

---

**hip-hop**

**nature boy**

**&**

**other**

**poems**

---

RUSKIN    BOND

---



*For Siddharth,  
who listened patiently  
while I read these poems to him,  
and laughed  
in all the right places.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Kasauli, Himachal Pradesh, in 1934, *Ruskin Bond* grew up in Jamnagar, Dehradun, New Delhi and Simla. As a young man he spent four years in the Channel Islands and London. His first novel *The Room on the Roof*, written when he was seventeen, received the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize. He has written over five hundred short stories, essays and novellas (some included in the collections *Dust on the Mountain* and *Classic Ruskin Bond*) and more than forty books for children.

He has lived in Mussoorie for over forty years, writing from the small cottage which he shares with his growing adopted family.

## INTRODUCTION

Nearly all my life I have been writing stories and novels, but now and then I burst into song—that is, I write a poem.

This usually happens when I am feeling very happy, although it can also happen when I am feeling rather morose or melancholy. So, most of my poems have been happy poems. But there have been a few sad ones too.

Sometimes I feel like singing. But I'm an out-of-tune singer; I can never hit the right note. People who are near me don't like to hear me singing, because odd things happen. If I'm in a car, singing, it goes off the road. Birds fall silent. Cows and other animals make a dash for safety. Schoolteachers go into shock. People do everything they can to prevent me from singing. So now, when I feel like singing, I write a poem. I put my song down on paper, and dance a little jig in my room. Like that, no one can stop me.

My poems are silent songs. I make them up in my head, but they come from the heart.

These poems were written at different periods during my long writing life, although the title poem and a few others were written especially for this collection. Sohini, my Puffin editor (she's actually a girl, not a puffin), selected poems that we thought would appeal to young readers.

I like the funny ones best. But we have mixed them all up, which means you can open the book anywhere and see if you can find something that you like. You can even read the book backwards. In a book of poems it makes no difference.

*Ruskin Bond  
Landour, Bangalore,  
Puri, Mussoorie*

DEDICATION

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

INTRODUCTION

## contents

- hip-hop nature boy
- look for the colours of life
- all is life
- a plea for bowlers
- to live in magic
- we must love someone
- this land is mine
- raindrop
- love's sad song
- a little night music
- the demon driver
- summer fruit
- dandelion
- love is a law
- firefly in my room
- rain
- if mice could roar
- so beautiful the night
- what can we give our children?
- a frog screams
- the cat has something to say
- lone fox dancing
- self-portrait
- granny's tree-climbing
- do you believe in ghosts?
- portents
- in praise of the sausage
- don't be afraid of the dark
- walk tall
- silent birth

- listen!
- cherry tree
- view from the window
- boy in a blue pullover
- little one don't be afraid
- october
- the owl
- the trees
- tigers forever
- the snail
- the snake
- once you have lived with mountains
- butterfly time
- slum children at play
- the whistling schoolboy
- for silence
- these simple things
- granny's proverbs
- we are the babus
- in a strange cafe
- remember the old road
- a song for lost friends
- the wind and the rain
- in this workaday world
- to the indian foresters
- we rode all the way to delhi
- we who love books
- my best friend
- dare to dream
- and as we part



## hip-hop nature boy

When I was seven,  
    And climbing trees,  
        I stepped into a hive of bees.  
Badly stung and mad with pain,  
    I danced the hip-hop in the rain.  
        Hip-hop, I'm a nature boy,  
    Mother Nature's pride and joy!

When I was twelve,  
    Still climbing trees,  
        I fell instead—  
And landed on my head.  
    Feeling lighter,  
        I thought I might become a writer.  
Hip-hop, dancing in the rain,  
    A nature-writer I became!

With Nature being my natural bent,  
    At twenty I took out my tent,  
        And spent the night beside a Nadi,  
Wearing only vest and chuddee.  
At crack of dawn I woke to find  
    A crocodile was close behind,  
And smiling broadly!

    In times of crises at my best,  
        I did not trouble to get dressed,  
But fled towards the Gulf of Kutch,  
        With fond salaams to muggermuch!  
    Mother Nature once again  
        Found me dancing on the plain,  
            Nanga-panga in the rain!  
                Growing older, even bolder,  
Took a winding mountain trail,  
    Up a hill and down a dale,  
All to see a mountain-quail.

The quail was extinct, long expired,  
    I was limping, very tired;  
        Thought I saw a comfy cot  
            In the corner of a hut.  
Feeling grateful, I sank down

Upon a blanket soft as down.  
    Blanket rose up all at once,  
        Gave a shudder, then a pounce.  
Stumbling in the darkness there,  
I'd disturbed a big brown bear!

    I did not stop to say goodnight,  
But fled into the open night.  
        Hip-hop in the rain,  
Dancing to that old refrain.

