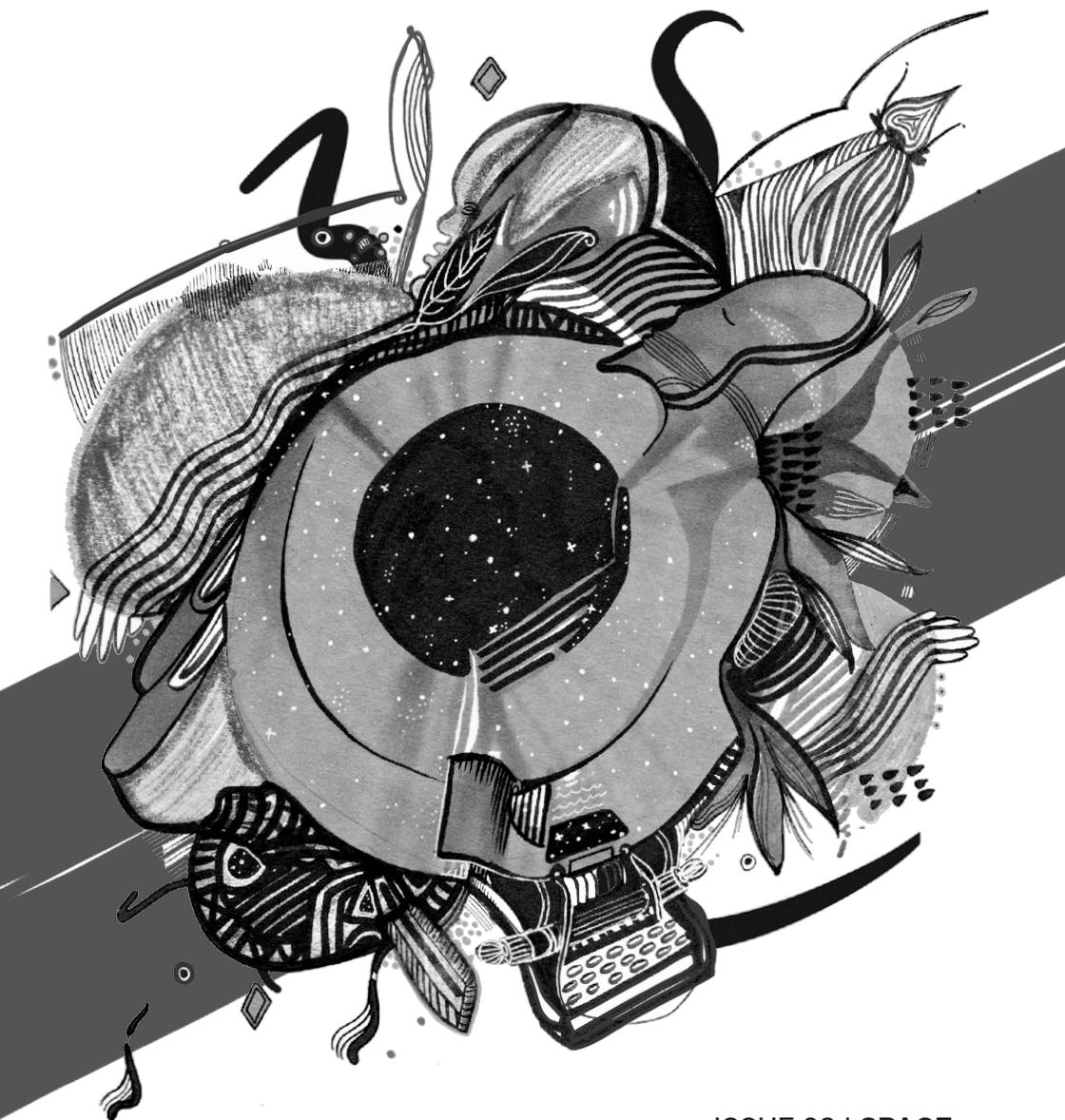


# LACUNA



ISSUE 02 | SPACE

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When the theme for this issue was first announced, a lot of the DMs we received asked about the limitations of ‘space’ and what type of space we meant. Some writers asked if we meant celestial space, physical space, or the absence of space— the space that comes from not giving someone space. The varieties of the theme and what it meant to different writers gave birth to a spectacular range of pieces.

This issue sees Lacuna cementing its own space. As a magazine, a refuge for underrepresented writers to seek out. It has become a hub that belongs to all of us and forces us to test the elasticity of our creative minds. Reading the pieces in this issue are clear testaments to this maturation, we have returning writers and new writers. All of the pieces, however, share the common denominator of authenticity. Of experiences and emotions that are valid and unique, and clothed in a refined literary form. This is what makes Lacuna special to us, the opportunity to offer our writers a space where they can gauge the everyday and imaginary in one sitting. Where they can be forced to be their truest selves and write in a way that does the most justice to them.

The stunning range in this issue shows that we did not have to define what space is, our writers have engaged with the abyss in their unique ways. The boundless nature of space is after all, what makes it so entrancing.

