

# Beetle

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## A CONFESSION OF ACCEPTANCE

Babra Shafiqi

The inside of my mouth resembles my Baba  
I carry him on my tongue  
in the reckless way I spit  
I must kiss like him too  
But I don't know how he kisses  
I know how he swears  
or how he curses  
And how he licks his lips  
when the foam of anger leaves his mouth  
Like ocean hitting the silver rocks  
A white poisoned sheet  
A raging Poseidon  
punishing the waves.  
My laminated teeth shine ever so brightly  
Unlike his yellow pebbles  
Granite Mountains  
Harsh caves, speckled homeless walls.  
Where now I live, inside them  
with him, us holding each other,  
Tightly like a clenched jaw.

# ODE TO A LAND I HAVE NEVER KNOWN

Syeda Namayah Fatima Hussain

My head tucked in the crevice of her knees  
like a creeper around its roots,  
I trace the fading lines on her palm,  
more wrinkles than geometry now,  
Speaking volumes of two different lands  
in a language River Indus only truly gets;  
longing.

Fate of her life is governed by lines  
akin to palmistry rules,  
The predictions written by men on a map  
etched deep in border ink,  
So fingers intertwined I look into her eyes  
one thing amidst Kohl halos lingers alone;  
separation.

Dupatta on her head perches unmoving  
parting the silver into a clear half,  
Reminiscent of her two origins so close yet so far  
Lucknow and Karachi are torn by barbs,  
I witness a flower wilt right in front with no wish  
but of a folklore from back home;  
nostalgia.

She sits in front displaying numerous tiny scars  
not even turmeric could heal  
Her pain of being torn between two countries  
belonging to each,  
Why, I wonder, though I feel a pining of the very same?  
Was it rubbed with oil infused with jasmine in my stream?  
Or was it whispered with familial secrets along the kitchen sink?  
Did the cut her bangle gave me mix my blood with my foremothers' voice?  
Or did the lullabies she sang from the palang seep into my soul?  
It becomes hard to choose with ethnicity still a  
'Muhajir';  
migrated.

A past becomes present; craved.





# THE LANGUAGE I BREATHE IN

Ilina Sinha

Once upon a time...  
Summer breaks meant dusty village roads, home,  
golden beetles and fireflies that slipped into our bedroom at night.

Once, there lived little sparrows on our roof.  
Before the roof cemented and strictly meant  
'no space for nests'.

I write them letters.

'Dear little sparrow,

You left unnoticed.  
I wonder if you still remember home.  
if 'home' means something more than your fore-fathers' distant memory.

Home isn't always a place.  
Sometimes, it is that 2-sec silence to the question  
"So, where do you come from?"

Sometimes, home has no roof,  
but a hand to hold on to.

Such fragile is our existence, dear sparrow,  
we are dew drops on a blade of grass.  
Endangered.  
Endangered.  
Extinct.'

My letters to the sparrows are more soliloquy than solace,  
written in an endangered language to an endangered species.  
We all need a place to belong.

Google says- 'A language dies every 14 days.  
A species is wiped away every 9.6 minutes.'





We rarely realise that a species is the biological equivalent of the entire human race.  
History, Art, Mozart, Networking, Information  
lost without a trace.  
Evaporated.  
Like a dew drop under the sun.

That. Is. Extinct.

When the crusade came,  
the Phoenicians, who gifted us our first alphabets,  
fled inside a dead volcano for life.

When my forefathers heard gunshots,  
they fled beyond valleys and hills...  
blood on feet, sweat on forehead,  
and the surviving words of my dying language on their tongue.

They planted the family tree on this land - named it 'home'  
No soil, dying roots.  
Home, isn't always a place.  
Sometimes there is no roof, but a hand to hold on to.

The last time I visited home,  
the horizons shrank back in my body.  
There was no raindrop.  
No sparrow  
Not a single voice echoed in my mother tongue.

Only a prelude to our eventual insignificance.

My freezing hands reached out for the rusted trunk.  
Pulled out the old stethoscope,  
letters, worn out photographs.

I placed the stethoscope on my heartbeat.  
Fingertips on pulse  
and heard the chorus of blood-rush:  
'home, home, home.'





# PINIONS

Vaishnavi Sathish

You made me run the whole week.  
You've tied up the saddles too.  
I close my eyes to envision the time  
When I'll let down the crew.

You expect me to run courses  
And jump obstacles.  
You believe I'll jump that river  
And make miracles happen.

Understand you're betting  
On a useless creature  
As these feeble legs  
Cannot run any faster.

The very thought that  
I know I can't  
But you still expect from me,  
Makes my ribs wither  
And my apologies get  
lost in my lungs.

I'd love to fulfill your dream  
But if you're hoping to  
Grow roses out of a lily seed,  
Sorry, there's not much I can do.

The stables were opened  
And you walked me to my lane,  
But when my saddle came loose,  
I didn't hesitate;  
I flew away.

I heard you all gasp.  
I didn't want you to get  
Disappointed either.

But please! Perceive that  
The Pegasus is not born to run  
A horse's race.







# YOU KNOW NOTHING, WOMAN

Poorva

You don't know what it is  
to be a boy, they say  
Damn right!  
Your childhood was pink,  
your hair long  
your eyes in a perpetual mission to avoid  
unwanted attention  
you oriented yourself  
as you climbed the bus to home  
every day from school  
you missed school one day every month  
your life a secret for five days a month  
month after month  
year after year  
every year  
you stopped playing at 7PM sharp,  
while the other half of the world was still  
up and about  
kicking the football  
you couldn't take home

You don't know what it is  
to be a man, they say  
Damn right!  
You hope to leave for home early  
to avoid the dark, deserted roads  
you self-doubt  
every time your colleague points out  
how gender diverse policies got you in  
You feel burdened by the good they have done  
for you, for them,  
by letting you in with without merit but with gender  
You know nothing, woman,  
all you know  
is how to hide your bra-strap when it matters  
for you can't let your gender leak  
to their sensitive eyes  
Be like a man,  
even when you have no clue  
what it is to be one.

# SILENT KILLER

Dia Bhojwani

racism is

gaping empty spaces where their names should be  
falling out of the lips of those that love them  
at birthdays and graduations and weddings and in the coos of brown  
babies who should know their fathers

racism is

their names with us instead  
the names of people who we shouldn't have known at all, who should have  
been unexceptional, should have laughed and loved and  
cried and peacefully died, who were denied the right to live  
unremarkably by the rot at the heart of the world

racism is

us repeating those names, over and over  
to the rhythm of a thousand heartbeats  
like a prayer, a chant, a hymn  
those five, ten, twenty, hundred names become one  
sandraandtrovandgeorgeandpamelaand alonzoandmiguelandindia  
domincandkeithandbillyandtanishaanddanteandjordanandalteria  
and we sing them not because we're scared we'll forget  
we want to make them remember  
so no matter how many times they scrub their raw hands  
and frantically wash their dirty linen  
the bloodstains will bloom as bright a scarlet  
as the day they were spilled  
and when we see them in the streets  
we'll know them for murderers

and yes

racism is

gunshots and knees buckling and the fever-pitch screams  
the inane screech of sirens, and her anguished sobs





but  
racism is also  
kids in a bus, bright eyed and loose limbed  
singing songs with  
words of a thousand years enslavement, humiliation, hatred  
words like the burn, the lash of a whip  
singing them at the top of their sweet shrill voices

racism is  
watching the new spiderman  
with puppy-dog eyes  
because Miles is cute and you are confused  
when your friend pulls a face of disgust  
at your fictional crush  
and won't tell you why  
her lips twist  
like she's tasted something sour

racism is  
sideways glances and pressing questions and little smirks and condescension  
and his lily white hands on her soft brown thighs where she doesn't want them,  
him telling her to be grateful, and him being spit at in the streets, and her pay  
check and your silence, because your silence is compliance, and your  
compliance is our end

and I guess what I've been trying to say is  
racism is  
quieter and closer than you think



# LIMINAL

Ananya Gupta

Kicking the threshold of adolescence, this place feels incongruous  
Watching my sister grow, my incessant fascination for her  
belongings screamed,  
Screamed for an identity, lost in this alien body  
I feel trapped inside this cage like a sparrow fluttering for freedom  
My soul yearns to tear apart through this skin hue wrapping  
labeled with norms to abide by and inflate my bosoms  
with air of individuality.  
These shoes gulp my feet only to be healed by the soft  
embrace of her bellies;  
this tie clutches my throat suffocating me to death.  
I do not approve of this attire or my deflated chest,  
My masculinity is conflicted by my feminine desires.  
The woman inside screams to be heard and accepted  
By this cruel society guarded by myths and taboos, walled  
by majoritarian rules.

The woman's lipstick cling to her chapped lips like a bunch  
of iron filings to a bar magnet,  
She places a red circular dot between her dark black brows  
where her soul rests,  
The mirror embraces her beauty.  
Alas! The darkness engulfs my existence and scrapes  
my identity with its sharp canines.  
Pedagogical dogmas compel my feminine self to  
mould itself into a firm man ready to serve this patriarchy.  
I wish to fill this liminal space  
The space between my internal realization and  
external acceptance.  
This wrapping makes me claustrophobic.  
I long to leave this shield and let my soul wander,  
Wander to unraveled places, undiscovered blocks of earth.