    Growing old, I thought it safer  
In my tryst with Mother Nature,  
To grow flowers—  
    Roses, dahlias,  
        Poppies, sweet peas, rare azaleas,  
    Candy tuft and tiny tansies,  
            Violets sweet and naughty pansies...  
A lovely garden I'd constructed,  
    Birds and bees were soon inducted.

    Bees! Did I say bees?  
        They were buzzing all around me—  
Angry, diving down upon me;  
    For where their hive had been suspended,  
        By accident it lay upended!

    Dear Reader, if you must  
In Nature put your trust,  
    Stay away from swarms of bees  
And strange crocs lurking under trees,  
        Or else, like me, you'll dance with pain  
    While doing the hip-hop in the rain.



## look for the colours of life

Colours are everywhere,  
Bright blue the sky,  
Dark green the forest  
And light the fresh grass;  
Bright yellow the lights  
From a train sweeping past,  
The Flame trees glow  
At this time of year,  
The mangoes burn bright  
As the monsoon draws near.

A favourite colour of mine  
Is the pink of the candyfloss man  
As he comes down the dusty road,  
Calling his wares;  
And the balloon-man soon follows,  
Selling his floating bright colours.

It's early summer  
And the roses blush  
In the dew-drenched dawn,  
And poppies sway red and white  
In the invisible breeze.  
Only the wind has no colour:

But if you look carefully  
You will see it teasing  
The colour out of the leaves.  
And the rain has no colour  
But it turns the bronzed grass  
To emerald green,  
And gives a golden sheen  
To the drenched sunflower.  
Look for the colours of life—  
They are everywhere,  
Even in your dreams.

## all is life

Whether by accident or design,  
We are here.  
Let's make the most of it, my friend.  
Make happiness our pursuit,  
Spread a little sunshine here and there.  
Enjoy the flowers, the breeze,  
Rivers, sea, and sky,  
Mountains and tall waving trees.  
Greet the children passing by,  
Talk to the old folk.  
Be kind, my friend.  
Hold on, in times of pain and strife:  
Until death comes, all is life.

## a plea for bowlers

Cricket never will be *fair*  
Till bowlers get their rightful share  
For toiling in the midday sun.  
What should be done?  
It's simple—  
Make those **wickets** broader, taller!  
That should make it much more fun  
For the poor perspiring bowler.

P.S. And in the interests of the game  
The size of the bat remains the same.

## to live in magic

What more perfect friend  
than the friend you have given me, Lord;  
What more perfect song than the  
whistling-thrush at dawn's first light;  
What lovelier thing than the ladybird  
opening its wings on the rose-petal;  
What greater gift than this moment in time,  
this heartbeat in the night?

# we must love someone

We must love someone  
If we are to justify  
Our presence on this earth.  
We must keep loving all our days,  
Someone, anyone, anywhere  
Outside our selves;  
For even the sarus crane  
Will grieve over its lost companion,  
And the seal its mate.  
Somewhere in life  
There must be someone  
To take your hand  
And share the torrid day.  
Without the touch of love  
There is no life, and we must fade away.

# this land is mine

This land is mine  
Although I do not own it,  
This land is mine  
Because I grew upon it.  
This dust,  
This tender leaf  
And weathered bark  
All in my heart are finely blended  
Until my time on earth is ended.



## raindrop

This leaf, so complete in itself,  
Is only part of a tree.  
And this tree, so complete in itself,  
Is only part of the mountain.  
And the mountain runs down to the sea.  
And the sea, so complete in itself,  
Rests like a raindrop  
On the hand of God.

## love's sad song

There's a sweet little girl lives down the lane,  
And she's so pretty and I'm so plain,  
She's clever and smart and all things good,  
And I'm the bad boy of the neighbourhood.  
But I'd be her best friend forever and a day  
If only she'd smile and look my way.

## a little night music

Open the window

Let in the Night

All that is lovely

Comes at this hour

Moonlight and moonbeam

And fragrance of flower

Blossoming Champa

And Queen of the Night—

And sometimes a field mouse

Drops in for a bite.

High in the treetops

An owl strikes a note

And the frogs in their pond

Sing out as they float

Along on their lily pads...

The brainfever bird

Is calling on high

‘Brain fever, brain fever!’—

Its monotonous cry.

The nightjar plays trombone

The crickets join in

An out-of-tune orchestra

Making a din!

I lie awake listening

To the wild duck in flight

As they fly to the north

For their annual respite;

And a star in the heavens

Sweeps past as it falls,

A leopard’s out hunting—

The swamp deer calls.

A breeze has sprung up,

It hums in the trees

The window is rattling

And I must cease

From my Nocturne

And shut out the Night.

Goodnight, birds

Goodnight, frogs

Goodnight, stars

Goodnight sweet Night.

