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A BUNCH OF POEMS

Rabindranath Tagore

TRANSCREATED BY MONIKA VARMA

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Rabindranath Tagore
A BUNCH OF POEMS
Transcreated by Monika Varma



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A Bunch of Poems

**RABINDRANATH
TAGORE**

**Transcreated
from Bengali
by Monika Varma**



A Writers Workshop Book

MONIKA VARMA

Born : Allahabad August 1916, daughter of Lalit Mohan Banerjee lawyer and judge of Allahabad High Court and grand-daughter of Sir Pramada Charan Banerjee, authority on law and judge of Allahabad High Court for 32 years. Her education was through tutors and teachers in her own home, non-academic in the strict sense. Married to Brigadier K. K. Varma; she has two sons, Jayant and Sanjay. She began her writing career in 1952 with stories for children and newspaper journalism. She has read her poems over the local and external services of All-India Radio. Her poems have appeared in *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (ed. by P. Lal), *Modern Indo-Anglian Poetry* (ed. by P. Lal and K. Raghavendra Rao), *Young Poets from India* (ed. by Howard McCord), *Temple Carvers* (ed. by Vishwa Nath). Her work is discussed by Amalendu Bose in *Critical Essays in Indian Writing in English* (ed. by M. K. Naik) and Subhas C. Saha's *Insights*. She has twice won poetry prizes and a short story prize in national competitions. Writers Workshop has nine books by her under its imprint. Her latest work is a study of the Krishna legend (published by Vikas). She lives in Delhi.

WORDS

I sought a symbol,
a husk of passionate breath
But words walked in.
Mountains and the sea, an
endless argument.
Which is the symbol, which
the seen . . .

(from *Past Imperative*)



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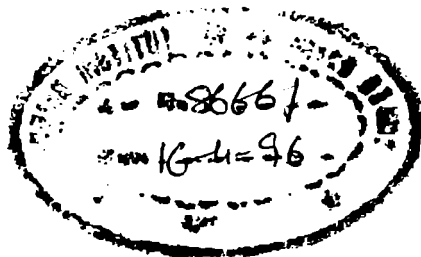
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RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Rabindranath was born in Calcutta on 7 May 1981, the youngest son of Maharshi Debendranath Tagore. Except for brief spells of formal education in schools (including St Xavier's School, Calcutta), he studied under tutors at home. In 1890 he published *Manasi*. *Sonar Tari (The Golden Boat)* appeared in 1893, *Chitra* in 1896, *Ksanika* in 1900. In 1901 he founded a school in Santiniketan, seeking to free education from commercial and artificial restraints. Between 1902-1907 his wife, a son and a daughter died. *Gitanjali*, the Nobel Prize winning work, was published in 1910. He received the knighthood in 1915, an honour he surrendered in 1919 as a protest against the Jalian-wala Bagh massacre of unarmed Indian protesters by British soldiers. Between 1916 and 1941, the year he died, he published 21 collections of poems. He visited and lectured in England and Europe, China, Japan, Malaya, Indonesia, Persia, Russia and America. His Collected Works (*Rabindra Rachanavali*) comprise 15 volumes, each containing over 1000 pages. No short account can give a correct picture of the multifarious ways in which he has influenced the modern Bengali and his culture; indeed, without Tagore, modern Bengal is inconceivable.



This logo was designed by Rabindranath from the calligraphy of the Bengali initials of his name. The sketch on the title-page is a self-portrait.

ABOUT THESE POEMS



This slim volume contains five long lyrics by Rabindranath Tagore, written in Santiniketan when he was seventy-five, within a one-month period, May-June 1936. They are all from his book entitled *Shyamali*: the order in which they appear here is:

- 1 *The Caress* (সম্ভাষণ : "Greeting") May 30, 1936
- 2 *This Arrogance, This I* (আমি : "I") May 29, 1936
- 3 *O Music-Maker* (বাঁশীওয়ালা : "The Flute-Player") June 16, 1936
- 4 *A Sense of Being* (প্রাণের রস : "Life's Essence") June 1, 1936
- 5 *The Meeting* (হঠাৎ দেখা : "Sudden Meeting") June 24, 1936

They are marked by emotional understatement, shrewd observation of domestic detail, sensitive nature-description, delicate irony, and the unique Tagorean quality of raising simple, even trivial, events and happenings into experiences of universal meaning and appeal.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE



The reason for my attempt to translate some by Rabindranath Tagore is that I have always poems been told the Western mind, raised in its own milieu, finds it very difficult to understand, and appreciate, Tagore's poems.