I dodge between baskets of external expectations and  
personal choices like a round air- pumped ball,  
unaware which basket to hit.  
I am confronted with my realities each passing day,  
approaching phase of transition with the  
limit tending to zero!  
I am transitioning. I am liminal.





## MINERALS

Tina Huang

Cellulite, not the lilac stalactites you see on  
Netflix flicks, not the Grainy-Indie-Understated  
grandeur & inspire me with your white saviorism callowness,  
golden spoon, golden fork, golden tongue entitlement cellulite  
on my dirty bag, fat fingers, stupid head doesn't  
kneel, not for your crumbs, not for fractals of angry wholes &  
plates painted in false silver & diamond perpetuity cellulite.

My cellulite stalactite is a glass of 1990 wine, bruised purple topaz  
bandaged in homemade quilts of mother & her mother &  
wordy canopies hiding the hearts of plastic Barbies in caves. Their  
teeth are my swords stolen from misplaced princes drunk on  
baked goods & elixirs feigning heroism. Before you, my years  
looked into windows without looking away,  
embracing yellowness of face,  
eyes of father, tears of breath, yet always, my skin still dries &  
always, my hug still hugs.





# PHANTOM DREAMS AND GHOST PAIN

Muskaan Ohri





at seven you look up at the sky  
drowning your eyes in the yellow moon above  
you raise pudgy hands to touch it, catch it  
seemingly just out of reach  
but you can't,  
so learning of funny looking men  
who go to space in their fishbowl heads  
you vow to hold it one day  
and stumble over the word astronaut  
writing it in the sand.

at ten you read your first novel  
under the bed sheet, past midnight  
stories of heroes and villains and the in-betweens  
tales of conquerors and their blazing swords  
bringing glory to their name and land.  
finding solace in the black and white  
who become your friends  
you swear to save the world.



at thirteen you read a magazine  
sifting through the glossy pages  
"Phantom Limbs and Ghost Pain"  
the title reads.  
fascinated,  
placing a finger at every word as you progress  
you take it in and wonder how people hurt  
in arms and legs they once had  
but no longer exist  
how the mind is an absolute trickster  
a deceiver, a cheater  
and perhaps you will be a hero and  
perhaps you'll save the world this way  
if only you unravel its mystery  
and write down 'neurologist',  
dreaming of you  
wearing a coat of white one day.

at fifteen you have your first heartbreak  
shriveling in sobs on the floor of your bedroom  
you watch your reddened eyes in the mirror  
and find a spark dulled, diluted  
the eyes that were black and white before  
you find, have a speck of grey.  
tunes of love and loss fill the room  
you don't know or see it then  
a chink in your armor  
and you find yourself a little less whole,  
hurting for a phantom love  
searching for ghosts of yesterday.



at seventeen you storm inside and slam the door,  
drowning the voices behind you  
hoping it seals the leak in your heart  
or your brain  
a paper sits heavy on the desk  
motionless as the wind blows  
the red on it marks your failure  
the things you wanted to be  
leave the things you are  
and float up silently  
to become castles in the air  
and outside the window  
as you look at the moon  
you find yourself shrunken  
a fist that can't hold  
the vast expanse of the land it wished to save.

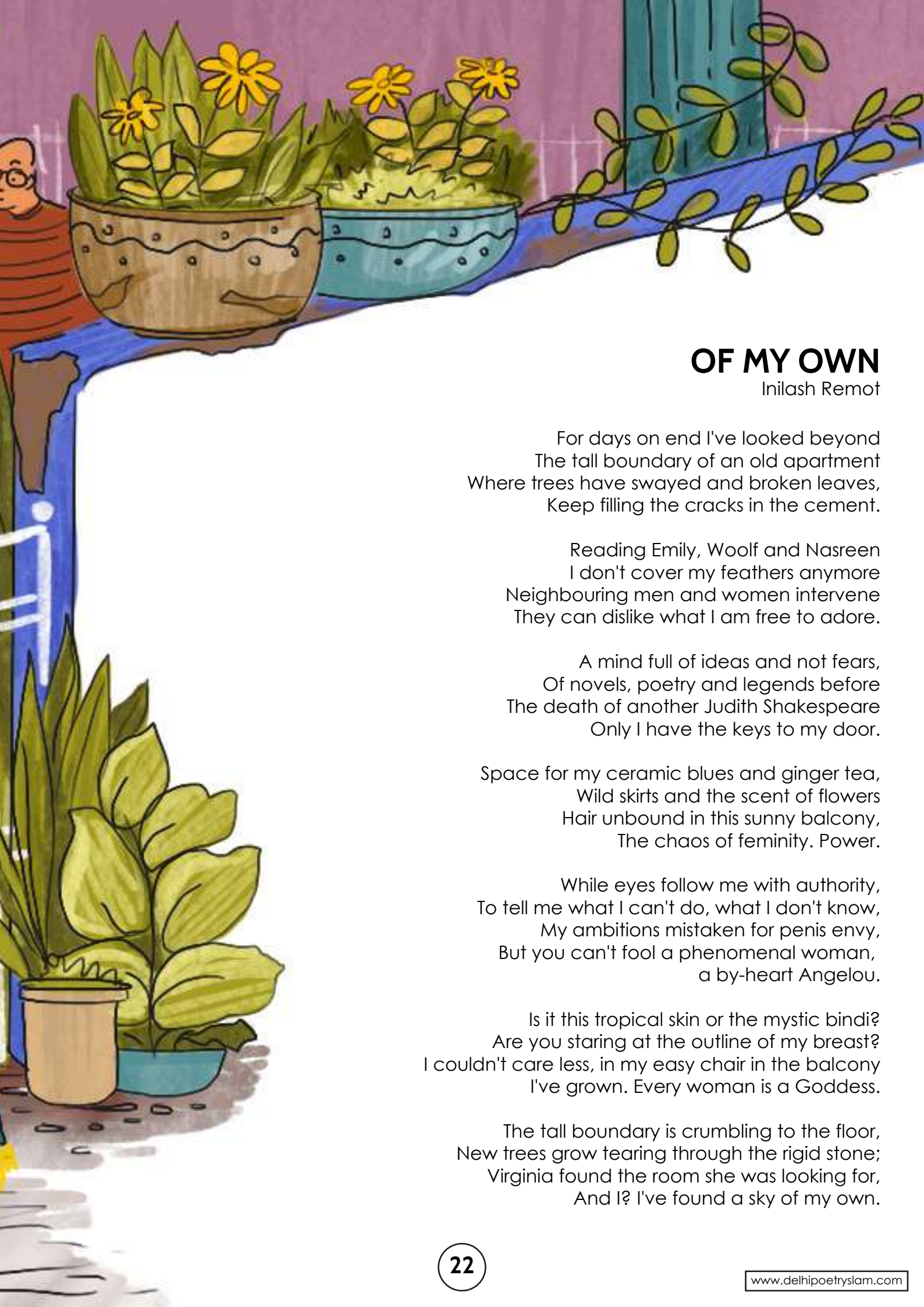
at twenty-one, you enter a well lit graveyard  
hundreds of warm bodies  
heads hung over a table of books  
you catch a tiny ray of hope  
these are now  
flashes of lightning, rare and sudden  
trying to make the most of it while it lasts  
you down the cup of brown liquid next to you  
with fervour  
and hope to salvage a saving grace  
as the sun sets, and comes up again.

look around  
in the train as you journey home  
in the rain with your hefty backpack  
in the space for your thoughts  
while they slip and wander  
as you struggle to push the key in the keyhole  
as you stir the pot for a defeated dinner  
in the mirror, in your empty eyes  
whose colour you've long since forgotten  
and ask yourself  
Where is the land that dreams go  
when they die and become ghosts?









## OF MY OWN

Inilash Remot

For days on end I've looked beyond  
The tall boundary of an old apartment  
Where trees have swayed and broken leaves,  
Keep filling the cracks in the cement.

Reading Emily, Woolf and Nasreen  
I don't cover my feathers anymore  
Neighbouring men and women intervene  
They can dislike what I am free to adore.

A mind full of ideas and not fears,  
Of novels, poetry and legends before  
The death of another Judith Shakespeare  
Only I have the keys to my door.

Space for my ceramic blues and ginger tea,  
Wild skirts and the scent of flowers  
Hair unbound in this sunny balcony,  
The chaos of femininity. Power.

While eyes follow me with authority,  
To tell me what I can't do, what I don't know,  
My ambitions mistaken for penis envy,  
But you can't fool a phenomenal woman,  
a by-heart Angelou.

Is it this tropical skin or the mystic bindi?  
Are you staring at the outline of my breast?  
I couldn't care less, in my easy chair in the balcony  
I've grown. Every woman is a Goddess.

The tall boundary is crumbling to the floor,  
New trees grow tearing through the rigid stone;  
Virginia found the room she was looking for,  
And I? I've found a sky of my own.

