



The hunt

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To cite this article: Mahasweta Devi (1990) The hunt, *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, 5:1, 61-79, DOI: [10.1080/07407709008571141](https://doi.org/10.1080/07407709008571141)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07407709008571141>



Published online: 03 Jun 2008.



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The Hunt

By Mahasweta Devi

Translated by Gayatri Spivak

The place is on the Gomo-Daltonganj line. Trains stopped at this station once upon a time. The expense of having trains stop was perhaps too much. Now one sees a stray cow or a goat in the station room, in the residential quarters and the porter's shanties. The board says "Kuruda Outstation, Abandoned." Arrived here the train slows. It gasps as it climbs. It climbs Kuruda Hill bit by bit right from here. It is a low hill. After a while the train enters a ravine. On both sides of the half-mile ravine there are blasted stones. There's a bamboo thicket on the hill, and occasionally the bamboo bends in the wind and hits the train. Then the train descends and it gathers speed. Now the station is Tohri. The busiest station in this area. The junction of many bus routes. Tohri is also a coal halt. The train picks up coal. There are surface collieries all around. In these parts lowgrade coal is to be found almost above ground. But Tohri's real benefactors are the timber brokers. It is a Sal-growing area. Sal-logs arrive night and day by truck. They are split in timberyards and sent in every direction. Tohri's bustle is an experience after the silence of Kuruda.

It is an experience to watch the train move on the hilltop from distant villages. The villagers see this every day, yet their amazement never ends. The train goes on, the engine gasps; now the ravine swallows the train. If you run you can see where it will spit it out. There were some elephants seen one day at the top of the hill. The elephants stopped as they ate the bamboo. From a distance they looked like toy elephants. After the train passed on they ran off trumpeting, trunks raised.

The village of Kuruda is a good way behind the station. There are two hills, one beyond the wide meadow. If it had been a bit closer the villagers might have started living in the abandoned brickbuilt house.

For people who live in the villages like Kuruda, life holds few breaks other than annual feasts. So their eyes are charmed by the scenes on top of Kuruda Hill.

When Mary Oraon comes up, she looks at the train, as the passengers look at her if they see her. Eighteen years old, tall, flat-featured, light

copper skin. Usually she wears a print sari. As she looks at the train, so the passengers look at her if she catches their eye. At a distance she looks most seductive, but up close you see a strong message of rejection in her glance.

You wouldn't call her a tribal at first sight. Yet she is a tribal. Once upon a time whites had timber plantations in Kuruda. They left gradually after Independence. Mary's mother looked after the Dixons' bungalow and household. Dixon's son came back in 1959 and sold the house, the forest, everything else. He put Mary in Bhikni's womb before he left. He went to Australia. The padre at the local church christened her Mary. Bhikni was still a Christian. But when Prasadji from Ranchi came to live in the Dixon bungalow and refused to employ Bhikni, she gave up Christianity. Mary pastures the Prasads' cattle. She is a most capable cowherd. She also sells custard apple and guava from the Prasad's orchards, driving terrifically hard bargains with the Kunjaras, the wholesale fruit buyers. She takes the train to Tohri with vegetables from the field.

Everyone says Prasadji is most fortunate. He pays Bhikni a wage. With Mary the agreement is for board and lodging, clothing and sundries. The Dixon bungalow was built as a residence for whites. Bhikni says the whites kept twelve ayahs-servants-sweepers. Under Prasadji Mary alone keeps the huge bungalow clean.

Mary has countless admirers at Tohri market. She gets down at the station like a queen. She sits in her own rightful place at the market. She gets smokes from the other marketeers, drinks tea and chews betel leaf at their expense, but encourages no one. Jalim, the leader of the marketeers and a sharp lad, is her lover. They will marry when either's savings reach a hundred rupees.

She has let Jalim approach her on the promise of marriage. Daughter of an Oraon mother, she looks different, and she is also exceptionally tall. So she couldn't find a boy of her own kind. The color of Mary's skin is a resistant barrier to young Oraon men. Mrs. Prasad had looked for a match. Their gardener's son. She had said, you can stay on the compound.

Bhikni was ecstatic. Mary said, "No. Mistress Mother has said it to keep her worker captive."

