

Slug

By Matias Travieso-Diaz

Slugs crawl and crawl over our cabbages, like the world's slander over a good name. You may kill them, it is true; but there is the slime.

- Douglas William Jerrold

One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in bed he had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug.

- Franz Kafka

Arun was an untouchable (or as they say nowadays, a *davit*), a human being at the very bottom of the Indian caste system—indeed, beneath all castes. He was born in the countryside in the Bastar district of the Indian State of Chhattisgarh. Bastar is notorious for the poverty and backwardness of its rural citizens. The Bastar untouchables are the lowest of the low, barely a step above the beasts in the field.

Arun never knew his father, and his mother ran away, abandoning him shortly after birth. His maternal grandmother took pity on the baby and rescued him from certain death. She brought Arun to her hovel in the city of Jagdalpur and took care of him through his early years.

It was not only the shame of having given birth to a bastard that drove Arun's mother to run away. The newborn was found to have a fluid-filled sac in the middle of his back, covered by a thin layer of skin. Arun's mother believed that the boy had been set upon at birth by a *Dasyu*, an evil demon that would eventually destroy him and bring ruin to his kin.

She was only partially wrong, for Arun was not a normal child. He suffered from weakness of the muscles of his legs and had trouble walking, a deficiency that increased as he grew older so that he could only move around using crutches. There were other problems: he had a curved spine and one of his hips hung lower than the other; he could not control his bladder or his bowels and was frequently soiling himself; he lacked sensation on his feet, legs, and buttocks, and did not notice when he got wounds, blisters, or sores. In short, he was a poor physical specimen.

Arun's grandmother tended to him the best she could but was too poor to get him medical attention. Sending Arun to school was also out of the question. Thus, from an early age, he was limited to begging for alms outside his tenement, under his grandmother's watchful eye. He taught himself to play the *bansuri* (a side-blown bamboo flute) and wove plaintive melodies to attract donors.

Even though he played the *bansuri* well and begged diligently, Arun had little success in his work. As a *davit*, he was considered so impure that people of other castes were affronted by the mere sight of him. His frequent wetting and soiling himself aggravated the negative reactions, and passers-by often crossed to the other side of the street to avert him and walked quickly away. So, the alms he gathered were few and far between and were often prompted by the people's sense of shame at feeling such revulsion for another human being, no matter how debased.

Through some miracle, Arun survived until his grandmother died, shortly after he turned sixteen. He was left alone sitting on the street outside the tenement where he once lived, wasting away and covered in his own filth. He would have starved to death had he not been spotted by a policeman, who determined that Arun was a public nuisance and needed to be removed from the eyes of the citizenry. He sought to make arrangements for the youth to be transported to a Christian-run community health center, where he was to be cared for by nuns and lay volunteers.

Two young men were conscripted to carry Arun to the health center on a stretcher. They were dark-skinned Sudras, members of one of the lowest Indian castes. They had to reluctantly obey the orders of the policeman, who was a higher-caste Kshatriya. Each man was given a few coins as recompense for the task of taking Arun since the boy was regarded as so polluted that touching or being near him was to be avoided.

The trip started out without incident, but as they were marching on a trail by a drainage canal, the man at the front got a foot caught on a rut in the road and fell to his knees. The stretcher overturned, and Arun tumbled to the ground. Unfortunately, his bowels chose that moment to discharge, covering him and the stretcher in foul-smelling excrement.

The Sudras were disgusted. One asked the other: "What now? We can't pick him up without contaminating ourselves, and the stretcher is soiled with his shit. Should we just abandon him here?"

“We can’t do that” replied the other. “People walking on this road will eventually find him, and the police may trace him back to us.”

“Then, what do we do?”

Their conversation was interrupted by Arun, who tried to sit, fell back, and lay spread-eagled on the ground. Although speaking was difficult for him, he managed to implore in a low guttural voice: “Please don’t leave me here. I’ll soon die if am not given help.” He then burst into tears.

“Shut up!” cried one of the men. “You have dirtied us enough already!”

“I have an idea,” said the other. “Let’s dump him in the canal. From here, it flows into the River Indrawati so the body may never be found or may come ashore leagues from here.”

“But then we have to carry him to the canal. I don’t want to touch his filthy body.”

“We’ll just push him to the edge of the water and dump him in with a branch or something.”

“Sounds good. What are we going to tell the police?”

“We’ll say that we delivered him to the nuns and left him in their care. I don’t think the police will follow up.”

Arun listened to the men’s exchange with horror and began whimpering and shaking convulsively. “Please, no. Please, don’t do it. For the love of Krishna, I beg you. Just leave me alone!” His olive skin had turned ghostly white, and his breathing had become labored.

