

POETRY

THE RIVER

NODI

Rabindranath Tagore



Do you know, any of you,
why such great waves rise in the water?
Night and day they dance and dance —
who taught them this?
Listen — the ripple and the runnel,
the water goes forever singing.
Whom do they call, arms flung up?
In whose lap do they rock and sway?
Always laughing, always tumbling,
running off to some unknown place,
pleasing everyone, and yet
keeping their own joy to themselves.

And I sit and wonder at it —
where did the river come down from?
Where is that mountain, which one,
does anyone even know its name?
Could anyone go there, to it?
Does any person live in that place?
There, no tree grows, no blade of grass,
no bird or beast makes its home;
there, not a single sound is heard —
the mountain sits like a great and silent sage.

Over its head there is only
white snow, spread out in silence.
There the clouds gather in crowds
and stay like children of the house.
Only a wind, cold as ice,
comes and goes, comes and goes;
only the stars, the whole night through,
keep their eyes open, watching it;
only the morning light arrives
and crowns it, smiling, with gold.
There, at the feet of the blue sky,
against the soft body of the clouds,
upon the breast of the white snow,
the river slept in a happy dream.

One day the sunlight touched its face
and it woke, of itself, alone.
One day, in an hour of sun,
it remembered — there was a game to play.
It had been alone, day and night,
with no one there to share its play.
No voice spoke, in any house;
no one there sang a single song.
So, trickling, faint and low,
the river set out, slow, so slow.

It thought: whatever the world may hold,
I must go and see it all myself.

Below, along the mountain's breast,
trees rise, piercing through the sky —
ancient, ancient trees, so old
that no one living knows their age.
In every hollow, every joint,
birds have built their nests of twigs.
Their black boughs, lifted high,
shut out the sunlight from the ground.
From their branches, like matted hair,
long green moss hangs down in strands.
Shoulder against shoulder, they lean,
as if they'd laid a trap of dark.
And underneath, in the hush below,
the river runs on, laughing low.
Who could ever hold it fast?
It slips away, it runs, it's gone.
Always it plays at hide-and-seek,
pebbles chiming at its feet.
Boulders lie heaped along its path;
laughing still, it pushes through.
If a mountain blocks its way,
laughing, it bends and slips around.

There live the wild goats of the hills,
horned, with hanging beards of grey;
there the deer, thick with fur,
that no hand has ever caught.

There the people are strange and new,
their bodies hard, their frames are strong;
their eyes are set a different way,
their speech no stranger understands.

They are the children of the mountain,
always working, always singing;
all day long they labor on,
bringing home their loads of wood;
climbing to the mountain's crest
they hunt the deer that roam the forest.

The further on the river goes,
the more companions come to join,
gathering now in crowds and crowds —
all of them, like it, set out
from their own homes, onto the road.

Anklets chime about their feet
as if small silver bells were strung.
Their bodies catch the light and gleam
as though they wore a chain of diamonds.

So many tongues, so much they say —

where does all that murmuring come from?

At last friend meets with friend, and friend
embraces friend, and leans, and laughs.

At last, with joyful noise, embracing,
they all become one single stream.

Then loud and headlong the water runs —
the very ground shakes, trembling, wavering;
somewhere it plunges down with a roar —
the stones shudder and quiver in fear,
boulders crack and break apart —
the river carves and cuts its way.

Great trees along the water's edge
lean, and lean, as if to fall.

Huge weights of rock come loose and drop,
splashing down into the flood.

Then, in the muddy, swirling water,
foam goes drifting, crowd on crowd.

The water spins in whirling rings,
as if it had gone half mad, and run.

At last, the mountains left behind,
the river comes into open land.

Here, wherever it turns its gaze,
everything it sees is new.

Here the open fields spread wide,

here the level roads run straight.
Somewhere farmers plow the earth,
somewhere cattle graze on grass.
Somewhere, on some great banyan tree,
birds are whistling as they dance.
Somewhere bands of shepherd boys
are playing games beneath the trees.
Somewhere, near a little village,
people move about their work.
Somewhere nothing bars its path,
and the river goes its own free way.
From every side the rains come down
and pour their streams along its road;
the river visibly grows and swells —
now who could ever hold it back?

Along its banks the grasses rise,
and there the herons make their home.
There herds of buffalo remain,
and wallow in the river's mud.
Wild boars, too, come wandering there,
and tear the earth up with their tusks.
There jackals lie in hiding, still,
and, come the night, they howl and cry.

It sees so many lands like this —
who could ever count them all?
Somewhere nothing but sandy dunes,
somewhere the earth is red as rust,
somewhere along the banks canes rise,
somewhere, on both sides, fields of wheat.
Somewhere only a little village,
somewhere a capital lifts its head —
there stands the mansion of some Nawab,
its pillars thick and carved of stone,
its terraced steps, in their hundreds, running
down to touch the water's edge.
Somewhere, on bridges of white stone,
the river is bound at either bank;
somewhere an iron bridge carries trains
that rattle by with a shrieking cry.