To interpret the idiom of Bengali thought I have tried to use the idiom understood by the English-speaking person. The imagery of Bengali thought has to be changed into the imagery native to the English language so as to remove the rather pedantic and tortuous sentences that emerge when one attempts to make too literal a translation.

My attempt has also been to keep to the spirit of the poem and the thought content, to transcreate the imagery into another language without in any way losing the quality of Tagore's imagery.

The idea has also been that when I have completed the translation, the poem, as such, must stand on its own merit as a poem, and not as just a translation.

I will also apologise to all Bengali-knowing persons in advance: if I have deviated from the exact words written by Tagore it has been because, as I said earlier, I have used the English idiom of thought and language to interpret the Bengali language and expression of thought. However universal Tagore might be, and is, once something is written in a particular language, especially an Indian language, the expression in that language is bound to be alien and removed from the idiom of thought and expression of a European language.

Translator's Note

It has been a task undertaken with great humility and love and I can but hope that I have, somewhere at least, been able to convey the delicate charm and lilt of words that have enchanted Bengalis for decades, even though I know that it is an impossible task to adequately translate Tagore's genius and mastery of words.

MONIKA VARMA

The Caress



Every day I call you by your known name,
Call you Charu ;
but suddenly it occurred to me that I would like to call
you in some other way,
In a form of caress, in more simple words,
by a name universal in manner, and meaning . . . My love.

I called you that quietly in the privacy of my thoughts,
and heard in answer your loud laughter.
It is understandable, for these are not days
for grace-filled, or deprecatory, soft laughter.
Of Ujjain and Avanti the days are dead, the classical age
is over.

You ask what is wrong with this work-a-day name.
I shall answer with a story-teller's tale . . .
It was an afternoon when I had returned early from work,
I lolled on the back porch, feet hooked to rails, the
evening paper at hand,
looked round to the room-at-the-side, and there you were.
Objects for the evening's adornment lay scattered,
a meandering stream of combs and pins.
As you sat intent before the mirror to dress your hair,
I watched : the arching of your neck,
the pins carefully arranged, each in its individual place ;
you seemed an artist
as you deftly coiled and built up the twisted ropes of hair.
I think it was a long, a very long time since I had
watched ;
or heard the whispered clink of bangles as they fell upon
each other
at the movement of your arms, your wrists, your hands,

And finally that scarlet cloth that you enwrapped about
yourself,
somewhere tucked, and somewhere loosened again,
draped lower in one place,
and in another pulled up . . .
All the gestures, the wholeness of it,
seemed to me somewhat in the manner of poets as they
change the shape of lines
and words, to suit the rhythm of their verse.
Today, for the first time, I realized how the housewife in
wages of beauty and love
pays back in graceful value the most ordinary small-
earnings
brought back by us, the pedestrian wage-earners.
This was not the work-a-day Charu.
In this very manner, in another age, did Avantika show
herself
decked in love's beauty to the eyes of love.
Whether wrought by a deathless century in metrical verse,
or whether it appears on a mountain peak,
or as a narrow path that falls as a cascading necklace
down a mountain path,
Beauty forever appears the same — the vision forever
remains the same.

From some secret place, on to and into the scene of
observation she moves . . .
I watch : she moves as if decked in passion's panoply
into the living-room,
and as she walks wrapped in love's sensuousness
it is as if a fitful wisp of tune belonging to another age
had somehow drifted in.

I walked out, down into the garden,
and there decided that I too will give pride of place to my
tenderness for you

and emblazon it on a scroll of honour,
so that when I call you to me
it will be a gesture of love.

The creeper is covered with white flowers . . .
I can never recall its foreign name, therefore I call them
 Star-fall instead . . .
their scent fills the night with meaningless chatter.
They have flowered out of season this year as if, impatient,
they could not wait for winter to end.
I have plucked a bunch of these . . .
they too will affix their signature to my scroll.

In this hour of quiet waiting, in this evening hour
obscured by the dust raised by the hooves of home-
 coming cattle,
you are the Charuprabha of the classic tales, and I your
 Ajit Kumar.

