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MANDA, MEHER

Busted Models

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Busted Models

Meher Manda

"Wipe out the paints, unmould the clay,
Let nothing remain of that yesterday."
Kamala Surayya

Here, Now and Again*

After Ilya Kaminsky, E. A. Markham

This is the chapter of a peaceful country.
In this suitable nation, by the divided border
a summer salad: a body that is now a headline
but you clip the sounds, smells and memory effortlessly.
The rest of us have declared truce with suffering
and edited our history to footnotes spanning
hundreds of years. We watch this peaceful
country, but do not see the gunshots. The body
is now freshly washed and free of guilt.
The sky is bright and the history up to date.

Nenu Kuda Ante

i too have been like you

some days i too have been / quiet pulped fruit on tongue / soft skin without bones to brittle / a celestial pull sealing the ocean shut / watching through a trench in the sky / cloudless with placid clarity i / tucked in the electric field of my blanket / sparking with bright splinters / my only ray of light / mother i too have been gathering dust / bound to my faithful silence / specks settling slowly on the surface of my body / torrential rain dug underneath / i too am exhausted of the volume / of the heavy downpour / of the words threading / vulgarly on puddled streets / time travelling and note taking / all this sadness poured into me / it is tiring to make voice / for other's foreboding / i have seen your shape / bent on a mattress / curved into a human foetus / tears gurgling at your mouth / in loud silence / i too have broken your body / snapped it into half softly / and seen you cry / a tune of carnatic melody / loudly playing in the background / your inaudible pain the great lesson / so here i am / watching this book of poems / here i am walking the streets / keeping to the corners / like you my feet land on soft puddings / my heels graze gravel / all sound suctioned to the core / my planet / bubbling / here i am watching a silent movie / here i am watching a woman / cut veins on her neck / with the butcher's knife / clipping runlets and streams / for irrigation / i will hold a bowl to her openings / fill her pain / before it all flows away / to the sea / of screaming

For Admittance

- after Nicole Sealey's Medical History

Before I'm dead and gone, I really want
people to know that you often inherit
that which you don't want.

I come from a family with no discernible
medical trauma, so spare the forms
for a moment please, and hear this out.
My father was the first diabetic in
a healthy family, pitter-pattering household
squabbles sent him running to deep fried
street food and all those years of blocking out
the anger; now a gentle cawing of conflict
sends veins popping on his neck. Varicose
blood vessels have irrigated blue channels
all over my mother's legs. She once had a
deep murmur in the chest but it was anxiety
she learned to hide, so she began to lift
bucketfuls of water for a dry household,
carrying weight on her legs, which is
why even in life-threatening events today,
she will only take small, unhurried steps.
My parents have loved and lost parents
to mortality counts, and cheap rumours,
so my father always stuck around with a job
that sucked the life out of him, never daring
for enterprise. My mother's father walked
one day and then never did for twenty
years, so even the smallest twinge of shooting
ache my mother calls lethal, because we live
in a world where people haven't returned alive
from a number of things like jobs / sleep / baths /
love / and my mother only knows too damn well
the consequences of taking things lightly. I,
in turn, take everything seriously, every snide
remark, stink-eye, disapproval I take to heart
and body like insomnia pills. I stay awake
long hours agonising over shameful moments,
and I have learnt to be hated without ever
asking why. I walk, vulnerable to death falls.
I imagine my death will hit me shoddily,
mid-emotion, jolting me out of wakefulness,
so I never allow myself too much happiness
at the beach or too much distance in the sea,
I take great pains to not take for granted
the safety measures on any mechanisation,
checking for locked switches, on-off buttons,
and power bolts. I believe nature is more likely
to kill me than man, so I keep equal distance
from both, like my mother who on her
first flight at the age of fifty was certain
that as luck has served her, she will plummet
to death toward the mouth of an eager shark,
like I who will never unfasten my seat belt
on a plane no matter how smooth its sailing,
it's only temporary. I don't know why my
parents are so scared of dying, when they
never really dug the living part. But I bear
great likeness to them in that I'm constantly
anxious of dying too, and this anxiety looks
like all my unwritten words in balloon font
growing inside my head, until one day they will
explode with all the gray matter and kill me
instantly. All this I will be unable to say
on an emergency form, so I carry a copy of
this poem in my wallet folds.

