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Website: www.delhipoetryslam.com Email: sristy@delhipoetryslam.com Instagram: @delhipoetryslam Facebook: /DelhiPoetrySlam

Editors:

Saumya Choudhury, Sristy and Rhys Milsom

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Art Director:

Saumya Choudhury

Cover Artwork and Illustrations

Dhanashree Pimputkar

Layout:

Dhanashree Pimputkar

Digital Content Manager:

Prashasti Shreshtha



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Free as a kite

UNFREEDOM

Alivia Ghosh

The closed shutters have gathered dust Like unvisited graveyards.
The terraces have grown human heads The sky looks closer with kite signals Red, yellow and green,
Celebrating death?

Streets look brighter
In unhorned silence.
Masked automatons in hurried fear.
The array of balconies
Burst in crackling laughter,
Apartment porches hung in dusky kisses.
Celebrating death?

The queue questing for life Lurks in fear. Students-policemen Beggars-vendors **Dalits-brahmins** Aazadi-hindutva Woven in the untouchable garland of death. The lonely street Now scares the rapist And the nationalist too-Like women, they too wear the night On their shoulders As the shield and the shroud. The anti-national has waged a war. Celebrating life?

Walking along the quarantined street, Passing by the matchboxed windows-A scoop of the orange sky Drops on the mossy monsoon street In resignation.
Like crumbling damp walls.
And the street lies alone In defeat of an independence.
Silenced-Are you my humans,
Still celebrating Death?



THE WALK OF FREEDOM

Harsha Sewani

I gaze outside the window, as the sun conceals behind the clouds. Wondering how far the street goes on, how the wind blows through the crowds.

How the road links up with the building,
I ponder on the subject a little.
I see a boy devouring an ice cream by the cart,
while an old man strolls by having bones that are brittle.

The kids play without any agitation,
I witness the magic of bricks attaching themselves to become a wall.
The colour is a beautiful hue of pink,
the smell of cement pricks my nose as I sprawl.

Dear mum inside the house runs around finishing up chores while brother rushes outside the door.

My sister jumps up and down, permission for going outside is all she is asking for.

Mum's eyes lingers on me, how I feel she thinks through day and night. But I can't walk while stuck on the wheelchair, Keep reminding myself, I don't know freedom.

I don't know how kids enjoy, while they run around catching balls. Or what it is like to be in the water, moving my hands and feet to crawl.

I'm on the wheelchair, I don't know freedom. Keep reminding myself, I don't know freedom.



LIFE UNDER A LONG DIVISION SIGN

Dyondra Wilson

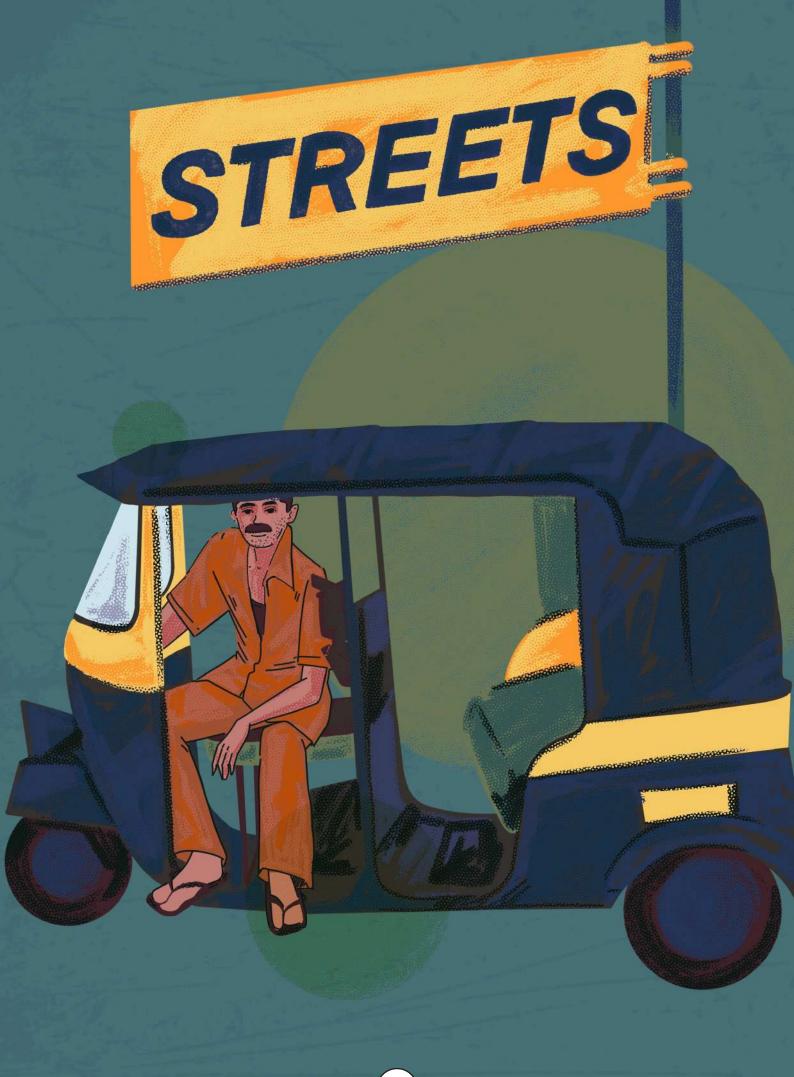
The glass ceiling I'm under has opened up
As tiny shards fall down
Leaving a bloody rut

