

• 50 UNTOLD POEMS FROM AROUND THE WORLD •

# WINGWORD POETRY PRIZE ANTHOLOGY

2020





# **Wingword Poetry Competition 2020**

Winning Poems

PUBLISHED BY WINGWORD PUBLICATIONS

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Cover Design by Wingword Publications

First Edition

Published & distributed in India by Wingword Publications

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## **Matriarchal Patriarch**

**Neal Hall**

fate is not in your stars  
but in part and parcel in you,  
that you are an underling

the hand he raises is made of  
the same hand you raised

you gave birth to,  
breast fed and raised  
his hand

fault is not in fate  
but in part, in you,

you, this grievous weight bearing arch  
shouldering a patriarchal fist

it's you who teaches the son  
it's his hand that sees in plain view  
your hand when you raise your hand  
against his sister, your sisters,  
your daughters-in-law

you can't demand your yoke be lifted  
while you yoke your sisters beneath you

fault is not in fate  
it grows in you, you gave birth to,  
breast fed and raised the man  
who raises his hand

fate and fault are not constellations  
but a distillation, a condensation of  
culturalized, traditionalized condemnations;  
birthed, breast fed to raise the back side  
of its hand to your daughter's face that she  
comes to know his will and her lowly place

it's you, your hard-handed, handiwork  
mandating domestic vocations over

economic emancipation from his high-handedness  
it's you, the pretty ones  
and ones the pretty ones say  
are not so pretty

it grows in you in hues of light,  
lighter and the lightest of white,  
it's your black specter cast from your black sun  
beneath which the contours of your  
dalit sister's darker darkness can't shadow  
your deep well waters of matriarchal  
privileges of light and lighter without being  
brutalized within inches of her life

it's you, your lipstick'd matriarchal arithmetic  
dividing, subtracting meager domestic wages on  
a niggardly patriarchal abacus that does not add up  
nor divide out evenhandedly from your hand

it's you, your hand that demands your  
handmaid sisters enter separate doors to sit  
lowly your floors before separate plates,  
separate knives, separate forks, separate glasses,  
made to eat separately sitting your cold matriarchal floors

too many their bodies your floors,  
sitting there

too many of their hopes your floors,  
dying there

and you wonder why he raises his hand at you,  
you, the mother of daughters and daughters-in-law,  
you who desecrate every universal law of dignity  
against your daughters, your daughters-in-law

fate is not in fault  
and fault is not in fate  
they're seeds in you to grow in you,  
your daughters, your daughters-in-law  
who grow to become mothers and  
mothers-in-law who violate every  
universal law of humanity against  
their daughters, their daughters-in-law



you can't demand the man above you  
to lift his yoke from you while you  
yoke the woman beneath you

it's his eyes of his hand  
that watch your hand clench  
a matriarchal fist of misogyny

it's you who teaches the son  
you who gave birth to,  
breast fed and raised his hand  
that demand the dowry,  
burns your flesh,  
acid splashes acid to you  
and your daughter's face

it's your hands, it's in your hands that  
first uncle's hands first rape your first daughter  
for the first time and her tears cry to try  
to tell you for the first time and your first reply  
to her tear-filled eyes is to bear this and  
bury it in the wounds of her womb and  
never speak of it a second time

fault is not in fate  
fate is not in fault  
but in part, in you,  
growing in you that  
you are his underling

it grows in you, you gave birth to,  
breast fed and raised the man  
who raises his hand against you

fate is not in your stars  
but in part and parcel in you,  
that you are an underling of  
your raised hand against you

## The Killing Fields

Zarin Virji

An evening.  
just another evening chore  
collecting animal fodder by the ripening rice fields,  
the woodsmoke from the distant dwellings winds its way up;  
the sky darkened, the shadows lengthened, her steps quickened  
while her plain cotton dupatta gathered the evening breeze.

The same evening.  
just another evening out  
for these four men, gelled and jeans-clad,  
mounted on their diesel chariot, their eyes roved right and left,  
settling on the girl whose head was heaped with hay;  
just the tonic they needed, quite a prized quarry.

This gang of neighbourhood louts,  
savages or beasts, call them what you will,  
they circled, they hooted and dragging her further afield,  
they looted, soiled and ravaged her clothes, her flesh, her innards.  
The more she bit, the more she screamed, the more she dug  
her nails into their muscled forearms, the more they squealed,  
with deep grunts, guffaws and name-calling, they finished,  
not forgetting to twist the dupatta around her neck;  
their feudal swagger was heightened to bursting point,  
after all, a vital lesson's been taught to the girl and her kin.

Rag doll-like, her flailing limbs fell silent, bit by bit;  
the rice stalks, crushed and dehusked,  
lay waste beside her but the liquid, viscous red,  
trickled and seeped into the soil in preparation for  
the rabi crop - will it feed and breed yet another crop of savage beasts?

An incident.  
Just another incident.  
It happens. Not only in India.

## Father's Shirt

Gopi Kottoor

Father's shirt  
Pegged on the clothesline.

I remember the day  
I wore my father's shirt  
Bulging at the arms  
And his soft paunch,  
Where I imagined the globe,  
Spinning  
As I lay by his side  
Hearing him snoring.

His snore  
Had a certain kind of bird music,  
Slipping somewhere along the bough,  
To a bright sudden frog croak.

And when he woke,  
He would take his bath,  
Run to the prayer room, dripping,  
Almost naked,  
Comb his balding head,  
As though it was still full of hair,  
And slip into his  
Terylene shirt

The one I wore,  
But never told him about  
Bulging at the arms,  
His paunch.  
How I became that day,  
His secret ghost.

My father's shirt,  
Pegged on the clothesline,  
Wet,  
That mother forgot  
To take back inside  
From the pouring rain.

## Camphor

**Bhavya Malhotra**

my grandma uses camphor  
to start her ritual of praying  
to greet the goddesses  
revered by every thing living

come diwali my sister and I  
are loved and prayed to:  
because we are saraswati  
and lakshmi; wealth and wisdom

on other days her ripped jeans  
tears the family apart and my blouse  
too deep shows the cleavage of my own,  
and of society, and then, agony awaits the streets  
while guilt enjoys the view as if on a retreat.

the same camphor lights a fire  
that is too hard to put out  
she doesn't know that fire is  
both: warming and consuming

## Fragrance

**Karishma Padia**

My father changes his perfume often  
The clouds  
Bubbles of exotic smells  
Announcing his arrival wherever he goes

He's territorial about his expensive scents  
Telling us off for sneakily using too much

Taking from him feels like a sin  
We do it regardless  
Bathing in the mist  
Walking around with our noses in the air  
Till sweat wins over by evening  
And we're back to earth again

My mother's fragrance is more reliable  
Pond's talcum powder  
Doused heavily morning and night  
Routinely building up in our AC  
Leaving the repairman coughing in clouds of white

It has no airs  
It's easily forgotten but always there  
Soaking sweat relentlessly  
Neither demanding acknowledgement  
Nor asking to be used carefully.

## **Fuck Boy Math**

**Dyondra Wilson**

Add one chick  
Take away another  
My math game strong with  
“I’m not like that dude” or “I love feminism”  
Raise my chance in a power of seconds

I multiply my lies by the 100th increasing my decimal and rounding out the edges  
Divide my clothes by hers and we both back at zero  
Finding her slope I make her feel good as I hit my plateau  
“Hey girl, why you so emotional?”

I brush off her y as I get my x  
Adding on more women than I have eyes  
No need for fingers as I keep tabs in my head  
And my hands on her thighs

## Achaar

**Aditya Vikram Shrivastava**

Grandma scurries across the balcony  
with her walking cane in hand.  
Lazy city monkeys sit on the edge  
of the parapet, feasting on raw  
mangoes spread out to dry.  
They play with pickles, sunbathing,  
the tips of their fingers colored  
golden in turmeric and spice.  
On the clothesline, in the claws  
of steel clips, an old sari hangs  
loosely, fluttering over their small heads  
as the mother monkeys pick lice.

They tear the clothes into halves,  
granny winces, shoos them away  
with all the loudness her breaking  
body can muster, a prayer more  
divine than her evening shloka,  
until her voice cracks at last.  
She keeps beating the marble floor  
with the long stick that is  
bent at the end like her back, till  
all of them flee, become a distant dot  
in the glare of that hot, quiet afternoon.

She picks the scattered pieces of  
unmade pickles and checks them  
for teeth marks. Unpins the torn  
bedsheet and the torn sari,  
carries them inside.  
Her eyesight has grown weak,  
and she can't sew it back.  
So she holds it in  
her shaking hands, and cries.

The fruit vendor hawks his lorry  
on the clustered street, grinning  
at her when grandma peers  
out of the window, asks the price.