I have just a few words to say to you today,
words laid out only as a gesture of love, a small ornament
built up by my thoughts much in the same manner as your
 hair
with its coils and twists ; a sculptured whole, yet but a
 segment.
If you must, laugh . . . but I shall say, "Beloved, these
 bunches of little flowers,
lost in a foreign land, were looking longingly at the sky
seeking a spring-time night ;
in compassion I have brought them to you
that they may seek their rest in your ink-black hair."

This arrogance . . . this I . . .



From the depths of my sentence the emerald obtained its
green.

and the ruby rushed to red.

I turned my eyes upon the sky . . . and there was Light,
rising in the East ; and to the West.

I looked at the rose and said : You are beautiful . . .
and thus the rose its beauty gained.

You will say that this is metaphysics, or a metonym,
and not in the poetic vein ;

but it is the Truth, and therefore a poem I state.

I agree it is a vanity, and an arrogance,
but then, mankind is a compound of this ;

it is the base, the foundation on which are placed
the painter's brush strokes for the cosmic scene.

With every breath held or exhaled the mystic chants,
"The emerald is no emerald, no ruby, no light is light.
no rose is rose, no you is you alone,
or this 'I' anything that may be claimed as this, which is I".
But I will give you an argument from the other side . . .
He who was not bound by the limitations of conscious
thinking
came, by purchase of his own will, within our limited
orbit . . .

And it is this conscious reality that now we call this 'I'.
Shape appeared when, in the assertion of that ego,
there was a confluence, a melting together, of darkness
and light ;
and in the perpetuance of this cosmic sacrifice
was wrought that molten spirit of emotions which adds
savour to life.

And somewhere in the midst of this pageantry and chant
of grandeur,
negation became a yes : in the lineation of colour and form,
in the actuality of sorrow and joy.

Do not call this metaphysics.
My mind, as if by flesh enraged, creates this cosmic-I,
As I sit, a visionary artist, in the court of creative endeavour,
armed with a deliberate brush and bowls of paint.

The learned say : "Observe the ancient moon with its
heartless and cynical smile,
like a messenger of death it creeps closer to the ribs of the
world.

Some day it will heave a vast tug to the oceans and hills
and into this world of matter and form will come,
like a book with its pages uncut and closed, Amorphous
Void.

It will swallow debits and credits, hoarded by days and
dark nights ;
and Man's actions lose their claim to immortality,
on his puny history will be smeared the blackness of
eternal night."

But I say that Man, as he loses sight at the dissolution of
seeing,
will wrench the very colour from Day, and with his fading
mind
draw the throb of all emotions into his very being.
Though vibrant energy walk from sky to sky,
nowhere will there be Light.

It will seem as if, in a concourse of musicians there are no
instruments,
and they make but empty gestures, and so, no music,
no melody resounds.

Deprived of the poetic theme the Maker shall sit, desolate

and alone,
in a sky devoid of all colour, applying his knowledge of
mathematical progression
to a creation un-peopled by the individualities of Man.
In the farthest reaches of space, beyond eternity's sway, in
worlds upon worlds,
nowhere in this enormous scene, will these sounds
reverberate,
You are beautiful and I love.
Will our Maker then, once again, sit, age upon age, to chant
in prayer,
"Speak, speak, speak again, say . . . *You are beautiful.*
Repeat . . . *I love.*"

O music-maker



Do you remember what I had said in my first letter to you ?
"O music-maker, play. Let me in music hear my new-found
name."

I am the woman from Bengal whom the Creator, while
creating Man,
did not spend sufficient thought upon, for he gave me no
completeness
and left me only half-a-life to live.
There is no congenial meeting ground between my inner
self,
and this, what I have to be.
There is no place for all my wants (where shall they meet ?),
my desires and hopes, and the courage to face frustrations ;
there is no conjugation between my pain and my wisdom
so harshly gained.
No one put me on the ferry that carries one over into the
contemporary scene . . .
Chained on Time's sand-bar, islanded, and caught in a
tremendous glare,
I watch the blurred outlines of a far-away life, as it is lived,
from afar
This beggar-mind becomes unreasonable and restless,
I stretch out my hands to hold, but can reach nothing ;
the hours do not move, I sit watching the rising tide,
the raft of hope floats by, the hidden wealth of daily
commerce
drifts by, and then with a play of light and shade the end
of day moves on . . .
But now I can hear that music — the call —
and once again, wild, pulsing, the vital joy of living
becomes the arterial blood of this skeletal day.

