

Refuge in the Forest

148

So I have roamed through perilous lands
in fruitless pursuit of reward,
relinquished my pride and my birthright
to fawn in futile servitude,
shamelessly eaten in other men's homes,
cowering like a common crow.
Greed, you gloated on my wretched deeds;
even now you will not rest content!

149

I mined the earth in search of treasure,
smelted iron mountains' rocky hoards,
crossed treacherous oceans' expanses,
placated kings with devoted care;
bent on evoking occult powers,
by night I roamed the burning grounds.
Not even a broken cowrie shell did I find—
cursed greed, grant me some reprieve!

I bear the villains' taunting words
intent upon appeasing them.
I choke my tears, which in disguise
become an empty heart's laughter.
I pay vile homage to my foes
stupefied by wealth.
Hope, you are barren—how
do you still compel me to dance?

The cyclic recurrence of sunset and dawn
daily serves to measure life's decay,
but burdened with his mundane tasks,
man does not grasp time's movement;
seeing old age and pain and death,
he does not experience terror.
Drunk on the heady wine of delusion,
the world is mad in oblivion.

If other men did not see his wife the pitiful victim
of poverty's woe, and the gaunt faces
of his starved and whimpering children
as they pulled at their mother's ragged clothes,
how could he stammer out the word "give"
that sticks in his throat from fear of rebuff?
What high-minded man would stoop to beg
for the sake of his own empty belly?

All desire for pleasure has waned,
the esteem of men has ebbed;
beloved friends and peers of life
now are lost to heaven;
the simplest movement requires a cane;
these eyes are veiled in darkness.
How bold this body is to fear
the final blow of death!

I failed to fix my aimless thoughts on Shiva's
holy foot to cleave these mundane bonds;
I heedlessly shunned the righteous way
which penetrates heaven's massive doors;
I even failed in my dreams to embrace
woman's voluptuous breasts, and her ample hips.
I lived my life like an ax, wasting
the forest of youth my mother slaved to nurture.

We savored no pleasure,
so we are consumed.
We practiced no penance,
so we are afflicted.
We did not elude time,
so we are pursued.
We did not wither craving,
so we are the wizened.

156

My face is graven with wrinkles,
my hair is streaked with gray,
my limbs are withered and feeble—
my craving alone keeps its youth.

157

Even the sensuous pleasures which rest
within our reach inevitably ebb away.
Is the pain of abstention so intense
that man cannot renounce them himself?
If pleasures abandon him at random,
man suffers unparalleled anguish;
but if he renounces them at will,
he reaps the fruit of eternal calm.

158

Even though my food is alms,
a single meager daily meal;
though my bed is bare ground,
my servant no one but myself;
though my clothes are tattered,
patched with scraps of rag,
the lures of the senses
never grant release.

159

Her breasts, those fleshy protuberances,
are compared to golden bowls;
her face, a vile receptacle of phlegm,
is likened to the moon;
her thighs, dank with urine, are said
to rival the elephant's trunk.
Mark how this despicable form
is flourished by the poets.

160

Unconscious of its violent power,
the moth flies into a flame.
The unwary fish through ignorance
bites the baited hook.
And even we, men who perceive
the tangled net of ruin
which passion casts, do not avoid it.
Alas, delusion's sway is inscrutable!

161

Forest fruits are my only food,
mountain water my drink,
the bare earth my bed,
bark cloth is my raiment.
I cannot acquiesce
in the impudence of evil men
whose drunken senses totter
from the wine of trifling wealth.

162

This world was engendered long ago
by gracious men with noble hearts.
Some sustained it, others conquered
to give it away as if it were straw.
Men of courage even now enjoy power
over the various realms.
What then is this fever of pride
in men who rule the smallest town?

163

You are a king;
I am exalted in homage to an honored guru's wisdom.
You are notorious for your might;
the poets spread my fame across the worlds.
O prince of pride,
the gulf between us is not great.
If you turn your face from me,
I am quite indifferent.

164

When warring rulers never cease
to ravage and divide the land,
what glory is there for a king
in conquest?
But men who rule some meager plot of land,
village lords,
who ought to feel despair,
rather boast delight—the fools!

165

Our intellects are not intent on knavery;
we rank not as dancers, lewd buffoons, or songsters,
nor as women bent with weighty breasts.
Who then are we in the palace of a king?

