Introduction

I. KABIR'S LIFE AND WORK

There are volumes of legendary biography about Kabir, but the widely accepted "facts" about his life can be summarized in a few sentences. He was born in Varanasi around the beginning of the fifteenth century in a class of weavers recently converted to Islam. He learned the family craft (later composing a number of poems with weaving metaphors), probably studied meditative and devotional practices with a Hindu guru, and developed into a powerful teacher and poet, unique in his autonomy, intensity, and abrasiveness. His verses were composed orally and collected by disciples and admirers after varying periods of circulation. He is generally assumed to have been illiterate, and no critic fails to quote the famous verse:

I don’t touch ink or paper,
this hand never grasped a pen.
The greatness of four ages
Kabir tells with his mouth alone. (sa. 187)

Though of course we cannot prove his illiteracy or his innocence of contact with ink or paper, the notion that he insisted on oral transmission accords well with the gist of his teaching. Of all the terms he used to refer to the enlightenment experience or the means of reaching it, the most prominent is śabda, the Word, along with naṁsa, the name, and rāma, Ram. He stresses direct contact with the teacher, indicating that the only authentic teaching is the word from the guru’s mouth (sa. 82). And he continually urges immediate understanding, a recognition which (like the apprehension of a vibrating word) is sahaja, spontaneous, simple.

In India, Kabir is almost universally believed (though on shaky historical evidence) to have been a disciple of the famous guru Ramananda.1 Perhaps the most popular legend about Kabir relates how he tricked the orthodox Hindu into accepting him, a Muslim, as a student. Supposedly he stretched himself across the stairs leading to the river where Ramananda came for his bath in the predawn darkness. Tripping over Kabir’s body and fearing sudden danger to his life, Ramananda cried out—as Kabir knew he would—his own mantra: “Ram! Ram!” Kabir then claimed that the mantra had been transmitted and he must be accepted as a disciple. Whether or not the two men were related in this way, Kabir’s poetry is full of exhortations to recite
the name of Ram, to devote oneself to Ram, to drop everything except Ram.

It should be emphasized that this Ram is not the deity of popular Hindu mythology, incarnation of Vishnu and hero of the Ramayana epic. In a number of poems Kabir explicitly repudiates this anthropomorphic Ram. Though he sometimes addresses King Ram, Lord, or Hari (a name of Vishnu) in the songs, many references to Ram and the Word indicate that his Ram is primarily a sound, a mantra consisting of the long and short syllables Rā-ma. We may surmise that he used this mantra, was perhaps taught it (as popular tradition asserts) by his guru. Whether or not Kabir's own practice was the repetition of "Ram," we know that he recommended it to others as a way of achieving the utter concentration necessary to penetrate the many layers of distraction and delusion, to reach the threshold of a fundamental question: is it two or one? something or nothing? can you find the tracks of a bird in the air? of a fish in the sea?  

While there is evidence that both Hindus and Muslims were ready to assault Kabir physically during his lifetime, they have since his death been ready to assault each other over the privilege of claiming him as their own. A famous legend about Kabir shows his Hindu and Muslim followers massed for combat after his death, each side demanding the cadaver. The two religious groups divide the flowers, and each goes off to bury or burn its half according to prescribed rituals.

The story illustrates the element of absurdity or futility that underlies the career of a great and courageous figure who passes from public contempt to adulation. Kabir was well aware of this element in his attempt to teach what he knew; his awareness is reflected in an irony that flickers throughout his verses, making him unique among the devotional poets of the period. He knew that people would inevitably misunderstand what he was saying, that they didn't want to hear it, that they would twist him into the image of the very gurus he excoriated, and that, after he had spent his life debunking ritual and slavish outward observance, his own devotees would be ready to shed each other's blood over the question of whether his carcass should be buried or burned, to the intonation of syllables in Arabic or Sanskrit.

Saints, see the world is mad.
If I tell the truth they rush to beat me,
if I lie they trust me. (6.4)

Another often heard story is that the infant Kabir was placed in a basket and set adrift on a pond by a Brahmin widow (who, it is sometimes added, conceived him immaculately and bore him through the palm of her hand), there to be discovered and adopted by a Muslim couple. This story seems obviously concocted by Hindus unwilling to concede the saint's Muslim origins. In fact his birth and upbringing in a household of Muslim weavers in Varanasi may be the only data we can take for granted about Kabir. Current scholarship favors 1398–1448 as the dates of his birth and death.  

But to be a Muslim in North India in the fifteenth century often meant to be still half a Hindu. For several centuries the Muslim invaders had been waging war, and down the subcontinent, taking over kingdoms and propagating their faith through the point of the sword. Large groups of local people—usually low-caste Hindus, often laborers and craftpeople—found it convenient to convert en masse to the religion of the conquerors. This did not mean that they forsook their former gods and practices. Old Brahmanic Hinduism, Hindu and Buddhist tantrism, the individualistic tantric teaching of the Nath yogis, and the personal devotionism coming up from the South mingled with the austere intimations of imageless godhead promulgated by Islam. Every one of these influences is evident in Kabir, who more than any other poet-saint of the period reflects the unruly, rich conglomeration of religious life that flourished around him.

Some modern commentators have tried to present Kabir as a synthesizer of Hinduism and Islam; but the picture is a false one. While drawing on various traditions as he saw fit, Kabir emphatically declared his independence from both the major religions of his countrymen, vigorously attacked the follies of both, and tried to kindle the fire of a similar autonomy and courage in those who claimed to be his disciples. In a famous couplet he declares:

I've burned my own house down,
the torch is in my hand.
Now I'll burn down the house of anyone who wants to follow me.  

If Kabir insisted on anything, it was on the penetration of everything inessential, every layer of dishonesty and delusion. The individual must find the truth in his own body and mind, so simple, so direct, that the line between "him" and "it" disappears. One of the formulaic phrases in Kabir's verses is ghata ghata mē, in every body, in every vessel. The truth is close—closer than close. Kabir understood the countless ploys by which we avoid recognizing ourselves. One form our foolish cleverness takes is our desperate, seemingly sincere searching outside ourselves. We try to find other people who have the secret, and then we try to understand them. So we have tried to do with Kabir. But he persistently evades our attempts to define or explain him. Was he a
Hindu? A Muslim? Were his ancestors Buddhists? Did he practice yoga? Did he have a guru? Who was it? The impossibility of ascertaining these basic facts about Kabir's religious life is part of his legacy of teaching.

The chief source for our understanding of Kabir is, of course, his poetry. But the many volumes published under his name and the imnumerable songs sung with his signature line can hardly be assumed to be authentic. If we are interested in discovering who Kabir really was and what his most characteristic utterances were, it is important to have a sense of how the verses were originally presented and how they attained popularity and fame, eventually to be canonized in various sectarian scriptures.

Religious "literature" in medieval India was sung. It spread across the country like wildfire on the lips of devotees and wandering ascetics who walked from region to region or met in conventions of "holy men" on the banks of some sacred river, where a chief activity was bhajm, or devotional singing. This oral tradition is still flourishing today, so that one can move among sadhus (monks and ascetics) or groups of singers in villages and transcribe songs by Kabir—at least versions of songs that have been passed over the centuries, across mountains and deserts, through dialectal alterations, and sometimes in and out of printed versions as well. The best-known translations in the West—Tagore's English renditions of one hundred songs, published in 1915, and Robert Bly's new versions adapted from Tagore—are based on verses originally brought together by a Bengali collector who transcribed them from the lips of wandering holy men in the early 1900s.

There are also written collections that have been preserved in roughly the same form over several centuries. The efforts of compiling these collections were made by sects that had some particular interest in the saint-poet whose sayings they set down. In Kabir's case there are three major collections, put together by sects in three widely separated regions of North India: the modern states of Panjab in the West, Rajasthan in the Midwest, and Uttar Pradesh/Bihar in the East. The oldest is the Guru Granth (or Adi Granth), sacred book of the Sikhs, which has been in its present form since about 1603. The Granth, compiled in Panjab, contains utterances of the early Sikh gurus and of other saint-poets whom they admired. The Rajasthani collection, called the Patricvâni ("Words of the Five") includes sayings of five saints exalted by the Dadu Panth. The Bijak is the scripture of the Kabir Panth and contains only works attributed to Kabir. The dates of origin of the Patricvâni and the Bijak are uncertain; but both can be assumed to have taken shape in the seventeenth century, rather later than the Guru Granth.

