

Against Negation: Suicide, Self-Consciousness, and Jibanananda Das's Poem, "One Day Eight Years Ago"

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Jibanananda Das (1899–1954) is widely revered as the preeminent poet of post-Tagore Bengali literature. His oeuvre is unremittingly autobiographical, narrating desultory journeys into a vulnerable yet stoic, companionless life. The poem that the paper analyses is one of his most well known. Two streaks of narrative run parallel in the poem: the protagonist's act of suicide without any apparent reason and the ceaseless brutality of nature as a way of life. The poem has occasioned a large body of critical literature. As against the prevalent interpretation of the poem, which privileges self-consciousness and a dialectical scheme of interpretation, we set off a Foucauldian, archeo-genealogical reading. In our reading, the poem is a theater of many voices constituting a matrix of language, which, strictly speaking, is a non-language—articulations that perfectly fold back against one another to implicate in a tautological bind the originary meaninglessness of living and of life's constitutive cruelty. Here negation is uncontainable and illimitable, always spilling over, always open to possibilities of being otherwise, its trail running in negating—almost inevitably—negation itself and thus gesturing an aleatory renewal of a space for the political.

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We grow up
 but do not comprehend life.
 We think life is just the passing of time.

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The fact is,
 life is one thing,
 and time something else.²

When we believe ourselves to be in the depths of life, said Rilke, death ventures to shed tears deep in us.³ We live in the midst of death and die as everyone dies. Does every witness to death teach us something about our own death that we didn't already know? Does the death of the person next to me, my everyday companion—the person with whom I shared the toaster, the toothpaste, the plates, and the cupboard, the person whose death bereaves me—bring to life a part of the death that is mine and that I ceaselessly hide from? Yet my death, every death, is so resolutely singular—the utterly singular “I” that I am in my dying. Although this is so, the opposite is also true: the face of the dead man is the face of every dead man, man's inescapable finitude. The face of the dead is marked by an uncanny generality. It is the “I,” the common “I” that is also the singular “I”—the radical point of singularity as collectivity. The face of the dead remains always unknown to me. It is the anticipation of a time, beyond which no anticipation is possible. It is the face of void, of aporia.

Death perhaps is most unresolved, most fascinating, when it is voluntary—that is, in the case of suicide. It is infinitely narrated for it is never narratable, never containable. Death by choice is the violation of death itself, of the understanding that life's course will one day on its own end in death. Therefore in the accepted scheme of things, suicide has to be a pathogenic eruption, a seizure of the cycle that holds life and death in balance. Except when it carries the promise of martyrdom, death in suicide is an invitation to be released from the closet into which life has gotten stuck and what it desperately wants to escape. Here life—not death—is the blindfolded state, an irremediable darkness that otherwise characterizes death. The forced termination of life in suicide, it is argued, is the result of the gross unfulfillment of a particular life or the devastating circumstances in which a particular life was caught. Durkheim called it *anomie*. Thus the aporia is explained, tamed, made workable, and the essential metaphysics of life restored.

But what happens when there is no apparent reason for suicide, when life for all practical purposes is fulfilling, devoid of any apparent want, not stuck in circumstances for which there is no exit but death? The present paper is about a poem on a suicide of such order. Considered a classic of modern Bengali literature, “One Day Eight Years Ago” by Jibanananda Das (1899–1954) is a poem on individual suicide and also large-scale killing: the suicide of the protagonist without any apparent reason is juxtaposed in the poem with the ceaseless brutality and killings characterizing the world of nature. In the Bengali literary canon, this is one of the most widely discussed poems and has a large history of critical attention behind it. This paper attempts to dislodge the dominant mode of dialectical-humanist interpretation by setting off two readings of the poem against each other: one that privileges self-consciousness and dialectics (the way the poem has been interpreted so far); the other a Foucauldian, archeo-genealogical reading that I am offering, a reading that interrogates (and at the

2 Hasina Gul, “Life and Time,” *Granta* 112 (2010): 190.

3 Rainar Maria Rilke, “Closing Piece,” [*Schlussstueck*] *The Book of Image* (New York: Northpoint Press, 1994), 253.

same time seeks a possible recasting of) the Hegelian model and its regional and disciplinary variants. Death is a constant presence in Jibanananda's poetry; his language is marked by death. But here in this poem, language imbibes the very nonrelationality of death—as such, it is language-*contra*-language. In our line of thought, negation—far from being a way of achieving reconciliation—is uncontainable and illimitable, always spilling over, always open to possibilities of being otherwise, its trail running in negating, almost inevitably, negation itself, gesturing an aleatory renewal of a space for the political.

Jibanananda Das is widely revered as the preeminent poet of post-Tagore Bengali literature. Buddhadev Bose, probably the most influential Bengali writer of that “bristly, fascinating post-Tagorean generation,”⁴ famously described him as “our most solitary poet, most singular.”⁵ During his lifetime, Jibanananda remained largely a poets' poet, the most modernist among his contemporaries. He was certainly the most important critical departure from Tagore, one who presented a markedly different texture, mood, and sensibility.⁶ His influence on Bengali poetry has soared over time. The process started in the late 1950s, with the rise of the poetry movement associated with *Krittibash*, the journal that attributed iconic status to avant-garde young poets such as Shakti Chattopadhyay, Sunil Gangopadhyay, and Utpal Kumar Basu—all known for their (apparent) resolve to challenge the Tagorean edifice, their closeness to Allen Ginsberg, and their bohemian lifestyle in partition-devastated Calcutta. Jibanananda's⁷ international recognition, however, continues to remain largely

4 Amit Chaudhuri, “Returning to Earth: the Poetry of Jibanananda Das,” *Clearing a Space*. (London: Peter Lang, 2008), 266.

5 Buddhadev Bose, “Banalata Sen, Jibanananda Das,” *Jibanananda Das: Bikash Prothishar Itibritta*, ed. Debiprasad Bandyopadhyay (Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 2007), 196. The expression “our most solitary poet, most singular” is my translation from Bengali. Among Jibanananda Das's books of poems are *Dhushor Pandulipi* (*Grey Manuscript*), *Bonolota Sen, Mōhaprithibi* (*Great Earth*), *Rupōshi Bangla* (*Bengal, the Beautiful*), *Shaat-ti Tarar Timir* (*Darkness of Seven Stars*), and *Shreshtho Kobita* (*Best Poems*).

