

FICTION

The Postmaster

RABINDRANATH TAGORE
Translated by William Radice

FOR his first job, the postmaster came to the village of Ulapur. It was a very humble village. There was an indigo-factory near by, and the British manager had with much effort established a new post office.

The postmaster was a Calcutta boy - he was a fish out of water in a village like this. His office was in a dark thatched hut; there was a pond next to it, scummed over with weeds, and jungle all around. The indigo agents and employees had hardly any spare time, and were not suitable company for an educated man. Or rather, his Calcutta background made him a bad mixer - in an unfamiliar place he was either arrogant or ill-at-ease. So there was not much contact between him and the residents in the area.

But he had very little work to do. Sometimes he tried to write poems. The bliss of spending one's life watching the leaves trembling in the trees or the clouds in the sky - that was what the poems expressed. God knew, however, that if a genie out of an Arab tale had come and cut down all the leafy trees overnight, made a road, and blocked out the sky with rows of tall buildings, this half-dead, well-bred young man would have come alive again.

The postmaster's salary was meagre. He had to cook for himself, and an orphaned village-girl did housework for him in return for a little food. Her name was Ratan, and she was about twelve or thirteen. It seemed unlikely that she would get married. In the evenings, when smoke curled up from the village cowsheds, crickets sounded in the bushes, and a band of intoxicated Baul singers in the next village sang raucously to the clapping of their hands, the postmaster would sit on his dark veranda and let his poetic feelings be stirred by the stirring of the leaves. Then he would go inside, light a dim lamp in a corner of the room and call for Ratan. Ratan would be waiting at the door for this, but she did not come at the first call - she would call back, 'What is it, Dadababu, what do you want?'

"What are you doing?" the postmaster would say.

"I must go and light the stove in the kitchen. You can do your kitchen work later. Get my hookah ready for me."

BOOK REVIEW

Honouring Poets are in plenty in February and March

GHUSHWANT SINGH

PEOPLE who do not understand Bengali have much to thank William Radice for bringing out the greatness in Rabindranath Tagore's poetry. Many scholars, including Tagore himself, translated his poems, songs, plays and essays into English but they left non-Bengalis with an uneasy feeling that

Bengalis, congenitally prone to exaggeration, also overestimated Tagore as a writer. And on account of the fact that most Bengalis are very thin-skinned few people dared to question their reverence for their Gurudev. I was rash enough to do so by airing my opinion that other Indians, including Bengalis, had written better novels, plays and short stories and barely managed to save myself from being lynched in the lounge of Calcutta's airport hotel. That did not prevent the Bengal Vidhan Sabha and the Rajya Sabha from passing unanimous resolutions condemning me.

I partly redeemed myself when I published a lengthy review of Radice's earlier translations admitting that Tagore was indeed a great writer of songs.

Tagore was deeply rooted in Indian tradition, deeper than any of his contemporaries or any Indian poet after him. O.E. Lessing rightly remarked "Tagore is perhaps the last great poet of ancient India". This is amply borne out by Radice's compilation. They are indeed as claimed by him, "pointed, witty, lucid and profound". Here are a few examples:

Plain speaking

The forest blooms with the coming of spring:
All that the koel-bird does is sing.

"I suppose," says the crow, "you've nothing to do
But flatter the spring with your hulla-balloo".

Pausing for a moment, the koel looks round:
"Who are you? Where do you come from, friend?"

"I'm the plain-speaking crow," the crow replies.

"Delighted," says the koel, and politely bows.

"Be free to speak plainly all the year long.

"I'm happy with the truth of my own sweet song".

The need for height

The flat field said in anger and pain:
"I fill the market with fruit and grain.

The mountain sits doing who knows what,
Like a great king perched on a throne of rock.

Why is God's management so unfair?
To me His reasons are not at all clear".

"If all," said the mountain, "were flat and even,
How could rivers bring manna from heaven?"

Professional difference

Nose says, "Ears, your life must be poor.
No sense of smell, just earnings to wear".

Ears say, "Nose, how sad not to hear,
And all you can do in bed is snore."

The same path
Let's shut the door to block out sin;

"Then how," says Truth, "shall I get in?"

Immutability

However you turn and turn about,
Your left hand is left and your right hand is right.