—She will give shelter.

—A shack.

—He's a good boy.

—No. Living in a shack, eating mush, the man drinking, no soap or oil, no clean clothes. I don't want such a life.

Mary was unwilling. She is accepted in the village society. The women are her friends, she is the best dancer at the feasts. But that doesn't mean she wants to live their life.

Man men had wanted to be her lover. Mary had lifted her machete. They are outsiders. Who can tell that they wouldn't leave her, like Bhikni with a baby in her belly?

There was a fight over her once in Tohri market. Ratan Singh, the driver of a timber truck, had got drunk and tried to carry her off. It was then that Jalim had cut in and hit Ratan Singh. It was after that that Mary was seen selling vegetables or peanuts or corn sitting beside Jalim. She has never been to his room. No, marriage first. Jalim respects this greatly. Yes, there is something true in Mary, the power of Australian blood.

There is distrust in Mary somewhere. She doesn't trust even Jalim fully. Even the marketeers of Tohri know that they'll marry as soon as there is a hundred rupees. Jalim's version is that he himself will save those hundred rupees. It will be good if Mary brings something herself. So she has left to Jalim the responsibility of saving money. It's not easy for Jalim. He has his parents, brothers, and sisters in the village. Here he'll have to rent a place, buy pots and pans. He won't be able to carry all the expenses. And he wants to give Mary clothes, the odd cake of soap.

Mary gave him the first present. A colored cotton vest.

—Your gift?

Jalim is delighted.

—No. Your wife sent it.

After that Jalim gave her presents now and then. Mary doesn't wear those clothes. She'll wear them after the wedding.

Mary understands that Jalim is taking many pains to save money. Even so she says nothing, for she has saved ninety-two if not a hundred rupees.

She has earned that money. At the Prasad establishment. By government regulation, if there are mahua trees on anyone's land in the forest areas, the right to the fruit goes to the picker. Mahua is a cash fruit. You get liquor from mahua, the oil of the black seed of the mahua fruit goes to make a blackish washing soap. It is Mary who picks the fruit of the four mahua trees at the Prasad property. No villager has been able to touch the fruit even in jest. Mary has instantly raised her machete. This is hers by right. This is why she works so hard for no wages at the Prasad house.

Mrs. Prasad doesn't like it much, but Lachhman Prasad says, "Take no notice. Who will clean so well, pasture the cows so well? Sell fruit and vegetable and nuts at a profit at Tohri?"

Mary works like a dog but does not tolerate familiarity from Prasadji.

—So Mary, how much did you make on your sale of mahua?

—What's it to you?

—Open a moneylending business.

—Yes, I will.

—It's good of me to let you pick the mahua. It is government property. I could hire people and have the fruit picked and I don't do it.

—Let the hired people come and see. I have my machete.

Mary's voice is harsh and grim.

Prasadji says, "It figures. White blood."

Mrs. Prasad has Mary give her an oil rubdown. Out of her lardy body she looks at Mary's hard perfect frame. She says, "So, what about your marriage? What does Jalim say?"

—What do you want with poor folks' talk? Will you organize my marriage?

—God be praised! With a Muslim? I run such a marriage?

—Why not? The Muslim says he'll marry. Your brother wanted only to keep me.

This mistress swallows the slap and says nothing. You have to take words from a girl who works like an animal, carries a forty pound bag on her back and boards the train, cleans the whole house in half an hour.

Everyone is afraid of Mary. Mary cleans house, and pastures cattle, with her inviolate constitution, her infinite energy, and her razor sharp mind. On the field she lunches on fried corn. She stands and picks fruit and oversees picking. She weighs the stuff herself for the buyers. She puts the fruit bitten by bats and birds into a sack, and feeds it to her mother's chickens. When the rains come she replants the seedlings carefully. She watches out for everything. She buys rice, oil, butter, and spices for the Prasads at Tohri market. She says herself, "The money I save you, and the money I make for you, how much do you put together out of it yearly, Mistress Mother? Why should I take a cheap sari? I'll dress well, use soap and oil, give me everything."

Mrs. Prasad is obliged to dress her well.

