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‘Daughter of the Soil’ by Epiácio Pais

Moga woke with a heavy head, her eyes full of sleep and sari damp with sweat. Immediately she felt a strong urge to lie back next to her son on the mat and enjoy the drowsiness of that hot morning.

But the thought of the cashews, which had gone unpicked for two days, made her spring to her feet. With barely a moment to arrange her hair or splash a handful of water across her face, she readied to leave. When her child stirred, she offered him a full breast and sang an old lullaby before hurrying out along the path to the hill.

Mahadev had left for town to renew the licence on their still with a promise to return by midday. But as he wasn’t yet back he’d probably gone to visit his mother-in-law, to let her know their little boy was fine, as tough as the rugged terrain Moga now walked upon.

In any case, she didn’t want to hang around for her husband. She wanted him to see his wife could harvest the fruit alone, tread it all without wasting a drop of juice, do what needed to be done. She wanted him not to laugh at her frailty but rather stare in surprise at the clean basin, the *bann* brimming with foam and the full basket of nuts drying on the terrace of their house. Then it would be her turn to laugh, Moga, daughter of Nagu, granddaughter of Naguesh, who had been the most feared man in Santana.

At that hour the village was deserted. Behind closed doors the odd child cried for its mother. Old men slept out on stone benches, red loincloths hiding bodies shrivelled from drink. The buffalo at the sides of the road lazily chewed their cud.

Moga went on, shielding her head from the sun, still scorching though it now declined towards the horizon. The stony ground burnt her feet and the warmth radiating up enveloped her in a disagreeable swelter. The wind slumbered. The scorched foliage drooped. Over by Pramila's the dung heaps must be seething, thought Moga, and the puddles in the banana grove without a drop of water left for the poor plants. And that bonfire-like heat, those filthy animal pens, the manure piling up, the mugginess settling in houses never to leave, what horror!

Just as well her Mahadev had knocked down their old place and moved them away from that neighbourhood, to a spot where life was healthier.

As she climbed the slope, she glanced back along the path from time to time in case she saw Mahadev returning through the palm orchard.

Munu's buffaloes grazed on the dry stubble of the *morodds* as he sat out in the hot sun. Tootling on a section of bamboo cane he filled the air with a hypnotic melody. Xencor swept the hill with his favourite song, his voice blending in pleasant harmony with Munu's tune. Pramila and her husband worked *khazan* land near the riverbank. She was stripped to the waist, her back shiny and wet next to the almost naked body of Rama. Their spades flashed as they rose and fell. When would that drudgery end? Three weeks had already passed since Moga saw the couple begin their work. He was a giant sucked

dry by hard liquor. She was pregnant for the fifth time and close to term. They dug in silence so as not to squander their strength, turning the earth over yard by yard. Between the rocks on the other bank, a woman — perhaps it was Parvoti — hammered off oysters to sell for a few *tangas*. That Parvoti! Only married a year and already black and blue. A night didn't pass without Moga hearing the poor wretch scream as the man allotted to her by fate beat her senseless.

Ah! Her Mahadev! Her good, strong Mahadev, gifted to her by Prameshwar! How different he was!

She began to imagine his chocolate-brown vigour, thews glistening with sweat and straining with effort. He didn't drink, had never touched a drop of feni. He'd even refused a sip the time he fell from that tree and broke his ribs. And he was hers, all hers and no one else's, like Rama was Sita's his whole life. Her Mahadev! How Moga loved him! Her love was silent, almost secret, without open affection and with little talk. But she knew, when her man took her in his arms, making her whole being throb beyond the limits of pleasure, that he loved her like no other. In his ferocious, Cyclops-like intent, she felt he didn't spill himself anywhere else. And she thought of the depraved village, that theatre of promiscuity and rape, furious drunken sprees and brutal abuse. She heard the screeching women betrayed by the violence of their husbands and the trudging men heading to the *taverna* in search of a little strength.

Prabhu was a walking barrel, dozing on verandas and kicked about by all and sundry. He was unable to work and his wife couldn't bear the sight of him. Naraina was sick, an illness from which even his family fled. No one will ever rescue him from his mangy-

dog life. In Tatu's house, his wife was dying, leaving behind a gaggle of scabby, rickety kids. Damu was off blowing his father's fortune. Fifteen-year-old Dina played cards day and night. In the neighbourhood of Valado Grande, Nanu had set fire to his own house in order to murder his wife. Droupoda, so young, was paralysed and without hope of cure. But the nadir of the village's misery was the succubus of Abolém, perverting men, a spirit possessed by carnal sin.