Soon Ratan came in, puffing out her cheeks as she blew on the bowl of the hookah. Taking it from her, the postmaster would say abruptly, 'So, Ratan, what do you remember about your mother?' She would talk for a long time: some things she remembered, others she did not. Her father loved her more - than her mother did, but she did not remember much about him. He used to come home in the evening after working hard all day, and one or two evenings were clearly etched in her memory. As she talked, Ratan edged nearer to the postmaster, and would end up sitting on the ground at his feet. She remembered her little brother: one distant day, during the rainy season, they had stood on the edge of a flooded pit and played at catching fish with sticks broken off trees - this memory was far more vividly fixed in her mind than many more important things. Sometimes these conversations went on late into the night, and the postmaster then felt too sleepy to cook. There would be some vegetable curry left over from midday, and Ratan would quickly light the stove and heat some chapati: they made their supper out of that.

Occasionally, sitting on a low wooden office-stool in a corner of his large hut, the postmaster would speak of his family - his younger brother, mother and elder sister - all those for whom his heart ached, alone and exiled as he was. He told this illiterate young girl things which were often in his mind but which he would never have dreamt of divulging to the indigo employees and it seemed quite natural to do so. Eventually Ratan referred to the postmaster's family - his mother, sister and brother - as if they were old friends. She even formed affectionate imaginary pictures of them in her mind.

It was a fine afternoon in the rainy season. The breeze was softly humid; there was a smell of sunshine on wet grass and leaves. Earth's breath - hot with fatigue - seemed to brush against the skin. A persistent bird cried out monotonously somewhere, making repeated and pathetic appeals at Nature's midday durbar. The postmaster had hardly any work: truly the only things to look at were the smooth, shiny, rain-washed leaves quivering, the layers of sun-whitened, broken-up clouds left over from the rain. He watched, and felt how it would be to have a close companion here, a human object for the heart's most intimate affections. Gradually it seemed that

ESSAY

ANDALIB RASHIDE

I cannot conceive of living without writing poetry' writes Noble Laureate Vicente Alexandre, 'Breathing and writing poetry are activities of equal importance to me'. Poetry is interwoven with breathings of the day. Everyday has its poems and poems. January had a bad beginning with Robert Burns' business shop burnt into ashes, but the poet in Robert well survived the inferno and transcended another two hundred years and even escaped two great wars, postwar grotesque situation and the bizarre howl of poets in the 1960s. February begins with the birth of poet John Suckling who was destined to end up tragically. Sylvia Plath chose February to expose her own art of dying. Albert Camus considered self-inflicted death to be the foremost challenge of his time. Once again this brief write up draws heavily from an anthology called 'Poem for the Day' edited by Nicholas Albery in recording poetic incidences of interest. Nicholas' collection is not a fabulous feast of poems but a wonderful package of information on poets both serious and silly. The sale proceeds of this anthology, poets and publishers in Bangladesh may like to note, are shared by families who look after dying people and struggle hard to find a free funeral undertaker. Poets may blissfully forget the note as we probably have only one poet, Shamsur Rahman who might have made a little money out of his poetic ventures, but publishers can give a thought to the idea of caring for the ailing poets and poets in deathbed.

Seventeenth century poet Sir John Suckling, born on 1 February 1609 inherited huge fortune at the age of 17 from his father and spent lavishly to satisfy his whims. He left Trinity College, Cambridge and began trotting the continent. He indulged himself in writing love poems and drinking alcohol. He invented a game called Cribbage and raised a troop of one hundred mounted soldiers dressed in luxurious scarlet coats to fight for Charles I in his Scottish expedition. The poet got involved in a failed conspiracy to rescue the Earl of Strafford confined in the Tower of London and risked his life. He fled to France and probably

the bird was saying precisely this, again and again; that in the afternoon shade and solitude the same meaning was in the rustle of the leaves. Few would believe or imagine that a poorly paid sub-postmaster in a small village could have such feelings in the deep, idle stillness of the afternoon.

Sighing heavily, the postmaster called for Ratan. Ratan was at that moment stretched out under a guava tree, eating unripe guavas. At the sound of her master's call she got up at once and ran to him.

"Yes, Dadababu, you called?" she said, breathlessly.