6 The establishment of the Bengali literary periodical, *Kallol* (The Upheaval), in the mid-1920s provided the poets of its time with a platform to challenge Tagore's variety of poetry. Poets like Achinta Kumar Sengupta and Bishnu Dey made loud announcements of their “liberation” from Tagore. Dey:

No merchandising of Tagore, anymore

For us, no tying up of the primal river

In hairy knots of performance; we keep

Open the Ganga of our souls,

Reach out to the sea in songs,

In new line and color, picture and poem

We open up in joyous new streams.—“25se Baishakh,” quoted in Dasgupta, 2. (See the end of this footnote.) Jibanananda made no such prophecies. But early in his career, readers recognized a brooding, detached, melancholic style that quite often blended sexuality and the darker sides of life with an overwhelming presence of lustrous nature as his signature. Critics, though, feel obliged to read Jibanananda as one variant of post-Tagoreism. For instance, Chidananda Dasgupta:

Jibanananda's strength lies in the way he carried the Tagore tradition forward into the spirit and idiom of a new era, rather than stand in opposition to it. He provides an excellent example of the relationship between tradition and the individual talent so precisely defined by T. S. Eliot in his essay by that name. Chidananda Dasgupta, *The Makers of Modern Indian Literature: Jibanananda Das* (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2004), 50.

7 To Bengali readers, Jibanananda Das is known mostly by his first name—and rarely as Das; I seek the indulgence of international readership to allow me to follow the same custom.

occluded by Tagore's overwhelming presence. For the West, literature from this part of the world is even now solemnized and largely monopolized by this one presence, which, however, is not the case in Bengal, where the prestige enjoyed by Jibanananda in certain circles stands at par with, if not exceeds, that of Tagore. Engaging in a detailed textual analysis of a single poem of his, this paper in a way also tries to address the continued one-sidedness of international reception of Bengali poetry.⁸

Poetry of Jibanananda: Verdant Nature of Cruelty and Remorse

Amit Chaudhuri rightly claims that "(t)hose who know (Jibanananda's) work first-hand are convinced that he is among the twentieth century's great writers, and so the process of recuperation continues, now in English."⁹ Viewing Das as a "colonial modern," Chaudhuri identifies "robust" intentionality and ambition in the making of pre-independence Bengal's mofussil cosmopolitanism in which he locates the poet. Such understanding of the cosmopolitan self goes well with the scholar-writer Nirad C. Chaudhuri and to the educated and professionally successful ancestry of Amit Chaudhuri that he mentions. His nuanced reading of the poems does not allow him to be sure to what measure it applies to Das himself: "Indeed, intentionality, and its robust mofussil cousin, ambition, are never transparent or clearly stated in Das's life, or in the lives of the drifting protagonists of his poems."¹⁰ I contend that Jibanananda Das's cosmopolitanism is a far more complex and in a way quixotic affair than what the twin registers of intention and ambition would possibly offer. The tactility of "an animal-vegetable-mineral rural Bengal,"¹¹ the folk-sacred memories and practices, the kaleidoscopic wanderings into ancient times, the displaced cartographies (both earthly and celestial), the near-constant deathward gaze—at times bucolic, at times ruthless with a point of view shifting between that of the flâneur and the stalker: the poet's cosmopolitanism is too rhizomatic to have a location, even though what populates and provides content to his work is mostly the pastoral setting of the verdant Barishal in which he grew up. For instance, the oft-quoted, oft-cited poem "Banalata Sen" is like a tableau of ruminations, bringing together in transversal mode different histories and temporalities, a heterotopic assemblage of icons, with no better attempt to make them cohere than phonetically—an extended *payar* rhyme, not much dissimilar from the

8 The arrival on the scene of *Krittibash* was important in dispelling the sterile left-right divide from Bengali poetry appreciation. Apt is a recent observation by Sibaji Bandyopadhyay on Jibanananda's pre-Krittibash appreciation:

Quickly a consensus emerged: Bengal's *loneliest poet* was also a master-craftsman of *imagery*. The same consensus helped to draw a battle-line and configure two contending camps, one appreciative of Jibanananda and the other hostile to him. The first tended to privilege "aesthetics" over "politics" and the second to reverse the order. The net-result: Jibanananda was either championed as the epitome of angst-ridden, alienated, awkward "singularity" or denigrated as being fixated on dabbling in form, a rabble-despising, self-absorbed "escapist." (See the *Routledge Online Encyclopedia of Modernism*, which is forthcoming.)

9 Chaudhuri, "Returning to Earth: the Poetry of Jibanananda Das," *Clearing a Space*, 266.

10 *Ibid.*, 268.

11 Clinton B. Seely, *A Poet Apart* (Calcutta: Rabindra Bharati University, 1990), 91.

one in which rural people read out the epics Ramayan and Mahabharat, and various religious lore.

Jibanananda Das's oeuvre—in both poetry and prose—is unremittingly autobiographical, narrating desultory journeys into a vulnerable yet stoic, companionless life marked by long phases of unemployment and day-to-day poverty. In the poem "Bodh" (Sensation), he narrates his alienation in the midst of everyone due to his own incommunicable idiosyncrasies (*mudradosh*¹²). This alienation that we all share blocks us from one another. The acclaimed Bengali literary scholar Sibaji Bandyopadhyay¹³ has sought reasons for the haunting solipsism of the poet in the collective crisis of Bengali life. He reads the poet's repetitive death wish as the result of a complex unconscious chemistry of his time. The poet's obsessive alienation that undoes all sociality, his unceasing meditations on death, cannot be without a social base, although its expression in poem after poem is resolutely singular. Also, if his poetry is an inscription of contemporary crisis, it is not without a distinct tinge of cosmological nihilism: "The many vultures at the listless corner of a Minaret fly past to what death/ Forgetting the birds of this world?" ("Shakun"; [Vulture]) Or "Above the gas lamps and even the high minarets/ I have seen the stars/ Fly towards the south sea like countless wild ducks" ("Sahar"; [City]).

"Forgetting the saga of the state, triumph and empire/ I shall extract the coldness of the wine stored deep inside the earth" ("Aboshorer Gaan"; [Song at the End of Work]). Death is a frequent visitor to the poet's solitary world—its consummately repetitive outpouring truly remarkable. The resonate cheers of love seamlessly lead to the vista of death: "I have called out for death in the many names of my beloved" ("Jiban"; [Life]). If death is at times the result of a metaphysical angst, rarely is it metaphysicalized. Death in Jibanananda is highly somatic and quite often the act of banal killing: "Like the deer hunted in the moonlit spring night,/ We too lay on the ground with our flesh" ["Campe"; [In the Camp]]. It is not contingent that in the midst of the moonlit spring night when their time of love has arrived, the deer is killed. This abortive end to life is what underwrites the erotic and attributes to the night its strangely baffling quality. To be noted is that the word he uses here to register the fusing of eros and thanatos, *bishmay* (dismay), will be used again in "One Day Eight Years Ago" to indicate the perilous stream that runs in the human, causing to devastate all domestic bliss and attainments.¹⁴ In dark remembrance of Haripada Ghosh, the post

12 *Mudradosh* was a standard charge against his work by a long line of commentators from Tagore onward. That the word also recurs in a number of Jibanananda's own poems is significant. I read it as a gesture of hyperbolic self-description and thus a rhetorical disavowal of the charge. Interestingly, apart from meaning idiosyncrasy and mannerism, the word *mudradosh* also has a hint of ideomotor action, which Webster's Dictionary defines as: "involuntary motor activity caused by an idea."

