

POETRY

Now that It's August Cry out in Sorrow

NIRMALENDU GOON

Translated by Fakrul Alam

Now that it's August, cry out in sorrow Bengalis!
I know you weren't allowed to mourn
for a long, long time
I know, hapless Bengalis, you weren't
able to cry at all
For twenty-one long years, but you can
do so now!
Cry your hearts out now for the time to
mourn has come
Clear the debt of sorrow you've piled
up for over two decades
In tears that can flow completely freely
now!

With the tears of pent-up passion
released from your hearts
Let Bengal's delta be flooded and swept
away.
Most people have no idea how striking
shared tears
Can look on them. Let everyone know
that truth now.
Like crickets chirping soulfully across
earth
Let your clamorous cries pervade and
overwhelm it.

Cry out soulfully, making earth quiver
with your cries!

Citizens of an ill-fated country shorn of
happiness
Cry out now like a hungry baby
deprived of milk
Cry out now like a lonely sister grieving
for a lost brother
Cry out now like a dear daughter
wailing for her dead father
Cry out now like poor people who've
lost all in ruinous floods
Cry out now like a mother who has just
birthed a still-born child
Cry out now like a wailing old man
who has just buried his own son,
Returned home, and is flailing
helplessly about on his courtyard floor.
You couldn't mourn when you wanted
to but cry out now
And let go of your pent up and till now
impotent anger and pain!

After twenty-one years the sun called
Mujib has burst through

Clouds and now blazes in Bengal's
skies again. Not in celebration
But with funeral cries greet him now.
Cry, Bengal, cry!

Like the immaculate juice oozing out
of an uprooted baat tree
Let tears ooze out of your eyes and flow
down your face
Like the warm juice of a date palm tree
that has been tapped
Let the tears pent up in your bosom
trickle down to its earthly urn.

Twenty-one years have gone by and
August has come again
August is the cruelest month
August is the month of mourning,
soaked in sin, harsh, cruel
Free it from its sins with overflowing tears!

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pages.

MUSINGS

To Be is to Be towards
Death: Tagore's Last Poems

FAYEZA HASNAT

While reading some of Tagore's last poems from *Shesh Lekha*—translated by Kaiser Haq and Fakrul Alam and printed in *The Essential Tagore*—I could not stop relating Tagore's views on death with the ontology of Being and nothingness. Tagore's last poems, as Aurobindo Bose once said, "came from the borderland of life and death." They reflect his adherence to the Upanishads and his understanding of Brahma as the infinite symbol of perfection; they also express the desire of the individual soul to unite with the Supreme Soul. Tagore's understanding of Being and its utmost potentiality achieved through death reminds me, in turn, of Heidegger's declaration: "To be is to be towards death." For Heidegger, Being towards death is the possibility par excellence. In death, Being loses its mastery as a subject and gets pulled into a future—"not yet" and never to be.

Kierkegaard had once said, "Life is lived forwards, but can only be understood backwards." Heidegger notes in his *Being and Time* that, in order to understand the *Dasein*, or Being as a whole, it is necessary to see it in the light of its end. The complete understanding and the backwards journey are not possible until the Being reaches the point of its departure. In his last poems, Tagore seems to have taken such a journey backwards in an effort to understand the kaleidoscope of his life and death. He presents himself as a poet in conversation and in convergence with the ultimate Other.

Take "On the Banks of Roop-Naran" for example. Written on May 13, 1941, this poem is a rejection of Platonic idealism. The subject as a being-in-the-world is awake and conscious. For the conscious subject, the world is not a dream. Haq translates the opening lines of the poem thus:

"I woke up on the bank
Of the Roop-Naran,
I knew for sure
this world's no dream."
The Being (or *Dasein*, as Heidegger calls it) struggle all its life, trying to understand its true self through sufferings and afflictions, and hoping to find the meaning of life in and through death. In our pursuit of truth, Tagore makes us realize, "this life is a meditation on sorrow till death—/ to realize the terrible value of truth/and settle all debts with death."

Written on July 27, 1941, "The Sun of the First Day" is Tagore's masterpiece on the existentialist pondering on death. Comprising two short stanzas, this too is a poem on being and nothingness. The first stanza is about a subject's being in the world, and the second one, about its being towards death. Alam translates this stanza as follows:

"On the new carnival of being
The sun of the first day asked:
Who are you?
But there was no reply."
We do not begin with the consciousness of ourselves as knowing subjects. That is why the first day's sun receives no answer from "the new carnival of being," since it is not a knowing subject yet. Knowledge would come to it in fragments through its being in the world. At the point of its departure, the Being is still unable to answer—when "asked the final question again"/ Who are you?" The Being has no answer to give, because the authentic discourse of death is not interchangeable; the final answer is only comprehensible in the first person by the dying subject.

Written two days after the above mentioned poem, "Dark Nights of Sorrow" (this time too in Alam's translation) represents the fearful game Death plays with its weapons of "Pain's distorted grimace and Fear's hideousness" with an intent to "delude one in the Darkness." Our Being-in-the-world is connected with anxiety. We are thrown into our world and wake up to find ourselves in a situation that we did not plan. We

live our whole life in a state of uncanny anxiety, always falling short, and always deceived, and always fearing that our lives will run out of us any moment. We do not feel at home in this world. This uncanny anxiety—a Freudian *'unheimlich'*—provokes us to seek the truth that is missing from our everyday world. Just as we are thrown into life, we are also thrown towards death; and until we reach our death, we live in that state of anxiety. In death, the uncanny finally settles down, the *unheimlich* becomes familiar, and we finally feel at home. We learn to unmask life's sorcery as "a kaleidoscope of fears—/Directed deftly by Death in the diffused darkness."

