

*Baishey Shraavan Special*

The 54th anniversary of death of Rabindranath Tagore, *Baishey Shraavan*, coincides August 6. On this occasion of paying homage to the great poet and person, The Daily Star takes a modest opportunity of presenting the following pieces which seek to recall and evaluate parts of his deeds and thoughts.

## Best Guarantee against Rot

by Waheedul Huque

*Universalism and regionalism cohabited in the urbane and at the same pastoral Tagore as if these were one and the same thing. Apparently an Orientalist he was the one enriching himself the most by all that was best of the Occident.*

CULTURE and civilisation connote things that many confuse to be similar. And to underline the fact that they indeed represent two separate compartments of portmanteau *humaniana*, many writers have taken pains to delineate their areas. In Rabindranath, this subcontinent, in fact the first half of twentieth century world as a whole, had not only a versatile genius of vast literary output but also a painter of pathbreaking quality and a great composer of songs that modernised subcontinental music and stands one day to revolutionise it. And then he was a man of action — always on the march to practise what he preached — socially, politically and, most of all, in matters educational. It is a privilege to be born a Bengali if only because Tagore was a Bengali, only because we can read him in the original. And it is a misfortune for the rest of the mankind not to know, as a Bengali so surely does, that in Tagore the two worlds of culture and civilisation met without leaving a joining mark. He isn't as much read now as Saratchandra is on the subcontinental level. But his is the culture that has spread all over this vast territory, joining that whole fractured entity in one, cultural sweep.

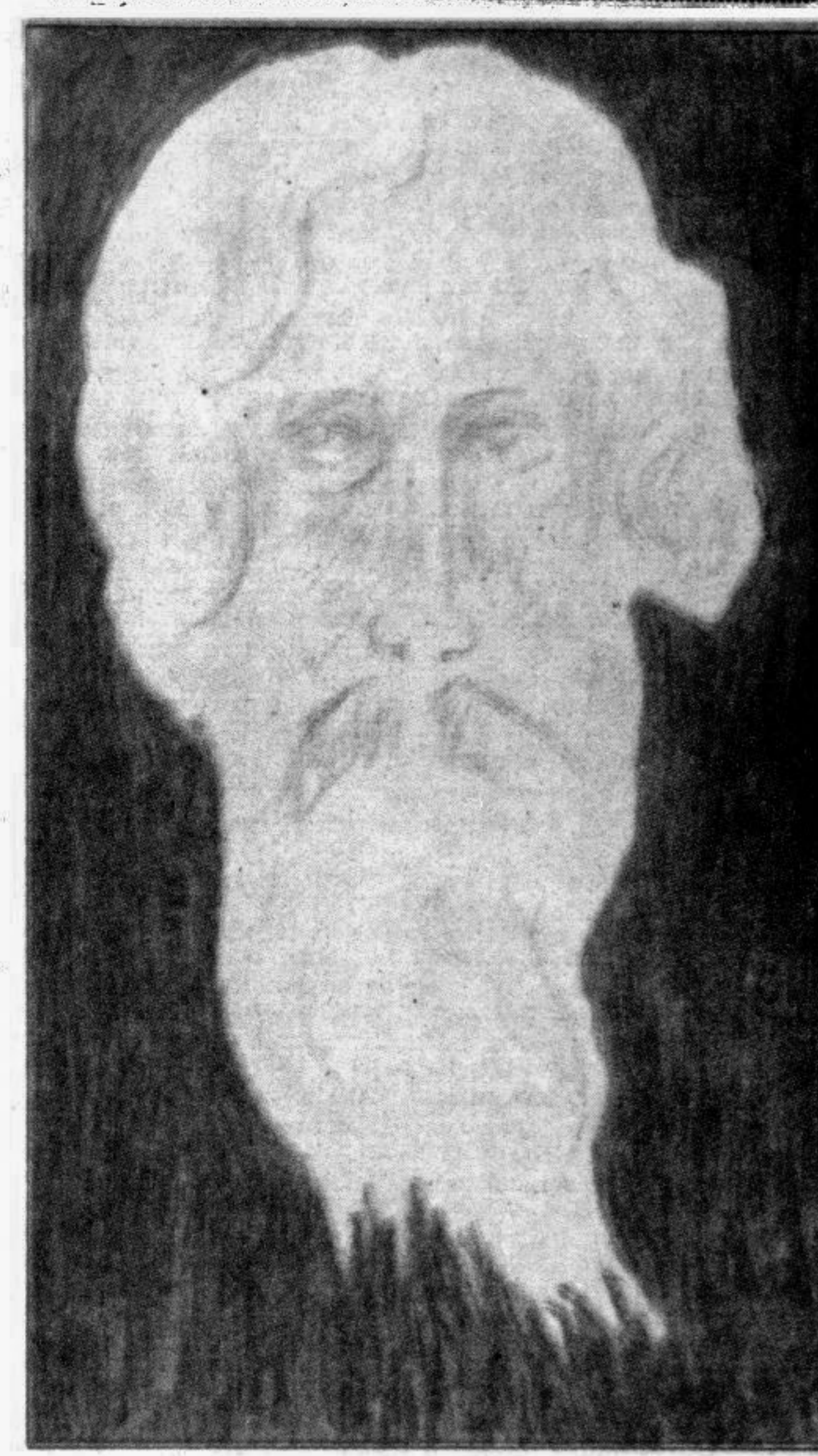
As with culture and civilisation, other sets of opposed aesthetic-philosophic entities met perfectly in Tagore. Universalism and regionalism cohabited in the urbane and at the same pastoral Tagore as if these were one and the same thing. Apparently an Orientalist he was the one enriching himself the most by all that was best of the Occident. The *Upanishads* are generally taken as moulding his philosophies of life and the world and man's place in it. And his main philosophical thrust was antithetical to the Upanishadic summation of the world being all illusion and appearance and no truth and substance. Outside of Tagore, these are hardly reconcilable positions. In Tagore their distinction disappears.