13 Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, *Prasanga Jibanananda* (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2011).

14 For a discussion of "bishmay" in Tagore, see Amit Chaudhuri's "Foreword: Poetry as Polemic," in *The Essential Tagore*. Defining the word as "a paean to coincidence," Chaudhuri writes in the context of a Tagore song ("The sky full of the sun and stars, the world full of life,/ in the midst of this, I find myself—/ so, surprised, my song awakens,"): "The role of the naïve or nature poet, or even a certain kind of romantic, is to wonder at the real, at the universe, but the speaker in the song is not just transfixed by the beauty of the universe but by the happenstance that's brought him to it: "in the midst of this, I find myself." Amit Chaudhuri, "Foreword: Poetry as Polemic," *The Essential Tagore*, eds. Fakrul Alam and Radha Chakravarty (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 2011), xvi.

office clerk immortalized in Tagore's poem, "Kinu Goyalar Gali" (Kinu Goyala Lane¹⁵), the clerks browse the files in the gloomy light of winter office afternoon: "Dead birds, their feathers like the files or the clerks of those files" ("Keranira";[Clerks]). The lonely and sad glide unnoticed into the eerie and grotesque, as in the poem "Sankhamala":

I saw her body, filled with melancholy bird hues.
The bird that clasps the damp *siris* tree limb in evening's darkness –
Upon its head, the crescent moon,
The hornlike crescent blue moon that listens to its warble.

Her face was white as cowrie shells,
Her two hands, cold.
In her eyes burned the red pyre
Of cashew wood: Sankhamala appeared within that fire,
Her head to the south.¹⁶

Rarely does the resplendent nature his poems so evocatively portrayed come without a mention of the cavorting, devilish world of thanatos as part of nature's organic cycle of life and death. Village Bengal in Jibanananda's poem might be verdant, but it is also the repository of slumber, death, unrequited labor, intense attachment, and a languid peace, which the poet gives voice to with a sense of sojourn, a "disinterested compassion" that is only apparently pastoral. *Rupasi Bangla* (Bengal, the Beautiful) is like one long mourning, a requiem, not for the passing of this or that aspect of beauty or more generally the retreat of the rural but a mourning that exists and intensifies despite the bountifulness of nature—comparable to what Marinos Diamantides calls, a Levinas-like "quiddity of suffering as a mode of being passively."¹⁷ The recurrence of certain motifs—like the mouse, the owl (quite often the two together), the *sankhamala*, the kite of golden wings, orange sunlight,¹⁸ *kash* flower, birds like the *shalik* and the *doyel*—pushes nature precariously close to artifice, while an intense but remote subjective presence works to its opposite effect—somewhat like what the Greeks called *aphanismo*s: "to vanish, to escape the self, to wrest the self from the self, to lose consciousness."¹⁹ Jibanananda's romanticism is the product of an urbane transference and quite often carries the musty, saline smell of blood. He knows that the world will come to an end, that soulmates have perished in the mute soils of the earth; regardless, lying on fragrant, dark grass, he keeps staring at the blue sky. The poet's stoic desires for at once love, life, and death—much like the play of ravenous killing and desperate seeking for life that marks lush, bountiful nature—do not contradict one another. They simply cohabit, constituting a world that allows for no transcendence—its endless, repetitive, banal cycle being the source of its cruelty and vigor.

15 *Goyala* means milkman in Bengali.

16 Poem translated by Clinton Seely in *A Poet Apart*, 133. The short patches of other poems are translated by me.

17 Marino Diamantides, "The Subject May Have Disappeared But Its Sufferings Remain," *Law and Critique* 11 (2000): 137.

18 Seely, *A Poet Apart*, 99.

19 Christine Buci-Glucksmann, "The Work of the Gaze," *Baroque New Worlds: Representative, Transculturation, Counterconquest*, eds. In: Lois Parkinson Zamora and Monika Kaup (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 144.

"One Day Eight Years Ago," the poem under study, indicates an anguish—far beyond the pale of the cause-effect time of psychological accounts:

The wife lying next to him – so was the child.
Love and hope awash in moonlight, and yet what ghost
did he see? Why did he startle out of sleep?
Or perhaps he lay long awake – now he sleeps restful
in the corpse-cutting room.

Later, and more vividly:

Listen
this saga of a man demised
isn't about love unrequited.
In his connubial bliss
no desire remained unfulfilled.
The churning of time turned up
The right trace of honey in the everyday, in the mind;
A life unshaken
in the painful misery of wintry penury.
Dead nevertheless.
In the mortuary spreadeagled he lies.²⁰

For Camus, life bereft of all dimensions save the prospect of endless repetition is too draconian to live. One day, inevitably, "the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement."²¹ This "why" question in the midst of familial bliss and material plenty had arisen for the man epitomizing eastern wisdom, too: Gautam Buddha. One night he quietly left the splendors of the palace in a chariot—the horse's hooves muffled by the gods—to overcome what plagues humanity: aging, sickness, and death. Buddha's was a search for light, enlightenment. The journey of Jibanananda's protagonist is a reverse one, a journey to the immense, unfathomable darkness of aborted life:

Perhaps he wished to sleep so,
Like a plague-rat, blood sodden mouth, neck tucked
in the clumsy darkness he sleeps
Never again to wake.

Leaving behind the sleeping wife and child, he sets out in the middle of the night and hangs himself from an unyielding branch of an *ashwattha* tree. Why did he not sleep for long? What tormented him? Why did he prefer to sleep "like a plague-rat, blood-sodden mouth tucked in its neck" on the dissection table of the morgue? Why was the "relentless gravitas of staying awake" unbearable for Jibanananda's protagonist? Why did the "cursive gush of life" leave him unaffected? The poem leaves very

20 The poem is one of Jibanananda's most well known and has a crowded and somewhat tortuous history of translation, with about a dozen available versions. Excerpts of the poem used in the paper are translated by me, taking liberal help from earlier translations by Prabir Basu, Chidananda Dasgupta, and the English poet, Joe Winter. Winter's translation of the entire poem is reproduced in the appendix.