Sometimes Mary goes to the village to gossip. When she can. Then she puts her sari around her belly and becomes Mrs. Prasad, limps and becomes Prasadji, makes everyone laugh. There she is easy. When the young men say, "Hey Mussulman's chick, why here?"

—Would any of you marry me?

—Would you?

—Why aren't you tall and white like me?

—You are a white man's daughter.

"Big white chief! Puts a child in a woman's belly and runs like a rat. My mother is bad news. When you see a white daughter, you kill her right away. Then there are no problems!"

—What about you if she'd killed?

—I wouldn't have been.

—Stop that talk. Be a Mussulman if you like. Before that for us . . .

—What?

—Rice-chicken-mutton and booze?

—Sure. I'll throw a fan-tas-tic feast. When have I not fed you? Tell me?

—Yes, true, you do give.

The same Mary who pulls hundreds of pounds, fights the Kunjaras over fruit, doesn't hand out a single peanut to keep Prasadji's profits intact, also steals peanut oil, flour, molasses from the house. Salt and spices.

She sits at any Oraon house in the village, fries wheatcakes on a clay stove, eats with everyone. Just as she knows she'll marry Jalim, she also knows that if she had resembled any Oraon girl—if her father had been Somra or Budhra or Mangla Oraon—the Oraons would not have let this marriage happen.

Because she is the illegitimate daughter of a white father the Oraons don't think of her as their blood and do not place the harsh injunctions of their own society upon her.

She would have rebelled if they had. She is unhappy that they don't. In her inmost heart there is somewhere a longing to be part of the Oraons. She would have been very glad if, when she was thirteen or fourteen some brave Oraon lad had pulled her into marriage. Mary has seen two or three Hindi films in Tohri. At harvest time itinerant film people come to Tohri. They show moving pictures in the open field. Not only the girls, but even the boys of Kuruda village have hardly ever been to the movies. They haven't been to the movies, haven't worn good clothes, haven't eaten a full meal. Mary has a certain sympathy for them as well.

So goes Mary's life. Suddenly one day, stopping the train, Collector Singh descends with Prasadji's son, and Mary's life is troubled, a storm gathers in Kuruda's quiet and impoverished existence.

Seventy five acres or two hundred and twenty five bighas of land are attached to Prasadji's bungalow. Nobody around here obeys the land ceiling laws. All the far-flung bungalows of the old timber planters have large tracts of attached land. Mr. Dixon had planted Sal on fifty acres. Not the dwarf Sal of the area but giant Sal. In time they've grown *immense and ready for felling*. Prasadji used to lament about all that he could have done with this land if there had been no Sal. Now that he knows the price of Sal, his one goal is to sell the trees at the highest price. Lalchand and Mulniji, the two other forest proprietors of the area, are also happy at this news. Prasad's son Banwari takes the initiative and starts looking around in Daltonganj and Chhipador. The fruit of his labors is Collector Singh.

The first thing Collector Singh looks at is the trees to be felled. Then they start negotiating prices. Prasad says, "Such Sal wood! How can I sell at such a price?"

—Why sell? You'll sell where you can make a profit.

—Name a proper price.

—Prasadji! Banwari is a real friend. He does service in Chhipador, and I'm a broker. Why tell a lie, the trees are mature, and the wood solid.

—The whites planted the stuff.

—Yes. But here I'll have them cut, in pieces! Trucks won't come here. This is not the white man's rule when I could have brought elephants from the Forest Department and pulled the timber to Tohri. I'll have to take it to Murhai. Flat tires on the dirt roads. I'll have to cut the trees before that, think of the expense!

—But you'll make a profit!

—Sure. Who works without profit? Still your profit is higher. Bought the bungalow dirt cheap, got a ready-made Sal forest! Whatever you get is your profit. Because you had no investment for it. Not corn that buffaloes pulled the plough, and fieldhands reaped. Not custard apple or guava that you chased birds and bats. Forest area, Sal area, have trees, sell straight off.

Lalchand and Mulni also said, "Don't make so much trouble brother.

What do we do if he leaves? Do you want to watch the flowers of a tree that bears no fruit? He wants to buy, we'll sell."

The broker wants the same thing. What trees the whites had planted! The tops break the sky, the trunks are as big as railway engines. Why buy only Prasadji's trees? He'll buy all the trees of the area.