Her lungs shrink, wrinkles deepen,  
Dasaratha weeps under her eyes.  
The pickles should be ready  
before the kids arrive.



## Not a word

Keya Bergeron-Verma

Conversation slips into the emptiness between  
sidewalk tiles and sofa cushions,  
grows old  
forgotten,  
unseen.

Listen:

a shy wind picks up,  
permeates the vacant folds of day  
that crave whispers not uttered  
by withered people who know  
that losing sleep is finding time  
so they collect the darkened hours  
following themselves back to houses they once knew  
where the trees spring taller than the papers at their feet  
and the heat is bearable because it once was born  
and the air doesn't smell like half-filled suitcases and foreign shoes  
but of lemons  
and midnight  
and silence testing time,  
waiting on park benches  
that have seen too many faces speak  
but none that stop  
for a moment  
to be.

Breathing is a business  
the price of air is high  
why waste it on words that

fall

linger

say nothing at all

and are gone.

## My Dad's Visits to America

Neethu Prasanna

They say, India: That is a mini world; And when my dad used to visit me, a mini India used to come along with him, hooking the fish of it in a dilapidated banana leaf, wearing an uncanny

urgency to come first, slum in the armpits pushing the heat out, coalescing into a cologne, blocked somewhere between inners and a blazer. Surge of pickles about to burst, contained well within

the pots by shackles, tapes, whacked by batons, belans, silenced even in peak altitudes to look like nothing ever happened. Ankle-torn socks covered with elite Woodland shoes, whose last letter is a t

instead of a d which nobody can really spot, other than me, since he had bought me many Adidaz, Pume and Tommy Hilfigr before. Jingle of aluminium molds, which are the future of a thousand

idlis, smoke and love, absorbed by spongy electronic carriers and wires; Never shown to the mist or the skies since they're born are the fries, the fritters, taken the shapes of triangle or square in cartons, in tiffin

boxes, wrapped around by one round of paper, one round of silver foil, still oozing out their curiosity through the multi pads of cotton towels, touching every possible untouchables; For every hour that he couldn't

kill, for a missing headset wire, for an occupied lavatory, the back-pedaling it gives, for a waning boundary, it's unstoppable anxiety, for a sudden lift, a doodle was donated to his servant's son's experience certificate. His

dexterity with tight knots is remarkable. In spite of all the turbulences, it kept the adult's night creams and children's DVDs, well within their territories, though both were compartmentalized in the same bedsheet.

How much time he could have taken to send back with the driver, that excess baggage which included my books, some grains, all nodding happily in the trunk, having sent a deity, agarbattis and a mini pooja mandir abroad?

## **You're Allowed to Leave**

**Rhea Johnson**

It is impossible to shake off the pigeons  
from their dogged grasp onto everything,  
the loft, the terrace, the roof-  
the loft back again.  
That blue-grey huddle,  
that wooden whir always wheeling.  
Nothing can make it give,  
to leave and not look back.  
Haven't I chased enough ones to know  
that a stone would only send them so far  
as to half-moon right back?  
Have I not wondered so much more  
if they wouldn't, just for once  
in a long while,  
surf the wind that blows  
or perch on a branch or ledge,  
not for anything else, but simply because  
they liked the way it caught the sun?  
Is that what I should have done too?

## The Plague

Rhea Gupta

I access the apocalypse  
through the guard  
of screens;  
a labyrinthine virtual insanity.  
I exit multiple tabs  
of reality  
with one touch  
I order around  
with one click  
I mindlessly scroll  
past news articles  
living through my black mirror

as a passive,  
ever-ravenous consumer,  
my reality is governed  
by reductive, condensed headlines,  
dehumanizing numbers,  
graphs and pie-charts.  
I navigate  
through a capitalistic jungle -  
hissing coils  
of social media advertisements,  
spider-webs  
of IDs and passwords,  
insect-like buzzing  
of text messages in chat boxes,  
a torrent  
of OTPs,  
rabbit holes  
of online propaganda;  
my world is a whirlpool  
of alphanumeric seductions  
and blaring rhetoric -

“We are all in this together”  
Are we?

Easing into the sheer abnormality  
of this ‘new normal’

seems smoother  
on a Saturday evening  
with a piping hot pizza slice  
between my moisturized fingers  
and my air purifier  
softly cooing in my ears  
as my house-helper sweeps  
leftover crumbs off the floor.

Escaping the horrors  
of a global pandemic  
only takes a split of a second  
and the soft tap of my fingers  
against my remote control or  
my cellphone or  
my laptop  
or I turn up the radio  
in my car  
as I rush past  
the ribbed-pot-bellied  
lying on the pavements, zombie-like;  
the music drowns out their silent screams  
and the stench of decay  
floating through the air.

I conjecture  
they despise me,  
as they tap their dry fingers at my car windows  
for a couple of pennies  
to get through another night,  
or perhaps  
they'd give away everything  
to be who I am.  
I'm both Satan and God in their eyes.

I'm both a detractor,  
as well as  
a beneficiary  
of this gaping divide.  
The plague  
is in the system,  
in my system,  
in everything  
I see,

touch  
and consume.  
This contagion  
renders invisible  
the social distance  
between the classes  
in the minds of the wealthy,  
whose ignorance and avarice  
no sanitizer can deterge,  
whose hands  
no soap can rid  
the proletariat's blood and tears of,  
whose bank balances continue  
to skyrocket  
faster than the pandemic cases  
as they transmit the virus  
of exploitation  
through their masks  
of online donations  
and exhibited philanthropy.

I wonder  
if there's any pharmaceutical company  
developing an antidote  
against this universal pestilence,  
thriving  
on the dehumanization  
of the necessitous.  
I wonder  
if my lyrical criticism suffices  
in fighting off the infection  
of consumer culture  
contaminating my head.  
I wonder  
if I'm any different  
from those  
I showcase contempt towards  
as I type away elaborate words  
on my laptop,  
in my air-conditioned room,  
with a belly that's more than full,  
in a language accessible only to the privileged.  
I wonder  
if my wonder is substantial enough

to save a world  
afflicted by hierarchies.

I wonder if  
“we are all in this together”,  
are we?

## **We are safe**

**Ipsita Banerjee**

The rain lashed the walls of my face  
Each drop piercing the skin as I chased  
The old unused tent that threatened to fly  
Off the terrace. Someone gave that tent  
To my daughters for them to play with,  
And there it stayed for years thereafter, out-grown,  
But not remembered to be thrown.  
The clouds raced their chariots across the sky  
In gun-metal grey and charcoal, as birds  
Flapped their wings against the breeze searching  
For a way out of the storm, a place to call home  
Even for a while. The wind blew in a flower  
from three houses down. The maid silently weeps  
As her daughter cannot be reached  
She did not go to the evacuation centre  
And the embankments have been breached.  
But we are safe here, in our homes.

Outside the cyclone rages, winds blowing  
In every direction, nature is so fierce, someone wails.  
Nature reminds us now and again how small,  
How helpless we all are. How small and useless  
How weak and ineffective in our mighty towers.  
Aluminium sheets from that fancy building  
Rained from the sky, others danced the streets  
Turning jagged corners as the wind  
Spun them in the air. Trees have fallen  
As trees in concrete tend to, their roots  
Not deep enough to withstand a cyclone. The wind blew  
In a flower from three houses down. How strong  
Are the roots that you cling to? Where do you go  
When you want to be home? Can you endure  
This devastation? Do you have yourself to hang on to?  
Do you seek or do you provide shelter in a storm?  
For we are safe here, in our homes.

There is a mother unable to feed her child  
Who feeds her hunger with drain water tonight  
A father that carries the world on shoulders  
That never have shuddered in delight.



Then, of course, there is Facebook  
Asking, are you safe in the cyclone?  
Have you kept your distance, have you been spared,  
The whimsical vagaries of nature, are you home?  
How are they, those who were walking?  
Those whose homes have been washed away?  
The wind has no sense of direction, it blew  
In a flower from three houses down.  
But where does the blood and water flow?  
These are things we only debate and discuss  
Talking in hushed voices, watching, wide-eyed  
Videos forwarded in clusters.  
You see, we are safe. In our homes.

## Amma can't cook

**Nila Lenin**

Overcooked rice sprinkled with leftovers from yesternight  
carefully crammed into her little lunch box,  
spared no effort to embarrass themselves  
among lip-smacking pickles and spicy Mughlai  
from Devi's and Aisha's,  
adorning the lengths and breadths of their classroom lunch table,  
whose flavoured aromas sculpt another dimension  
with no friendly facades to hide behind and smirk.  
She lowers her head,  
a matter of utter shame,  
her Amma can't cook.

Too much spice or too little salt, never too perfect,  
for the taste buds had a tough time dealing with her mixtures.  
A hair strand uncaressed for so long, that jumped to death  
or a tiny pebble eloped from the ration shop, a souvenir unasked-for,  
two meals a day provided a shelter home  
for the undesired and the lost.