## the demon driver

At driving a car I’ve never been good—

I batter the bumper and damage the hood—

‘Get off the road!’ the traffic cops shout,

‘You’re supposed to go round that roundabout!’

‘I thought it was quicker to drive straight through.’

‘Give us your license — it’s time to renew.’

I took their advice and handed a fee

To a Babu who looked on this windfall with glee.

‘No problem,’ he said, ‘Your license now pukka,

You may drive all the way from here to Kolkata.’

So away I drove, at a feverish pitch,

Advancing someway down an unseen ditch.

Once back on the highway, I soon joined the fray

Of hundreds of drivers who wouldn’t give way:

I skimmed past a truck and revolved round a van

(Good drivers can do anything that they can)

Then offered a lift to a man with a load—

‘Just a little way down to the end of this road.’

As I pressed on the pedal, the car gave a shudder:

He’d got in at one door, got out at the other.

‘God help you!’ he said, as he hurried away,

‘I’ll come for a drive another fine day!’

I came to that roundabout, round it I sped

Eager to get to my dinner and bed.

Round it I went, and round it once more

‘Get off the road!’ That cop was a bore.

I swung to the left and went clean through a wall,

My neighbour stood there—he looked

menacing, tall—

‘This will cost you three thousand,’ he quietly said,

‘And send me your cheque before you’re in bed!’

Alas! my new car was sent for repair,

But my friends gathered round and said, never despair!

‘We are all going to help you to make a fresh start.’

And next day they gave me a nice bullock-cart.



---

---

## love is a law

Who shall set a law to lovers?

Love is a law unto itself

Love gained is often lost

And love that's lost is found again

It's love that makes the world go round

Love that keeps us closely bound

Take this power to love away

We would be just beasts of prey

If Love should lose its hold on us

Discord would rule the Universe.

## firefly in my room

Last night, as I lay sleepless

In the summer dark

With window open to invite a breeze,

Softly a firefly flew in

And circled round the room

Twinkling at me from floor or wall

Or ceiling, never long in one place

But lighting up little spaces...

A friendly presence, dispelling

The settled gloom of an unhappy day.

And after it had gone, I left

The window open, just in case

It should return.

---

## rain

After weeks of heat and dust  
How welcome is the rain.  
It washes the leaves,  
Gives new life to grass,  
Draws out the scent of the earth.  
It rattles on the roof,  
Gurgles along the drainpipe  
Collects in a puddle in the middle of the lawn—  
The birds come to bathe.

When the sun comes out  
A lizard crawls up from a crack in a rock.  
'Small brown lizard  
Basking in the sun  
You too have your life to live  
Your race to run.'

At night we look through the branches  
Of the cherry tree.  
The sky is rainwashed, star-bright.

## if mice could roar

If mice could roar  
And elephants soar,  
And trees grow up in the sky;  
If tigers could dine  
On biscuits and wine,  
And the fattest of men could fly!  
If pebbles could sing  
and bells never ring  
And teachers were lost in the post;  
If a tortoise could run  
And losses be won,  
And bullies be buttered on toast;  
If a song brought a shower  
And a gun grew a flower,  
This world would be nicer than most!



## so beautiful the night

I love the night, Lord.  
After the sun's heat and the day's work,  
It's good to close my eyes and rest my body.  
It's a good time for small creatures:  
Porcupines come out of their burrows  
to dig for roots.  
The nightjar calls tonk-tonk!  
The timid owl peeps out of his hole in the tree trunk  
Where he has been hiding all day.  
Insects crawl out in thousands.  
The wind comes down the chimney  
and blows around the room.  
I'm watching the stars from my window.  
The trees are stretching their arms in the dark  
and whispering to the moon.

But if the trees could walk, Lord,  
What a wonderful sight it would be—  
Armies of pines and firs and oaks  
Marching over the moonlit mountains.

## what can we give our children

What can we give our children?  
Knowledge, yes, and honour too,  
And strength of character  
And the gift of laughter.  
What gold do we give our children?  
The gold of a sunny childhood,  
Open spaces, a home that binds  
Us to the common good...  
These simple things  
Are greater than the gold of kings.



## a frog screams

Standing near a mountain stream

I heard a sound like the creaking

Of a branch in the wind.

It was a frog screaming

In the jaws of a long green snake.

I couldn't bear that hideous cry.

And taking two sharp sticks,

I made the twisting snake disgorge the frog,

Who hopped quite spry out of the snake's mouth

And sailed away on a floating log.

Pleased with the outcome,

I released the green grass-snake,

Stood back and spoke aloud:

'Is this what it feels like to be **God**?'

'Only what it's like to be *English*,'

Said God (speaking for a change in *French*);

'I would have let the snake finish his lunch!'

## the cat has something to say

Sir, you're a human and I'm a cat,

And I'm really quite happy to leave it at that.

It doesn't concern me if you like a dish

Of chicken masala or lobster and fish.