# CRAFT

Aayushi Saxena

I am a canvas  
not a blank one, no  
blank means fresh, hopeful  
blank promises potential  
I'm the canvas  
that has been painted  
over and over again  
layer upon layer of dissatisfaction  
of never being good enough  
of always being altered, tweaked or completely remade  
one facade over another  
concealing what?  
each coat of colour  
morphs and blends with the ones before  
at the end of which I now stand  
a muddy lifeless black-brown  
I am everything and nothing, all at once  
so I ask myself  
what am I?

throughout each day's perpetual procession  
from the shrieking morning alarm  
to the hushed dinner-table conversations  
(are there any?)  
there come instances  
flashes, like lightning  
where I'm compelled, held at gunpoint  
to wonder where my self ended.  
my grades were never low  
nor was my social standing  
I was designed to outshine, to outperform;  
so where did the end start?  
in the unattended corner where I left all my suppers?  
a cold helping of disregard sprinkled with misery  
or the point where maa and baba  
stopped checking in on me completely?  
once the winds beneath my wings,  
they now linger around the house  
crowning me a silent reminder  
of all they failed to accomplish



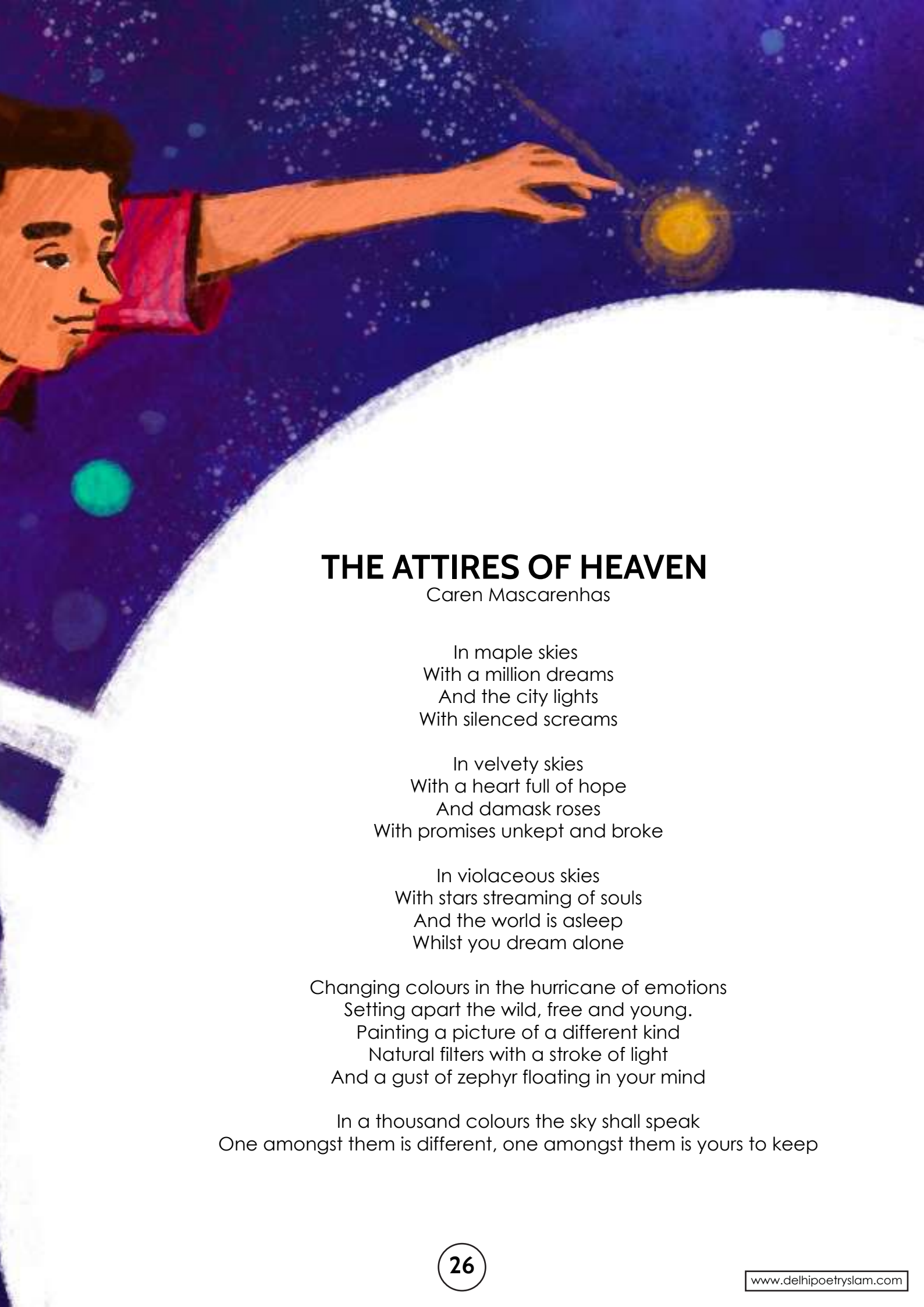
last year's NYE  
amidst the drunken madness  
someone asked someone,  
"who out of us do you think would end their life?"  
no sooner had the question ended  
that my name rippled through the air.  
I pretended to not have listened  
but in my mind I asked them,  
how would I end somebody who doesn't exist?  
who now is  
but crumbled grit of glass  
of the ceilings she once aspired to break  
a muddy black-brown stain  
decaying on a painting palette?  
if I kill someone  
who ceased to be who they were long ago  
who do I really kill?











## THE ATTIRES OF HEAVEN

Caren Mascarenhas

In maple skies  
With a million dreams  
And the city lights  
With silenced screams

In velvety skies  
With a heart full of hope  
And damask roses  
With promises unkept and broke

In violaceous skies  
With stars streaming of souls  
And the world is asleep  
Whilst you dream alone

Changing colours in the hurricane of emotions  
Setting apart the wild, free and young.  
Painting a picture of a different kind  
Natural filters with a stroke of light  
And a gust of zephyr floating in your mind

In a thousand colours the sky shall speak  
One amongst them is different, one amongst them is yours to keep



## SUFFOCATE

Shruti Mungi

again I think of the lady who frowned at my shoulders  
too much skin, too much life  
she lies trapped in yards and yards of history  
not unraveling  
what does she know  
how I carve pain on my arms  
how I breathe it in and swaddle it like a child  
it needs, feeds off me  
my baby, the sharp pain I inhale  
and I know I'm alive  
I have to choose my words carefully  
god can't be real  
god can't care for so many burdened souls  
I hold onto this thought like an injured bird  
let it bite me in places it hurts  
the smell of death is also the smell of incense  
his body encased in glass can't be dead if god exists  
if god exists, his eyes are windows to where I want to be  
not here  
there are words I will not say  
jaws clenching, eyes tearing up always  
for fear that angels are not angels  
their smiles will turn crooked if you look too long  
just don't look too long













## AN OBITUARY

Akanksha Patra

26th August 1998 to the first day of spring any year,  
died from pollen allergy, in a field full of dandelions,  
buried far from those bastards, as per her wishes by the sea:

“...so little children building sand forts can dig up my bones,  
and bring me home where I will stay, decorated, on a mantel.”

there lies her, a daughter, a sister, a nurse, a poet, a woman;  
lover of humanity, empathizer of suffering, winner of bread,  
ever learning, ever evolving, battling bouts of sanity and insanity.

she was—  
a wildflower, growing on an annual rainfall of 500 millimetres,  
a citadel of red stone, cracking at the joints, needing restoration,  
her mother's Thursday prayers frantically made at the altar of Durga,  
conch shells and the bustle of Jagannatha Swamy's elephant corridor;  
a jon boat on the Mahanadi, as it floods; stupid, desperate, undaunted,  
a stowed away Laila off to pursue a double Masters in Berlin over Majnun,  
afraid of nuns, vipers and lies, alike; took refuge in pastries and rain,  
a coastal town run by fisherwomen, the weekly Sunday Bazaar,  
an omnibus of experiences, filled with fires and mountains,  
a warm, winter afternoon meal of rice and ghanto,  
lost many times, found seldom,  
a narrative retold, a movement.

died with the hopes of having her name spelt right, just this one last time,  
Rest in Awe, ~~Akanksha~~ Akanksha.

# HALT!

Debahuti Borah

Halt, right there,  
From snatching my existence  
Made upon wet sands.  
Halt, right there,  
From making me believe  
That I do not belong.  
I love her black tresses,  
To comb off the stars  
That stick to her hair,  
Like the sky shooting meteorites.  
Halt, right there,  
From calling me insane  
For I, a woman, loves another woman.  
Or do call me insane -  
For I wouldn't really care  
What you have to tell me  
About plenty men in the streets,  
While I kiss my woman on the lips  
In the streets of Hyderabad in India.  
For I wouldn't really care  
What words you breathe out,  
While I hear poetry from my lover's lips  
Everytime she tells me that she loves me.  
For I wouldn't care  
What of patriarchy and homophobia  
Is resounded by science,  
While my heart beats in the face of love  
In gentle multitudes,  
In the afterglow of syrupy tales.  
Oh halt, please,  
From telling me that I need to look within,  
When I have found life  
By looking within, and not in tempest.  
She said, "Yes"  
And I do not wish for the church bells  
To chime in unison,  
We would rather love to be supported  
By people who belong, and believe,  
Watching us take vows,  
Dressing in your not-so-usual rainbow showers.  
So, haters, halt,

Because I say,  
I would still kiss her in the streets  
Of India, or in Amsterdam, or Ireland,  
I would still hold her hands  
While walking down the  
aisle of supporters  
Like I would when we are  
grocery-shopping.  
I wouldn't give a damn,  
And neither would she,  
For we belong, to ourselves,  
To each other,  
To the community,  
To our identity,  
To the world,  
And your words  
Arising out of the pits of denial  
Would be something  
We wouldn't care about.  
So, halt.