Men cry as they're hit with words like "no"
Begging for sympathy for crimes that span the sea
These lies start with "trust" and end with "me"
But far too many know that symphony

I sign my name in blood as the shards continue My time is up, under this sad life of divide and conquer

May the divide fall
And may women rise
I accept no pleas or your misogynistic cries.





STREET NIGHTS

Ishani Shambhobi Ghosh

1.

The street lays out
its yellow-dash spine
burning below
the halogen's basilisk-eyes.
"I'd rather watch the moon
than count motorbikes to sleep,"
she mumbles, "it has more stories to tell."

2.

Raindrops sizzle on the sidewalks in a sudden flash of drizzle – A windscreen wipe swings like the scythe of Kronos.

Two cheating lovers in the front seat list all the things gone wrong in the last couple of weeks, and a steady rush of wheels in the backdrop whisper nothing's ever worth the wait.

3.

Roadside shutters blush red and green with the blinking signal's glow.
Light-poles tower above the rain, indifferent, black wires sagging over a creeper on a broken wall, waiting like a taut feline back for a sparkle, firework, blackout.

1

Animals haunt the shadows and pools of golden light, chasing bikers down alleyways that once belonged to the White Wolf. "Rooftops are curious places," says the cat in the night time. "Sometimes, they are animal limbo – or time machines for me to jump over nine more lives."

5.

In the hour after midnight,
you're an empty bottle
chucked out of the car window,
lonely lorries kicking around
your butt-end, headlights gleaming
with the glee of children
playing street-football –
but never quite managing
to crush you flat.



PECULIAR

Ananya Sahoo

I live on the most peculiar street in the world, A pretty bubble if you may.

As I step outside on to the cobbled grey pathway,
A plethora of aromas greet my nostrils.
The smell of Aliya Aunty's biryani spices mixes with
That of Savitri Didi's famous Sambar,
As if they were long lost lovers meeting after decades.
I dodge quickly as a torn, red, cricket ball comes thundering my way
And a troop of little boys follow hungrily.
Atif and Prakash are opening batsmen –
The fielding team's nightmare come true.
The sun's last rays hit Radhika's neatly oiled pigtails
And bounce off Fatima's hijab as they cycle along the road furiously,
Perhaps trying to outrun society's stern gaze.

I stand and take pause as I look at the setting sun.

Watching over our little street as everybody prepares for dusk to begin,

Oblivious to the differences which are pointed out by society again and again

I take pause and marvel as the cacophony of noises

dissolves into a well-rehearsed harmony.