Lacuna

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# EXTORTION

*Prose by B. E.*

Newport West Jamaica doesn't produce any more magnum wine because I have drunk it all. I emptied the barrels, the reserves, and even their iron supplies—down my throat. J Wray and Nephew are at my door. Every home grown, every farm and every synthetic, I have burned it down into the loving, open arms of my lungs. I don't have time to discriminate between strains, frivolous names and links. Strawberry Stratford, lemon Thames, Ben Nevis Kush, Penge Pineapple- I have smoked this all away. Canada is at my door. I have screamed all the shouts, dug all the holes,

inflicted,

distracted,

deflected,

malpracticed.

I have broken all the sand timers and bought an excavator to perpetually bury my head in. I have wasted time like camels' labour and ignored space like it were climate change. I'm hungry for blood, car fumes, women. My energy is liquefied into eternal, to use up running myself off cliffs- like how you rev up the toy motorised cars. I have worn all the clothes, felt all the faiths and prayed to all the Gods. Stood on high streets waiting to be evangelized but no one came. Ran up all the debts—'don't take the tv, take me'. And for any surplus kindness that comes my way - no one is home, take it back to the depot for 14 working days and discard it. I am last in the queue. I have watched all the shows, the drivelling one-hour Youtube vlogs, read all the twitter threads, trail-blazed through memes. There is no end. I am tired of swimming in circles and calling it meditation when my heart is on fire.

But yesterday on the walk to work I didn't feel like running. This morning I was reminded there is only so much constricting a spider can bear. This evening I might even blow the dust off my shelves.

# PLANKS

*Poem by Ankita Saxena*

Alia, you can liquefy your body to fit any hospital bed: labour the trick of sawing  
bodies in half, motherhood the trick of the rabbit in the hat.  
How many rabbits did it take to convince your husband  
you were worthwhile? In the two-storeyed house  
you are thin enough to bend into hidings  
in the wall: fold like underwear  
in suitcases. Outside  
you're bolder  
in your  
routines.  
Vigilance, the motto  
learnt aged five in a playground  
prank. Magic, the way you strut out  
unbruised: not a single colour on display.  
To everyone else—it seems like a mere play of luck,  
that in another world, on any other day you'd emerge  
snapped in two. They applause even—as you stand by his side:  
harmony another word for victory, good show another word for lie,  
miracle another word for marriage, another woman tested to the ends of flexibility.

# AND MEDUSA

*Poem by Isabelle Bollekens*

to mirrors releases her face;  
unleashing fried serpent scatter,  
reaching out for her own embrace,

eyes, burnt, on netting buzz; trains chase  
their coaches estranged: tatters  
to mirrors, releases — her face

from shielding shutters leaks; through  
brace  
and brass/onlookers' gags/chatters  
reaching out — for her own embrace

(that black-hole-gut) might swallow space:  
spew green on muses' clean platters  
to mirrors, releases her face

now evacuates — now, to trace  
the basement trunks: woman matter  
reaching out — for her own embrace,

to swim to whole; to paint her place  
— the see-through glass — full: the latter  
to mirrors releases her face,  
reaching out for her own embrace

# SPACE, IN ABSENCE

*Short story by Aamiya Dhillon*

The bus jolted forward, its passengers stayed in place. Faux leather briefcases, the stench of a day's struggle, crumpled shirts and *saris* were bound together by the absence of alternative, and a common thread of eagerness. It was the six o'clock bus that took them home, and its doors remained forced open by men barely holding onto a colleague or stranger who had successfully made it inside.

The roads were made narrow by the vehicles that littered it. Cars and motorcycles had children interspersed, balloons in hand not for triumph but wage.

They halted next to a yellow and green rickshaw, calling out to the girl with the crumpled *dupatta*.

It was her third day at the office. She sat in the rickshaw, but her mind was elsewhere, untouched by the restless honking that formed the perpetual symphony of a New Delhi road. It was her third day at the office, and she mulled over the words of the manager. It was a lapse of judgement, really, and just one sheet of paper, really. The error was corrected before any significant damage could occur, and she assured herself that her employer would see that when she went up to him with an appropriate apology the first thing in the morning tomorrow. She fidgeted with her phone, she fidgeted with her bangles.

She shot the balloon-sellers a tired glance, her curiosity piqued by the woman behind them.

A young lady on a *Royal Enfield* was a rare sight on these roads. It wasn't meant for the red lights of Delhi, but she planned on moving soon. The purchase didn't come easy, forgoed a trip, her annual apartment renovation, and a decent wedding present for her cousin, in the process. She shuddered at the memory of the event, the loud music, the scores of aunts and uncles with the same condescending reassurances that marriage was overrated. The relatives took her inexpensive present for the wedding of the youngest of the family as bitterness, and her sister didn't think otherwise.

Her parents didn't approve, of course. They were supportive, helped her out with the loan application, fervently looked for buyers for her former hatchback. But a *motorbike*, so expensive, so 'masculine', and so final, sealed the deal on her singlehood. She sighed, tired, almost not noticing the impatient honking of the van behind her.