The three collections have much in common, but show somewhat different characters. In all traditions—eastern and western, oral and written—Kabir is known for his toughness and iconoclasm. But in the western-based Guru Granth and Patricvâni there also appears a softer, more emotional Kabir who sings of ecstatic insight, who experiences passionate longing for and tormented separation from a beloved, or who offers himself in utter surrender, as a servant or beggar, to a personified divine master. Often the western poet's expressions are colored by the terms and forms of the Krishna bhakti (devotional) movement which was then dominant in those regions.

The Bijak presents a more austere and dramatic personality, a poet of sudden flashes and jagged primary colors rather than subtle emotional hues. Above all he is the intense teacher, striving to shake his listeners out of their false security, their careless dishonesty, the naive belief that they actually possess and will continue to possess house, body, mate, and family, or that the mind—which Kabir images as a nervous thief or a dog howling at its own reflection—is an accurate reporter of what is going on in the world. This Kabir is passionate too; but his passion is to awaken. His personal drama has receded into the background, and the great truth or supreme being he urges us to understand shows almost no trace of anthropomorphism or personality.

Yet Kabir's teaching is very personal. This is because he speaks directly and aggressively to us, his listeners and readers. Almost all his poems have some term of direct address: Hey seeker! Listen, brother! Tell me, Pandit Fool, you've missed it! His poems bristle with questions, assaults, paradoxes and enigmas. He confronts, irritates, and fascinates, always trying to set off a spark of consciousness in people who are sinking in the river of time, the ocean of delusion.

II. ROUGH RHETORIC

Many scholars have noted Kabir's odd combination of crudeness and potency. Charlotte Vaudeville observes that while Kabir is undoubtedly rude, crude, vulgar, and prosaic, he is at the same time eloquent, exciting, dazzling, and unforgettable. Some Indian critics find the crudeness of Kabir and other nirgaha poets a grave defect. Others have tried, like royal messengers trying to cram the stepsisters' big feet into Cinderella's dainty slipper, to fit Kabir's utterances into the categories of classical Indian poetics. Some have told me confidentially that Kabir was not a poet at all, but a social reformer.

Kabir was a poet, and a radical reformer, though society was only the outermost skin of what he wished to reform. What makes his
rough verses so strong and memorable? The question points to a study of style.

The problems involved in using translations to analyze the style of a medieval Indian poet for a twentieth-century Western audience are minimized in Kabir's case, for he is the most translatable of the non-modern Indian poets. This is, first, because of the simplicity and bluntness of his style; and further, because of a way of looking at and speaking of things that is more modern than classical, more individual than idealized.

Leonard Nathan, a recent translator of Kalidasa's Meghaduta, has discussed the difficulties a Western audience may have in understanding the assumptions that underlie the Sanskrit poet's world view. One such assumption is that the empirical world, being impermanent and disordered, is unreal. Art is meant to reflect not this chaos of passing forms, but the harmonious reality beyond them. The poet, using the language of permanence and perfection (classical Sanskrit), composes the elements of the empirical world into an endlessly elaborated unity in which everything reflects everything else; or more exactly, reflects and gathers itself in perfect order around the human. So Kalidasa's "cloud-messenger" turns the whole subcontinent into an image of itself:

Mountains and rivers are invested with feeling and their beauty charged with sexual attraction; trees and flowers become their ornaments. Animals evoke human beauties... Even the great rains act out the release of pent-up passions.

Classical Indian art, as Nathan describes it, is a ceremony celebrating in minute detail the unity and ideality of the world beyond appearances.

There may be unity underlying Kabir's vision, but he does not take the route of the classical poet to reveal it. Unceremoniously, he shows us actual human feeling, surrounds us with the experience of delusion, makes vivid the fragmented nature of ordinary life. What unity there may be comes forth in flashes, or in leaps from the disordered surface of the world to a momentary recognition: it is here, in every body (ghata ghata me); something simple (sahaja); a single word (sabda). He does not, like Kalidasa or the Hindi classicist Tulsidas, anthropomorphize flora, fauna, and the elements to reflect ideal human feeling.

The modernity that many readers have remarked on in Kabir may be better understood through a passage in which Nathan contrasts Western and Indian expectations of poetry:

Where we look for close adherence to psychological and physical reality, the Indian poet rigorously excludes verisimilitude. Where we expect the poet to speak in his own voice—a voice that should be at once close to common speech and yet identifiably original—the Indian poet stays far behind his subject and strives at every turn for uncommon eloquence which yet deliberately echoes the voices of his tradition. Where we are prepared for, if not direct conflict, at least strong tension needing drastic resolution, the Indian poet gives us the slow unfolding of a foregone conclusion. Where we might hope to feel the pleasure of new insight, the Indian poet wants his audience to experience the delight of a foreknown universal sentiment.

In every one of these contrasting pairs Kabir fulfills the expectation not of the Indian audience, but of the Western.

Although his nirguna God or supreme truth seems impersonal when compared with the anthropomorphic Ram and Krishna, Kabir can be described as the most personal of all bhakti poets: not because he dwells on his private experience, exposes his own quivering heart, but because he gets very personal with us, the audience.

Stylistically this factor most clearly distinguishes Kabir from his famous colleagues Sur, Tulsí, and Míra: they are primarily addressing God; he is primarily addressing us. Even when Sur and Tulsí sing in their own person of the Lord's wondrous doings on earth, the implicit relationship in the poem is between poet and God—a relationship often made explicit in the signature line, where the devotee turns to God with a prayer or other fervent expression of feeling. It is a convention of reverie, ecstasy, longing, in relationship to God. The reader or listener is present only as eavesdropper.

The reader is central in Kabir. Nearly everyone in North India is familiar with the formula kahat Kabir saho bháti sáhídho—"Kabir says, listen brother sadhu!" or sau bo santo, "Listen oh saints!" It is Kabir's trademark. But far more than a formula, it signifies Kabir's passion to engage, to wake people up, to affect them. This power to affect through language is fundamentally what we mean when we speak of rhetoric.

Address and Assault

In his mastery of the vocative, Kabir is unique among the bhakti poets. Not in the saguna devotees, not in nirguna Dadú or reformer Nanak, not in the radical Bengali Buddhist poets, the iconoclast Gorakh or the surreal Bauls, whatever else they may have in common with him, do we find the intense bearing down upon the listener that is so prominent in Kabir. It shows itself first in the array of addresses he uses to seize our attention: Hey Saint, Brother, Brahmin, Yogi, Hermit, Babu, Mother, Muslim, Creature, Friend, Fool! Many poems are simply directed at "you." But titles or pronouns of address are only the begin-
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Kabir pounds away with questions, prods with riddles, stirs with challenges, shocks with insults, disorients with verbal feints. It seems that if one read him responsively one could hardly help getting red in the face, jumping around, squirming, searching, getting embarrassed, or shouting back.

For a taste of the style, here is a pastiche of lines from various poems:

Pandit, you've got it wrong.
Monk, stop scattering your mind.
Pandit, do some research and let me know how to destroy transiency.

Now you, Mr. Qazi, what kind of work is that, going from house to house chopping heads? Who told you to swing the knife?
Pandit, think before you drink that water!
Think! Think! Figure it out!

Saints and reverences—
Morons and mindless fools—
Enchanted madman—
Look in your heart!

You simple-minded people...

The vocative sabotages passivity. If someone shoots you a question, you immediately look for an answer. If someone sneaks behind your chair and whispers, "Why are you slouched over?" you will straighten your back before thinking about it. If someone calls you a lunatic you may be angered or amused, but you will certainly be interested. Addressed affectionately, you will soften and begin to trust—which may just prepare the way for a new, unexpected blow.