Sisters on Gravel

in all the games, we played secret roles you wouldn't want to be
caught dead in, dangerous, swashbuckling butter knife-flingers,
with our mothers in the kitchen, we took mythical old-timey folktales,
twisted them in over our heads, we swung genders, played heroes,
tucked our skirts between our legs, we disrobed, took showers,
and cut through water with leaps and punts like wushu champions,
landing clumsily on naked butts, with our mothers in the kitchen,
we mixed soap and glycerine, and blew rainbow bubbles down to
wishing wells, watched them fly deep down below, slinging rocks to
measure the danger, daring and rescuing the sine qua non of our existence,
our mothers in the kitchen, we touched gently our plucky teats, compared notes
by squeezing tightly between our fingertips each body, we learnt to hold
by holding the other, we discovered textures, patterns, curves and edges
by walking over our bodies, noting down the twists and turns, our mothers
in the kitchen, we took kitchen playware, filled model vessels with dirt,
we collected rocks, crop shellings, plant offals, cooked meals for devils,
we refused to play woman, wrote stories with snakes in them, the snakes
were our friends, our mothers in the kitchen deep-fried cornballs to tame
our energies, imagined us as mothers in training while, we yanked heads
off doll necks, we gave puppets crazy eyes, laughing witches-like, we
cleaved down plants from strange trees, rubbed their chunks on our shins
for magic, we played rough, we kissed roughly, we had to unlearn our kisses
to kiss others because we kissed each other ferocious, by choking pores,
we sucked the planet's air between our mouth, and poured it into each other,
our mothers in the kitchen, we loved with our bodies, our lips, we distilled
our love in secret homes, far into neglected backyards, my sister and I grew
to be unwomanlike together, to be everything our mothers in the kitchen were
not, so when my sister dropped my hand, she taught me my first lesson of
betrayal, when she sieved my name through love notes for a man, our mothers
stepped out of the kitchen to let me know—to be wild is to be temporary.

God-Fearing

A devout Hindu *ammayi*,
a reverent Christian *mol*,
a pious Muslim *larki*,
take over the last ass-flanking
cushioned seat of the bus.
In hushed secrecy, they open
notebooks with bare-chested
film stars pasted upon pages,
their naked torsos glistening
under the rushing afternoon sunlight.
The girls giggle with desire
and an almost feverish hunger
for food they have not yet been taught
to buy.

Kali

She welcomes me, blue coloured,
tongue smeared blood, four-handed
holding trident, conch shell, cutting
disk, club, ready to strike, her foot
clobbering the chest of a rakshasa—
our very own angry Goddess.

dear sister of mine / simmer down a minute / shrug off that tension / that unbending rage / and let's talk / angry woman to / angry woman / breathe easy / listen / despite my misgivings / my utter lack of faith in scriptures / hailing you god / destroyer of ego / checker of evil / slayer of deceivers / my body aches to channel / your superhuman wrath / my form stretches into stances / of fury / my tongue boldly / spits smack / without fear / without penalty / but you tire me so / did you choose to be / tasked with misleading me this way / did you ask to be painted on / ask for blood on tongue / ask to be named / the black one / indigenous menfolk to kill / a crusader on quest / to consolidate justice / do you know / your irate self on walls / notwithstanding / they always fan my madness / to sleep / to hypnotic dormancy / with fancy chatter / of systems and institution / of respect / due processes / they hail your violence / and cool mine / because they defer to you / and cast me out / is why you are / god / and I / a hunkered down image of / woman?

Soni

To purify is to remove, extract, expunge contamination.
Example: Purify oxidised metal by scrubbing rust off with a scouring pad.

When you set out to purify a society, you get to decide who is the contaminant and who isn't. The decision is dangerous because it always rids the world of something. Or some ones. For only those with power set about to clean the power-deprived.

∞

Militia is both : a supplemental force for government-backed army and a rebel force against the government-backed army. If you're caught somewhere in the middle, you're automatically a member of the rebel force, because you refused to align with the polity.

∞

To be Adivasi is to exist from the beginning of time.

Before colonisation, independence, governments, border forces, cement-blocked, forest floor-eroding industries, privatised foreign economies. Before military operations and counter insurgencies.

To be an original dweller.

When the Indian Constitution calls them tribal it gives them a tribe, a collective energy, a communal spirit of resistance. The fault exists, thus, in the language. It gives them power to resist, to survive.

∞

There are places in India, where law-licensed armies and law-prohibited armies battle each other over acquisitioned tribal land in an attempt for purification. These areas are taped Red Corridors. For obvious reasons.

