

Lapis Lazuli

An International Literary Journal

ISSN 2249-4529

www.pintersociety.com

GENERAL ISSUE VOL: 8, No.: 2, AUTUMN 2018

UGC APPROVED (Sr. No.41623)

BLIND PEER REVIEWED

About Us: <http://pintersociety.com/about/>

Editorial Board: <http://pintersociety.com/editorial-board/>

Submission Guidelines: <http://pintersociety.com/submission-guidelines/>

Call for Papers: <http://pintersociety.com/call-for-papers/>

Lapis Lazuli

All Open Access articles published by LLILJ are available online, with free access, under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non Commercial License as listed on

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Individual users are allowed non-commercial re-use, sharing and reproduction of the content in any medium, with proper citation of the original publication in LLILJ. For commercial re-use or republication permission, please contact

lapislazulijournal@gmail.com

The Anklet

Anukriti Upadhyay

As she walked down the delicate, fretwork stairs, she became conscious of the vacancy around her left ankle. She paused at the last step and Shubho walked on to the parking area to retrieve the car. Waiting as usual to see him drive past, she lifted the dull gold hem of the loose silk trousers slightly. Sure enough, one slim, pale ankle was bare. The other had a thick, linked chain of gold, the colour of old zari, little bells hanging from one end, encircling it. The left anklet with the faulty clasp was missing. She was still staring at her ankle, taking in the fact that she had most likely lost one of the pair of gold anklets her mother had given her when Shubho drove by. He was heading to the new site he was working on. “See you in the evening, sweetheart..” he mouthed, eyes gleaming, before pressing the accelerator, making the car leap.

She turned back and climbed the steps to the Japanese restaurant where they had lunch. She walked through the short passage towards the private lunch room and looked in the foot-well of the Japanese-style seats. The remains of their meal – sushi and Japanese tofu washed down with clear-tasting Japanese green tea, were still on the table but there was no anklet, lying like a wounded, golden snake, on the wooden floor. She did not really expect to find it there. It would have been a wonder if it were. Earlier that day she had walked around the town, from her home near the Oval, past Eros Cinema to Flora Fountain. The anklet could have fallen anywhere along the way or at the hundred year old snack-and-dry-fruits shop where she had bought her favourite savouries from the garrulous shop keeper. It could be lying between the misaligned paver blocks of the pavement, its gold dusty and dull, to be found by a boy selling pirated books or crushed under the wheels of a Best bus on the traffic junction before Kala Ghoda. In fact now she wasn't certain whether she had actually felt the absence of the anklet's snug weight around her ankle at the restaurant steps or the knowledge had come to her earlier and she had pushed it away to enjoy her time with Shubho, only allowing herself to feel it when it was time to part.

The crowd of office workers had thinned but the narrow, broken pavements were still crowded enough for her to thread her way carefully to Oxford Bookstore. She wanted to buy a copy of Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows* for Shubho, a book combining his interest in Japanese aesthetics, from architecture to food. Browsing through the heady jumble of books during the slow part of the day, with only a few students around, and those more interested in each other than the books, was a rare joy. She was not going to let the lost anklet stop her from enjoying it.

They had discovered each other at the gym they were both members of. Shubho liked saying that their acquaintance had been formed on the treadmill and strengthened doing weights but as a matter of fact they were in the spinning class together. After a

particularly punishing session, they had stood next to each other at the juice bar in the gym drinking the mandatory bitter-gourd-and-cucumber juice. In a moment of camaraderie induced by their mutual hatred for the sadistic, pony-tailed instructor and the acid-green, bitter juice, one had turned to the other. It was agreed to go and sample the goodies at a newly-opened, wildly-popular dessert-bar. Who had invited whom is rather unclear after all this time but she has a suspicion it was her. They had discovered a common interest in cityscapes, agreeing over the art-deco building lining Marine Drive being overrated and disagreeing about the sunset at Chowpatty, Shubho insisting that the only sunset worth watching in Bombay was from Haji Ali. To illustrate his point, he had hailed a taxi. They had watched the red ball of the sun sink behind the white toy-Mosque from the crowded side-walk at Haji Ali. They had met often after that, initially after the gym and afterwards for lunch or coffee at the small restaurants in the lanes off Kala Ghoda and in Colaba. The office of the business journal she worked for was located in an stone-fronted building near Old Customs House and Shubho spent majority of his time on-site in Ballard Estate where his architectural and interiors firm was developing. She found his unabashed curiosity about her and interest in everything she said, making her repeat her sentences to ensure he caught every word, attractive. He had a way of being present and focused, of making all else fall away when they met.

