

# Lapis Lazuli

## An International Literary Journal

ISSN 2249-4529

[www.pintersociety.com](http://www.pintersociety.com)

---

GENERAL ISSUE VOL: 7, No.: 2, AUTUMN 2017

---

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](mailto:lapislazulijournal@gmail.com)

**“Death or Die”**Tanya Singh

---

“Because this is what we have been doing for years”, explained Maato to Puri, his six-year-old son as he examined the cow lying dead on the ground. “Remember, we are good at it. It needs *jigar* to do it. Not everyone has that. It needs skill, technique, experience”, Maato continued as he sat down taking his position to begin with the process of skinning the dead cow. He would always start from the foot. The sight or smell of the dead cattle did not bother him. Rather, he was too busy to even look into his son’s direction while talking to him. Puri was sitting not far from the scene and was closely observing the hand movements of his father, the way he held the knife with one hand and used the other hand to pull the hide to separate it from the flesh. Puri wanted to ask him if he could skin a person too. He decided not to. Instead he chose to sit quietly and listen to his father explain the keen precision it requires. Listening to his father he jumped up in alertness especially when his father declared that not everyone can do this. This made him feel a strange sense of exclusivity. However, for no reason, images and visuals from school started to knock on his mind and soon he was engulfed by the thoughts of other kids at school who always kept a distance from him and whispered amongst each other that he was the son of a tanner. Whenever he crossed their way, they would cover their noses and sneer, “Chee!”. Puri wondered what if his name was Chee, would it have been that bad then too? Maybe not. Or maybe it always will be.

It was nothing less than a treasure to find a dead cow. Sometimes the privileged owners of the cows themselves called on to the tanners’ community in case their cattle died in order for it to be disposed, and also to bear a share in the money received from tanning and selling of the hide. The cows were often left open to stray, graze on whatever they may find in the dumpster from rough grass to dirty plastic bags, from pea pods to used condoms. The masters did not mind them eating anything, as long as they kept producing milk. Plus, it saved fodder money. Despite the presence of the tanners’ community at the outskirts of the town, the cow owners never felt scared of letting their cattle loose in that area. They were aware that nothing would happen to them. They knew that the tanners wouldn’t dare touch the cows.

Puri was looking at his father’s precision at his craft. He knew where to put the knife and at what angle, at what pace to segregate the skin from the body as he would initially start slowly, and when it had developed some strength it would run as smooth as butter on hot pan. Maato was done in less than an hour. Looking at the procedure Puri thought that it much resembled his father helping his younger brother to take off his sweater. He would hold the sweater from the hem and then pull it upwards and, done. That easy. He wondered if he himself would ever do this job. Usually the work culture runs as a legacy in the family. But if he too would skin a cow then would he, like his father, be a tanner? It was difficult for him to explain to himself what was wrong with it but he was sure that something, some element, in some measure, was.

Maato collected the hide and put it in the sack that he had brought with himself in a shabby cotton bag. The cow now looked like a new born which was ironical. He felt relieved after the work, beads of sweat collected at the sides of his forehead. He smiled

at Puri and he smiled back. "Let's go", said Maato. Puri got up at this, still smiling. It wasn't the first time that Puri was accompanying his father at work. But his inquisitive self always found a variety of questions to be asked. As he was walking with his father he sought, "what do we do with it now?". Maato had answered this question before many times but the sheer interest of his son in his work was enough to make him happily answer it again, now and in the future as well. "We clean it properly in order to rid any blood, dust and other things and then we hang it under the sun for it to be dried", he replied in a seemingly rehearsed answer. "What do we make out of these? Puri asked. "Once it is cleaned, dried, polished and has gotten into the form we sell it to the leather merchandisers and they make everything from it; bags, shoes, jackets and what not!", said Maato.

Explaining all this Maato wondered if Puri would ever do this job in his life. The very thought sent a familiar terror into his guts. Every fibre of his body prayed against it. He hoped that education would pull Puri out of this quicksand in which he was already stuck half-deep and would continue to sink down with each passing minute. "How is school? You learn anything?", he asked induced by the fear of his thoughts which had now created a web in his mind and seemed to be ever-growing. "Yes. It's all fine. We learn multiplication tables", he answered disinterestedly. Maato was pleased to know his son's progress. They had reached some distance and then Maato asked him to head home while he would join him at home after his visit to the market and disposing the dead cow.