So why all these protests around the house

If for dinner I fancy

A succulent mouse?

Or a careless young sparrow who came my way?

Our natures, dear sir, are really the same:

Flesh, fish or fowl, we both like our game.

Only you take yours curried,

And I take mine plain.

## lone fox dancing

As I walked home last night  
I saw a lone fox *dancing*  
In the cold moonlight.

I stood and watched. Then  
Took the low road, knowing  
The night was his by right.

Sometimes, when words ring true,  
I'm like a **lone** fox dancing  
In the morning dew.

## self-portrait

There was an old man in Landour  
Who wanted young folk to laugh more;  
So he wrote them a book,  
And with laughter they shook  
As they rolled down the hill to Rajpore.



*laughter*

## granny's tree- climbing

My grandmother was a genius. You'd like to know why?  
Because she could climb trees. Spreading or high,  
She'd be up their branches in a trice. And mind you,  
When last she climbed a tree, she was sixty-two.  
Ever since childhood, she'd had this gift  
For being happier in a tree than in a lift;  
And though, as years went by, she would be told  
That climbing trees should stop when one grew old  
And that growing old should be gone about gracefully  
She'd laugh and say, 'Well, I'll grow old disgracefully.  
I can do it better.' And we had to agree;

For in all the garden there wasn't a tree  
She hadn't been up, at one time or another  
(Having learned to climb from a loving brother  
When she was six) but it was feared by all  
That one day she'd have a terrible fall.  
The outcome was different; while we were in town  
She climbed a tree and couldn't come down!

We went to the rescue, and helped her descend...  
A doctor took Granny's temperature and said,  
'I strongly recommend a quiet week in bed.'  
We sighed with relief and tucked her up well.  
Poor Granny! for her, it was more like a season in hell.

Confined to her bedroom, while every breeze  
Whispered of summer and dancing leaves.  
But she held her peace till she felt stronger  
Then sat up and said, 'I'll lie here no longer!'  
And she called for my father and told him undaunted  
That a house in a treetop was what she now wanted.

My dad knew his duties. He said, 'That's all right  
You'll have what you want, dear, I'll start work tonight.'  
With my expert assistance, he soon finished the chore:  
Made her a tree house with windows and a door.  
So Granny moved up, and now every day  
I climb to her room with glasses and a tray.  
She sits there in state and drinks mocktails with me,  
Upholding her right to reside in a tree.

do you believe in  
ghosts?

'Do you believe in **ghosts**?'  
Asked the passenger  
On platform number three.  
    'I'm a *rational* man,' said I,  
    'I believe in what I can see—  
Your hands, your feet, your beard!'  
'Then look **again**,' said he,  
And promptly *disappeared*!

portents

Spider running up the wall  
Means that **rain** is going to fall.  
  
Spider running down the wall  
Means the *house* is going to fall!



ghosts

## **in praise of the sausage**

I like a good sausage, I do;  
It's a dish for the chosen and few.  
Oh, for sausage and mash,  
And of mustard a dash,  
And an egg nicely fried—maybe two?  
At breakfast or lunch, or at dinner,  
The sausage is always a winner;  
If you want a good spread  
Go for sausage on bread,  
And forget all your vows to be slimmer.

## **don't be afraid of the dark**

Don't be afraid of the dark, little one,  
The earth must rest when the day is done.  
The sun may be harsh, but moonlight—never!  
And those stars will be shining forever and ever,  
Be friends with the Night, there is nothing to fear,  
Just let your thoughts travel to friends far and near.  
By day, it does seem that our troubles won't cease,  
But at night, late at night, the world is at peace.



*moon*

*light*

## walk tall

You stride through the long grass,  
    Pressing on over fallen pine-needles,  
        Up the winding road to the mountain pass:  
Small red ant, now crossing a sea  
                            Of raindrops; your destiny  
    To carry home that single, slender  
Cosmos seed,  
        Waving it like a banner in the sun.

## silent birth

When the earth gave birth to this tree,  
There came no sound:  
A green shoot thrust  
In silence from the ground.  
Our births don't come so quiet—  
Most lives run riot—  
But the bud opens silently,  
And flower gives way to fruit.  
So must we search  
For the stillness within the tree,  
The silence within the root.

**listen!**

Listen to the night wind in the trees,  
Listen to the summer grass singing;  
Listen to the time that's tripping by,  
And the dawn dew falling.  
Listen to the moon as it climbs the sky,  
Listen to the pebbles humming;  
Listen to the mist in the trembling leaves,  
And the silence calling.