From braving the breadline  
to breaking the bars to make it,  
class, caste, gender, you name it,  
Somewhere between leading dawn to dusk,  
mining multiple jobs to make ends meet  
and customary yielding to nocturnal liquor-scented slaps  
and choke marks that cling like a tattoo  
around her long scrawny neck,  
day-to-day offerings in vain for their only child's sake,  
Amma kind of forgot to tend to  
frowns, giggles and get-together belly laughs  
that forever mouthed,

"Amma can't cook."

## **Kali's Dance**

**Navjyot Kaur Vilain**

The Mother has stirred  
From the dark night of destruction  
In the wake of tyranny  
Amidst the denial of the sacred  
She has arisen  
With a surge of rage in her veins  
And with divine justice in her heart

Be warned  
Her howl resurrects the silenced from their stupor  
Her eyes burn to the core of the countless crimes  
Unveiling dark paradigms and darker narratives  
And layer upon layer of lies and lies and lies  
The heartbreak, her shield, her force to shatter the madness

O the primordial force! the Goddess of goddesses ! The Black One !  
Noble titles bleed away as her feet stand engaged in virtue  
The warrior untamed, loyal only to the source  
She needs neither consent nor ceremony  
For she, the rightful guardian of destruction  
Guided by ferocious wrath and fierce love  
Armed with fearlessness in the face of ignorance and hypocrisy  
Fuelled by the injustice to the spirit of the soul  
She strides upon the violation of the land and the death of the truth

As humankind sways to the beat of disorder  
Wings of the world clipped by the vultures of deceit  
Her bare feet tread upon the ashes of arrogance  
Uprooting an ill-authority of misdeeds and malice  
Crushing the foundations of a bloodsucking reality  
She has risen to slay the predators might  
She has risen to sever the bondage of obedience  
She has risen in the name of freedom

She leads from the shadow of humanity  
From behind the curtain she clings to the lost souls  
She dances  
Destroying the infectious virus of greed  
From the foul scent of decaying minds  
She dances

To the crematorium of illusions  
Burning the pillars of power and privilege  
She dances

Unhindered flames purify versions of vice and hate  
The smoke purges sick structures of oppression  
She dances  
With the flow of her seasons will  
The dance of death and life and death and life  
Her rhythm holds no reason for he who cannot dance  
Within her passion for life and her honour of death

The unseen Majesty of love  
The ultimate restorer of righteousness  
Grounded within her timeless grace  
And ever blazing fire of life-giving abundance  
Planting the humble seed of consciousness within the heart  
From a love ignited by the calling of the truth  
More intense than the fires that consume  
A love more fierce than her fury

Defender of the light, bearer of the truth  
From the darkness she rises to rebirth the sovereign law

“Oh glorious Kali  
From the sanctity of your omnipresent love  
Evoke the alchemy of change  
And rebirth a braver new world”

In the name of death  
In the name of life  
And in the name of love  
She dances.

## My Land is Bleeding

Ambika Raina

It's been a long time now, two decades of existence  
It stung me before, it still pricks,  
These seemingly superficial questions.

The shell remains, I have the face  
I have the nose, I have the grace  
The shell remains, the only trace  
The only trace...

But still under the yellow maple,  
Or in loose dinner discussion,  
You'll ask me, hey, where are you from?  
It's a casual conversation.

It's a casual conversation, sure,  
For you the answer's easy  
But I will have to rack my brain  
How do I say,  
My land is bleeding?

Let's not intensify  
I'll take it slow, this should be breezy  
I'm from India! I say with conviction  
Traveled all my childhood  
Amusing answer,  
You probe further,  
Unsatisfied  
I know you are.

So Raina huh? Aren't you Kashmiri?  
Well. Congratulations. I guess so.  
Instant reaction - Wow! Exotic! I love roghan josh  
Well good for you, I'm glad you do  
I love it very much too.

Do you speak the language? No I don't.  
Ouch, but I still smile  
Where in Kashmir? Srinagar. Oh wow!  
Ouch, still smiling meanwhile  
Don't you go back? No I don't.

So where do you stay?  
I stay in Gujarat,  
In Punjab or Maharashtra..  
Just not in Kashmir.  
AWAY.

## Water's Story

Sonali Pattnaik

the falling from above  
of water reminds us  
that the story of water  
remains half told  
water gives, takes, dances  
and destroys  
it surrenders without  
relinquishing a drop  
of its power  
it's a paradox,  
a talisman of  
the truth in resistance  
do not let water  
and its generous falling  
trick you into believing  
that she is gentle and appeasing  
she flows, feeds and forms  
for herself alone  
water is held and holds  
without boundaries  
banks are contours  
to her infinite body  
your banks she is certain  
to break and overflow  
she is not made to be controlled  
through the years, ever so silently  
she will rearrange  
the mighty land's structure  
through her meandering course  
like love, water only  
appears contained  
the fount of all birth  
water never truly belongs  
it is not only fire that undoes  
water caught, chased,  
choked and harmed  
is self-damnation  
she will explode every pore  
of the parched firmness  
you stand upon

water is given to release  
and flow not to fall  
she will become you as you immerse  
in the end over your limbs fold  
the falling of water from  
above reminds us that  
water will not be caught  
let her be many,  
let her fondle  
and enter the earth  
to rise again and again  
she is here for love  
for it is not fire, but water  
that ignites many a hunger  
and ends many a thirst  
water, a testament  
to life's divine and delicious  
contradictions  
was here first  
yet her story  
remains to be told



## **I'll play the blues for you**

**Asmi Sundru**

Do you see the blues?  
Blue pages, blueprints.  
Flipping through our lives  
Trying to write it down  
Or write it off  
Blue erasers, blue pens.  
Make some mistakes  
Then delete it  
Or repeat it again  
Blue skies, blue seas.  
Limitless like our souls  
Tied to the tides  
Fleeting with the wind  
Blue detergents, blue dustbins.  
To wash off our sins  
And discard our trash  
Or fill it in our sad minds  
Blue nails, blue skin.  
Because in cold spirits  
All warmth is gone  
Replaced with illnesses  
I see the blues everywhere.

## 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.'

## Uniform

Susanna Correya

do you remember the day you outgrew those black buckle shoes?  
your toes were sardined inside them but you knew better  
than to complain about the serious lack of wiggle room.  
that grey pinafore stiffened into a sheet of lead.  
its straps hung heavy on your back and bent it out of shape.  
life was so dull in greyscale.  
your unoiled braids began to maneuver themselves  
out of the serpentine red coil of ribbon and untangle.  
(in retrospect, your back was not the only thing that got bent out of shape.)  
what about that garrotte of a tie?  
how promptly it tightened around your throat whenever it sensed  
an inflammatory mob of asterisks, hashtags and exclamation points  
charging towards the exit!  
(you swallowed a lethal amount of those.)  
it's a good thing you can regurgitate them now  
like the formulas and the facts you regurgitated  
on those answer scripts that were expected to be--  
what was that word they used?--  
uniform.

## **Horror of Lights**

**Probal Basak**

In a not so ordinary day  
someone somewhere somehow  
trumped up the plan  
to wake the world up from  
primitive darkness under its hood.  
As the world woke up to lights,  
too much lights around,  
it craved for even more  
like the colony of beetles  
flies to the smoldering wood.

As our world continued its walk  
into the horror of lights, the  
addicted eyes lost eyesight one day,  
and, the blind world laid an egg,  
unlike the one the firebugs brood.

## Streaming

**Kanupriya Rathore**

I like to make a fuss  
in picking a movie we  
will never watch because  
you want to touch me too much  
we argue  
over Nana Patekar's  
best work  
and for a moment you forget  
all about my breasts  
you are lost, in a fight  
you are now having with yourself  
about the brilliance of another man  
it is easy to like you then  
we lie on the couch  
the only solid thing, as you fight your nemesis  
my old bra, I am grateful  
for your neck and for  
the stray dog that is now ours  
I take a sip of your beer  
How come we don't have a song, I think, we kiss  
later, when you're holding my foot  
up against your chest  
I wonder, if I wore too much eyeshadow  
for a night of Netflix  
and this  
on the screen, Nana Patekar mouths  
the words of a song, I laugh  
maybe this could be our song  
We talk, about your mother  
how she forgets your name sometimes  
another beer for you  
that I drink most of  
the credits roll and we are washed in the  
light of names, many names  
and none of them are us

## **Family Tongue**

**Rahat Tasneem**

My father has many tongues,  
but little feelings to go with them  
and is sparse with his words.  
Maybe you don't need too many words  
when you have a miscegenation of languages  
at your disposal.

My mother is certain, and verbose in her monolingualism.

