myself, caught;
before it becomes mine, I have already become its own.
Believing I have gained it, I nurse a vain and wounded pride —
going out to bind another, I bind only myself.

Seeing the door flung open on the treasure-house of longing,
with both hands I plunder jewels beyond all counting —
I mean to carry them off, but the weight is too much to bear;
the stolen goods, turned burden, end up robbing the thief.

Forever I go begging the earth to lend me more,
I hoard it away, calling it provision for the road,
and forget, in the hoarding, that I have pawned myself —
in the end I sit imprisoned, clutching my own store for the journey.

Loaded with the weight of desire, the boat sinks, ever sinks —
yet the heart will not let go; what, then, is there to do!

Translator's Notes

The poem's central paradox is set out in its opening couplet: the hunter is caught by his own prey before he catches it — "সে আমার না হইতে আমি হই তার" ("before it becomes mine, I become its"). The proverb-like line "চোরা দ্রব্য বোঝা হয়ে চোরে করে চুরি" — literally "the stolen goods, turned into a burden, rob the thief" — is

one of those compact Bengali turns of phrase that sound almost folkloric; I kept its structure intact in English rather than smoothing it into something more explanatory, since its bluntness is the point.

ARMS

বাহু

Whom do these two vine-like arms long to enfold?
to whom do they cry, weeping, "do not go, do not go"?
How is it they show forth their restless longing —
who has ever heard the silent yearning of an arm!

From somewhere they bring the heart's own message,
and write it on the body in letters of thrill.
Through their touch they carry news from the innermost self,
and leave, deep within the soul, a trace of sweet enchantment.

Taking the garland of youth down from around the throat,
holding it between two fingers, they lift it and place it back again.
The two arms carry with them the heart's own offering-tray,
and lay it down, as if, at the beloved's feet.

Let this embrace twine forever, unbroken, on the breast —
tear it not, tear it not, this bond the two arms make.

Translator's Notes

বাহুলতা ("arm-vine" or "arm-creeper") is a classical compound image, standard in Sanskrit and Bengali love poetry, comparing a lover's slender encircling arms to a climbing vine — tender, but also faintly possessive, since a vine that twines can also strangle. The more striking word is ডালা: a ceremonial tray used to carry offerings

in a puja. By calling the embrace of two arms a "heart's dala," Tagore quietly folds a devotional, ritual gesture into an erotic one — the beloved's body becomes something offered at an altar, not merely held. I rendered it "offering-tray" to keep that ritual undertone rather than a generic word like "gift."

IN SOLITUDE

বিজনে

Call me not today — this is not the time;
alone I remain here, in a deep solitude,
I have shut in and held fast this unquiet heart of mine,
I mean to discipline this wild, unruly heart.

If it goes out among people, it slips free of me entirely,
in the uproar of the thousand it loses its own way,
its greedy fist would clutch and hold whatever it can reach,
and, forever, through every day and night, it wears itself out weeping.

I mean to chide it, alone, apart, in solitude,
let it, after all this weeping, fall for a little while to sleep,
and in her vast green lap, beneath the wide veil of sky,
let Mother Nature herself keep it bound close.

Seated in that calm and tender lap, let it learn tenderness there —
call me not, none of you, not today.

Translator's Notes

শাসন, which I translate "discipline," carries a slightly firmer weight in Bengali than the English word suggests — it's the same root used for governance, rule, even a ruler's authority over a kingdom. The speaker isn't gently correcting the heart; he's treating it as an unruly subject to be governed. That governing task is then handed

over, in the poem's second half, to প্রকৃতি জননী — "Mother Nature," personified not as scenery but as an actual nursing mother, which is a very characteristic Tagore move: the psychological interior and the natural world are treated as continuous with one another, not separate.

THE WISE ONE

বিজ্ঞ

Your little girl, Mother, understands nothing at all,
your little girl is such a baby still.
She thought the stars themselves were rising up
when it was only we who'd sent a paper balloon aloft.

When I play at "eating, eating,"
setting pebbles out nicely on a play-plate,
she thinks it's really something to be eaten,
and stuffs a whole fistful into her mouth, Mother.

If I open her little primer in front of her
and say, "Khuki, do your lesson" —
she sits right down and tears the pages out with both hands —
just see, Mother, what sort of "lesson" your little girl does!

If I put a cloth over my face
and come creeping slowly, slowly toward her,
your little girl bursts into tears at once —
she must think the old bogey-woman herself has come.

If ever, pretending to be cross,
I shake my head and glare and scold her —
your little girl only bursts out laughing;

she must think it's all a game I'm playing.

Everyone knows that Father's gone abroad,
yet if I only say, "Here comes Father!" —
she looks about her, quick, on every side —
that's how silly, how foolish, your little girl is.

When the washerman comes, and I play schoolmaster,
dragging along their little donkey to give it lessons,
I say, "I am the teacher here" —
but she just shouts out and calls me "big brother."

Your little girl wants to catch hold of the moon,
and calls out "Ganesh" as "Ganush," Mother.
Your little girl understands nothing at all,
your little girl is such a baby still.

Translator's Notes

The title is the poem's private joke: **বিজ্ঞ** means "wise" or "learned" — normally a word of real praise — applied here, sarcastically and fondly, to a toddler who thinks pebbles are food and a covered face means a monster has arrived. I titled it "The Wise One" rather than a flatter "Wise" to keep that irony visible from the very first word.

গান্ধী for "Ganesh" is a piece of toddler mispronunciation — I kept it as a distorted echo of the god's name rather than translating it away, since the poem's whole tenderness lives in these small, exact details of how a small child actually talks.

FAREWELL

বিদায়

Then I will go now, Mother, then I go.

In the morning, when your lap lies empty
and you call out, "my little one, my boy" —

I will answer, "he is gone now, that boy is here no more."

Mother, I am going.

I will become the wind itself, and mix with the wind,
and blow, Mother, across your breast —

but you will not be able to catch me with your hands.

In the water I will become a wave, Mother,
and no one at all will know that it is me —

I will play beside you at your bathing hour.

When the rain comes falling down,

and you lie awake at night thinking of me,

I will be the one singing that rustling song out in the trees.

And from among the clouds, through your window,

I will flash down and look in on you —

will my laughter come back to you then, in the dark of the new moon?

If, Mother, longing for your boy,

you should lie awake deep into the night,

I will become a star and tell you, "sleep now."