Tagore was a major influence on the international cultural scene as long as he lived. Why was he so soon lost to world culture and cultivation of literature and the arts? Didn't some of the reasons arise from elements he had discussed in his prophetic 'crisis of civilisation? Who of the pre-second world war literary eminences — Shaw and Galsworthy, Chesterton and Beerbohm and even Yeats and Stevenson — continues to influence world literature? Tagore of the translated *Gitanjali* is surely a junk quite out of tempo with the times of satellite TV and Michael Jackson and Madonna. But no literate Bengali commits the folly of treating Tagore and *Gitanjali* as synonymous. Without ever reading much of Tagore the average Bengali middle class man and woman go about their business of life using linguistic norms shaped largely by Tagore and abiding by manners originating most in the way bore and conducted himself.

Rabindranath Tagore, so very living and pertinent in the subcontinental, particularly Bangladesh, reality is, as a matter of fact, very irrelevant to all the three worlds now encompassing humanity — the Siric-Mongolid Asian, the African and the white Euro-American. The measure of this irrelevance corresponds very interestingly with that of the relevance Bangladesh, the Bengali people and their culture have to those worlds. It is not Tagore's worth as a writer and creative genius that is at the root of his present eclipse. The place his people and his language enjoy in the scheme of contemporary power equations of the world do determine the chances of his continued acceptance as a great product of world culture and civilisation. The poorest among nations, always making a fool of herself since 1975, Bangladesh stands at the rockbottom of international esteem. It is no wonder this sixth, or perhaps fifth, largest spoken language in the world, Bengali, is not taught in even a dozen of universities outside the subcontinent. Many Universities in Europe and America that have long been offering courses in Bengali, have ceased to do so or are in the process of doing so.

Bengalies are a people given to excess of both enthusiasm and frustrating self-pity. But when Bengalies know in their hearts that in the genre of short story Bengali literature can stand comparison to the very best in world literature, they are not far wrong. But who in Japan and China or the two Americas or the continents of Europe and Africa know about this or even care about this? The phenomenon that accounts for this also explains very largely the loss of Tagore to the world abroad.

and ostentation. This will be a far greater force to wean the Bangladesh Bengalies away from Tagore. Tagore's was the single most effective inspiration behind the emergence of Bangladesh. And Tagore is one whose beacon light would lead the Bengali to his destiny. He is our last great voice, still heard among the agonising cacophony of people denouncing in a strange fit of lost self-respect the curse of being born a Bengali. Can another ever sing more clearly and with more conviction: *Sharthok Janam amar jonmechhi ei deshe, sharthok Janam mago tomar bhalobeshe*. Ullash Kar-Dutta, the terrorist-revolutionary, on being sentenced to death broke into a throaty rendition of this song before the pronouncing judge. And now is come a time his song, *Amar Sonar Bangla*, when sung as the national anthem of the homeland of the Bengali nation is taken as a great joke and Tagore for a fool. What Bangladesh needed most at this hour of trial is telling in all truth, *ami tomar bhalobashi*.



