



Under the Banyan Tree



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To the writers and readers of haiku,
with the blessings of
His Divine Grace
A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda,
my spiritual master.



In the summer of 1966, in a small storefront on 26 Second Avenue on New York City's Lower East Side, His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda opened a temple for the worship of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. A few young people stepped forward to become his disciples.

In our minds—fantasies, psychedelic ambitions, the belief that “IT” is impersonal light. The brass hand cymbals ring through the storefront, one . . . two . . . *three*, one . . . two . . . *three*. Then his voice—sweet and rich with Bengali melody . . . “Let it come,” we think, as he chants the ancient *mantra*, “let its waves carry us far and high.”

On Swamiji's rug:
a playpen romp
to *samādhi*.

I have come for the books. "These are commentaries on the scriptures?" I ask. "Yes," he says, and I take them from his hand. "Sit down," he says heavily. "I'm sorry," I say, "I'm only on my lunch hour." But I leave with the books. He was glad to see me go like that.

Book buying:
the price is high
but I want them.

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Relaxed, philosophical
Swamiji appears
as if he'll never leave.

“Sit down.”
I can't—
but the books.

Walking fast
through city streets
with three big books.

“This is Steve,” I say through the phone. “Do you remember me?” He says yes. I ask if he could please save lunch for me.

Bowing this first time,
my head at your feet,
just you and I.

His lecture over, I loiter on the curb, wondering what to do—a dangerous moment. He sees me and calls me to him: “We are having a feast and I’m inviting you to come. Do you have an engagement? Can you come?”

Just before I dove
you caught me
in your glance.

Your sweet-rice
saved me.

He lectures, then stops. “Are there any questions?” I finally get it out: “Is misery eternal?”

A young LSD man
asks about death:
Do you know?

Beyond
bones and madness:
your words.

“This is my life’s savings,” I say, and shyly hand him six hundred dollars. He smiles, but then he sees my pride.

In his reprimanding eyes,
my naked soul
and a glimpse of his pure love.

He speaks of Viṣṇu with four arms standing in the spiritual world and in our hearts. "There are no persons with four arms anywhere!" I think. "It's inconceivable, impossible!" Then I know: *He* is inconceivable, impossible. And he is here.

Beautiful bluish youth,
four symbols in His hands —
I scratch my head.

Hearing from Swamiji
on the Lower East Side:
Viṣṇu is everywhere.

Hearing from Swamiji
next to the Esso station,
I want to stay with him.

Late at night, while I type in his room, he sits and eats puffed rice. He glances at me, his eyes wide.

Typing
my constant prayer:
please accept me.

“Swamiji, I feel like I am many different persons, but how do I know which person I should be to please Kṛṣṇa? If I have many different selves, which self would He like me to be?” Looking at me and then replying before a roomful of people, Śrīla Prabhupāda says, “This boy Steve is very nice. He does typing for me, and sometimes he gives me donations. So you should all be like this.”

From perverted, mirrored selves,
New York City madness,
he pulls me out.

Out of the jungle,
out of word jumble—
a servant.

After *guru's* praise,
a happy boy
sings in the storefront.

The others sit with him in his clean, sunny apartment and hear of Kṛṣṇa the Supreme. But for now, let me work and earn for him.

With leisure I'll sit
in Swamiji's room
under the banyan tree.

Walking for Swamiji,
eating for Swamiji,
earning for Swamiji.

Mrs. Gomez and five kids,
husband ran off, leaping mice—
yogī welfare worker.

Disabled man with ten cats;
who can tell him,
“Chant Hare Kṛṣṇa!”

“Swamiji, your words protect me at the office. Knowledge of the soul is beyond this body.” He is pleased to hear me state it.

“Great Gordon’s gin!” —
Black lady boss laughs
at the *karma yogī*.

On interoffice phone
a chant comes out.
“What the hell is that?”

Mantra-armor,
inner smile,
Swamiji is just four blocks away.

“Swamiji, is there a level of spiritual advancement one can make from which he doesn’t fall back?” “Yes,” he says, “it is such a nice thing.”

Trying to do Nothing
alone in a sterile room,
so-called Lao-tse follower.

Keeping clean
two weeks at a time
then ferry to Manhattan.

Gold-skinned master,
sunlight pouring in:
yes there is.

My father telephones: "If you don't stop that nonsense, we won't have anything to do with you."

When his mother died,
Nārada* cried,
and started north.

*An enlightened sage whose mother died when he was five years old.

Initiation Day, Rādhāṣṭamī, September 1966.

Bowing with closed eyes,
close to his bare feet,
plunging in devotion.

Feeling at home.
By his will,
my new name.

Kneeling close
with the boys, the fire-warmth—
to Swamiji.

Just before autumn,
touching his hallway mailbox.
Now I am disciple.

His words from my old diary: "If you love me, then I'll love you."

Twenty-six Second Avenue:
pilgrims collect
its dirt in a jar.

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Garbage in the storefront.
The scene vanished;
devotees stand and hear it.

Where is the Swami's room?
Where is his sunlit form?
Where is he working?

No grapes from his hand now;
but worship of his photo
with incense every day.

Prabhupāda is everywhere
right now every day —
“If you love me.”

hare kṛṣṇa hare kṛṣṇa
kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa hare hare
hare rāma hare rāma
rāma rāma hare hare

(Kalisantarāna Upaniṣad)