And once you have fallen asleep,
I will slip into the room as moonlight,
and steal a kiss upon your closed eyes.

As a dream, through the gap of your eyelids,
I will come to look upon my mother,
I will steal into the very middle of your sleep.
And waking, on some hope that isn't true,
you will pass your hand beside you, feeling for me —
and where I will have melted away to, who can say.

When the festival season comes, and all the other boys
go wandering, playing in the courtyard,
they will say, "the boy is no longer here, in this house."
And I, then, in the tune of a flute,
turning and turning across the whole sky,
will go on coming back to you, in everything you do.

And if your sister, holding the new festival clothes in her hands,
should ask you,
"Where has your boy gone off to?" —
you will say, "How could my boy ever be lost?
He is here, in the very pupil of my eye,
he is folded still, into my breast, into my lap."

Translator's Notes

This is the Bengali original behind the poem Tagore himself later rendered into English as "The End," included in *The Crescent Moon* (1913). Rather than lean on his own celebrated English version — which many readers already know by heart — I've translated it fresh from the Bengali, so the phrasing here is my own throughout.

পুজোর কাপড় ("festival clothes" / "Puja clothes") is a specific, dating detail: at Durga Puja, children traditionally receive new clothes, and the aunt arriving with them in hand makes the child's absence achingly concrete rather than abstract. I kept "festival clothes" rather than the more generic "new clothes" to preserve that particular, seasonal ache.

THE HERO

বীরপুরুষ

Suppose that we were travelling through some far country,
and I was taking you, Mother, a long way off.
You would be riding in a palanquin, its two doors
opened just a crack,
and I would be riding a red-brown horse,
trotting along, close at your side.
Up from the road, from under the horse's hooves,
a cloud of red dust would come rising.

Evening would come, the sun sinking low,
and we would reach, say, the field by Joradighi.
Wherever I looked, all around, an empty waste,
not a single soul anywhere in sight,
and you, to yourself, would grow afraid,
thinking, "wherever have we come to!"
And I would say, "Don't be afraid, Mother —
look, there, you can see the bed of an old, dried-up river."

The field would lie covered over with cockle-burs,
the path winding, bending through the middle of it.
Not a cow or a calf anywhere about —
they'd have gone home to the village the moment evening fell —
and where we ourselves were going, who could say,

for in the dark nothing could be seen too well.
 And you would call out to me, saying,
 "What's that light there, by the edge of the pond!"

And just then — "Hâ re re re re!" —
 some men would come, bearing down on us with a shout.
 And you, in fear, huddled in a corner of the palanquin,
 would call silently on every god and guardian you knew,
 while the bearers, setting the palanquin down among the thorn-bushes,
 would stand there trembling, head to foot.
 And I would call out to you, saying,
 "I am here — why should you be afraid, Mother?"

Sticks in hand, their hair a wild, matted mane,
 red hibiscus flowers tucked behind their ears.
 And I would say, "Stand back! Take care!
 Come one step closer, any one of you —
 look here, at this sword of mine —
 I'll cut every one of you clean to pieces!"
 Hearing that, they'd leap up with a shout,
 and roar out, "Hâ re re re re!"

You would say, "Don't go near them, child" —
 and I would answer, "Just watch, and stay quiet."
 I'd spur my horse and ride straight in among them,

shield and sword clashing and ringing out,
 and such a fearsome battle would follow, Mother,
 that just to hear of it would raise the hair on your skin.
 So many would flee away in terror,
 and so many heads would go rolling to the ground.

Fighting against so many all at once,
 you'd think your boy was surely lost, surely killed.
 And then I, drenched in sweat and smeared with blood,
 would come and say, "The fighting is over now" —
 and hearing that, you would step down from the palanquin
 and gather me up into your lap, kissing me all over —
 saying, "What luck it was my boy came with me!
 What terrible trouble I'd have been in, otherwise."

So many things happen, every day, this and that —
 ah, why can such a thing never really happen!
 It would be, just then, exactly like a story,
 and whoever heard it would be amazed, every one —
 and my elder brother would say, "How could that possibly be —
 does the boy really have such strength in him?"
 And all the people of the neighborhood, hearing it, would say,
 "What luck it was the boy was there beside his mother!"

Translator's Notes

Like বিদায় above, this is the Bengali original behind Tagore's own English "The Hero" in The Crescent Moon; I have translated it independently from the Bengali rather than drawing on his published version.

"হাঁরে রে রে রে রে" is a pure onomatopoeic battle-cry — a whooping shout with no literal meaning at all — so I left it exactly as sound, transliterated, rather than inventing an English war-cry that would lose its rhythm. The poem is dense with small, specific rural-Bengal detail — the palanquin (পালকি), the cockle-bur field, the hibiscus flowers tucked behind the bandits' ears — which is what keeps a child's daydream of heroism feeling like a real place rather than a generic fantasy; I kept all of it rather than trimming for pace.

RAIN FALLS, PITTER-PATTER

বৃষ্টি পড়ে টাপুর টুপুর

The daylight has begun to fade,
the sun is sinking, sinking low.
Clouds have gathered round the sky,
greedy, greedy for the moon.
Cloud is piled on cloud —
color heaped on color —
and in the temple the gong and bell
have struck up, clang on clang.

On that far bank the rain has come,
the trees and bushes gone hazy and dim.
On this bank, here, atop the clouds,
a hundred jewels have been lit ablaze.

In this rain-wind I remember
a song from my childhood days —
"Rain falls, pitter-patter,
the river's come in flood."

Across the whole sky the clouds are at play —
where, indeed, is their boundary!
From land to land they wander, playing,
and no one tells them no.

On so many new groves of flowers
they let fall their rain in passing —
moment by moment some new game,
who knows from where they think it up.

Watching the clouds at their play, how many
old games of mine come back to mind —
so many days of hide-and-seek,
in so many corners of the house.

And along with it I remember
that song from my childhood days —
"Rain falls, pitter-patter,
the river's come in flood."

I remember the room, all lit,
my mother's smiling face;
I remember, at the rumble of the clouds,
the thudding fright in my own chest.

On one side of the bed
a little boy lies sleeping —
the mischief he works upon his mother
is past all counting, past all telling.

Indoors the unruly boy
romps about in his play;
outside, the clouds cry out and rumble —
all creation shudders and shakes.

I remember, from my mother's own lips,
hearing that very song —
"Rain falls, pitter-patter,
the river's come in flood."