21 Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 13.

little as effective clues. Did he face, to borrow from Camus, the real possibility that life is meaningless, that life is not worth living at all?

For Camus, life is inherently absurd but absurdity can be countered by living rebelliously. In emphasizing that life, despite its absurdity, is not unworthy of living, what he does in practice is simply to defer the act of suicide. Death as negativity remains the condition for freedom, only that suicide is ever again postponed. This is very much Hegel as interpreted by Kojève: Man is free because he is “death incarnate.” Camus merely dramatized this cycle of death and resurrection by emphasizing the act of living despite life’s inherent absurdity. There can be little doubt that life had become meaningless, unbearable, and oppressive for the protagonist of Jibanananda’s poem. But was this meaninglessness of the same order as Camus’s? Even as meaningless, were they similarly constituted, emanating from similar sources and having similar genealogies?

“One Day Eight Years Ago”: A Theater of Many Voices

The poem is a crisscross of voices. Each voice is like a witness; each act, therefore, is like a rhetorical enactment: an enactment of the art of showing oneself. The poem begins in the style of reportage. Following on the tracks of hearsay, the poet lets us know that the body of a man has been taken to the morgue where it lies on the dissection table, sleeping restfully like a plague-rat with blood-sodden mouth. He describes the condition that instigated the man to commit suicide, which are actually no conditions. The wife was lying next to him, as was the child. Yet what made him startle out of sleep and choose the path of death? The erotic overtones are conveyed by the moonlit night of spring.

This is followed by two short stanzas that rotate between sleep and wakefulness:

. . . yet what ghost did he see
to startle out of sleep?
Or perhaps he lay long awake – now he sleeps restful
On the dissection table.

Did he want to sleep like this?
Like a plague-rat, blood sodden mouth tucked in its neck
To sleep, seeking darkness.
Never to wake again.

A sudden disruption of sleep, a waking up with a start. This eruptive wakefulness is dissolved in the very next line in a slumber that delivers the protagonist from sleeplessness and also from the travails of life. But doubt never ceases to creep in. Would the protagonist’s chosen slumber relieve him of the anguish that caused him to wake up with a start in the first place? Would it release him from the weight of being alive as he “rests” in the morgue? Embodied through such quick shuffling early in the poem between sleep and wakefulness, waking up with a start and lying in restful slumber, the torments of life and the “rest” that the morgue bestows constructs an imbroglio that can only offer aporetic openings.

The narrator reports from a slightly bemused distance the protagonist’s decision to commit suicide in the spectral light of the midnight moon of fifth night, leaving

behind his sleeping wife and child. Unlike the Greeks, the protagonist is not trying to master his death. He is merely trying to terminate the deep anguish that living inevitably involves. The bare essentials of the event being conveyed, a new voice emerges abruptly, a voice of nature lamenting—chorus-like—the protagonist's death even before it happened:

'Never again will you wake;
the relentless – relentless gravitas
of staying awake

Never again will you bear –'
in darkness's strange state
when the moon had sunk, by the window's rim –
a silence, like a camel's neck, loomed in wait
to say these words to him

An ominous, wizened silence at the prospect of the looming neck of a camel beside the window brings at one place the spectral and the aporetic.²²

In the next stanza, the voice disappears as a stark change in gaze and tone is effected through the highlighting of biopolitical ruthlessness of an otherwise bountiful, lush nature. It is the world of the predator and prey—cruel, ever in wait, unforgiving. The owl relishes the anile toad's lacerated desire for a few extra moments; nonetheless, even in its last gasp, the toad dreams of the intimate resonance of morning that could have driven the owl away. Thus the protagonist's suicide and the relentless killing that goes on in nature are woven together in a tapestry of eros. Nature is the real source of enigma in the poem, for it is not only death-driven, but it is also where life expresses itself in full glory, thus making a travesty of both cruelty and kindness.

Even then the owl stays awake;
And the wasting anile toad begs for a few moments' grace
With promise of another dawn
In speculative intimate warmth.

Almost immediately, a shift in gaze takes place as the narrator returns in the first person:

In the deep unknown of the crowded dark I come to know
the unsparing hostility of the mosquito-net on all sides...
the mosquito sodality keeps vigil, in love with the cursive gush of life.

Here the "I" is no more of the narrator who had heard about the suicide from hearsay. Rather, it has moved position and taken an in-between space, one between the protagonist and the voice of nature we encountered earlier. If the previous stanza had

22 Bose called Jibanananda's poems "purest poetry." It is interesting to note the traits he thought went into the making of such "purity": an incoherent series of pictures, a melancholic subdued tone, a layered, free-flowing, meandering composition, a strange diction, a Rabellesque atmosphere in the poem "Hawar Raat" (The Night of Wind), and an excessive self-consciousness verging on the grotesque. Buddhadev Bose, "Jibanananda," *Uttarparba*, ed. Debiprasad Bandyopadhyaya (Calcutta: Pustak Bipani, 2000), 147–53.

situated death in the ceaseless hunt that keeps nature awake, this stanza situates it in the quotidian, ritualized eros of conjugality.

In the next stanza, the narrator directly addresses the protagonist. The strains of killing and usurpation that mark verdant resplendent nature are expressed through a child's mirthful capture of a dragonfly that fights for its life. This is the ambience in which, once the moon has sunk, the protagonist leaves home with a loop of rope, knowing well that even in his death march, man is destined to remain unconnected with the world of dragonflies, *doyels* (magpies), and other such easy preys of nature. The nature that empathizes is also the nature that celebrates in erotic mirth:

That branch of the *ashwattha* tree
 didn't it cry out? Didn't a mob of fireflies commingle
 in the soothing cluster of golden flowers?

The expression "radiant life" (*bikirno jiban*) binds with a phantasmagoric touch the child's mirthful destruction of the dragonfly and the scenario of suicide. The way the protagonist conducts the act of killing himself proves a self-sufficiency and mastery that evaded him in life. In the process, he culturalizes nature and death, even though both will always remain inaccessible to him.

yet still, in the lording dark, when the moon had gone –
 knowing the dragonfly's, the *doyel*-bird's life with man's has
 no comparison –
 in your hand a rope in a bunched-up heap,
 to the *ashwattha*-tree alone you went on.

And in the midst of all this, the ageless, sightless owl makes the aplomb assertion of catching a few helpless rats as the ancient, haggard moon eclipses in the deluge. Thus the act of hanging from a branch of the *ashwattha* tree by a man driven by an imperative evacuation of any attachment for life in the midst of plenty is implicated in the thanato-political scenario of a ruthless sovereign (owl). The animal world (one that the rats populate) is left completely unprotected from this devouring almighty. As a sign of the crisscross of the world of the human (protagonist) and that of the animals, the body that lies on the dissection table of the morgue is compared, more than once, to a plague-ridden rat—its sheer repetitiveness marks the transaction with an allegorical hue.