Almost from the beginning, she knew he was married. He had never said so, yet she knew by the deftness with which he handled her, knew all the right shops and wore the right ties. Eventually, he had mentioned his wife because of the vacation he was taking away from the city. He had mentioned the fact that he was married and had a life she knew nothing about, with a woman who was his wife as one mentions the state of traffic in Mumbai – something inconvenient but unavoidable. She imagined his other life – waking up in the morning next to his wife, returning to her in the evening, entertaining guests, taking holidays, going to bed. She would have no part in that, to her, his full, real life. Yet, she continued to turn to him, almost against her own will, attracted to him in a manner not to be resisted.

It was a day in late January, unusually cold and slow for Mumbai, when they became lovers. Her only defense was that it was not pre-meditated but she could not deny to herself that it had been clear for a while that that's where their encounters were leading. Their unconfessed desire was palpable like a third presence at their meetings. That afternoon Shubho had been pleased with the way his project, a boutique hotel he was developing, was coming along. It is in complete harmony with the quiet, leafy street full of old Edwardian buildings, he had said, explaining the complexities of introducing modern comforts in an old building. You have to see it for yourself, he had insisted, and like their first meeting, had called a taxi, leaving his car in the parking bay of a club he was member of. They had found the site inexplicably deserted in the middle of the day. Shubho had called the supervisor while she had walked about the show-suite looking at the old oil-paintings of Parsi men and women on the walls. There's a bomb scare in the area, Shubho had told her after hanging up, I am so sorry, I had no idea... She had stood playing with the folds of the thick brocade curtains. I didn't know this

obscure little street was important enough to be a target, she had joked feebly. They had fallen silent, and in the silence thrumming with their desire, he had reached for her hand. She had drawn closer and he had kissed her, at first hesitatingly and then, her trembling giving her away, deeply.

It was over a year since that afternoon, yet every time they met, she remembered her breathlessness, his trembling hands. Shubho had suggested that they meet at her apartment. The show-suite is not private, he had said, people walk in and out, my secretary, and others, he had trailed off. She had hesitated, a man visiting her in the middle of the day, the family across the landing peering through the grill, but had agreed in the end. There was nowhere else to meet. She had shrunk from the sordidness of a hotel-room and Shubho's home, a five-bedroom palace in Juhu, was out of question. Shubho had stepped in as soon as she opened the door and had hugged her once the door was closed behind them. He had looked around the sparsely furnished apartment in surprise. I will probably move again, she had explained. There is no lift and the wooden stairs are slippery, the plumbing's not good, the kitchen is old. Leave this place, what nonsense, Shubho had taken her hand and walked her around the apartment, pointing out the high ceiling, teakwood paneling, ornate cornices and friezes on the walls. And the circular staircase is iconic, it has been in movies, this is just the right place, he had said taking off his dark suit jacket, not too close, not too far, we'll have to think once my site here wraps up. He had held out his wrists to her, these cufflinks, can't put them on, can't take them off. She had slowly removed the coral-and-silver cuff links from the eyelets in the cuffs, not asking who had put them in. There should be magnolia-white silk curtains and cream rugs here, he had reverted to the apartment as they lay snuggled together after their urgent, fevered love-making. That window-niche can be converted in a work-space for you, I'll do something, he had said before giving her a final hug and getting up.

He had repeated his rhapsodies about the flat, his vow to transform it at every visit but it was she who bought silk drapes and rugs and large floor cushions to make the place more to his taste. One day he had arrived suddenly, lugging a large parcel. Couldn't send it with anyone else, he had panted, gently placing the oblong package on the floor, get me a cardboard-cutter and at her blank look had laughed, just get me a knife. The package had contained a large glass sculpture, a twisted tree with inverted flowers, rising pure and clear from a block of glass as if conjured out of transparent light. Isn't it spectacular, he had said, sets the whole place off. She had nodded. After he left, she had collected the cardboard, wads of packing material, swathes of bubble-wrap and moved the glass-tree gingerly to one side of the living room. It turned out to be a dust-magnate and she soon gave up attempts to keep it sparkling. She only cleaned it with the glass cleaner and a soft cloth when Shubho was to visit.

They always met during the day. She associated all their love-making with eyes tightly shut against the bright day just beyond the curtains. Spending evenings together was rare. Bloody parties, Shubho would say, awkward to say no to folk, it is the punishment

for having lived in this city all my life. You did the right thing, leaving the city you grew up in. She would think about her lonely evenings, spent in front of TV or with women she knew from work whose husbands or boyfriends were away, smile and say nothing. Yet she was irrational enough to be hurt that he took so freely all that she gave and offered nothing beyond the secret, the transient, the unacknowledgeable. A few months ago he had invented the dinner game – he would book her a table at the restaurant he was meeting a client or professional acquaintances or sometimes friends. Through their separate dinners, he would text her surreptitiously, summoning her to dim passages, dark corners of the restaurant for hurried encounters, rub against her, squeeze her breasts, slide his hands over her, leaving her lipstick smeared over her face, her hair and clothes in disarray. He called them their dangerous dinners.