I remember the tale of the favored queen
and the unfavored queen,
I remember the sorrow of proud, wounded
Kankabati.

I remember, in the corner of the room,
a lamp flickering low,
and along one wall
dark, deep shadows.

Outside, only the sound of water,
drip, drip, dripping down —
and the mischievous boy, listening to the story,
lies perfectly still and quiet.

And along with it I remember
that song of the cloudy days —
"Rain falls, pitter-patter,
the river's come in flood."

When was it the rain fell,
and where did the flood come to?
When Lord Shiva himself was married —
how long ago was that story now?

Was it, that day too, just such
a great massing of cloud?
Was the thunder, again and again,
striking down with lightning then as well?

Having married off his three daughters,
what became of him after that, in the end?
By what river's bank, I do not know,
in what land, I cannot say,
for what child, to lull him off to sleep,
did someone once sing this very song —
"Rain falls, pitter-patter,
the river's come in flood."

Translator's Notes

The refrain — "বিষ্টি পড়ে টাপুর টুপুর, নদেয় এল বান" — is not Tagore's own invention but a real Bengali folk lullaby, older than the poem, which he weaves in the way an English poet might quote a half-remembered nursery rhyme. টাপুর টুপুর is onomatopoeic for a light, patting rain-sound; "pitter-patter" is the nearest English equivalent, though the Bengali is a touch more playful and percussive.

সুয়োরানী দুয়োরানী ("the favored queen and the unfavored queen") are stock figures from Bengali folk fairy-tales — the beloved co-wife and the neglected one — a pairing as familiar to a Bengali child as "the wicked stepmother" is to an English one. কঙ্কাবতী (Kankabati) is not a generic name but the heroine of a well-known nineteenth-century Bengali fantasy tale by Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay; I kept her name untranslated, as Tagore's original readers would have recognized it instantly as a specific, beloved story rather than an invented figure.

THE SCIENTIST

বৈজ্ঞানিক

The moment, Mother, the clouds gave out
 their first low rumbling call,
 the moment the month of Asharh brought
 its streaming showers of rain,
 the moment the east wind, crossing the field,
 came rushing in
 and, whistling through the bamboo grove,
 struck up its own flute-song —
 just then, look, Mother, see —
 covering all the ground over,
 up sprang, from who knows where,
 flowers, heaps and heaps of them.

You go and think that they're nothing more
 than simple flowers, plain and ordinary,
 but it seems to me, Mother, that you
 are very much mistaken.

Every one of them is really a schoolboy,
 his books tucked under his arm,
 and underneath the ground, that's where
 their own little schoolhouse stands.

They sit and do their lessons there
 in a room with the door shut tight,

and if any of them wants to go out and play,
the schoolmaster makes him stand as punishment.

The months of Baishakh and Jyaishta, to them,
are only their midday hour;
once Asharh comes, and darkness falls,
that's their late afternoon.

The branches and the leaves make their noise
deep in the thick of the wood,
and at the rumble of the clouds, that's when
their half-past-four bell rings.

And the moment they're let out for the day
they all come rushing out at once,
dressed up in every kind of color —
yellow, red, green, and white.

Do you know, Mother, their real home
must be up there in the sky itself,
right where, at night, the stars
stand lined up, row on row.

Don't you see, Mother, filling the garden,
how very busy they all are?

Can you guess, then, why it is
they're in such a hurry, every one?

Do you know toward whom it is

they're all stretching out their hands?
 Do you think, perhaps, that they too
 have no mother of their own, like mine?

Translator's Notes

This is a companion piece, in spirit, to poems like "The Astronomer" elsewhere in Tagore's children's verse: a child builds an entire, logically consistent fantasy — flowers as truant schoolchildren from an underground school — and then, in its very last line, quietly turns that fantasy into a real question about love and belonging.

বৈশাখ, জ্যৈষ্ঠ, আষাঢ় (Baishakh, Jyaishta, Asharh) are months of the Bengali calendar, and I've kept their Bengali names rather than substituting "April," "May," "June," because the poem's whole joke depends on exact monsoon timing: Asharh is specifically the month the rains begin, which is why it becomes the flowers' "late afternoon" in the child's private cosmology. A reader who knows the Bengali agricultural calendar feels that logic instantly; an approximate English month name would blur it.

RESTLESS

ব্যাকুল —

Why do you sit like this, mother —

won't you take your boy on your lap?

There in the corner, legs spread out on the floor,

what is it you are thinking, all to yourself?

Your hair is still unbound.

The rain wets your head through the open window —

what is it you keep watching for?

Your clothes will be stained with mud and dust.

Four o'clock has already struck,

school let out long ago —

but no whistle to say brother is coming.

The day has slipped away just so —

why do you sit like this?

I think today Father's letter never came.

The postman took every letter from his bag

and left them all —

but why does he never bring Father's?

He keeps it back, he says, to read himself,

and walks off still swinging his bag —

that postman is a wicked, cunning man.

Mother, oh mother, listen to me,

don't go on thinking like this all the time.
 Tomorrow, when it's market day
 and you go out to buy your things,
 tell the maid to bring me paper and pen.
 See — I won't make a single mistake —
 from ka to the cerebral ɳa,
 I myself will write Father's letter.
 Why do you laugh, mother, why?
 I know I can't write
 as beautifully as Father does —
 but with the lines ruled straight,
 in big, round, heavy letters,
 you'll see, when I write, you'll see.
 And when the letter is written,
 do you think I'll be so clever as Father
 and drop it in that postman's bag?
 Never — I'll carry it myself,
 I'll bring it to you and read it aloud —
 they never deliver a good letter, once they have it.

Translator's Notes

- স্যায়না — a colloquial word for "cunning, sharp-witted" (kin to সৈয়ানা), used here almost affectionately as a child's grand accusation against the postman.
- মূর্খন্য ɳ — "the cerebral ɳa." Bengali distinguishes a dental ন from a retroflex/cerebral ɳ, both transliterated "n" in English but taught separately in the

alphabet. The child's pride in naming this specific letter — a fine point of literacy — is untranslatable in substance, so I kept the linguistic term itself.

- বুলি-কাঁখে — literally "bag at the hip," the postman's satchel slung against his side as he walks. I rendered it as "swinging his bag" to keep the physical, almost mocking motion.