The vocative creates intimacy. "Where did two Gods come from?"

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might be a good opening to a polemical poem. But how different the effect when Kabir says, "Brother, where did your two Gods come from? Tell me, who made you mad?" (§ 30). The vocative draws the reader, as participant, into highly charged dialogues:

Sons, once you wake up don't doze off.
Pandit... tell me where untouchability came from, since you believe in it.

Sometimes an intimate address turns out to be a brazen trick: "Where are you going alone, my friend?" the poet begins softly in § 99. A few lines later we realize he is addressing a corpse.
The address may become so aggressive that it must be called an assault, complete with abuses that no decorum moderates:

You go around bent! bent! bent!
Your ten doors are full of hell, you smell like a fleet of scents, your cracked eyes don't see the heart, you haven't an ounce of sense.
Drunk with anger, hunger, sex, you drown without water. (§ 72)

In one shocking opener Kabir calls his listener the "son of a slut." Then he steps out from behind this attention-getter and proceeds with his poem:

Son of a slut!
There: I've insulted you.
Think about getting on the good road. (§ 102)

Kabir's provocations often take the form of questions, skillfully inserted to ruffle us up or draw us out. Questions are used in a variety of ways—in openings or conclusions, singly or in series, as bait or goad, as funnel to point our inquiry. Sometimes a single question comes like a sudden jab: "When the pot falls apart, what do you call it?" (§ 75). The jab may be just a setup: when we rise to it, a hard slap may hit us from another direction. Sometimes questions are shot in rapid series, like blows from a boxer, left, right, left, right. When they end we may find ourselves staggering:

Who's whose husband? Who's whose wife?
Death's gaze spreads—untellable story.
Who's whose father? Who's whose son?
Who suffers? Who dies? (§ 36)
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Qazi, what book are you lecturing on?
Yak yak yak, day and night ...
If God wanted circumcision,
why didn't you come out cut?
If circumcision makes you a Muslim,
what do you call your women? ...
If putting on the thread makes you Brahmin,
what does the wife put on?
That Shudra's touching your food, pandit!
How can you eat it?
Hindu, Muslim—where did they come from?
Who started this toad?
Look in your heart, send out scouts:
where is heaven?

In quieter poems questions are a way of approaching an experience
that is not accessible to direct statement. In certain cases questions
seem to open a space at the end of a poem that is wide and silent (for
example, § 67, discussed on p. 24 below; and r. 7).
The intimacy created by Kabir's style is not always obvious or en­tirely conscious, because the audience would often prefer not to iden­tify with his addressees. As readers or listeners, we are more inclined
to identify with Kabir. When he conjures up a comic pandit, we laugh.
When he exposes the greedy and hypocritical, we scorn. When he re­veals the incredible blindness of people who won't face death, we ap­plaud. The use of stock characters allows us to maintain a sense of de­tachment. We know what a Brahmin priest looks like: he has a shaved
head, paints marks on his forehead, dresses in a white pleated loin­cloth, counts his beads, and sits among his paraphernalia of brass
trays, sandalwood paste, scriptures and bells, exacting coins from
hapless pilgrims. A yogi wears a patchwork cloak and drinks out of a
cup made from a skull. A merchant sits amid his wares in the bazaar
and holds up his scales, two round plates suspended from strings.
These are not descriptions of us.
But gradually something begins to gnaw at our consciousness. It oc­curs to us that pandits can wear other costumes besides the white
dhoti and rosary of tulśi or rudrākṣa beads, can sit under other um­brellas than those that front the Ganga at Varanasi. It is relatively easy
to notice panditry in the universities, violence in government, greed in
the marketplace, phoniness in religion. Then we can spot signals
closer at hand, in the gestures and voices of our neighbors. But Kabir's
power is most tellingly revealed when his words reverberate in our
own skulls, and we see the succession of disguises under which we live
our daily lives:

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Dropped from the belly at birth,
a man puts on his costumes
and goes through his acts.

Riddles and Surprises

One set of formulas in Kabir clusters around the words acarā—
surprise or amazing thing—and adbhut—wonderful, marvelous,
strange. Formula or not, the promise of amazement stirs up our inter­est and gives Kabir a further chance to play with us:
Saints, here's a surprise for you.
A son grabbed his mother
while a crazy virgin fell for her father,
dropped her husband but went
to the in-laws.
Think of that!

Related to the “surprise” formula is the “Who will believe it?” for­mula:
Who can I tell?
And who will believe it?
When the bee touches that flower,
he dies.

The opening questions are teasers, designed to make the reader vol­unteer, “Tell me. I'll believe it!” The sudden injection of “that flow­er” again elicits a curious response—“what flower?”—and the poet
is setup for his main exposition:
In the middle of the sky's temple
blooms a flower.

The poem could easily have begun at this point. But the experience is
quite different when it begins with the rhetorical questions and the
dramatic introduction of flower and bee.
A number of poems are framed explicitly as riddles:
Think, pandit, figure it out:
male or female?
What will you call the Pure?
Say, creature, how will you mutter the name
of one without hand or foot,
mouth, tongue or ear?
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Sadhu, that yogi is my guru
who can untie this song.

Is there any guru in the world wise enough
to understand the upside-down Veda?

As the last example suggests, from the riddling poems it is just another small leap to ulabhānsi, the “upside-down language” of paradoxes and enigmas that Kabir inherited from the Sahajiyas and Naths and adapted to his own purposes:23

The cow is sucking at the calf’s teat,
from house to house the prey hunts,
the hunter hides.

Sprout without seed, branch without trunk,
fruit without flower, son born
of a sterile womb, climbing a tree
without legs...

It’s pouring, pouring, the thunder’s roaring,
but not one raindrop falls.

frog and snake lie down together,
a cat gives birth to a dog,
the lion quakes in fear of the jackal—
these marvels can’t be told.

There is a great diversity in the interpretation of the ulabhānsi poems. It has been questioned whether they are authentic, whether their symbols have the same meaning in Kabir as in the tantric tradition, or whether they have any meaning at all. For the purpose of our brief rhetorical inquiry it is enough to note that these poems fascinate while they perplex the reader, that the images stick in consciousness even when their meaning eludes the mind, initiating a dialogue not only between reader and poet but between the reader and himself, which may go on for years. Riddles and their extension, the paradoxes and enigmas of ulabhānsi, besides being effective rhetorical devices, are teaching devices, comparable to the Zen koan—a problem the student can’t solve and can’t escape, a matrix of verbal impossibilities in which a transparent truth lies hidden—or perhaps, as the Rigvedic hymn has it, does not.24

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Structures

It is hazardous to analyze a pada by Kabir as if the structure had something inevitable about it. The same song might turn up in another collection in fragments, or with its stanzas reshelved like a deck of cards. Still, certain principles of structure are apparent; once spotted, they can be recognized again and again. And many poems have a clear unity. They may consist of an extended metaphor, an unfolding argument, a dialogue, or a monologue. These structures reveal both how songs in general are organized for oral performance, and how Kabir in particular organized his utterances to produce the effects he wanted to produce.

Several typical patterns in Kabir depend on repetition with variation. Some poems comprise a series of negations whose syntax can be varied for pleasing effects in sound and rhythm (§. 43, r. 6). Some are built on anaphora—repetition of a word at the beginning of each line (rs. 3, 7; §. 71). Or the repeated word may be scattered in different positions (“died” in §. 45, “look” in §. 104). The repeated element may be a grammatical structure, like the if-then clauses of §. 40, 42, and 84, the parallel sentences of §. 59, the jabbing questions of §§. 98 and 84.

Some poems are catalogues—of Vishnu’s incarnations, famous sages, stereotyped fools (§§. 8, 12, 92, 38). One trick of Kabir’s is to take a literary convention and turn it upside down. Other poets use the “ten-avatar” sequence to glorify Vishnu’s descents; Kabir uses it to ridicule them (§. 8). The rainbird (cātaka) is normally presented as a touching symbol of longing and devotion. Kabir conjures her up to point out her delusion (§. 71).