She paid for the books she bought at the counter and slid the bunch of bookmarks she'd never use into the paper bag. Glancing at her watch, she decided to take a taxi to the boutique at Kemps Corner. Shubho had seen a dress in its window while driving back home. Bought you your birthday gift, he had texted, collect it from the boutique. It is just right for you. She looked out the taxi's window at Marine Drive, cement parapets dotted with kissing lovers, chowpatty slowly coming to life with balloon-sellers, food-vendors, monkey shows and toy car rides. Incongruously, the crowded streets reminded her of her anklet-less bare ankle.

The shop was cold. Racks of dresses, sarees, all sorts of accessories seemed to shiver in the arctic blast of the air-conditioner. The only warm thing was the hot-pink lipstick the tall, frail attendant wore who took her receipt and ushered her into a changing room with soft lights. She sipped the warm, fragrant tea she was given as another waif-like girl brought the dress, encased in a muslin-cover and crackling with fine paper, for her to try. The thin tissue-paper was like the sheets kept between folds of old wedding sarees preserved in her mother's trunk. She lifted the dress out. It was an evening dress, its black length covered with little jet-tubes and dark crystal. She knew rather than felt that it was beautiful. She put it on and gazed at herself in the full length mirror as the shop attendant zipped it up behind her and pulled the waist in place. It fitted perfectly, flattering her slender, erect figure. Changing back into her tunic and silk trousers, she looked at the flowing, pastel-coloured tunics, sarees embroidered with rose-gold and copper and silver threads, trendy shift-dresses.

Climbing the winding staircase to her flat she tried to think about the evening ahead but her thoughts kept straying to the lost anklet. She glanced at her ankle again, half-expecting it to reappear miraculously, resting like a bit of golden rope around her foot. The anklet was not just a favourite piece of jewelry, it was a gift from her mother and she minded losing it. Besides, though she would not have confessed it to anyone, she was superstitious about losing gold and believed it brought bad luck.

She entered her apartment and immediately became aware of a rustling different from the rustle of the silk drapes. Hurriedly she switched on the lights and screamed as a

dark shadow swung towards her. A huge bat swooped past her, its rat-like triangular face turned sideways, dark, vampire wings rasping against the pale walls. She stood trembling as the bat blindly bumped into the glass pane of the window, trying to reach the night without. She backed into the lobby and closed the door quickly, her heart hammering. It must have entered through the half-open window, perhaps it will find the open half by itself and escape. She waited, listening to the sounds of the bat bumping inside. Something fell with a thump and she reached for her mobile with shaking hands. Shubho's number rang a couple of times and was disconnected.

She stood still with the phone in her hand and the bat scraping the furniture in its blind, headlong flight in the living room. Eventually, she called the guard from the building's management office. He opened the window and steered the bat out with a broom tied to a pole-end, talking volubly about the bat nuisance. Third time a bat has entered a flat in this building, he said, I am not paid to be bitten by a blood-thirsty filthy creature. She gave him hundred rupees for his trouble and shut the door.

Left alone in the apartment, its white interiors aloof and uncomfortable, the foul smell of the bat around her, she took off her slippers and deposited the shopping bag with the new dress behind sofa. Crouching down, she slowly laid her head on a floor-cushion and closed her eyes.

She was not sure how long she lay there. Her phone had beeped with text messages several times. When she finally rose, it was past 10 o' clock. Her knees and ankles, arms, neck, other unknown, remote parts of herself, ached. She went into the bedroom, took off her clothes and put on a t-shirt. After washing her face and applying her night cream, she bent down and removed the single anklet from her right foot. She held the gold trinket in her palm, the gold of the links fused together and gleamed softly through the tears in her eyes.

BIO-NOTE

Anukrti Upadhyay has post graduate degrees in Management and Literature and a graduate degree in Law. She also wrote a doctoral thesis in Hindi Literature in a past life. She writes fiction in both English and Hindi and poetry in Hindi. An English novella has been accepted for publication by Speaking Tiger and Hindi poetry by Rajkamal Prakashan. Short stories in Hindi have appeared in prestigious literary journals and have attracted attention and interest. She has worked in global investment banks as Compliance and Risk Officer and at present is working in the area of wildlife conservation. She is Indian by nationality, married and mother of one and leads a more or less unsettled existence between Bombay and Singapore. She is grateful for both the richness and vacancy in her life that compel her to write.

E-mail id: anukrti.upadhyay@gmail.com