- The repeated মা গো মা ("mother, oh mother") carries the incantatory, pleading rhythm of a child trying to talk an anxious parent down — I kept the doubling rather than smoothing it into a single address.

WITHIN AND WITHOUT

ভিতরে ও বাহিরে —

The baby dwells in the inner chamber of the World-Mother —
that is why he hears so many songs, in so many melodies.

Painting the sky and the earth in every hue,
Mother has built the courtyard of his playhouse.

She smiles when the trees and creepers
lean toward the child, murmuring their leafy nonsense.

Sun and moon fling off all their laws
and laugh with the baby as though they were his own age.

Old Truth himself puts on masks of every colour
and tells stories to the child, becoming a child again.

Setting aside all the labour of the universe,
Mother comes to play with her baby.

For his sake she creates whatever she pleases —
no rule, no obstacle stands in the way.

She makes even the mute speak into the baby's ear,
she wakens even the lifeless into conscious life.

For the child's sake the rains and the autumn weave their tales,
and the whole universe turns into a playroom.

The baby wanders about in the midst of it all —
the baby dwells in the inner chamber of the World-Mother.

We grown-ups dwell in the schoolhouse of the World-Father —

its walls are built and mortared in stone.
 Sun and moon move by the rules of astronomy,
 held fast on their reins of law.
 So too the trees and the creepers stand,
 as though they understood nothing at all.
 The champa buds open on the champa branch
 as though no one there had ever heard of the Seven Brothers.
 The clouds gaze about so blankly, so unknowing,
 as if they had no idea where they were bound.
 The broken doll rolls upon the ground all day,
 as though it were nothing more than a lump of clay.
 The pond lies silent through day and night,
 as if the tale of the serpent-princess were only a story.
 Joy and sorrow are pressed so tightly to its breast,
 as if they were no story at all.
 Whatever is, remains just as it is —
 and has no power to become anything more.
 The World-Teacher sits there, stern and unmoving —
 we grown-ups dwell in the schoolhouse of the World-Father.

Translator's Notes

- অন্তঃপুরে — the "inner chamber" or zenana, the traditional private women's quarters of a household. It carries connotations of intimacy, protection, and hiddenness that "inner chamber" only partly recovers.

- The poem's whole architecture rests on a deliberate gendered cosmology — the maternal principle as living, playful, boundless creation; the paternal principle as ordered law and discipline. I preserved "World-Mother" and "World-Father" as parallel titles to keep that symmetry visible.

- সাত ভায়েৰে — "the Seven Brothers," a direct nod to the Seven Champa Brothers folk tale (see poem 13 below) — the adult world has forgotten the very story the child's world still lives inside.

- নাগকন্যেৰ কথা — "the tale of the Nāgakanyā," the serpent-princess of Bengali folklore, said to dwell beneath ponds and rivers. No single English term carries this, so I rendered it descriptively as "serpent-princess."

MOTHER LAKSHMI

মা-লক্ষ্মী —

Towards whom, mother, do you gaze,
your two eyes opened wide in sorrow?
Who has torn the petals from a flower,
who has caught a bird from the woods?
Who has said what to whom,
in whose heart has some pain struck —
that your two eyelids have filled
with such tenderness and grief?
My little mother, in the midst of your play,
it seems the play is over.
A cluster of flowers lies fallen in your lap —
why, my dear, this weariness?

There is so much sorrow in this place,
this world is so brimful of grief —
yet in the nectar of your two eyes
the whole earth finds its coolness.
Tell me, Lakshmi, tell me truly,
in which ocean were you hidden away?
By whose merit have you now, so suddenly,
risen into our house?
You have brought with you

a heart brimming with the nectar of tenderness —
 you will pour out your heart
 to satisfy this world's hunger for love.

Hush, hush — let no one
 speak a harsh word near her.
 Let no one wound another
 while she carries such sorrowful eyes.
 If she cannot bear it,
 if she should weep and go away —
 she will fall from this stone-hearted earth
 like a flower dropping from its stem.
 She is my dewdrop,
 she is my evening star —
 when she came, when she will leave —
 this fear consumes me through and through.

Translator's Notes

- লক্ষ্মী — the title plays a double game. Lakshmi is the goddess of fortune and grace, but "lokkhi" is also ordinary Bengali endearment for a good, sweet child (as in lokkhi meye, "good girl"). The poem hovers between addressing a divine visitor and simply praising a beloved daughter, so I left "Lakshmi" untranslated as a name/title rather than choosing one reading over the other.

- আঁখির সুধা — "the nectar of the eyes." সুধা (sudha) is the ambrosia of Hindu myth, the drink of immortality — a stock image for anything that soothes and cools. I kept

"nectar" to preserve that mythic register rather than flattening it to something like "the softness of your gaze."

- পাষাণ-প্রাণে — literally "in a stone-souled existence." I rendered it as "stone-hearted earth," compressing the compound but keeping its hardness intact against the child's fragility.

THE BOATMAN

মাঝি —

I long to go
to the far bank of the river —
there where, along the shore,
little dinghies are moored in rows
to stakes of bamboo.
Farmers cross over
with their ploughs on their shoulders;
fishermen haul in their nets,
and the herd-boy swims his cows and buffaloes
across to the other side.
When evening comes and everyone
has gone back home,
only deep in the night
the jackals set up their cry
over the casuarina wastes.
Mother, if only you'll allow it,
when I grow up I mean to be
the ferryman of the crossing-ghat.

I have heard that further in
there lies a marshy stretch.
When the rains have passed,

flock after flock come there —

the ruddy geese in pairs.

Thick along its edges

the tall reeds have grown;

there the cranes make their home,

and the snipe leave the prints of their feet

traced upon the mud.

How many evenings, mother,

have I stood in the corner of our roof

and watched, lost in thought —

the moonlight pouring down

over that white forest of kash-flowers.

Mother, if only you'll allow it,

when I grow up I mean to be

the ferryman of the crossing-ghat.

I'll row my boat

to this bank and to that.

All the boys and girls

bathing at the ghat

will stand and watch me pass.

When the sun climbs high overhead

and the day grows late,

I'll come home saying,

"I'm so hungry, mother —

give me something to eat."
 And I'll come back again
 when the dark of evening falls,
 home to your house.
 I won't go away, mother,
 like Father, to work in some far country.
 Mother, if only you'll allow it,
 when I grow up I mean to be
 the ferryman of the crossing-ghat.