The windows of the loud menace were rolled down to allow in the stillness of the June breeze. It was the last of a dying breed of taxis, painted yellow and black with an illuminated board identifying it to be such. A family of ten fit inside. The grandfather rode shotgun, his grandchild playing with his greying beard, nestled on his lap. The mother, the grandmother, and the youngest aunt sat in the row behind, passing the sleeping infant to the other in shifts. The last row had the father, the uncle, and the oldest brother, hunched over to avoid bumping against the low roof.

The pungent chutney in the jute bag made its presence felt, immersing itself into the stale air. Fanning herself with a rolled newspaper, the mother thought of her son, and the last

time they spoke. He had refused a very good match, a direct recommendation of the family astrologer. It was quite the controversy, and she'd sworn to never speak to him again. But here she sat, heading into these urban ruins, an album full of eligible girls in her suitcase. Try as she might, she couldn't suppress the intense dread that had gotten a hold of her. He must have found some girl in the city, a likely explanation to the sudden change in his behavior. The fact that he hadn't introduced her already furthered her annoyance. She mulled over it, her fury at the *siren* luring her son away increasing with each passing minute.

The son in question was in a bus a few cars down the road, not knowing, of course, that the family had planned a surprise visit to the city. He had tucked a few roses into his laptop bag, and held onto the cake he bought for dear life. Tonight was an important night, he smiled at his watch, which ticked away impatiently.

Had he known of the entourage arriving at his doorstep, his nervous demeanor would've found reason elsewhere. Had he known, he wouldn't have invited his beau home. Perhaps the horror of the difference in caste would reduce the horror at the similarity in gender.

The beau himself was in the metro that ran parallel, being jostled by equally disgruntled companions. He had had a terrible day at work. First some newbie had mixed up the paperwork for two important sales, then he spilled *chai* onto his new shirt, and to top it all off, the regional head came in for his monthly, which is more often than not biannual, visit to the branches. The relief of going home was suspended in the meanwhile of transit, and he checked his watch again. He would have an hour to himself, and then again, he would cross town to meet his beloved. It was the first time he had been invited over, and anxiety and excitement battled for dominance as he attempted to stifle both.

The traffic crawled on the Ring Road that lay like a blood vessel in the heart of a nation, dotted with lights yellow and red, green too, but never frequently enough. It snaked through the grand architecture that saw the Mughal, the British and then the Indian *rajah*, commit a string of similar atrocities; the roadside *chai-ki-dukaan*, where the tea-seller eased the pain of routine oppression for strangers, friends, and the local stray. It divided into smooth roads that were decorated with a canopy of green, grand houses and the smiling elderly out for their evening stroll. It wove around the skyscrapers and the slums that took in the same grey air, bound together by the same silent fortitude demanded by a city whose pace ran indifferent to your exhaustion. It climbed up to the President's residence, bold and ornate, and down to the rough patches, the darkside of a town that had grown too old to still be called so.

# LOSS

*Prose by Esobe Uwadiae*

I still trip upon the pieces of you I find scattered throughout my life. An Athenian postcard hidden between my books. Your frog shaped bottle opener that sits by my window.

Like lint, I keep finding you in the pockets of my coat, mashed together with week old train tickets and a pair of broken headphones I keep meaning to throw out.

I stitch together this collection of fragmented and miniscule pieces. Of 3 am fights and kissing on trains, and silent prayers for this to never end.

It paints a picture of a past I am only now finding the words to mourn.

# ALL THAT IS, EVER WAS, EVER WILL BE

*Poem by Yvonne Wren*

To me  
the Sun and the Moon have the best love story  
you laughed  
and said  
    why take love so seriously?

So...  
I tread lightly  
afraid you'd come too close  
I'd burn

like the Sun

but when we embrace  
hearts melding into one  
heartbeats building rhythm  
and our rhyme meets the heat

Some are afraid of darkness  
but you went with it right through me  
your fingers curled, my head fell  
crown slipping into the darkness further  
bursting into euphoria

like the Stars

    are you heavy with lust too?  
    did their brilliance excite you?  
So come closer  
rock us to our Milkyway  
'cause some day we will return  
back to star dusts anyway

To you, apparently  
I am too fussy  
and operate periodically

like the Moon

with my blood floating through the Cosmo  
waving hello to Galileo  
to you this is too much  
that my slit I should close it up  
and my feelings  
they are not valid during this period



# ANew

*Poem by Rebecca Jacquez*

Finally in the present moment  
Long time to arrive  
I sat on the beach crying to god  
Anticipation of unknown  
Stepping out of old into new  
I resist to ask god why  
Moving in sync with the waves of the ocean crashing in and flowing back  
Mourning past selves while holding them in heart  
Moving fearlessly  
Journaling on the plane  
Reading the card my sister wrote  
I am ready  
Happy everyday  
Abundance in mind  
Love in heart  
I step into Me

# MOTHER OR DEMON

*Poem by Maxine Sibibwana*

a cosmic shift  
brought back The Dead  
singing songs of marriage  
and other fallacies

breathing hope  
into a famished soul

(hideously delicious)

ravenous, galvanised  
They rot our creations  
suck on darkness  
spit out the seeds

and lick the spoon.