# HAIRETICAL

Diya Sabharwal





Having been raised in a devout Sikh household, I am, unquestionably, an expert in avoiding hairy situations.

In my religion, hair is a sacred object, and it is seen as a sin, practically hair-etical, to cut one's hair. Accordingly, all the adults on my mother's side of the family have unshorn hair. This is slightly different for everyone: the men tie their hair up in turbans every day, while the women wear their hair in buns or braids. My mother and grandmother used to both wear their hair down every day, naturally pin-straight and thigh-grazing, the kind of hair that their staff at the hospital would gawk at as they walked down the hallways. Even as a little girl, I was raised to aspire to that kind of hair. Every time I walked into the hospital, the staff would come up to me and ask, "How long is your hair now? Is it as long as Dr. Ramnik's yet?"

It wasn't as long as my mother's was yet, but it was already very long in its own right, going past my skirts' hemlines and flowing in waves around me every time there was a breeze. My classmates petted it and fawned over it. And initially, so did I.

But my Rapunzel-like hair had a mind of its own. It wasn't pin-straight like that of the other women in my family; it fell loosely, openly, nakedly. I hated leaving it untied because it would keep getting tangled in everything, from doorknobs to other people's bracelets. I used to swim every day back then, and my hair would never fit into the swim caps because none of them were big enough. So I would have to wash my hair every day, because it would always get wet in the pool, adding nearly an hour to my daily routine to wash and dry three feet of hair. It got in my way, tripped me up, tickled my eyes, ears, lips. It wasn't my shield, the way it was for my mother and grandmother. It didn't cover me. If anything, it exposed me.

My life was *mal aux cheveux*: literally, 'hair sickness' (which also means 'hangover' in French). This was apt: my hair hung over my routine, my clothing, my range of activities: It hung like a pall over my sense of identity as a woman, writer, activist. Who, exactly, was in charge here? I complained to my mother, who, in return, brought me back a book from the Gurudwara, the Sikhs' place of worship. It was very beautifully illustrated, and spoke eloquently of the beauty of Sikhism. I still remember it having this one passage about 'Kesh' (the word in Sikhism for holy, unshorn hair).



"Ah! Well, let my hair grow long; .... I cannot forget the knot He tied on my head; It is sacred, it is his mark of remembrance. The Master has bathed me in the light of suns not yet seen; There is eternity bound in this tender fragile knot. I touch the sky when I touch my hair, and a thousand stars twinkle through the night."

But still, my hair became a burden--a weight, both literal and figurative, on my shoulders. There it was, getting onto the bus with me in the morning, my braid getting caught in my busmates' bags' zippers ; it was there at ballet class, all .5 pounds of it, not able to hold all its weight in a bun as I twirled and pirouetted. I'd open a notebook, and there it would be again: a forty inch-long strand, shedding because haircare is practically impossible when you have that much of it, and aren't allowed to do anything about your split ends. I often imagined what it would be like to be free of it, but guiltily tucked my fantasies aside.

As I got older, I started seeing the gaps in my family's reasoning for following the practice of kesh. Why, for example, do the males wear turbans, while women's hair has to be worn free? Diving into Sikh literature, I found that all Sikhs were instructed by our Guru to wear turbans: the turban was chosen because at the time it was a symbol of aristocracy, and allowing women and lower-caste people to wear it aimed to abolish the structure within itself. But most Sikh women today don't wear turbans: they are seen as a masculine accessory. I began feeling that the male gaze dictated a Sikh women's practices almost as much as the Guru's teaching; I started losing faith in this superficial tradition, though I wasn't ready, just yet, to take the plunge and be seen as 'different' or 'disobedient.'

So when I first saw "Self-Portrait With Cropped Hair" by Frida Kahlo, I saw myself in it. In 'Self-Portrait With Cropped Hair,' Kahlo depicts herself sitting on a chair in a bare room, staring directly at the viewer, wearing a man's suit and with a man's haircut, holding a pair of scissors, with locks of her hair strewn all around her. Inscribed at the very top are lyrics from a Mexican folk song, about a relationship ending because the singer's lover cut her hair: "Mira que si te quise, fué por el pelo, Ahora que estás pelona, ya no te quiero"—which roughly translates to "I only loved you for your hair. Now that you are without hair, I don't love you anymore."

Frida's stony gaze spoke to me. I connected her act of cutting her hair to my own inability to make that same decision for myself. I felt trapped by my religion to live my whole life with three feet of hair trailing after me, against my will, like a sinister shadow. Just like Frida felt like she had to do certain things to please her now ex-husband, Diego Rivera, I felt I had to keep my hair long because I was born into a certain way of living. The steely expression on Frida's face as she stood in the middle, with locks of her freshly-cut hair surrounding her, conveyed a sense of freedom: a chance to finally make choices for herself, which was a direct result of her no longer being bound to her relationship with Diego Rivera. I was surprised by how much I envied her.



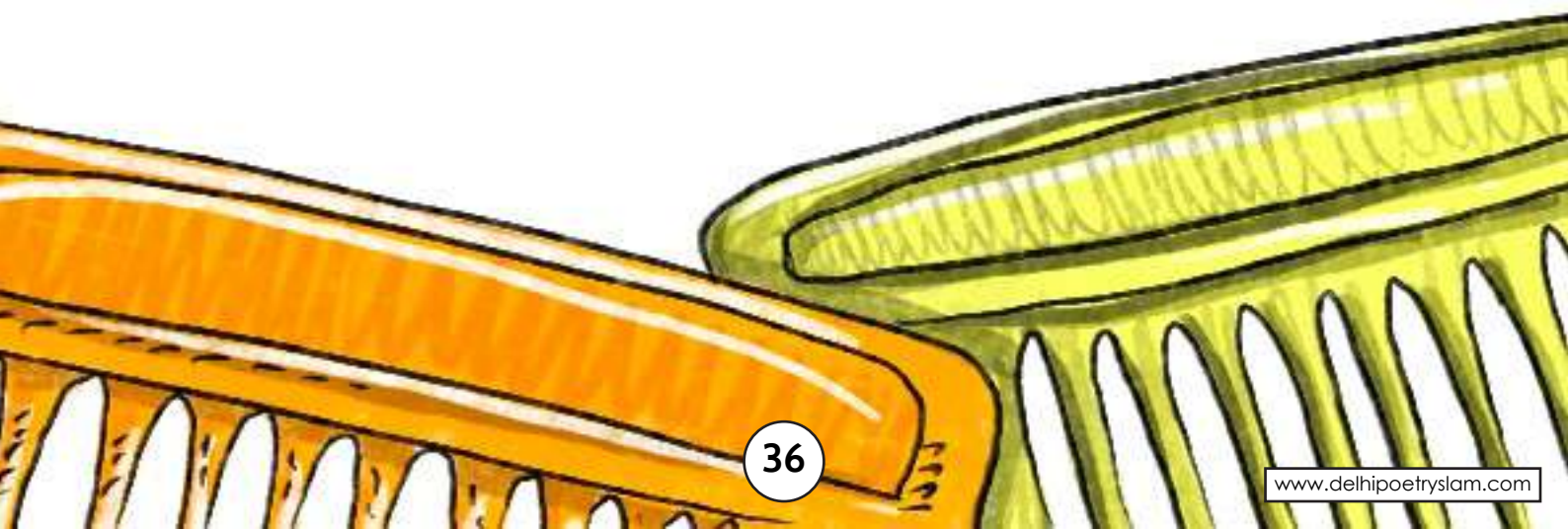


I only loved you for your hair. Seeing Frida got me thinking about what my religion actually means to me, and to what extent I want to follow beliefs that had been propagated over generations. The lyrics of the Spanish song reflect a seemingly simple dilemma, but it's what I had been afraid all these years that God would do to me. I'd spent my whole life thinking God would love me less, would think of me as unfaithful, if I cut my hair. But would He really, actually do that, as long as I still devoted myself to him, still prayed to Him, still visited the Gurudwara on a weekly basis? Does simply cutting my hair mean I am less faithful to Him?

So I decided to test my faith -- I got a haircut. With my sister, I visited the salon at which I was regularly taken by my mother to wax my eyebrows, my moustache (hair which, of course, I was not theologically bound to retain). After spending my life with hair that draped to my mid-thigh, when the hairdresser asked what kind of haircut I wanted, I took a deep breath, thought about it for a few seconds, and said: Make it so short that it doesn't even dare to touch my chin. Free me of it. The hairdresser clapped his hands.

Two hours later, I had a new look, and a new outlook. Three feet of hair, fifteen years, a few ounces. I felt lighter. I didn't care what my mother would say. Because I suddenly knew the truth.

I chose to end my hair, punctuate it and round it off. But what I was most surprised about was the way this actually felt like a beginning: a reclamation of my own self. Hair grows: that is its teleology. But so do people, through the exercise of their will and judgement, through the operation of their criticality and skepticism, through their ability to question received wisdom and, occasionally, challenge the status quo. Today, my hair is but a memory, existing in pictures, in my mother's occasional comment (but it was so long and beautiful...). But I am closer than ever to God, our relationship newly empowered with my will to see it through in my own way. I am still a Sikh, even though I have short hair; except, now, more than ever, I 'seek' my own answers.



# HERE, THERE AND NOWHERE

Nikita Prabhu

June 2008.