Every five years or so some trees will be ready and I'll buy. One two three. This is still a virgin area, and I'll do the monopoly on tree felling.

That was the decision. Prasadji realized later that the argument about the expense of carrying the trees was not altogether correct. For the trucks came past Murhai, close to Kuruda. That side is flat and stony. No problem with the arrival of trucks. The broker pitched his tent there. Two experts came to fell trees.

The broker started planning the deployment of manpower. Oraon and Munda men and women came from six villages—Kuruda, Murhai, Seeho, Thapari, Dhuma, Chinaboha. Unbelievable. Money at home. Others will fell the trees, twelve annas daily for men, eight annas for women for trimming branches and carrying the pieced timber to the trucks. And a tiffin of cornmeal in the afternoon. Unbelievable! Salt and cayenne with the meal. The village priest and elders will bring the men and women. A sack of salt weekly for each village. The elders said, "How about the women's honor if they work?"

The broker said, "They are everybody's mothers and sisters! Whoever forgets will be sacked."

Mary is a regular contact and bridge between the outside world of Tohri and Kuruda. At night when she brought Prasadji warm water for his medicine she said, "The bastard tricked you. He took all the profit. Everyone from Tohri to Chhipador is laughing."

Prasadji took off his false teeth and put them in a bowl of water. Then he took his medicine. In a while he said, "What to do Mary? With no road, have I the power to sell at profit to anyone? This happens if you live in the forest. Banwari brought him. Banwari is pig-headed and takes after his mother. I first said 'no,' then Lalchand and Mulni got angry. There were many objections at home."

—Banwari's taken his cut.

—You know this?

—I am aware of it.

—What a shame.

Prasadji sighed and gave her a rupee. He gives her like this from time to time. “You take such trouble so I don’t get tricked over a piece of fruit, a grain of corn,” he said. “My own son understands nothing. What shall I do? Don’t I know that he’ll sell everything and take off when I die?”

—When you sell trees later, there will be a road, don’t give it to him. Go yourself to Chhipador. Talk to the big companies and do your business. Don’t be soft then.

—You’re right.

Mary told the Kuruda elders as well, “Twelve annas and eight annas! No porter carries gentlemen’s cases for this price.”

The elders said, “What to do Mary? If I said ‘no’ the villagers would go wild. They would say, ‘Who gives us this kind of money?’”

Mary said, “He’s greedy now. He’ll come again in five years. Then he’ll bargain for three or two rupees. And he’ll have to give. Otherwise how will he get an outsider here?”

—No road, no jobs, you know how it is.

Mary thought, in return for the broker’s glance she had shrewdly revealed the man’s true nature to everyone.

But Collector Singh didn’t forget her. A few days later, when Mary was running on a water buffalo’s back herding other cattle, the Collector came up to her. “How pretty,” he said. “You look like Hema Malini.”

—What?

—You look like Hema Malini.

—You look like a monkey.

Collector Singh felt much encouraged by such a remark and came up close. Mary didn't stop her water buffalo. As she moved on she took out a sharp machete and said in a lazy voice, "Brokers like you, with tight pants and dark glasses, are ten a rupee on the streets of Tohri, and to them I show them this machete. Go ask if you don't believe me."

The Collector found her way of speaking most beguiling.

Banwari said at the evening meal, "Mary has insulted my friend."

He was speaking to his father, but it was Mary who replied, "How did I insult your friend?"

—You spoke to him rudely.

—This time I let him go with words. If he comes to fuck with me again I'll cut off his nose.

Banwari was scared as well. He said, "What, did he do something crazy?"

—It's crazy talk to me. It may be good talk to you.

Prasadji said, "Ask him not to. These problems don't go with buying trees."

—And Mary shouldn't talk about selling Sal Trees at Tohri market.

—It is illegal to sell Sal trees if they are on your own land. The Sal belongs to the government.

—Ah keep your laws. Who keeps land legally here, who doesn't sell Sal in these parts?

Mary said straight to Banwari, "Have I spoken about your tree sale in Tohri market?"

—Have I said you said? I just asked you not to.

—Don't try to set me straight.