∞

For lessons in our history, learn to read the scarred bodies of the countless women left behind.

∞

On October 4, 2011, Delhi Police arrested Soni Sori, an Adivasi woman from the Dantewada district in Chhattisgarh, a school teacher, a tribal activist, under suspicion of channeling money to counter-state militia. She was handed over from one state to another, and transferred to the Chhattisgarh state police in Dantewada. Upon receipt, she was stripped naked. Blocks of stone were found inserted into her vagina and rectum. Police-approved electrodes had left charred venular scars on her body. All this Sori documented in letters from jail.

∞

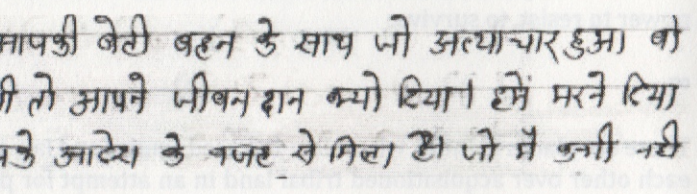
In 2005, after a Memorandum of Understanding was signed by the Chhattisgarh State Government for the construction of a steel plant, the Salwa Judum, a state-funded militia was initiated to counter the anti-state rebels.

Salwa Judum literally means a Purification Hunt in the Gondi language. The group did not fall under the jurisdiction of any law in their march for social cleansing.

∞

Jawaharlal Nehru too wrote letters from jail during the Independence movement. He broke free to become India's first Prime Minister. Then again, Nehru was not a tribal woman from a small district in Chhattisgarh.

∞



To the Supreme Court judge,
Was the torture borne by your daughter, your sister not enough that you have granted me the justice of life. You should have left me to die.

∞

You would have left your daughters, sisters to die. You would have granted them the mercy of death.

∞

No Indian woman born after the 1900s gets to achieve god-like status in this country risen from ashes.

∞

On February 20th, 2016, tribal insurgent Soni Sori, now a political candidate from the Common People's Party, was attacked by a group of men who flung an unknown chemical at her face. She suffered burns on the lower part of her face, and her eyelids remained shut for a long time after the attack.

∞

You use chemicals to purify a metallic surface. Do not apply the same rules to persons.

∞

Do not apply.
Do not app—
Do not a—
Do not—
Do n—
Do—

∞

Her face is a road map. On it, the government has barricaded clear lines for behaviour that they call pro-nation, and for behaviour they call anti. Parched rivulet paths swirl turns on her face. A borderline drawn with crude wire fencing rests on her face. Continuous army tank wheel tracks on her face. Bullets from state sanctioned guns have left drop-shaped pellet holes on her face. Dantewada soil callused into brown reefs, a planet on her face. Gas bombs have built clouds of smoke screen—all dark blue and green of chemical warfare—on her face. The anti-army army has struck

pointed glassed troughs on her face. Life-size stick-figured art of incarcerated tribals on her face. Statistics on her face. Time-tested opacity deepens on her face. A film role burnt, an archive of violence recorded on her face.

∞

Why am I using this story, you ask yourself a hundred times as you type, retract, backspace on words that reflect retrogressive anger. What use is your fury for the time that is not now for you, that has never been nor will ever be now for you, as you sip coffee from a cafe that is dense with the poltergeists from your country.

∞

It is because you are sick of women's bodies being used as conduits in political warfare without permission.

∞

In the warm burroughs of a home, parents name their child Soni. A beauty. A light for this darkening country. Whom we hesitate to call—that which we call others so easily, with abandon—a Goddess.

Sita

"I will enter a fire, to obtain the only course appropriate
for me, who has been abandoned amidst an assembly
of men, by my husband who was not
satisfied with my traits"
Sita to Rama, in Valmiki's Ramayana

dear sister of mine / does it ever strike you / to come upon the people who have you made / a motif of chaste virtue / to see them / know of their songs for you / sung in celebrated abstinence / to read their poetry / of you / of your being / in belonging / to the man / who had you in his power / deported / with uncertain future / your fate excluded from his / a worthless refugee to his whim / do you feel emboldened then / when your names are uttered / in unison your figurines / hailed for the kind of love / possible only between two / strangers impossible / to strip your character of his / to mutter your temptations / to outline the paths you could have chosen / wilfully / if not under the burden / of impunity / do you not think / you owe an explanation / to phantom women you left / in your wake / to give them the opportunity / to stray toward pleasure / even if it comes / with a death blow / even if it is ephemeral / dear sister / if you knew what was to come / in your departure / would you have taken a moment / to set the record straight

Anomaly

They taught me the virtues of the goddess
but not her defiance that flayed
every man of terror
that dare cross her.