# LIQUID BODIES

*Prose by Oyinda Yemi-Omowumi*

The first time your finger lingered, brushed across my lip in a soft act of tenderness, I felt something inside snap—a string tightly wound. I wanted you to reach inside and pluck it out; I wanted you to fix it, to feel it, to take my heart and crush it in the palm of your hand till all that remained was something like a seed waiting to be swallowed. This desire transcends wanting to be pressed against you, she spins a thick white web, a cocoon, pushes us hand to hand, lip to lip, and eye to eye; her thread wraps around and around and suffocates, until space between us dissolves into nothing.

My eyes have become pincers, gripping, trying to pick your pupils empty. Next to you, I feel my body burning slow, turning amber as your touch trickles inward and outward... I feel myself turning fluid. Lovers, like the pouring of sand, fall like liquid, fall like rain. Bodies becoming one, moving as one in a syrup-stream flow; I feel the earth start to shudder, something metallic, a little electric, leaking out of cracks, bubbling and spitting, rising, the earth folding into herself. I see silver stars, its soft white glow, the taste of holiness, sucked bottomless into soil.

Liquid bodies, bedsheets stained, love runs silky. It's a sunset-glow flood of honey, sweet, falling out of terracotta milk jugs into holes dug in the earth, into lunar craters, into pockets and bags exposed. Our fingers are poking holes, our eyes watching as we part, and then unite—I am stung by the image of red velvet curtains, hands tugging on ropes, an audience mesmerised from start to finish as the world behind is made bare, and then veiled in shrouds of crimson.

The sky above is a mushy thing, soft and pulpy, white clouds bleeding into a tangerine canvas. And just like taking an apple from the branch of a tree, I could reach into his mouth and clutch at cotton fluff, pull it apart, watch it crumble in the palms of my hands, disintegrating into white dust. Snowflakes scattered across a puddle of our liquid bodies. We run soft, so smooth that I am spilling into you... clumsily. I, a swallower, simultaneously swallowed, engulfed by open mouths, hungry and wanting to be more than empty shells of human skin. Liquid bodies, you and I, mixing into shades of desire, bruised by love, turned into obsession to become and possess.

-

I felt myself being tapped hollow. I watched you pour out of my mouth, bleed from the tips of my fingers, I dreamt that you took a torch and smoked all that remained, those liquid pieces, out of the shadowy corners of my heart. Your hands sculpting your body solid. I think, maybe, mould licked the liquid poisonous.

I was swept out of you, a broomstick dancing across a dirty dust-coated floor. I felt the push;

it was a gentle shove and I landed on a forest floor thick with green moss, watched as white lilies covered in the corners, embedded in spindly roots and dying branches that hung low to the floor.

Now we are apart, chasmal, *it is*

*reminiscent of broken glass scattered across the ground, like broken pieces of the sky. i dream of broken glass hung from fraying string on a line across two poles embedded in the seashore—rocky*

*like broken pieces of windswept blue, the water ripples across a fractured sea.*

-

The last time your finger lingered, it was a drizzle across my collarbone; the pads of your fingertips were restless, like they were searching for something below the surface of my skin... I felt something inside break, splinter, a shard of glass lodged in my ribcage.

# SATELLES

*Poem by Regina Legarte*

You, Lonely One, you who  
walks among stars,  
what do you seek?  
I think of you and wonder  
as you waltz with planets  
swept in a gown of moondust.  
Courts hold secrets as night does.

You, Watchful One, you the  
tender of the night sky,  
what do you keep?  
Your gaze crescent  
like a shepherd's crook  
pulls to safety your starry flock,  
stray waves and runaway clouds.

You, Silent One, you with  
a face that launched a thousand ships,  
why do you weep?  
Eternal beauty begets selenic craze.  
I think of you, lonely companion,  
and wonder if your tragedy  
will always be another's.

You, Constant One, you our  
mythic satellite,  
what will you be?  
Light and dark wed in the sky;  
all histories speak of the silver  
that is born, but your silver is blue  
and blue is a colour we share.

You, Only One, you who  
sleeps among gods and heroes,  
what is your story?  
Truth eclipses dreams  
so descend from heaven, come close.  
Let gravity be, come close the space  
and fall as stars do.

# HERE & HOME

*Poem by Ebunife Emma Botu*

Between here and home lie broken promises and dreams untold  
The constant longing for the best of both worlds, seeking approval

'Home is where the heart is', they said  
But my heart was lost at sea, along with the spoils of war.

Between here and home lies fear  
of a redemption uncertain  
For we are the race against the tide, seeking a haven

'The grass is greener across the Atlantic', they said  
But drought struck as the climate changed.

Between here and home lies death  
Blood and bones of kin, exposed with every detonation  
Death to peace and pieces of death sprawled across the plains

'Tomorrow will be a better day', they said  
But tomorrow never comes  
And my desperation for her loosens all my bolts.

Between here and home lies disappointment  
married to shame, birthing regret for the years wasted  
For roots transplanted and fruits perished

They said, 'Let us travel west'  
But nothing grows in the west  
Nothing beautiful survives here

all things come to die.