## cherry tree

Eight years have passed  
    Since I placed my cherry seed in the grass.  
    'Must have a tree of my own,' I said—  
    And watered it once and went to bed  
And forgot; but cherries have a way of growing  
Though no one's caring very much or knowing,  
And suddenly that summer, near the end of May,  
                    I found a tree had come to stay.  
    It was very small, a five months' child,  
Lost in the tall grass running wild.  
    Goats ate the leaves, a grasscutter's scythe  
Split it apart, and a monsoon blight  
    Shrivelled the slender stem... Even so,  
    Next spring I watched three new shoots grow,  
The young tree struggle, upwards thrust  
                    Its arms in a fresh fierce lust  
For light and air and sun.  
  
I could only wait, as one  
    Who watches, wondering, while Time and the rain  
Made a miracle from green, growing pain ...  
                    I went away next year—  
    Spent a season in Kashmir—  
    Came back thinner, rather poor,  
    But richer by a cherry tree at my door.  
Six feet high, my own dark cherry,  
    And—I could scarcely believe it—a berry,  
                    Ripened and jewelled in the sun,  
Hung from a branch—just one!  
    And next year there were blossoms, small  
Pink, fragile, quick to fall  
    At the merest breath, the sleepest breeze ...  
                    I lay on the grass, at ease,  
Looked up through leaves, at the blue  
    Blind sky, at the finches as they flew  
    And flitted through the dappled green,  
While bees in an ecstasy drank  
    Of nectar from each bloom, and the sun sank  
  
    Swiftly, and the stars turned in the sky,  
    And moon—moths and singing crickets and I—  
    Yes, I!—praised night and stars and tree:  
    A small, tall cherry grown by me.



## view from the window

I'm in bed with fever  
But the fever's not high.  
Beside my bed is a window  
And I like looking out at all  
That's happening around me.  
The cherry leaves are turning a dark green.  
On the maple tree, winged seeds spin round and round.  
    There is fruit on the wild blackberry bushes.  
    Two mynah birds are building a nest in a hole—  
        They are very noisy about it.  
Bits of grass keep falling on the window sill.  
    High up in the spruce tree, a hawk-cuckoo calls:  
        'I slept so well, I slept so well!'  
    When the hawk-cuckoo is awake, no one else sleeps,  
That's why it's also known as the fever bird.  
    A small squirrel climbs on the window sill.  
        He's been coming every day since I've been ill,  
        and I give him crumbs from my tray.  
    A boy on a mule passes by on the rough mountain track.  
He sees my face at the window and waves to me.  
        I wave back to him.  
When I'm better I'll ask him to let me ride his mule.

## boy in a blue pullover

Boy in a faded blue pullover,  
    Poor boy, thin, smiling boy,  
        Ran down the road shouting,  
            Singing, flinging his arms wide.  
            I stood in the way and stopped him.  
            'What's up?' I said. 'Why are you happy?'  
    He showed me the nickel rupee-coin.  
    'I found it on the road,' he said.  
            And he held it to the light  
            That he might see it shining bright.  
    'And how will you spend it,  
        Small boy in blue pullover?'  
            'I'll buy—  
            I'll buy a buckle for my belt!'  
    Slim boy, smart boy,  
    Would buy a buckle for his belt  
Coin clutched in his hot hand,  
    He ran off laughing, bright.  
        The coin I'd lost an hour ago;  
            But better his that night.

happy

# smiles

## little one don't be afraid

Little one, don't be afraid of this big river.  
    Be safe in these warm arms for ever.  
Grow tall, my child, be wise and strong.  
    But do not take from any man his song.  
Little one, don't be afraid of this dark night.  
Walk boldly as you see the truth and light.  
Love well, my child, laugh all day long,  
    But do not take from any man his song.

## october

October comes ...  
The mountains resonate  
To festive drums.  
    At sunset time  
The western sky  
    Is drenched  
    A crimson winterline.  
October's here.  
    The pilgrims come  
Steep hills to climb,  
    For now  
It's Durga-puja time.  
  
    At Ganga's mouth  
    The icy waters  
Issue forth.  
  
The hills resound  
    As waters from the north  
    Sweep down ...  
The mighty river  
    Makes its way  
And winds along  
To Bangla's Bay.

The days speed by,  
Diwali lamps  
Are shining forth  
From East and West  
And South and North.  
The goddess smiles,  
Our heads bow down,  
We pray  
For better things to come.

October's gone!  
The night's grow long,  
We sing a softer  
Sadder song,

Recalling hopes of yesterday,  
Lost loves, lost dreams ...  
But still we pray  
For better times to come our way.





## the snake

When, after days of rain,  
    The sun appears  
        The snake emerges,  
    Green-gold on the grass.  
Kept in so long,  
    He basks for hours  
        Soaks up the hot bright sun.  
        Knowing how shy he is of me,  
    I walk a gentle pace  
Letting him doze in peace.  
        But to the snake, earth-bound,  
            Each step must sound like thunder.  
    He glides away,  
        Goes underground.

I've known him for some years:  
    A harmless green grass-snake  
    Who, when he sees me on the path,  
        Uncoils and disappears.