They taught me to weave threads
around a plucked flower,
and save its dying petals
in a book
with secrets for pages,
and whispers for notes
but not to reach out
and scream it.

They told me to walk
with one foot on the ground,
like a fleeting moment
but not to jump from boulders of height
into marshes of deep,
leaping high and sinking low.

All this I learnt
on my own.

How to be an unsubmissive voice
in the cavern of judgement,

a ticking torpedo
against the fire of whatmusts.

Draupadi

"And Kunti who was there within the room and saw not
her sons, replied, saying, 'Enjoy ye all (what ye have obtained)."
Kisari Mohan Ganguli's translation of The Mahabharata by Ved Vyas

dear sister of mine / when you took on / unwillfully / to reap a mother's words / five / husbands not lovers / five / who could dare not cross / mother another woman / whose words / tore down your body / to pulp / food that must be shared / between loving brothers / your body portioned into five / men who were not / your lovers your husbands / did you spend a night / tinkled by the prospect / of so much love / an ocean of torrents / bodies with arms / swimming through the cerulean / propelling the waters / for their part / of you / so why then have these stories / thrust upon you / immaculate honour / have taken their share / of your body / as offering for young girls / how can these tales / think that a woman / like you / would not drown in love / that five / men and five / days of the week / can not tire you / for two resting nights / tell me that you have acted upon this choice / have set kin against kin / for your pick of the evenings / tell me that you took your portioned body / and chose the man / who would drink it whole / each night of / each week

I Buy Mangoes To Lunch

to snack to dinner I take my great nation's fruit and let it flood me with sweetness now when
the world changes wings when days are longer and fuller of stuffed heat touch glass
tree bark door knob and person and get burned kind of heat hot like mother
dousing my body with iced buttermilk that I use to swallow fruitfuls of mango feed myself
into a plant I nurture and sprout mango flavoured heat boils
but I persist scoop out spoonfuls of creamy *appus* from its arched bed
suck life from the *banginapalli* the *dasheri* the *langra* squeeze their hearts of all their juices
leave behind parched seeds like the kissing boys who began to eat the mango
off my tongue so for love I stopped kissing saved all my thirst for a fruit
shaped like a season's cycle the rich yellow of summer afternoons the golden wounds
shutting my eyes to blinding sun all reminders of a sickly sweet childhood
when the other grandchildren and I had *ammamma* in our trap needling our mangoes
with tender, crooked time-pressed fingers to feel their ripeness
to tell us which fruit is ready to be eaten like an ol' timey general
pausing a hot minute before charging us to attack so we crowd around her
year after year in a time honoured tradition of growing children and ageing grandmother
and the muchness of fruit but sometimes *ammamma* looks frozen
at something else entirely inspecting fruit and fullness she looks into the eyes
of me a woman among boys scanning for the hunger robustly swelling into a body
of tightness and loops of flesh and fiber capable of so much sugar and so much hurting
how this body had begun to yearn without my learning to hide plainly in site *this*
ammamma watches as she goads my fruit all of my unmitigated desire for everything
while I gulp down her stare tell her to make it quick tell her using all of me
and my craving *I'm ready* *I'm ready* *I'm ready*

A Note From Indian Girls Who Hate Getting Naked

Somewhere in my past is an inadequate girl,
a half-formed person, her skin coagulated
like woven fabric, its marks stitched to reveal designs
of a local motif, stick-figured men riding horses along
parched river trails, body, a crumpled battlefield.
Day of full bloom with gulmohar leaves in syndicated repetition,
they put on the costume, an elongated stole going around
the breadth of her body, muscle cowering underneath.
This is the grand theme of our lives, masked and out of sight.

They never taught us to love our bodies.
They never taught us to learn it.

This endless and perverse jig, of covering and unshowing,
Limb and hide, fat and muscle, but never taught to pause,
to stare deeply and etch along stretch marks the sketch
that causes this brown shade to shine earthlike in moonlight.

Sorry for young girls who let slip gasps
when their *dupattas* reach for the ground.

Sorry for the women who created legends
walking into funeral pyres, to defend honour
of body but not scalding skin.

Sorry for tying in honour to the body at all.