I struggle between my two languages-  
one found, one forgotten.

All of us still fail to understand each other.

## Riot

Elvin Lukose

doors latched shut from the inside  
he sits on whatever remains of the toilet seat  
at a roadside latrine  
smoking his flimsy cigarette  
watching the smoke ascend  
to irritate the halogen glow  
of a bulb that hangs hopelessly  
from a leprotic roof

the bucket is filling up to the brim  
drop by drop  
from the nozzle to the bottom  
keeping time  
in a suddenly timeless world

he can see the flashes  
on the door in front of him  
like a movie  
the civil barter of warfare  
of petrol bombs and molotov cocktails

the only company he has now  
are these buzzing flies  
fleeing from the clouds  
of phosphorus  
of gun powder  
and ash

he can hear the police  
the blaring microphones  
the battle cries of the street warriors  
the goons  
the guardians  
and the invisible line between them

he peers out of the window slits  
all he can see are  
legs running  
bodies darting from point to point  
some of them interrupted in their tracks



by a gunshot to their belly  
only to fall onto a puddle  
of their own blood  
soon to be motionless  
lifeless

he is getting used to the pounding  
on the outside and the inside  
there is nothing worth watching anymore  
his eyes haven't closed since 3 days  
there is no dream  
there is no sleep  
no night  
no day  
just flashes of amber  
and smog from the pyres

he sits back on the toilet seat  
staring at the little streams  
meandering between patches of moss  
on the moist floor  
spiraling into the closet  
the fetid stench is suffocating  
but bearable  
at least it doesn't smell  
like blood and fire here

the cigarette is shrinking  
down to the filter  
his last fix  
is about to end  
his eyes are wearing out  
his toes are pruning  
from the wetness on the floor  
he lies down, curled up, legs to his chest  
head to the knees, in his own little womb  
he can hear his mother  
singing his favorite rhyme  
like an angel stroking his weary head  
within a tactile memory

he still has two match sticks  
and one more cigarette on him  
as he holds its crooked body

trembling between his fingers  
and buries it back in his pocket  
for safekeeping  
for future  
no matter how long it is  
or how short

he will need to stay there  
for a few more hours  
maybe even days  
it looks like it will be awhile.

## ice-cream summer

Meghna Chatterjee

iv.

that summer, i  
held an ice cream stick between my legs, it  
stayed still for a while, then melted  
allatonce.  
god, that feeling of falling down a rabbit hole.

iii.

"write about love", 'write about love', write about love,  
to hide what you can't write about.  
come under this bed, it's dark and cool and dark

ii.

fingers, my fingers, some fingers, play a dangerous chess, look there's a hole  
in my dress,  
maybe we can slip through it like water,  
look there's a noose in my dress

i.

black mold on my teeth;  
lockjaw, self-imposed, but that's a given;  
we push and pull like an elastic band

## A Pot-Pourri of Email Openers

**Gunjan Nanda**

'How to kill Isolation boredom'  
'Sick of the inside of your house?'  
'New skills for a new reality'  
'New Normal: Picnic at home'

I wake up to the buzzing of a new email alert every morning  
'Feeling Stressed? Schedule self care with these 5 easy steps'  
Hmph. Stressed while at home? I think this is the best paid vacation I would have ever asked for

'Stay safe, Play from Home and win unlimited real cash daily'  
Hah! If I had a nickel for every email I've ever received like this one  
But wait, did you see what they just did? They're taking advantage of this golden opportunity of being home  
You're home, away from friends, maybe away from family, too much time on your hands, maybe too little because you're overburdened with WORK FROM HOME  
But for those lucky few, 'earning real cash' might just be it, a saviour in a physically distanced world

'Check out our exclusive selection of Face time ready shirts'  
(Because who wears pants anymore?)  
I think of the realm we live in, and the realm we need  
Much like the broken clock in 'Alice in Wonderland',  
perpetually stuck at six  
Are we stuck?

'Stretch marks? Cellulite? Veins? XYZ waterproof body makeup has you covered'  
Pretty sure I'll need this after eating tons of cheese-laden deep dishes and coffee cakes  
(Add to cart)

'Travel with your taste buds'  
Interesting! Always thought travelling was an actual verb.  
Although my palate does like the idea of being guided  
Thai for dinner? Naan and Paneer for lunch?  
Count me in, Virtual Chef!

'Why Physical Distancing might last for some time'  
Now this one got me thinking

See, here's the thing about distancing yourself from the world, you should do it anyway

Do it in a way which isn't obnoxious or nasty

Do it in a way that saves lives (politely)

Behaviour is the one thing we, as humans, have very little control over

Everyone is stressed out, fearful and anxious for their own health, we need to be sensitive and sensible Try not to be the town watchman

MOVE BACK, someone says

Didn't you just come back from one of your international travels, another one says '6 feet apart' was never this consuming

...

(Another email buzz)

Together at home: We may be apart right now, but in some ways we're more together than ever'

## Family Photograph

Nidhil V

a lonely camera looks on,  
at five imperfect people and five imperfect smiles,  
five imperfect sets of clothes and five imperfect stories,  
that have been paused,  
to steal this perfect moment, from time itself.

blinded by the flash, they huddle around the camera.  
dots of blue and purple, curtain their vision,  
and no one notices that there's five people,  
and only four sets of teeth.  
dadi said they're crooked, whispers my sister,  
crooked is ugly.

Lieutenant General Vohra beams from ear to ear.  
the wound below his eye is a battle scar,  
which he dons with, pride and honour.  
a badge, like the ones that grace his uniform.  
Undergraduate Vohra's  
gold dupatta, glimmering, like her 4.0 GPA,  
is wrapped around her wrists.  
her cuts reek of dishonour.  
they're from a battle,  
history books won't talk about,  
and she won't either.

my dad's heavy hands,  
rest on my shoulders.  
my dad's heavy eyelids,  
droop slightly, as he stares into the distance.  
my dad's heavy heart,  
suffers from undiagnosed eternal grief.  
my dad's heavy shoulders,  
haven't felt hands rest on them,  
since,  
my dad's heavy hands,  
set fire to a wooden pyre.

i see myself,  
happy, calm, still.

still.  
the me in the picture, isn't shaking his left leg,  
or drawing circles with his right hand,  
and no one can tell that my mind,  
has already wandered onto foreign thoughts.  
what would it feel like to devour a kebab,  
made out of a t-rex's flesh?

the photographer and my mom,  
are talking shop.  
highlights, exposure, gradients, contrast.  
his smile says that he is impressed,  
with the 45-year-old lady's knowledge,  
of Adobe Photoshop.  
after years of receiving fairness creams  
as birthday presents,  
she found her magic wand,  
in photo editing.

as we hang the family photograph,  
up on the off-white wall,  
someone calls it,  
"a picture-perfect family."  
i smile. my little sister laughs.  
this time, she can't help but show her teeth.

## A Backseat in Duronto Express

Lakshya Singh

It doesn't matter if the engine,  
sneakily crawls,  
or bolts like that cold-sandwiched air  
blowing past,  
those weary faces,  
dispersed on dull green, metallic benches  
when you are lying still,  
a dormant volcano,  
lips shunned , eyes-shut  
away from the sight of that glass window,  
on that upper berth 64-B1,  
which smells,  
rather fumes of someone familiar,  
of white-linen soaked in fingertips,  
vaporizing beneath that  
strangely cold, grey blanket  
coiled like the hair of that lady  
drifting in her late sixties,  
supping her tea in a plastic cup,  
glancing at the glass window  
which stares back at her like  
a cracked mirror.

With her back hunched as  
a crumpled sheet of paper,  
her name, age and a thousand other letters  
carved on her round face,  
the ticket collector stares  
at the blurriness of her eyes:  
a perfect identity card,  
passes a faint, nearly invisible smile  
and then moves away,  
near a couple with an  
over-zealous toddler sucking  
the nipple of his milk bottle,  
and babbling occasional "Amma, Appu",  
which fades away in the bustle of the tires,  
his mother, dressed in her khaki-kurta  
probably watching dunes fall back



into little grains of sand on her cheeks,

his dad, pretending to read a book,  
while rubbing his son`s back.

Upon his arrival,  
they sit befuddled  
as an unhinged door,  
she vigorously searches her handbag,  
he lays hands on his narrow pockets,  
nothing, mere lumps of rock  
tanked like an empty silo,  
outside their window,  
inside their throats.

They unzip their luggage ,  
bags shut open like their mute mouths,  
clothes heaped over -another  
like buried, unspoken words  
“It will be fine,  
we`ll be fine,  
you`ll be just be a video-call,  
just a few semesters,  
probably then a 9-5 job away.”

