

# Lapis Lazuli

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CS LAKSHMI

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**Translated Poems**
**Let All Mothers Die**

I was a little child then  
 And mother, a young woman  
 What is that, why this, how  
 Following her about  
 A thousand continuous questions  
 Mother would be thrilled  
 Would kiss and embrace me  
 My darling...  
 Would swing me up in the air  
 Sing in a sweet syrupy voice  
 And lift me up to the land of the moon  
 When mother washed clothes  
 I would put in my little hands  
 Water all over the house  
 Spilt milk  
 Scattered toys all over  
 Not knowing how to separate food and muck  
 I would smear it all over my body  
 Mother would warm up water  
 Gently bathe me  
 With mock anger in her eyes  
 Put clean clothes on me  
 And take care to ward off evil eye  
 Spread before me fantasy stories of sparrows and crows  
 .....  
 Now in mother's blind eyes  
 In her skeletal body  
 The moisture of nine decades have dried up  
 AdarU avaLu aMganavADiya Arara bAle  
 But like a six-year old primary school child  
 She is stubborn, adamant and bubbling with life  
 Restlessly moving about  
 Like a cat with a burnt tail  
 The half blind woman of ninety  
 Stumbling  
 Wobbling

Spilling things  
More than her  
Her clothes seem to eat  
The food given to her  
An uncomfortable silence in the house  
If a warning finger is raised to admonish  
She freezes like a stone statue  
She asks  
What is that?  
Why this?  
How?  
A hundred questions  
About a thousand mysteries  
In reply  
A cane to scare her  
A stick to frighten her  
The assertion of healthy bodies  
As if picking and throwing out in disgust  
A worm found in the pudding  
When the whiplash of words pour out  
She raises her hands towards the sky  
Her eyes cannot reach the stars anymore...  
She says she wants to go to Benares  
“Only a person with legs can go to Kailasa  
How can you go limping?”

Let all mothers go to Benares  
Let the earth of Benares swallow them  
Let the Ganges draw them into its flow  
In the valleys of Badrinath  
In the deep gorges of Kedarnath  
Let them slip and fall  
Let the forest fires of Himalayas burn them  
But let their ashes  
Not be found by any of their children.

(Translated from Girija Shastry's poem in Kannada "Ammandirella Sayali")

[2]

I don't know at all  
The name of my great grandmother's great grandmother

I do not know  
The aerial roots of the banyan tree  
She held tight to swing  
With her petticoat tucked up

I do not know  
The stone she used to wash  
Clothes stained with her menstrual blood  
Nor the river which turned  
Red, purple and black  
After the wash

I have no clue at all  
If her first coital moan  
On a pitch-black night  
Was of pleasure or pain

I have not heard  
The heartrending cries  
That came out of her  
When she delivered her children

The milk sprouting  
From her full breasts  
I have not tasted

The clay pots  
That she filled with water  
Drawn from the village well  
I have not borne their weight

The signs and sign posts  
Her eyes fell on  
I have not come across them

How she died  
When she died  
Why exactly her spirit  
Lingered around thereafter

I do not know

Who wailed for her  
And who among those surrounding her  
Sat with choked tears  
I do not know

Who imbibed the legacy she left behind  
And who just got a waft of it  
And touched it with the tongue  
And discarded it  
I do not remember

Who took the vow  
To complete what she left incomplete  
Who was apathetic  
And thought no more of promises made  
I do not really know

What I know is  
Even today  
The blowing wind dispersing  
The ashes of her life  
Gets trapped in my chest  
To become a deep warm sigh

Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Sky...  
These are the ancient aerial roots  
Of the timeless banyan tree that  
Girls still hold on to  
To sway and swing

It is not that the great grandmother  
Of my great grandmother is non-existent

It is just that nobody remembers her name anymore.

(Translated from Meghana Pethe's untitled Marathi poem to be published in the forthcoming book of SPARROW.)

**Being With You**

Being with you

I have always felt

That different directions have come closer

Every road has become shorter

The world has reduced

As if into a courtyard

Which is completely cluttered

There is no loneliness

Neither without, nor within

The shapes of all things have shrunk

The tree has become so small that

I can place my hand on its head

And give my blessings

The sky bumps into my chest

Whenever I want I can hide my face in the clouds

Being with you

I have always felt

That everything carries a meaning

Even the grass swaying in the wind

The breeze blowing through the window

And the sunlight climbing the wall

And then leaving

Being with you

I have always felt

That we are surrounded by not

Impossibilities but possibilities

A door can be made in every wall

And an entire mountain can pass through every door.

