

# A HANDFUL OF SUN

Modern Poetry

from West Bengal and East Pakistan

edited by

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P A P U A   P O C K E T   P O E T S

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A HANDFUL OF SUN

I offer you

A handful of sun

The sweet touch of the sky.

Wear this vermilion sun

Be a bird.

Speak, speak out,

Speak of the mind and blue sky

Speak of the forest of stars.

I have exchanged the fine work

Of the creator for you.

The wealth of my mind is now yours.

But how far can a handful of sun go?

Can anyone guess its presence?

North and South, now hand in hand,

Are talking to themselves, softly.

The sun will remain in my world

Baring its mind

Opening up its sky.

A JUGGLAR

You came back early. The breeze is blowing.  
It's lonely now. Confess:  
What made you light such a huge fire on the road?

Is that so? Hush!  
A glacier is inching its way down into my blood  
Like a snake. Beware its bite.  
Someone may burn your house.

It's all a jest to you, even  
When you stab the night.  
I am returning home with burning eyes,  
Ablaze with fireworks.  
What is this sport that draws your feet  
Towards the veil of green and blue?

Sunilkumar Nandi

## THE PUPPET OF TIME

You sacrificed your entire youth to make an idol of time .

You gave the best of your life to break the rock of words .

The forehead of your troubled fate is pierced ,

Like a perplexed and callous monarch , you sweat and bleed -

Roaming through your chaotic kingdom , you try to bring ideal form

To the rock , an image is found , but it is repulsive ,

It bursts into naked laughter , when robbed of its polished body :

Make puppets , sculptor , if you have to , idols are not possible .

## I DIDN'T TELL YOU

Firecrackers thrown at the sky  
Where desperate clouds wrestled and roared:  
Amongst these you celebrated your birthday  
Yesterday.

Though rain swept into the room  
- I didn't shut the windows -  
And the lamp burnt out  
I saw your face  
Gleaming with lightning in the dark room.

And often  
The wind forced its way in  
Only to rock my flowers  
On your table.

Why I couldn't sleep last night  
I didn't tell you -

A mischievous cat  
Played with discarded writing paper  
All night  
And an obstinate clock tried to frighten me  
With its ticking -

But I didn't tell you that  
Once we settle down under the earth  
We shall not recognize each other  
Nor did I tell you  
What I shall buy  
At the fair of the chariot festival -

A palm leaf flute for our daughter  
A few flowers and fruit plants for you  
And for our house  
Two beautiful budgerigars  
In a bright bronze cage.

WATERCOLOUR

Don't touch calendar,  
Fool, dumb one, leave me now.

Chair is empty, window unshut.  
the illiterate breeze  
Is opening the pages of the same book  
Again and again.

Don't touch hands of the clock,  
Time is carefully docketed.

Pot plants are under the verandah,  
A pair of sandals on the floor,  
A clay butterfly is moving her antennae  
Sitting down.

Feathers, falling off from a duster,  
Fly wild in the room,  
Pieces of a letter under the table  
Scatter around.

Feet to the sky, arms dropping  
Clothes are spread on the railings.  
And a coloured kite  
Is stuck on a clothes line.



Light is switched off, eyes are shut.  
Still I see everything:  
Insects, in a wooden box,  
Are eating up an old group photograph.

Come once, running  
O river, o memory -  
Clutching the wall of this room  
You will stand and behave well.

Who is pushing the door curtain?  
I leave the room. Again I return.  
As my feet make noise  
The dark staircase recedes.

TWO SHORES

Two armies encamped on opposite shores of the sky  
Covered with the crimson dust of the setting sun,  
The elephants all around, are raising their trunks  
And suddenly scatter thick darkness above.

What a mad storm this is on a quiet afternoon .  
The frightened birds return in the anxious sky.  
The Santal girls quicken their pace  
And hasten back to Paruldanga village.

Is there no escape from the storm of my heart  
From the stunning surprise at the setting sun?

Two camps are aroused in the afternoon sky  
On the two banks of my confused and shaken heart.

YOU

My heart melts into a sleeping lake.  
You come silently at night like a moon  
And dip into my blue water.  
My memory lies scattered on the banks  
Like dead fallen leaves.  
Only the breath of your southerly breeze  
Makes them whisper and sing.

Thirsty impatient waves rise and sink.  
You lower the sky enfolding me  
And suddenly I hear your flute  
Blowing and sweeping over my forgotten tracks.

## FRIENDS

Evening lights up the city.

Footsteps frighten images.

We run and pace through the streets

Feeling safe.

I hide the pain in my shoulder.

