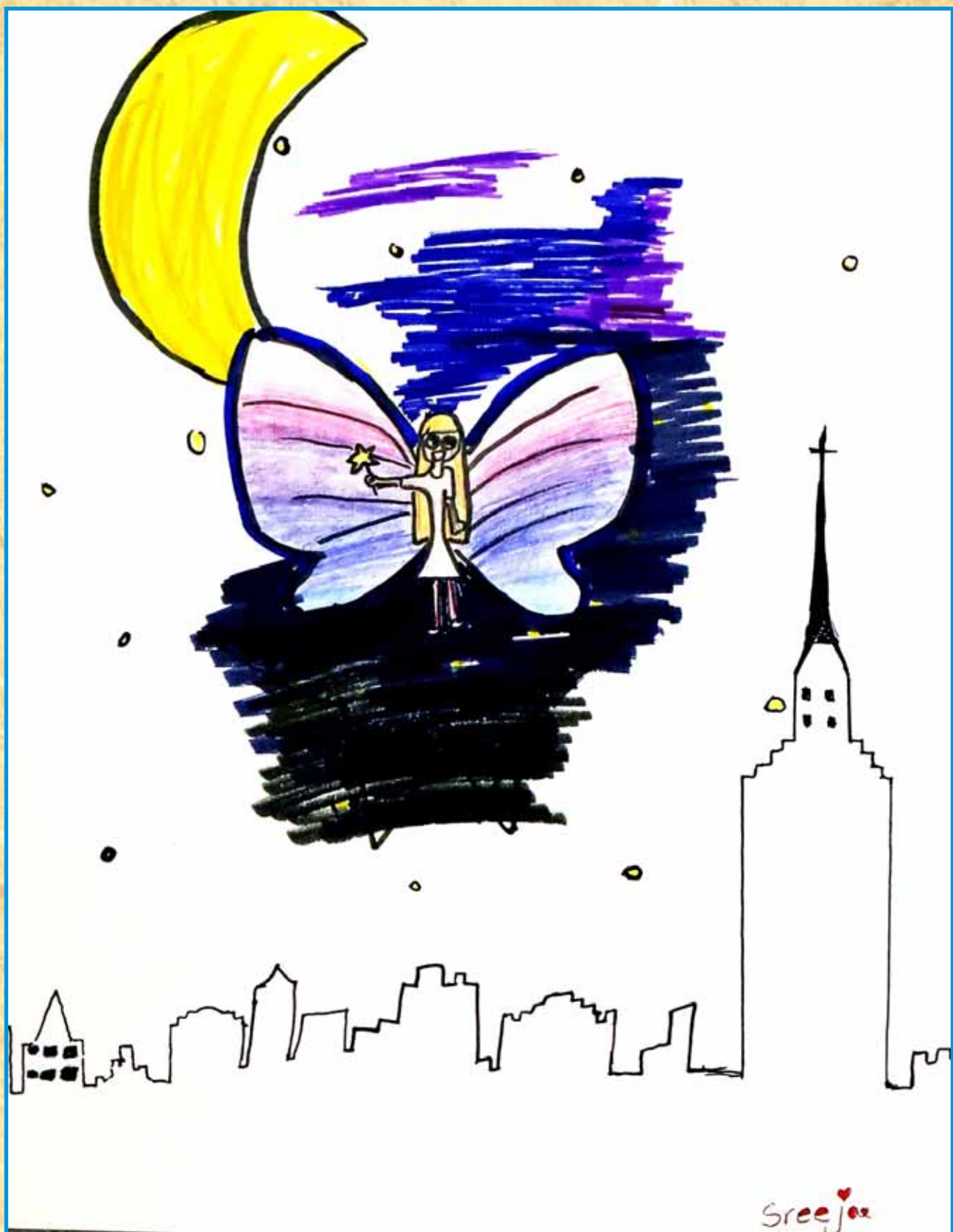


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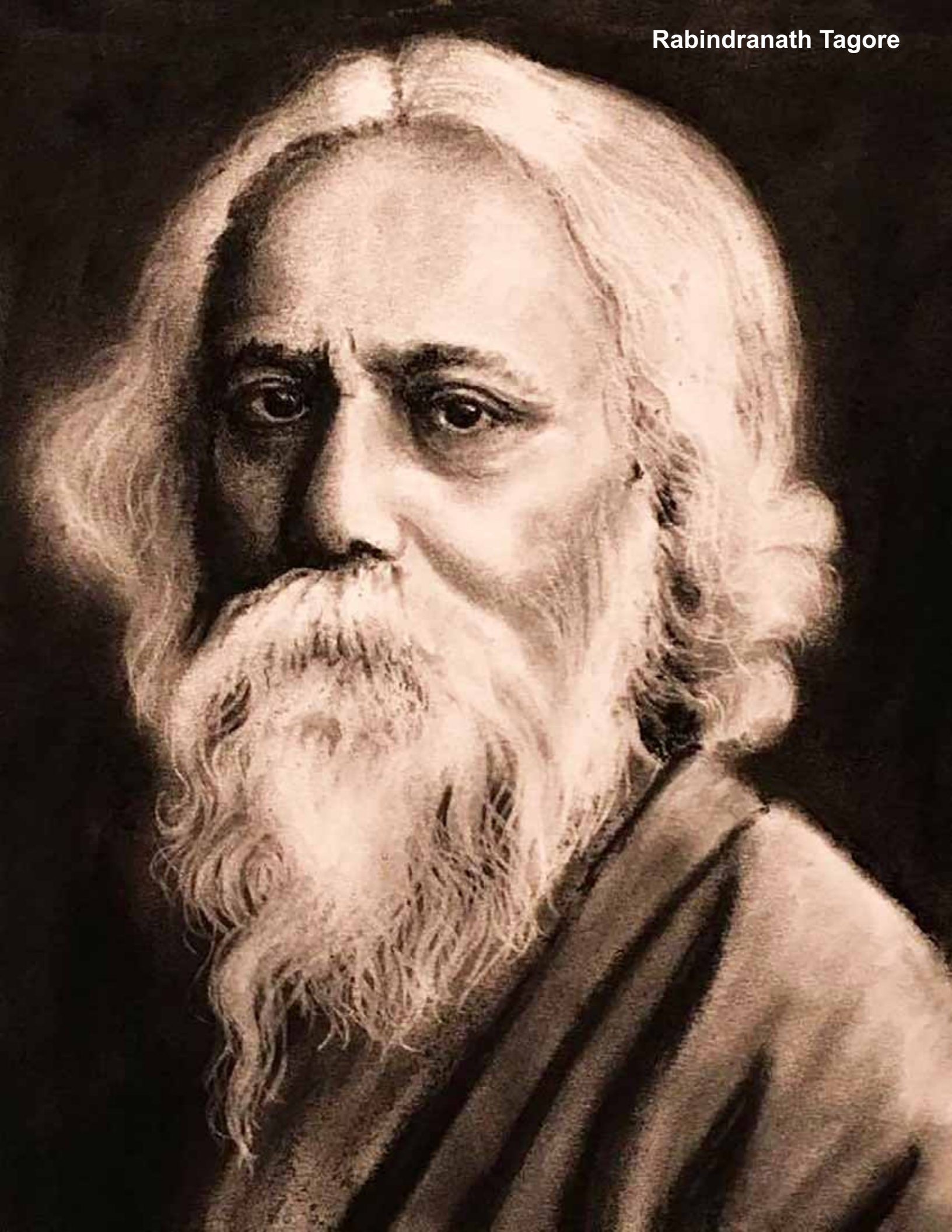




Starlight: A fairy, drifting soundlessly through the inky blackness. Over a city, not daring to imagine where she'll end up.



Rabindranath Tagore







# বাগান

*Batayan*

Volume 16 : May, 2019

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### Rabindranath Tagore Photo : Charcol Painting



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### Title Page : Prayer Hall, Shantiniketan & Back Cover



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## Editorial

This is issue of *Batayan* holds plenty of creativity from the visual arts, to poetry and book reviews. We offer two unique views of Rabindranath Tagore's diverse writing: his poems for children in Indrani Mondal's review of *The Crescent Moon* and a comprehensive anthology of his English writings, letters, essays and translations in *Tagore for You* by Satyam Roychowdhury. We can almost hear the beautiful music in Viola Lee's *Dancer and the Violinist* and taste the cake left out by roommates in David Nekimken's *The Last Crumb*.

Also in this issue, Shravani Datta takes us to Lake Como to share the quiet scenes of the lake and elegant architecture of the Italian palazzos. Susim Munshi creates fine art out of simple materials in *Lessons Learnt at Sea Glass Charm Making*. Lew Rosenbaum offers glimpses of the art world of Jean-Michel Basquiat and Romare Bearden in his book review of *American Histories* by John Wideman.

In *Bengali Immigrants-Making America Home*, Biswadim Chakraborty discusses the website and new book edited by Amitabha Bagchi and Debayoti Chatterji which shares immigration stories from the 1880s to the present day, including many funny, sad and totally true accounts from immigrants' lives. We hope this issue of *Batayan* inspires you to read, write, dance, cook and to create your own masterpieces, in whatever medium you like best.

**Jill Charles**  
English Editor





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## Indrani Mondal

### On Tagore's Child Literature (in the context of *The Crescent Moon*)

It was our special text for Elective English in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. A collection of poems with a front cover picture of a thin sliver of waxing moon with a little child riding on it like a canoe in the darkened sea-sky. Our English lit teacher told us it was a collection of poems for children written by Rabindranath Tagore or more accurately translated by the poet himself from his various Bengali poems in *Sishu* and *Sishu Bholanath*. The book was called as you have surely guessed by now, *The Crescent Moon*. When writing literary appreciation about the poems in that book, I remember saying how I enjoyed the descriptive word pictures they drew but the 'deeper' meaning, that our lit teacher insisted we write about, somehow eluded me.

Since then I have always been intrigued by the fact that most of Tagore's child literature was not written for children but more about children. That is to say, they idealize child qualities of sheer innocence, clarity of vision, simplicity of enunciation, restless questioning and honest curiosity. And all this from an adult's point of view. Some scholars say this is because Tagore was deeply influenced by British Romantic poets. Remember William Wordsworth's oft-quoted, '... child is father of the man ...' from his evocative yet super simplistic poem 'My heart Leaps up' or 'Rainbow'?