So, at last, the river comes
into a land of gentler soil.
Here — where our own home stands —
the river arrives before our door.
Here streams and channels, marsh and pool,
have laced the land in nets of water.
So many girls are bathing at the ghat,
so many boys are swimming there;

so many fishermen cast their nets,
so many boatmen hold the helm;
happy oarsmen sing their songs,
and many a ferry crosses over.

Somewhere old temples of Shiva
stand awake, along the shore.

There, twice each day, at dawn and dusk,
the bell and gong of worship sound.

Ash-smeared, matted-haired ascetics
sit so still upon the ghat
they seem like figures someone painted.

Somewhere a market has sprung up on the bank,
and boats crowd thick along the landing.

In the fields, the lentils, mustard, rice —
who could ever measure all of it?

Somewhere, in the thick sugarcane groves,
mynas wander, free and unconcerned.

Somewhere a vast bare sandbank stretches,
home to the terns that skim the river.

There the turtles bury their eggs
beneath the sand, and slip away.

There, in winter, the wild ducks
come to nest in flock on flock;
there the ruddy shelducks gather,

calling to each other all day long;
there the snipe, along the shoreline,
peck and peck into the mud.

Somewhere, by the edges of the paddy,
in thick banana groves and bamboo,
in dense mango and jackfruit orchards,
a village shows itself, tucked in a corner.
There the granaries stand full of rice,
there the straw is stacked in ricks.
There, in the cowshed, cattle stand tethered —
black and brown and white among them.
Somewhere an oil-presser's little hut,
where all day the mill creaks round and round.
Somewhere a potter's wheel is turning,
spinning on and on, all day.
At the grocer's shop, someone sits,
reading the old Ramayana aloud.
Somewhere, in a village school,
the boys all shout their lessons out,
while, with a long cane on his lap,
the old schoolmaster nods to sleep.
Here the village road winds on,
bending, breaking, far away.
There a heavy bullock-cart

creaks slowly on, its driver calling.
Thin and hungry village dogs
go sniffing through the dust for food.
And when the night of the full moon comes,
the moon fills the sky and smiles.
Beyond, the forest lies in darkness;
on the water, light flickers and gleams.
The sand glimmers on the shoal,
shadows crouch, afraid, in the thicket.
Everyone sleeps beneath their roofs,
not one boat stirs upon the water.
Not a single leaf on the trees is moving,
no wave rises, no wave falls.
Sometimes, if sleep should break and flee,
the cuckoo calls out, *ku-hu, ku-hu*;
sometimes, on the far-off sandbank,
a bird cries out, as if in dream.

The river winds on, right and left,
never resting anywhere.
There the forest grows dense and deep,
no man, no soul, upon its banks.
Only the crocodile, by the water,
suns himself in peace, on the sandy bank.
The tiger prowls among the thickets,

and falls upon its prey in a single leap.
Somewhere a leopard can be seen,
its body marked with round dark spots.
At night it comes, soft-footed, to the ghat,
and licks the water, quiet and slow.

Here, when the tide begins to run,
the river swells and churns and rises.
Then the water brims to the very banks,
and so much comes drifting in — flowers, fruit.
The waves break out in peals of laughter,
and the boats rock, unsteady, to and fro.
The river swells up like a python,
as if to swallow both its banks.
Then, little by little, the ebb tide comes,
and the water slips away, and away.
Then the river grows thin and frail,
and mud appears along both sides.
The steps of the ghat show through the water
like the very ribs within a breast.

The farther the river makes its way,
the more the water swells and fills.
At last no bank at all is seen,
the eye itself loses its bearings.

The water turns a deep, deep blue,
and tastes of salt upon the lips.
Gradually there is no floor beneath;
gradually sky and water merge;
somewhere the land is left behind —
there is nothing now but water, water.
Oh, what is this uproar that I hear?
Look, what a deep and endless blue!
That, surely, must be the sea, out there —
who knows where its far shore may lie?
There a hundred thousand waves rise up,
forever dying, beating their heads.
White foam breaks and rises, wave on wave,
as if in some tremendous rage.
The water roars, and roars again,
as though it meant to seize the sky.
The wind comes rushing in from somewhere
and flings itself, laughing, on the waves —
like a boy let loose from school,
who runs and leaps about in play.
Here, as far as I can see,
there is nothing — nothing at all.
Only sky, and air, and water,
only the endless roar and murmur,
only foam, and only waves —

and nothing else. No one else, at all.

Here, at last, all lands come to an end;
here the river's long journey is done.
Here, for all its days, for always,
its play will never come to a close.
Its endless dancing, its endless singing,
will never, ever, reach their end.
Now there is nowhere left to go —
the sea has taken it to its breast.
Laying it down on a bed of blue,
it will wash the last mud from its body;
wrapping it in a cloth of foam,
rocking it in the cradle of the waves,
singing low, soft songs into its ear,
it will carry all its weariness away.
And the river, now, forever,
day and night, without end,
will remain, dissolved,
in a tenderness that has no floor.