One of the young men gave the prone figure a savage kick. “Shut up! You are dead already, you piece of dung!”

Arun uttered a loud cry, and his body went limp. He had passed out.

His fainting was in a way mercy, for he did not witness the series of vicious kicks with which the men moved his body to the canal’s edge. It was hard, brutal work, and by the time they had Arun by the water, they were drenched in sweat. Both of them had cut branches from trees growing by the road and used them to shove Arun’s body into the murky waters. He dropped in and sank.

“Let’s go,” said one. “We’ll need to take a purification bath right away,” said the other. They left without looking back.

When Arun regained consciousness a few moments later, he was floating on his back in the dirty waters of the canal. His body hurt as if every bone had been crushed. He had trouble breathing, and his vision was blurred. He was only able to make small motions that drew him slowly toward the shore. After what seemed an eternity, he found himself hanging from a shrub at the water’s edge. Carefully, he lowered himself to the bottom and noticed that he could stand as the water only reached his chest. He realized he might not be able to get out unaided and was again seized by despair. He was exhausted, broken, and surprisingly hungry. He wished for death to come to end his agony, recalling the Hindu teaching he had received from his grandmother: When he died, his soul would be reborn in a different body, hopefully much improved over his current one.

Yet some force made him rebel against untimely death. He wanted to survive, get justice, mete out retribution against those two men and all others who had wronged him in his short life. He held onto the shrub with all his might but soon fell into a waking trance.

On the road near the edge of the canal, he then saw an odd animal: a very large olive-brown creature with a moist, elongated body that lay flat on the ground. It was legless and had two pairs of long tentacles protruding from the head followed by a saddle-shaped structure and a long tail. It moved by contracting and releasing the muscles on the underside of the body while at the same time secreting a sticky mucus as it traveled. It looked like a snail without a shell, and it seemed harmless despite its odd appearance.

As he gazed at the animal, Arun had a sense of communion between him and the visitor, and then a strange desire to be like it. After a while, he started to experience the same sensations as the slug. He could see and smell through the top pair of tentacles, touch and taste through the lower pair. He drew air through an opening on the saddle behind its head and felt an increasing hunger for anything vegetable: leaves, fruits, mushrooms, the lichen that coated the rocks by the canal, even the moss on the trees. He also perceived other, more complex emotions: yearning for moisture, fear of attack by predators, sexual longings. Arun could not totally mesh his human emotions with the primitive urges of the slug, but both sets of feelings coexisted and were mutually acknowledged. He came to feel that he was not just himself anymore but had become one with the beast. Little by little, he realized that he was able to experience the sense of being in the particular form of the slug while not

actually changing physically.

He developed a sense of admiration for the slug's ability to be in harmony with its environment. With a pang of envy, he was awed by the creature's intactness, the absence of hurts, or deformities or feelings of inadequacy. The slug was strong and could take care of itself.

With a mighty effort, Arun propped himself further up so he was braced against the sand at the edge of the canal. The slug began moving away slowly, heading in the general direction of the nearby town, all the time feasting on the various forms of plant life, which he chomped through thousands of tiny teeth. Arun was too weak to get himself out of the canal, so he hung there, half the body immersed in the fetid water as he watched his "other self" start to slither away. But the psychic link between the two persisted: Arun could experience, without actually physically perceiving, the slug's sensations as it drew farther apart from him.

As the day warmed up and the slug inched away from the humid vicinity of the canal, its body, made mostly of water, began to dry up uncomfortably. It released mucus to keep itself moist but ultimately had to hide under a large fallen tree where it found dampness and shelter from the heat of the sun. It rested there, waiting for the night and yearning for rain.

The following day, heavy rains began, ushering the start of the monsoon season. The slug shook itself into action and resumed its slow progress toward Jagdalpur as directed by the boy's mental urgings. Its progress took them by several of the many farms that dotted the Bastar district. The Zaid crops—pumpkin, cucumber, and gourds—were ripening and getting ready to be harvested.

The slug made frequent detours to sample the delicacies. It was going through a pumpkin patch, savoring the green and yellow fruits that lay on the ground, when a bark sounded and a large mangy dog approached, bent on mayhem.

Although far away, Arun blanched and cowered in fear, for the memory of the violent attack by the Sudras was still fresh in his mind. The slug, however, seemed prepared for the eventuality. It contracted its body, making itself more like a ball, and firmly attached itself to the ground, while at the same time releasing copious amounts of mucus. The dog tried in vain to get a firm hold of the slippery beast and, after several unsuccessful attempts at dislodging it, walked away from the slug, uttering a disconcerted growl.