This is not to say Tagore didn't write any child friendly poems at all. By child friendly I mean poems which children instantly comprehend and connect with, and because of the fun and *easy* cadence of such poems, can instantly commit to memory as well. Think about *Sahaj path*, which in spite of being a beginner's manual for learning Bengali language, remains an epitome of millions of rhymes, that are so catchy and buoyant in meaning, so bright and fresh in presentation, that they sound like the pitter patter of playful children. Some ever-popular children's poetry per se by Tagore are, 'Kumor parrar gorur gari...', 'Amader choto nadi...', 'Taalgaach ek paye dariye...', also 'Mone karo jeno bidesh ghure, maake niye jacchi anek dure...' etc. Then again there are children's poems like, 'Diner alo nibhe elo, sujji gelo dube...' (from *Kori o Kamal*) which has Bengal's most-recited children's couplet, '...Brishti pare tapur tupur, nadeye elo baan ...'. Interestingly this poem ends with an inevitable extension of vision by a poet, who is really a philosopher, bringing in glimpses of a worldview which transcends a little child's periphery of vision. Thus, the poem ends with, '...Na jani kon nodir dhare, na jani kon deshe...kon chelere ghum parate ke gahiche gaan...' ideas that involve from an adult thinker's universalism.

Now turning our attention to *The Crescent Moon*, which was our 7th grade special text, it can surely be said that the tone and feel of almost all the poems in this collection have a wistfulness at the adult's world's loss of innocence as compared to a child's world of inherent, innocent happiness. In my copy of the book, the first poem, *Home*, had an illustration by Nandalal Bose, of a mom in a white sari, carrying her child on her shoulders, that I really liked, but I have to admit, the essence or ideas of certain lines that the poem start and end with, '...the sunset was hiding its last gold like a miser..' and '...young lives glad with a gladness that knows nothing of its value for the world ...', while beautiful to read slipped over my juvenile sensibility.





Most poems in *The Crescent Moon* are replete with such lines, which are loaded with significance more appropriate for mature minds. For example, the poem *Janmakatha*, translated as The beginning or The Source in *The Crescent Moon*, abound with ideas that made sense to me only after I became a parent myself.

Other poems in *The Crescent Moon*, have lines like, "...I hire you with nothing ...", from *The Last Bargain* which also comment on how the child is Nature's unspoiled gift to humans, in contrast to grownups who are wrought with the task of making choices that can make or break them.

*The Wicked Postman*, *The Land of Exile*, *The Astronomer* etc. are poems that are spoken by the child. But these too have hints of notions which a young mind, that the poet eulogizes, cannot readily dwell upon. The *First Jasmines* bring echoes of Wordsworth's *The Rainbow* or *My heart Leaps*. Both poets voice similar sentiments, Wordsworth marvels that his heart still leaps up at the sight of a rainbow just as it did when he was a youngster. Tagore muses, a garland of fresh, fragrant jasmines enthralls him as an adult just as it did when he was a child.

My favorite poem in *The Crescent Moon* was and still is, *On the Seashore*.

It was my favorite poem back then because the word pictures would make me remember how fun and free it had been as a child, to play on the sea beach with the relentless breakers rolling in with froth and salty spray, on our summer vacations to the sea resort Puri. Years later, this poem came to me as a sharp and intensely descriptive contrast of the unfettered joy and fearless abandon of a child in its purest form, as against the stress-ridden adult world of ruthless bargain, searing responsibility and fear of future hurdles. As such for me this poem remains a marvelous ode to the simple beauty of the quintessential child vis-à-vis the hue and cry of our grownup world.

In conclusion, I have to admit, that though as a school student I was baffled by the 'inner meaning' of the poems in *The Crescent Moon*, the poems had a magnetic pull of detailed imagery that made me search, find and read the original Bengali poems they were translated from. The mellifluous language and natural rhymical flow of the poems stuck in my mind, making me return to them over and over again. As my personal experiences evolved, I found myself able to go beyond the linguistic, even poetic qualities of these poems, discovering new insights into their many strata of meaning. This has only reinforced my view, that reading a truly great writer's work is never a "been there, done that", kind of experience, but one that slowly and surely reveals hidden treasures that enlighten and enrich our psyche in new ways, as we encounter them at various stages, in the ongoing process of living. In short, *The Crescent Moon* when read by a child appeals in one way but when assessed by an adult, amazes with its wealth of philosophical truths. When Tagore's children's literature has the charisma to draw us in different ways, for different reasons, at different times, we can gladly give them pride of place in the treasure house of his collected literary works.



Indrani Mondal studied in Calcutta and Jadavpur Universities, India, and holds a PhD in Philosophy and Social Studies. A freelance writer in both English and Bengali, over the last decade Indrani has written fiction, nonfiction and poetry mainly on social and cultural issues facing immigrants and has published three books of poetry "Fugitive Wings", "Pratidin Sati Hoi" and "Raater Sarir". She is an active member of the Chicago Creative Circle, Unmesh and is the current coeditor of a bilingual online newsletter.



## Shubham Sanyal

### Heave Ho!

#### Robi Thakoor's 'Khorobayou Boi Bege'

Winds are roaring at a great pace,  
Clouds are covering heaven's face,  
Won't you boatman steer away the boat oar?  
You can man the hull out there,  
While I pitch the sail out here  
And let us both cry out, "Heave Ho! Heave Ho! Heave Ho!"

Hear the sound of clanking chain, ringing in tormented vein  
This is not the rendering of the mighty ship's anguished pain!  
Struggling hard to break the shackles of the iron bonds in vain  
Rocking up the vessel from stern to bow!  
Come on let us all cry out. "Heave Ho! Heave Ho! Heave Ho!"

Days and nights have passed on by  
And you may be wondering why  
"Should we steer ahead or return back?  
But don't let your spirits stray  
Fear and doubts will fade away  
Move on with your will and just stay on track!

When there cometh the doomsday  
Thundering clouds are on their way  
Hurricanes are churning up the waves into a mighty sway!  
Don't you fear, oh my dear, join the Nature's beat and pray  
And certainly you shall the glimpse the VIBGYOR !  
Come on let us all cry out. "Heave Ho! Heave Ho! Heave Ho!"



**Shubham (Subrahmanya) Sanyal** is an IT Program Manager based in Chicago. He graduated in Mechanical Engineering from IIT Delhi and passed MBA from the Delhi University. He moved to USA in 1997 and has been settled in Chicago since 1999. His passions include drama, literature and music. Shubham has directed and acted in multiple plays in Bengali, Hindi and English. He is an active member of Unmesh, the Bengali literary society in Chicago and has written several stories, poems, articles and published a book of Bengali comic stories called 'Time-Pass'.



**Shubham Sanyal**

**The Hero**

**a Child's Fantasy**

**(Americanized adaptation of Rabindranath Thakur's 'Bir Purursh')**

1. Imagine we are traveling through the day  
With Mama to lands far away.  
Mama with her knitting kit and fan  
Sitting 'neath the Caravan roof  
I'm on my trusty stallion 'Dan'  
Sending up dust-smoke at each hoof !
2. The sun descends below the battered plain.  
We emerge into a bleak terrain.  
Boulders, bushes and cacti -  
Nought but wilderness meets the eye.  
So, Mama, you anxiously ask me,  
"Koko son, tell me, where are we?"  
Casually I reply, "Mamma dear,  
Yonder flows the river, why fear?"
3. Thorny bushes dot the dusty ground.  
Ahead we spy the pathway veering round.  
No bird, no beast comes into our sight;  
They're homebound with the onset of the night.  
We know not now to which place we walk  
For every thing has blurred out with the dark.  
You call me and whisper to me then,  
"What's that light I spy within the glen?"
4. Suddenly rings out a piercing yell.  
Red Indians are riding down the dell !  
Huddled in a corner of the cart  
You pray to God with all your heart.  
The drivers two who thought themselves too smart  
Have disappeared in fear of their lives.  
Assuring you I say, "It's okay Mom !  
I'm still here with my two Colt 45's"





5. With bows, arrows, spears and tomahawks  
Indians now are thundering down the rocks !  
Furiously I cry out, "Hold on there !  
Stop before it's late, or if you dare  
Come nearer you shall not return!"  
Yet they laugh and come without concern.
6. "Koko we must flee!" you plead to me.  
I say, "Mom, just relax and see."  
With both guns drawn I ride to meet the 'Red'  
Arrows now are whistling by my head  
My guns spit fire, and fast one by one  
They topple over, and then ....they're all gone!
7. By this time you've plunged in grief and dread  
For you think that Koko's surely dead.  
Suddenly from by your side you hear  
"The fight is over. They're all gone, Mama dear."  
You jump out and in great ecstasy  
Pull me to your bosom and kiss me,  
Saying, "Dear, you *are* a worthy son!  
A braver man I know not anyone!"  
.....
8. So many things happen every day.  
Why can't such a thing be true some day ?  
Wouldn't that be a fabulous tale to tell?  
Listeners would be bound as though in spell.  
And Uncle Bob would tease me and say, "Waaal,  
Koko is not *that* brave at his best!"  
But townfolk would pat my back and say,  
"Koko is the Hero of the West!"

----- O -----



**Shubham Sanyal**  
**The Mantra of Life!**  
**Robi Thakoor' "Tomar Holo Shuru"**

My task here is done,  
While yours has just begun.  
And thus 'tween you and me  
Life just ....goes on and on!

.....

Lights brighten up your home  
Friends in merry-making spree!  
The dark night descends on me,  
And stars just lead me on...  
My task here is done....while yours has just begun!

.....

You stand firm on solid ground  
While I float in the sea.  
You can sit back, relax  
While I'm on a moving spree.

Your earnings rise every day  
My savings are on decay.  
The grey future shakes your mind,  
....but my worries are all gone!  
My task here is done....while yours has just begun!

.....





## Kathy Powers

### I Know

I see Chapstick on the Redline tracks.

I see beggars in the street, oh yes!

I see plastic in the trees so high.

And I know why.

Yes, I know why.

I see deep holes in the street; I trip.

I see pigeons, and they're spiked, lifeless.

I see fences on bare lots, no less.

And I know why.

Yes, I know why.

I see people shout in streets with signs.

I see ear buds blocking out the noise.

I see artwork on brick walls quite nice!

And I know why.

Yes, I know why.

I see traffic backed up miles, oh my!

I see PACE cars missing pick up times.

I see readers scratch their heads, in time.

And I know why.

Don't ask me why.

---

**Kathy Powers**—I am a civil rights activist and developed my passions from coping with bipolar disorder symptoms. I have a tagline: "Advocacy is my therapy." Through advocacy I have discovered truth and beauty in helping people and sharing art.

---



M. C. Rydel

**New Year's Eve in Paradise**

Time sweeps her hand across the Earth  
Like a monstrous spirit the size of suns,  
Who brushes invisible moments onto all of us  
As her gleaming lamplit gaze dazzles like starlight.

She rattles the earthen-floor tin shacks  
Of our island without monsoon flash  
Or trade wind blast - and shimmies westward  
Sprinkling joy and sorrow on the faces of clocks,

Wrapping moments of tawdry lace  
Into glinting, clinking, noisy British glass,  
Seeping through overcast cracks like a melting moon  
Illuminating Bronze Age hunters on the hills and reaves.

I can see her blue snowstorms creep on radar screens  
And make their way across the frozen lake,  
Muffling music in Michigan huts  
With the smell of whiskey on her breath.