What is it you play . . . what is this music ?

I do not know what ache it wakens in minds unknown to me
but your music carries as a folk song the lilt of the youthful
loves

of the southern winds.

Listening to you I become one with the slender rivulet
rippling over its rocky bed

when a sudden storm raises an agitation in its breast
and with the morning light we see the banks torn, washed
away,

and watch the obstinate stones cling, though hustled and
hurtled away

by whirlpools formed in the water by its intolerable strength.

My blood hears the call of your music,

the call of storm, and flood, and fire,

I hear the terrible call of oceans, and death.

The wind shouts its desolate, lonely cry, rattles the latch,
and raises a hulloo to fill with sound my incomplete but
teeming pool

with the sound of floods.

Will it reft me, wash me away ?

In every limb I feel the coiled pain, the drag of whirligigs
raised in the heart of storms, that carries the scold
of the forest's wind-lashed ache.

I have been given no wings of my own,
but your songs have coloured my dreams with a gladness,
the gay grief that flies as a madness in storm-built skies.

Quietly I work, get praised,

the others see that I raise no claims,

there is no sound of greed, and when the world strikes

I bow my head to the dust, and cling.

I lack the strength of arrogance to rout the sentinels of
"No."

I do not know what fierce love is, and all I know is to weep
and to beg the shelter of your feet.

O music-maker, your music sounds again, there is a call
from far away,
and in that far-away place my lowered head is raised again ;
there my little life is tender as the early sun
seen through torn shreds of morning mist ;
there my eager hopes get wings of fire, brook no denials,
and wing forward on unfamiliar paths with the brilliant
eagerness
of first hunger, of new-fledged flight . . .

O music-maker, maybe you want to meet me,
but I do not know the rendezvous . . . the time, the place.
How will you even know me ?
On a lonely night of July, filled with the shimmering shrill
of cricket-call
a shameless girl in shadow shape went, by secret ways,
on assignation, to meet you, her lover.
Have you not in un-numbered and unknown springtimes
adorned her with chaplets
of flowers : immortal rhythms of metres that do not die, or
wither, or fade ?

Hearing your song, the modest one, the bonded and dulcet
girl
left her dark corner, threw back her face-darkening veil,
and stood out alone, brave.
It seemed that this new tune raised so gay a lilt
that even you were startled . . .
Now she says she will not leave her new place
and will write you a letter while she sits in the shadowed
melody of all songs.

O music-maker, let her remain,
let her remain in the immeasurable distance of your
canticles, and your songs.

A Sense of Being



Let me listen, I wait too hear.
The hour is late, the day ending.
And at this time, at the ending of the day
The birds sing in spendthrift abandon
Throwing all their gathered wealth into the sweetness of
their song.

They are drawing me into the very heart of melody,
Into their mansions of modal tones.
The only record of their history lies in a scatter of sounds :
We that are, we live, we all aware are
Of this most magic moment, this astonishing Present.
And inwards it reaches to waken the compassion of my
heart.

At evening girls fill water-jars at village pool and lake ;
In the same manner the commotion in the craters of my
heart

Flings my mind to the skies, uses it as a jar,
Fills it with waters, or words, heaving from space.

Give me a little time,
I have outspread my mind, I wait,
In this ebb-tide hour when into the evening light,
Strewn upon the grass, has fallen the silent joy of trees,
The hidden depth of joy tossed among the leaves,
My heart blends itself into this breeze
And feels the caress of the universal breath
By this catalyst : the awareness of my soul
Give me time, leave me time to rest that I might see a vision.

You have come with your arguments and your disputation,
But today at day's end, at this sunset hour,

I find myself possessed of a little time ;
It contains neither right nor wrong,
Nor does it hold jealous malignment or fame.
There is in it nothing of hesitations or regrets,
Or the sorrows of being torn apart by loyalties and love —
There is only the forest's green and of water a brief gleam —
This fragment brings a slight tremor in the flow of living,
A brief clamour, the agitation of a wave.
This fragment that belongs to me,
This momentary pause between action and demanding
Flies a moth spreading its iridescent wings
To end at sunset its brief-lived day.
Do not ask your questions, they are profitless.