Translator's Notes

- মানিক-জোড় / চখাচখী — the ruddy shelduck, a bird of Bengali riverbank folklore said to be parted nightly from its mate and to call out in longing across the water. I simplified to "ruddy geese," though the fuller resonance — eternally paired, eternally separated — is worth knowing.
- কাশের বনে — kash, the tall white-plumed grass that lines Bengali riverbanks in autumn, inseparably tied in Bengali culture to the arrival of Durga Puja. I kept "kash-flowers" rather than the vaguer "reeds" to preserve that specific seasonal image.
- খেয়াঘাটের মাঝি — "the ferryman of the crossing-ghat." Ghat (a riverside landing or bathing place) has no single-word English equivalent; "crossing-ghat" tries to hold onto both the function and the concrete place-word.

MOTHER-LOVING

মাতৃবৎসল —

Mother, those who dwell among the clouds
call out to me, call out to me.

They say, "We do nothing but play,
from morning to noon to evening.

We play with gold at daybreak,
we play with silver, catching the moon."

I say, "How can I ever come to you?"

They say, "Come to the edge of the field.

Stand there and lift up your hands,
and we will carry you off to the land of clouds."

I say, "But my mother sits at home
watching and waiting for me —

how could I ever leave her behind?"

Hearing this, they smile, mother, and drift away.

So instead, mother, I'll become the cloud myself;
and you shall be my moon —

I'll cover you over with both my arms,
and the sky will be the roof above us both.

Mother, those who dwell among the waves
call out to me, call out to me.

They say, "We do nothing but sing

from morning through the whole long day."

They say, "We travel on, brother, to no country —
we have no fixed address at all."

I say, "How can I ever come with you?"

They say, "Come to the edge of the landing-ghat.

Stand there and close your eyes,

and we will carry you off to the land of waves."

I say, "But my mother keeps watching for me,

and calls me by name when evening falls —

how could I ever leave her behind?"

Hearing this, they smile, mother, and drift away.

So instead, mother, I'll become the wave myself,

and you shall be some far, far distant shore.

I'll fling myself, laughing, into your lap,

and no one will ever find where we have gone.

Translator's Notes

- This is the poem behind Tagore's own celebrated English piece "The Cloud and the Wave" in *The Crescent Moon* — the shape and address will be familiar to readers of that collection, though what's above is an independent translation.

- উদ্দেশ — "whereabouts, trace, address." "কেউ আমাদের পাবে না উদ্দেশ" literally means "no one will find our whereabouts." I rendered it as "no one will ever find where we have gone," aiming for the sense of a joyful, total disappearance into intimacy rather than a loss.

- ঘাটের শেষে — again ghat, the riverside landing — untranslatable in one word, so folded into "landing-ghat."

MASTER SAHIB

মাস্টারবাবু —

Today I am Kanai the schoolmaster,
and my kitten is my pupil.
I never beat him with a real cane, mother —
I only sit there holding a stick, for show.
Every single day he comes in late,
and never puts his mind to his lessons;
he lifts one paw and yawns wide
however many times I say, "Listen! Listen!"
Day and night it's play, play, play —
he is thoroughly careless about his reading and writing.
I say, "Cha, chha, ja, jha, ña" —
and all he ever says is "Meow, meow."

I open the first primer
and explain to him, mother, so much —
never steal and eat what isn't yours,
be good, be like the boy Gopal in the story.
But whatever I say comes to nothing —
even if he listens to one single word,
the moment he catches sight of a fish anywhere
he forgets it all completely.

And if he spots a sparrow,
 he drops every lesson and runs.
 I say, "Cha, chha, ja, jha, ña,"
 and he only makes mischief and says, "Meow."

I tell him again and again,
 "Study your books at study-time —
 and once you're let out for the day,
 then play all you like at play-time."
 He sits there looking like a perfectly good boy,
 glancing sideways up into my face,
 pretending, just as if
 he had understood every word I said.
 But the moment he finds his chance
 he is gone, and nowhere to be seen.
 I say, "Cha, chha, ja, jha, ña,"
 and all he ever says is "Meow, meow."

Translator's Notes

- কানাই — a common pet-name for Krishna in Bengali Vaishnav tradition, and by extension a generic affectionate name for a boy. The child crowning himself "Kanaï Master" is a small, proud act of self-importance.
- গোপালের মতো — a reference to the folk figure of Gopal, the archetypal obedient "good boy" of Bengali children's morality tales, invoked here the way an English-language poem might invoke a fairy-tale paragon of virtue.

- চ ছ জ ঝ ঞ — the fourth (palatal) row of the Bengali consonant alphabet, recited in strict order. I transliterated rather than substituting "ABC," to preserve the concrete detail that this is alphabet-drilling, not vague "lessons."

THE KING'S PALACE

রাজার বাড়ি

Where my king's palace stands, no one at all knows;
if people ever found out, would it even go on standing there?
Its walls are built of silver, its roof laid with gold,
and its stairs rise storey upon storey of white ivory.
In its seven-storeyed halls dwells the chief queen,
wearing round her neck a necklace strung with the wealth of seven kings.
Where my king's palace is — listen, mother, into your ear —
it's there beside the roof, where the tulsi plant stands in its pot.

Where the princess lies sleeping, beyond seven seas,
no one but I can ever find her.
Two bangles on her wrists, two earrings in her ears,
and her hair spills loose from the bed down onto the floor.
When her sleep breaks at the touch of a golden wand,
her laughter will scatter jewels falling to the ground.
Where the princess lies sleeping — listen, mother, into your ear —
it's there beside the roof, where the tulsi plant stands in its pot.

When all of you go down to the ghat at bathing time,
I slip away quietly, up onto that roof.
There where the wall throws its shadow into a corner, mother,
I sit there alone, legs stretched out, lost in my own thoughts.

I bring with me only Mini, my cat —

even she knows where the barber-boy's quarter lies.

Do you know where the barbers' lane is? Listen, mother, into your ear —

it's there beside the roof, where the tulsi plant stands in its pot.

Translator's Notes

- তুলসি গাছের টব — the tulsi (holy basil) plant in its rooftop or courtyard pot is a near-universal fixture of traditional Bengali Hindu households, worshipped daily. The poem's whole charm rests on this: the child's fabulous secret kingdom is hidden inside the most ordinary, sacred corner of the actual house.