Mary left. Prasadji said, "This is not correct. Tell your friend. Lives in house, like a daughter, I am insulted if she's accosted."

Banwari said to Collector, "She's a real bitch, a rude girl, doesn't give a damn for anyone."

—Who wants a damn?

—Besides, her marriage is fixed.

—Where?

—A Muslim's house.

—Dear God! No man in her tribe?

—Her taste.

Collector didn't believe that a Mary Oraon from a wild village like Kuruda could blow him away. He stuck to Mary through marking and felling the trees, cutting and transporting them. That Mary wouldn't look at him and would rather marry a Muslim increased his anger.

Then he brings a nylon sari for Mary from Daltonganj, sweets for Prasadji. He says to Prasadji, "I come and go, she feeds me tea, I give her a sari." Prasadji didn't accept it, but Collector insisted. Mary had gone to Tohri. She heard about the sari when she got back. First she gave Prasadji the accounts for Tohri market. Then she had tea and toast in the kitchen. Then she went out with the sari.

Collector was sitting in the tent paying the men and women. Lots of people. Mary enters and throws the sari at him. She says, "You think I'm a city whore? You want to grab me with a sari? If you bother me again, I'll cut off your nose." She goes off proudly swinging her arms.

Collector loses face in everyone's eyes. He wants to say, "I gave something in good faith . . ."

The elders say, "Don't give again."

—What?

—Don't give again.

—Is she a good character? Would a good one marry a Muslim?

—It's too much.

Suddenly Collector understands, he and his men are in a minority, the others are greater in number. Everyone has a spear or a machete. He shuts up.

The driver knows Collector has a wife and children. He knows that Collector still lusts after women. Mary is indeed an eyeful, but it would be stupid to provoke the tribals and create a police case on her account. If Mary was willing, there would have been no problem. Mary is unwilling. Collector must accept that.

Now Prasadji gets serious as well. It is Bhikni who brings tea these days. Collector stops going to the house. But he doesn't give up chasing Mary.

When Mary returns from pasturing cattle, returns from Tohri, or goes the three miles to Murhai station to go to Tohri, or goes marketing to Dhuma, Collector keeps his distance and follows her.

The girls say, "Mary, that broker loves you."

—Because he can't catch me. If he does his love will vanish. The white man also loved my mother.

—He'll marry you.

—He has a wife.

—So what?

—Let it go.

The felling goes on. Slowly the weather warms. There are miles and miles of poppy fields around here. New buds appear. Then the gong sounds one day in the priest's house. It is revealed that the ritual of the hunt that the tribes celebrate at the Spring festival is for the women to perform this year. For twelve years men run the hunt. Then comes the women's turn. Like the men they too go out with bow and arrow. They run in forest and hill. They kill hedgehogs, rabbits, birds, whatever they can get. Then they picnic together, drink liquor, sing, and return home at evening. They do exactly what the men do. Once in twelve

years. Then they light the fire of the Spring festival and start talking. Budhni tells them stories. "That time we killed a leopard. I was young then."

The old women listen, the aging women cook, the young women sing.

They don't know why they hunt. The men know. They have been playing the hunt for a thousand million moons on this day.

Once there were animals in the forest, life was wild, the hunt game had meaning. Now the forest is empty, life wasted and drained, the hunt game meaningless. Only the day's joy is real.

Mary was getting tired of the Collector's tireless singleminded pursuit. Jalim might get to know. He'd be wild if she let him know. He might go to kill Collector if he got the chance. Collector has a lot of money, a lot of men. A city bastard. He can destroy Jalim by setting up a larceny case against him.

Collector too was losing patience. The felling would soon be over, they would have to pull up stakes and then what?

Collector caught Mary's hand one day.

The timing was good. No hunt for the men this year. The men will drink and make up new songs for the Spring festival, dress up as clowns and go out to sing for money. Collector has promised them liquor for the festival.

Returning from the felling there is singing every day. In a droning monotone. Mary was listening. On the way back from market. Dusk fell as she listened. She started home.

Collector knew she would come. Collector caught her hand. He said, "I won't let you go today."