Many poems are constructed as dialogues or monologues (§§. 103, 75, 62, 35). Sometimes a single figure is developed throughout a poem: the cow, the flower, the yogi, the con man (§§. 28, 63, 65, 36). Sometimes a series of parallel examples will be brought together in a conclusion, much as a sonnet may in successive quatrains give illustrations which are summed up in the sestet or couplet (e.g., the dog, lion, and elephant of §. 76).

Perhaps the most consistent structural device in the lyrics is that of the strong “opener” and “clincher” lines that keep Kabir rhetorically in control. We have seen how proficient he is at seizing the audience’s attention with intriguing, challenging, shocking addresses at the beginning. He is just as adept at twisting our noses at the end, summing up the poem in a peculiarly powerful way, turning things around unexpectedly, making a wry comment, or jamming on the brakes with a suddenness that sends us hurtling forward into the darkness.
won't beat up a future fiend.

Maya set up all these traps
to drive the pure ones from their paths.
The ten avatars are divine malarky
for those who really know.
Kabir says, pay attention saints:
only second things bloom and blow.

Saints, I've seen both ways.
Hindus and Muslims don't want discipline,
they want tasty food.
The Hindu keeps the eleventh-day fast,
eating chestnuts and milk.
He curbs his grain but not his brain
and breaks his fast with meat.
The Turk prays daily, fasts once a year,
and crows "God! God!" like a cock.
What heaven is reserved for people
who kill chickens in the dark?
For kindness and compassion
they've cast out all desire.
One kills with a chop, one lets the blood drop,
in both houses burns the same fire.
Turks and Hindus have one way,
the guru's made it clear.
Don't say Ram, don't say Khuda.
So says Kabir.

Saints, the Brahmin is a slicked-down butcher.
He slaughters a goat and rushes for a buffalo
without a twinge of pain in his heart.
He lounges after his bath, slaps sandalpaste
on his brow, does a song and dance
for the Goddess, crushes souls
in the wink of an eye—
the river of blood flows on.
How holy! What a superior race! What authority
in society, and how people grovel
to get his initiation!

It makes me laugh.

They tell tales about ending sin
but their actions are base.
I've seen one of them throttle each other,
but Yama carted off both.

Kabir says, saints, this is Kaliyug:
the age of phony Brahmins.

Saints, they're flushed, they're drink-drunk!
They tipped a couple of cups
of that sweet juice of love
and flushed seven colors of drunk.

They built a distillery, mixed
higher and lower, then drained the lip-puckering
dregs. No more dirty reactions.

They plugged up Passion's holes. Now the juice
runs endlessly down the chute.

Gorakh, Vasishtha, the bard Vyasa, Narada, Shukdev
dasp hands,
while in a tight clutch sit Shiva and Brahma's boys,
heads back, lips curled like teacups.
Likewise Ambarish, Yagyavalkya, and that fool
Jarabharat, along with Vishnu's serpent,
his thousand mouths gaping. How high should I count?
Homeless ones, palace dwellers, mad.

Dhruva, Prahlad, Vibhishan, drunk. The woman who tasted plums
for Ram, stoned out of her mind.

The ineffable Absolute, drunk in Vrindavan,
still can't shake off the hangover.

Gods and sages, males and females,
Hindus and Muslims—drinkers are knowers.
Sugar in a dumb man's mouth. How (asks Kabir)
to describe it?

Oh Ram! The knot of confusion
won't loosen, so Death
keeps plucking you off.\(^1\)
Monks and yogis give up their pedigrees
but still brag of their lineage.\(^2\)
Knowers and heroes, poets, philanthropists,
people with all sorts of talents
can't break through
this state of mind.
They read hymns, legends and laws
but miss the experience.
How can iron turn to gold
without touching the touchstone?
If you don't cross over alive,
how can you cross when you're dead?
Alive, you're not crossing!
Wherever you put your faith,
that's where you'll be at death.\(^3\)
Clever man! Whatever you've done,
wise or foolish, try to understand.
Kabir asks: what can you say about people
who don't see what they're staring at?

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King Ram! The old woman ordered some weaving
after the weaver left home.\(^2\)
Nine yards, ten yards, nineteen yards
the warp is stretched.
Seven threads, nine twists, seventy-two across—it's really a big one.
No scale can weigh, no yardstick can measure,
but it fits in a two-kilo crock.\(^3\)
It doesn't stretch or shrink by a speck
but the housewife kicks up a row
with her husband, rants and raves.\(^4\)
The thread gets wet, the warp is wrecked,
the weaver goes away mad.
Kabir says, who created this?
Stop spreading yourself out thin,
worship Ram, it's harsh,
this life-and-death ocean.

23
Hermit, nature has unnatural ways.
She smiles on a pauper and makes him a king,
she turns a king to a beggar.
She keeps the clove tree from bearing fruit,
the sandalwood from blooming.\(^1\)
Fish hunt in the forest,
lions swivel in the ocean,
the castor-oil plant turns to Mysore sandal,
its fragrance bursts in four directions.
Three spheres are cut from the cosmic egg,
a blind man watches the show.
A cripple leaps over Mount Sumeru, swings free
Through the three worlds.\(^2\)
A dumb man illumines knowledge and ignorance, pronouncing an endless word.
He ties up the sky and hurls it down
to the snake-world. A serpent rules heaven.\(^3\)
Kabir says: Ram is king.
Whatever he does is natural.\(^4\)

24
Hermit, that yogi is my guru
who can untie this song.
A tree stands without root,
without flowers bears fruit;
no leaf, no branch, and eight
sky-mouths thundering.\(^1\)
Dance done without feet,
tune played without hands,\(^2\)
praises sung without tongue,
singer without shape or form—the true teacher reveals.
Seek the bird's, the fish's path.
Kabir says, both are hard.
I offer myself to an image:
the great being beyond boundaries
and beyond beyond. ³

28
Brother, the creator gave us a cow.
She’s horribly heavy, brother.
She takes in water through all nine holes
but it doesn’t quench her thirst.
They locked up seventy-two apartments
with adamantine doors,
buried a stake and tied her to it
with unbreakable cords,
but she broke loose.
Four trees, six branches, eighteen leaves:
she grabbed them all and bolted—
an incorrigible cow.
Seven and seven, nine and fourteen, brother—
she ate them all and grew fat,
but still wasn’t full.
The cow lives in a town, brother,
and has white horns.
She’s neither colored nor colorless, ²
she eats what’s edible
and inedible.
Brahma and Vishnu searched, brother,
Shiva and Sanaka too,
countless adepts joined the hunt,
but no one could find the cow.
Kabir says, did you get the poem?
Did you figure out the cow? ³
If so you’ll get ahead,
you’ll settle things somehow.

30
Brother, where did your two gods come from?
Tell me, who made you mad?
Ram, Allah, Keshav, Karim, Hari, Hazrat—
so many names.
So many ornaments, all one gold,
it has no double nature. ¹
For conversation we make two—
this namāñ, that puñā,
this Mahadev, that Muhammed,
this Brahma, that Adam,
this a Hindu, that a Turk,
but all belong to earth.
Vedas, Korans, all those books,
those Mullas and those Brahmins—
so many names, so many names,
but the pots are all one clay.
Kabir says, nobody can find Ram,
both sides are lost in schisms.
One slaughters goats, one slaughters cows,
they squander their birth in isms.

31
Oh swan, the knife of doubt cuts deep. ¹
The cow is sucking at the calf’s teat,
from house to house the prey hunts,
the hunter hides,
hot sand churns in the water,
dust-waves surge,
rain from earth soaks the clouds,
the banks are swimming.
The swan has flown, the pond is dry,
a foot is stuck in the mud. ²
As long as hand waggles and toe stirs,
there’s no hope.
If a man can’t see how things move,
don’t trust him, says Kabir. ³

32
Hey swan, clear your mind
in the morning. They’ve set
so many snares, knit the net
of three qualities.
and trapped the world.
If the landlord is a butcher,
why think about the tenants? 1
Those who have no devotion
are called devotees;
they fling away nectar
and swallow poison.
The brightest ones have sunk,
not listening to what I said.
What I said was, tie your bundle tight,
stay alert day and night.
Kaliyug’s crafty gurus entice the world
to destroy it. 2
Veda and Koran are traps laid
for poor souls to tumble in. 3
Kabir says, if you meet the one
who can extricate you,
you won’t forget it.