Puri started walking towards home thinking what excuse he could make tomorrow to not to be forced to go to school. He had already used bad stomach and headache. Sometimes he came up with some unheard-of-before excuses. Once he said that he dreamt that on his way to the school he was tossed by a bull. His stomach split open and his intestines came out now scattered all over the road and he was holding them with his hands trying to push them in but the more he pushed the more they spilled out. As he narrated his fabulous and yet fictional dream, his superstitious mother got up with one hand on her wide opened mouth and eyes dilated in sheer horror and proclaimed before humans and inanimate things alike that her son would stay at home the whole day. Other day he said that while he was sleeping an insect with big fluttery wings entered his mouth and jumped down his throat. Now he could feel the insect crawling inside and trying to take flight. He himself was not sure what made him come up with such convincing ideas. He would often plot his excuses at night, lying on his bed and pretending to be asleep. Although he couldn't think of anything yet but was sure that by morning he will be able to come up with something believable.

Puri reached home and saw his mother in her usual position at this time, she was cooking. Mutton was kept in front of her in a brass thali and besides it were kept grounded red chillies, garlic and onions. "I am making *charpara* mutton, just the way you like it", she said after seeing him entering the house. She knew he loved it even more than pork. He sat there with his mother and looked at the fresh meat. It reminded him of the skinned cow that he had seen less than an hour ago. The pink, soft flesh underneath the dull, dark skin. He wasn't sure if he should feel repulsed or be intrigued. Murty threw garlic cloves into the heated oil in the pan and the aroma oozing out of it made him forget everything and just savour the lunch even before it was made.

There was a lot of noise that could be heard coming from outside. Puri and his mother were left puzzled for a minute. But they knew that it was one of those drunken brawls

that happened so often here. “What a nuisance! Everyday an idiot has to prove that he can be a bigger idiot”, retorted Murty. They both were aware of the patterns of such brawls. There would be a lot of screaming and yelling till the time it becomes a spectacle and then there would be some more yelling till someone who has nothing to do with it would step in and yell on the already yelling ones and hence pacify things. After this everyone would get back to their chores. She had seen many of these since she came here after her marriage and now it no longer made her as curious as to go outside and check it out. She could always find it out with added dramatic elements from the women of the *basti*. She continued cooking and Puri continued watching and waiting as he knew that today he was going to eat mutton for lunch and dinner both. Whenever mother made meat, they would have it for all the meals throughout the day.

The noise outside was gaining strength and had started to come in a chorus. Murty stopped stirring the pot and started to listen to it with an attentiveness akin to speculation and ambiguity. She got up and straightened her saree and started to walk out to see what was today’s *tamasha* all about. As she came to the *chaukhat* of her house and saw herds of people running about in confusion and women were crying loud. There was a look of horror on the faces of everyone. She sensed that something was not right for it did not appear to be a regular brawl. She started to pace towards the crowd and every step taken in that direction only made it more unclear for her. Her heart started to pounce. All the women she met on her way just wept. Finally, she saw her neighbour and held her, “what is going on? What is this furore about?” “We are damned Murty, that’s what happened. We are damned”, she replied and burst out crying and walked away. Murty moved further, now feeling a sensation in her stomach. There was an utter chaos. Everyone was running in all directions. She could from a distance see a crowd of people had gathered and all the sounds coming from there had created a babel. With every step nearing the crowd her limbs seemed to shake even more. Each hair on her body was now erect. “Why? Why?”, she muttered, she felt as if language failed her. There was a young boy who was rushing from the scene. She stopped him. This time she didn’t have to ask, the boy stood in front of her and announced, “They are saying that our people killed a cow. They are beating our people. No one killed a cow”, he said monochromatically and ran away. Hearing this rendered Murty dizzy. All she could now think of was Maato who had gone this early afternoon to skin a cow. Her mind though all shaken up, could see clearly through the social logistics in which a cow is dead only if the *oonchi jaat* people say it is.