She won't make it to Hawaii for hours,  
Until then, here I wait in Paradise, thirty-eight minutes,  
Counting, forgetting, distracted and drinking  
Knowing it is time to change my life.





Viola Lee

**The Dancer & The Violinist**

It is the beginning of Summer,  
& my daughter, always an early  
riser, watches a video clip posted  
by a friend on Facebook. Meanwhile,  
families, at our nation's border  
down south, split up &  
separated from each other,  
children are as early as 12  
& 18 months, or younger.  
This clip plays round & round —  
an old violinist playing a soft  
melody, slightly melancholy,  
on a street in old Trieste,  
a cafe with people sitting, a family  
a mother (sister?), a daughter,  
& of course, the father.  
The mother (sister?) stares  
& inches closer to the sound  
from the old violinist. Seconds  
pass, the father speaks,

they are Palestinian. He speaks  
to his daughter & then says, *Do it*.  
Where & then, she stands & does.  
Everything begins to disappear.  
We no longer focus on that town,  
the father or the mother (sister?),  
or the people sitting at that cafe —  
We turn instead to the daughter-dancer &  
the old musician & watch how they both  
eat up time with violin & motion,  
devouring space, surrendering  
to that which gives them this power  
and together, the two of them, the  
violinist & dancer make & create  
something unworthy of language, unworthy  
of movement — something near —  
as when countries, cities, states,  
create a head-on collision of sorts,  
an unearthing, a possibility, a final  
release, let go, let down, we let go.

---

**Viola Lee** was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois. She studied Poetry at Loyola University, Chicago and received her MFA from New York University. Her poem *City of Neighborhoods* was published in an anthology of Chicago poetry called *City of the Big Shoulders* which was published by the University of Iowa Press. Her manuscript *Lightening after the Echo* was published by Another New Calligraphy last year. She teaches 6-9 year olds at Near North Montessori School and lives in Chicago with her husband, her son and her daughter.

---



## David Nekimken

### The Last Crumb

It always starts out as whole-  
a double chocolate cake or  
pecan pie or  
chocolate chip cookies or  
sourdough bread...

Then I and my housemates begin to attack them with vigor  
one piece at time  
slivers, small pieces or large hunks  
until  
there is one serving left-  
of a carrot cake or  
lemon meringue pie or  
oreo cookies or  
whole wheat bread...

Now this is where it gets interesting  
or weird or just plain amusing,  
the last piece has been cut in half  
then half again  
and half again  
with explanations  
"I'm not very hungry"  
"I'm not a pig. I want to save some for another housemate"  
"I need to exercise self control"...

Until  
we arrive at the last crumb,  
If we proceed any further  
we'd be splitting the last atom



of a strawberry shortcake or  
sweet potato pie or  
oatmeal raisin cookie or  
Sabbath challah  
(as if any atom has such an identity)...

This is serious business  
as splitting an atom leads  
to a nuclear reaction  
a nuclear chain reaction  
a nuclear explosion  
and a mushroom cloud,  
nobody wants to see a mushroom cloud  
and slow death by radiation poisoning...

A bold housemate eats the last piece  
and explains  
"That piece is mine"  
"Others had their chance"  
"I'm hungry and don't need to apologize to anyone",  
and does the unthinkable,  
the real reason for all this tomfoolery  
"I guess I'll just have to clean the cake pan  
or pie tin or cookie sheet",  
And if he/she/they are feeling guilty  
Or crazy or particularly magnanimous  
"I guess I'll just have to bake a red velvet cake  
(or strawberry rhubarb pie or peanut cookies or pumpernickel bread)"...

So, it's every man, woman or child for him/her/themselves,  
Go for it, eat the *first* piece!



**David Nekimken** — David is a senior citizen who has been a poet most of his life, with poems published in a few publications. He has a self-published book of poems *Anything and Everything Goes*. He is a grandfather with three wonderful grandchildren. He currently lives in a housing co-op in Hyde Park.



## Urmi Chakraborty

### Tutsy & Tutiana

Early one morning at 5:30AM, they both came out from the egg shells looking towards the first sun of their life. They tried to crawl on the sandy beach while the gush of the cold wind made a shiver on their spines. The white foam on the blue waves lashing on the beach invited them to the monotonous destiny but they refused it and did not look back. It is a journey of two brave souls who wanted to explore a beautiful unknown world, called Muscat. They are Tutsy and Tutiana, my two loving turtles and my best friends.

It is not an easy job for anyone to explore the new horizon and it has been proved by many explorers from Columbus to Captain Cook. But these brave soul turtles chose their own destiny.

I still remember the date and it was on my birthday, 29th April, when I brought the sweet turtles in my house and was overwhelmed with joy. They were very small, little and looked very cute. Whenever I call them by their names, Tutsy and Tutiana, they come running toward me. I take them in my hand and they look at me with their small black eyes which looks like a button in such a way as if they are conveying something to me. Tutsy and Tutiana eat, play and sleep together. It is really amazing to see the love and bonding between them. Most of the time they prefer to remain in water and they come on the small island in their tank when they feel sleepy. It is very nice to see both of them how they hug each other and sleep very deeply.

Tutsy and Tutiana are my dearest and most loving pets. They have a routine life and follow it scrupulously. They get up early in the morning at 6AM and I feed them. My pets are so sensitive that if food is given by anyone else they will not eat. After taking food they play for a while and try to explore various things like putting their legs up and standing by catching the tree, coming outside of their tank after struggling a lot. It is very interesting to see how they perform various activities. During the morning I keep my two sweet pets on my balcony and they move around everywhere. I enjoy very much to see them playing with each other. They are very sweet natured and also very calm and quiet. For about 2-3 hours they move around the house, sometimes sit quietly and sometimes move their head to see the new place as they are very inquisitive by nature. Then I carry them back to their place in a vessel. They sleep in the afternoon and in the evening I give them a small quantity of food. As soon as they finish eating they start playing.

My friends visit my house very often to see my two little turtles. They watch the activities of the turtles very keenly and enjoy them a lot. They feel very astonished to see them. It is really amazing to see the intense





love between them. When my friends try to feed Tutsy and Tutiana, they refuse to take the food. My pets never get scared of anyone in fact are very friendly with everybody.

Time passed very quickly and I observed that the female turtle, Tutiana, has grown little bigger than Tutsy. Now both of them have become a little naughty. Tutiana always tries to come outside of their tank by standing on top of Tutsy to explore the new place.



It is not necessary that we can learn things only from human beings. I feel that lots of things can be learnt from animals as well as turtles, fish, birds etc. Though we cannot communicate with them, we can understand them very well. They have their own language and they convey to us various things like when they feel hungry they make sounds.

I never thought that I will get such sweet and loving friends in my life. After coming to Muscat I am charmed to see the beauty of the country and moved to see a very unique species like the turtles which have taken an important place in my heart.

I take lot of care for my pets as they are my loving, caring, dearest and best friends. They are part of my life and I cannot imagine living without my best friends who are everything for me.

I feel that not only human beings can be best friends but also animals and birds can become very loving as well as dearest friends. I am very lucky that I got Tutsy and Tutiana with whom I spend the whole day and do not miss my friends who are staying in India. I keep myself engaged all the time looking after my pets. Not only turtle, I also have two java birds and three goldfish. So I have seven friends totally in Muscat and my pets have filled the empty place in my life. I am very deeply attached with all my pets and they are like members of my family. Even my husband loves them very much and takes immense care of them. Despite his busy schedule he devotes some time for them. It is only because of his support that I am able to manage to keep such loving pets with the utmost love and care.



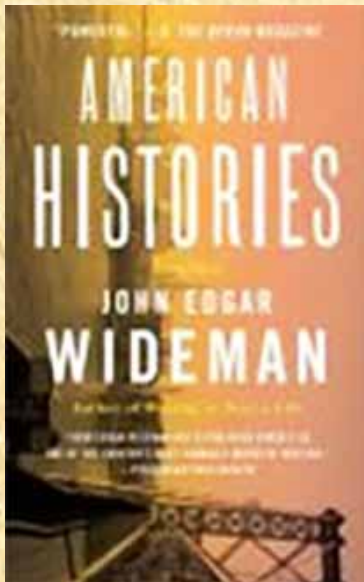
**Urmi** presently lives in Sydney. She has a great passion for travelling and love to explore new places, avid reader of english novels. She wrote numerous hindi poems and english articles in facebook and different blogs. She is extremely happy to share her creation with Batayan's readers.



## Lew Rosenbaum

### Collage—A Review Essay

[*American Histories*, by John Edgar Wideman, was published in May, 2018. The paperback will be released later this month, March 26, 2019, by Scribner— ISBN 9781501178351, \$16. It should be available at your favorite bookstore]



You can discover the key to *American Histories*, the profoundly dialectical collection of what purports to be short stories by master craftsman John Wideman, on page 206. “Well, Basquiat asks, how does the artist resolve this dilemma, Maestro? This perpetual losing battle, this shifting back and forth, this absence, gap, this oblivion between a reality the senses seize and a reality the imagination seizes.” The Maestro in this story is Romare Bearden, the artist who in his youth lived in the Pittsburgh neighborhood, in which Wideman himself grew up a couple of decades later. The conversation is imagined, but it could have been real, because Bearden and Jean-Michel Basquiat lived and worked not far from each other in Harlem, where both of them died in the same year, 1988. Bearden, who preferred to be considered an artist and was usually called a “collagist,” was born in 1911. Basquiat, described primarily as a painter, was born in 1960 and died at 27. Bearden and Basquiat never met.



Perhaps it’s the parallelism in their work, the fact that they were both giants of the art world in New York at the same time; that they incorporated, in abstract work, elements that clearly responded to the social situation that surrounded them; that jazz influenced their work; that Bearden was of the Black art movement and that Basquiat seemed unaware of it – perhaps all of that is why Wideman chooses to imagine a conversation between the two of them. You can be curious about that if you want to. But it’s what he does with the mystery of the artistic forms that connect them and what separates them, and the

Pittsburgh story, that intrigues me.