Country roads, take me home  
To the place, I belong

- John Denver ,Take Me Home, Country Roads

I'm on a three-hour flight from Muscat to Mumbai. Years of visiting 'home' have prepared me and my brother for the drill. Two weeks before we leave, my mother insists on packing every variety of imported chocolate for my cousins, perfume bottles for the adults and customised presents for anyone who asks for it. A week before we leave, my father insists on packing our suitcases, triple-checking the passports and flight ticket printouts and giving me and my brother a rehearsed lecture on how we're 'supposed to behave' in front of our relatives.

My mother always tells everyone we're flying home. I'm an Indian and my home should be India, but it isn't. It's a place where I go on vacation. India is a two-month-long ritual I'm forced to follow. India is where the traffic never ceases to horrify me. India is where my dust allergy gets worse. India is where I cherish the lingering taste of pani-puri followed by a side dish of diarrhoea which, to say the least, I do not enjoy. India is a mild hangover which I dust off after two months, the moment the Oman Air flight lands back in Muscat.

Oman is home. Oman will always be home.

December 2016

मुसाफरि हु यारो  
न घर है न ठिकाना  
मुझे चलते जाना है  
बस चलते जाना

(Friends, I'm a traveller  
I don't have a house, nor a place  
I have to keep moving  
I simply have to keep moving)

-Kishore Kumar

I'm on a three-hour flight from Mumbai to Muscat. Is Oman still home? I can't tell anymore. I'll be honest I haven't been particularly loyal. Two and a half years ago, I moved to Gujarat for my undergraduate studies. It was in college that a variety of supposedly synonymous identities were slapped on my face- NRI (Non-Resident Indian), spoilt rich kid, the girl-who-has-it-easy etc. In my head, I was merely was a person who lived in Oman for the majority of her life. To others, I was an Indian who belonged to India and yet somehow, betrayed it.



The last two and a half years were confusing. India was like trying on a new pair of shoes. It took a while to break in but now, it has become comfortable. India is where I'm engulfed by the smell of galle ki chai. India is where even the unaesthetic beaches bring on a unique sense of calm. India is where the diarrhoea doesn't stop me from engorging on the delicious street food.

Yet, India doesn't feel mine. I feel like an intruder here. As the Oman Air flight touches down on Muscat, I wonder if Oman is mine either? Maybe now it's just a place I go on vacations.

June 2020

It's been six years since I started living in India. I know it's every nook and cranny and while it may or may not accept me, I've accepted this one-sided love. We fight and we have disagreements and yet, here we are. Have I forgotten Oman? Definitely not. It gave me the first taste of hope and love. It's something I'll always carry. My identity will be an imperfect amalgamation of both my homes.

Oman is where I learnt to walk,  
India is where I learnt to run.



# LAZYBOY SHAMAN

Chaitanya Huprikar

goodbye old friend  
tumbled mass of faded leather  
ingrown inbred into ashen skin  
of a cold pallid lazy boy

ensnaring rainbows in a helical maze  
crafty carlos crafted for me  
a precious fragile crystal flute  
my don Juan of shimmering skin

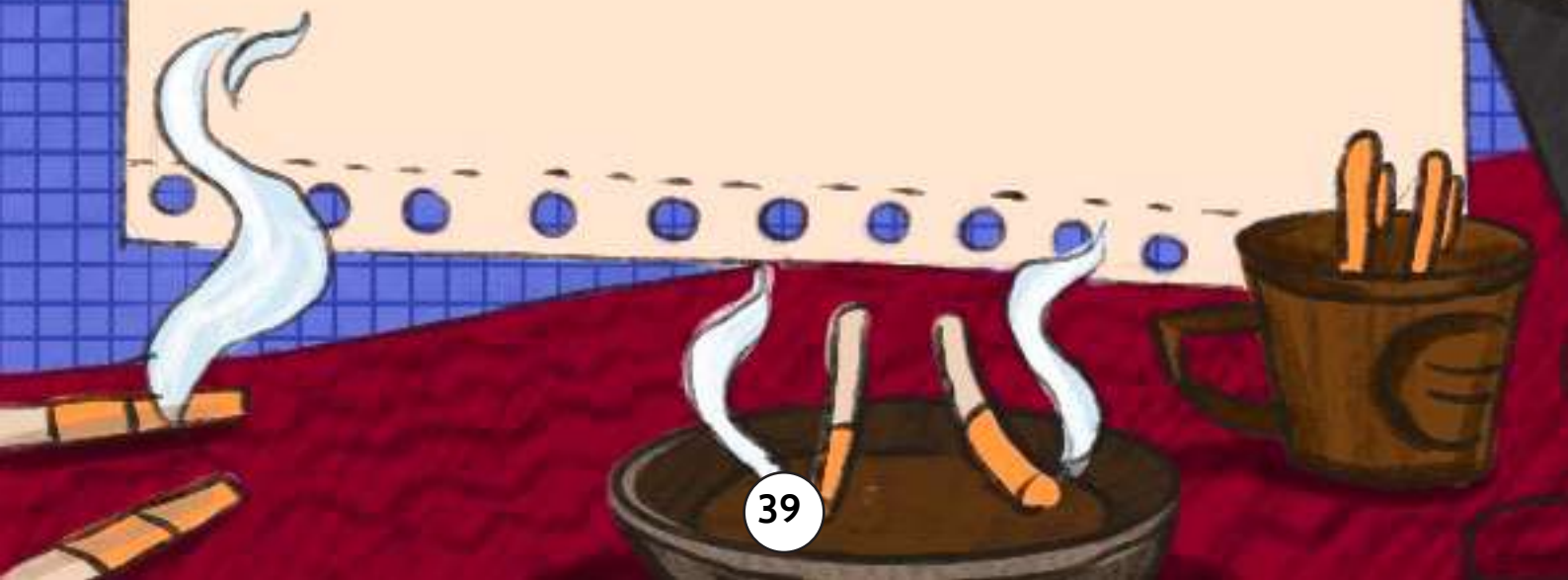
goodbye old friend  
enslaved in glorious rigor and routine  
of junk amoled programming  
caffeine and nicotine

vaporous notes bear thrill of trance  
infuse in discordant, wilted lungs  
symphonies of an ancient dance  
hymns of rain in aztec tongues

goodbye old friend  
upholstered in your despondent shroud  
each sound a dread a burden each step  
my skin my cage

slashing through dark sombre cloaks  
lead for feathers, threads of leather  
I weave a mantle for my warrior head  
and emerge now wings outstretched

on lacerated shackles i look down once  
and head into the light of a thousand suns.  
*, hoping like always to never return*















## MY MOTHER ASKS ME TO STOP EATING MORE

Diya Kandhari

My mother asks me to stop eating more,  
I tell her I eat when I'm unhappy,  
At the breakfast table, my hair is wet with maple syrup,  
lips brown with fudge,  
When she replies with silence,  
I eat the silence; the hollow vacuum.  
I see my unanswered words bouncing off the walls,  
I eat the words, the earth, gravity even;  
Tarmac to tongue.  
My mouth is home to the cheap taste of  
stainless steel and gravel.

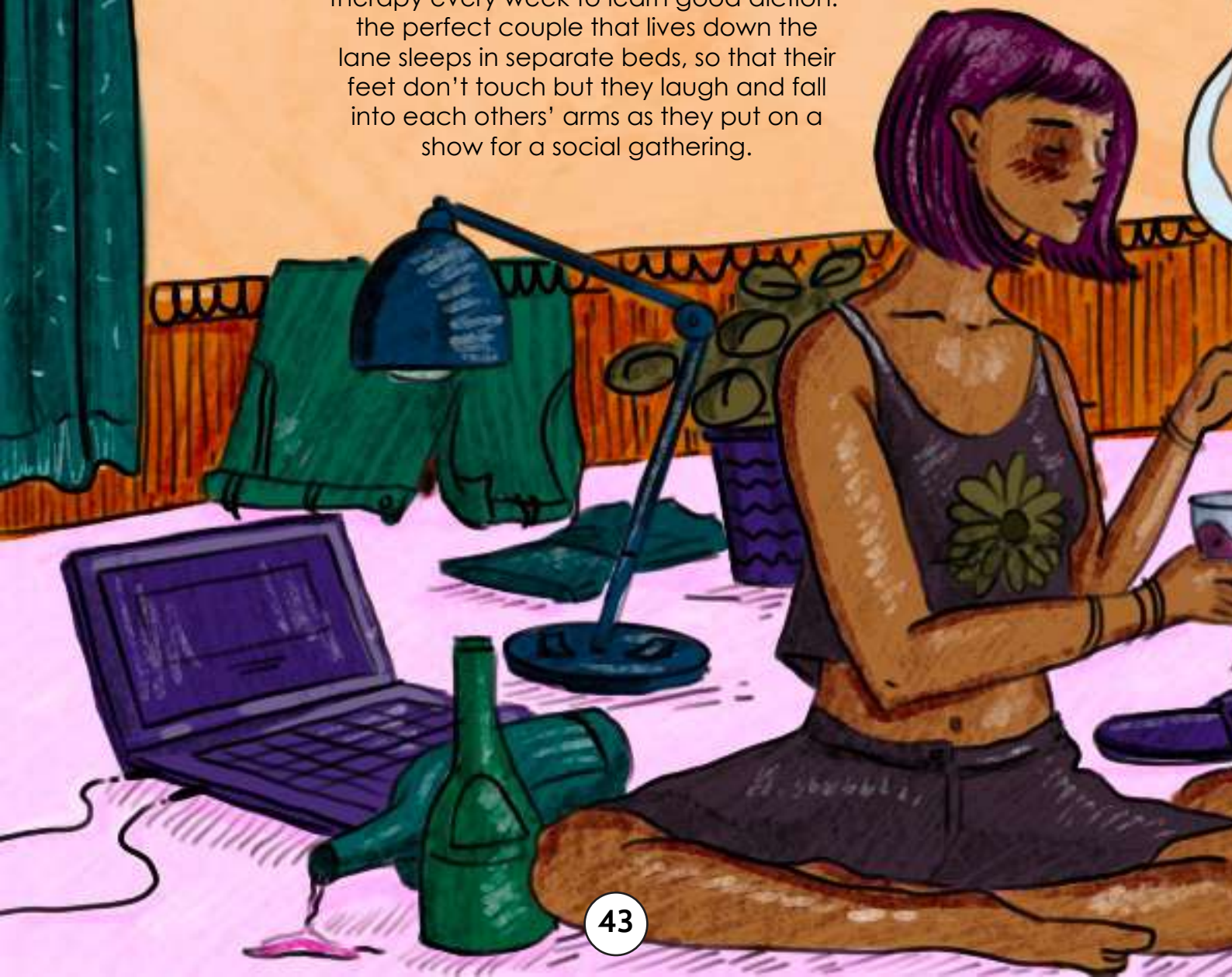
My mother asks me why I'm unhappy,  
I say it's because I eat too much.  
At the breakfast table,  
My stomach is full and round,  
There is orange juice in the hollow of my collarbones,  
She looks at me like I'm someone else's daughter,  
So today I eat my own body.