She started to walk as fast as she could although her limbs seemed to not support her. Fear triggered her mind to visualise Maato being beaten, all covered in dust and blood and pleading forgiveness for his family. Tears collected in her eyes. As she reached there she started to aggressively make her way through the crowd and what she saw was only summed up by the horror reflected in the contours of her face. In her life of about 35 years she had been through various experiences of caste, being never in favour of her. Though what was happening in front of her only echoed of stories told by the elders, a generation of a distant time. There were five men there standing or lying on the ground encircled by the crowd, they were stripped of their clothes and integrity, hands tied at the back with rope. Their naked bodies were smeared with dust and enveloped by sweat and blood which had changed the colour and texture of the layer of sand on them. And it was hard to tell whether the physical blows would kill them or would they be suffocated under the pile of verbal abuse. They were being flogged in broad daylight by a group of men that no one had ever seen before. An intense sense of righteousness could be seen in their crisp white clothes and fiery red eyes. With each



blow the naked men howled in pain and the audience's face shrunk as a reflex to the screams. Murty's eyes roved about the faces of all the men who were being publicly beaten by belts among many things which perhaps was made of leather. But she could not see Maato to be one of them. She felt as if she could breathe a little again. But what she was witnessing was only a reminder of her own worth which was as little as she would have preferred to talk about it.

As she stood there glaring at the scene something started getting heavier and heavier inside her. She was motionless. Lost as she was, she realised that someone grasped her hand. It was Puri. He must have followed her. He was young but Murty knew that he understood every bit of what was happening. But her mind was constantly thinking about Maato. What if a similar thing is happening in the *bazaar* and Maato is caught there? What if Maato has already been caught with the sack of hide and beaten or perhaps killed then and there? Many possibilities started to crop up in her mind and in all of them she could clearly see the results. Without any exchange of words Murty and Puri started pacing towards home. There was nowhere else that they could go. And Murty feared for Puri. They both shared each other's silence which was impregnated with pity, horror, self-examination, and also hope, though in a faint measure. Instead of going inside the house they settled for sitting outside under a tree. Quiet.

It had become dark now. People had come back to their houses with their doors shut. But an emotional commotion could very easily be felt around. Murty and Puri were sitting a little apart, unsure of when to start the moaning of having lost a father, a husband. They were waiting for the news to come any minute. Murty tried asking many people but in this situation of utter oblivion, everyone was as clueless as her. Then they saw a dark figure approach. It was Maato. Murty could not believe what she saw. She stood up and sat down again and started to weep. All the emotions that had heaped inside her finally found an outlet. Tears rolled down from Puri's eyes as well. Maato hugged Murty, something he had not done beyond the territory of their charpoy. He understood every figment of their emotions. "Let's get inside", he braved the words.

As they stepped in Murty looked at the pan kept on the *chullah* and realised that she had left it on flame thinking that she would return in time only after getting a glimpse of what she thought to be a regular neighbourhood affair. The fire had died down but the mutton was now burnt to coal. "I am not hungry", said Maato seeing this. Murty and Puri didn't say anything but Maato figured that they weren't going to eat anything either. They all sat down. There were so many things that they wanted to ask but could not manage to bring words out. Puri came and sat near his father, more shaken than sad and asked, "Baba, why did they beat our *biradari* people? They themselves wear leather. They themselves don't want to do this job. So why?". Maato was sitting on the cot holding his head with his hands and looking down. It was a question that they have not been allowed to find an answer for. Books, rituals and men in crisp white clothes have ensured that they accepted what was told. One day it is their traditional occupation and the other day the reason for their death. They are made to dance within this circle of no escape.

"Tell me, baba!" insisted Puri.

Mustering courage Maato answered, still looking down at the mud-plastered floor, "Because this is what we have been made to do for years".

**BIO-NOTE**

---

Tanya Singh works as Assistant Professor of English at Kalindi College, University of Delhi. Besides reading and teaching English literature, the author also enjoys writing short stories. Her last story “Named” was published in the Sahitya Akademi journal, “Indian Literature”.

Email: [tanyasingh441@gmail.com](mailto:tanyasingh441@gmail.com)