At first Mary was scared. Struggling she lost her machete. With great effort, after a good deal of struggling, Mary was able to spring out of his grasp. Both of them stood up. Collector did not have his dark glasses on. Long sideburns, long hair, polyester trousers, pointed shoes, a dark red shirt on his back. Against the background of the Spring songs Mary thought he was an animal. A-ni-mal. The syllables beat on her mind. Suddenly Mary smiled.

—Mary!

—Stop, stop right there. Don't move up.

—What are you looking at?

—You.

—I, you—

—You want me a lot, no?

—A lot.

—Good.

—What's good?

—To see what you really want.

—Really want. I've never seen a woman like you. You are worth a million. How will that marketeer know your worth? That Muslim?

—Will you?

—Sure. I'll give you clothes, jewels—

—Really?

—Everything.

Mary took a deep breath. Then said, "Not today. Today I'm unclean."

—When Mary, when?

Mary's eye and face softened. She said, "On the day of the feast. Stay near that rock. The women will go far to play the hunt. I will come to you. You know which rock! You look for me from behind that stone."

—All right.

—Then that's our pact?

—Yes Mary.

—But don't tell anyone! A man can do no wrong, but a woman is soiled. As it is I am illegitimate, and then I was going to marry a Muslim.

—Tell me you won't. Why any more?

—Have a bit of patience. Don't follow me around like that.

—I took so much trouble over you . . .

—I'll make up for everything. On the day of the Spring festival.

Mary patted his cheek. She said, "You are nice, dear! I didn't see at first." She took off sinuously. She knew Collector wouldn't clasp her from behind a second time.

III

The fire burned last night and tonight as well. Last night the Spring festival fire burned very high and reddened the sky for quite some time. Today from first light the men are wild with drink and songs and color. The very old women are looking after the children.

The women are all in the forest. Each woman had stood excited in front of her own door armed with spears and the men's bows and arrows. As soon as the priest struck the gong they burst the sky with sharp halloos and ran forward. Bhikni is running in Prasadji's shirt and Mrs. Prasad's petticoat.

Budhni, Mungri, Somari, Sanichari—their running days are over. They have gone to the abandoned Bomfield bungalow with bottles of liquor, food for cooking, pots, snacks, fried corn, onion-chili. There is water in the well there. The men too cook and eat there after the hunt. Budhni had said to the women, "In our time we never returned without something, a hedgehog, a hare, a partridge. Let's see what you do. How you hunt."

Mary is wearing a new sari today. Jalim's gift. There are beads around

her neck. Dancing she clasps Budhni and says, "I'll marry you after I play the hunt. Then I am the husband, you the wife."

—Good.

—I'll make you dance.

—I'll dance.

Mary is running over with joy today. She has put ten rupees into her mother's hands and bought four of her mother's chickens. The chickens are now in Sanichari's hands. Mary has also contributed two bottles of liquor. This is over and above. The women have already asked and received liquor from Collector. Collector has given the men a goat plus the liquor. He has promised to demonstrate the twist dance of the city in the evening. He will drink bottle after bottle. His tree-felling is done, just small pieces are left. Many bits. With great generosity he has given them to the people of Kuruda as firewood. He has said, "I'll come again, I'll hire only you to fell trees. I'll keep you pickled in liquor then."

Joking with Budhni's group Mary also ran along. Sanichari said, "Look how Mary is looking today. As if she's Mulniji's daughter-in-law."

Budhni said, "When she leaves after marriage Kuruda will lose an eye."

Mungri said, "She has never come to the village empty-handed. You see her now, you've forgotten how pretty Bhikni was as a young woman?"

Somri was half-asleep as she walked. Suddenly she sang out with eyes almost closed:

Fire in the Spring
Fire at the feast

Look and come home
Please don't forget.

The others took up the refrain. Four elderly decrepit women long past their youth singing songs of love, the sun warming, the mood thickening, and the sound of gong and horn in the distance.

Mary ran on. The women are all going up Kuruda Hill entering the forest, going to the side of the Cut. Mary is laughing. They won't find a kill. Like all games the hunt game has its rules. Why kill hedgehogs or hares or partridges? You get the big beast with bait.