For instance, a page later he expands on this “losing battle” in describing the problem of collage: “He’s (Bearden) unable to explain to Basquiat why removal of objects from an array sometimes makes the array more plentiful, not smaller. Nor can he explain how a board on which he is arranging things becomes more spacious as he packs it.” Or, Wideman has Bearden say, a few sentences later, “You might say each collage starts with the bare bones of a story.” He tells a brief story about how he and two other kids beat up a



Romare Bearden



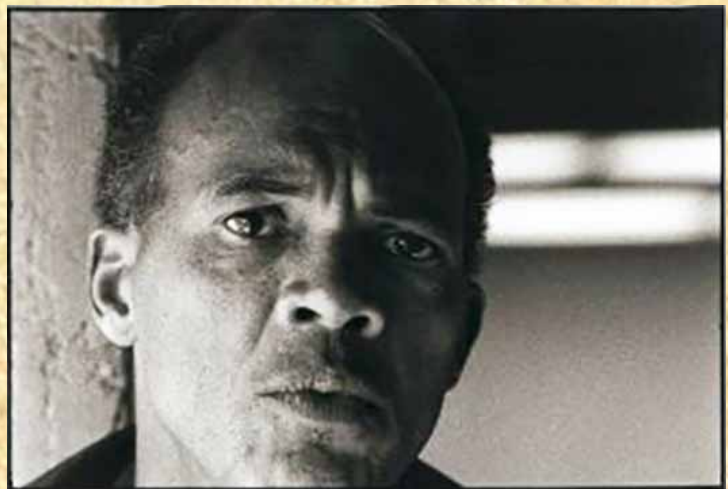
neighbor. When Bearden's grandmother intervenes, she brings that disabled neighbor boy, Eugene, to live with his family. A story that haunts the artist for 50 years: "A collage I built [*Farewell Eugene*] is layer upon layer questions about that simple story." Adding each piece to the collage requires studying that piece, and the whole composition disappears; "To see it whole again, his eyes must relinquish his grip on the element."

And so it is with the whole of *American Histories*. But in this collage, concentrating on this one piece ("Collage") brings everything else into focus. *American Histories* is a collage of imagined American history, in which the imaginative is at least as important as the sensual. The writer struggles with the gap between what maybe ought to have occurred and what we believe did happen. John Brown and Frederick Douglass converse in the very first story, the Old Man unable to convince the escaped slave to join him at Harper's Ferry. It's not clear what part of "JB and FD" is real, what is imagined, and through it all what part is the writer's voice. And it ends with wondering why the author makes John Brown a Black man.

Wideman plays with the confessions of Nat Turner, imagining what is going through his head as he stands ready for execution. Turner begins to recite his "abc's" – he is self taught, and instructs us about his own history and plans. As he explains the meanings of letters, he reaches his conclusion skipping to the end of the alphabet. An alphabet foreshortened as much as execution foreshortened his life.

At the very beginning, Wideman's "prefatory note" is an open letter to the president. It's likely written, or at least finished, after the 2016 election, and he wonders if the president who receives this note along with his stories will be a woman, perhaps a Black woman. If any president will receive it, he doubts. Wideman doesn't explain the stories: They speak for themselves. "The note is a plea, Mr. President. Please eradicate slavery." And maybe, Wideman declares, terminating slavery may even be "beyond your vast powers." The thirteenth amendment did not accomplish the fact, another example of the play between sense and imagination, "But you should understand better than most of us, Mr. President, that history tells as many lies as truths."

There is of course the poetry of the language, a defining characteristic of Wideman's writing. Framing the whole as a collage though, makes me look again and again at an element in "Maps and Ledgers," a sentence that begins on page 57 and ends on page 59 and has to be written this way. A story as much about language as about a life experience. Story with sentences, like this one, without verbs and articles. Another gem of a short story in which every paragraph begins with "We go out to dinner and discuss." The two paragraph story "Bunny and Glide" parodies with the robbers of legendary fame. The long story, in which Wideman's narrator stands at the edge of the Williamsburg Bridge contemplating suicide.

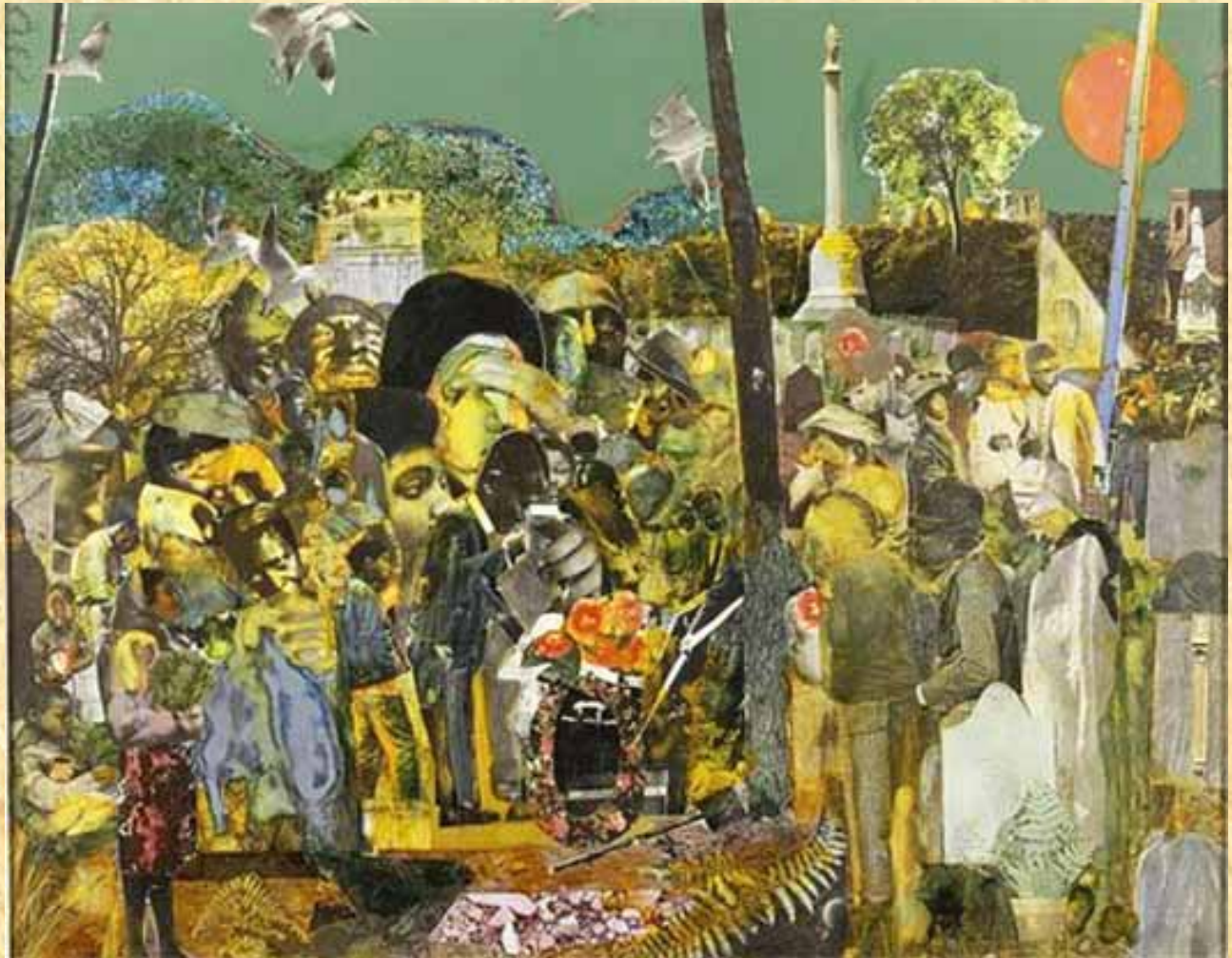


John Edgar Wideman

In the Aldous Huxleyesque universe of "Empire," Wideman replaces "superfluous



distinctions" like race and gender with the "gratefuls" and the "givers." This, in a way, reprises the prefatory note's allusion to the separation of peoples by immutable but superfluous categories and the question, when will it end and under what circumstances? His story "Expectations" ends with "I expect Nat Turner. I expect he will die again for the sin of color." If we get a second coming of Nat Turner, do we also get a second coming of John Brown? What will the next Harper's Ferry look like?



*Pittsburgh Memories — Farewell Eugene by Romare Bearden*

From beginning to end, Wideman layers story after story, after a patient lifetime's practice, as if they are colors, fabrics, doing what Bearden did on a board, having "practice[d] patiently for a lifetime the skills of cutting and pasting, gluing down textures, colors, fabric, layer after layer to picture what the past may have been and how it rises again, solid and present as the bright orange disc of the sun I put at the top right corner of *Farewell Eugene*."







Sreya Sarkar

## One Hundred-Rupees

The cheery picture on the book cover drew Pari's eyes instantly. The exposed light bulb hanging above quavered and swayed from side to side in a dance of light and shadow in which the elephant in the picture seemed to march on with a grinning boy in a knight's armor on its back. They seemed to be on their way to an exciting journey and Pari for a moment wished she could go along. She pursed her lips as she read the name on the cover. *The Adventures of Dennis by Victor Dragunsky*. Neither the title, nor the author rang a bell really, yet she took the book off the shelf and settled down on the only stool available in the bookstall, just as wobbly as the hanging bulb but sufficient to support her slight weight.

Ever since she had hit the double-digit age group, her body had only grown in height and shoe size, and the rest of her had forgotten to play catch up and accumulate proportional fat. Her legs were like toothpicks and her hands like rubber bands, all bendy and flexible, so much so that her teacher had requested her to demonstrate a reflex angle with her hand at the start of the school year. The girls in her class had rolled their eyes and the boys had emitted an intemperate outburst of laughter to her demonstration. Not too conscious about her physical appearance till then, Pari had felt a hot flush of humiliation wash over her and decided with a heavy heart, to turn to books and stories instead of the mean kids around her. She started reading up everything that came her way and had secretly started preferring them over friends.

The blurb on the back cover said that it was a collection of short stories about an eight-year-old boy in Moscow in the nineteen-sixties. Pari read the first short story and gawped at the cheerful illustrations. She read another and found it humorous. *Wasn't it a bit childish of her to indulge in a picture book*, she wondered. After all, she had graduated from reading Enid Blyton to Classics like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Treasure Island* and was recently trying to read Sherlock Holmes though its archaic English was getting in her way more often than she would like to let on. Her newfound love for books and long hours of perusing was puffing up her pride and converting her into a book snob.

Pari turned the book over in her hands a couple of times and flinched inwardly as she learned its price from the orange tag stuck to its spine. It was double the amount she received as her monthly pocket money. One-hundred rupees was way out of her reach. She tucked the hard-bound book away and scanned the other books peeping out of the shelf. Nikolai Gogol and Leo Tolstoy stared back at her. She had seen these authors in her father's collection. They looked terribly serious, unlike the yellow book she had in her hands a moment ago. She turned her attention to the table that displayed Russian fairy-tale illustrated books translated into English and Bengali. They looked less expensive but her heart did not truly desire them. The book that she wanted cost one-hundred rupees, a big amount for a twelve-year-old in the late nineteen-eighties Calcutta, much before it was renamed Kolkata.

It was a time when Salt Lake's neighborhood Durga *puja* celebrations were low-key, the lighting and *pandal* tents, less elaborate; the Durga idol rosy-cheeked and homely, with no similarity with Bollywood stars as some of the idols of present time exhibit. Neither did they look





like aliens packed with metallic steel or gold colored paint designed by the present day abstract art lovers. The celebration was more about the residents' need to form a close community. It was focused on organizing cultural programs to intellectually tutor their children. The business side of the *puja* had not yet kicked in as back then, there was no competition for the Asian Paints Award to attract media attention. It was the cultural and emotional side that found expression and nurturing during festivals.