"I'm going to teach you to read a little," said the postmaster. He taught her daily at midday from then on, starting with the vowels but quickly progressing to the consonants and conjuncts.

During the month of Sraban, the rain was continuous. Ditches, pits and channels filled to overflowing with water. The croaking of frogs and the patter of rain went on day and night. It was virtually impossible to get about by road - one had to go to market by boat. One day it rained torrentially from dawn. The postmaster's pupil waited for a long time at the door, but when the usual call failed to come, she quietly entered the room, with her bundle of books. She saw the postmaster lying on his bed: thinking that he was resting, she began to tip-toe out again. Suddenly she heard him call 'her. She turned round and quickly went up to him saying, 'Weren't you asleep, Dadababu?'

"I don't feel well," said the postmaster painfully. "Have a look - feel my forehead."

He felt in need of comfort, ill and miserable as he was, in this isolated place, the rain pouring down. He remembered the touch on his forehead of soft hands, conch-shell bangles. He wished his mother or sister were sitting here next to him, soothing his illness and loneliness with feminine tenderness. And his longings did not stay unfulfilled. The young girl Ratan was not a young girl now. From that moment on she took on the role of a mother, calling the doctor, giving him pills at the right time, staying awake at his bedside all night long, cooking him convalescent meals, and saying a hundred times, 'Are you feeling a bit better, Dadababu?'

Many days later, the postmaster got up from his bed, thin and weak. He had decided that his enough was enough: somehow he would have to

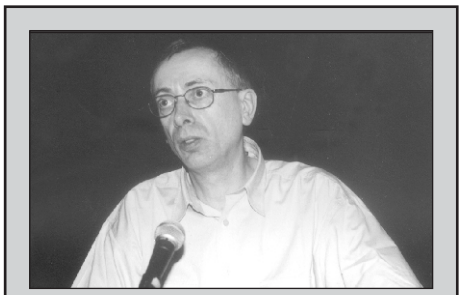
committed suicide at the age of 33 stabbing with a knife. There is another school of suspicion that considers that his servant stabbed John to death. He exhausted his fortune faster than he exhausted his poetic imagination.

Mary Shelly, wife of poet P B Shelly and the famous writer of Frankenstein died on this day in 1851. Langston Hughes, the most famous black American poet of the 20th century was born in 1902.

James Joyce, the great novelist of Ulysses and not so famous a poet for his volume of verse called 'Poems Penyeach' was born on the second day of February 1882. John Crabbe achieved some poetic fame mostly for being the most favorite poet of Jane Austen died on 3 February 1832. John was head over heels in debt and was rescued from dire poverty by Dr Sir Edmund Burke.

Sixth February 1564 records the birth of Christopher Marlowe. One of the greatest playwrights of all time Marlowe could instantly pick up a fight without giving a thought to his security and safety. In one of the street fights he was accused of killing a person. Creativity added to his innovative criminal thoughts. He attempted forging gold coins in the Netherlands and was deported. His efforts in undermining churches and spreading atheistic ideals almost got him chained in prison. He jumped into a tavern brawl on a question of paying the bill with one Ingram Frizer and attacked him. In return he received a serious stabbing and died on the spot without allowing his drunken friends any time to carry him to a hospital.

On 9 February 1874 Amy Lowell, a poet always pictured with large cigars popped out of his mummy's tummy with a resounding cry and no cigar clumped between fingers. On February 10 1837 the great Russian poet Alexander Pushkin died of wounds that he received in a duel to defend his wife's honour. Russian Lyric poet and novelist, famous for Doctor Zhivago, Boris Pasternak, brave enough to incur displeasure of the communist government and a little coward as well in not attempting to move to Stockholm to receive the Noble Prize was born on this day in



William Radice is currently Senior Lecturer in Bengali at London's School of Oriental and African Studies. He is also a poet and writes a fortnightly Letter from England for The Statesman. His latest work is hitherto untranslated writings of Gurudev: Particles, Jottings, Sparks: The Collected Brief Poems of Rabindranath Tagore (Harper Collins). The strange title, in fact, stands for three genres of poetry to which Tagore himself gave names Kanika (particles, or kabitika), Lekhan (jottings) and Shpulinga (sparks, published posthumously in 1945). They are reminiscent of the kind of messages sent out by Panchtantra tales and Aesop's fables but are in verse. Tagore was almost forced to compose them during his tours abroad, particularly to China and Japan. His admirers and autograph-hunters would insist he write a few lines on whatever was handy: slips of paper, paper fans, napkins etc. He obliged. Many of them were lost for ever; some were copied out by family members and friends accompanying him. Dr. Radice gave Third Jyotirmoy Guhathakura Memorial Lecture on March 27 in the city on 'Poetry and Community.' Read an exclusive interview of this Tagore scholar with The Daily Star next Saturday.

move from this place. He wrote at once to his head office in Calcutta, applying for a transfer on grounds of ill-health.