Self-portrait

## Failing Rabindranath We have Failed Ourselves

by Nilratan Halder

lock to the unlikely candidate, a poet in the making, for a salvage operation. Rabindranath had to begin from the scratch. First he sold everything that was saleable — mostly the legacies of a zamindari past of comfort and affluence, then he collected money from his writing — a large portion in advance — to pay off all the debts. What remained was nothing more than pennies; and the financial manager in a poet started his tentative journey into the world way. He did not fail. Rather the poet turned-zamindar helped his estate to turn around. And what is amazing in the happy co-existence of the poetic passion with this new-found economic acumen.

Instead of making the poet a hardened bully and heartless oppressor, his stint with zamindari in East Bengal — Shelaidah and Shazadpur — brought him closer to the people, the peasant class to be precise, and the heart of the country. Evidently, he enjoyed the broad panorama of green fields and the vast expanse of Padma and Gora.

He has known nature from a close quarter ever since his childhood. But now he came into contact with a particular kind of nature where the sunlit realism was married to the near surrealism of the sandy islets awash with the bountiful silvery moonlight. *Babu mahashai* as he was known to his people, the farmers, was not only understanding, compassionate and responsive but also deeply involved in their welfare. A combination of rare qualities alone could bring the poet so close to his people. We know no other literary genius who has ever attempted, through his own initiatives, such practical measures as the formation of co-operatives and innovation of improved version of plough.

All this he could do because of his love for the people. In his address to the public gathering on the occasion of his 70th birthday celebration, he clarifies this point in no uncertain terms. What he seeks is 'preeti'. I don't know if translated in English, the word *preeti* exactly means love. Love in English means so many things but not perhaps what is meant by this sober Bengali word. The poise and enduring calm beauty of this word is what I find fascinating. The poet has asked only for this from his friends and all who are favourably disposed towards him. He makes it clear that poetic fame may have to see good and bad days but that is not what he is craving — or even cares for.

We only pretend to have an appreciation for the poet once we have listened to his songs but never go deep into his life's riches.

So the poet had his feet planted on the earth all the time. It is because of this contact with the world in its diverse manifestations — where according to the poet, Jam's sister Jamuna and the Ganges coming out of Shiva's unkempt hair find a meeting point in the world's eternal flow — that the poet has rejoiced. No wonder, the poet has rejected material contribution to the nurturing of his young mind. What he considers highly valuable is the literary environment at home.

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## Going by the Golden Boat

by Ziaul Karim

He was never an artist in isolation nor did he hold the greatly expressive and undiluted high hopes of the Romantics. Unlike other great creative geniuses of the century, he carried his kind of romanticism into the modern world: a romanticism that bled on the thorn of personal tragedies, a romanticism that took unbearable pity for the crisis of civilisation and for the sufferings of mankind, a romanticism that never sought the Wordsworthian pantheistic God in nature and life. For him nature and life were a *rahasya* or mystery. He, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), truly was a Renaissance man in a non-Renaissance age, and perhaps God's last Renaissance man who never lost his faith in man, even when the curse of the Second World War befell man, he, in his last public speech, had pronounced, "It is a sin to lose faith in man". On the 54th death anniversary of this great believer of man, I take the opportunity to present the following piece which seeks to read and reread the most elusive poem of the whole Tagorean oeuvre — The Golden Boat or *Sonar Tari*.

To gain a point of entry into the poem we would like to put Tagore's versatility on trial. He has, throughout his life, served almost all the Muses and towards the end the Muse of painting. A warehouse is needed. Auden once said of Jean Cocteau, "to store his complete works, not bookshelves". The same is true about Tagore. It is said of him that like Goethe he is not one man rather a combine of many. This one in many or many in one is one central thought of Upanishadic philosophy. And there is no argument on Tagore's borrowings from and influence of Upanishad. Or one can go even further by putting that his life-blood was always Upanishad. Here in-

voking Bhartrpraneya, one of the eminent exponents of the Upanishadic doctrine, would certainly help us to shade light into the mystery of his prodigious sum of creation. According to Bhartrpraneya, Brahman is one, but its unity is such as it includes variety. Its conception is thus of a one-many. The variety is due to the infinite number of selves that it comprehends as well as the numerous distinctions of the physical universe. But that variety is only implicit in it, and becomes explicit in the process of creation or *sristi*. The whole concept of Brahman and its coming into expressing itself in *sristi* is significant in our understanding of the many-sided genius of Tagore. Here, one would

definitely recall the much-celebrated song that opens thus: "We are all things in the kingdom of our majesty". This song would point to the notion of Tagore being the Brahman or the creator. Many a time Tagore talked about *jiban-debata*. A *debata* he searched within himself and through him to the greater *debata*. That is why, Tagore thought of an equality; an equality, for him, can only embrace something of the same grade. This will explain why Tagore took particular interest in Lalou the baul. Because the *bauls* or the mystics also travel psychologically. Their universe is within themselves. A journey of a mystic is essentially a journey within himself and through it to a greater self — the Creator. No doubt, it is the deep Upanishadic influence on the whole that acted behind the incredible variety and richness of his creation.