Translator's Notes

****The couplet refrain.**** The most distinctive feature of the original is invisible on the surface of a translation: each line pair opens with a short, detached lead-word — ওরে, জলে, ওরা, তাহা; সেথা, সেথা; কোথাও, কোথাও; শুধু, শুধু — set apart from the rest of the line, almost like a drumbeat cueing the next phrase. This is a device from Bengali oral and nursery verse, and it gives the poem its trotting, incantatory rhythm even before you get to the meaning. English word order won't tolerate a literal transplant of that structure, so I leaned instead on anaphora at the level of the line and stanza — repeating "There...", "Somewhere...", "Only..." — to recreate the same forward-marching pulse without forcing artificial syntax.

****মহামুনি (mahamuni)** — "the great sage."** Tagore describes the silent, treeless, soundless mountain peak as sitting like a *mahamuni* — a great ascetic lost in meditation. This is a precise and loaded image: the Himalaya as a figure of tapasya (spiritual austerity), utterly still, from whose contemplative silence the restless, singing river is born. I kept "sage" rather than softening it to something like "giant," because the poem's whole cosmology depends on this contrast between the mountain's silence and the river's speech.

****জটা (jata)** — "matted locks."** The moss hanging from the ancient trees is compared to *jata*, the matted, uncut hair of ascetics and of Shiva himself. It's a small detail, but it quietly turns the old forest into a congregation of hermits — continuing the "sage" imagery from the mountain. I rendered it as "like matted hair" to preserve that specific, culturally rooted picture rather than a generic "like moss" would.

****Onomatopoeia.**** Bengali is extraordinarily rich in reduplicated sound-words — chôlchôl chhôlchhôl (the trickle of water), jhuru jhuru jhiri jhiri (a faint rustling seep), dhôko dhôko (a train's clatter), kyã kô (a creaking oil-mill), khilikhili (a peal of giggling), thôrthôr (shivering), tôlômôl (wobbling/rocking) — and the poem is built out of them almost as much as out of its imagery. English has no equivalent word-class, so I translated for effect rather than form: "peals of laughter," "shudder and quiver," "rocks unsteady, to and fro," aiming to keep the sound-painting alive even though the specific words are gone.

****নবাব (Nawab), শিবালয় (Shiva temples), রামায়ণ (the Ramayana).**** These are left as proper nouns rather than paraphrased into generic "ruler," "temple," or "holy book," because the poem is deliberately cataloguing a real, specific Bengal — Hindu and Muslim landmarks side by side along the same river — and flattening those names would erase the social geography Tagore is drawing.

****চখাচখী (the ruddy shelduck / "chôkha-chôkhi").**** In classical and folk Indian poetry these birds are famous for calling to each other from opposite banks at dawn and dusk, traditionally read as separated lovers who can never quite reach one another. Tagore's line about them "quarrelling all day" plays on that old motif without stating it outright; I kept the image plain ("calling to each other all day long") but wanted to flag the allusion here, since an English reader would otherwise miss why this particular bird gets a couplet to itself.

****কাদাখোঁচা (kadakhocha) — the snipe.**** The Bengali name is a small joke of a word: *kada* (mud) + *khocha* (a jab or poke) — a bird literally named for what it does. I couldn't preserve the pun, but I kept the action ("peck and peck into the mud") so the behavior the name describes still comes through.

****Rhyme versus rhythm.**** The Bengali is end-rhymed throughout in tight couplets (তুলে/দুলে, নাচে/কাছে, and so on), which is part of why it reads so naturally as a children's poem despite its length and ambition. Forcing an equivalent rhyme scheme onto the English would have meant sacrificing image after image to find a matching sound — exactly the trap Tagore himself warned against when he loosened his own poems into free verse for *Gitanjali* and *The Crescent Moon*. I made the same choice: meaning, imagery, and cadence over rhyme, trusting the anaphora and line-length to carry the music instead.

****The closing image — "অতল আদরে মিশি" ("merged in fathomless tenderness").**** This is the poem's real destination, and it's classic late Tagore: the river's individual, restless, playful selfhood — born in solitude, gathering

companions, growing turbulent and vast — finally dissolves without struggle into the ocean's embrace, described almost as a lover or a mother receiving a tired child. It's the same gesture of return-to-the-infinite that runs through *Gitanjali* — individual consciousness, having lived and wandered fully, surrendering at last into something boundless and tender rather than being extinguished. I chose "a tenderness that has no floor" for অতল আদর specifically to keep both senses alive at once — *atol* as literally "bottomless/unfathomable" and *adar* as the physical, embracing tenderness of being held.