Released from nursing the postmaster, Ratan once again took up her normal place outside his door. But his call did not come for her as before. Sometimes she would peep in and see the postmaster sitting distractedly on his stool or lying on his bed. While she sat expecting his summons, he was anxiously awaiting a reply to his application. She sat outside the door going over her old lessons numerous times. She was terrified that if he suddenly summoned her again one day, the

conjunct consonants would all be muddled up in her mind. Eventually, after several weeks, his call came again one evening. With eager heart, Ratan rushed into the room. 'Did you call, Dadababu?' she asked.

"I'm leaving tomorrow, Ratan," said the postmaster.

"Where are you going, Dadababu?"

"I'm going home."

"When are you coming back?"

"I shan't come back again."

Ratan did not question him further. The postmaster himself told her that he had applied for a transfer, but his application had been rejected; so he was resigning from his post and returning home. For several minutes, neither of them spoke. The lamp flickered weakly; through a hole in the crumbling thatched roof, rain-water steadily dripped on to an earthenware dish. Ratan then went slowly out to the kitchen to make some chapati. She made them with none of her usual energy. She kept stopping, turning things over in her mind. When the postmaster had had his meal, she suddenly asked, 'Dadababu, will you take me home with you?'

"How could I do that!" said the postmaster, laughing. He saw no need to explain to the girl why the idea was impossible.

All night long, whether dreaming or awake, Ratan felt the postmaster's laugh ringing in her ears. 'How could I do that!'

When he rose at dawn, the postmaster saw that his bath-water had been put out ready for him (he bathed according to Calcutta habits, in water brought in a bucket). Ratan had not been able to bring herself to ask him what time he would be leaving; she had carried the bath-water up from the river late at night, in case he needed it early in the morning. As soon as he finished his bath, the postmaster called her. She entered the room softly and looked at him without speaking, waiting for her orders. 'Ratan,' he said, 'I'll tell the man who replaces me that he should look after you as I have; you mustn't worry just because I'm going.'

No doubt this remark was inspired by kind and generous feelings, but who can fathom the feelings of a woman? Ratan had feebly suffered many scoldings from her master, but these kindly words were more than she could bear. The passion in her heart exploded, and she cried, 'No, no, you mustn't say anything to anyone - I don't want to stay here.' The postmaster was taken aback:

ark/and furnish it with food, with little cakes, and wine/for the dark flight down the oblivion.' Lawrence remained banned for decades with his Lady Chatterley's Lover. Sexual intercourse, after facing a long banal, was reintroduced in 1963 (!) after his lady hid the bookstores with the consent of the god fearing and lady adoring jurists.

Poet Thomas Sturge Moore, who proposed Rabindranath's name for the Noble Prize was born on 4 March 1870. Thirteen magistrates issued a warrant of arrest on 4 March 1603 to nab poet of 'Pilgrims Progress', John Bunyan for preaching without obtaining license. Rudyard Kipling lost his daughter Josephine on the same day in 1899 in a chilly waiting room in a drafty New York custom hall. Chill benumbed her to death. Kipling had a near death experience on that day.

Anna Akhmatova, a poet who enraged the regime of Stalin died on 5 March 1955. Anna's husband was shot as a counter-revolutionary and her son suffered confinement in Stalin's concentration camp. Elizabeth Barrett Browning was born on 6 March 1806. Invalid and confined to wheel chair and refused marriage by her possessive father she allowed her suitor six year her junior Robert Browning to see her and they got married secretly. Elizabeth died a death imbued in love and tears in Robert's arms.