33
Dear swan, where will you go
when you leave the lake? 1
You used to peck up pearls there
and taste such pleasures—
now water shrinks from the leaves,
the bed is dry, the lotus withers.
What’s taken away today, says Kabir,
will it come again tomorrow?

34
The blessed one wanders free as a swan 1
speaking the spotless name.
With a pearl in his beak he lures the world, 2
silent or singing God’s fame.
On Mansarovar’s shore he dwells,
cool at the feet of Ram.
No stupid crow can come near
that visionary swan.

36
That con man Hari has conned the world,
but brother, who can live without him? 1
Who’s whose husband? Who’s whose wife?
Death’s gaze spreads—untellable story.
Who’s whose father? Who’s whose son?
Who suffers? Who dies?
With his conjuring he snatches away
your roots. 2 No one can see
Ram’s trickery.
Kabir’s heart accepts the thief.
Cheating disappears
when you recognize the cheat.

37
The trickster Hari roves through the world
pulling tricks, and saying
nothing. Oh childhood friend,
when you left me,
where did you go that morning?
You’re the only man,
I’m your woman.
Your footstep is heavier than stone.
The flesh is clay, the body air.
I’m afraid of Hari’s tricks,
says Kabir.

38
Without Hari he’s befuddled,
without a guru he’s a mess.
 Everywhere he goes
he loses himself
in nets within nets.
The yogi says, “Yoga’s the top,
don’t talk of seconds.”
RECEIVED ORIGINALS WITH
MISSING PAGE # 54-55
In heaven or the underworld?  
If Gopal is everywhere, where is hell?

Heaven and hell are for the ignorant,  
not for those who know Hari.  
The fearful thing that everyone fears,  
I don’t fear.  
I’m not confused about sin and purity,  
heaven and hell.  
Kabir says, seekers, listen:  
Wherever you are  
is the entry point. 

43  
Pandit, you’ve got it wrong.  
There’s no creator or creation there,  
no gross or fine, no wind or fire,  
no sun, moon, earth or water,  
no radiant form, no time there,  
no word, no flesh, no faith,  
no cause and effect, nor any thought  
of the Veda. No Hari or Brahma,  
no Shiva or Shakti, no pilgrimage  
and no rituals. No mother, father  
or guru there. Is it two or one?  
Kabir says, if you understand now,  
you’re guru, I’m disciple.

44  
Think, pandit, figure it out:  
male or female? 
In a Brahmin’s house she’s Mrs. Brahmin,  
in a yogi’s she’s a disciple.  
Reading the Koran she’s a Turkish lady.  
In Kaliyug she lives alone. 
She doesn’t choose a husband,  
doesn’t get married,  
but has sons.  
Not a single black-haired fellow escapes her,  
but she’s a permanent virgin.  
She stays with her mother,  
doesn’t join her in-laws,  
won’t sleep with her husband.  
Kabir says, he lives from age to age  
who drops his family, caste and race.

45  
Hey pandits, who didn’t die?  
If you find out, tell me.  
Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva died,  
Parvati’s son Ganesha died,  
so many suns and moons died,  
Hanuman the bridgebuilder died,  
Krishna died, the maker died.  
One, the Original, didn’t die.  
No fall, no rise.  
Kabir says, that one never dies.

47  
Pandit, think  
before you drink  
that water.  
That house of clay you’re sitting in—  
all creation is pouring through it.  
Fifty-five million Yadavs soaked there,  
and eighty-eight thousand sages.  
At every step a prophet is buried.  
All their clay has rotted.  
Fish, turtles and crocodiles  
hatched there. The water is thick  
with blood. Hell flows  
along that river, with  
rotten men and beasts.  
Trickling through bones, melting through flesh—  
where does milk come from?  
That’s what you drink after lunch, pandit.
And you call clay untouchable?
Throw out your holy scriptures, pandir,
those fantasies of your mind.
Kabir says, listen, Brahmin:
All this
is your own doing.

52
Think about it, knower of Brahma.
It’s pouring, pouring, the thunder’s roaring,
but not one raindrop falls.
An elephant’s tied to an ant’s foot,
a sheep eats a wolf,
a fish jumps out of the ocean
and builds a house on the beach. 3
Frog and snake lie down together,
a car gives birth to a dog,
the lion quakes in fear of the jackal—
these marvels can’t be told.
Who tracks down the deer of doubt
in the forest? The archer aims,
trees burn in the sea,
a fish plays hunter.
Oh, what marvelous knowledge!
If anyone can hear,
he’ll fly to the sky without wings
and live, not die, says Kabir.

53
If you can see that tree
you’ll be free
from age and death.
The tree is a whole world.
From one trunk burst three boughs,
the middle bough has four fruits,
and leaves and branches—who can count them?
A creeper clings to the three
spheres, wraps tight
so even the wise ones

can’t get free.
Kabir says, I go on shouting
and the pandits go on thinking.

54
She went with her husband to the in-laws’ house
but didn’t sleep with him,
didn’t enjoy him.
Her youth slipped away like a dream.
Four met and fixed the marriage date,
five came and fixed the canopy,
girlfriends sang the wedding songs
and rubbed on her brow the yellow paste
of joy and sorrow. 5
Through many forms her mind turned
as she circled the fire.
The knot was tied, the pledge was made,
the married women poured the water.
Yet with her husband on the wedding square
she became a widow. 2
She left her marriage without the groom.
On the road the father-in-law explained. 3
Kabir says, I’m off to my real marriage now. 4
I’ll play the trumpet
when I cross with my lord.

55
Brother, see what comforts man—
it’s an untellable story.
Lion and tiger are yoked to a plow
sowing rice in a barren field.
The wild bear is pulling weeds,
the billy goat runs the farm.
The nanny goat married a lion
while a cow sang wedding songs.
The dowry was an antelope,
the bridesmaid was a lizard.
The crow washed all the laundry
while the heron gnashed its teeth.
The fly shaved its head, shouting,
I must join the marriage party!
Kabir says, can you
figure out this
poetry?
If so I’ll call you
scholar, genius,
devotee.

58

Lord!
A fire is raging
without fuel.
No one can put it out.
I know it spreads from you, enflaming
the whole world.
Even in water
the flames sprout.
Not one but nine streams
are burning. No one
knows any device.
As the city blazes, the watchman
sleeps happily, thinking,
“My house is secure.
Let the town burn, as long as my things
are saved.”
Ram, how your colors flicker!
In a hunchback’s arms can a man’s desires
be fulfilled?
Even as you think of this, you disappear
from birth to birth, your body forever
unsatisfied. No one is so stupid
as one who knows this
and pretends he doesn’t.
Kabir asks, what’s the way out
for such a fool?

59

Maya’s the super swindler.
Trailing the noose of three qualities,
she wanders, whispering
honeyed words.
For Vishnu she’s Lakshmi,
for Shiva she’s Shakti,
for priests an idol,
for pilgrims a river.
To a monk she’s a nun,
to a king she’s a queen,
in one house a jewel,
in one a shell.
For devotees she’s a pious lady,
for Brahma, Mrs. Brahma.
Kabir says, seekers,
listen well:
this is a story
no one can tell.

61

When you die, what do you do with your body?
Once the breath stops
you have to put it away.
There are several ways to deal
with spoiled flesh.
Some burn it, some bury it
in the ground.
Hindus prefer cremation,
Turks burial.
But in the end, one way or another,
both have to leave home.
Death spreads the karmic net
like a fisherman snaring fish.
What is a man without Ram?
A dung beetle in the road.
Kabir says, you’ll be sorry later
when you go from this house
to that one.

