

Flute-Music

Rabindranath Tagore

Translated by Sunetra Gupta

For note on the author, see page 57.



Milkman Alley.

A two-storeyed building
And an iron-barred room upon the ground floor
Right by the street.
The salt has etched away the sand from the walls,
And they are spread with damp green stains.
A label from a bolt of cheap cloth
Is stuck upon the door,
Showing the beneficent elephant-headed god.
There's one other inhabitant of this room:
That is a gecko.
The rent covers both of us.
There's only this difference:
He doesn't lack food.

Twenty-five rupees a month
As the pettiest clerk in a merchant office.
I get to eat at the Dattas' house
By tutoring their son.
I spend the evenings at Sealdah Station:
It saves me spending electricity
To light my room.

From Rabindranath Tagore, *Selected Poems*, edited by Sukanta Chaudhuri,
Oxford University Press, 2004.

The sound of the engines,
 The trains' whistle,
 The bustle of the passengers,
 The raised voices of the porters—
 It rolls around to half past ten;
 After that, back to the undisturbed darkness of my room.
 My aunt's village by the Dhaleshwari river.
 Her brother-in-law's daughter
 Was firmly betrothed to this unfortunate.
 The holiness of the appointed hour was indisputable
 In that hour I made my escape.
 At least the girl was saved,
 And so was I.
 She did not enter my room, but passes endlessly through my mind
 Dressed in a Dhaka sari, vermilion in her hair.

The rains are thick upon us.
 I spend more on tram fares,
 And sometimes they dock my salary for being late.
 In the corners of the alley
 There gather and rot
 Mango skins and pits, jackfruit cores,
 Fish gills,
 Dead kittens
 And all sorts of other rubbish.
 My umbrella is like my salary
 After many fines—
 Full of holes;
 And the clothes I wear to work,
 Like Gopikanta Gosain's heart,
 Always nicely watered.
 The dark shadows of the rains
 Enter this mildewed room
 Like a trapped animal
 In a dead faint.
 I feel always as if I am strapped

To the world of the half dead.

Around the corner lives Kanta Babu

With his neatly-parted long hair,

Large eyes

And refined temperament.

He likes to play the cornet.

And so sometimes there is music

Upon the ghostly breezes of this alley:

Sometimes deep at night

Or in the half-light of dawn,

Sometimes in the afternoon,

In the flickering dazzle of the play of light with shadow.

Or suddenly in the evening

Come the strains of the raga Sindhu-Barawan,

The whole sky resonates

With the immemorial anguish of separation.

In that moment

This alley is revealed as a gross falsehood,

The intolerable ravings of a drunken man.

Suddenly I feel

That nothing separates the Emperor Akbar

From the clerk Haripada.

The wistful strains of the flute

Thread my ragged umbrella into the emperor's canopy

On their journey to the same paradise.

Where this song is truth,

There

In the endless twilight wedding-hour

Flows the Dhaleshwari,

Its banks thick-shaded by tamal trees.

In the courtyard

She who waits is

Dressed in a Dhaka sari;

There is vermilion in the parting of her hair.