The narrator returns to the reader, but the voice is distinctly of a parable as it says that this wasn't a death due to unrequited love or some worldly unfulfillments. The use of the word *tai* (Bengali for so or therefore) toward the end of the stanza puts the logic of desire in a causal bind with abrupt voluntary death.

in the chill of the destitute's exhausted doom
 his life never shivered and shook . . .
 and so
 in the corpse-cutting room
 he is lying on his back on the table.

The plethora of conjunctives like *tai* (so, therefore), *tobu* (yet), *athaba* (or, otherwise)—often serving more or much less than their prescribed function—gestures to an undercurrent of a subterranean reality, an eruptive possibility forever postponed.

Tai is almost like an erasural bond here. Instead of linking what precedes and what follows, it implicates both in a different theater.

The bind will subsequently be unpacked: It is not feminine love, progenitive bliss, wealth, fame, and splendor that decide our fate. An unknown restlessness rips us apart, plagues us within. It exhausts us, dissevers us, provokes us to the "peace" of the morgue. Yet, night after night, the old, sightless, doddering owl emerges, looking for its prey in the darkness of an eclipsed, timeless moon. The poem ends with the narrator addressing the owl—"O grandmother of the deep ways, is it alluring even today?" whom he joins in the necrological feast, hoping that he, too, one day will grow old, and after dunking the moon in the waters of Kalidaha, in the ensuing murky gloom, together they would erase all traces of life—a perfect banalization of death in what is otherwise a Baroque-like festival of cruelty.

The poet/narrator does not die himself, but embarks on the impossible task of thinking death. His is an Orphic enterprise. The expression "you and I together deplete we shall/ many a repository of life/ and take our leave" indicates to a constitutive equivocity: an emptying out, but also a process of ceaseless consumption ("together deplete we shall"). A destruction of life that's possible only by living it, an evacuation on condition that the source of consumption remains constantly full. This gives death an unquestioned sovereignty. It is the sign of excess that in order to be excess has to ensure the constant supply of life. Here destruction is not termination; it is a state of being. The act of suicide declares as it were the impossibility of termination, which also in a way means the impossibility of dialectical resolution.

The Nonrelational Sovereign: Self-Consciousness and Negation

Sibaji Bandyopadhyay reads in the poem a ceaseless clash between nature and consciousness. In what follows, I give a gist of his analysis.²³ In the first part of the poem, the animal world bereft of consciousness seemed preferable to the life of knowledge and consciousness. The obedient, repetitive, law-abiding social self of the human makes life a perilous bafflement amid all worldly pleasures. The conflict between nature and consciousness provides succor but also takes away the spirit that animates life. The protagonist is torn in this conflict. When he was about to hang himself from the branch of the *ashwattha* tree, perhaps the branch had protested. The ancient, stooping owl or the dragonflies had tried to inspire him through their frictionless relation with life but could not stop the drive of consciousness. In the last stanza, the disguised narrator makes clear that it is not with the life of humans and the bonds of consciousness, but his real friendship is with the old owl and its devilish mode. Even as a partisan of the experience of the tired humans, Bandyopadhyay asks, is it being suggested that he is closer to the senseless, tireless modes of animals? If that is so, the poem ratifies its early preference for a life sans consciousness. A closer reading of the tonality of the poem, however, suggests something different to Bandyopadhyay. He sees an attempt at restoration of equilibrium in the concluding two lines: "And both together deplete we shall/ Many a repository of life." Bandyopadhyay sees the desire for life getting the better of the poet as he comes out of the self-incurred

23 Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, *Prasanga Jibanananda*, 74–75.

gloom of the death-wish. What helps Bandyopadhyay to make this optimistic move is a couplet from another poem (“Anupam Tribedi”) where the poet suggests that the key to life is the dialectical tension between the world of consciousness and its absence.²⁴

Sibaji Bandyopadhyay’s analysis is a reiteration of the Hegelian scheme of death and resurrection, the cycle of sacrifice of self-consciousness to nature only to be resurrected in a purer form—in a nutshell, the philosophy of freedom through negation that we discussed at the beginning of this paper. Bandyopadhyay is no lone traveler here. As a matter of fact, his analysis is the most cogent, most comprehensive in a long line of interpretations of this poem over the past fifty years where the trail of the author ultimately leads to the trail of life. Though published recently (2011) in a new edition, Bandyopadhyay’s essay was written early in his career. Talking of Bengali literary criticism overall, however, this trend of dialectical-humanist analysis and the eagerness to interiorize the world has remained a pervasive presence as part of the legacy of India’s incorporation in the Western knowledge order during colonial days.²⁵

In Hegel’s distinction between animal and man, what liberates man from animal also captures him in an economy of a so-called higher order, the interior. Man is destined to an inner existence.²⁶ Right from Aristotle, Western philosophy has been led by the distinction between the “merely living” (or, what Bandyopadhyay calls “nature” or “inert”) and the life of consciousness. Agamben explains the Aristotelian scheme as a division between *zoe* (bare life) and *bios* (good life in the sense, life of consciousness). For Aristotle, *zoe* is what man as a living animal shares with other living animals, whereas *bios* signifies man’s entry into the world of ratiocination, of justice. *Bios* is therefore the sphere of language, which differentiates man from other animals. Reading from the standpoint of Aristotle (*a la* Agamben), Bandyopadhyay’s

24 “Jar o Ajar dialectic mile amader du-diker kaan/ Tane bole benche thaki.” (Literally, this means: Because the dialectics of the inert and the not inert pulls us on two sides by our two ears, we continue to live.) Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, *Ibid.*, 75.