What will it serve to bring me your demands and your
detentions ?
From this Present my gaze is turned away —
I rest on a sand-bar that sinking rolls away.
The time is long past, gone, when the loving heart
Wracked by multiple sorrows wandered searching
Amidst leaves and branches plaited by play of light and
shade.
Between the pauses of my canticle
Comes the soliloquy spoken by the winds
As they move over the shimmering grasses,
Cross fields, and join the flowering sedge,
Silver under the noon-tide beams of a September day.

It is ended the great dilemma, the knots are severed.
The web of questions that entangles life in its coils is gone.
A pilgrim on the road that must be walked, the Traveller
has moved away.
He leaves no angers to chain him with hate :
No desire for those endless tomorrows,
And of me and mine he leaves no trace,
Only in the murmur of the leaves is left a memory —

They also lived — a greater truth than that they are no more
Is this : They also lived ; and today what is left —
That we possess, a sense of the throb of colour,
An imprint of the garments they shed,
A breath of movement, a stir of breeze,
Of the glancing look, the clinging eyes, a repeated tale,
That and the metrical beat of love remains.

Into the day's white river of faith
Falls, in westward movement,
Blue, the deep dark river of love.

The Meeting



We met unexpectedly in a railway compartment,
When I had not thought it possible ever to meet her again.
In those gone days I had always seen her dressed in red,
 blossom red,
the soft red of pomegranate blossoms,
but today a silk of mourning enveloped her
covering her head and framing the delicate magnolia of her
 face.

It gave an impression as if black by its very lack of colour
drew, into it, the depth that lies beyond the rye field's
 ripple,
and that which lies like a darkening of the eyes amidst the
 sa/ forest.

Halted by thought my mind stood still for a moment
as I looked at what was once so known, and intimate,
in this garb, unfamiliar, and grave.

All of a sudden she put down the newspaper she was
 reading
and made a gesture of greeting ; and when I saw that the
 door of social conventions
had opened, I asked the usual questions . . .
How are you, how does the world go with you,
and all the etceteras that are usually said.

With her face turned away she kept looking out of the
 window,
as if absorbed in the look which was now beyond the touch
of the past, and the present.
True, she answered once or twice, and made a few soft
 sounds ;

some questions she answered, others not,
 only her hands betrayed her by their restlessness . . .
 "What is the point of all this talk —
 would it not be far better to keep quiet?"

I was sitting with her companions on the opposite bench
 when she beckoned to me.
 She grows bold, I said to myself, but went across and sat
 next to her.

Under cover of the sound and noise of the train she said :
 "Don't think so ill of me, where have we the time to waste
 this little time that we have ? You have a far journey to
 make,
 but I shall be getting down soon, and we shall never
 meet again.
 Will you answer, truthfully, the question I would have an
 answer to,
 the question so long unasked?"

I said, "I will."
 Looking at the far horizon she pleaded,
 "Those days of ours, are they entirely gone,
 is nothing left?"

For a moment I hesitated, then I said,
 "All the stars of the night are present deep in the vast
 glare of day."

Involuntarily I stopped . . .
 Had I been truthful, was the answer contrived, was it
 sincere ?

Oh, let it be, she said, go, sit over there.
 At the next stop they all got down, everybody,
 I went on, alone.



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WRITERS WORKSHOP

WRITERS WORKSHOP was founded in 1958. It consists of a group of writers who agree in principle that English has proved its ability, as a language, to play a creative role in Indian literature, through original writing and transcreation. Its task is that of defining and substantiating the role by discussion and diffusion of creative writing and transcreation from India and other countries.

The WORKSHOP is non-profit and non-political; it consists of writers sympathetic to the ideals and principles embodied in creative writing: It is concerned with practice not theorising, helpful criticism not iconoclasm.

The WORKSHOP publishes a bi-monthly journal, "The Miscellany," devoted to creative writing. It is not a house journal; as a rule it gives preference to experimental work by young and unpublished writers, its two chief criteria for selection being high imaginative awareness and mature technique. Established writers appear in its pages if their work meets those standards. "The Miscellany" does not carry advertising.

One can become a member or an Associate by written application to the Secretary, which requires the support of two members and approval by majority on committee. Members are writers with published work to their credit. To be an Associate requires agreement with aims and objects of WRITERS WORKSHOP, active interest in creative writing, and a willingness to lend practical assistance to WORKSHOP activities. Subscription to "The Miscellany" automatically confers Associate membership. Further details are available from the Secretary, P. Lal, at the WORKSHOP address: 162/92 Lake Gardens, Calcutta 45.

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