# MY SKIN

*Poem by Iman Adebowale*

I became quicksilver.

Twisting and turning away from you

But I won't be your psychopomp any longer, won't fetch you from Hades

Your darkness plunged into me, turned it into a rope and was left slung cold kelp around my neck.

I counted my saffron numbered days,

Like a stone turned out for its flesh, I searched for my skin, which you had burnt with your hellish eyes.

My eyes spit a corkscrew birdsong caw of frustration,

'Where is my skin?!'

In this one minute, I can feel you again running your fingers down my skeleton until blood drips under nails.

'Look!' I screamed, 'Where am I?'

I stand where the whipped air tickles my fleshless skeleton.

I could taste your heat on my tongue.

Up between the clouds and right back down to the floor with my heels clanging as I walk out the door away from you,

I find it.

I find my skin.

# THE (VAST) SPACE BETWEEN US

*Poem by Georgina Peters*

Driven by the tremendously intense desire  
To travel, to explore, to discover, and to conquer  
They worked tirelessly to construct transportation  
Allowing them (and allowing us)  
To venture across some vast lands and oceans  
Encountering other civilisations  
Overcoming the distance between us

There lay a great gap between groups of people  
And even when that gap was closed  
When we *can* meet  
We *still* see a barrier, constructed by some,  
To stay away from 'them'

They gazed intently across the world  
We gaze intently above it  
They wanted to discover the world  
We want to discover the universe

If there are other life forms with the same capacities as humans  
I hope that history will not repeat itself  
As it has  
As it tends to do  
It tends to repeat  
Repeat itself

# SONG OF AFI

*Poem by Eileen Gbagbo*

When I get my heart broken, I become a better poet  
That emptiness is filled with a language—  
Foreign and manipulated,  
Distorted letters dancing with limitation,  
Choking on convention,  
Manichean and conflictual.

If love is colonial  
I carry the suffering of my father's name.  
Proverbial inscriptions adorn my waist  
Strung together delicately like ignorance  
My mother's lessons tucked away in the gap between my teeth  
She told me to sing not because I had the answers  
But because the hum of a woman echoes like forty talking drums.

I am the clown captivating the audience like the politician—  
And when you broke me, I found my seat in resistance

# THE FIRST TIME YOU BLED

*Short story by Meher Pandey*

In the sun-facing corner of the fourth house on the third lane down from the main road of Mansa Devi Complex, there is MaPapa's bedroom. In the centre of that bedroom, there is MaPapa's bed. It is bigger than mine and my brother's. On the left side of the bed, there is me.

Ma is on a work trip. I miss her, so I slept on her side last night. It smells like her lady perfume. I bury my head under the pillow, press the sides down till it feels like I'm burrowing into her neck. Papa let me sleep in today. The door to the dining room is closed but I can hear him and Dadi eating breakfast. Their voices are hushed; the way adult voices become hushed when there are no children around.

Papa had opened the curtains though, to make sure I didn't stay in too long. The sun streams in from my right. It is warm, warm, hot on my legs. I need to pee.

*Throw the pillow off, pull yourself up. Wring your face awake. Big yawn. Big stretch.*

There is an ache behind my stomach.

A little red spot. There is a red stain on the bedsheet. What is happening what is happening. Is that blood am I bleeding why am I bleeding

I untangle myself from the dohar, pull it back to observe the dot. It's there. I can see it and it's the brightest red I have ever seen. It looks like fake blood. Where am I bleeding from? I check my legs, maybe a baby scab was pulled off too soon.

There is an ache behind my stomach, my mind traces all the places that could be bleeding and I reach between my legs. My pink cotton leggings have a red spot on them. I'm bleeding from my vagina. My vagina is bleeding.

*In and out, breathe in and out.*

I want to scream for my mother. I know she's not home.

Ma ma ma ma ma—I don't know what to do. Tears in my eyes, my wrists feel weak.

*Check that the door to the dining room is still closed. Hide the red spot with the dohar; you will deal with that later. Pull the curtains closed. Go to the bathroom. Lock the door. Pull your leggings down. Check, again—the door is locked.*

There is a mirror in the bathroom. I meet my mirror-eyes and think to mirror-me.

*You are a woman now.*

How can I be a woman now? I don't feel like a woman. Ma told me about periods. She told me what they mean, but we hadn't got around to discussing what you do. I don't feel like a woman. I am just a bleeding baby.

*You are a woman now.*

I sit down on the toilet, my dotted panties are soaked through so I pull them off and throw them in a corner. They are soaked in red and I cannot stop looking at them. This is different from the stain on the sheet. This blood is dark. This blood is pulpy. It looks like death. It looks like dying. I feel like I'm dying.

*Grab some toilet paper. Grab more. Unravel it. Unravel it till it looks like it could soak up all the blood.*

I stare at the wad of toilet paper. My hand is shaking. The blood is still dark. It looks like something died inside me.

I have left drops of red all over the tiled floor. The drops I leave behind are bright, and the ones that I wipe away, dark. I don't understand. I'm making a mess. I'm not doing this right.

*Go to the shower. Wash yourself. You must wash yourself.*

I sway to the shower. My panties are still by my knees. I pull them off.