25 In “One Day Eight Years Ago,” says Buddhadev Bose, life is victorious and death defeated. The old owl wanted to instigate the protagonist to catch rats and thus help restore his desire for life but could not halt the project of consciousness. By bringing back the old owl at the end of the poem, Bose argues, the poet announces his faith in life. It is not the pessimistic poem that it would have been had it ended with the restfulness of the morgue. The owl’s announcement of its savage pleasure in killing its prey works as an elixir; the poet is inspired by the example of the ancient grand female of life. Buddhadev Bose, “Jibananda Das,” *Uttarparba*, ed. Debiprasad Bandhyapadhyay (Calcutta: Pustak Bipani, 2000), 149–51. Debiprasad Bandhyapadhyay reads in the poem the planetary and celestial flow of life: the world that is beyond the pleasure of woman and domestic bliss is also the world of the dragonfly and *doyel*; the world beyond this world, the *mahaprithibi* (great earth, which is also the name of the book from which the poem has been taken), is tied up in the flow of the universe, of life or death as the last waves of the earth reach and spread into the still night. Debiprasad Bandhyapadhyay, “Introduction,” *Jibananda Daser Kabya Sangraha* (Calcutta: Bharbi, 1993), 79. And this is how Seely reads the last stanza of the poem: “The moon has set again. Again she will hunt a mouse or two, despite her blindness. Is exhausting, blinding life still so wonderful? Presumably she would answer yes. She has lived to a blind old age and now sits upon the hanging tree, the tree of enlightenment, or of *samsara*. And yet she reaffirms life. With that observation, the narrator rejects suicide and affirms (for the time anyway) a life like the owl’s. He will not commit suicide, but instead will feast on life, continuing to struggle, to fight against death.” He concludes with the aphoristic statement: “Unless one struggles, he (sic) dies like a rat.” Seely, *A Poet Apart*, 140–41.

26 See Malabou, chapter 4.

conclusion stands for the restoration of the life of consciousness (i.e., good life) from the challenge of *zoe* (merely living, or bare life). Bare life, in the way Agamben explains, is a necessary part of good life, or the life of consciousness. But this does not work out as a dialectic between two comparable moments of the human. Rather, they exist in their disjunction, in a relationship of domination. Bare life is so called because even as excluded, it is not allowed to move away from the sway of the life of consciousness; it is in Agamben's apt phrase: "being-outside, yet belonging." This, for him, holds the crux of modern politics:

There is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion.²⁷

Agamben will call this "threshold," which is not amenable to any dialectical scheme. Threshold gestures to an evacuation of something that is also constitutive. Hence, here evacuation works as a sign of excess. Modern politics in its ceaseless attempt at inclusive exclusion of the marginal is caught up in its own excess where there is no resolution or redemption.

Integrating rupture into life, Bandyopadhyay much like other critics brings the poem back into the very metaphysical orbit it had rejected. Instead of a dialectical resolution of nature and consciousness, I am tempted to read the poem in its topological displacements and variations. The dialectical enterprise of bringing two entities into one would imply that the opposite is also true: that is, one entity can be broken into two. But this is an impossibility because every time one divides something into two, one merely distinguishes multiplicities from multiplicities, or what Deleuze discussing Foucault calls "the pragmatics of the multiple."²⁸ Foucault: "the opening of an inexhaustible horizon, the constantly unwinding play of an unending unity."²⁹ When history is radical discontinuity, nothing is negated. This is precisely what Foucault's archeo-genealogical history is all about. The operative figure of opposition to dialectics is what he calls "nonpositive affirmation." Things emerge and disappear unpredictably, contingently. Emergence is, however, connected with an act of affirmation of the disappearance of their genealogical predecessors and of the space left behind by these. Not the *definite negation of something*, but the *affirmation of the absence of something* is therefore the (nondialectical) "act" constitutive for a discontinuous history. Not telos but transgressions.³⁰

The theater of different voices in Jibanananda's poem that I discussed constitutes a matrix of language, which, strictly speaking, is a nonlanguage, articulations that perfectly fold back against one another to implicate in a tautological bind the originary meaninglessness of living and of life's constitutive cruelty.³¹ The significance of this

27 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 12.

28 Jacques Deleuze, *Foucault* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 70.

29 Michel Foucault and A. M. Nazzari, "History, Discourse and Discontinuity," *Salmagundi* 20 (1972): 227.

30 Correspondence with Pravu Mazumder, email: May 1, 2011.

31 Here referring to the Marxist outcry that Jibanananda was an "escapist," callous to the turbulence of his time, let us say that it is not that this poem is cocooned from history; rather, its historicity lies in its

bind is that it allows the poem to double two apparatuses of capture. One is of quotidian domesticity, where in the very act of offering fullness, life is evacuated internally—in other words, the nothingness of plenitude from which the protagonist suffers (and not the plenitude of nothingness). The other is of ceaseless, banal killing as the defining trait of the cycle of life and living. The animal converts the contingency of everyday life into regulated work through the habit of killing. Therefore at the heart of the continuity of life lies an emptiness, a complete emptying out of itself at every turn.

By making such banal killing (in guise of the owl's emphatic declaration) clearly in excess of its functional need, the poem opens up an economy where the second apparatus capture (i.e., killing as a mode of living) not only implicates the first (i.e., domestic security) but in the process overdetermines it. The protagonist's act of killing himself as a response to the repetitive despondency of life thus becomes part of the generalized scenario of necrological rapaciousness. But this overdetermination does not happen, cannot happen, without the moment of madness; hence, the delirious oath-taking of total killing with which the poem ends—killing, and killing till the last vestiges of life remain:

O grandmother of the deep ways, is it alluring even today?
I too shall be old like you – and ferry the old moon clean
through where the Kalidaha flood-waters heave;
you and I together deplete we shall
many a repository of life
and take our leave.

This is not language touched *by* death (which in a way is a trait of the poet's entire oeuvre) but language *as* death, the moment of the nonrelational sovereign, reminding and reverberating in cruel Dionysian laughter the secret of all relationships that Alexander Garcia Duttman expressed so elegantly: "To that which was never before we cannot relate, just as we cannot relate to that which has always already been."³² The moment we relate to that which was never before, Duttman explains, we have transformed it into something recognizable; similarly, the moment we relate to that which has always already been, we have made it into something new, something that never existed before.

Just as it is true of its opposite term, dialectical negation, too, denotes a positivity of meaning and has a reality of its own, very much like the negative qualities of mathematics. Nietzsche calls the dialectical encounter "opposition without difference." In contrast, what is performed in Jibanananda's poem, I argue, is the pure negation that nonrelationality demands and not the Hegelian notion of negation, that is, a negation that also conserves and retains what it rejects for a dialectical affirmation.

textuality: its peculiar ontic structure that problematizes any smooth to and fro movement between different spaces—the phenomenal text, the writer's or reader's private life, and the public sphere of social and political concerns, proving once again that any reading that assigns the text some meaning signified outside of textuality is illusory. (For a discussion of textuality from this standpoint, see Timothy Yates, "Jacques Derrida: 'There is nothing outside the text,'" ed. Christopher Tilley, *Reading Material Culture: Structuralism, Hermeneutics and Poststructuralism* 18.3 (Autumn 1991): 397–404.

32 Alexander Garcia Duttman, "Never Before, Always Already: Notes on Agamben and the Category of Relation," *ANGELAKI: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 6.3 (2001): 3.