62

Mother, I’ve poured glory on both families!
I ate twelve husbands at my father’s house
and sixteen at the in-laws.
I tied sister-in-law and mother-in-law to the bed, and insulted brother-in-law.
I burned the part in the hair of that hag who nagged me.²
In my womb I got five
plus two plus four.
I ate the neighbor lady for breakfast along with the wise old mother.
Poor thing! Then spreading the easy bed,³
I stretched my legs and slept.
Now I don't come, don't go,
don't die or live.
The master has erased all shame.
Seizing the name, I dropped the world.
I caught the name—
so near!⁴
I saw the name!
shouts Kabir.

63
Who can I tell?
And who will believe it?
When the bee touches that flower, he dies.¹
In the middle of the sky's temple blooms a flower;
it's petals are down and its roots are up.
No tilling, sowing or watering, no shoots or leaves—
just a flower.
Beautifully it blossoms, beautifully the garland-maker ties her knots.
If it's destroyed the bee despairs.
Kabir says, listen saints:
the pandits are greedy for that flower.

65
The yogi's gone away again
to a town of five women
in another country,
no one knows where.
He won't come back to his cave.
His rags are burnt, his flag torn, his stick snapped, his bowl cracked.
Kabir says, This miserable Kaliyug!
What's in the pot comes out the spout.¹

67
If seed is form is god,
then, pandit, what can you ask?³
Where is the intellect? ego? heart?
the three qualities?
Nectar and poison bloom, fruits ripen,
the Vedas show many ways to cross the sea.³
Kabir says, what do I know of you or me, of who gets caught and who goes free?

69
The musician plays a peerless instrument with eight sky-mouths thundering.
Only you are played, only you thunder, your hand alone runs up and down.
In one sound thirty-six ragas, speaking an endless word.
The mouth's a shaft,¹ the ear a sounding gourd—
the Satguru made the instrument.
The tongue a string,
the nose a peg—
he rubs on the wax of Maya.
Light bursts in the sky-temple
at a sudden
reversal.
Kabir says, clarity comes
when the musician lives
in your heart.

Beast-meat and man-meat are the same,
both have blood that's red, sir.
Men eat beasts, but even jackals
shun a man that's dead, sir.
The potter Brahma shaped the earth;
death, birth—where do things pass, sir?
But you eat animals and fish
as if they grew like grass, sir.
For gods and goddesses of clay
you slaughter a living beast, sir.
If your god's real, why can't he go
to the field and have his feast, sir?
Kabir says, saint, say Ram, Ram,
and Ram and Ram again, sir.
The things men eat to please their tongues
come back to eat the men, sir.

Rainbird, to what far place
are you crying?
The world is overflowing
with that water.
The water where sound and sea
divide, where Vedas
and six rites are born,
where dwell
both god and soul,
that water holds earth,
the stretcher. After that, swan, you're on your own.
Burned, you'll turn to ashes.
Buried, you'll be clay.
Like a raw pot filled with water your great body caves in.
Not reveling in Ram, drunk with delusion, you sink in time's well.\(^1\)
Kabir says, man, you've trapped yourself like a parrot on a pole.\(^2\)

74
He's that rascally kind of yogi who has no sky or earth, no hand, foot, form or shape.
Where there's no market he sets up shop, weighs things and keeps the accounts.
No deeds, no creeds, no yogic powers, not even a horn or gourd, so how can he go begging?

"I know you and you know me and I'm inside of you."
When there isn't a trace of creation or destruction, what do you meditate on?
That yogi built a house brimful of Ram.
He has no healing herbs, his root-of-life is Ram.\(^4\)

66
He looks and looks at the juggler's tricks, the magician's sleight-of-hand—Kabir says, saints, he's made it to the King's land.\(^2\)

75
It's a heavy confusion.
Veda, Koran, holiness, hell, woman, man, a clay pot shot with air and sperm . . .
When the pot falls apart, what do you call it?
Numskull! You've missed the point.
It's all one skin and bone, one piss and shit, one blood, one meat.
From one drop, a universe.
Who's Brahmin? Who's Shudra?
Brahma \(\text{rajas}^\text{a}\), Shiva Tamás, Vishnu \(\text{sattva}^\text{a}\) . . .
Kabir says, plunge into Ram!
There: No Hindu. No Turk.

76
The self forgets itself as a frantic dog in a glass temple barks himself to death; as a lion, seeing a form in the well, leaps on the image; as a rutting elephant sticks his tusk in a crystal boulder.
The monkey has his fistful of sweets and won't let go. So from house to house he gibbers.\(^1\)
Kabir says, parrot-on-a-pole: who has caught you?\(^2\)

77
Many hoped but no one found
Hari’s heart.
Where do the senses rest?
Where do the Ram-chanters go?
Where do the bright ones go?
Corpses: all gone
to the same place.
Drunk on the juice
of Ram’s bliss, 1
Kabir says,
I’ve said and I’ve said.
I’m tired of saying.

78
Now I’ve understood
Hari’s magic play.
Beating his drum he rolls out the show
then gathers it in again.
The Great Hari dupes gods, men and sages.
When he brings out the sorceress Maya
she baffles everyone in the house,
truth can’t enter a single heart.
The magic is false,
the magician true—
to the wise it’s clear.
Kabir says, what you understand
is what you are. 1

80
Make your own decision.
See for yourself while you live.
Find your own place.
Dead, what house will you have?
Creature, you don’t see
your opportunity.
In the end no one belongs to you.
Kabir says, it’s difficult,
this wheel of time.

83
They’re morons and mindless fools
who don’t know Ram in every breath.
You rampage in, knock down a cow,
cut her throat and take her life.
You turn a living soul to a corpse
and call it a holy rite. 2
You say the meat is pure, brother?
How was it born? Listen:
Meat is made of blood and sperm,
that’s your unholy dinner.
Fool! You say, “It’s not our sin,
but our forefathers’ preaching.”
The blood they shed is on your head
who taught you such a teaching.
The hair is white that once was black
but the heart’s as black as before.
Why chant and shout, why pray
till you drop dead at the mosque door? 2
Pandits read Puranas, Vedas,
Mulla’s learn Muhammad’s faith.
Kabir says, both go straight to hell
if they don’t know Ram in every breath.

84
Qazi, what book are you lecturing on? 4
Yak yak yak, day and night.
You never had an original thought.
Feeling your power, you circumcise—
I can’t go along with that, brother.
If your God favored circumcision,
why didn’t you come out cut?
If circumcision makes you a Muslim,
what do you call your women?
Since women are called man’s other half,
you might as well be Hindus.
If putting on the thread makes you Brahmin,
what does the wife put on?
That Shudra’s touching your food, pandit!
How can you eat it? Hindu, Muslim—where did they come from? Who started this road? Look hard in your heart, send out scouts: where is heaven? Now you get your way by force, but when it's time for dying, without Ram's refuge, says Kabir, brother, you'll go out crying.

Kabir, in your forest of desire the mind goes hunting. Garden of the body, deer of bliss: ready—aim—fire. The king's alert in his hut of breath. He easily ties the root. Grasping the bow of knowledge, the arrow of attention, the yogi shoots. He pierces the six circles, pierces the lotuses. Light bursts. He chases out rage, lust, drunkenness, greed, like wild beasts. He halts at the door in the middle of the sky where there's no day or night. Kabir's arrived: no comrades, no friends.

It's not a wild beast, brother, not a wild beast, but everyone eats the meat.

The beast is a whole world—unimaginable! Tear open the belly, no liver or guts. It's this kind of meat, brother: every minute sold. Bones and hooves on the dump—fire and smoke won't eat it. No head, no horn, and where's a tail? All the pandits meet and fight. Kabir sings a marriage song.

Lucky one! Why waste this precious life through greed? In the field of former lives you sowed the seed. From a drop to a shape, you stayed in the pool of fire; Ten months in your mother, then again seized by desire. Again youth, again old age, what had to pass has passed. Yama ties you and takes you away. The tears flow fast. Don't hope for life, time owns your breath—Kabir's advice: It's a gambler's world. Before you throw the dice, think twice.