It was at this point that Arun realized why the slug was his animal kintype. They were both ungainly, soft, and vulnerable, and both were despised and subject to attack by the hostile world. They differed only in that the slug had developed mechanisms for coping with those attacks—he had no such defenses.

The slug's crawling brought it in the early morning to the slums that ringed Jagdalpur, a succession of poorly built hovels with thatched roofs, crowded together randomly, without sanitary or drinking water facilities. The slug proceeded slowly on the dirt road, oblivious to the human misery around it. Its first inkling of danger was the appearance of a pack of children ranging from toddlers to near teenagers. They were uniformly dirty, and most were naked. They noticed the slug with bored eyes, but then their expression turned to malice as one of them picked a pebble from the road and threw it at the beast. It hit the slug with a plop and buried itself on its mantle before a convulsion from the slug succeeded in dislodging it.

Arun warned the slug to slink away from the children as fast as it could, and it began doing so, but one of the oldest in the group seized a large rock and hurled it at the animal, pinning it to the ground. Arun felt a sensation of excruciating pain and blacked out.

When he came to, the children had gone away. The slug had flattened its body and elongated it until it was just a thin ribbon and was slowly crawling away from the rock under which it was buried. Arun could feel the intense pain experienced by the slug and its blind determination to escape its predicament and urged it on. Finally, the slug resumed moving on the dirt road, leaving a pale blue trail of blood on its wake.

After a few minutes, the slug detected a bramble bush by the side of the road and slid under it. Arun could feel its exhaustion as the animal's body reacted to the loss of fluids from the attack and the rising day temperature. "We are dying," he observed with resignation.

Providentially, the afternoon's monsoon rains provided an injection of moisture to the ravaged body of the slug. It lay there, hiding and feeding on the brambles and recovering its strength for two days and nights. All the while, Arun felt himself near death and pondered what he should direct the slug to do next. His heart was heavy

with sorrow and increasing anger at the callousness of his fellow humans. Somehow, his emotion managed to break through the barrier between species and resonated as a visceral dark feeling in the slug.

Arun had no particular destination in mind when he had steered the slug toward Jagdalpur; he was merely returning to the only place on earth he knew. However, as the slug reached town, its vision focused on a tall tower crowned by a large metal sphere; the tower was surrounded by a beehive of indigent shacks and tents. Arun realized that the tank stored water for the city, and a sudden dark thought occurred to him. Neither he nor the slug had any weapons they could use, but within the slug's body, there were thousands of larvae of a roundworm parasite whose presence Arun had detected as a generalized internal itch on the beast. Prompted by Arun, the slug could perhaps manage to get inside the tank, drop into the water, and drown. As it decomposed, the larvae it hosted would be released into the water, infecting it. Arun was no scientist, but he was smart enough to expect that the befouled water would be consumed by many, causing at least distress and potentially worse consequences. That would be at least some revenge for both him and the beast.

The ascent toward the spherical tank on top of the tower proved difficult because a slug's method of locomotion is not adapted for climbing. It proceeded by wrapping its soft, boneless body on one of the spindly legs of the tower and hoisting itself little by little. As the rain continued unabated, the slug did not dry out or overheat.

Finally, the slug was at the base of the tank, and Arun started to wonder how to get inside. The slug circled around the massive metal structure and discovered that there was a long narrow crack, like a spider web strand running across the bottom of the tank. It would be fairly easy for the slug to enlarge the crack and squeeze through the opening. The slug had no hands or tools, but it started secreting a special form of highly acidic mucus that it often used to fight off predators. The slug attached itself to the base and began bathing the crack with corrosive slime. Midway through the intrusion, however, the enlarged crack began to leak: a trickle that could become a flood.

Arun then had a moment of self-reflection. His revenge was almost accomplished; soon, the slug would be able to squeeze into the tank and, dying, release its toxic innards into its water. However, there could be a massive outrush from the tank upon the ground below, reaching the shantytown that circled the tower; people might be hurt or drown. Did he have the right to hurt those innocent people? Conflicting emotions paralyzed his will. Should he direct the slug not to enter the tank but instead to provide an improvised patch that sealed the crack?

In the end, the thirst for retribution prevailed. Prompted by Arun, the slug dropped into the water and drowned. As it decomposed, the larvae it hosted were released into the water. The trickle of water exiting the tank continued but never became a flood.

Several weeks later, a pump failure in the municipal water system resulted in the flushing of the tower's water into the Jagdalpur's potable water supply. Many cases of angiostrongyliasis, also known as rat lungworm, were later reported in the city: scores of people came down with bacterial meningitis, leading to paralysis and in many cases, death.

Arun did not survive to witness the result of his experiment, for he had died by the canal just as the slug drowned in the tank. Had he still lived, he would have rejoiced in his revenge.

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