Because of this pure negativity, the protagonist's suicide could be implicated in the larger domain of the "merely living" where one lives by the death of others as a way of life, where death is arbitrary, random, and commonplace.

Perhaps the question to ask is: In privileging pure negation, a space outside of the outside, is the poem then liquidating the political altogether and taking us back again to the originary moment of the primal horde? I would say, no. Negating negation is not the demise of the political, but on the contrary it's most heightened state, a state that we can perhaps describe as "onto-aporia," a state of at once total clearing and constituent excess. A close look at the body of the poem, its architectonics, shows that it is actually a poem of threshold. It not only negates but negates negation as well; it not only says that relation is impossible, but puts this impossibility under erasure. When negation negates itself, it faces the challenge of a concept coming out of its positivity. To understand how this evacuation of the interior is performed, let us return to the poem one last time.

In the midst of the distance of the reportage style and the series of eruptive voices that frame the poem, the protagonist—his decision to commit suicide despite worldly fulfillment unexplained—remains a shadowy, obscure presence. What the reader gets to see is him lying "spreadeagled," cold, dead, language-less—a visible yet unnamable imminence, an uncanny passivity. The figure of the protagonist lying on the dissection table like a plague-rat with blood-sodden mouth is a hyperbolic literalization of what Foucault calls subjectivation—a production of a mode of existence that discharges the subject from all interiority and even from all identity. The poem performs three different sets of negation: the negation of the "contemplative autarky"³³ of consciousness; the negation performed in the world of animal marked by an instinctive excess; and, finally, negation of negation itself which leads not to dialectical positivity but opens the passage of what Foucault calls the "outside"—not the outside that interiorization requires for its own sake, but outside of that outside:

language (that) escapes the mode of being of discourse—in other words, the dynasty of representation... making its dispersion shine forth, taking in only its invincible absence; and that at the same time stands at the threshold of all positivity... in a word we might call "the thought from the outside."³⁴

Removed from the dialectical-humanist interpretative scheme, the poem can be read as a comment on the crisis of the sign system itself. Because in the sign system everything is immediately transformed into its sign, the "interior" that critics are so keen to rescue in the poem can never express itself adequately, marred as it inevitably is by an incursion of opacity that comes along with transparency. This opacity haunts the sign system and the dream of acquiring a crystalline, transparent form through language. It is eruptive; it is the passage to the delirious, the mad, and the primordial nights. In the long preface to Malabou's celebrated book, *The Future of Hegel*,³⁵

33 Expression borrowed from Ian Hunter, "The Morals of Metaphysics Kant's Groundwork as Intellectual Paideia," *Critical Inquiry* 28.4 (2002): 916.

34 Michel Foucault and Maurice Blanchot, *Foucault Blanchot* (New York: Zone, 1989), 15–16.

35 Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic* (New York & London: Routledge, 2004).

Derrida repeatedly returns to her epiphanic figuration, “seeing what is coming,” which he explains as the possibility of seeing more than what is coming: seeing what hasn’t arrived, but also what hasn’t not arrived because it is already arriving. Here seeing is hinged on infinity. Similarly, if habit is a system to deal with what is coming, then because what is coming is potentially infinite, it acquires the necessary possibility of overrunning itself, becoming hallucinatory. This as a rule cannot only be true of the animal world’s habit of killing others for one’s survival, but must include the mundane, quotidian habit of the human. Reading against the grain, Malabou finds in Hegel’s systematization and the dialectical quest for identity an incursive excess, a penchant to dwell at the edge of things: a forming that yields no form, yet thinking always goes with this forming. This she calls plasticity. We shall try to show that it is this hallucinatory streak in what is taken as habit, the regular and repetitive, that binds the two registers of killing in Jibanananda’s poem—the killing of the self and the ceaseless killing that marks the world of animal and implicates the world of language.

“Spreadeagled he lies”—a refrain in the poem, as is “*burichand*” (ancient moon) or the grimy exhortation, “*Chamatkar!*” (wonderful!)—the strain of black art unmistakable here: these are the different figures of nonconnection linked all at once to silence, language, and death. To put it in another way, the overlapping yet non-relational doubling and relay of voices, and the two narrative lines—of the protagonist and the world of nature—dispersed yet together, fusing but only like a fractured joint—all these go to implicate the poem in a *mise-en-ablîme*, an echo-chamber, where words, living outside the strict narrative line, are more like an indefinite play of images or hermetic resonances in a void. In this enchanted realm of speech and visibility existing under different registers of circulation, the reader stops asking whose voice it is exactly that erupts at which point in the poem. To see in this poem is to see through shifting voices: apparition, eruption, encounter—a mode of seeing that reveals no transcendent but is caught in its liminal spaces.

The supreme liminal point is, of course, the figure of the protagonist—a figure of complete transparency and strange opacity—whose motivations (life of consciousness) remain unknown to us while the poem is wrapped in a necrophilic desire for his corpse. Because inwardness is what man puts into language; it stares him in the face. The face becomes the unresolved manifesto of man’s constructed inwardness. Hence there is the special significance of physiognomy in modern times that acquires a life of its own. Hegel was one of first philosophers to point this out. The protagonist is the name for radical alterity, *both* as well as *neither* identity and difference, referring to an excess or unincorporated remainder, the point of crisis of the representational and resisting the imperious demand of consciousness to interiorize.³⁶

36 Here I take the liberty to quote in some detail from Peter Fitzpatrick’s very insightful reading of my paper:

(F)or me and I suspect for you, the focal intensity comes with the idea of a completely voluntary suicide. Such a suicide, it seems, constitutively contrasts with the “norm” of being contained, trapped, of having “no way out.” The “entirely” voluntary suicide, in going utterly beyond constraint, opens onto what could be seen as something of an ultimate aporia. One half, as it were, of the aporia would be something like the negation “against negation” which, given your title and overall orientation in the piece, would be your own inclined reading of the poem. This ultimacy of the negative would perhaps resonate with religious traditions

After his initial avuncular admonition ("Why do you wrestle so much with language, etc.? You should know, mannerism comes in the way of poetic felicity"³⁷), Tagore in a letter to Bose praised the pictorial quality of Jibanananda's poetry. *Chitrarupamoy* is the word Tagore used—literally: like the beauty of a picture (the ethical register of the visual leading to the point of vision—or, better, realization—is unmistakable). Jibanananda's, however, is no ordinarily pictorial world. In poem after poem, the poet's enterprise is much like the way Cezanne characterized his own: "painter of perception and not of the perceived." In this poem, regardless of the presence of strong visual elements, the pictorial is completely dismembered (and, along with that, the subject of perception). Doubling and inversion induct an anamorphic seeing where what is visible functions as its own allegory, a polymorphic perversity of reality—where, to quote Benjamin on Baudelaire, anything can symbolize anything else. Without much of the exuberance and gore with which the baroque is typically associated, *Aat Bachor Aager Ek Din* is deeply baroque in spirit and craft.