166

You are a king of opulence;
I am a master
of infinite words.
You are a warrior;
I hold a skill in eloquence
which subdues the fever of pride.
Men blinded by riches serve you;
but they desire to hear me
that their minds may be pure.
Since you have no regard for me,
the less have I for you,
O king—I am gone.

167

Why, my heart, do you waste the days
seeking attention of other men?
Why do you enter the thicket
of anguish just to curry favor?
If you find contentment within yourself,
your thought will become a wish-granting gem—
zeal for freedom's joy
will starve your worldly craving.

To cultivate lives as ephemeral
as droplets on a lotus leaf,
what do we not stoop to do
when discrimination fails us?
In front of rich men,
senseless from wines of wealth,
I shamelessly stood boasting
about my own virtues.

Alas, my friend, great was the king
with his circle of courtiers,
the counselors at his side,
the ladies' moonlike faces,
the host of haughty princes,
the bards and their tales—
but we submit to time,
which swept them all from power
to the path of memory.

Our parents, who begot and bore us
to the world are long since dead.
Our friends of youth are banished
to the realm of memory.
Now, from day to day, we wait for
death's imminent call—
like trees on the frail sandbanks
of rivers, we wait for the flood.

In a house that once was full,
a solitary man stands.
Where many descendants lived,
no one remains.
They toss day and night
like a pair of dice
and move men like pawns—
Time plays a frenzied game with Kālī,
his partner in destruction.

Should I sojourn in austerity
on the sacred river's bank,
or should I, in worldly fashion,
court women of high grace?
Or drink at streams of scripture
the nectar of rich verse?
In life as transient as a flashing glance,
I can choose no single course.

173

Hope is a river
whose water is desire,
whose waves are craving.
Passions are crocodiles,
conjectures are birds
destroying the tree of resolve.
Anxiety carves a deep ravine
and the whirlpool of delusion
makes it difficult to ford.
Let ascetics who cross
to the opposite shore
exult in their purified minds.

174

Days which dragged through the heavy pain
I felt entreating wealthy lords,
days which fled to naught while my mind
was ensnared in the sensuous sphere—
let me recollect the laughter
of those cursed days' end
when I awake from meditation's depths,
seated on a mountain cave's stone couch.

175

I never learned pure scholarship
or amassed any wealth;
my mind was not devout
in reverence due my parents.
Even in dreams I failed to embrace
maids with trembling eyes.
I passed my time like a common crow
groveling for other men's crumbs.

176

Though I search the triple world
through all its mundane passages,
no man has met my vision's field
or come within my hearing's range
who could really bind
to a post of self-restraint
the raging elephant of his mind
with its drunken desire to court
the world of the senses.

177

I dwell content in the hermit's dress of bark,
while you luxuriate in silken splendor.
Still, my contentment is equal to yours;
disparity's guise is deceiving.
Now let him be called a pauper
who bears an insatiable greed;
when a mind rests content,
what can it mean to be "wealthy" or "poor"?

Pleasures are as ephemeral as lightning
flashing through a canopy of clouds;
life is as fragile as a water-filled
thunderhead blown by the wind;
transient for mortals is youth's caressing.
Wise men, reflect on this and hasten
to fix your minds in yoga,
purest fruit of calm and trance.

Wandering through holy cities or sacred forests,
bearing the covered alms bowl,
begging where the smoke-gray sky
gives sign that priests offer holy oblations
whose remnants are fit for mendicants—
this is the righteous way
to fill a gnawing belly.
The proud mendicant is still blessed,
but not the parasitic wretch
who grovels daily amid his kinsmen.

Abandon the depths of sensuous chaos,
that prison of torment!
The course reaching beyond toward bliss
can instantly allay all pain.
Initiate then a peaceful mood!
Renounce your gamboling unsteady ways!
Forsake the ephemeral mundane passions!
Rest placid now, my thoughts!

My dear, rest content
with forest flowers, herbs, and fruits;
with earth's bare couch
and garments fashioned crudely of fresh bark.
We retire now to a sylvan silence,
to the forest where no echo sounds
of wicked men whose muddled minds
show their confusion—
vile lords whose tongues stammer folly aloud,
confounded by disease of wealth.

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Purge your delusion,
find joy in moon-crested Shiva,
dwell in devotion, my thoughts,
on the banks of the heavenly river!
What certainty exists in waves, or bubbles,
or streaks of lightning?
In women, or flames, or serpents,
or torrents of water?