Just as the Ganesh temple's aarti puja begins
With bells ringing at uniform intervals,
The mosque's azaan rings out, loud and clear
As if reminding everybody that Allah and Ganesh ji are indeed brothers.
As I walked along, the bright lights at the Akhtars' were switched on,
lighting up the huge front yard,
Where the elderly Gupta Aunty sat with Noor Aunty, exchanging
the latest tea over a cup of chai.
Her saffron draped dupatta swaying slightly in the

Her saffron draped dupatta swaying slightly in the

air beside her best friend's dark burga

The saffron and black breathing confidence into each other.

I was stopped by an excited Salma,

With a steel tiffin full of Ramzan special semiyaan.

Two steps later, Lakshmi Aunty purposefully

handed me the evening puja's prasad.

I walked along, with my tiffin of semiyaan and ladoos,

Breathing in the slightly stale air resulting from bikes,

lunas and other conspicuous middle class vehicles.

I walked along, an anomaly outside the bubble, For who can imagine saffron and green together? Outside the bubble, shiny red flowed down the streets - not saffron, not green, loud screaming red.

Outside the bubble, Allah and Ganeshji watched, With tears in their eyes as their masterpieces wreaked havoc. Divine tears falling upon us as rain,

Trying in vain to wash off our collective sins.

A small world of bliss in a world full of chaos.

As I walked down my street, I felt surreal,
As if the bubble might pop any second,
As if the world I lived in balanced on a precarious set of scales,
And tipping it even a little would be catastrophic.
I looked around my street with pride,
Where the Farhans and Rahuls and Farahs and Radhas
Lived and loved and breathed in the same air.
My street was a utopian anomaly, a glitch in the matrix,
Defying society's rules in broad daylight.

I live on the most peculiar street in the world, A pretty bubble if you may.

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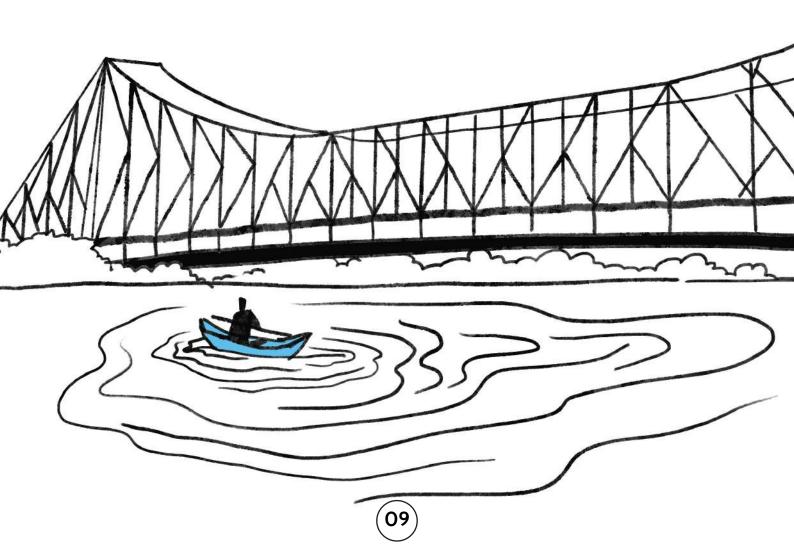
SHE, THE CITY

Maria Uzma Ansari

Even though I hate naming things, I could never live in cities divided into sectors. I would much rather live in old cities with streets named after real people, that speak to me. Our summers were spent with us pretending to be tourists in our own city, where we would mark out every road on foot. Our mornings would begin with pancakes and bacon at Flurys and end with a scoop of Vanilla at Mags' ice cream parlour.

If you want to see my city, you will have to seek out the people she houses, You shall have to share a cognac with the Armenian community and give the Anglo-Indian community living in houses painted red & green at bow barracks a visit; maybe even witness the extravagance of the Gujarati community at Elgin.

How a sharp turn at Russel street leads one to Park Street or how going further than Park street lands one in Wood Street, are all lessons. I learned from the road. So, if you want to know my city, you must sit in the middle of the park street cemetery and light a cigarette while listening to the Maghrib azaan.



You should go strolling in her dingy alleyways of the North and go through hundred years of History in a single breath while looking at the Protima in Maddox square during Durga Puja. Go, go to her jewish synagogues and her Catholic chapels & her Protestant cathedrals.