*Turn the tap and wash your vagina. Water makes the bleeding stop.*

It doesn't. Water doesn't make the bleeding stop. It swirls into the drain—bright red. My knees give out and I slump to the shower floor. My wrists feel weak. My arm is jelly, but I reach up to the tap and turn it off. It did not help and I'm alone.

“Meher, beta, are you okay?” Papa is standing on the other side of the bathroom door. He knows.

*Don't say anything don't say anything. You have to do this on your own.*

“Meher, open the door please.” He is talking slowly, as if to an animal. I'm staring at the door, wishing it would dissolve. But I am also glad it's there. I need it there because I am a woman now.

My eyes stray to the floor again and my chest caves. His voice is making this real, I'm howling now. It is loud and panicked and sounds like dying.

“Meher, please open the door. I’ll wash the sheets, I’ll deal with the sheets don’t worry. Don’t worry please open the door.”

“Papa—I don’t know what to do, I’m really scared! I’m really really scared.”

“Let me in, beta. I know where Mama keeps her pads. I know what to do please let me in.”

Leaning on the tiles I pull myself up, the ache behind my stomach is raging and my head still feels fluffy.

Mirror-me is still here.

I pull a towel down to cover myself, I am a woman now and only I can see my bleeding vagina.

*Unlock the door. Open it. Let Papa in.*

He sees me crying and his face crumples, I collapse into his arms- right there in the doorway. Right there where the sunlight from the open curtain is too bright and searching. He tightens his arms around my ribs. Papa papa I’m not ready.

The howling is louder but it doesn’t sound like dying anymore.

“Everything is going to be fine beta.” He strokes my hair away from my face, over and over like he does. The lump in my throat is smaller now. He wipes away my tears with his big thumb. I can breathe a bit better now. “Let me find you Mama’s pads.”

*Thank you for being here.*

He lets go of me, reaches behind him to close the bathroom door again, not locking it, just shutting it behind him. He has to. He goes around me to the shelves in the back, brings out a big, bright green bag. I cannot move. Whisper Ultra. I’ve seen ads with their clean blue stains. There was no whispering in this bathroom. Howling and dark red, pulpy blood.

Papa pulls out a square, unwraps the pad. “You stick this in your panties. The shorter side in the front. Then when you change into a new pad, you use this packaging to wrap your old one to throw in the dustbin.” I nod, weakly.

“I’ll bring you a new pair of underwear and some clothes to change into, okay? You wait here.” I stand in the exact same position. I track him in my head. Exit through the bathroom door—close the door. Turn right quickly to leave through the bedroom door—close the door. It’s important to close doors when you leave blood behind.

Keep walking past the breakfast table. Dadi is still there.

(I can feel her eyes on him. She is watching him with me. He doesn't look back at her. Her mouth purses.

*She is a woman now. She shouldn't ask you for help. You shouldn't offer.)*

Then right again to go into mine and Dishaan's room. Open my cupboard to get a change of clothes. And then back. I've been standing in the same spot, unmoved, hands cramping on the towel.

"Here, baby, change. I'll wash the sheets later. You change and come out and we'll talk okay?" I nod.

He leaves, I lock the door again. Unwrap the towel from myself, check for a stain, there is one.

*Clean the blood on the floor. Don't leave evidence of this behind. It's disgusting.*

I've used so much toilet paper today. Wiping blood off of white tiles isn't easy. It takes at least three strokes or you leave a red streak. Over and over and over till the tiles are bright white as they were before.

"Meher are you almost done?"

"Haan papa, one minute." My voice is only slightly shaky.

Double check to make sure everything is the same as before. Unlock the door. You are a woman now.

But one look at my father and I know that I am not. He is sitting on the bed, the sheets have been stripped. I am still holding the towel, I'm not sure why. I should have left it in the corner with the rest of the bloody clothes. My hand clenches and I am chewing the inside of my right cheek.

"Come here, beta." He opens his arms again. Pulls me onto his lap. I laugh shakily, am I too old for this now? Papa locks his arms around me and I sigh a big sigh and deflate. I cry a bit more. This is relieved crying. He rocks us back and forth, back and forth till my breathing matches his.

"Everything is fine. This is normal."

"I know, Ma told me about it." My voice catches, there is something about a hug that can make you unravel. "I was just really scared, I didn't know what to do. There was so much blood."

"I know baby."

The bedroom door creaks open. We tense but tighten around each other. Dadi is in the doorway. She does not come in.

*(This is not how womanhood begins. The blood creeps out of your vagina like a secret. And you keep it. Womanhood begins and must grow old behind shut doors.*

Her smile is clumsy. She thinks of entering but everything she has been taught holds her back.

Her love is reserved. Her love is there, nevertheless.)

“Theek ho?”\*

We both nod, and she closes the door as she leaves.

*Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. You are okay. You are not alone.*

\*“Theek ho?” means “Are you okay?” in Hindi.