Songs sound before you, eloquent bards
from the south are at your side,
behind you are plume-bearing maids
whose anklets ring in play.
If you so desire,
taste these worldly delights.
If not, my mind, plunge into
deep meditation, into a trance
free from fantasy dilemmas.

Are roots extinct in the valleys?
Have mountain cascades ceased to fall?
Are boughs that bear fruit and yield
the hermit's bark withered on the trees?
How can the world bear to behold
the faces of arrogant rogues
whose brows dance in the winds
of a little hard-won wealth?

O beneficent Shiva,
behold a solitary man,
free from desire, tranquil,
drinking from his hands,
wearing the sky as his raiment.
When shall I master the way
to root out the store of my karma?

If wealth which yields all desire is won,
what then?
If your foot stands on the head of your foes,
what then?
If honored men are drawn to you by riches' force,
what then?
If man's mundane body endures for an aeon,
what then?

When man feels devotion to the Lord Shiva,
has the fear in his heart of death and rebirth,
indulges no bonds of attachment to kinsmen
or frenzy born of amorous passion;
when he dwells in a lonely forest
free from the taints of society,
he lives indifferent to worldly concerns.
What loftier goal can man strive to attain?

If you men perceive your deeper selves,
then reach toward Brahman boundless,
enduring, remote, and pervading;
and it shall follow that
power and pleasure in the world
will seem the obsessions of wretched fools.

You descend to nether worlds,
you traverse the sky,
you roam the horizon
with such mobility, my mind!
Why do you never, even in error,
remember what is pure
and part of yourself,
that Brahman, through which
you would reach your final bliss?

Earth his soft couch,
arms of creepers his pillow,
the sky his canopy,
tender winds his fan,
the moon his brilliant lamp,
indifference his mistress,
detachment his joy—
tranquil, the ash-smeared hermit
sleeps in ease like a king.

Why do men need scriptures revealed, remembered,
recited in legend? Why tedious tomes of precepts?
Why the labyrinth of ritual acts
performed for reward in heaven's abode?
When compared with the fire ending time,
ending all the pain of worldly toil,
and leading men's souls into bliss,
all these are the goods of haggling merchants.

Life is a rough uncertain wave.
The splendor of youth is a transient bloom.
Fortune is imagination's whim.
Pleasure flashes like lightning during the rains.
Even fond embraces of beloved arms
do not rest long in their show of love.
Meditate then on that highest Brahman
to cross beyond this sea of worldly dread.

Moonlight beams, a forest glade,
the fellowship of friends,
the legends told in poetry,
all are enchanting.
Enchanting too is her lovely face
gleaming with tears of anger—
enchanting if only your thought can forget
their ephemeral nature.

194

While his body's vigor is whole
and old age is remote;
while his sensuous powers are unimpaired
and life not yet exhausted;
only then will a wise man
strive to perfect his soul.
Why attempt to dig a well
when the house is already burning?

195

I failed to master the knowledge
needed to conquer the host of polemists
abroad in the world.
I did nothing to spread my fame
across the sky on the rapier
made to pierce war elephants' heads.
I never sipped the moonrise nectar
from women's beautiful,
tender, blossom lips.
Alas, I passed a futile youth,
like a flaming lamp
in an empty house.

196

You are favored men who sit in mountain caves,
in meditation on an inner light,
while on your laps calmly perch birds of prey
to drink the tears of bliss.
But we, poor fools,
waste away our lives in games,
dallying in pleasure groves and ponds
of castles desire creates.

197

Birth is scented with death.
Youth's brilliance is shadowed by old age.
Contentment is menaced by ambition,
calm, by impudent women's amorous looks,
virtues, by men's malice,
woodlands, by serpents, and kings, by villains.
Rich treasure
is plundered by transience.
Is anything spared the threat of eclipse?

198

Youth in its prime is sapped
by a hundred plagues of longing.
Wherever the bird of wealth alights,
misfortunes swarm through open gates.
Soon death is sovereign
over every helpless creature born.
What is fashioned to endure
through capricious fate?

199

Still unborn, man suffers a painful
confinement in woman's foul womb.
In youth, he suffers separation's pangs,
the misery of each parting
lover's embrace.
Even old age is accursed,
exposing him to women
flashing looks of scorn.
Tell me, men, does worldly existence
offer us any joy at all?

200

The span of man's life is a measured hundred years,
yet half is lost to night
and of his waking time,
callow youth and hoary age each claim a share;
his prime is spent in servitude, suffering
the anguish of estrangement and disease.
Where do men find happiness
in life less certain and more transient than the waves?