If you want to feel her, you feast your eyes on Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake at Nazrul Manch and spend a day at Nandan. Take a hand pulling rickshaw and end up at the national library on college street, find the best tea at the Indian Coffee House just opposite to the two hundred year old Hindu College before spontaneously getting a tram ticket to Shyambajar.

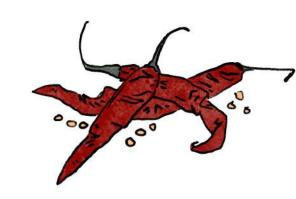
If you want to find her, stand on the intersection of Rabindra Sarani and Zakhariya street and listen to the call for prayer and while you are at it, don't forget to stop by the antique violin shop, that looks like it is lost in time at a busy street in Shakespeare Sarani.

Here, you can go back in time while taking a walk through Dalhouse while breathing in the finest of colonial architecture and when you exhaust yourself, savour the momos at Sikkim House; listen to live music play at Hard Rock, gorge on the Chelo Kebab of Peter Cat and down a beer at Oly Pub.

Ours, is not a concrete jungle. Not an urban culture that was brought up in malls. This city, lives in the kids playing football among horses at the maidan, with the city's skyline towering over them. This city exists through the couple sitting on the bench at millenium park, overlooking the sight of the Howrah bridge. It lives because of the awkward apprentice history lover, who loses her way only to find herself at the museum, on an odd weekday.

This city lives in the train line that passes through Prinsep Ghat and in the boat rides that allow you to gawk at the grandeur of Vidyasagar setu. It lives in the painter who spends his day sketching at the Victoria memorial and in every horse cart ride you take around it. This city, lives on the promise of the multitude of artists who promise to never stop making art.

Today, the jews, the greeks, the chinese, armenians and the kabuliwalas may have all fled the city, par aaj bhi tumhe koi insaan chai ki dukaan par baitha, haath me kulhad liye, Murphy Radio par Abhi naa jao chhod kar, sunte huye mil jayega (But even today, you may find somebody at a tea stall with an earthen cup of tea in hand, as they hum to the tune of "Abhi na Jao Chhod kar" on Murphy Radio) because Calcutta is no less than a page taken out of a History book.



SENSORIUM OF SUN

Sumedha Chakravarthy

Somedays, the city unfurls a map of secret sunny lanes.

When I first chanced upon one such tucked-away street
(really more shared, gravelly, verandahs leaking out of back doors)
I was worried by how quiet it was.
I wondered if unwanted noise was caught and filtered away by the holes
in the gravel by the blossoming acacia, or
trapped under carefully potted money plants, or
snared by the wicked bougainvillea drapes.

The air is heavy here with the musk of freshly-shelled peas, drying chillies, open cans of paint, intimate conversations, hushed conspiracies, and toothless laughter.

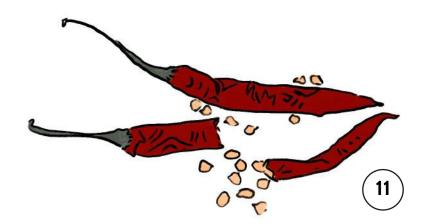
The denizens are a motley group: grinning old women and well-sunned dogs. They are quick to observe a stranger-raising an eyebrow, barking out a languid enquiry.

Intruders, once approved,
share a laugh with the denizens, barter questions, argue over 'correct' facts, find a story,
dust it out, and leavereceding slowly but surely

into the shade of an intersection that will lead us away and onto a walking path littered with semul, and lined by less smug tufts of grass.

Marveling and mourning, all the while, a fleeting intrusion into the sunniest of worlds:

founded and run by a colorful spectrum of aunties and their wonderful dogs on any Delhi winter afternoon.



PEOPLE AND PLACES

Varisha Abdullah

Mama's love for shopping was unconditional and mine, for her. So, on each trip to the market, one could spot an uninterested me beside her (although I don't hate shopping, I love it neither).

Once in a month, to shop for exotic yet cheap items, we would travel for three long hours to visit the famous street mart down south, which was a hustling-bustling arena of roughly every sort of trade and commerce—medium-scale, small-scale; semi-organised, unorganised; legal, illegal.