- সাত মহলা কোঠায় — "seven-storeyed halls" — like "seven seas" and "seven kings" elsewhere in the poem, this is a stock fairy-tale intensifier from Bengali rupkatha (folk tale) formula, signalling boundless grandeur rather than a literal count.

- নাপিতপাড়া — "the barbers' quarter," a real neighbourhood named for the caste-based trade clustering typical of Bengali town geography. The joke is gentle: the cat's worldly knowledge extends only as far as this very local landmark, puncturing the fantasy with domestic reality.

HIDE AND SEEK

নুকোচুরি

Suppose, mother, out of pure mischief,
I turned into a champa flower blooming on the champa tree,
and in the early morning, mother, on a branch
I rolled about among the tender young leaves —
then you would lose me altogether.
Would you know me at all, mother, then?
You would call, "Where has my baby gone?"
and I would only laugh, and keep quite still.

While you go about your work,
I would watch you the whole time with open eyes.
After your bath, when you come walking beneath the champa tree,
your hair loose down your back,
and pass this way toward the room where you say your prayers,
you would catch the scent of flowers from far off —
but you would never guess
that it was the scent of your own baby's body reaching you.

At noon, after everyone has eaten,
you would sit down with the Mahabharata in your hands,
and the shade of the tree, falling through the window,

would lie across your lap and your back —
 and I would bring my own small shadow
 and set it swaying over the pages of your book —
 but you would never guess
 that it was your baby's shadow drifting before your eyes.

In the evening, when you had lit the lamp
 and gone out to the cowshed,
 I, still playing my flower-game,
 would come tumbling down, mother, and fall to the ground.
 And I would be your own baby again,
 and come to you and say, "Tell me a story."
 "Where were you, you naughty thing?" you would ask.
 And I would say, "That I will never tell."

Translator's Notes

- This is the poem behind Tagore's own well-known English piece of the same name in *The Crescent Moon* — one of the collection's most anthologized poems. The version above is a fresh, independent rendering.

- চাঁপা — the champak flower, prized in Bengal for its intense fragrance and used in offerings and hair ornamentation. Its scent is structurally essential here — the mother catches the "flower's" perfume without ever guessing it is her own child. No single common English flower carries the same association, so I kept "champa."

- মহাভারত-হাতে — the mother's midday reading of the Mahabharata reflects the ordinary devotional rhythm of a traditional household, grounding the child's fantasy in believable domestic life.

WINTER

শীত

The bird says, "I am going away."

The flower says, "I will not bloom."

The south wind says only,

"I will not go running through the woods."

The young leaf, without lifting its head,
withers and falls away, dying.

Evening draws a thick, smoky veil
across its own face.

Why has the bird gone away,
why does the flower refuse to bloom?

Why does the restless south wind
no longer race through grove after grove?

Winter's heart has gone from him,
his mind has grown numb and senseless;
his brow, furrowed in three deep lines,
is the very seat of a hard, rigid wisdom.

The youthful beauty brimming in moonlight,
the fragrance ripe in a flower's youth,
all the south wind's childlike games,
all the young leaves' childish clamour —
all of it he counts as sin,
all of it he calls Nature's delusion;
to sit like a picture, unmoving —

that alone he knows as the sage's duty.
 And so the bird says, "I am going."
 The flower says, "I will not bloom."
 The south wind says only,
 "I will not go running through the woods."
 But Hope says, "Spring will come."
 The flower says, "I too will come."
 The bird says, "I too will sing."
 The moon says, "I too will smile."

Spring's heart is ever new —
 it opens its eyes freshly on the world.
 Whatever it sees, it laughs to see;
 whatever it finds, it takes up to play with.
 A hundred hopes stir in its breast,
 not even knowing itself what it wants —
 its spirit runs out in every direction,
 searching, searching for a kindred soul.
 The flower blooms, and its own face blooms with it —
 the bird sings, and it sings along —
 and when the breeze comes close to its heart,
 the two of them clasp throats and play.
 That is why we hear, "Spring will come,"
 the flower say, "I too will come,"
 the bird say, "I too will sing,"

the moon say, "I too will smile."
 Winter, why have you come here at all?
 Your own country lies in the north —
 there no bird sings its song,
 there no flower opens on the branch.
 All there is a waste of snow,
 all there is dark and empty of people —
 sit there alone,
 O wise one, and spend out your days.

Translator's Notes

- ত্রিবিলালিত তার ভাল — literally "his brow furrowed in three folds," a classical Sanskrit compound describing a deeply lined, stern forehead — a stock image of severe asceticism. I rendered it concretely as "his brow, furrowed in three deep lines."

- জ্ঞানী ("jñānī," the wise one / the knower) carries real weight in Indian philosophical tradition — one who has renounced worldly attachment through knowledge. The poem's irony is sharp: this jñānī has become cold and lifeless, a quiet jab at ascetic suspicion of beauty and desire.

- প্রকৃতির ভ্রম — "Nature's delusion," echoing (without naming) the philosophical concept of maya, illusion. Winter regards sensuous, natural beauty itself as error.

WINTER'S FAREWELL

শীতের বিদায়

Spring, the boy, his face brimming with laughter,
hair flying loose in the wind —
Winter goes fleeing, pelted all over
with great, heavy, whole flowers.
His skirt overflows with a hundred gathered blossoms,
he flings roses, and tagar, and champa, and bela —
Winter cries, "Brother, what game is this?
It's time for me to go — I'm off."
Laughing, Spring catches at his robe and tugs,
drives him half-mad with his cuckoo-calls,
strikes at his very life with the scent of flowers —
strikes laughter upon laughter.
Flower-pollen flies, flower-fragrance flies,
flower-petals scatter and set the air reeling —
branches burst into bloom, the forest path lies hidden,
flower falling upon flower.
In the south wind Winter's garments fly loose,
his white hair streams and scatters as he runs;
he finds no path, no direction to go,
and loses his very bearings.
The boy Spring laughs till he doubles over,
his two rosy feet stumbling and swaying,
singing, he chases on, running and running —

tumbling and rolling through the woods.
 The river claps a hundred lifted hands,
 the branches whisper the news to one another,
 vine embraces vine, laughing,
 pointing their fingers at the sight.
 Watching the fun, jasmine and mallika laugh,
 all around, the jati and juthi flowers laugh,
 and the touch-me-not covers her face and laughs too —
 all the young brides of the forest flowers.
 So many birds call, so many birds sing,
 so many go flitting past with their chirruping,
 turning their heads this way and that,
 dancing, their tails spread and lifted.
 Winter flees, looking back again and again,
 thinking to himself, "What kind of farewell is this?" —
 he flees weeping under the sting of their laughter,
 defeated by a battering of flowers.
 Dry leaves fly off along with him,
 and the north wind cries out in its grief —
 wrapped head to foot in mist,
 who knows where Winter has gone.