# THE HEALING

Maria Uzma Ansari

I once threw a date and a tree sprouted  
from it, the city celebrated its 378th  
edition of pride, as the conservatives and  
the conservationists marched together.  
generation suicide, stuck in red lights and  
headlights, jaded from standing in Ford's  
assembly lines. The metro stations have  
installed barricades to hold back  
humans who keep masquerading behind  
the words of dead poets.

the manipuri dancer is in pain,  
the swimmer's day begins at 4 am,  
the actress breaks herself like a yardstick  
every night,  
the girl brought her ptsd to school,  
chugging and choking on cotton balls she  
smiles through her depression.  
the eloquent youtuber, with 'that fake  
accent', has been walking into speech  
therapy every week to learn good diction.  
the perfect couple that lives down the  
lane sleeps in separate beds, so that their  
feet don't touch but they laugh and fall  
into each others' arms as they put on a  
show for a social gathering.





Inside a room, two people lie on bedrocks  
with their sunny sides up. The no fucks  
given is cool at 17 and not at twenty-seven.  
the air pressure at ten feet tall is deficient  
but oxygen masks don't come down.  
the room is steamy, the pressure cooker  
is edging, there's old monk on a tray  
beside a mattress on the floor but these  
are people who would prefer 509 grams of  
peace as opposed to twenty grams of  
cocaine. Frozen in time, rigour mortis.

Here, tan lines blend into self-harm scars  
clocks know when people aren't around  
amphetamines and sleeping pills fall to  
form a heap of debris. Irish goodbyes,  
taste of sour handpicked strawberries  
from the kitchen garden but  
neither can pills for lucid dreaming nor  
roses and champagne undo years of war,  
so they pour denatured alcohol into  
champagne flutes and down then with a  
gulp. Beautiful eucalyptuses  
can only grow on wastes  
and contaminated soils  
but I'll still leave the gas on  
in case you want to die.







# ALLEVIATION

Radhika Agrawal

The bruises from my father's belt  
Have now faded, but the scars stay.  
Winter came, the powdery snow I smelt  
Left me dancing, ablaze in disarray.

When existence is a wretched bane,  
Dearth of purpose leaves me dazed.  
Dressed in green, along comes Mary Jane  
As a warm and calming cloud of haze.

The sight of godmother dying in my arms  
Is as vivid today as it was then.  
Lucy wipes my eye and with her kiss  
Teleports me to lands where I smile again.

The sound of my first heartbreak  
Was so loud, it still echoes today.  
A golden brown Horse dulls the ache,  
She lays me down as I ride away.

I think of how the jolly are gifted.  
Tears hit the earth while I lay in grass.  
With Spirit in my blood, my spirits are lifted.  
Sorrows drown to the bottom of the glass.

I float through the days, emotions amiss,  
I've stooped as low as one can fall.  
The strangest part of the problem is  
I don't believe I have a problem at all.

# WOMB

Mrudula Kuvalekar

today i felt small / a giant  
inside a giant / inside  
another  
aching  
giant / a body  
of touch-me-nots / a body  
of eyes  
everywhere / a body  
that lives inside / a body  
tied / with ropes thick  
enough to cut / a body  
tangled / a body  
woven from rapunzel hair  
too short / to reach / the ground

it cries

for its mother /

has left /

and it is late / and the train  
is long gone / the station  
drips with left / over rain / too soft  
to touch /

it cries





for today / the body  
felt small / a child  
seeking asylum  
from itself / a child  
holding / the body  
a hostage / a child  
wailing / its mother  
long gone / it cries

the war is over /  
but the noose / still sways  
in the wind / waiting

for the child / waiting

for the mother /

to come home.



# RED

Riddhi Puranik

cherry

they let themselves in with the fleeting innocence of smiles long gone. the foot in the door welcomes the barrage of voices inside. I see the silhouette of subtle shades of repentance in the distance. I kick my shoes off and sprint, sprint to a place where they cannot get to me.

rose

the garden of perfumed petal lips, a refuge, a respite – a regret. It's catching up.

I say, "By the pricking of my thumb,  
Something Wicked this way comes"

the dastardly destruction of pricking thorns, uprooting life as it blooms, I look around for Wicked. I don't see her. the thorns weigh me down. I gently caress a few and bury them, the soil surrounding them. it weighs the same. repeat. repeat. repeat. it feels heavier. Wicked isn't here yet. all that moves are the ripples in the water distorting my reflection.

au(burn)

the flames lick away at my skin, disfiguring it & disappearing eventually. the trees that line the windowsill sway with the wind. the permanent dusk aches for a lone cherry tinted cloud to float by again because at least it wouldn't be as dark. a lone flame disintegrates the edges of the notes I intended to leave behind but never had the courage to. the dark corners the words at the center filled with guilt and goodbyes.

rust

the ladder rests against the wall. I go down and lower thinking each step is the last. one more rung and the descent to madness will be sealed. the paint clings stubbornly to the metal with patches flaking off & embedding themselves into the fabricated reality of my universe. the echoes cling to my skin and the yellow fades to the cerulean skies – I pray it comes back.

crimson

the ache of bleeding knuckles after the futile fight with Fate – an inevitable one. only one of us hurts. only one of us deserves it. splintered, the fragments of my reality disappear with each second spent separated from the silver. a flower-adorned girl once fell in love the blades of grass with years ago, the disappointment she would feel at the thought of growing up and hoping that they could tear her skin apart when the rusted silver never stayed with her.



scarlet

the rage you feel, when you're powerless in the face of forces that are stronger than you.  
like the tide. a lunatic yearns for the moon, the pull, the need to do something anything  
everything just to feel those little drops of crimson that found themselves exposed. every time  
you go over them again with the edges that best be left alone, you lower yourself another rung.