In his last poem, "On the Way to Creation," Tagore seems to have mastered his anxieties and fears. As Alam's translation records, the poet has successfully maneuvered through the "myriad nets of deception" spread "on Creation's path" and has gained the strength to see through all deceptions. He has "embraced



truth/Cleansing his innermost being by its light." The poem confirms that one who knows how to withstand "deceptions effortlessly" and endure the uncanny anxiety will eventually earn the "unremitting right to peace."

Dictated one week before his death, at 9:30 in the morning of July 30, Tagore's poem "On the Way to Creation," comes to us like a declaration of his understanding of God's/Death's power. Tagore is said to have expressed his desire to edit and revise the poem later. Unfortunately, he did not regain consciousness after the surgery on that day and passed away on August 7, 1961.

As Heidegger has explained, a Being in the world is actually a Being towards death, and it achieves 'wholeness' only by meeting its death. Death is an enigma that cannot be possessed or grasped by anticipation. The Being's journey is complete through the knowledge and/of union with the future. Tagore's inability to edit his last poem is not to be regretted; after all, he has already accepted death as the end of his term as a being in the world and has already foreseen the future that is not-yet, and will never be. What else was there to revise?

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August is the
Cruellest Month

SHUBORNA CHOWDHURY

"Shravan clouds crowd the azure
In the dark lightning sparks again and again.
There are no friends nearby, nor is peace;
Cruel memory befriends hundreds of skulls.
The slain father, Agamemnon, lies in his grave."
Shamsur Rahman's "Song of Electra," is a poem about a daughter lamenting her father's inopportune death. He is really none other than the father of our nation who was snatched from us one dark August night in 1975. Some thirty years later, on another August day, the poet himself left the mortal world. But decades ago the poet, a confere dreamer, didn't hesitate to narrate what he had dreamt of about the ones who had also gone by then. What he dreamt of was as follows:

"Bangladesh dreams of a bronze-statue, huge and still,
Blowing the ground that wakes up at the dead of night.
The statue craves to say something, trying to knock

Bangladesh? Surely, it is: so many of its august ones left it in this month. Tagore had gone long before Bongobondhu. The rebel poet Nazrul Islam left us all next; years later they were followed by the great poets of the second half of the twentieth century: Shamsur Rahman and Shahid Qadri. These exceptional poets would become companions in the other world of the greatest poet of our politics, Bangobondhu, who through his one single composition made all our dreams come true as well.

"This fight is for our freedom,
This fight is for our liberation!"

He had declared and a spell was cast on his people immediately. Later Nirmalendu Goon, another outstanding poet wrote about these lines, "from that very moment, the word 'Liberation' became our own." People of Bengal had been waiting for that one single poem for hundreds of years, and finally the new poet could emit his magic words to transform the fate of his people. But August would soon cast its death spell on our spell-binding orator as well.

The next August snatched away Nazrul from us. The poet had appeared like a comet and had faced royal wrath and was arrested by the colonizing king's men. In response and in court the rebel poet had said, "I am a poet to reveal the veiled truth. ... A royal-translator of the king had translated the words but failed to present its life. His loyal translation aimed to please the king, but my words are there to express the truth, its sparks and soul ... I am the aqua of truth - the tear of God's eyes." And God's teardrop too, would leave us all in another August.

And Tagore too had departed in August. Tagore, our everyday companion, the one who has shaped our music, language, literature, almost everything! Tagore was the forerunner of today's global notions about the duties of the world's poets. Fearless Rahman, the prime poet of his time, never hesitated to give voice to our socio-political aspirations and was not spared by cruel August either.

I have wondered at times—was it mere coincidence that all had fallen in late monsoon, in August? But then what is 'Death'? A 'Slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men, that causes us to sleep' ... that causes permanent departure. But does it? 'The secret of death lies in the heart of life' and 'our illimitable life is enshrouded by death.' (মৃত্যু-মারো ঢাকা আছে যে অন্তহীন প্রশ্ন) Life keeps dancing, death too follows dancing (নাচে জন্ম, নাচে মৃত্যু পাছে পাছে) "For life and death are one, even as the river and the sea are one." that is the joy of eternity's flow. Whether we lament brood, complain, people die every day and every month of the year. Why blame August? For sure some deaths are different like some lives are ... Still, as in the light of the vastness and enormity of the universe, death is not a cessation but a part of the eternal flow. Let's thus keep pondering the legacy the dead ones have left on the ones who are living and vow to get the best out of our existence. August, I choose to ignore you, and there ...

"We have to cross this fire, though we
Do not know how,
There is none here in this region who may
Give us the mantra to cross the fire today.
There is no one today whose magic wand
May readily transform the engulfing flames
To serene saplings of a flowerbed. In fact,
Now there is no one
Who may face this inferno
And in unshattered voice
May say afresh:
Don't be scared, this fire doesn't have the strength
To burn your limbs, but Fire, you will be blown away."

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