They check over his little pockets,  
the little fingers, those curly hairs,  
the bottled milk, nothing.  
mere ghost spaces  
and bones intertwined into one.  
The TTE mumbles and moves away  
with a slight hand gesture,  
rather a sympathetic nod  
read as” Its okay, I understand, anyways.”

It doesn`t matter if the engine  
whistles or  
silently drags itself with  
a thousand bodies floating  
through time and space,  
when those fluorescent lights are already shut,  
the pastel blue curtains drawn and  
that bottled milk spilt on the floor.

## A Letter to One Returning Home

Aditya Saha

Plant your steps softly dear  
for the fallen leaves may look  
familiar brown and homely old -  
but the street has a coat of tar new ,  
a new pair of potholes few steps  
from the lamp post standing beside

Hush dear, don't fish out from  
your childhood days of playing truant,  
the name by which you used to call that  
street of your favourite sweet shop  
beside that stout alphonso tree with  
welcoming boughs and a shade of respite  
nor don't you pay your dues in here  
with your old notes 500 or 1000  
(saved aside from what your relatives  
thrust into your hands during the puja)  
for they are good for naught but origami

ask that atm kiosk standing there  
by the turn of this street  
about how he had to cope up  
with the unending lines from  
dawn to dusk as the entire nation  
stood sweating with bowed knees  
and trembling upturned hands  
just as one stroke of twelve on clock  
on one cold November night  
turned pockets of country men  
to trash , as bunch of promises, men  
and national assets sell out for cheap

wear your sweater tight dear  
for the winds blow bitter cold  
and not just the thermometer  
but the gdp shows drops  
however the jawans are on guard  
in the glacier outpost of Siachen  
surely you could learn a thing or two  
of sacrifice and self reliance

from the brothers putting their lives in  
the crossfire of hostile neighbour

Step aside dear , you might get lost  
in the crowds rushing about  
for they are seeking their identity  
in midst of lists questioning their existence  
temples and statues rising up anew,  
cities changing names,  
paper notes acquiring new colors,  
bills diverting your attention

Put on your mask dear above your nose  
for many have lost their sense of smell  
either in literal or in figurative sense of words  
or like bio hazard many have been dumped  
stay back in favourite corner of your home  
(unlike the scores of migrant workers)  
with a note of thanks to the farmers who  
turn their sweats to keep your nutrition intact  
you can afford to live on your bank  
and stream the old Masakali on Spotify  
for you are not locked up without internet

## **Bird died at the edge of NH-22 on a national holiday**

**Diya Kandhari**

Bird died on NH-22 on a national holiday  
and grief fluttered into an inconvenience,  
a sliced open pigeon wing, bruised mantle, crushed beak  
against asphalt; the vertebrate sticks out like flawed timing.  
The neighbour's children have paint on their faces; an unfinished celebration  
They complain about the vacuum cleaner that fell into disuse after the last death  
about how the house is still filthy, humidity clinging onto shelves like an omen  
Mother says today wasn't the right day for death  
You see grandfather has lost his driving license  
which means mother has to drive him to and from the the highway.  
Bird died at the edge of NH-22 on a national holiday.  
Bird died on a highway no one drives upon because of the drunk civil engineer in  
1940s  
Bird died and here we are, and mother says bird should've died another day  
Stacked up deaths are easier.  
The distinctness of death is what makes it painful, it's peculiarity, of location and  
cause  
Aunty died on a hospital bed from heart disease, uncle drowned in a lake,  
  
Mother says bird should've died tomorrow  
But tomorrow is Mimi's ballet recital, and day after is national cookie cutter day  
And the day after the day after, is significant because it's day after  
Bird died on NH-22 on a national holiday and grief fluttered into an inconvenience,  
because it was always meant to.

## Hello

Shristi Sainani

I did try and say hello  
Outside the butcher's shop,  
Where they also sold in bulk  
Marigolds strung to beetle leaves.  
You seemed to be distracted,  
Perhaps looking at the dusky shepherd

Herding cattle on the right,  
Magenta saree shop on the east,  
From the incense scent  
Or the vermilion ruins of chewing  
You stepped in.  
I did try and say hello  
But the traffic was too loud  
The buses sped fast  
Crows called above.  
My hands, tied with heavy jute bags.  
There was muck on the streets.  
I did try and say hello,  
But it vanished  
In between.

## **Crimson Cup**

**Prateek Joshi**

Twilight. It's gray, and I have an objection to tea —  
in the hours, two of which have passed fleetingly.

A wish to be anywhere but here presses me  
My syllables ache, disjointed

The market is in disarray, and the inns are closed  
I took a nap to forget the boredom, but a noise knocked me up  
Once the owner of a bar saw me slipping out the window  
Since, I have grown an ear in my belly

I am listening to the blood mix in my spleen  
All feuds return in the gossips of servants  
It is getting too warm to wear pants.  
Forged paintings in my bedroom color my clutter.

What did I tell you? It's twilight, gray  
and I have an objection to tea?

Two hours have passed fleetingly.  
It's past daytime now, and I can't keep denying a cup of it.

## **We the hoarders**

**Qubra Rather**

The soothsayers with their crystal balls and the tarot readers gazing at their cards, are irrelevant here.

Even the weatherman has realised the futility of his gauges and barometer.

The famine of hope being seasonal like the monsoon,

Brings in the need to feign plenitude to cover up for paucity.

Rendering the institutionalised apparatus of hoarding, an indispensable skill.

Hoarding for the cold winter.

Hoarding for the bloody spring.

Hoarding for some viral invasion, anew.

Hoarding groceries along with worries and pain and guilt.

Hoarding good memories to live through tough times.

Hoarding the unfinished work-in-progress of dreams.

Hoarding courage to carry the carcasses of being.

Hoarding relics of life to handle the crossover with death.

These reserves of, overwhelming fear, blood curdling resentment,  
milk fermented by the sourness of hearts,

left over bread of yesterday which just couldn't be gulped down,

pots of tea still brewing with anger,

drugs to bring on bouts of apathy,

buckets of slime, stress balls and fidget spinners for the more cautious,

all become inventories in – The Warehouse of Rage.

In the cold storage, rage remains rage.

Sometimes processed into numbness. Sometime action.

Sometimes death. Sometimes the living dead.

## Pandemic Salvations

Riniki Chakravarty Marwein

our neighbour's elder mouth bells  
at the door, announces his wife  
he titled on the internet. her cheeks  
of country virgin fresh  
now have a leader, they meet  
our assumed aura of spinsters.  
his elevated expression swells out  
more tongue about his other  
salvation by newly heard online healers,  
he adds they have tagged him  
one of our town's latest corrections.  
we noise the part where his name  
is floating their marquee with our duty  
to inform our homing one of us upstairs  
who is now in pathogenised demography.  
we are eager to also offer our apologies for  
having to miss his prayer before two cups of tea  
to celebrate his third matrimony, but the end  
of our pandemic sentence made long  
by mother tongue converges on his wife's  
teenage speed with which she slings  
her own lightness from his side  
to the street. he mismatches her urgency  
with polite charge towards her waiting  
for him but in a hurry, her see-through kerchiefed  
eyes passing through closed window parts  
of our home's body. we watch his Bible-  
fattened pocket switching parts  
to let his right hand crawl  
back to grease her story.



## Collision

### Indra Hatpins

I~

You~

Rise from a land of the mythical kind,  
a paradise hidden behind the white man's lie,  
which is only  
his story, a most devious study,  
a viewpoint that fumes in colonial envy,  
adopted by seditious pundits,  
scholars whom I cloak in air-quotes,  
the leftists, the seculars, the urbanised Naxals~

Call us anti-national, the usual suspects,  
alas, our clenched fists defy governments  
and their bent narratives, not the Republic,  
deception with a forked tongue,  
the serpent that slithered out of Eden,  
if your twisting coils smother our critical lungs,  
it's only natural of us  
to struggle for freedom~

Cities crumble when these pesky radicals  
assemble for a peaceful rumble,  
their roots, buried in home soil  
to suckle dry that fertile grind  
trampled under ruthless hooves  
of a thousand years of invaders,  
a disease of weeds to sully  
the Sanatani garden,  
foul like a burka to dull  
the belle of Dharmic tradition~

Subtle Islamophobia  
is the new orange,  
pupils of Jamia  
need more than just a bandage,  
their image punctured  
by venomous drips of news media outlets,

blasphemous,  
like serving beef to customers,  
stomach this instead and get upset:  
the irony of blindfolds on Lady Justice~

A crippling of righteousness,  
political correctness has forgiven too many wrongs,  
minority appeasement trafficked in violet fingertips,  
but not anymore,  
for my awakened spirit  
sparks into an amalgamation,  
I electrify the revolution,  
a desi renaissance, the spicier version,  
a glorious reinvention of the Motherland,  
painted with indigenous passion~

As bloodshed and tear gas shells  
litter the Nation,  
pellet prints carelessly sprinkled  
like misplaced freckles across torsos and faces  
of citizens, guilty and innocent,  
the due process of law, a fading wall  
once crafted to protect us all,  
before it erodes into figments of imagination,  
we'll arrive as reinforcements,  
ready to write the last stand like Stephen.