If one's strength is limited

So is the strength of many things

If one's hands are small

So is the sea bound

Competence is only another name for desire

The land between life and death

Is not that of destiny

It is mine.

(Translated from Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena's Hindi poem "Tumhare Saath Rehana")

**Petticoat 2**

You said

Adivasi women don't wear petticoats

Adivasi women don't wear blouses

They cover their bodies with piece of cloth

You sir, you madam,

You have not come to our country

For centuries

You said, no inspector can make anyone sit

In the jail for four days and four nights

You sir, may have come to our village

Before independence

That independence which your country got in 1947

You have not come to our jungles

You don't know that we don't leave our husbands because

There are no toilets because

He brings something to eat

He brings it just one time in the night

He would kick, but he brings it for sure

If there is food, there is milk

If there is milk, there is child

You have not come to our village

Otherwise you will not ask,

Dopadi, why do you get caught

In this illusion of love with your children?

What will your son do?



He will spend his time starving

He will wander in one jungle after another

And he will die

You have not come to our village

Or I would have told you

He will save the forest

He will save the animals

He will get shot at

He will run away

With an Adivasi woman

This is how life is for us

You have not come to our village

Or I would have told you

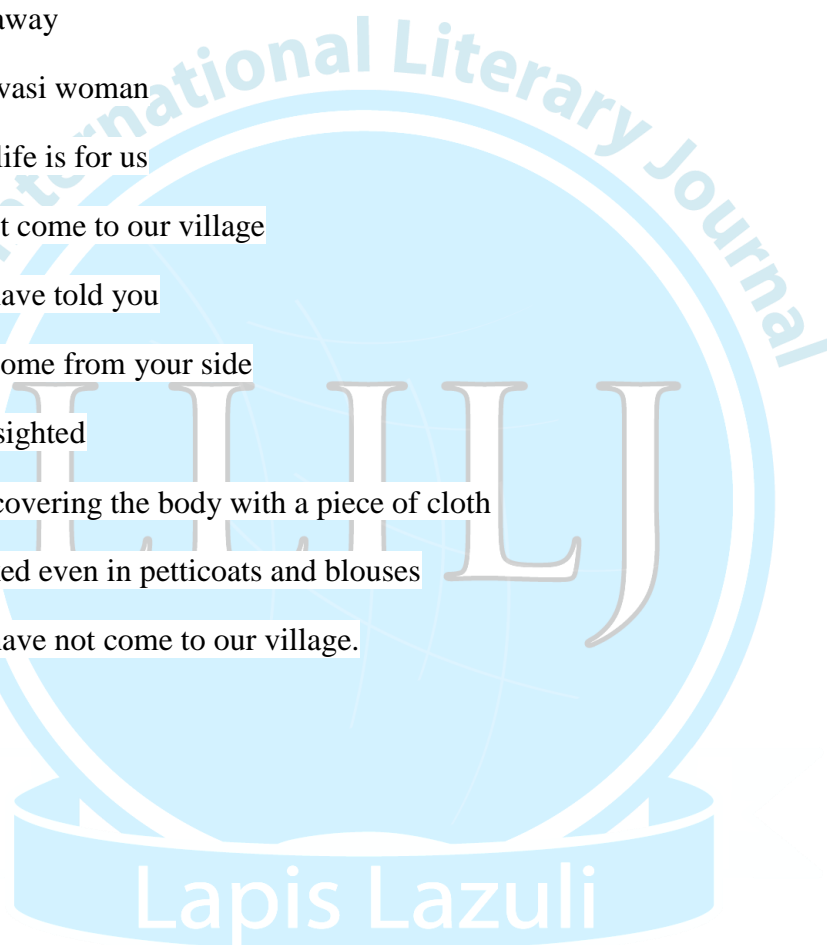
Those who come from your side

Are very farsighted

You talk of covering the body with a piece of cloth

We look naked even in petticoats and blouses

You surely have not come to our village.



(Translated from Dopadi Singhar's hindi poem of the same title)

**BIO-NOTE**

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C. S. Lakshmi (Ambai), born in 1944 in Tamil Nadu, is a distinguished and decorated fiction writer in Tamil. Her works are characterized by her passionate espousal of the cause of women, humor, a lucid and profound style, and a touch of realism. She is presently the Director of Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women (SPARROW) in Mumbai. She is one of the most important Tamil writers today. Most of her stories are about relationships and they contain brilliant observations about contemporary life. Exploration of space, silence, coming to terms with one's body or sexuality, and the importance of communication are some of the recurring themes in her works. Her stories have been translated into English and many other languages. The Library of Congress holds several of her writings in its collection.

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