## once you have lived with mountains

Once you have lived with mountains  
Under the whispering pines  
And deodars, near stars  
And a brighter moon,  
With wood smoke and mist  
Sweet smell of grass, dew lines  
On spider-spun, sun-kissed  
Buttercup and vine;  
Once you have lived with these,  
Blessed, God's favourite then,  
You will return,  
You will come back  
  
To touch the trees and grass  
And climb once more the windswept mountain pass.

## butterfly time

April showers  
Bring swarms of butterflies  
Streaming across the valley  
Seeking sweet nectar.  
Yellow, gold, and burning bright,  
Red and blue and banded white.  
To my eyes they bring delight!  
Theirs a long and arduous flight,  
Here today and off tomorrow,  
Floating on, bright butterflies,  
To distant bowers.  
For Nature does things in good order:  
And birds and butterflies recognize  
No man-made border.

## slum children at play

Imps of mischief,  
Barefoot in the dust,  
Grinning, mocking, even as  
They beg you for a crust.  
No angels these,  
Just hungry eyes  
And eager hands  
To help you sympathize ...  
They don't want love,  
They don't seek pity,  
They know there's nothing  
In this heartless city  
But a kindred need  
In those who strive  
For power and pelf  
Though only just alive!

They know your guilt,  
They'll take your money,  
And if you give too much  
They'll find you funny.  
Because that's what you are—  
You're just a joke—  
Your life is soft  
And theirs all grime and smoke.  
And yet they shout and sing  
And do not thank your giving,  
You'll fuss and fret through life  
While they do all the living.

## the whistling schoolboy

From the gorge above Gangotri  
Down to Kochi by the sea,  
The whistling-thrush keeps singing  
That same sweet melody.

He was a whistling schoolboy once,  
Who heard god Krishna's flute,  
And tried to play the same sweet tune,  
But touched a faulty note.

Said Krishna to the errant youth—  
A bird you must become,  
And you shall whistle all your days  
Until your song is done.

## for silence

Thank you, Lord, for silence;  
The silence of great mountains  
and deserts and forests.  
For the silence of the street  
late at night  
when the last travellers  
are safely home  
and the traffic is still.  
For the silence in my room  
in which I can hear small sounds outside:  
a moth fluttering against the window pane,  
the drip of the dew running off the roof,  
and a field mouse rustling through dry leaves.

## these simple things

The simplest things in life are best—  
A patch of green,  
A small bird's nest,  
A drink of water, fresh and cold,  
The taste of bread,  
A song of old;  
These are the things that matter most.  
The laughter of a child,  
A favourite book,  
Flowers growing wild,  
A cricket singing in a shady nook;  
A ball that bounces high!  
A summer shower,

A rainbow in the sky,  
The touch of a loving hand,  
And time to rest—  
These simple things in life are best.

## granny's proverbs

A hungry man is an angry man,  
Said dear old Gran  
As she prepared an Irish stew  
For the chosen few  
(Gran'dad, my cousins and me).  
But then she'd turn to me and emote—  
'Don't be greedy, or your tongue will cut your throat!'  
And if I asked for more of my favourite fish,  
'That small fish,' she'd say, 'is better than an empty dish!'  
Like Manu, she taught us to honour our food,  
She was the law-giver, seeking all good.  
Gran'dad and I, we'd eat what we were given  
(Irish stew and a tart)

But sometimes we'd sneak away to the bazaar  
To feast on tikkees and chaat  
—And that was heaven!



## we are the babus

Soak the rich and harry the poor,  
That's our motto and our law;  
We are the rulers of this land,  
We are the babus, a merry band,  
Under the table, or through the back door,  
We'll empty your pockets and ask for more!  
We are the babus, this is our law—  
Soak the rich and harry the poor!

## in a strange cafe

Waiter, where's my soup?  
On its way, sir, loop the loop!  
Straight from our famous cooking pot,  
Here it comes, sir, piping hot!

But waiter, there's a fly in my soup.  
That's no fly, sir,  
That's your chicken.  
The smaller the chicken the better the soup!

Please take it away.  
I'll just have the curry and a plate of rice ...  
The curry's very good, sir, full of spice!  
Waiter, what's this object that's floating around?  
Just a small beetle, sir,  
Homeward bound!

Never mind the curry, just bring me some bread,  
I have to eat something before I'm in bed.  
What's on the menu? Hungarian Goulash?  
I suppose it's served up with beetles and mash.  
Isn't these anything else I can eat?  
Yes sir, you could try the crow's feet.  
Highly recommended and good for the teeth.

All our best guests  
Are most happily fed here.  
And where are they now?  
All happily dead, sir.

# remember the old road

Remember the Old Road

Remember the old road,

    The steep stony path

That took us up from Rajpur,

    Toiling and sweating

    And grumbling at the climb,

But enjoying it all the same.