Now waves rise high in the red lake.

I close my eyes and run, I run

Intoxicated by the fragrance of the tall tree.

A tiger has seized my left side with his paw:

Blood gushes out like a mountain spring.

The sharp knife of the moon's crescent

Has pierced my eyes.

When my feet slip in the street

I silently retreat:

And footsteps still frighten the trees -

Faint reminiscences.

These are word games.

I have come here with heavy step

In the cold of winter, in the heat of summer,

To offer these games into whose hands?

My head spins like a large turbine wheel.

I walk alone, tossing the coins.

All moonshaped:

Some round, some crooked.

THE NECK OF THE GIRAFFE

Shrubs, creepers and the leaves of lower branches  
Are all consumed.

Seven hells burn in the restless stomach.

Leaves still clustered on the tip of the tree

Send a hundred melodies of dream downwards.

The giraffe raises his neck

And relishes the green food with zest.

When the leaves are exhausted, a curse falls upon him -

His neck now approaches the moon for food.

The infinite journey in search of harvest,

The heavenbound love is unfulfilled desire,

The unceasing efforts to reach the moon

Are felt in every house of every country.

The Heavenly drink will defeat the desperate hunger

And absentmindedly, hell moves now towards heaven.

ESCAPE

The afternoon earth is filled with clashing colour  
The crows have returned with anxiety  
Dew will soon fall  
Death suddenly looks out:  
A solitary fig tree  
Stands like a silent ghost of our fathers.

Write my name onto rocks,  
A lost soul searches for Tibetan solitude.

Day wraps its bloodless face into darkness  
And vanishes.

Rugged hills -  
Fog has covered the Santal huts  
Foolish crows, thinking it is down, croak now and then -  
The noise fades away  
Into the calm stream of time.

SELF CRITICISM

Once we were unhappy apes,  
Now, engaged in boasting, we are brave monkeys.  
Setubandha is far away,  
The impudence of the demons on the other shore increases daily.  
We see their camel necked envoy  
Shamelessly raping our country.  
But brother, I am certain  
History will side with us in the end,  
Possessed by the power of this divine history  
We see the treacherous tail coil round the neck of Ravan,  
the demon king.

- \* In Ramayana: Setubandha - "the bridge" - was built on the sea between India and Ceylon by Rama's soldiers - mainly monkeys - who ultimately defeated Ravan, the demon king of Ceylon or Lanka.

THE FULL MOON IS A CHARRED BREAD

Eternal life,

Enough of poetry

Bring us rough, dry prose.

Let the music of subtle stanzas fade,

Raise the hammer of bold prose today.

Poetry, I say goodbye to you,

Your pleasures are not needed,

The earth is wrought in prose -

Under the reign of hunger.

The moon is a charred bread.



OFTEN FATAL SNAKE BITES

Often fatal snake bites and the call for the medicine man -  
These alone liven up my monotonous calendar,  
Besides pleading and supplications  
And doctors and chemists bills,  
Odd debts lie unpaid, for which the grocer  
Threatens me every day in bold language,  
I don't take it seriously, I can't afford to  
My sense of dignity hides its wings under my sleeves,  
You seem to be all at home in this world, begging, pleading,  
Your face kicked and whipped, amidst soothing words and affection,  
O yes, you have a sense of dignity - "the wife of Mr. X  
Doesn't swim close to the shore - she goes a bit far."  
Often fatal bites from snake women,  
Then the call for the medicine man,  
These alone brighten up my calendar,  
And pleading and supplication and doctors and chemists bills.

FORGIVE ME

The jar containing vermilion crashes against  
the hard edge of the table

It crashes every day

It rains every day - continuously - drip-drop, drip-drop,

The noise spreads and is absorbed in an ocean of noise

Where colour is greater than noise

Where harmony is greater than colour

There only the original note sounds

Leaving an imprint on her heart of sand

She floods my face with saliva

She rests her hand on my shoulder and whispers

Forgive me : you cannot play me any more .

SONG OF A MAN IN LOVE

Now, into me, enters the whole earth:  
Tall houses, people, dress shops perfumed by female bodies,  
Toil, quarrels, spoilt teenagers excitedly abusing others,  
And park benches, where old age pensioners spend their time.

After midnight, piercing me deliberately,  
A loud cry erupts, then fades again.  
Movements, up and down the stairs,  
Tread heavily on me.

That lame beggar girl tearing out my nerve  
Weaves it as a ribbon into her plaited hair with artless delight.  
The whore's broken voice, sounds like a conch shell  
In my untrained ears.