Roland Barthes distinguishes between two sorts of writer and also two sorts of writing. He suggests that the author performs a function and the writer an activity; that there are the 'transitive' writer or *ecrivain* and the 'intransitive' writer or *ecrivain*. The former writes about things and the language he uses is the means to an extra-linguistic end, to a meaning or reality which is, in a sense, 'beyond' the writing; the latter does not intend to take the reader beyond his writing but to call the attention of the reader to the activity of writing itself. The *ecrivain* has 'nothing but writing itself', not as the 'pure' form conceived by an aesthetic of art for art's sake but, much more radically, as the only area for the 'one who writes'. Thus following Barthesian taxonomy we can put Flaubert, Zola and Ernest Hemingway in the 'transitive' category, and Proust, Joyce and Samuel Beckett in the 'intransitive'. Now in any

## Tagore the Painter



Illustration of a scene of 'Tapati' (a Tagore play)

When Tagore took to painting in right earnest quite late in his life (at the age of sixty-one, in fact) and did not rest before drawing some 3000 pictures, in a compulsive and restless stretch of deviant artistic outburst, people thought that painting, for Rabindranath Tagore, was something very sudden, almost like a volcanic eruption that caught everyone unawares, including the painter himself.

This is definitely not the case. The Tagores were, apart from everything else, also a family of painters. Tagore himself had a long history of making sketches and doodles, and the way he created designs out of corrections made upon the body of his poems is a sight to see. There certainly is a hidden history of his apprenticeship in drawings and paintings which was pushed in the background by his brilliance in verbal art.

## About My Paintings

An apology is due from me for my intrusion into the world of pictures and thus offering a perfect instance to the saying that those who do not know that they know not are apt to be rash where angels are timidly careful. I, as an artist, cannot claim any merit for my courage; for it is the unconscious courage of one who walks in dream on perilous path, who is saved only because he is blind to the risk.

The only training which I had from my young days was the training in rhythm, the rhythm in thought, the rhythm in sound. I had come to know that rhythm gives reality to that which is desultory, which is insignificant in itself. And, therefore, when the scratches in my manuscript cried, like sinners, for salvation, and assailed my eyes with the ugliness of their irrelevance, I often took more time in rescuing them into a merciful finality of rhythm than in carrying on what was my obvious task.

In the process of this salvage work I came to discover one fact, that in the universe of forms there is a perpetual activity of natural selection in lines, and only the fittest survives which has in itself the fitness of cadence, and I felt that to solve the unemployment problem of the homeless heterogeneous into interrelated balance of fulfillment, is creation itself. My pictures are my versification in lines. If by chance they are entitled to claim recognition it must be primarily for some rhythmic significance of form which is ultimate, and not for any interpretation of an idea, or representation of a fact.



Rabindranath Tagore  
 May 28th, 1930

In an essay of 1960 called *Ecrivains et ecrivains*,  
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## The Golden Boat

by Rabindranath Tagore

Clouds rumbling in the sky; teeming rain.  
 I sit on the river-bank, sad and alone.  
 The sheaves lie gathered, harvest has ended.  
 The river is swollen and fierce in its flow.  
 As we cut the paddy it started to rain.

One small paddy-field, no one but me —  
 Flood waters twisting and swirling everywhere.  
 Trees on the far bank smear shadows like ink  
 On a village painted on deep morning grey.  
 On this side a paddy-field, no one but me.

Who is this, steering close to the shore,  
 Singing? If feel that he is someone I know.  
 The sails are filled wide, he gazes ahead.  
 Waves break helplessly against the boat each side.  
 I watch and feel I have seen his face before.

Oh to what foreign land do you sail?  
 Come to the bank and moor your boat for a while.  
 Go where you want to, give where you care to.  
 But come to the bank a moment, show your smile —  
 Take away my golden paddy when you sail.

Take it, take as much as you can load.  
 Is there more? No, none, I have put it aboard.  
 My intense labour here by the river —  
 I have parted with it all, layer upon layer:  
 Now take me as well, be kind, take me aboard.

No room, no room, the boat is too small.  
 Loaded with my gold paddy, the boat is full.  
 Across the rain-sky clouds heave to and fro.  
 On the bare river-bank, I remain alone —  
 What I had has gone: the golden boat took all.

Translated by William Radice