    At first the hills were hot and bare,

But then there were trees near Jharipani

    And we stopped at the Halfway House

    And swallowed lungfuls of diamond-cut air.

Then onwards, upwards, to the town,

    Our appetites to repair!

    Well, no one uses the old road any more.

Walking is out of fashion now.

    And if you have a car to take you

    Swiftly up the motor-road

    Why bother to toil up a disused path?

    You'd have to be an old romantic like me

To want to take that route again.

    But I did it last year,

    Pausing and plodding and gasping for air—

    Both road and I being a little worse for wear!

But I made it to the top and stopped to rest

And looked down to the valley and the silver stream

    Winding its way towards the plains.

And the land stretched out before me, and the years fell away,

And I was a boy again,

And the friends of my youth were there beside me,

And nothing had changed.



Tommies and Yanks scuffled drunk and  
disorderly

In a private war for the favours of stale women.

Lonely in the house with the servants and the child  
And books I'd read twice and my father's letters,  
Treasured secretly in the small trunk beneath my bed:  
I wrote to him once but did not post the letter,  
For fear it might come back '*Return to  
sender ...*'

One day I slipped into the guava orchard next door—  
It really belonged to Seth Hari Kishore  
Who'd gone to the Ganga on a pilgrimage—  
The guavas were ripe and ready for boys to steal  
*(Always sweeter when stolen)*  
And a bare leg thrust at me as I climbed:

'*There's only room for one,*' came a voice.  
I looked up at a boy who had blackberry eyes  
And guava juice on his chin, grabbed at him  
And we both tumbled out of the tree

On to the ragged December grass. We rolled and fought  
But not for long. A gardener came shouting,  
And we broke and ran—over the gate and down the road  
And across the fields and a dry river bed,  
Into the shades of afternoon ...  
'*Why didn't you run home?*' he said.  
'*Why didn't you?*'  
'*There's no one there, my mother's out.*'  
'*And mine's at home.*'

3

His mother was Burmese; his father  
An English soldier killed in the War.  
They were waiting for it to be over.  
Every day, beyond the gardens, we loafed:  
Time was suspended for a time.  
On heavy wings, ringed pheasants rose

At our approach.  
The fields were yellow with mustard,  
Parrots wheeled in the sunshine, dipped and disappeared

Into the morning mist on the foothills.  
We found a pool, fed by a freshet  
Of cold spring water. '*One day when we are men,*  
He said, '*We'll meet here at the pool again.*  
*Promise?*' '*Promise,*' I said. And we took a pledge,  
In **blood**, nicking our fingers on a penknife  
And pressing them to each other's lips. Sweet, salty kiss.  
Late evening, past cowdust time, we trudged home:  
He to his mother, I to my dinner.

One wining-dancing night I thought I'd stay out too.  
We went to the pictures—***Gone with the Wind***—  
A crashing bore for boys, and it finished late.  
So I had dinner with them, and his mother said:  
'*It's past ten. You'd better stay the night.*  
*But will they miss you?*'

I did not answer but climbed into my friend's bed—

I'd never slept with anyone before, except my father—  
And when it grew cold, after midnight,  
He put his arms around me and looped a leg  
Over mine and it was nice that way.  
But I stayed awake with the niceness of it  
My sleep stolen by his own deep slumber...  
What dreams were lost, I'll never know!  
But next morning, just as we'd started breakfast,  
A car drew up, and my parents, outraged,  
Chastised me for staying out and hustled me home.  
Breakfast unfinished. My friend unhappy. My pride **wounded**.  
We met sometimes, but a constraint had grown upon us,  
And the following month I heard he'd gone  
To an orphanage in Kalimpong.

a n



Of long-dead Colonels, Collectors, Magistrates and Memsahibs.  
For here, in dusty splendour, lay the graves  
Of those who'd brought their English dust  
To lie with Ganges soil: some tombs were temples,  
Some were **cenotaphs**; and one, a tiny Taj.  
Here lay sundry relatives, including Uncle

Henry,  
Who'd been for many years a missionary.  
*'Sacred to the Memory  
Of Henry C. Wagstaff',*  
Who translated the Gospels into Pashtu,  
And was murdered by his own chowkidar.

*'Well done, thou good and faithful servant'—*  
So ran his epitaph.

The gardener, who looked after the trees,  
Also dug graves. One day  
I found him working at the bottom of a new cavity,  
*'They never let me know in time', he grumbled.*  
*'Last week I dug two graves, and now, without warning,  
Here's another. It isn't even the season for dying.  
There's enough work all summer, when cholera's about—  
Why can't they keep alive through the winter?'*  
Near the railway lines, watching the trains  
**(There were six every day, coming or going),**

And across the line, the leper colony...  
I did not know they were lepers till later  
But I knew they were different: some  
Were without fingers or toes  
And one had no nose  
And a few had holes in their faces  
And yet some were beautiful.

h a

They had their children with them  
And the children were no different  
From other children.