French poet Guillaume Apollinaire was hit on head by a shell splinter on 17 March 1918. The wound confined him in bed and he died of influenza on 9 November 1918. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe the greatest among all German men of letters died on 22 March 1832. With his Olympian wisdom Goethe found woman as man's energizer and source of creative life. Fallen in love with Christine Vulpius he fathered a son in 1789 and married her seventeen years later.

John Davidson a not-so-famous poet drowned himself to death on 23 March 1909. In the British Museum Reading Room sometime in 1894 John approached William Butler Yeats and said, "I am writing verse. I had been writing prose for a long time, and then one day I thought I might just as well write what I liked, as I must starve in any case. It was the luckiest thought I ever had, for my

he had never seen Ratan behave like that before.

A new postmaster came. After explaining the job to him, the resigning postmaster got ready to leave. Before going, he called Ratan and said, 'Ratan, I've never been able to pay you anything. Today before I go I want to give you something, to last you for a few days.' 'Except for the little that he needed for the journey, he took out all the salary that was in his pocket. But Ratan sank to the ground and clung to his feet, saying, 'I beg you, Dadababu, I beg you - don't give me any money.' Then she fled, running.

The departing postmaster sighed, picked up his carpet-bag, put his umbrella over his shoulder, and, with a coolie carrying his blue-and-white-striped tin trunk on his head, slowly made his way towards the boat.

When he was on the boat and it had set sail, when the swollen flood-waters of the river started to heave like the Earth's brimming tears, the postmaster felt a huge anguish: the image of a simple young village-girl's grief-stricken face seemed to speak a great inarticulate universal sorrow. He felt a sharp desire to go back: should he not fetch that orphaned girl, whom the world had abandoned? But the wind was filling the sails by then, the swollen river was flowing fiercely, the village had been left behind, the riverside burning-ground was in view. Detached by the current of the river and the journey ahead, he reflected philosophically that in life there are many separations, many deaths. What point was there in going, back? Who belonged to whom in this world?

But Ratan had no such philosophy to console her. All she could do was wander near the post office, weeping copiously. Maybe a faint hope lingered in her mind that Dadababu might return; and this was enough to tie her to the spot, prevent her from going far. O poor, unthinking human heart! Error will not go away, logic and reason are slow to penetrate. We cling with both arms to false hope, refusing to believe the weightiest proofs against it, embracing it with all our strength. In the end it escapes, ripping our veins and draining our heart's blood; until, regaining consciousness, we rush to fall into snares of delusion all over again.

agent now gets me forty pounds for a ballad, and I made three hundred out of my last book of verse." His inspiration did not last long. son of a minister of one of the extremist religious groups he had troubled childhood and suffered from poverty. T S Eliot liked his writings and termed these as great poems forever.

Poets born on 24 March include William Morris (1834), Lawrence Ferlinghetti (1919) and Ian Hamilton (1938). Thomas Hardy's most favourite women poet of Charlotte Mew committed suicide on this day in 1928. Poet Shelly was expelled for his refusal to admit the authorship of 'The Necessity of Atheism' from the University College of Oxford on 25 March 1811.

On 26 March birth registers glow for A E Houseman (1859), Robert Frost (1874), and Gregory Corso (1930). But the day marks the death of Walt Whitman who died in 1892 French poet Paul Verlaine was born on 30 March 1844. He shot Rimbaud in the wrist in 1873. The last day of March stands as the birthday of Andrew Marvell (1621), Edward FitzGerald (1809) and Octavio Paz (1914). Paz is widely acknowledged as the greatest contemporary Mexican poet and when he was awarded the Noble Prize nobody asked, 'Who is Paz, anyway?' John Donne died on this day in 1631, not a poor death, but a dramatic one. He got up from the sickbed, preached a last sermon, got dressed in his shroud to have his portrait painted and finally Donne was happy to have nothing left undone but to die. Izaak Walton notes, '... his last breath departed him, he closed his own eyes, and then disposed his hands and body into such a posture, as required not the least alteration by those that came to shroud him.' This is the seventeenth century poet John Donne who warned 'Death, Be Not Proud':

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death: nor yet canst thou kill me.

Painters who fought war

SALAHUDDIN AKBAR

HITLER and Churchill. Diametrically opposed in many ways had one small thing in common: they were both painters. But no wonder that their attitudes to art also were very different.