In this essay, I have tried to be alive to the resistant beauty of the poem's singularity and at the same time open to the possibility of a philosophical search for the difficult measure of this resistance. To achieve this, I have made the move (with as much temerity as prudence) from the operations of negation to tracing the ontological advent of the "multiple." My analysis tries to show the poem itself *playing* that move in many voices and several guises. Perhaps the most vivid and lacerated space of this play is the space of the "in-human"—that of the owl, the plague-rat, the moon, the branch of *ashwattha* (where the act of hanging was performed). I am tempted to think that this space would also include the multiple anonymous voices of the poem that are as much the voices of the most "im-possible and non-human" Being.

By extending the mundane act of suicide to the world of nature where the right to kill is the order of life, the poem makes defunct the dialectical-humanist project of negation/freedom/self-consciousness and stakes its relevance to contemporary life. But along with this, by negating negation as well, the poem upholds the aporetic as another inauguration of the political. Caught between the unachievable liberation of suicide and the interminable confinement of the self by the self of the protagonist,

geographically closer to you but also with some varieties of European Christian mysticism and some varieties of negative theology—but perhaps the latter is pushing it too far. And, having regard to what is often put as a concreteness of poetry, the conjugal etc disregard in the poem could be matched to Christ's injunction to completely set aside all such relation.

The other half, again as it were, of the aporia would see such suicide as an ultimate confinement—the confinement of self by self, a confinement itself caught in the rejection of relation, conjugal and otherwise—the affirmation, in terms borrowed from your subtitle, of a hyper-determinate "self-consciousness"—the attempt for "one's self" to surpass "the perilous stream," to counter or negate (also) life or "eros." That is probably pushing your reading too far in another direction but the graphic grimness of the poem and its situated specificity (including "one" specific day) would push me in that direction. The invocation of "nature" could be seen as mediating the aporia but that invocation itself is grim, decrepit and terminal. Peter Fitzpatrick, email; October 3, 2011.

37 Letter to Jibanananda by Tagore (Bengali year 1322, later corrected as 1334).

the poem enacts the impossible extension to the world of nature, marked by both evacuation and excess. Is the apparition that haunted our protagonist and compelled him to leave behind his sleeping wife and child the name of this aporia—an apparition that made him set out on a journey diametrically opposed to that of the Eastern man of light, Lord Buddha? I prefer to end on this skewed note.

Appendix

Reproduced following is the translation of the entire poem, *Aat Bachor Aager Ek Din* (“One Day Eight Years Ago”) by Joe Winter. It is taken from Winter’s collection of poems of Jibanananda Das, *Naked Lonely Hand*, with permission from him and the publisher (London: Anvil Press).

One Day Eight Years Ago
Jibanananda Das

They say he’s been taken away
to the corpse-cutting room;
that last night – in *Phalgun’s* night-gloom
when the fifth-day moon had sunk behind the sky,
he chose to die.

His wife was by his side, his child too there lay;
and love was there, and hope – in the moon’s ray –
and then – what ghost did he see? What happened to break
his sleep? Or perhaps he lay long awake. As it is
he’s asleep in the corpse-cutting room today.
Did he want to sleep like this?
With lolling neck in a narrow dark place
he sleeps, like a plague-rat with blood-flecked face,
never again to wake.

‘Never again will you wake;
the relentless – relentless weight
of waking, its all-deep ache
never again will you take –’
in darkness’s strange state
when the moon had sunk, by the window’s rim –
a silence, like a camel’s neck, loomed in wait
to say these words to him.

Right away an owl wakes;
dawn calls – and a wasted decrepit frog still makes
his ardent request for a few moments more – you can guess his
passion’s glow.

In the deep unknown of the crowded dark I come to know
the unsparing hostility of the mosquito-net all sides...
in its monastic vigil the mosquito is in love with life’s flow.

From blood and fat and liquid filth back in the sun a fly glides.
How often I’ve seen an insect at play as the sun’s gold waves
it rides!

It seems the sky's their bosom friend –
 that life a ray can send
 to capture their hearts; a dragonfly shudders deep
 in a naughty boy's hand, in its fight to avoid death's end;
 yet still, in the lording dark, when the moon had gone –
 knowing the dragonfly's, the *doyel*-bird's life with man's has
 no comparison –
 in your hand a rope in a bunched-up heap,
 to the *ashwattha*-tree alone you went on.

That branch of the *ashwattha*-tree,
 didn't it protest? Didn't a mob of fireflies scatter free
 in a soft play of golden flowers? Didn't a blind tottering owl
 arrive and say, 'Where's the moon? Has the flood carried off
 the old girl?

Wonderful!

Now let's catch a mouse or two!

Didn't it come and tell its deep great news to you?

The tang of life – as when ripe barley's smelt
 on an autumn afternoon – this was not to be borne, not to be felt.
 Have you found your heart's quietness
 in the morgue? the morgue – in a rancidness
 like a flattened rat's with lips on which blood-spots glisten?

Listen

to a dead man's tale.

In no woman's love did he fail;

in his married life he enjoyed

his hope's fulfilment, unalloyed;

in the course of time as a wife he took,

pure sweetness – and sweetness of the mind

she let him find;

in the chill of the destitute's exhausted doom

his life never shivered and shook...

and so

in the corpse-cutting room

he is lying on his back on the table.

But I know – I know

a woman's heart – love – a child – a home – this is no

full account; not wealth or fame, nor being able

to pay one's way – but something else, immense and vulnerable,

plays in the blood that is within us;

It wearies us;

it wearies – wearies us;

a tiredness that is all unable

in the corpse-cutting room, to be – and so

in the corpse-cutting room

he is lying on his back on the table.

Still each night in the gloom
I look out and see –
ah, coming down to perch in the *ashwattha*-tree –
the tottering blind owl;
swivelling its eyes it says, ‘Where’s the moon? Has the flood carried
off the old girl?
Wonderful!
Now let’s catch a mouse or two!’
O grandmother of the deep ways, today is it wonderful too?
I shall be old like you – I’ll ferry the moon, the old girl, clean
through where the Kalidaha flood-waters heave;
you and I together as one will exhaust the rich storehouse of life
and take our leave.³⁸

38 Joe Winter, *Naked Lonely Hand: Selected Poems* (London: Anvil Poetry Press, 2003), 65–66.