Translator's Notes

- টগর চাঁপা বেলা — a run of specific Bengali garden-flower names (tagar/crape jasmine, champa, bela/jasmine), none with a clean single English equivalent. I kept

them transliterated to preserve the sheer profusion, rather than flattening them to a generic "flowers."

- লজ্জাবতী — literally "the shy/bashful one," the Bengali name for the touch-me-not plant (*Mimosa pudica*), whose leaves fold shut at a touch. The image of a "shy" flower laughing behind her own veil is a happy coincidence that survives translation.

- বনফুলবধূগুণি — "the forest-flower-brides," personifying the flowers as young, traditionally shy, veiled brides at a kind of wedding-party scene of nature — a cultural resonance no single English phrase fully carries.

FELLOW-FEELING

সমব্যথী

If, instead of your baby,
I had been born a puppy —
would you, then, have stopped me
from putting my mouth to the rice
there on your own plate?
Tell me the truth,
don't deceive me, mother —
would you have said to me, "Get away, get away,
where has this dog come from"?
Then go, mother, go —
take me down off your lap.
I won't eat from your hand,
I won't eat from your plate.
If, instead of your baby,
I had been born your parrot,
would you, for fear that I might fly away,
have kept me tied with a chain?
Tell me the truth,
don't deceive me, mother —
would you have said, "That wretched bird
is only trying to trick us and gnaw through his chain"?

Then put me down, mother,
you don't really love me at all.
I won't stay on your lap any longer,
I'll go off and live in the forest.

Translator's Notes

- The title সমব্যথী literally means "a fellow sufferer," one who shares another's pain — usually a term for human solidarity in grief. Applying it to a child's imagined kinship with a stray dog or caged bird is a quietly radical move, extending compassion across the boundary of species. I chose "Fellow-Feeling" over a flatter "Sympathy" to keep that sense of shared suffering.

- শিকল কেটে দিতে চায় রে ফাঁকি — "wants to cheat us by gnawing through the chain" — a specific, ugly suspicion: that a caged bird's trust is only a ruse toward escape. It's a compressed but devastating detail — captivity breeding mistrust even of love — that I tried to keep intact rather than soften.

THE CRITIC

সমালোচক

They say Father writes whole books himself.
No one can make out a word of what he writes.
The other day he was reading it aloud to you —
tell me truly, mother, did you understand it?
If that's the kind of writing it is,
tell me, what good does it do?
The kind of talk I hear from your own mouth, mother —
why doesn't he write that way instead?
Has Grandmother never once
told Father stories of kings?
Has he forgotten
every one of those tales?

When it's time for his bath
you go and call him, mother, again and again —
you sit there with his food waiting,
and he doesn't even remember it's there.
The whole day long
he just plays his writing-game.
When I go to play in Father's room,
you scold me, "Naughty boy!"

When I make a noise, you tell me off —
 "Can't you see your father is writing in there!"
 Tell me, tell me truly —
 what does all his writing come to, in the end?

But when I pull Father's notebook toward me
 and sit down with the inkpot and pen
 and write, ka, kha, ga, gha, ña, ha, ya, ba, ra —
 why do you get so angry with me, mother?
 When Father writes
 no one says a word.
 Doesn't Father spoil
 whole sheets of good ruled paper every single day?
 But if I only want to make a paper boat,
 at once you say I mustn't waste it.
 I suppose it's good, then,
 to turn clean white paper black?

Translator's Notes

- This poem is a wry self-portrait: Tagore was himself the "বাবা" who wrote books all day, so the child's complaints gently mock the household's own reverence for the poet's vocation. The demand that stories be as clear and warm as a grandmother's oral tales even reads, in miniature, as a quiet artistic credo.
- ক খ গ ঘ ঙ হ ঝ ব র — another alphabet string, but here loosely scattered rather than in strict sequence, evoking a toddler's messy scribbling rather than careful recitation (contrast poem 6's orderly drilling).

SEVEN CHAMPA BROTHERS

সাত ভাই চম্পা

Seven champa flowers on seven trees,
seven champa brothers —
and sister Parul, dressed in red,
beyond all comparing.
Among the seven golden champas
are seven golden faces;
and Parul-didi's young, tender face
glows soft and rosy.
Their sleep breaks at the birds' call,
the night has worn away —
and in the morning light falls on the champas,
a light golden as themselves.
They wash their faces in the dew
and put their faces out to see
what it is the seven brothers
watch all through the morning.
They watch, in the flower-grove,
roses opening one by one,
sunlight falling leaf by leaf
and glittering there.

The wind comes swinging by and runs off
like some naughty boy,
setting vines and leaves a-swaying,
so much embracing everywhere.

The tree trembles by the riverside,
its shadow trembles in the water —
and all the flowers fall, weeping,
beneath the shiuli tree.

Poking their faces out from the blossoms
brother and sister watch —
their hearts grow restless, longing
for a mother in her sorrow.

All day long they tremble, tremble,
a rustling among the leaves,
as though the whole wood's heart were beating
with a joy that aches.

All that can be heard is a murmuring,
some game the water plays.

In the wood the doves keep calling
the whole afternoon through.

The honeybee goes humming, humming,
searching for someone, somewhere,
and down among the grass the crickets
keep up their endless chirring.

Resting their heads against the petals

brother and sister listen —
memory of their mother rises,
and their hearts grow restless.
They gaze up toward the clouds —
the clouds go drifting by,
and wild geese, flying, flying,
pass on to who knows what country.
Where the butterfly's home may be
nobody at all can say,
nor where, the whole day long,
a hundred thousand ripples travel.
Through the afternoon, again and again,
the wind turns listless, sad,
and dry leaves, come loose and falling,
go drifting off, who knows where!
Chins in their hands, among the flowers,
brother and sister watch —
memory of their mother returns,
and their very souls weep.
When evening comes the fireflies kindle
among the leaves,
and on the ashvattha tree two stars
hang at its very crown.
The wind has ceased its blowing,
the birdcalls have grown still,

and now and then a crow or two
caws out, again and again.