blood

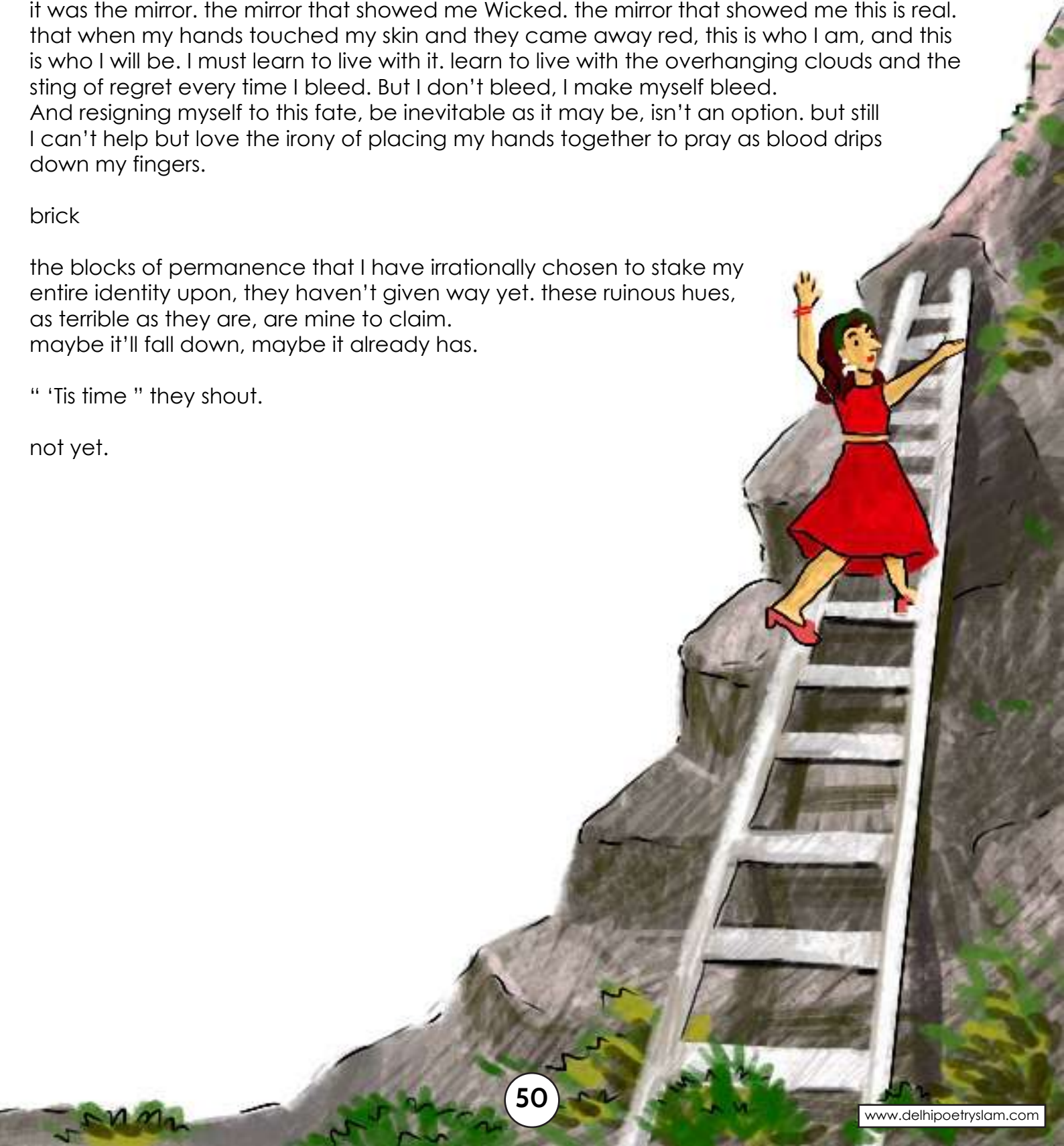
it was the mirror. the mirror that showed me Wicked. the mirror that showed me this is real.  
that when my hands touched my skin and they came away red, this is who I am, and this  
is who I will be. I must learn to live with it. learn to live with the overhanging clouds and the  
sting of regret every time I bleed. But I don't bleed, I make myself bleed.  
And resigning myself to this fate, be inevitable as it may be, isn't an option. but still  
I can't help but love the irony of placing my hands together to pray as blood drips  
down my fingers.

brick

the blocks of permanence that I have irrationally chosen to stake my  
entire identity upon, they haven't given way yet. these ruinous hues,  
as terrible as they are, are mine to claim.  
maybe it'll fall down, maybe it already has.

" 'Tis time " they shout.

not yet.

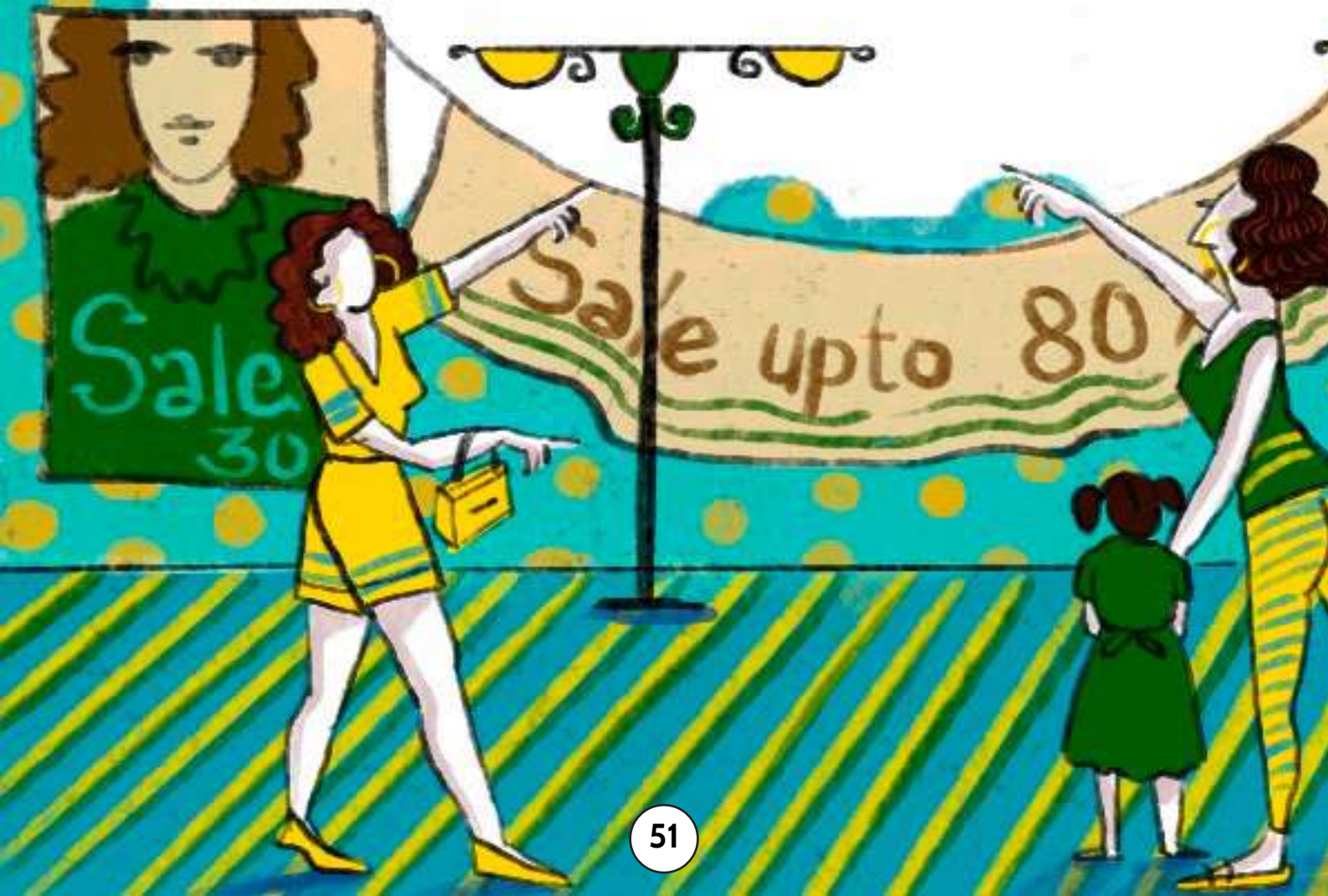


# ONE MORE LIFE

Manisha Mishra

One more lipstick  
One more shampoo  
One more mascara  
One more perfume  
In a hurry  
In a swift choice  
She rushed to the counters  
To make them all hers.

One more ketchup  
One more juice  
One more cookie jar  
One more butter knife  
One more fork set  
She grabbed them all  
Panting through the shelves  
As never before.





One more palazzo  
One more off-shoulder top  
One more pyjama  
One more lingerie  
One more evening gown  
With bated breath  
And a greedy gleam  
There would not be  
Another day like this.

One more Jacuzzi  
One more bath tub  
One more glass stand  
One more chandelier  
One more air conditioner  
Would surely  
Make her house impressive  
She thought.

Incomplete feelings  
Filling substances  
In the intermolecular void  
Of her emotions  
One more life  
Would suffice all her wants  
She mused.