Saints and Reverences, recollect: who slips through time's noose? Datta, lost in false tastes, couldn't find the heart. Like butter churned from water—
that was his meditation.
Gorak\n couldn’t keep his breath
though he knew some yogic tricks.²
Power, profit, control—yes,
but he couldn’t go beyond.
Vasishtha knew so much
even Ram, who’s called creator,
sat at his feet; but time
wouldn’t let him go.³
Hindus say, “Burn my body,”
Turks say, “Follow my Pir,”
They fight religious wars.
The swan discerns, says Kabir.

92

Recognize the mind, my brother:
when the body drops,
where is the mind?¹
Sanaka, Sanandana, Jaydev, Nama²—
devotees, yes,
but they didn’t know the mind.
Ambarish, Prahlada, Sudama,
with all their devotion
didn’t know the mind.
Bhartrihari, Gorakha, Gopichanda,
visited and enjoyed the mind.
In a mind whose secret no one knows
Shukdev was absorbed.
Shiva, Shesha, Narada, Brahma’s sons
inside the body
couldn’t glimpse the mind.

In all bodies, one
without stain.³
There Kabir wanders,
there Kabir stays.

94

What will you call the Pure?¹
Say, creature: how will you mutter the name

of one without hand or foot,
mouth, tongue or ear?
The light called light-within-light,²
what is its sign?
When light-within-light is killed by light,
where has it gone?
They say Brahma
made the Veda,
but he couldn’t get
this state.
Kabir says, seekers, sages, scholars,
listen and penetrate.

95¹
Who will be sheriff
in a town littered with meat
where the watchman
is a vulture?
Mouse in the boat,
cat at the oars;
frog sleeping,
snake on guard;
bull giving birth,
cow sterile,
calf milked
morning, noon and night;
lion forever leaping
to fight the jackal.
Kabir says, rare listeners
hear the song right.

97.
The creatures are like you, Allah-Ram.
Lord be kind to them.

Why bump that shaven head on the earth,
why dunk those bones in the water?
Parading as a holy man,
you hide yourself, and slaughter.
Why wash your hands and mouth, why chant with a heart full of fraud?
Why bow and bow in the mosque, and trudge to Mecca to see God?
Twenty-four days for the Hindus,
thirty days for the Turks—
a month each year for fasting,
eleven for other works.¹
Does Khuda live in the mosque?
Then who lives everywhere?
Is Ram in idols and holy ground?
Have you looked and found him there?
Hari in the East, Allah in the West—
so you like to dream.
Search in the heart, in the heart alone:
there live Ram and Karim!
Which is false, Koran or Veda?
False is the darkened view.²
It’s one, one in every body!
How did you make it two?
Every man and woman born,
they’re all your forms, says Kabir.
I’m Ram-and-Allah’s foolish baby,
he’s my guru and pir.³

Where are you going alone, my friend?
You don’t get up, or fuss
about your house.
The body fed on sweets, milk and butter,
the form you adorned
has been tossed out.
The head where you carefully
 tied the turban,
that jewel,
the crows are tearing open.
Your stiff bones bum
like a pile of wood,
your hair like a bunch of grass.
No friend comes along, and where
are the elephants you had tied?
You can’t taste Maya’s juice,
a cat called Death has pounced inside.
Even now you lounge in bed
as Yama’s club
falls on your head.

101
I looked and looked—astonishing!
(Only a rare one hears me sing.)
The earth shot backwards to the sky,
an elephant fell in an ant’s eye,¹
mountains flew without a breeze,
souls and creatures climbed the trees,
in a dry lake the waves lashed,
without water, waterbirds splashed.
Pandits sat and read the law,
babbled of what they never saw.
Who understands Kabir’s rhyme
is a true saint to the end of time.

102
Son of a slut!
There, I’ve insulted you.
Think about getting on the good road.
You don’t even dream of meeting
the master of your house.
Brahmin, Kshatriya, Bania¹
don’t listen to what I say.
Yogis and creeping creatures
follow their own way;
and yogis at their leisure
don’t withdraw
from pleasure.

103¹
You simple-minded people!
As water enters water, so Kabir
will meet with dust.
"That Maithili pandit said
you'd die near Magahar.
What a terrible place to be dead!²
If you want Ram to take you away,
die somewhere else instead.
Besides, they say
whoever dies at Magahar
comes back a donkey."

So much for your faith in Ram.
What's Kashi? Magahar? Barren ground,
when Ram rules in your heart.
If you give up the ghost in Kashi
is there some debt
on the Lord's part?

104¹
How will you cross, Nath,
how will you cross,
so full of crookedness?
Look how he meditates,
serves and prays.
Look: the white plumage,
the crane's sly ways.²
Mood of a snake, look:
utterly lewd,
utterly quarrelsome,
utterly shrewd.
Look: a hawk's
face, and the thoughts
of a cat.
Schools of philosophy
like a cloak furlèd.
Look: the witch vanity
gulps down the world.

106
The bee has flown, the heron remains.
Night is over,

day is going too.¹
The young girl quakes and shivers,²
not knowing what her lover
will do.
Water won't stay
in unbaked clay.³
The swan flutters, the body withers.
Beating at crows, the arm grieves.⁴
Says Kabir, the story sputters
and goes out here.⁵

107
Without your lord
you're an oilman's bullock.¹
You don't sit with the wise.
Born in the yoke
you die plodding,
driven by Yama's stick
and your own greed.
For the sake of wife, son, house, job, power,
you take this load on your head.
It was you who left your lord
to soak in the senses, you
who sowed the seed of sin.
Spinning out hopes,
false salvations,
you eat the crumbs of ghosts.²
Through eighty-four hundred thousand incarnations
the sea rolls.
Kabir says, saints, you're holding on
to a dog's tail.³

108
Once again a fish in the water.¹
In the last life I was drunk
on austerity. Heart detached,
I renounced family,
muttering only
Ram! Ram!
I renounced Banaras,
became a fool.
Lord, where am I now?
Was I a bad servant?
Were you unconscious?
Between the two of us, God,
who's to blame?
I came for your refuge
but couldn't find your feet.
I came to you!
Now the servant Kabir
is truly hopeless.

Is there any guru in the world wise enough
to understand the upside-down Veda?
Fire burns in water, blind eyes see.
Cow ate lion, deer ate cheetah,
crow pounced on falcon, quail conquered hawk,
mouse ate cat, dog ate jackal.
He who knows the primal teaching
is dressed right.
One frog ate five snakes.
Kabir shouts:
both together one!

This is the big fight, King Ram.
Let anyone settle it who can.
Is Brahma bigger or where he came from?
Is the Veda bigger or where it was born from?
Is the mind bigger or what it believes in?
Is Ram bigger or the knower of Ram?
Kabir turns round, it's hard to see—
is the holy place bigger, or the devotee?

Ramainī

The inner light—the word—a woman.
From her Brahma, Vishnu, Tripurari,
from those three endless males and females,
even they don't know the beginning or end.
The creator made a house of fourteen stories.
Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva,
great names, settled in three villages.
They shaped
the parts of the universe,
the six philosophies,
the ninety-six rites.

No one reads Vedas in the womb.
No Turk was born circumcised.
Dropped from the belly at birth,
a man puts on his costumes
and goes through his acts.
On that day you and I had one blood,
and one desire for life
engulfed us.
The world was born from one mother.
What wisdom teaches separation?
When you come from the vagina, you're a child.
When you enjoy the vagina,
they call you a man.
No one knows this ineffable movement—
how could one tongue describe it?
If any man has a million mouths and tongues,
let that great one speak.

Your life—from here
to there! shouts Kabir.
Without Ram's name, the worlds
into dying worlds disappear.\textsuperscript{6}

6

What form or shape to describe?
What second one is there to see?
At first, no Om or Veda—
who can trace his ancestry?\textsuperscript{1}
No starry sky,
no moon or sun,
no father's seed,
no calm air,
sea or land—
who can name him
or know his command?
No night or day—
his race and family
who can say?

Remembering the empty, the easy,
a light broke out.
I offer myself to a being
based on nothing.