The tail end of the eighties had exposed India to the winds of change that were about to usher in economic liberalization but there was still a good dose of romanticism left for the Marxist ideology. The bond between Bengal and Russia was sounder than the rest of the country because of the Communist ruling party in charge in that era. Though the political party claimed to be secular, they did not shy away from tossing in a stall or two of Soviet Union book stalls with their distinguished red colored banners in Durga Puja *pandals* all over the city. The over-the-top propaganda though did not seem out of place for children of those times who were unsuspectingly drawn towards Russian literature, popular for their amazing pictures and relatable storylines.

Pari was standing in one such garishly red, almost empty bookstall mindfully absorbing its quiet ambiance and the smell of glue and paint and new books when her friend called out her name in an unintentionally harsh tone.

"I have been looking for you everywhere. The show is going to start any minute and they will not be able to hold on to our seats if we don't show up now!" she said pointing to their other friends.

Pari turned away from the bookstall and picked her way through the crowd assembled to watch the evening's presentation. She did not care much for it, but her friend's sister was participating in the dance show and it could appear rather rude if she chickened out of it at the last minute to stare at a silly book.

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"I saw a book last evening at the Soviet Union stall which looked like a lot of fun," Pari said to her father as he read the morning newspaper. She dangled her thin legs sitting on the wide window sill in their living room sipping noisily from her cup of milk and Bournvita.

"What is the book about?" he asked folding the paper in half.

"It is about a boy called Dennis who lives in Moscow. The stories are short but quite hilarious..."

"How much?"

"What?" Pari paused between her sips.

"How much does the book cost?" asked her father without raising his eyes from the paper.

"One hundred," Pari mumbled.

"I can't hear you. Speak louder."

"One hundred rupees."

"Hmm...", he said looking up from the newspaper for a moment. Pari knew that look too well. It meant *Are you out of your mind?*





"It is expensive," she added.

"It is," said her father raising his eyebrows slightly.

And that was that. The end of the conversation. He went back to his newspaper and Pari let out a long sigh.

There was no point thinking about the book anymore. She would have to search for it in her school library or perhaps read a few more stories and look at the pictures later in the day when she revisited the stall. Brushing aside the thoughts Pari got ready to go out with her friends..

As she was leaving, her father called out to her.

"Do you really like that book?"

"Yes, I do," said Pari, her eyes lighting up.

"Then you have to earn it."

"How?"

"Come closer."

Pari stepped close to her father, taking in his broad forehead and big shapely eyes behind thick-framed glasses. A smile formed on his lips traveling up to his eyes, adding a secret twinkle to them. Pari loved looking at her father's face. It was her most favorite face in the World.

"How many grey hairs can you see?" he asked pointing to his temples.

Pari's eyes narrowed as she focused on her father's scattering of grey amidst mostly black hair. "I don't see too many."

"I will pay you for every grey hair you pluck out. One rupee per hair."

"Why?" It sounded like a ridiculous idea to Pari.

"So that you can buy that book you were telling me about."

"What if I don't find so many grey hair?"

"What if you do? There is no way of knowing for sure, is there?"

"No."

Pari gazed at her father, turning over the idea in her mind slowly. It was impossible to judge looking at his mop of thick hair if there were really that many grey hairs hiding in there.

"It will take time."

"I know but, today is only *Shaptami*. You have till *Dashami*. That gives you four days." he said sticking out four of his slender fingers.

"Can I start now?"

"Aren't you going out with your friends now?"

"That can wait."

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Pari plucked out twenty-two of her father's grey hairs. She let go of the task as her hand started hurting.

Next morning, she asked her mother for a tweezers. "My fingers get slippery, I need it to get a better grip of Baba's hair," she explained. As her mother learned about her arrangement with her father, she teased Pari. "How many of the hairs you are taking out are really grey?"

"You know, I don't cheat." A scowl zigzagged her thin brows.

"Then you will never get a hundred rupees."

Her mother was not pessimistic as such but her brand of honesty tended to discourage Pari from doing anything experimental or adventurous. Pari nodded at her mother acknowledging the truth in her words. For a fifty-five-year old man, her father was strikingly young looking with hardly any grey hair.

"Now I have already committed to it. How can I back out?"

"It is your decision, what can I say? The tweezers is in the first drawer of my dressing table. Return it to its place once you are done with it," said her mother before turning away, leaving behind her a whiff of talcum powder.

She sat her father down for another session and plucked out thirty-five shiny, silver hairs. This time she laid them out on a dark cloth so that her credibility would not be questioned, the germ of the idea had been mentioned earlier by her mother, riling her up enough to take the step.

*Thirty-five plus twenty-two equal to fifty-seven. Another forty-three to go!* She did the math letting out a quiet sigh.

*Dashami* arrived way too soon. She and her friends had spent their *puja* days frolicking around in their new clothes, the kind that was in fashion, *dhoti salwars*, and long skirts with absurdly wide belts, eating an insane amount of *bhelpuri* and *phuchka* and other street food that were not allowed during the rest of the year. Every now and then Pari would peep into the bookstall to look at the yellow book, sometimes managing to read an additional story, but mostly catching only a brief glimpse.

The number of grey hair severed stood at eighty-nine on *Dashami*. Pari combed through her father's hair carefully but could not find any more.

"I took out eighty-nine grey hairs. I cannot find any more. So, will I still get a hundred-rupees or only eighty-nine?"

"What do you think I should do?" asked her father.

Pari shrugged her shoulders without responding. Her father fixed her with a stare that made her uncomfortable. There was no telling what was going on in his mind when he looked at anyone like that. A sudden spell of self-respect took over her and she felt irritated by the uncertainty the situation had ushered in.

"I don't know."

There was a touch of resignation in her voice and how she wished she could mask that. It was just a book. There was no reason to feel so attached to it.





As she sat finishing her breakfast that morning, her father came down from his room dressed in clean ironed *dhoti Punjabi*, the traditional Bengali attire, she did not often find him in.

"Let's go to the *pandal* together," he said and Pari's eyebrows shot up. He never went to the *pandal* in the mornings.

*And the mystery continues. Why did he have to create so much suspense about a simple thing?* He could have simply told her if he will give her hundred-rupees, or not, but he chose to drag it on meaninglessly.

She had to walk fast to keep up with her father's long strides. A gentle October breeze ruffled her new frock's lace and made it stick to her scrawny legs. She hated the frilly frock she was wearing but her mother had announced that she was not grown up enough to choose her dress every day of the puja, which Pari had wholeheartedly argued against. But however willful she might be she could not hurt her mother's feelings by refusing to obey her, and now she felt annoyed as she came close to the *pandal*. Nothing was in her control, neither the dress she wore nor the book she wanted to buy so badly. That, mixed with the realization that it was the last day of puja, dampened her mood infinitely. She did not want to pause but, her legs stopped involuntarily in front of the Soviet Union bookstall. The yellow book was displayed in the front today as if to mock and make her feel even more miserable. She turned away from it with a sigh and bumped into her father, who was standing right behind her.

"Sorry," she said with a start.

Her father was watching her with an unreadable expression pasted on his face. He pointed towards the book. "Is that the one you were telling me about?"

Pari nodded her head.

He picked up the book and leafed through the pages. A slight smile hovered on his mouth as he took in the pictures. Pari observed her father and suddenly felt happy in spite of how low she felt overall. She could tell that he liked her choice and that made her feel proud. Her father caught her looking at him a moment later and a big smile cracked his lips open. He handed her the book and took out a hundred-rupee note from his leather wallet.

"Go buy it," he said softly.

Pari stood blinking her eyes in quick succession.

Her father knew she wanted a glimpse into his thought. So, he added, "I am paying you eighty-nine for the grey hairs and an extra eleven for your patience."







## Bani Bhattacharyya

### Christmas Eve

*"There is always some madness in love...."*

"Would you please reach the container of sugar on the top shelf of the cupboard for me?" Rita asked her husband, Ben in a loud voice while he is watching the football game on TV.

Ben slowly paced towards the kitchen, keeping his eyes fixed on the TV and handed it to Rita. She understood Ben wasn't entirely happy doing her this favor.

This type of problem wasn't new in her life. Rita was four feet, eight inches in height. She had dark complexion and poor eyesight. Rita recalled her mother's suggestion, "Instead of looking at his bank balance, you should look for a tall man with a relatively fair complexion who has good eyesight, so your children can enjoy a better life."

Maybe God was listening to Rita's mother. Rita married Ben, and he made up for what her mother considered Rita's shortcomings.

When they purchased their home, Rita made sure she could at least reach a few lower shelves in the kitchen. The upper shelves were harder to reach for her, so Rita either had to depend on her husband as he was five feet, ten inches, or she had to pull out a chair to reach the top cupboards.

Many years had passed. Rita became middle aged. It didn't bother her anymore when people commented on her short stature.

For the last few weeks, Ben was unusually cheerful. Rita guessed his good mood was due to anticipation of their two sons and their families coming from Boston for Christmas. She also invited the parents of one of her daughters-in-law, Amal, and Sheila, who lived forty miles from Rita and Ben. The daughter-in-law's brother and his family were also invited.

Rita prepared dinner for the Christmas holiday. She cooked all the items on her menu by herself. Sometimes she needed help from Ben to bring down some spices from the top shelves of the cabinets. He helped her with a smile on his face. Rita thought his upbeat mood was just his Christmas spirit.

After dinner on Christmas Eve, everyone was of good cheer as they exchanged gifts. Rita had bought a nice sweater for her husband which she handed to him. After opening the present, Ben said, "What am I going to do with this one? I've enough sweaters lying in the closet."

Rita felt embarrassed in front of the in-laws. Then she softly asked, "Are you going to wear it?"

"I have to now, because you spent good money on it."

Instead of losing her temper, Rita asked him to try it on.

Ben answered calmly, "I will. But first let me bring you your gift." He headed for the basement.





Rita was surprised. Knowing her husband, she couldn't think of him going anywhere on his own to buy a gift for her. On Christmas, Ben had told her, "Because you don't like whatever I buy you, take my credit card. You can buy whatever you like at whatever price you want to spend."

His comment was right. So far whatever he purchased for her either she didn't like or didn't need it. She chose to either return the gifts to the store or give them away to friends. Sometimes she even donated them to the Salvation Army. Rita thought, *What in the world did he buy me now that I will have to open in front of the in-laws?*

In the meantime Ben came up from the basement carrying a large box, nicely wrapped in Christmas paper. He placed it in front of her. Everyone stared at the box with wide open eyes. Rita opened the box with sheer curiosity. To her utter amazement, she saw inside the box a black three wheeled stepstool.

Proudly Ben said, "This is a special gift from me to you. Now you don't have to wait for me to bring down anything from the high selves in the cupboards." He gave her a sly look.