Even animals come along, crawling,  
As if searching for some unclaimed portico to rest in.  
A big cart buffalo, spreading his tired carpet, seems pleased,  
A mongrel bitch speaks through her charming eyes.

Distance moves in on me: valleys, forests, fields,  
Pathways, vans, bridges,  
A hefty breeze, released in the mountains  
Blows across the peaks, the telegraph poles.

All well,  
All quiet, safe, secure,  
Like events, carefully written into a play:  
I alone  
Am turned into a stream, flowing, released -  
Unending, open-mouthed, reddened,  
Incurably infected, filled with sluggish discharges,  
A wound.

THE END

Of all things God gave me despair:  
Now I begin to understand  
I have not known it fully,  
Though I am only eighty two.

You can count on your fingers  
Your actions that bear fruit  
- Building a house, breeding.  
But friendship shines like vermilion  
Marking a dark pitcher.

The dead bodies of my friends sing out  
Nailed in the box of Time  
The rapid stream flows past me on both sides  
Blind fool, grab - grab the oars.

WORDS ARE YOUR MIND

Words are your mind. I touch them, but as I cup my hands  
To hold them, they trickle through my fingers  
And vanish in airy waves. A fountain of light  
They flow, dishevelled, illuminating my yard  
Merely to darken it again, I have no power to command them,  
No incantation to marry them. I don't know what to do.

Like your hair, your restive eyes, breasts, lips,  
Words pierce my heart with unintelligible signals  
And I forget my work. On the way to the dark pool, I drown.  
As I touch the bottom, I find myself on the edge of the sea.

Words a vast sea, I a horseman - groping for the reins.  
Often, on the peak of a violent wave I reach the sun,  
Often, darkness leaves me under the sea, blind, breathless.  
The sea, your mind, an expanse of words. The rein slips  
out of my reach.

## SNAIL

The snail

Does not appear to be a creation of nature.

Examine it closely:

It was born

In the strange imagination of a clever engineer

Like Leonardo da Vinci

Who decorated his life with rows of armoured cars.

The whole snail is meant to outwit

An imagined enemy:

Eyes concealed on the front of its snout,

To be rolled back into the shell, if attacked,

Nose nowhere near the eyes or mouth,

Nostrils tucked under his waist -

If the hips of a snail can be called waist.

Though the snail is my neighbor

It is difficult to believe

He is a creature of this planet.

When I see the fort-like snail,

The whole steals my mind.

Thousands of miles away from us,  
The whale roams about, lonely  
Often reclining on her huge belly  
Feeding babies with the milk of her breasts.  
Compared with the snail  
The whale's shape is much tidier.  
We can imagine a loving whale.  
Thinking of the impenetrable snail,  
We feel related to the whale.



## HARVEST

The day of harvest comes to a close:

The rice is cut and carried from the fields -

The gold is stored, the straw stacked here and there,

The river banks are quiet, roads empty, the stars

Can only be guessed at, behind grey skies.

Incomprehensible symbols, mysteriously reflected

In the water of the lake, intimate shadows

Invalidate the dumb trees, they stand ragged

Like worn out shawls. Villages sink into smoke

Of sapphire blue. Evening brings dilemma to every house.

The balance is nil: our energy

Evaporates with perspiration.

Our exhausted bodies, deeply marked by poverty,

But virtuous in an infamous house, we are content within,

And leisure breathes repentance.

Though eyes are closed, we find no sleep,

The arteries are frozen, our happiness gone cold,

And blinded by the light of the setting sun,

We're unequipped by nature to comprehend

The depth of night, brightened by immortality.

EVENING IN THE FIELD

I am walking aimlessly. Suddenly

I stop. I am in the field.

Looking back

I see a river, flowing quietly in the afternoon.

O river, mysterious river,

Do not get lost in the dark, wait a while

The light is weak here, the shadows thin:

Still I see the first star in the evening.

O star, mysterious star,

Light your lamp and hold it out before me.

What is this sadness that descends from the sky?

Let me watch that tired bird, that flies away in the dark.

O bird, o mysterious bird.

Sky, earth, both are lost. Weeping sad evening.

What is that breeze that blows, stirring waves

Of sorrow in the river, lost in the dark?

O breeze, mysterious breeze.

MORNING IN KANDAGHAT STATION

The bashful morning looks like a golden orchid.

Gauri will not set foot in the sky.

The arms of Shiva angrily tore her to pieces

In his embrace. He scattered her all about.

The kurchi flowers have blossomed here

And sobbing was heard - guroo, guroo.