# UNTETHERED

*Poem by Nikki Wong*

The insides of the words don't make sense to me  
inflections are alien and salty and foreign in my mouth  
husks of meaning are strung together in broken rhythm  
vowels do not meet the cadence I had hoped

My mother's tongue is not my own  
Because my mother tongue was learnt from another  
This is where she  
lost me

I            am            untethered

can't see it or touch it or find it,  
this otherworldly place,

but it's there  
feel it  
strange, silent, surreptitious  
this cavern

this brokenness,  
in the cracks of the haphazard collage of  
quirks drawn from different homes,  
is etched into my bones

I            am            untethered

There's an oddity to the way the words are heard  
I can see it in her eyes  
The void between us ever deepening,  
ever darkening

The sacred string that ties our navels snaps.

I            am            untethered

An astronaut                    without her reel  
   floating, drifting  
   in the eternal cosmos

of in-between

no woman's land

I am left standing on the edge of the words never learnt

a lone

and between

because the insides of the damn words don't make sense to  
me

# THE VOID

*Poem by Rania Putri*

The first man she ever loved sat her down  
and handed her a paperback list:  
77-bullet points of reasons.

Among them were lies about  
how she could do better (debatable);  
lies saying they weren't the right fit (they were),  
that they needed something new (they didn't),  
that she was worth so much, he could not make ends  
meet.  
(That last one was not a lie.)

But she was no idiot;  
she arranged words for a living,  
trained in the nuances of language  
well enough to peel apart the cover page  
and read the foreword of his constructed list:

*in this heart, you are no longer welcome.*

She told him she understood.  
Handed him what remnants of himself  
had found their way into her room,  
cut his apology short and waved goodbye.

In his absence, she mopped up  
the foolish tears that spilled;  
tore down the cobwebs of memory  
from the dark corners of her mind;  
purged his boring old folk songs;  
wrapped up what trinkets he'd left behind  
and threw everything into what she called  
*The Void*, to join her teenage boyband crushes  
and other crippling disappointments.

New infatuations could occupy  
the cavity she'd carved out now.  
She should have never let him inside, anyway.

# CHANDOR TUKRA

*Poem by Mahfara Ahmed*

My grandma named me  
after a stolen word from a foreign poem.  
From a distant land which is still within me,  
she bonded us for eternity.  
People mangled it in their mouths,  
and tore it apart with their tongues.  
I thought they were trying,  
but really they were tired.  
It's just three syllables, I'd say.  
It's pronounced how it's written, I'd repeat.

When I was old enough to understand,  
mummy told me my story.  
'It's ancient Farsi, my dear.  
It means crescent moon, my love.'  
Beauty lies in translation  
and mine is in the sky.  
A solar system, a galaxy,  
a universe, a potential.  
From the window of my room  
I'd climb onto the roof,  
look at the night sky  
and see a crescent moon.

You are not a full moon.  
Part of you is eternally damned  
to the shadows of a hidden world.  
You are broken,  
half missing.  
They say you are shining.  
Look deeper,  
you're reflecting.

Chandor tukra,  
crescent moon,

piece of light,  
no peace of mind.

The stars seemed to whisper

'you can be as powerful as your namesake.'

# YOUR VANISHED POWER

*Poem by Anuscha Zeighami*

To stand in the room is to be crushed, crushed with the weight of the times.

Quiet echoes with the winds of the room, noise rises from its parket floor.

Life caresses from the chandelier, suicide swamps over the windows.

Pain and suffering and endless endless grief looks one deep in the eyes from its walls and;  
in the middle of the middle, enlightenment, like a beautiful liberatress ascends:

I'm lonely and alone  
grief fills me up like it does to the windows,  
and yet, and yet,  
the 17th has turned into a normal day again.

The birds in the early morning scream and light is there,  
grey but there,  
and sadness too, and sadness too  
but not because of you

Warmth inside and slow planes that circle the morning sky.

# JUICY

*Poem by Ria Lilley*

Why so shy won't you come  
closer won't you be my  
blue eyed honey  
Maybe you like girls with  
skin the colour of gold  
Maybe you like girls with  
dark eyes and light hands  
Put those old school vibes on  
we could be next episode type shit  
we could be so juicy  
Baby I've had my fair  
share of kisses north  
of the river but still  
something's got me thinking  
about tequila on your  
renaissance lips  
You don't need to be  
Angelic with me.

# HOW TO LOVE THE SKY

*Poem by Nga Man Annessa Chan*

They say China's best poet drowned  
Embracing the reflection of the moon.  
I, too, wondered what it is like  
To love the sky so much.

The sun and the moon and the stars  
Lined up to gift me my name:  
雅 for elegance, a wish.  
But 雯, with rain, to balance it out.

There are never enough blanks  
For me to write my two names—  
Both English name and 中文名字  
Both mine, both real, both true.

All this contradiction is who I am:  
Obedient Asian girl at Asian family gathering  
Outspoken international accent, no intent to confuse  
Neither one, and both things at once.

I will not turn my back on all the things  
That, like shooting stars, fell into place  
To give me my name, my family  
My past heritage, my future destiny.

再見！

I'm switching back to the tongue  
Of my mother, and my mother's mother  
The language of Tang poetry  
Speaking in a dialect called coming home.