Rita started to seethe with anger. She thought, *Was this a proper gift to give somebody just to remind about her deficiency in front of guests on Christmas Eve?* She tried to compose herself as best as she could, and uttered "Thank you," in a low voice.

Her in-law, Sheila, commented, "A very practical gift! You're so thoughtful, Ben! This will be a great help for Rita!"

Amal added, "Wow! What a great idea."

Another year went by. The stepstool was a great help to Rita throughout the year. She was happy not seeing Ben's bothered unhappy face for her need.

A soft white blanket of snow covered the ground as a cold chilly wind blew reminding people that Christmas was approaching quickly. Party time would soon be at hand, Rita thought, so get ready. Again this year, Rita wanted the party in her house on Christmas Eve. Her sons, physicians wouldn't make it, as they were both on call at their hospitals. Daughter-in-law's brother also had an excuse not to come. So this year only Ben, Rita, Amal and Sheila, would spend Christmas Eve together with a fine dinner Rita would prepare. She kept three gifts under their decorated tree. Rita bought a sweater for Amal, a warm shawl for Sheila and a hat and gloves for her husband. She thought, her husband would most likely forget to buy any gift for her. Maybe he'd give her a check to choose her own gift. At least she wouldn't be embarrassed in front of the in-laws.

On Christmas Eve, after having a delicious, sumptuous meal, they went into the family room to open the gifts. A beautiful cozy warm atmosphere by the nice flame of fire in the fireplace brought cheers into everybody's mind. While Rita prepared to hand out some of the gifts, she noticed that Ben stands up and disappear. She thought because of a sudden call of natural demand in his body, he left the room for a few minutes. Soon, he reappeared with two large unwrapped cardboard boxes. Because he tried to balance the heavy load in his hands, he was going to lose his own equilibrium. Amal immediately got up to help him, carried one of the boxes and placed it on the floor. Rita looked at those boxes and knew immediately what was inside.

Without hesitation, Ben took out the pocket knife on his keychain and opened one of the boxes. He placed the box in front of Sheila. "This is for you. I know you go through the same





difficulty Rita does, being short." It was a stepstool exactly the same color and same shape as he had bought for Rita the Christmas before.

Rita was startled. She couldn't believe her eyes and ears. *Who would dare to say to a woman, an invited guest, especially an in-law, that her body was deficient because she was short?* Rita felt ashamed, her ears felt warm. This was almost like bullying. When would Ben learn to behave like a mature person?

Rita was almost ready to apologize to Sheila for her husband, but Sheila spoke first, "You helped me a lot and thank you. Ever since I saw the stepstool in your house, I looked at numerous stores to buy one for myself, but I had no luck. I was too embarrassed to ask you where you bought it. Thank you immensely."

Rita was stunned to hear Sheila's remark and felt relieved and happy that Sheila liked the gift. Before she could say anything, Ben said to her, "Darling, don't worry. I bought the exact same gift for you, so you could use it upstairs too." He then placed the unopened box at her feet. Rita had nothing to say to Ben in front of the in-laws. She managed a dry smile for him.

Rita found that the second stool came in handy. She kept bedspreads, blankets, etc, on the top shelf of the closet. Rita thought, *How had she lived so long without these gadgets?*

Another year went quickly by and it was December again. This year both of her boys decided to go skiing with their families. Daughter-in-law's parents and their son went to visit India. So Rita and Ben were alone in their nest for this Christmas holidays. Rita didn't feel like decorating the house with lights, nor did she want a Christmas tree. Who was going to see it or critique it? There was more snow outside than she expected. Because of her progressing age, Rita preferred to be homebound during holidays. She had no desire to exchange gifts. At the last moment, she bought a coffee mug with Ben's name printed on it. She kept the gift in the closet.

On Christmas morning, Rita handed Ben the gift saying, "This is a small gift for you. For God's blessing, we all are doing good, and everybody is happy when we have here each other."

Before even opening his gift, Ben said enthusiastically, "Thanks. I have something for you. But, you have to keep your eyes shut tight until I tell you to open them."

He took Rita's two hands passionately in his and placed them on her closed eyes.

Rita was so touched that she could not utter a word. In her thirty years of marriage, Ben never had showed so much emotion. She thought, while keeping her eyes tightly closed and covered, *Ben had probably bought me an expensive diamond ring or a gold necklace. Besides showing off her expensive gift, she has to brag later on about this day.* She never expected him to be so romantic. As she daydreamed for a few minutes, keeping her eyes tightly closed, she could suddenly feel Ben's presence.

Ben softly said, "Open your eyes now."

Rita enthusiastically opened eyes to find on the floor in front of her an ugly, black, three-wheel stepping stool. This time, it wasn't even in a box or wrapped.

Ben whispered with a canny smile, "This one is to keep in the basement. I know you are thinking to remodel the basement, and these days people seem to be taller, so they make cabinets with higher selves. This stepstool will come in handy for you."



Rita didn't know whether to cry or laugh, scream or yell, kick him out of the house or keep him forever. Then suddenly she wanted to hug him for being so different, not like any other man in the world.

Many years have passed since that Christmas. The basement was eventually done and the kicking three wheeled stepstool came in handy. Many of her friends admired her husband's thoughtfulness. Some of them asked him where he purchased the stepstool.

With all these memories and their uncommon relationship, they lived happily together and love towards each other kept them going. Rita realized how special Ben was to her by adapting and compromising being the magic behind it.

If Rita could only share her Christmas stories with others.

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**Bani Bhattacharyya** — Since my childhood my passion was to write my day to day events. Born in Kolkata, I came to the USA in 1960's. Being married in America, I was busy to fulfill my professional duty and taking care of my family. Now, I live in Barrington, IL and enjoy writing novels, short stories and poems. Many of my articles are now published in Amazon and in various magazines.





Susim Munshi

**Essays from The Education of a Bengali Gentleman —  
Lessons Learnt at Sea Glass Charm Making**

For two years now we have had a family vacation at The Resort at Pelican Hills, Newport Beach, California. We are planning to go back a third time. Three times is a charm! We spend just three nights and four days there and are working on narrowing our list to top five activities for the third and final visit. The list includes our choice of restaurants and food shacks. The farewell lunch will be at P. F. Chang's. It's the right location when you are flying back home from John Wayne Airport, Orange County. We found the perfect appetizers and entrees to suit our different dietary preferences. The portions were just right. Remember to cut out and carry the coupon from your welcome package at the hotel for a discount and one free cocktail. Or any flavored iced tea you like. They look and taste gorgeous, if that word is allowed to describe how a raspberry, pomegranate tea looks and tastes.

Why go through the exercise retelling the highlights of a family vacation with the goodbye lunch? The real highlight of the last trip was the Sea Glass Charm Making class we all took. Literally all! What is sea glass? Naturally produced sea glass originates as pieces of glass from broken bottles, broken tableware, or even shipwrecks, which are rolled and tumbled in the ocean for years until all of their edges are rounded off, and the slickness of the glass has been worn to a frosted appearance. They come in all shapes, sizes and brilliant colors.

When you are on vacation, mornings are lazily wrapped around long stretched out breakfasts. That day we had to make an exception. Quickly drowned coffee and pastries. Class started at 10:00am. When we walked into Captain Long John Silver's pirate decor classroom, we stumbled into all of the other residents who had been up earlier than usual to learn to make sea glass charms. No reservations. The first twenty guests. We got lucky and found a spare high chair to pull around our already set up high table for four all laid out with square pieces of felt cloth, a rainbow of sea glasses in dishes, roll of 22 gauge silver coated copper wire, wire cutters, tweezers and slim paint brushes. No paint. So why the paint brush. We were about to learn soon. The instructors were all enthusiastic, energetic teenagers making a fast buck at a summer resort. But boy! Did they know their art of making sea glass charms to a T. Actually there enthusiasm was infectious. It's what got everyone to get their noses out of their coffee mugs.

The mystery of making a firmly made sea glass charm was in the paintbrush. After you have snipped of a suggested length of the silver coated copper wire, you wrap it tightly around the wood end of the slim paintbrush. It is the starting point of assembling your sea glass charm. Only later did we discover that after your sea glass charm is fully constructed you slip out the paintbrush and WALLA you have the loop into which you can string a necklace to go around your neck. Truly amazing. An easy first step; the rest could not be very complicated. Once your loop was ready you started work on encasing your chosen sea glass with the two loose wires hanging from your recently constructed loop. Mind you the paintbrush stays in place until the very end. You take one loose wire, wrap it firmly around your sea glass, starting at the bottom working upwards and around the the neck of the loop. Twizzlers now come into play. You use them to tighten the first wrap you just made. Now it is turn to repeat these steps with the second loose wire. After that





your repeat with each wire strand alternately till your sea glass is firmly encase and will not dislodge. The silver coated copper wire began to make its own intricate designs with every craftsman at the table. Hopefully your estimate of the length of silver coated copper wire was sufficient to twist firmly around each other several times at the bottom of the sea glass to finish your sea glass charm construction.

The instructors circulated amongst the tables pulling, tugging and twisting the wires making sure not one of the sea glasses were going to escape from their encasings. All of this took about twenty minutes. There were an abundance of high fives going around and many, many exclamations of admiration as we all looked in awe at our handy work . We had each successfully made a sea glass charm. The exercise came to a close with soft leather necklaces passed around on which we hung our charms and wore them proudly. Exaltation. More hugs and pats, and we raised our glasses filled with fruit punch, lemonade or water to toast our masterful work. We wore our sea charms all day.

The next morning was our scheduled visit to Crystal Cove Beach at the Crystal Cove State Park with its 3.5 miles of pristine uninterrupted coastline. We walked in ankle deep water, stooping down to scoop up hand full of sand, sifting through it, looking for our own sea glass. Once or twice we got lucky. Sitting in the palm of our hand was piece of brightly colored sea glass smoothed plain by the ocean. At breakfast at the Beachcomber Cafe we compared our haul over toast, eggs and coffee and made plans to return the following year.

As we sat around our farewell lunch the next day, we had many curious diners ask us where we had bought our attractive sea glass charms dangling from our necks. We answered in one proud unison, "We made them ourselves." And raised a toast!!

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"Forward to the *Essays from The Education of a Bengali Gentleman*" by Susim Munshi — The great Stoic teacher Epictetus stated we become philosophers when we examine our preconceived notions, ask questions about our emotions and even the words we use each day. The essays in this collection are an honest self-examination of Bengali sentiments, values, and beliefs as perceived by the author who while growing up in a traditional Bengali household learned to look at them from a different perspective while going to a Catholic School and College in India, then moving to America for the rest of his adult life."