Moga thought then that these people, so strong and sober in times past, were marching along the road to perdition. There were no men left, just as there were no more women, for it was impossible to give such names to the dregs who populated the village of Santana and who, year upon year, pushed out into the world dozens of atrophied beings incapable of development. Santana was ending, drowning in vice. In days gone by men had fathered robust children. They didn't drink, but built muscles of steel from ambil, chapattis and water. Their work was praised and was worth more than that of today's machines. She recalled her father, for whom the *bhatcar* landlords vied in the digging season. He had never known the taste of wine. He was convinced those who drank became pigs in the next life. And the women! Where today could you find a woman like her mother, a strapping countrywoman, who tilled the earth beside her husband and took good care of the family? Her parents had lived contentedly together, in placid, healthy harmony, with more than enough vital force to make children as robust as buffalo!

She continued upwards. It was the second time she had gone alone to the cashew grove. In the whitish trunks there was something that unsettled her and, in the flushed agony of dusk, she felt an animistic force threatening to burst through. She took fright at the

contrast between the fiery brushstrokes of light and the deep black shadows. The silence no longer broken by crows, the sudden flight of quail fleeing the *morodd* gave her goose pimples and her mind billowed with dread.

When she reached the top, she smelt the stinking basin. The cashews must have dried out. A thin stream of bubbly, acidic juice was trickling down into the *bann*, which was buried up to its neck. In the little depressions in the stone swam insects vying to sate their greed, ants drowning in the half-rotten slops.

As Moga drew near, the whole swarm took flight. She gave the area a good once-over, removed the must, and left the stone ready for that day's treading.

But why hadn't Mahadev returned? He knew the cashews hadn't been collected for two days and that she alone would be unable to pick and tread them all before they went off. He knew that spoiled fruit makes bad wine and that this loss could make all the difference to paying their rent. And what did he go and do? Swan off to visit his mother-in-law, see her, wish her good health. He should have remembered his wife, Moga, who was alone on the hill, a frail woman, unable to handle by herself what was too much for a single man.

Anger flared. But it was a passing emotion, a desire to pinch Mahadev, to nip his ears that night when he embraced her, to sulk because he was acting no better than the other men of the village.

Now, however, it was growing late and she had no choice other than to pick the cashews herself. So off she went, the raw grace of her body slipping from tree to tree, beneath the branches, where the fruit practically carpeted the ground.

When, a few minutes later, she lifted her eyes towards the sea in the distance, she was shocked to find the sun touching the line of the horizon. Already the waters were losing their bright hues, and, on the other side of the river, the stripped hillsides were almost silhouettes against the white backdrop of clouds. Before long there would be no trace left of the ruddy pomp of Surya's departure.

She paused in her work and offered homage to the all-powerful giver of life. It was Surya who made the cashew trees blossom, the rice sprout from the earth and the salty waters rise to irrigate the *khazans* and *morodds*. The sea was its restful bed, where it slept at night only to rise each morning to reign over all creation. That was what she had been taught. That's what the *puranas* old Ananda sang out on the *nattak* field told her. The Christians worshipped a piece of wood raised up on a pedestal. They lit candles to it, prayed to it. But what did that lifeless cross represent before the splendour of Surya, a living god whose might and presence were evident, undeniable?

The sun's last rays illuminated her completely, penetrating the folds of her sari and revealing to the astonished eyes of the crows her divine shape, glowing red like an antique statue in the firelight of its sanctuary.

The sun plunged into the ocean, and Moga went back to work with redoubled haste. She heard the church bells toll, the air vibrating to their sound, and was again shocked to find it was the homecoming hour when the Christians began their prayers.

But what did her discomfort matter if that bitter juice turned into money and that money into rice and that rice into milk for her darling child? Those born poor, without a plot of land to call their own, had to work to buy cloth, betel and sandals for feast days, as well as food, for the rest was a luxury.

Night fell upon the hill. Heavy clouds overspread the stars. The heat became intense and everything around her was sunk into impenetrable dark.

Moga finished shelling the cashew nuts.