In the west a last glimmer,
in the east the dark comes down —
and the seven brothers huddle close
within their champa house.

"Tell us a story, sister Parul,"
the seven champas call,
and hearing sister Parul's story
memory of their mother returns.

The hour strikes, the night has come,
the wood rings with its own hush —
among the flowers, fast asleep,
lie all eight brothers and sister.

Seven stars stand gazing down
into the seven champas' garden,
and moonlight settles softly
on the seven brothers' faces.

The fragrance of flowers wraps around
the seven brothers' bodies —
what a bed has been spread for them
of seven flowers' pollen!

Among the blossoms all seven brothers
dream about their mother —
and in the morning, "Wake, oh wake,"

calls sister Parul to them all.

Translator's Notes

- The poem draws directly on the well-known Bengali folktale "Saat Bhai Champa" (Seven Champa Brothers), in which seven cursed brothers become champa flowers and their sister becomes a parul blossom. The "story" that Parul-didi tells the brothers within the poem is, implicitly, this very tale — the poem folds a fairy tale about itself inside itself.

- পারুলদিদি — Parul is both a proper name and a flower (*Stereospermum*); "didi" is the ordinary Bengali word for "elder sister." I kept "sister Parul" throughout to preserve the warmth of direct address rather than a more distant "Miss Parul."

- শিউলি গাছের তলে — the shiuli (night-jasmine) blooms at night and drops to the ground by dawn — a classic autumn image of wistfulness in Bengali poetry, echoed in "the flowers fall, weeping" just beneath it.

- অশথ গাছে — the ashvattha (sacred fig/peepal), one of the most venerated trees in Indian tradition; its quiet appearance sacralizes the evening scene without any explicit comment.

A HEAP OF LAUGHTER

হাসিরাশি

We have named her Bablarani —
a tiny scrap of a girl.

Her whole face is overspread
with the happy light of the moon.

Her little teeth gleam white,
her lips are small and round.

And all the words inside her mouth
come out completely topsy-turvy.

Two tender little hands,
two tender little fists —

let anyone waggle their mouth and speak,
and she doubles up with laughter.

"Tai tai tai," she claps her hands,
swaying to and fro,

and her hair, all black,
tumbles down across her face.

"Toddle, toddle, step by step,"
she totters along, unsteady,
laughing, so pleased with herself,
glancing sideways as she goes.

She lifts her hand to show off

her two little bangles to anyone at all,
and dancing along with her laughter
the little nose-ring swings at her nose.
Close by her two red lips
a pearl-drop always seems to hang —
as though her mother's own kiss
had turned to a swinging pearl.
She has spotted the moon in the sky,
and lifts both her hands toward it,
swaying on her mother's lap,
calling, "Come, come!"
The moon's own eyes grow cool with peace
just gazing at her face;
the moon wonders to itself, from where
has such a moon-like girl arrived?
The laughter of her young small soul
goes racing toward the moon,
and the smile on the moon's own face
blooms wider still to see it.
Hearing such a longed-for call,
how can the moon just stay up there —
it seems it might drop all its stars
and come right down close!
It seems it might steal away
the laughter from her nectar-mouth

and run off in the dead of night
hidden behind a cloud.
But we will hold her fast,
close beside our little queen.
Her heap of laughter shall stay bound
within its heap of laughter.

Translator's Notes

- বাব্লারানী (Bablarani) — an affectionate double pet-name typical of Bengali baby-naming, "Babla" plus "rani" (queen). I kept it as a single proper name rather than translating "rani" separately.

- সুধামুখের — "nectar-mouthed," using the same sudha (ambrosia) imagery as poem 3, a stock epithet for impossible sweetness.

- The closing line, হাসিরাশি বাঁধা রবে হাসিরাশিতে ("the heap-of-laughter shall stay bound within the heap-of-laughter"), echoes the poem's own title and is genuinely riddling even to fluent readers. Rather than resolve its ambiguity, I preserved the repetition and the image of laughter as a hoarded treasure held close.

PROLOGUE (TO SISHU)

ভূমিকা (শিশু)

On the shore of the world's great ocean
the children have gathered together.
The endless sky above their heads
stands motionless and still,
and the restless, foaming blue water
dances on the whole day long.
What clamour rises on that shore —
the children have gathered together.

They build their houses out of sand,
they play with shells and stones.
Upon the vast blue tide
they launch their little play-boats,
carelessly shaping with their own hands
rafts strung together out of leaves.
On the shore of the world's great ocean
the children are lost in play.

They do not know how to swim,
they do not know how to cast a net.
The pearl-diver dives for pearls,

the merchant sails his ship for trade —
but the children only gather pebbles
and sit arranging them, and let them go again.
They seek no jewels, no treasure;
they do not know how to cast a net.

The sea rises up in foam and laughs,
the sea-shore itself breaks into laughter.
The terrible, towering wave sings
its liquid lullaby into the children's ears,
just as a mother, rocking the cradle,
sings and gently rocks her child.
The sea plays there with the children,
and the sea-shore laughs.

On the shore of the world's great ocean
the children have gathered together.
The storm wheels on through the empty sky,
ships go down in the distant water,
death himself flies past on his errand —
still the children go on with their play.
On the shore of the world's great ocean
is the children's great, unending gathering.

Translator's Notes

- This is the poem behind Tagore's own famous English piece "On the Seashore of Endless Worlds," which opens *The Crescent Moon*. The version above is an independent rendering, though the central image will be immediately recognizable.

- জগৎ-পারাবারের তীরে — literally "on the shore of the world's ocean." পারাবার (parabar) is a grand, somewhat archaic Sanskrit word for "sea," chosen instead of the more common সমুদ্র or সাগর to give the poem's opening a cosmic, almost scriptural weight — hence "the world's great ocean" rather than a plainer "sea."

- মরণ-দূত — "death's envoy/messenger," a striking and unsettling personification I kept close to literal. The poem's power depends on this exact contrast: children absorbed in innocent play against the vast, sometimes lethal indifference of the adult world's ocean around them.

A general note on register: several poems repeat the vocative মা ("mother") mid-line, a natural feature of spoken Bengali address that can feel repetitive in English. I kept most of these, since the poems are dramatic monologues — a child talking to a present mother — and the repetition is part of their intimacy and urgency, not padding.