## “Ü-This Poem Starts Here”

**Imsanenla Jamir**

(For my grandmother and her grandmothers and her grandmother’s grandmothers.)

|  
The crow at your funeral  
perched on a naked tree  
Otsü<sup>1</sup> smiled- said  
you paid a visit  
You are the pots clanking  
at night- said  
you paid a visit  
The first stone at the graveyard  
The rumble among the bamboos  
You who went and never came back

||  
Your tsüngkoteptsü<sup>2</sup>-  
stained and painted with  
tigers, mithuns and heads  
Your ardour, your children, your grandchildren  
You walked barefooted to the capital  
An alien gun bound on your back

|||  
Otsü had  
ten mouths to feed and lull  
Empty ponds, dying fields- rape  
Cicadas mocking her- and  
her sully shawl  
Now grandchildren asks her  
Why women did not- and  
Why women should go to war

||||  
The leaf of life  
Our ancestors plucked-  
Plucked from the forest spirit

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<sup>1</sup> Otsü- Ao Naga word for grandmother.

<sup>2</sup> tsüngkoteptsü- An Ao Naga shawl stained with plant juice, or embroidered with pictures of tigers, mithuns and heads they (warrior) killed.

Ladder to heaven erected-  
erected our ancestors  
Plucked and ate clouds  
This lust for life

||||

Otsü, Obu<sup>3</sup>

My name-

Your namesake

But-

Wrapped my tongue, I have

Shortened my name, I have

Shrank, diluted my being

Rammed my pot of milk

With stones

and offered it to them

But-

They know, they know

They know It all

All the letters from A to Z

Except what comes after Z

Ü<sup>4</sup>

This lust for life

This pregnant lady's contractions

This naked child spread on my chest-

I welcome them all

This poem starts here

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<sup>3</sup> Obu- Ao Naga word for grandfather.

<sup>4</sup> Ü- The last word in Ao Naga alphabet

## The Play

**Mandar R. Mutalikdesai**

A lamb out to play  
Among un-eyed faces  
A lamb made to pay  
Just so it can play.

A lamb about to pay.  
The play, acceptance  
The pay, toffees.  
The play, the lamb  
The pay, the lamb.  
The toss of a coin  
The fate of the lamb  
Head: a punch  
Tail: a stab.

A lamb out to play  
A lamb about to pay  
The lamb, the gamble  
Terror, the outcome  
An angst, a wedding  
A tremor, the bride.  
A lamb out to play  
A lamb again to pay  
For a game of ball.

The ground, an abyss  
Endless, the fall  
To the faces, an appeal  
An appeal they see  
An appeal they un-see.  
A throw, the play  
An eye, the pay.  
A lamb out to play  
A lamb about to pay  
The lamb, the ride  
Emptiness, the park  
Bloodied without a trace  
Not a touch of steel.

A lamb, played in full.  
A lamb, paid in full.

## The Difference

Laudeep Singh

The poetry speaks itself about the poet  
and each word states clearly  
with what purpose and intent  
it has been written by the so-called 'poet'.

I don't like poets  
who cackle and grin all the time  
as there is no cloaked wisdom in that,  
irrespective of what their dreary optimism dictates them.

I don't like poets  
who are egocentric;  
the ones who write to advertise and sell,  
the ones who write to fill their coffers with money,  
and the ones who write for notoriety and respect.

I don't like poets  
who read in large gatherings;  
the ones who make a spectacle of their poetry,  
the ones who always only read out their representative poems,  
and the ones who recite less and spit more  
to generate a wider response among the audience.

I don't like poets  
who don't drink and smoke;  
the ones who are afraid to die,  
the ones who want to live a long successful life,  
and the ones who themselves call themselves 'poets'.

I like poets  
who cry all the time,  
who howl their heart out  
wherever they go,  
who embrace the glumness of life,  
and who denounce phoney sanguinity.

I like poets  
who are altruistic in their nature,  
who write for themselves,  
and who write for the contentment

of their own heart, mind and soul.  
I like poets  
who don't read their own verse  
but are always appreciative  
of the poetry of other individuals  
and if the need be -  
those who read only in small gatherings,  
who read out diverse chunks of poetry,  
who recite more than the audience can chew,  
and who feel pleased  
if no one understands and reacts to their poetry.

I like poets  
who indulge in all sorts of madness;  
whether it is the use of some substance  
or other means to nourish their creativity,  
who don't wish for a long joyful life,  
who themselves never call themselves 'poets',  
who are not terrified of death,  
who consider death as their darling,  
and who wait for their union with death  
till they breathe their last.

## The Maid

Sampoorna Gonella

The room sits in vacant silence  
as I slap a wet rag over the marble floor,  
a familiar wave of panic  
coating my skin.

Occasionally a chime announces  
a tickle of wind at its feet,  
the corner of the newspaper  
dabs the coffee table until  
it surrenders itself back to quiet.

The scream is all too familiar,  
a roar ripping through his lungs,  
the fragile silence in the room,  
and every pore of my shivering skin.  
It spews a volcano of words,  
rattling against doors, windows  
and walls  
of my heart.

I tug the ends of my sari over my face  
as madam descends the stairs in whispered strides,  
shoulders hung in resignation,  
fresh powder clinging to the bruise on her cheek,  
her eyes lift just long enough  
to register the swollen half moon  
scoring my eye, a remnant  
of last night.

She looks away from this mirror  
almost instinctively, before the truth  
can swell in her eyes.



## Evolution

Harshit Pratap

i.

There is a little marigold plantation  
In front of my house, across the road  
A woman comes there  
EVERYDAY  
In her oddly draped saaree  
With a sac dangling in front of it  
Apparently, she “owns” the plantation.

And every day, she plucks marigolds,  
Gold, orange, red.  
One by one.  
Pluck. Pluck. Pluck.  
PLUCK. PLUCK.  
P.L.U.C.K.!  
Every time she does it, it hurts me.

Why haven't the flowers learnt  
to not grow yet.  
I wonder.

ii.

It's not like I don't understand  
What happens to the marigolds  
Once they are plucked.

They become.  
Sometimes decoration,  
Sometimes garlands,  
Sometimes offerings  
(divine or not).  
And many would say,  
Aren't those beautiful to be!

And they'd wither away anyway,  
If they stayed on the plant,  
For too long.

And that's exactly what I ask,  
What's the point in growing,  
If dying is what you'll do,  
Eventually.

iii.

If we didn't have to wither,  
Would growing be worth it?  
Is eternity what we crave?

Well, far from it.  
Who'd crave an eternity of pain?  
Of being  
plucked.  
PLUCKED.  
P.L.U.C.K.E.D.!  
Who can guarantee me monotony?  
Not that that's any better.

So, maybe the joy of life is  
the joy of being  
plucked  
PLUCKED.  
P.L.U.C.K.E.D.!  
Some people don't see it,  
Others don't mind.  
I do and I ask.

Why haven't the flowers learnt  
not to grow?  
Yet.

## Departed

Digjam Sarma

father  
am i making you proud  
i have been a real good wife, haven't i  
silently taking in  
all the blows and burns  
since you betrothed me to him

the scaly belt torn in half  
skin branded names by red-hot poker  
my mark of honour  
my tears now feed his thirst, father  
more than my flesh  
look at me now  
look at me  
you son of a bitch  
look at your princess darling  
before this bullet thins your skull.

## Combing Through

Garima Behal

Combing through my wet hair,  
I pause.  
Broken strands fall onto my hands,  
my nape, my back, and onto  
the bare, swept floor.  
Dead. Scattered.

I know this is what happens  
when the comb of years  
runs through thin strands of memories  
housed in the partitions of my mind.

Combing through the years,  
I'm left with sliced memories  
like diced apples with  
their core discarded.

Once a part of all that I was,  
No longer a part of all I could be.

## **Beyond the letters**

**Dishika Deepak Iyer**

A poem is an ecosystem,  
Made by:  
Reefs of nouns, adverbs and other parts of speech  
Feasted on by tiny fishes of metaphors and similes,  
Predator sentences that devour these fishes,  
Zigzagging through punctuations and pebbles,  
In the setting of themes and motifs,  
Maintaining the delicate balance of a language.