People—residents as well as nonresidents—kept launching into the place all hours and, like ruthless bulls, banging into each other. At that, handcarts, rickshaws, and bicycles tended to worsen the space crisis, by spontaneously taking the sole responsibility for cautiously filling up any possible room for our locomotion across the street.

Fortunately, we were compensated for such inconvenience by the enchanting array of colours and hues exhibited by the houses and shops. My gaze would sharply deny cooperation—I wished to view one thing at a time but it would immediately sight another; what a splendid frenzy it was!

As Mama bargained over product prices skilfully, I would notice that the shopkeepers were barely eager for customers or sales. They were carefree, though not careless.

Walking ahead whilst holding her warm, supple hand, I would see groups of men in high spirits—sipping hot, milky tea—at crooked, unhygienic snack corners and rarely, the women.

The men, out at work, would wear plain clothes but the women, inside the houses, all shiny garments with showy jewellery. I would ponder such irony often.

Perhaps that was their feeble attempt to expression of liberty, the only attribute adding glitter to their monotonous lives. They were an obvious contrast to Mama—an educated, independent, confident woman.

The children, in incredibly shabby clothes, were a bittersweet delight to the eyes—playing in swarms and running recklessly into everything, everyone; oblivious to the harsh realities of life, which Mama had taught me to stay ready to face sooner or later.

Furthermore, while chitchatting with her, I would always find either that old couple near the crossroad, buying groceries from Laalaa Kalkattvii's stall across the way, or that lady with a half-burned countenance, receiving heartless, horrified stares from the passersby, or that disabled teenage boy lying on the far end of the path, who appeared poor but, weirdly, I never discovered him begging.

Those persons were not my acquaintances, yet not even strangers. I knew their faces and nothing much—this would provoke my curiosity all the more.

Despite longing for asking them why they laboured to run their household at such a fragile age—'do you have no guardian?'—or how that happened/who did it—'doesn't each dreaded stare shatter you from within?'—or how he sustained himself—'isn't it difficult for you to live alone?'—I couldn't.

Maybe because none broke the ice, or rather it melted away on its own and, sadly, the cold water remained in between us—unquestionably, they were my 'half-strangers'!

Eventually, after Mama finished her shopping, on our way back home, I would conclude sensing a strange overall idleness—typical of suburban elements—peculiarly concealed by the active struggle to survive.

To me, everybody there seemed uninspired, as if they never dreamed, never thought beyond today.

Nonetheless, I would wonder if any of those small, dilapidated houses be raising our next popular child prodigy/politician/superstar, etc.; I simply wondered, as Mama reckoned aloud the leftover chores...

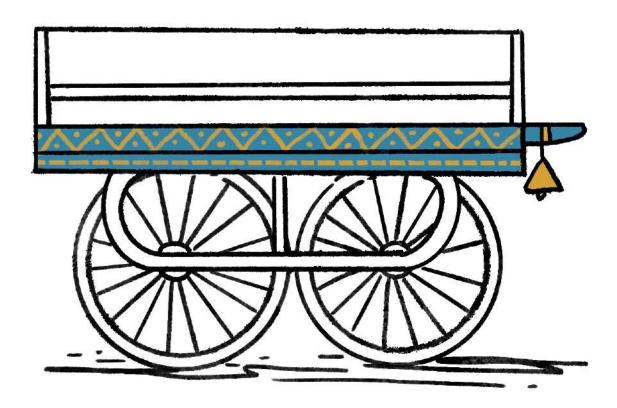
Now, it has been thirty-odd years down the line.

I do visit the street once in a blue moon, to be, each and every time, taken aback by the transformation it has undergone over the years—the crowd and vibrant scenes being its exclusive constants though.

The shopkeepers are overly careful of their customers and sales, and way business-minded. They hanker after money, by hook or by crook.

The masculine get-togethers at the snack corners continue to be held and, remarkably, most snack corners are managed by the women, dressed in the very same shiny garments with showy jewellery—their new and bold expression of liberty.

Oh, and the children! They still keep playing and running around, like cut kites flying wildly in the open sky. Their tattered clothes have been proudly replaced by local school uniforms paired with little jute bags.