7

On that day neither air nor water.
On that day creation—who gave birth?
On that day neither womb nor root.
On that day neither knowledge nor Veda,
on that day neither sound nor sorrow,
on that day neither body nor house,
no earthly place, no sky or space.
On that day no teacher, no one to teach,
no difficult path, in or out of reach.

Of the sourceless state, what to say?
No town, nowhere to stay;
seen without a trace;
what do you call that place?

19

They're hoping to hear the unstruck sound—
see the upside-down spectacle!
Just look at the spectacle, brother—
they've taken off for the void.
They want emptiness, go to emptiness,
let go of hands and are left handless.\textsuperscript{1}
The world is a beast of doubt.
Death hunts the prey, early and late.

Keep remembering Ram,
Death has you by the hair.
He'll strike at home or in foreign lands,
you never know when or where.

20

Say it: Ram's indestructible name.
If you leave Hari, there's no place to go.
Wherever you go, you're just a moth.
Do you see the trap?\textsuperscript{1} Then don't
burn. Get attached
to Ram's name, and learn
how the insect gives its heart
to the bee.\textsuperscript{2} The world is heavy
with the load of grief.
Creature, if you can think or see,
make an effort! Your thoughts are useless
waves, you can't see this shore
or the other.

The world: an ocean of desire.
Ram's support: a ship.
Take Hari's refuge: the sea will be
as wide as a calf's hoofprint.

21

So much pain, a mine of pain.
You'll save yourself when you know Ram.
The Ram-knowing trick is the only trick
that doesn't land you in a trap.
The world sticks to its own tricks,
it certainly doesn't listen to me.
Gold, silk, horses, women,
a lot of wealth
last a little time.
From a little money
a man goes crazy.
He doesn't hear news
of the King of Death.
When the terror comes,
his face shrivels.
Cheated, he learns
his nectar was poison.

I make, I kill, I burn,
I eat, I fill
the land and water.
Spotless is my name.¹

Joy is small;
grief at the start, grief at the end.¹
The mind rushes on, a drunk elephant.
Can you forget joy and be free?²
You leave truth and run after lies.
Fire and light blaze; you burn
like a moth, pleasing your eyes.
Think: what's the way
to end sorrow?
Break your engagement with lies.
Your birth is guttering out in greed,
old age and death crowd close.

World tied up in confusion,
everything comes and goes.
You got a human birth.
Why are you so deceived?

The maker himself became a potter,
the potter shaped all kinds of pots.
He set them in one place, the creator—
carefully he made those pots.¹
He baked them in the belly's fire,
guarding them the whole while.³
Then carefully he brought them out
and "Shiva," "Shakti," named them all.³
If the son of the house is stupid,
clever ones don't follow him.
I'm telling you my own truth,
madmen follow others' dreams.
Hidden and visible—all one milk.⁴
Who's the Brahmin? Who's the Shudra?
Don't get lost in false pride.
False is the Hindu, false the Turk.

The one who made this picture
is the true artist.⁵
Kabir calls him a good man
who can see this art.

Brahma was given the universe,
seven islands, nine-part earth.
Vishnu, firmly fixed in the truth,
was put in charge of three worlds.
Then Shankar with his lingam¹
nailed earth to the seventh hell.
Next came the eight-limbed lady,
bringing three worlds under her spell.²
Her second name was Parvati,
she got Shiva by austerity.
There's just one man, just one woman.
From them the four life-forms,
four castes,
three qualities,
earth and sky.
From one egg of Om
the whole cosmos spread.
Kabir says, we're all women to Ram,
the husband, the steady man.

28
No one knows the secret of the weaver
who spread his warp through the universe.
He dug two ditches, sky and earth,
made two spools, sun and moon,
filled his shuttle with a thousand threads,
and weaves till today: a difficult length!
Kabir says, they're joined by actions.
Good threads and bad,
that fellow weaves both.

32
Veda, Purana: a blind man's mirror.
Does the ladle taste the great flavor?
Like a donkey loaded with sandalwood,
a fool can't tell when the smell is good.
Kabir says, they search the sky
but don't find out
how to quell their pride.

33
Brother, the Shastras
are the Vedas' daughters.
Out they came, holding the rope.
Men twined it and bound their own throats
with lying allurements, the noose of death.
Once tied they can't get loose,
the whole world lost in sensual forms.
I see the world stripped by thieves.
Saying Ram, Kabir got free.

34
Read, read, pandit, make yourself clever.
Does that bring freedom?
kindly explain.
Where does the supreme being dwell?
In what village? Pandit, tell
his name. Brahma himself
made the Vedas, but he doesn't know
the secret of freedom.
People babble of alms and merit
but don't hear news
of their own death.
One name—unreachably deep.
Unmoving—the servant Kabir.

35
The pandit got lost
in Vedic details
but missed the mystery
of his own self.
Worship, prayers,
six sacred activities,
four ages teaching Gayatri,
I ask you: who's got liberty?
You splash yourself
if you touch somebody,
but tell me who
could be lower than you.
Proud of your quality,
great with authority,
such pride never brought anyone good.
He whose name is Pride-Breaker—how will he tolerate pride like yours?

Drop family, drop status, seek the nonexistent space, destroy the shoot, destroy the seed, reach the unembodied place.

36

Wise, subtle, skillful people! A single cleverness isn't clever. A double cleverness misses the point (creation, destruction, day, night). They've turned it into a retail business—rules, piety, self-control, God. A lord like Hari can't be forsaken, yet children sing songs of weddings in heaven.

Where have the dead men gone who drank the gurus' tonics? Know Ram's name to be your own, throw away unreal things.

37

First cleverness—not clever. Second cleverness—who can know? Third cleverness—eats cleverness. Fourth cleverness—off they go. Fifth cleverness—no one knows it. Everyone is ruined in the sixth. If you know the seventh cleverness, brother, show it to me in the world or the Veda.

The bijak tells of a treasure, a treasure that doesn't show. The word tells of a creature. Only rare ones know.

45

Hiranyakashipu, Ravana, Kamsa and Krishna went, gods, men and sages with all their relations went, King Brahma missed the whole mystery. Big folks and clever ones went, and they never could figure what Ram's story meant. Was it all milk, or pure water? More road ahead, but the breath is gone. With desolation in ten directions they move on.

The world is a fishnet. In an iron boat loaded with stone they row, claiming to know the secret. Crying, "We float! We float!" they drown.

Like fish with worm, mouse with chameleon, snake with poisonous mole, each one gives up his soul.

49

Where's his doorway, dervish? How does the great king dress? Where does he travel? Where does he camp? What's this form you bow to? I'm asking you, Mr. Muslim, with your red and yellow rags and robes. Now you, Mr. Qazi, what kind of work is that, going from house to house chopping heads? Who gave the order for chickens and goats? Who told you to swing the knife? Aren't you afraid to be called a sage?
as you read your verses
and dupe the world?
Kabir says, this high-class Muslim
wants to force his way on the world.

Fast all day,
kill cows at night,
here prayers, there blood—
does this please God?

51
The one whose name is unsayable, brother,
why sing a ramaini
to him?
The meaning—something like
a traveller on a boat, a
holding and letting go,
moving while sitting.
The body stays
but don't confuse
nature with dress.
Mind still.
Don't talk.

Mind goes without body,
body goes without mind.
Mind and body one:
Kabir says—there's a swan.

78
Culprit, you've missed
your human birth.
Many owners share this body.
Parents say, "Our son!"
and raise him for their profit.
Woman says, "My dear!"
and devours him like a tigress.
Fond wives and loving sons sit,
their mouths gaping like death.

Crows and vultures think
about death, dogs and hogs
eye the road.
Fire says, I'll burn the body.
Water says, I'll quench the flames.
Earth says, I'll mingle with it.
Air says, I'll blow it away.
You think that's your home, fool?
It's the enemy at your throat.¹
Dazed by swarms of sense-forms,
you call the flesh your own.

The body has so many sharers,
born and dying in pain.
Insane, entranced, unthinking man
shouts "Mine!" and "Mine!" again.