The distance between where I grew up  
And where I want to be  
Grows wider and smaller each day  
Like crossing a river of stars.

I was born in the wrong place, the wrong time  
There is not enough room for me on this planet  
I belong amongst the clouds in the cosmos

My heart is somewhere else.

I have learned to love the skies  
The vast expanse of infiniteness  
Where I can carve out someplace  
I can call my own.

I am off to a place they call interstellar  
And maybe there  
I will know what it is like  
To have the space to breathe.

# ASTEROID

*Prose by Philippa Metcalf*

Maria lies in bed at night in an unfamiliar room.  
Wraps her arms around and feels the empty space between lungs.  
Goes days without speaking a word.  
Cocooned.  
Exists alone as a spectre among the crowds.  
All sound blocked out.  
Removed from the others by the layer of singularity.  
No other person acting as a conduit to the wider world.  
The city is lonely.  
The city is windy.  
There's a girl in her 10 am class who puts down her bag like it's the most natural thing in the world.  
She smiles at Maria once while sitting, quickly. But her headphones are in. Maria smiles back. Quickly as well and she's sure it doesn't look as natural on her face as it does on the girl's.  
They don't speak. Maria doesn't speak.  
But replays that moment over and over until it's broken.

Maria goes to concerts alone. (It's more fun this way.)  
It's not possible to be alone when you're surrounded by people.  
The music is loud enough and the crowd happy enough that everything outside the small dark room no longer matters. Someone spills a drink.  
The dissociation of the collective kicks in as quickly as a key of ket.  
A nameless face, formless.  
Drifting buffered.  
The music washes over her and without anyone else's eyes on her she doesn't exist.  
If a tree falls in a forest and no one was around to hear it did it make a sound?  
Does life appear as a treadmill- disappearing behind her and reappearing in front of her as she walks?  
Street lights cast an orange glow that dyes the pavement, her shoes. Going home at night it feels like no one else exists. That it's the end of the world. Maria thinks this might be when she's happiest.  
It's very quiet.  
There aren't many stars in the city. But they still exist behind the clouds and smog.  
Bathing her in a golden glow so the awful cold dead touch of loneliness can't reach.

The bathroom is across the hall from the bedroom. Three steps.  
Hanging her head low in the shower just the right way so the water won't run into her nose. Water drips and pours and drowns out the outside world.  
The steam covers her like a blanket. But it wraps around her neck too tight and all of a

sudden, it's hard to breathe.  
Tripping outside the cubicle there are voices in the hallway. Laughter.  
Chest constricts against the air pressure.  
The voices move away.  
Leans her head against the cold tiles.  
It's so quiet.

On Wednesday Maria walks into class and sits in her usual seat. Adrenaline floods her body. And when the girl puts down her bag Maria waits until her headphones are out before leaning forward, drawn by a magnet.

"Have you started the essay?"

"I've written the first paragraph but nowhere near finished."

It's easy. Who knew it was easy.

"Hey, do I follow you on insta?"

"I don't think so."

"What other modules are you doing?"

Anna wants to get coffee sometime next week.

Something in Maria's chest catches and squirms and chokes her.

She's *terrified*.

Maria tilts her head up.

Breathes out in a puff of condensation and smiles.

The weight of Anna's arm through hers' is like a microwave. It heats her from the inside out. It's still cold outside.

But it's warm now.

Her breath smells like Jägermeister.

They all scream with laughter on the top deck of the bus. Her head is spinning.

The floor is sticky, but it feels good to have Anna's hand in hers. To sing and to be seen.

It's easier to lunge forward and hug her.

She's never met Tom before tonight, but he tells her he loves her with an arm around Anna's shoulders.

"You're a fucking cool girl. What do you do again? Shit, you guys wanna leave soon?"

Maria's always been too cool. Been ice cold. Frozen in place.

Inertia decayed her from the inside out.

There's laughter in the room. The air is a little musty. Someone should open the window.

The warmth of someone else's leg pressed against Maria's on the bed.

A tapestry hangs above the bed and the lamp is on. It casts the same orange glow as the street lights.

The trees have grown back their leaves and the weight of the universe no longer narrows down to the place her fingers meet her skin.

Maria has built bridges where there was only blank space before.

She never realised how much she had isolated herself until she unspools and stretches into places that were empty before.

Lying in bed later imaging the stars swaying through the three layers of concrete that separate them.

The stars are warm. The light is yellow, not orange, and the shadows still feel like protection.

But Maria doesn't want it.

# ON DANCING WITH MY EXCELLENCE

*Poem by Precious Musa*

i'm drunk  
underwear soaked in sweat  
i pass the beat  
ass shakes with purpose  
take a piece of that  
pass  
curves win trophies  
i always think of poetry at parties /  
wow  
i found god  
pass  
back hips rollingrolling / wow  
this is thighs legs / delicious might  
pressure from all sides / dance  
no one else will love you  
the way these bones do  
point look / got it now / electric  
body we love in love  
wow / pleasure  
thighs ass cool breath hot necks  
circlingcircling showing pointing  
look / werk / look do  
move / in this room  
we free  
we link  
we love



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Lacuna

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