In her colored sari and red blouse Mary is now like the flamboyant flower in motion. As if a bunch of flowers from the flamboyant tree is running in the wind. Red flowers on all sides. Everything is red. A hare ran past. Mary laughed. She knows where the hare lives. Go back! No fear! Mary said laughing. In her drunken abandon. A great thirst dances in her blood. Collector, Collector. I'm almost there. Collector wants her a lot. Now Jalim is nothing to her. With how much violence can Collector want her? How many degrees Fahrenheit? Is his blood as wild as Mary's? As much daring?

A hedgehog. Go, go away! If it hadn't been today Mary would have killed it, eaten the flesh. Today a small thing cannot please her. She wants to hunt the big beast! A man, Collector. She sees the rock from the distance. Straight, steep stone. Stone jutting out from the top like a ledge. Gitginda vines have come down in a dense mat. On it the yellow flower of the gitginda. Behind the creeper is concealment. Mary's blood burst up at the thought. Forward behind the creeper is the ravine, loose stones on its sides. No one knows how deep the ravine is. No one has gone all the way down. If one could go down into that bottomless cold darkness? She and Collector! She noticed Collector's red shirt.

—Imported liquor, cigarettes, Collector.

—Come inside dear.

—Where is inside? Inside you?

—Yes dear, yes.

—By the ravine. Behind the creeper.

—First have a drink?

—Why just a drink? Give me a cigarette.

—How does it taste?

—Great.

—Not so fast.

—I want to get drunk.

—How drunk?

—I want to get very very drunk.

More booze. She's getting drunk. Stars are strobing in her head. Ah, the stuff is putting spangles in front of her eyes. Shining spangles. Behind them is Collector's face. More liquor. The bottle rolls off. Into the depths of the ravine. Not even a sound. How deep is the ravine? Yes, the face is beginning to look like the hunted animals.

Mary caresses Collector's face, gives him love bites on the lips. There's fire in Collector's eyes, his mouth is open, his lips wet with spittle, his teeth glistening. Mary is watching, watching, the face changes and changes into? Now? Yes, becomes an animal.

—Now take me?

Mary laughed and held him, laid him on the ground. Collector is laughing, Mary lifts the machete, lowers it, lifts, lowers.

A few million moons pass. Mary stands up. Blood? On her clothes? She'll wash in the Cut. With great deftness she takes the wallet from Collector's pocket. A lot of money. A lot of money. She undoes the fold in the cloth at her waist and puts the money with her own savings.

Then first she throws Collector in the ravine, his wallet, cigarettes, his handkerchief. Stone after stone. Hyenas and leopards will come at night, smelling blood. Or they won't.

Mary comes out. Walks naked to the Cut. Bathing naked in the Cut her face fills with deep satisfaction. As if she has been infinitely satisfied in a sexual embrace.

In the women's gathering Mary drank the most wine, sang, danced, ate the meat and rice with the greatest relish. At first everyone mocked her for not having made a kill. Then Budhni said, "Look how she's eating? As if she has made the biggest kill."

Mary kissed Budhni with her unwashed mouth. Then she started dancing, beating two empty bottles together. The night air is cool. Sanichari lights the fire.

Drink and song, drink and dance. When everyone is dancing around the fire and singing

Ooh Haramdeo our god

Let there be a Spring feast like this every year—

Let us hunt this way every year—

We'll give you wine

We'll give you wine—

Then Mary moves back as she dances. Backing in the dark they are dancing, dancing hard. Mary runs fast in the dark. She knows the way by heart. She will walk seven miles tonight by way of Kuruda Hill and reach Tohri. She will awaken Jalim. From Tohri there are buses, trucks. They will go away somewhere. Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Gomo, Patna. Now, after the big kill, she wants Jalim.

The Spring festival fires are scattered in the distance. Mary is not afraid, she fears no animal as she walks, watching the railway line in the dark, by starlight. Today all the mundane blood-conditioned fears of the wild quadruped are gone because she has killed the biggest beast.

Mahasweta Devi is a Bengali writer and political activist who has facilitated tribal rights and published a journal for tribals in Palamo, Bihar, India since 1968. Besides "The Hunt," her story, "Draupedi," has been translated into English by Gayatri Spivak and has appeared in a volume of Spivak's writings. Two volumes of her work, Bashai Tudu, a collection of short stories, and Five Plays, have been published in India in English translation.