# VEGAN FOR A WHILE

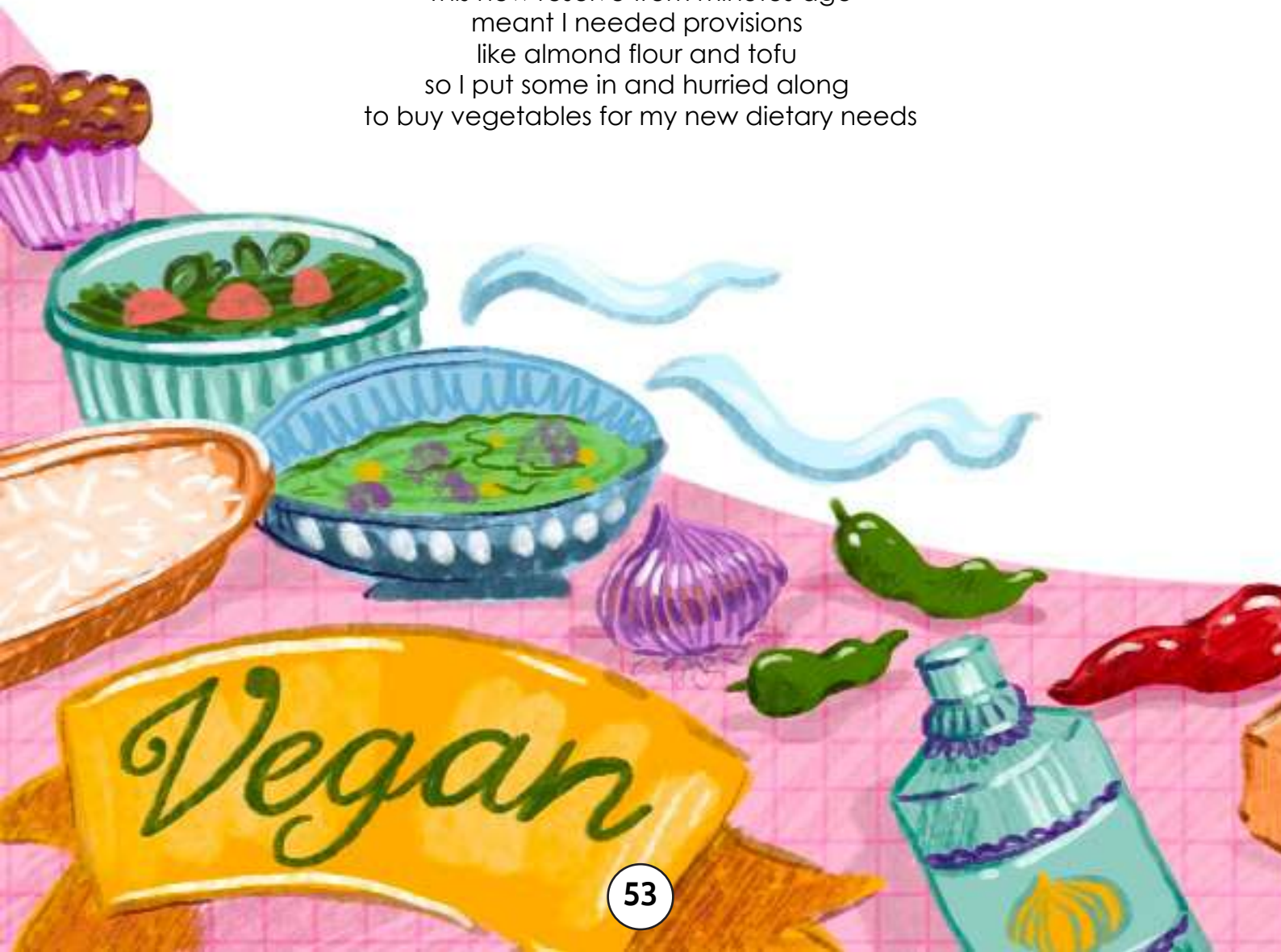
Sanjana Saksena Chandra

I pushed a trolley  
through aisles of symmetrically stacked groceries  
inviting me to pick them  
to partake in the consumerism  
and so I did

Into the cart  
went canned and peached goodies  
succulent fruits  
for desserts and puddings  
I'd probably never make

I added some cans of alternate milk  
soy and almond and coconut from a pretty shelf  
for 'vegans' their label read  
'I'm not one yet' I thought to myself  
but why not try now, it's the cool new thing

This new resolve from minutes ago  
meant I needed provisions  
like almond flour and tofu  
so I put some in and hurried along  
to buy vegetables for my new dietary needs





I weighed in the potatoes  
the onions, pickles and peppers  
lemon and chilli, basil and thyme  
all the while cooking up  
a vegan storm in my head

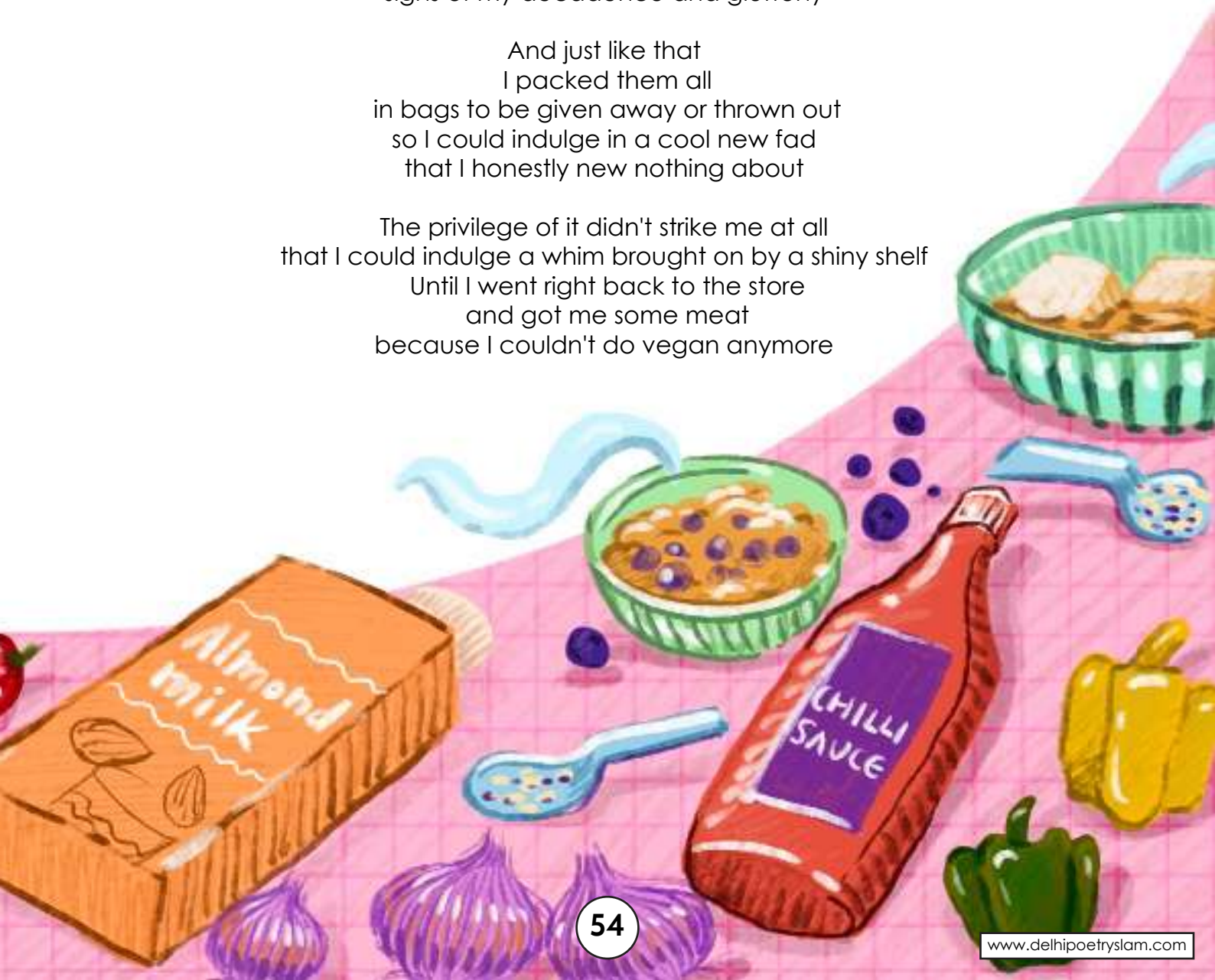
Satisfied, I pushed the now heavy cart  
to the aisle where shiny bottles called to me  
with their promise of making me prettier  
shampoos for longer hair and lotions for brighter skin  
I put them all in

I moved slowly to the checkout queue  
pleased with myself  
after all I'd bought all I needed  
for my new vegan experiment  
and some more to look and feel good

The bags, laden with new choices sat on my kitchen table  
while I stared at a fully stacked fridge  
of chocolates and cheese and greek yogurt  
of sauces for roasts and chicken mince for pie  
signs of my decadence and gluttony

And just like that  
I packed them all  
in bags to be given away or thrown out  
so I could indulge in a cool new fad  
that I honestly new nothing about

The privilege of it didn't strike me at all  
that I could indulge a whim brought on by a shiny shelf  
Until I went right back to the store  
and got me some meat  
because I couldn't do vegan anymore



# CONSENTED RAPE

Naman Garg

I have been touched by men  
A hundred times before  
And I prepare my flesh  
For a thousand more

I have seen my body becoming a grave  
That some hollow men still do crave  
And rape me  
Again and again  
They rape me  
with my consent

And I will be raped as I can sense:

That men with vigour haven't been pushed  
By vaginas, that are not as bruised  
As mine, which is not yet mine  
For men out there are too sublime:

To stand  
And stand with grit  
And speak in voices clear and crisp  
That my pride  
Demands prejudice

Men are drunk  
So drunk on lives  
And boys frightened  
To recognise  
My eyes are red  
And sorrows high

I hide my grieves  
Just like my scars  
They die with time  
Centuries and hours

My scathed skin  
Is sweet surprise  
For decent kin  
That offers bribe

My body is set  
to be loved once more  
Oh! I am not a queen  
I am a whore

My kisses are sweet  
Their kisses are spit  
My moans rehearsed  
As orgasm hit

My sparkles lay  
between my legs  
That invaders chase  
handsomely dressed

They strip my clothes  
I strip my soul  
For I have a family with empty bowls  
And dreams  
That my rapes endorse

Consent  
Endorsed by people meant  
To fight the trend so relevant

Of royals  
who drink my sap  
And act so sober to perhaps  
Adore their queens with jewels and dress  
And leave my body motionless  
For people  
Who call me a whore  
And show fake love  
Behind the door

Long live the king!  
They chant with thump  
But its only me who can confirm  
That king didn't last long enough  
To feel my vagina turning rough

And see my twirks losing their price  
The royal smirk reaches new heights

Long live the king!  
Love live the queens!  
Long live their love!  
And fellow beings!

And if my body is still being craved,  
Long live my grave!  
Last long my rape!





## *Beetle*

Beetle is an alternative literary magazine, filled with invigorating poetry, imaginative stories and straightforward essays. The magazine hand-picks new writing from all over the world. Accompanied by bold and visionary illustrations, Beetle envisions to do the important work of circulating a soul-touching narrative. Beetle is an electronic publication by DelSlam.

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