A calm morning appears and brightens the earth -

Someone must have heard the hour-glass drum of Shiva.

\* Gauri is the consort of Lord Shiva in Indian mythology.

AND YOU KNOW

And you know  
Mud on the back  
When eating sun  
Dries up  
Disintegrates  
Crumbles -  
Death on the back  
Like a leech drinks blood  
Swells into drum  
Bursts  
Rots  
Disintegrates  
And vanishes  
One day

THE CLOUDY AFTERNOONS

The cloudy afternoons

Make me lonely

On my way home.

The large bare ricefields

Recede under my feet.

A raven, pecking the sun,

Disappears behind clouds.

A face

suddenly dismembered into crimson dust

Falls on my fading shadow.

SONG OF PALANQUIN

It sways and rocks  
To the ominous rhythm of sound  
Thugs are robbing  
Cats and tigers  
Cousins and aunties.

Ghosts and goblins  
Walk in the night  
Now they are running  
Ghosts and goblins.

The palanquin rocks  
Staggering up an embankment  
The palanquin swings like a nosering  
Climbing down a ditch.

In darkness, in light,  
Under shrubs  
Cats play  
With the shadows.

A dead river  
With sandy banks  
And a fish market  
In the yard of the snake goddess.

A haunting ground  
- Land of gods and phantoms  
They do not diminish  
Ghosts and phantoms do not vanish.

Some of them fly  
Like gnats and bluebottles  
Some of them walk  
With quick legs  
With light long legs.

Some of them drowse  
Under a tree  
Some of them rock  
Like palm leaves.

At midday  
Bats rest and sleep  
At midnight  
They join the fish owl.

Weasels and skunks  
Toads and tadpoles  
Geckos - the ticking lizards,  
And blindfolded flies.

Crickets and grasshoppers  
The fire fly  
The cockroach  
And an unclothed baby.

Mice and rats  
Foxes and jackals  
Dry leaves  
Tree branches.

All are ghostly  
Ghostly and shadowy  
They are spinning  
Around in the whirlwind.

Over the earth  
Dust flies and rolls  
The winnowing fan rocks and wavers  
Wafting the dust.

All are ghostly  
Ghostly and shadowy  
Lights and eyes of a ghoul  
Shine at a distance.

All are ghostly  
- The goblins are at play :  
Bricks are showered  
Under the date palm.



## A NOTE ON BENGALI POETRY IN ENGLISH

Modern Bengali poetry has never been systematically translated into English. An early effort was made by Deviprasad Chattopadhyay, who edited "Modern Bengali Poems" (The Signet Press, Calcutta, 1945), but it has long been out of print.

"Poems From East Bengal", compiled by Yusuf Jamal Begum (Pakistan P.E.N., 1954), contains a number of modern poems. Seventeen contemporary poets have been represented in "Green And Gold", edited by Humayun Kabir (Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1957).

Nine poems of nine Bengali poets have been included in "Modern Indian Poetry", edited by A.V. Rajeswara Rau (Kavita, New Delhi, 1958).

Among all writers, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) is best known outside India. His poetry is readily available in English (mainly through The Macmillan Company). "A Tagore Reader", edited by Amiya Chakravarty (Macmillan, New York, 1961), contains some of his best poems. Poetry of Jasimuddin (b. 1903), Jibanananda Dash (1898-1954), Nazrul Islam (b. 1899) and Manindra Ray (b. 1919) are currently available in English: "The Field Of The Embroidered Quilt: a tale of two Indian villages" of Jasimuddin (tr. by E.M. Milford, Oxford U.P., Calcutta, 1939), "Banalata Sen" of Jibanananda Dash (tr. by various writers, Writers Workshop, Calcutta, 1962), "Selected Poems" of Nazrul Islam (tr. by Kabir Chaudhuri, Bengali Academy, Dacca, 1962), "Bewitching Veil" of Manindra Ray (tr. by Sujit Mukherjee, Bengali Literature Publication, Calcutta, 1969). Twentyone poems of Sukanta Bhattacharya (1926-1947) have been rendered into English by Sisir Chattopadhyay for private circulation.

Bengali poems in English translation occasionally appear in the pages of Poetry, The Hudson Review, Encounter, Indian Literature, Quest, Poetry India, Mahfil, etc. Mahfil (The University of Chicago, South Asia Area Center) has recently brought out a special issue of Bengali poetry. Bengali Literature, a quarterly, edited by Ashis Sanyal from Calcutta, is the only journal that regularly publishes Bengali poetry in English.

P A P U A   P O C K E T   P O E T S

edited by Ulli Beier

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