## Paralyzed

Niveditha Shree

“Spiders.”  
“Spiders. Spiders” I tell you  
You asked the question but you are not really looking  
or listening  
or even hearing.  
“Spiders” I repeat once more.  
“That’s what I am afraid of” I say a little more loudly.  
A pat on the head.  
A touch of indifference.  
“Oh. It is going to be fine. Tiny creatures. Harmless.”  
And I go back to watching the shadows of the leaves,  
Dancing in the sunlight.  
These spiders, just tiny monsters under my bed.  
Did I forget to mention?  
The monsters aren’t under my bed,  
They are everywhere, every corner, every step  
Waiting to pounce on me.  
To rip me apart,  
Until there is nothing left,  
Except for a pile of bones.  
We are so lost, aren’t we?  
On this earth.  
Lost.  
Trapped.  
Paralyzed.  
What are you scared of?  
You ask me again.  
And I mentally go through my list,  
Trying to pick the right one.  
But what if I tell you,  
That I am afraid,  
Of everything,  
Of melting ice caps,  
Of dried rivers,  
Of forest fires,  
Of plastic filled oceans,  
Of simple conversations,  
Of soulless conversations,  
Of no conversation.  
What if I tell you?

That I am afraid of something beyond spiders,

Of the voices in my head,  
That are desperately waiting to be heard,  
What if I tell you, that I am  
Afraid of it all coming to an end,  
But it never really began,  
Did it?  
So when I tell you,  
That I am afraid,  
Of everything,  
Are you going to pat my head,  
And tell me that,  
“It is going to be fine?”

## **An ode to two girls**

### **Karmishtha Krishna**

This is not a poem.  
It is a vivid memory of two girls from 2004  
One nearly five, the other nearly six  
One with a bob cut, the other with a tight oily braid  
One who hated going to school  
And the other, who never had a chance to.  
One was me, the other was our helper's daughter  
We spent our days  
Dancing around a white wooden table on a green grassy lawn  
Nurturing a friendship that was too difficult for others to imagine.

'Two polar opposite DNA strands can't helix up together', they said  
'Those who can afford new clothes every month mingle only amongst themselves',  
they said  
And so, she began to mingle with only those  
To whom the fortunate ones donated their old clothes  
And so, I gradually stopped sitting by the glass window  
Waiting for her to come by holding her mother's old, ripped saree  
Waiting for her mother to salute mine and watch the mothers scowl  
As we galloped to our little corner -  
But before I knew it, it was all over.  
I moved on and made new friends every dusk  
And began sipping from porcelain teacups  
And she, was sent to Nepal  
For a more 'disciplined' upbringing  
And sadly, I have nothing more to recall.

But this, is not a poem.  
It is a painful memory of two friends from 2004  
Who were scarred by differences in privilege  
Which I, a child of the gentry refused to remember  
Until I heard that she'd come back in 2018.  
And I ran to the glass window once again  
To get just a glimpse of my long-lost friend  
And there she was.  
Brown and beautiful as ever, with her tight oily braid  
I saw the child in her alive  
The little fingers tightly grasping an old, ripped saree  
But wait –  
It wasn't her smile, it was her child's.



She was now a mother.

Let me remind you - that this, is not a poem.  
It is a memory of two coming of age girls from 2018  
I, who carried the weight of board exams  
And cribbed about the heavy burden  
And she, who carried the weight of a baby and an abusive husband  
And silently swallowed all her pain  
This is a memory of the day  
When two childhood friends met after fourteen years  
Through a glass window  
That somehow didn't shatter that day -  
With screams that echo  
When they cross each other in the colony even today  
Without a smile, or a word.

You see, this is not just a poem.  
This is an ode to two girls from 2004  
Way before one of them  
Was any different from the other.

## Creator and the Creation

Abhinav Shukla

The creator created man in his image,  
I have been told.  
The way I see it,  
The man created the creator in his own,  
A warm rendition of light,  
Was the answer of man,  
To the dark, perpetual cold.  
A drug that leaves my senses numb,  
To the finite that I am,  
Confronting infinity.  
A shelter that I built,  
Out of figments of my incoherent dreams,  
For myself in eternity.  
The creator created creation in his image,  
Was the story I was told,  
The creation created the creator,  
To its convenience,  
Is the belief I hold.  
Battered on the ground was creation,  
Inching to get back on its feet,  
A fiction was created thus,  
Beyond itself,  
An ideal beautiful,  
And convenient to believe.  
Born out of heathens,  
Nurtured by the mortals,  
Is God,  
An immortal art.  
A touch of insane,  
A hint of chaos,  
To preserve sanity,  
To bring harmony,  
In the forsaken homes,  
And the broken hearts.  
Why did the creation create the creator?  
Is the question I am asked,  
After burning in hell,  
An answer I bring unto you, at last.  
The man created God,  
In an image that was his own

For he was brave enough,  
To know his destiny,  
And coward so much,  
That he succumbed,  
To the fear of unknown.  
He carved God out of his heart,  
To be engraved on the stone,  
The path of the devil then,  
He embraced all alone.  
You can tell a lot about a man,  
From the God he worships,  
For the sins he committed,  
Stay forever in his heart,  
Confessions of his murders,  
Mumbling on the edge of his throat,  
Almost on his lips.  
The man created God,  
To bear his unbearable guilt.  
His dreams are cursed to an eternity,  
With the sights of those he killed.  
The stains and screams haunt him,  
From the blood that was spilled.  
To atone for the graves of his victims,  
Were the churches and temples built.

## Malum in se

Sneha Hegde

It's a chilly winter morning.  
The town is still asleep,  
in contrast with my bustling mind.  
My breath makes tiny wisps of mist as I shiver,  
and I pull my coat closer to my body.  
As I do, I feel the broken bottle shard  
resting in my pocket,  
and I wonder if I'll ever have to use it again,  
the way I did last night.

I stand in front of the sprawling building,  
feeling rather small,  
as men and women in khaki uniforms  
move about, tending to their duties.  
I ask myself if they'll ever be able to help me,  
as cases like mine, although common,  
tend to never reach them, and instead,  
are swallowed by the stigma that surrounds them.  
Even now, I can't help but to think of the shame and guilt  
that would be thrust upon me by the prying eyes of society,  
if my intentions were to become known.  
They wouldn't accept me, they'd be ashamed of me.

I jolt out of my thoughts and shake my head.  
As I turn to leave, head lowered,  
my eyes fall upon the ring on my finger, and I feel trapped.  
This could destroy everything that ring means.  
At the same time, I remember why I'm here.  
All the motivation rushes back to me, and my resolve hardens.  
I need justice. We all need justice.

I cautiously make my way inside, to the man behind the desk,  
his badge and medals displayed proudly across his shirt.  
I lean over to shake his hand,  
and he notices the scratches all along my forearm.  
I close my eyes,  
and begin to recount the harrowing experience of last night,  
how I was pinned down, the weight of his body cracking my ribcage,  
how I can still taste the gag that prevented me from screaming,  
how every inch of my body was explored while silent tears trickled down my cheeks,

how I tried to push him off, but all I got was a slap to the face,  
how I was shoved aside when it was over,  
all by myself, with only my thoughts  
and the sheet that covered me,  
how I was scared and all alone...  
As I relive the last of it, I open my eyes,  
expecting to see the outrage on his face.  
He says nothing for a second,  
then to my dismay, begins to laugh, his belly heaving with the effort.  
“Madam, you say he is your husband.  
Then how can it be rape?”

His words echo in my mind as I make my way back home,  
fighting back tears, and I’m barely able to digest it.  
My hands tremble as I unlock the front door,  
only to see the bottle shards still all over the floor,  
and him sitting on the bed, with his head bandaged,  
leering at me, knowing there’s nothing I can do to escape.  
My eyes fall upon the ring on my finger,  
and I feel trapped.  
“Section 375, Exception 2”

## **An Indian Tragedy**

**Satish Pendharkar**

Can you blame Laxmichandra and Babita  
For not having possessed  
Prescience in adequate measure to foresee  
The nightmare that was looming large?

Their solitary child Avinash was dying.  
However, they had pinned their hopes  
On the monuments of Super Speciality -  
The Taj Mahals of Medical Hospitality.

Shuttling from one hospital to another,  
Begging that their sinking son be saved;  
Racing through streets - their ambulance's siren  
Muffling the pitiful wails of their lad.

Yet everywhere encountering the trauma  
Of doors being slammed on their faces.  
The cruel discovery: One is an outcast  
In a city one regards as one's own.

The caring hands that readily caress,  
Cuddle, calm and coddle the affluent  
And the influential – those very hands  
Often crush the spirit of the multitudes.

Their boy on the verge of the precipice,  
They saw Hippocratic Oath-takers  
Turn hypocrites to shut them out, realizing -  
When one's untitled, one's not entitled.

Deflated, they resumed their leather-hunt  
Finally finding an oasis in the desert.  
Soon thereafter, calamity struck  
Snuffing out the flickering candle.