However, sadly, I fail to trace my 'half-strangers'—the weary couple, the scarred lady, or the crippled teenager. I regret not trying to learn more about them, their life stories.

They will never know how some complete stranger—in this large, cruel world—cherishes their vague memories even now. Yet, I hope for, one fine day, to stumble across them and, finally, break the ice, myself.

All along, I vehemently miss Mama's smart bargaining, affectionate handhold, chirpy chitchat, and more; that educated, independent, confident woman taught me everything but how to not miss her once she is gone...

Anyway, when returning home, hiding a tear or two, I smile at my young daughter holding my hand tightly, like a child of two; and, wonder how quietly a place, as buzzing as the streets, can preserve people's fond recollections, memories, and nostalgia in their pristine beauty.

Truly, lives have changed, times have changed; but, love for people and places goes on.

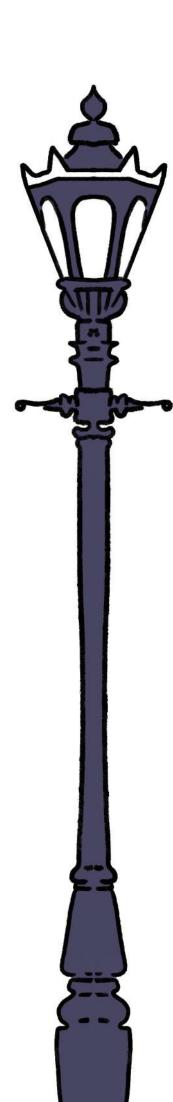
THE STREET ACROBAT

Mukul Kumar

He is moving upon his hands,
Upside down, his head
Shaking with name and shame;
His inverted intestines
Coil around his head, and
Steady it in balance.

Blind to the audience,
He keeps moving meticulously;
Even quite a while hence,
He finds that he is moving
Only over the concrete
And no currency; in not long,
He watches a horde of intestines
Furiously leaping out from
The undifferentiated bodies, which
Flog him back upon his feet.





ROADS NOT ELABORATED, BUT EXPERIENCED

Aditi Shah

Gunmetal-grey moustache, jaded crow's feet, the derby's spoke all concrete english with renewed sass polished into it by Charlie's Shoe Shiner by the side of the street, previously owned by a tinker. It's smugness at this second wiped by a clinker, the minute the heel of the shoe got a shoulder tap, turning to the sound of a stone on a saltatory path of the roughened street, kicked by tallest of the juveniles, sound in rhythm with the shout of the peppery old lady across, with the largest mango tree, the leaves of which covered the gravel of that street, like a baby tucked in. Kick rocks she had said, and so the boys took it literally. The lamp post next to her house still broken, was it by the cricket ball, his winning six? or was it a near miss of the rock aimed at her window by her unrequited lover,

her window by her unrequited lover, requesting a rendezvous? Shifting sides, to the dim corner, the only shelter from the ol' razzle dazzle of the feasting festivities around. This street, decades back, smeared with cinder of cigars of the rich, now with butts, like the road is made up of ash, built by the kids that once said they'd never be like this. Here and now, the rugged street and resistance of the sole hurt the foot, which could once unflinchingly run bare

through rocks to reach to raw guava first.

Gutter beside now seems closed, where will the 7 tailed rat from granny's fairytale go? Playing the cassette on the walkman in back pocket, tuning from the 1960's to the timeless, the town turning sepia, a turn to the right, dusty chalk, drawn hopscotch squares, a few jumps, even the limping leg could pass through. The two fingers that will braid hair and make bread, now in the street on the left, shooting marbles like some top dog. Pistachio painted doors with chipped paint, familiarly, by the frame, stood a father waiting for his kid, barely tolerating a minute past 9, a minute too late. Soon the tape reel stops turning but rather not bemoan after all at the end of the day, rewind and all these streets lead to home.

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.

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Magazine until January 2021.

Submissions are currently open for Wingword Poetry Prize.
Awarding a total of Seven Lakh Rupees annually to
budding poets, Wingword serves as a platform to express
themselves creatively through writing poetry.

The competition is open to children, teenagers and adults.
Visit www.wingword.in to submit your poems.

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