## Shravani Datta

### Lakeside Vacation

In Hemingway's classic novel, Farewell to Arms, some of us will remember that Frederic Henry takes 'a good room' on Lake Maggiore. Later in the novel, Hemingway writes: 'I remember waking in the morning. Catherine was asleep and the sunlight was coming in through the window. The rain had stopped and I stepped out of bed and across the floor to the window. Down below were the gardens, bare now but beautifully regular, the gravel paths, the trees, the stone wall by the lake and the lake in the sunlight with the mountains beyond.'

That was my first virtual visit to the Lake District, located somewhere in between the snow clad crags of the Alps and the Dolomites of the south.

Dotted with some beautiful lakes and dark green mountains, it has the landscape to relax and soothe any traveler. Milan, the nearby airport, is the gateway to the lakes. From Milan's central station, Como, San Giovanni rail stop is an easy forty five minutes ride, with trains leaving almost every hour.

We arrived on a clear September day, which is definitely a good time to be in Italy. Fewer tourists, moderate weather and prices are lower!

The town of Como is Lake District's most visited and busy town. It is also the starting point of Lake Como and draws crowds as you can begin exploring the rest of the Lake from here. Imagine an inverted "Y" and you get the shape of the Lake which is 32 miles /50 kms of forked shores with some of the prettiest villages, though often intruded by man-made grandeur.



*Lakefront, Como town*



*Como Cathedral, built in the 14th Century*

We opted for a hired car which was waiting outside the station. A lazy one hour drive through the arterial lake shore road took us right to the little village in the eastern shore, Lezzeno.

The Villa Aurora, where we stayed, is a charming villa next to the medieval city hall and church tower. This boutique hotel was renovated to accommodate the modern amenities in a building which regaled in its 20th Century charm.



The spot where the three branches of the Lake meet is also speckled with the villages of Tremezzo, Bellagio, Menaggio and Varenna, very simply connected by Como's waterway the Navigazione Laghi. This is the Centro Lago area, the quintessence of Romantic Italy with opulent villas and glamorous hotels. However, it still retains its absurd rustic beauty in its cobbled streets and narrow stairways opening to courtyards with old towers with huge metal bells calling out at every hour.

Each of my three days in Lezzeno would begin at the break of dawn with thin streaks of balmy sun rays sneaking in through the heavy curtains of the lake facing room. A quick freshly brewed coffee would be invariably followed by an elaborate breakfast seizing some local flavors of cheese and ham.

We took the ferry across to **Lenno** first to spend time at the morning Lakeside market and then walk up to the Villa Balbianello

The villa was built in the 18th century for an influential cardinal, Angelo Maria Durini. Guido Monzino, an Italian explorer was its last owner. He is famous for having led the 1973 Italian expedition which reached the top of Mount Everest. After his demise, this was bestowed to the State, a decision which has made both tourists and the movie industry super happy! Tourists have to walk up hill for at least 0.5 miles before getting to the front door. The way back is easier, as you could take a boat out from the foot of the villa to the pier of Lenno.

As we get back on the ferry to float past **Tremezzo's** Villa Carlotta, we are again struck by yet another building and its neo classical white exterior. You can always pause, get off the ferry and spend a leisurely afternoon in any of these villages.

We continued to one of the last of the villages in Como, before the water merges upstream, to **Varenna** where we were scheduled to have lunch at the restaurant inside the villa now turned hotel, Villa Cipressi. The lush botanical garden of this Villa coats the periphery and descends



*Tranquil waters, Lake Como*



*Villa Balbianello, as seen from the Lake*



*Inside Villa Balbianello, the site for James Bond's Casino Royale and Star Wars can be toured for 8 euros*



straight in to the lake. This makes it a very pretty sight and the food and wine served here is a complete departure from the homey Italian flavors found in the local markets.



*Balcony of Villa Cipressi, in the village of Varenna*



*The dock of village Varenna*



*The botanical garden surrounding Villa Cipressi in Varenna*

If you had more time, you could take a train across the border to Switzerland's Lake Lugano or speed through the water for a couple of hours to Lake Maggiore and Garda, the other two large lakes.

The most exquisite and busy village is **Bellagio**.





*Approaching Bellagio, by boat*



Bellagio's relaxed elegance and the idyllic charm are unbeatable. Houses painted in the familiar ochre and streets filled with local gelaterie and cafes along the lakefront make almost any village in Como a peaceful retreat.

The silk of Como is one of the best and you could shop some rich patterns and if you wish to gain deeper insights of silk production a stop at the Lake Como Silk Museum could suffice. The Antonio Ratti Foundation also showcases fabrics with information on silk history.



*Cobbled stairways, Bellagio*



*Silk scarves from Azalea, Lake Como's premier silk store and on display handmade pottery found in Como but made in Caltagirone*

It is not unusual to spot in the distance, a wind surfer negotiating the airstream, often shaking the resolute of the strong Alpine winds. The locals understand the wind and call the soft morning breeze "tivano" and the ever changing afternoon wind, the "brevia". As I take the last ferry out, I can almost feel this infectious wind's fervor in my sails. It instantly powers me up with the energy needed to brush the grogginess off my daily routine, but isn't that's what a vacation is supposed to do?



Shravani Dutta, BS MBA, works in a Leadership role in healthcare in Chicago. She has lived in Europe, India and USA and has traveled extensively for both work and leisure.

Sharvani began writing as a trainee journalist at the Telegraph News desk in Kolkata, where she contributed in the business pages of the daily. She has written for other newspapers and participates at the local poetry forum in Naperville, IL.

She lives in Naperville, IL with her husband, Aniruddha Basu

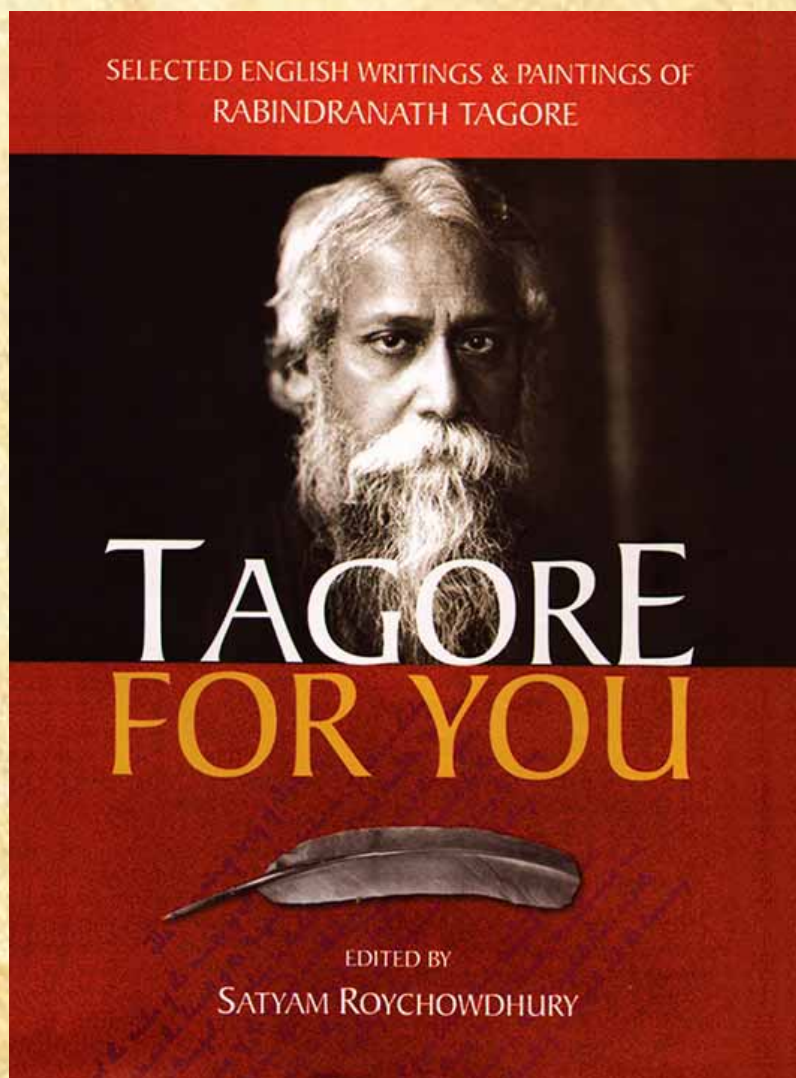


## Satyam Roychowdhury

### A Note from the Editor

Rabindranath Tagore wrote with great abundance, even in English. And the present anthology of his English writings purposes to showcase almost the entire gamut. Apart from the letters, most of the writings are translations. But even as he renders his own writings or Kabir's into English, he transcreates. He writes mellifluously in English just as he does in Bengali, displaying the same confident strength of his genius, the same high norm of stylistic elegance and intellectual brilliance. Tagore's English writings are, to quote D. H. Lawrence in a different context, "the perfect utterance of a concentrated, spontaneous soul", although in a language not his own. His finest single achievement in English is his Gitanjali or Song-offerings which this collection includes. Tagore's English Gitanjali evinces a sensibility of language animated by both a sense of compassion and artifice, taking us to the lofty rendezvous of the poet's intense personal engagement with God. His supreme discourse on the Realization of the Infinite deeply penetrates into the quivering meaning of existence.

"The Upanishads say: be lost together in Brahma like an arrow that has completely penetrated its target. Thus to be conscious of being absolutely enveloped by Brahma is not an act of mere concentration of mind. It must be the aim of the whole of our life. In all our thoughts, deeds we must be conscious of the infinite. Let the realization of this truth become easier everyday of our life, that none will live or move if the energy of the all-pervading joy did not fill the sky. In all our actions let us feel that impetus of the infinite energy and be glad". As we can see, even in his English writings Rabindranath doesn't let words run away with him. Far too good a craftsman for that, he chooses his words with immense care and displays his usual passionate intensity. And most of his English writings also have the characteristic mystic essence.





However, no selection of Rabindranath Tagore's writings can be universally satisfactory. Differences of opinion will always be true. The writings in this volume have tried to cover the entire range, from the simple to the contemplative, from the dramatic to the narrative, from the passionate to the complex. And all through the volume, in whatever he is writing, he remains unwaveringly Rabindranath. Last but not the least; I would like to thank Sri Baridbaran Ghosh for his immense contribution to the book. It was truly an enriching experience to be associated with someone who has such vast knowledge on Tagore. I sincerely thank Sri Ranjan Banerjee for his crucial input which helped in shaping the book; my friends from Deep Prakashan — Sankar da and Diptangshu for their untiring efforts; my family members for their love and support and the wonderful Techno India Group family — my dear students, faculty and staff members, for being there with me at every step of the way.



**Satyam Roychowdhury** is a Managing Director of Techno India Group and the Chancellor of Sister Nivedita University. He is a fond listener of Rabindrasangeet, also known as Tagore Songs, and is an avid reader. This Book is a collection that celebrates Rabindranath Tagore's (the great poet and Nobel Laureate) short stories, plays, articles and poems. It has been critically lauded and has received wide acclaim across the globe.