‘That good-for-nothing still isn’t back’, she moaned. ‘I’m going home. I can’t take this anymore’, she murmured, on the brink of tears.

But no. She wouldn’t go home yet. She had to finish the work, to get even.

She rolled up her *capodd* and stepped resolutely into the basin. As she took a firm grip on the bamboo support, the runnel of juice beneath her feet thickened and drained away into the pot with a gurgle.

She was absolutely drenched. Sweat streamed down her legs and vanished into the swirling liquid. For a long while now her arms had ached; her legs were on the point of



buckling. But through sheer force of will she kept going, urged her limbs on to one final effort.

A few moments later, the treading was complete.

She sat down on the stone edge to regain some strength. Once more she strained her ears for any sign of Mahadev's arrival. Not that it made any difference now, but her vexation, which had reached a peak, needed an outlet. She choked on a mix of love and anger. At the same time, she wanted to be praised and petted. She desperately wished Mahadev would appear and clasp her in his arms so tightly that she couldn't breathe, her body thrilling to his warm caress. The spent state in which she found herself was that of swooning nights of passion, when her flesh was transformed into a mass of vibrating nerves.

She leant down over the flow of juice and slurped like an animal, quenching the thirst that raged in her throat. When she lifted herself back up she saw that her sari was soaked and that she could no longer cover herself. She was naked from the waist up.

From the sea rose a slight breeze. Scattered droplets of rain fell from the clouds. But from the earth, from the dry *morodd*, from the rocks, a hot vapour emanated. Moga removed the last of her clothes and stood savouring the drizzle, which calmed her stormy nerves. The light air upon her skin was like the kiss of a goddess of the night, ruling inky hued and supreme over the primal darkness of creation.

She felt like hanging back, allowing herself to be borne away by the waves of pleasure, to forget time and space. It was only when the drawn-out cries of the jackals, which had begun their nocturnal scavenging, broke the calm that she realised how late it was. Her son might have awoken; perhaps Mahadev was waiting at home.

Over the sere land drizzle tapped on the parched foliage, the liquid seeping down into the soil, hardly satisfying its urgent needs. Birds flapped their wings, stretching them wide to expose their bodies to the sky's charity. Lizards scurried from their holes and before long termites would chew the dry twigs. Moga was aware that when the rain came early it ruined the seedbeds. It stripped the blossom from cashews and mango-trees. The rice didn't grow with the same vigour. In the salt ponds, the brine diluted and baby coconuts were felled from their trees. In the ditches, pestilence would ferment, giving rise to a thousand illnesses. But, all the same, those rains did wash away the sweat she found so utterly unbearable.

The scent of the wet earth filtered down to the deepest recess of her lungs, giving her new life. The image of the great downpours of July, those rains that levelled river and khazan, played in her thirsty imagination. Ah! The great cloudbursts of the monsoon! Her whole being shivered with the urge to bathe in the muddy creek alongside Muni's buffalos.

As she drew near to the village, she heard cries coming from Anandi's hut. Perhaps her son, recently home from the mines, had died. He had been feeling debilitated, unable to work, his body reduced to a clutch of bones sheathed in ashen skin.

There was no doubt about it: Anandi was howling with grief. From the door, in the light of the high-pressure lamp, the bamboo coffin in which they would bury her boy in Moroda Grande could be seen. There he would lie, beneath the red sod and the stones with which they would fill his grave, to keep jackals from the corpse.

‘What if somebody saw me like this, without a stitch on? The shame!’

In the thick black night not a star was shining. There wasn’t a soul abroad. The drizzle had stopped and the sultry breeze was no encouragement to cover her body.

She reached home, opened the door and entered. Judging by the silence her son still slept. Moga placed the basket down in the corner and crouched by the mat, her hand stroking her little boy. She was overcome with fatigue. Hunger reared its head but her body refused to make the slightest movement, even to light a fire for the *canjee*. And besides, the water jugs were empty, the well far away and all the firewood out in the little backyard. A heavy weight bore down on her eyelids, her senses clouded over.

She lay down next to her child, taking him in her loving arms. A trace of warmth in the mat irked her. She rolled onto the hard floor, savouring its cool surface, the inviting smell of dry cow dung. There, like a daughter of the soil, she stretched out her arms and legs and allowed herself to slip into a deep sleep.

*Translated by Paul Melo e Castro*