Hitler was a failed art student. And it was major setback of his early life, embittering him, and deepening his alienation and extremism. At 18 in 1907 he left his native Linz for Vienna to take the entrance examination of the General School of Painting at the Academy of fine Arts which he expected with typical over-confidence would be "child's play". But the fact remained Èhe was rejected at the second stage. One can see Hitler's own reference to it in his Mein Kampf "Downcast, I left van Hansen's magnificent building on Schillerplatz for what I had just heard about my abilities seemed like a lightning flash suddenly revealing a conflict with which I had long been afflicted". He failed quite narrowly, apparently because it was felt that there were too few studies of figures and heads in the drawings he had brought. Humanity was a subject in which Hitler showed no interest, as an artist and otherwise. His biographer, Werner Maser, interestingly noted: "What the world might have been spared if Hitler had included a few more 'heads' in his portfolio can only be conjectured."

Surviving examples show that as a draftsman he was not completely without talent either. But probably good enough to get into art school with a little more luck as he failed again the following

year. For the next few years he augmented his income by selling watercolour pictures, often copied from postcards and prints. For Hitler, painting was a bread-and butter matter. A scene of devastation at Ypres painted by him in 1916 was sold in 1997 for 4,600 Pounds Sterling. But the art about which he felt passion was architecture. Always the megalomaniac choice. But for the First World War, he claimed, "I should certainly have become an architect, perhaps even one of the leading architects, if not the foremost in Germany."

On the other hand, for Churchill painting was a love affair. It was a release into a happier, less exhausting world. It was a discovery he made halfway through his life- at the age of 40 Eand, as he put it, at a "most trying time."

It was one of those weekends in 1915 Churchill watched, intrigued, while his sister-in-

law painted. The next, he was already seated at an easel with brand-new palette and colours when his house-guest Hazel Lavery, wife of the painter, Sir John Lavery arrived. At that stage, he deliberately placed an area of blue on the canvases, "about the size of a bean", Lady Lavery, a painter herself, bowed up and seized the brush: "Splash into the turpentine," wrote Churchill, "wallow into the blue and the white, frantic flourish on the palette clean no longer and then several large, fierce strokes and slashes of blue on the absolutely covering canvas". With this example he never looked back.

In 1925 Churchill anonymously entered a painting exhibition and won an amateur painting prize. Two of his work of paintings entered again in 1947. That time they were hung at the Royal Academy, to his delight. Stylistically he was a British Impressionist ! He admired Cezanne who

was a controversial figure in England during Churchill's time, his fond of bright colour gave him some affinity with fauvism. Among his mentors were such leading artists as Sickert, Lavery and William Nicholson.

In his book 'Painting as a Pastime', written in early twenties, Churchill suggests, "We must not be too ambitious. We cannot aspire to masterpieces. We may content ourselves with a joyride in a paint-box. And, for this, audacity is the only ticket." What he was after Èwas painting as relaxation and therapy Èa sovereign remedy for stress. Whenever he was exhausted and despondent he turned to painting and would say: "I have had a happy day." Painting was therapeutic for Churchill. He used to take refuge from northern cold winters in the hot south- often in Morocco. And hid paintings too, was a revelling in light and colour. "Now I'm learning to like painting

even on dull days. But in my hot youth I demanded sunshine."

Painting was a symbol of happiness, and the activity on which, Churchill remarked, he intended on entering heaven "to spend a considerable part of my first million years. I shall require a still gayer palette than I get here below. I expect orange and vermilion will be the darkest, dullest colours upon it." In To wards the end of 1945 Churchill was in Italy, recuperating from the long years of war and shattering defeat at the general election. Later he went to Recco, a village close to the villa where he was staying, and set up his easel. His subject was a railway viaduct, plus some bomb-damaged houses. The local inhabitants, recognizing him, took offence, shaking their fists and booing.

The incident upset Churchill somewhat, but he readily admitted it was a tactless thing to do, and said that he would have been damned annoyed if Hitler had started to paint the bomb damage to London." This trivial event documents the importance of painting to Churchill. The efforts and frustrations of a professional painter's life were not what Churchill wanted. For him painting was something like a spiritual exercise. "Happy are the painters for they shall not be lonely. Light and colour, peace and hope will keep them company to the end, or almost to the end of the day."

That was not a feeling which Hitler never shared.

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