The ruthless world yet continued  
To extract from them a further price;  
For what greater sorrow can visit one  
Than one having to bury one's only child

Feeling awfully lonely, utterly hopeless

And terribly guilty, they stared hard  
At the gaping ground below before tying  
Their hands together to take the final plunge.

“It’s nobody’s fault” they had written.  
Incorrect. For, we as a nation failed them.  
So, what plans have we – acts of atonement,  
To ensure their deaths have not gone in vain?

## lassi, aam panna

Amrisha Sinha

curled fists fuse themselves  
into the warmth  
of clipped grass,  
tension easing into loose soil.

inhaling the empty wind  
of hell's own kitchen fire,  
you welcome it in.  
it's the wilting of lungs  
you crave now.

a year ago,  
when cool artificial air  
saved you from twig-like  
fingers and chins,  
when the soft whistle  
of a laugh was the only air  
you wanted to breathe in.  
closed doors, dark curtains,  
reflective glass  
and khus injected lassis  
- a small incubator  
for your open mouths  
and his gentle sway.

now you listen  
to the crackling of dried mint leaves  
above glasses of aam panna,  
hoping you could avenge  
your lost innocence,  
your past ignorance.  
while the sun illuminates  
your corpse,  
you wish  
you didn't know  
what it meant  
to feel smothered  
while breathing  
virgin air.



## The 6:12 News

Lawrence Fray

Covid keeps us apart.  
When permitted, going out is an adventure  
With masks and latex gloves.  
We must remember to keep our distance,  
Not to gather in groups;  
When queuing, to maintain a gap of two metres.  
Not to touch surfaces  
And to go home without delay. Even better  
To stay indoors unless  
We have good reason or in an emergency  
Forcing us to travel.  
So our days unravel.  
The days are hot, humid;  
We look up expectantly at the Delhi sky  
For the weather to break  
And the beautiful rain to fall and bring relief  
From the oppressive heat.  
Those who can, pray; a few believe, everyone hopes.  
So it has always been.  
Power cuts are more frequent as we stay confined,  
Cut off in a war zone,  
Besieged by a foe that does not discriminate,  
That shows no prejudice:  
Everyone's nemesis.  
Heavy clouds oppress us  
The air is still, the leaves on the trees mutely beg,  
Their palms open, waiting.  
The stifling heat oppresses, Covid stalks the land:  
Unholy alliance  
That sweeps people from the streets and sometimes from life,  
Keeping us trapped in fear.  
It is clear we cannot return to former days.  
Complacency has gone;  
We live in a locked down world of uncertainty.  
Now we must change our lives:  
Needs must as devil drives.  
We do not meet with friends,  
Family and colleagues; we stay in touch by phone.  
The ceiling fans circle,

Cleaving the palpable air, mindlessly spinning.

We remain in our shelters  
And wait for the All Clear signal that does not come  
Like the absent showers.  
We need to refine and redefine once normal  
Parameters of life,  
Redraw the maps by which we navigated years  
In accustomed fashion:  
With post-Covid passion.  
The monsoon rains are late;  
The grey sky withholds it's blessings from the parched ground  
While the plague stalks about;  
A dystopian vision made reality.  
Fake news proliferates;  
There are opinions, discussions, talks and debates,  
But there are no answers.  
The decision makers, those who have influence,  
Responsibility,  
Are often seen washing their hands. They sanitise,  
While we must watch and wait:  
We should recalibrate.

## Unholy Women

Madhu Shruti Mukherjee

“Why are you touching it?” cried Ma from afar.  
She came hurriedly to the altar  
And snatched the idol from me.  
“Don’t you know?  
Bleeding women can’t touch God.  
Bleeding women are considered unholy.”

That made me think-  
This wasn’t the first time I heard the word  
It was echoed at cousin Rita’s wedding.  
They blamed her  
For not bleeding on the wedding night  
And cursed her for the unholiness spreading.

Which reminds me- not very long ago  
I had offered alms to a woman  
And shaken her hand when Baba pulled me back.  
“These aren’t real women!” he cried.  
“These are just men dressed up.  
Don’t ever touch anyone from this unholy pack!”

And only yesterday  
We cremated my sister who died  
From the grief of bearing an unholy daughter.  
Her in-laws blamed her  
For being unable to gift them a son  
They simply couldn’t put their family name up for slaughter.

I realized I had been lost for some time.  
So I handed the idol back to Ma  
And asked her to look at me.  
"Don't you know?  
Bleeding or not-no matter who we are  
We women were born unholy.”

## the things we keep

Pritika Rao

a monkey slips his fingers into the leather bag  
strapped onto a black motorbike  
that belongs to a man who is taking photographs of the mountainside  
the culvert is sprayed with blood-red paan  
the graffiti of the poor  
the green shrubs have plastic debris beneath them  
stacked like glistening Christmas presents  
a few ripe jackfruits hang from the trees  
while some weaklings have broken and split in the carpet of dried leaves  
a stray nail from the plank of wood  
digs into my thigh  
as I place my order with a middle aged lady in a patterned cotton nightie  
we receive two cups of coffee  
that taste like diluted jaggery  
and a plate of pillowy idlis drowning in sambar  
we watch as a stray dog just escapes  
the raging wrath of a bleating van  
and barks defensively as it disappears around the bend  
the lady rushes to survey the commotion  
and we all collectively offer the dog our quiet support  
satisfied, he proceeds on his journey  
the monkey has gone  
the man returns to his bike  
he picks up a spectacle case and ratty keychain  
from the damp mud  
and rides off into the cool evening  
as we all re-settle into a state of calm,  
something catches the light in the distance  
the monkey tries on his new pair of neon sunglasses.

## **anxiety. poetry?**

**Aditi Upadhyaya**

I feel anxiety in my right foot  
in the middle of conversations  
at the dinner table  
doing my laundry  
solving an equation  
my right foot starts shaking  
suddenly, abruptly  
and I have to excuse myself  
I graze my fingers over my palms  
I count the number of things I can see  
I wanted to write a poem  
on my anxiety  
in the hopes it will make me feel better  
less anxious, even  
i am trying so hard to make this poetic  
but we can't romanticise this  
my anxiety is not poetic  
it is deadly, scary, dangerous  
it is not sacred, not beautiful  
so the next time  
my right foot starts shaking  
and I run away to graze  
my fingers over my palms  
I will just remind myself  
these are the same hands  
that bleed poetry  
anxiety is not poetry  
but my hands are  
and I will keep telling this to myself  
until either my anxiety goes away; or becomes poetry

## Nail

Anshu Pandey

There's a tiny crack on my nail.

"I've fought with my anxieties  
To nurture this beauty. No, I won't cut it."  
So I shaped it an almond leaving a tinier crack intact.

There's a tinier crack on my nail.

Days pass by and my silly self feels I've fixed the problem.  
I go about my regular business but  
Whenever I pass my hands through my hair,  
A strand of hair gets stuck in the crack.

Again.

And again.

There's a bigger crack on my nail.

That day in the shower,  
Completely unaware, my nail broke  
And got lost with the irreversible running water.

There I have it. A broken nail.

Why did this nail break?  
Why did it need fixing?  
The nail on the wall is quite sturdy,  
The one that has kept the clock stuck to the wall.

But then it's just a broken nail.

What about the other brokenness?

## **My Mother**

**Anushka Das**

my mother is decreasing

she tip toes barefoot about  
the house to not make a  
murmur of her existence

my mother is contracting

she nibbles at our leftovers  
until the morsels choke the  
base of her throat

my mother is dwindling

she has a shadow which  
attempts to detach itself  
and a reflection which  
strives to crack open the mirror

my mother is shriveling

she is a ghost wearing  
cheap moisturizer laden  
skin over appendages  
that rattle when she moves

my mother is condensing

she cries but within time slots  
to not allow the full throttle of  
her sorrow to manifest

my mother is recoiling

she stands at the edge of  
family photos such that one  
of her limbs is always cut out

my mother is shrinking

she has an arched back that  
curls more inwards as  
she makes up space for us

my mother is a frail framework  
of brittle bones and tattered tissues

she has nourished this house  
with enough love to call it a home  
but every corner bears shackles  
the size of her withering wrists

her larynx is a morgue  
with unsaid words  
rotting like unidentified cadavers

my mother is  
one-fourth  
the woman she  
could be  
three-fourths  
the woman she  
had to be

so I excavated  
years of generational  
expectations  
from in-between  
her vertebrae  
and asked her to  
straighten her spine

I told her that  
I will always look  
up to her



## **If Not**

**Mathew John**

If you would prefer death to poetry

Then, let a poem be

Among the waymarks,  
A U-turn

In the midst of stars,  
A black sky

Still alive in the silence,  
A querymark

In the field of vision,  
A teardrop

Somersaulting in the skydive,  
A dead leaf.

Published by Wingword Publications

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