I made friends with some  
And won most of their marbles  
And carried them home in my pockets.

One day my parents found me  
Playing near the leper colony.  
There was a big scene.  
My mother shouted at the lepers  
And they hung their heads as though it was all their fault,  
And the children had **nothing** to say.  
I was taken home in disgrace  
And told all about leprosy and given a bath.

My clothes were thrown away  
And the servants wouldn't touch me for days.  
So I took the marbles I'd won  
And put them in my stepfather's cupboard,  
Hoping he'd catch leprosy from them.

6

A slim dark youth with quiet  
Eyes and a gentle quizzical smile,  
Manohar. fifteen, working in a small hotel.  
He'd come from the hills and wanted to return.

I forget how we met  
But I remember walking the dusty roads  
With this gentle boy, who held my hand  
And told me about his home, his mother,  
His village, and the little river  
At the bottom of the hill where the water  
Ran blue and white and wonderful,  
*'When I go home, I'll take you with me.'*  
But we hadn't enough money.  
So I sold my bicycle for thirty rupees  
And left a note in the dining room:



**the wind and the  
rain**

Like the wind, I run;

Like the rain, I sing;

Like the leaves, I dance;

Like the earth, I'm still;

And in this, Lord, I do thy will.

**in this workaday  
world**

It's a busy world, I know,

And we must hurry here and there

And not ask who or why or where,

For fear our credits fall too low.

But here upon this hilly crest

There's some respite; and when

The fretting day is done,

Beneath the cherry tree there's rest.



## to the indian foresters

You are the quiet men who do not boast  
Although you've done much more than most  
    To make this land a sea of green  
        From here to far Cape Comorin.  
    Without your help to Nature's thrust,  
This land would be a bowl of dust.  
    A land without its forest wealth  
Must suffer a decline in health,  
    For herbs and plants all need green cover  
        Before they help the sick recover.  
    And we need trees to hold together  
Beasts, and birds of every feather,  
        And leaves to help the air smell sweet;  
And this and more is no mean feat.

Dear foresters, you have not sought for fame or favour,  
Yours has been a love of labour.  
Our thanks! Instead of desert sand  
You've given us this green and growing land.

(Composed and read to a gathering of young forest officers at  
the forest Research Institute on 10 April 2004)

## we rode all the way to delhi

In the Bicycle Age  
    When I was a kid  
We rode all the way to Delhi,  
    Yes we did!  
    Somi and Ranji and I...  
    It took us three days  
    As we pressed on our pedals,  
All two hundred miles  
    From Dehra to Delhi,  
        And they gave us no medals!

We sheltered in dhabas  
    And ate what they gave us,  
    But no welcoming crowd  
        In Delhi received us  
        As dusty, dishevelled  
We crossed the old bridge

And rode round the city  
    And camped on the Ridge.  
    Next day we rose late—  
        Our bodies they ached—  
        So instead of cycling  
            All the way back again  
    We put our bikes on the train  
And went home in style  
    To Dehra from Delhi,  
Somi and Ranji and I...

## we who love books

Some books I'll never give away,  
    Though old and worn, their binding torn,  
    Upon my shelves they'll always stay,  
        Alive, still read, still fresh each dawn,  
Their magic moments never gone.  
    Great verse, great thoughts, still stand the test  
        Of time that's passing by so fast ...  
    These good companions never fail  
        To give us joy, to nourish us . . .  
We who love books will always be  
                                    The lucky ones,  
                            Our minds set free.

## my best friend

My best Friend  
Is the baker's son,  
I gave him a book  
And he gave me a bun!  
    I told him a tale  
    Of a magical lake,  
    And he liked it so much  
    That he baked me a cake.  
    Yes, he's my best friend—  
        We go cycling together,  
            On bright sunny days,  
Or in rain and bad weather.  
  
    And if we feel hungry  
        There's always a pie  
            Or a pastry to feast on,  
                As we go riding by!

*fresh*

## **dare to dream**

Build castles in the air  
    But first, give them foundations.  
Hold fast to all your dreams,  
    Make perfect your creations.  
All glory comes to those who dare.  
    Failed works are sad lame things.  
Act impeccably, sing  
    Your own song, but do not take  
        Another's song from her or him;  
    Look for your art within,  
You'll find your own true gift,  
    For you are special too.  
And if you try, you'll find  
There's nothing you can't do.

## **and as we part**

The day is done,  
It's time to sleep,  
And with this world  
To make my peace.  
Enchanted days  
Have all my life  
Brought beauty  
More than bitter strife.  
May you who read  
These words today  
Be blessed in every way...  
And as we part,  
I give you all  
That lies within my heart.