“The child who is decked with prince's robes and who has jewelled chains round his neck loses all pleasure in his play; his dress hampers him at every step.

In fear that it may be frayed, or stained with dust he keeps himself from the world, and is afraid even to move.

Mother, it is no gain, thy bondage of finery, if it keep one shut off from the healthful dust of the earth, if it rob one of the right of entrance to the great fair of common human life.”

— Rabindranath Tagore





**Biswadip Chakraborty**

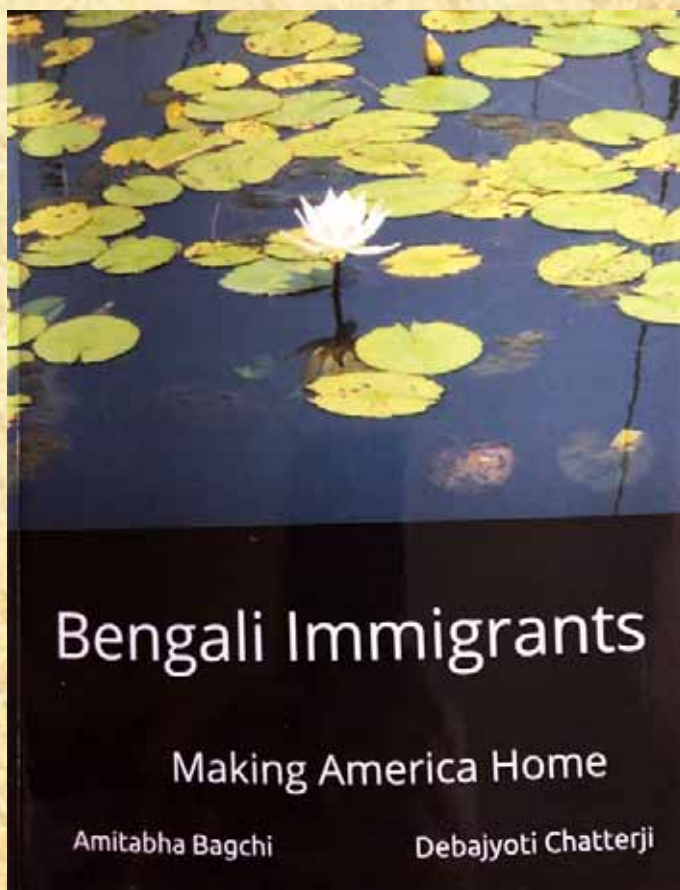
**Bengali Immigrants – Making America Home**

Editors – Amitabha Bagchi and Debajyoti Chatterji

I am a regular reader of <https://www.immigrantbengalis.com/>. I chanced upon it accidentally. Initially I regarded it as an interesting project. But the moment I started reading few pieces, I could realize what a wonderful resource it is! The website chronicles the personal accounts of Bengalis arriving in United States over last 60 odd years. The experiences are diverse as well as unique. Writing styles also varied among the contributors. It has gone far beyond obvious and humorous experiences. Most of those stories – well actual life events, are written with much literary aplomb. Some are very thoughtful essays, even touching the history of Bengali immigrants from early years. The website also structured itself very well with a historian's approach. Now selected essays from the website have come out in a bound volume – **Bengali Immigrants – Making America Home**.

The book is divided into several sections. The first one, focused on history of Bengali immigrants in America talks about laws that enabled immigration. This section also traces back Bengali immigration as far back as 1885 when Bengali chikandars and laskars landed on the East Coast. While we all know the famous speech of Swami Vivekananda, there is an essay that chronicles the other monks who follow his footsteps.

If the first section talks about the history in the traditional sense, the following sections bring about the personal nuggets from the immigrants who came to the land of opportunities starting from the 50s. Those were the days when even finding another Indian family in a town was a rare situation. More immigrants started trickling in from 1960s in the form of university students and researchers. A complete section is devoted to the preparation, eventual travel and arrival that vividly bring out the tension and anticipation of arriving at a distant land. Several contributors shared their personal experiences detailed with sometimes funny yet some poignant moments. The open eyed wondrous moments of their first baby steps in embracing a new culture, new land and a different ways of living are a wonderful read. As I read the individual essays on arrival and settling down in America in 50s to 80s, the slow evolution cannot be mistaken. The early settlers become the guide for the new ones as they navigate their ways into the new country.







The following sections further elaborate the experiences of building one's career, raising families without parental support and integration into the social milieu. The accounts are personal yet transcend in a way that an immigrant reader can very well compare and contrast with their own experience. One can relive one's own years while reading these accounts, smile and nod in equal measures and feel a deep sense of belonging to the diaspora.

History is far beyond milestone years and national events. History belongs to the people, their lives, triumphs and failings. The book has gone far beyond the usual experiences and brought out every facades of a Bengali immigrants lives in America. There are many worthy contributors, so naming a few may not be necessary. Amitabha Bagchi and Debajyoti Chatterji, immigrants from 60s themselves, are the originators of the website as well as editors of the book. They have worked well with fellow immigrants by providing them a platform where they can express freely – their wonders, joy and happiness; and sometimes anguish even. A wonderful book, even if I can read those and more in the website , this sure is an important collectible for my bookshelf. So, it is for anyone remotely interested in understanding immigrant's history in America.

(The book is available on Amazon)





Abantika Bose (Ghose)

## **The Yellow Wallpaper**

by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

*The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is a classic from 1890s and a very powerful feminist novella. It's about a woman battling postnatal depression in the Victorian Era who has been prescribed the 'rest cure'. The "rest cure" was a popular prescription to battle the then called nervous disorder. The therapy included being at home all the time, having two hours of actual life a day and never touching a pen or a brush or a pencil ever. In short, it needed you to be 'domestic' and cut you off any kind of mental or social stimulation.

"If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression-a slight hysterical tendency-what is one to do?"

We find the protagonist of the book narrating how she finds her new mansion queer and the yellow wallpaper of her bedroom disturbing. We find how John, her 'loving husband' brushes it all off by claiming it as just her hysterical tendency. She keeps on narrating how she disagrees with her husband's treatment methods but cannot do anything about it. Through her narration we witness her helplessness in the imprisonment of her house and her marriage. And then through it all, we watch her descent into psychosis. Watch her slowly get obsessed with the very wallpaper and hallucinate women trapped in it. We witness her fixation on setting them free.

"Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over."

This book is multi-dimensional. It is about the terrifying impact the specific treatment had on people and on Gilman herself. It's about how constantly not acknowledging her medical condition and the mistreatment that drives her to insanity. It's about our unstable protagonist and so many other women. It is about andro-centricism and how a certain gender dominated the field of medicine in the 19th century. It's also about patriarchy and an unequal marriage. About how much control men have had on our lives and over our minds.

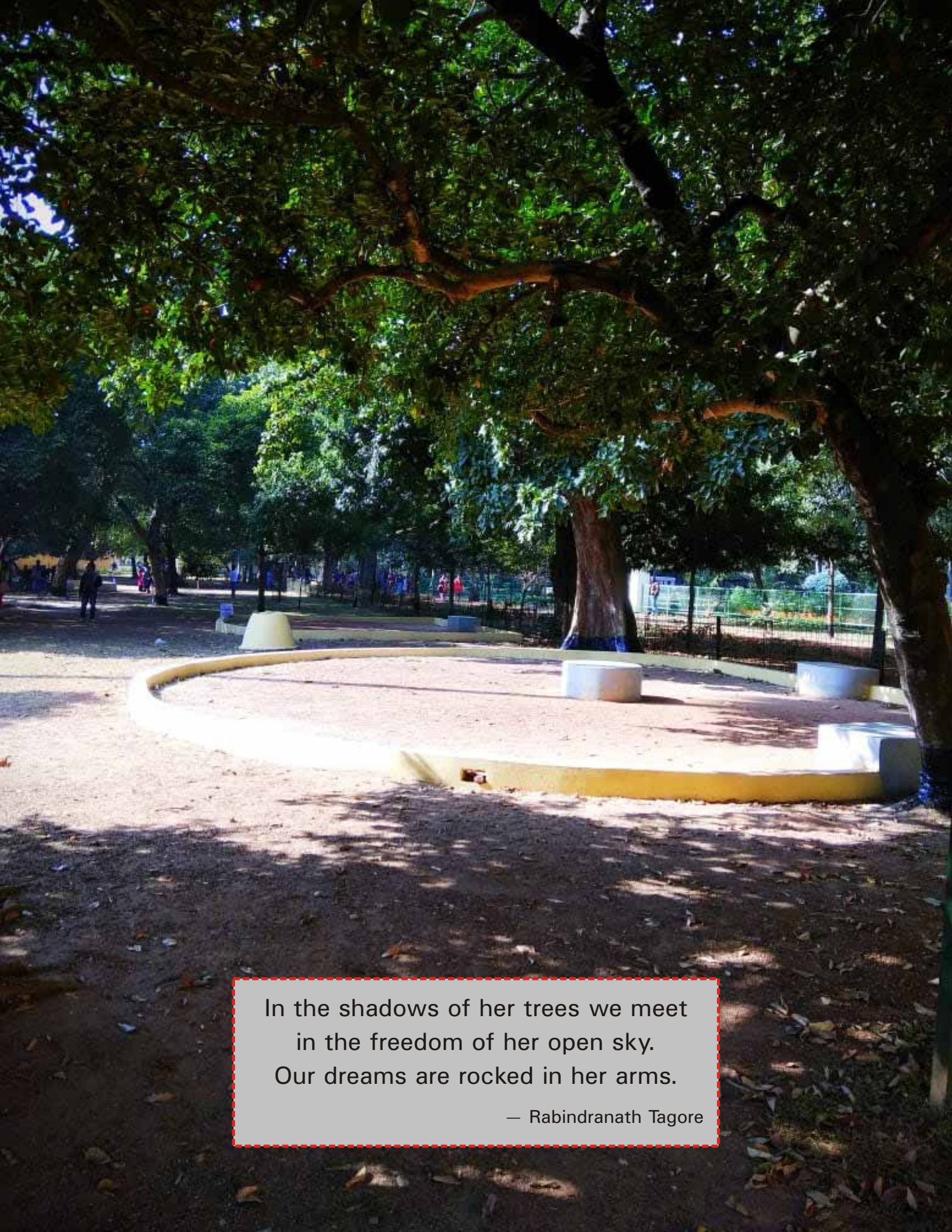
Partly autobiographical, *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a disturbing and yet an important book. The story is haunting. The writing, compelling.









A large, leafy tree with a thick trunk and dense green foliage dominates the upper half of the image. Its branches spread out, casting shadows on the ground below. In the foreground, a circular concrete structure, possibly a well or a small pond, is visible. The ground is dry and dusty, with scattered leaves. In the background, other trees and a few people can be seen, suggesting a park or a public area.

In the shadows of her trees we meet  
in the freedom of her open sky.  
Our dreams are rocked in her arms.

— Rabindranath Tagore