This raw plant, its petals curling into itself
pixels streaming in the rainbow of sunlight
what a joy its show of light. Its shameless display.

Sorry for cloaking it over, shamefully choking
its breathing pores, letting it dessicate underneath.
Wrapped like a ball of yarn cupped in the palm of
a young boy eager to please his fathers

who ask us why we're burning? Dissolving into fabric.
Don't you see our bodies are sweatshops. Our breaths rise above
like acrid smoke from chimneys, our systems churning productions.
We've not the pluck to unscrew our bolts, air out our rooms
and hang our nakedness to drip.

Every Memory Is A Dying Song

A little black boy swims into the baptism of blue waters, stroking stringed music in freedom. In moonlight he is blue, in blue waters he is midnight, and his sound is sky wide and cobalt. A story rises from the death of an image. Meanwhile at home, sexuality is a chest heaving urgent love in a backless blouse to a snake charmer's shrill. Just like that, we become the stereotype we hate. In a small room, my mother listens to M. S. Subbulakshmi sing to the lord and I struggle to sleep. The internet throws back a photo from the late thirties to jolt me awake. In it, M. S. Subbulakshmi has exchanged her heavy saree for striped silk pyjamas, the flower garland on her hair for loose, unruly plaits, the voice on her lips for an unlit cigarette, and her sitar for friend and dancer Balasaraswati in similar outfit. So outlandish is that barter that one can only assume it is costume. I show the photo to my mother. Her face contorts into an expression of anger, confusion, and denial. Or is it betrayal? She physically pulls herself away from the photo, refuses to look at it lest her eyes peel off her face. I'm reminded once again of how stories are killed. My mother sees the photo and cannot reckon her idols with such frivolity. I, on the other hand, see two women getting away with a dirty secret because they can. The photo lay buried for over seventy years gathering dust. What a great story it could have made. That can't have just been a woman who sang hymns to heavens. Did she wrap her silken pantsuit into a treasured alcove? Did she stick her lips out, blow smoke rings to write—

ఓం దేవ్యై నమః

—into a curled night? Like a child with unadulterated belief in the divine, I mother that story on to the page, play witness to a woman rising from songs serving an invisible god, draw her into an intractable image. If M S Subbulakshmi was a life lying undiscovered on a photograph, then some days, I too fear the uncertainty of erasure. My body, sucked into a notebook becoming an unfinished poem, is today still a word. What parts of my life will I have to murder into memory to become a celebrated book?

Haikus For a Decaying Country

We are born in chunky,
rigid bodies. Such stubborn thickness
covering skeletal hearts.

Our hairs are sturdy, black,
unlawful vines of shoot. To maintain them,
ammamma insists we oil daily.

On a string, I oil hair and body,
let the sun burn all my
exposed limb and skin.

So my anger and I can both be
coloured red like the fire petals rising
above a country set ablaze.

Bright is the light
of our burning homes, our bodies
are logs of wood, wilful.

There are shades of yellow,
red, blue, and orange in the cremation
of this country. We're vibrant now.

We're festivals, prayers, and traditions,
we're devotees of lukewarm gods,
soft pulsations of waiting.

To wait, is to be caught unaware,
to be neck bleeding freely,
to be the death that dies vainly.

I think often of Jayanta Mahapatra
sitting at the banks of the Ganges
taking this country for corpse.

Body floating down the river lifeless
and I shudder for those who will be
left behind for the last rites

For those who must mourn,
inhale the smoke, sweep the decay
and remember always.

Carry the weight, the charred remains,
and pass on the stories that
a living country thrived to hide.

Tales of bundled live women, t
and dead once-women, all maimed
and hurt in similar ways.

I fear that burden of narration,
of trauma brought on by
remembrance and recountal.

To the leftovers of Late India.
Can we let our kin, those young, new
children breathe anew.

Rinse the country of her ashes,
and etch onto its caves the engravings
of a new history.

While we're still around,
rattling our last years of breathing,
tell all the stories.

Uncover this country,
strip its covers and shame,
into pages and overrun check-lists.

Memory can crush the strongest hearts.
To forget is the privilege of short
histories. How much are we willing to pass on?

Voices like stalk
stuck stolidly in the gaps
of a toothed mouth, unignorable.

Turf

Mumbai, circa 21st century

The ladies compartment of the local train at rush hour is a battleground. The trains don't even have to stop for us to jump into the open door carriages because we are that skilled an army. The women at the front are the cavalry and if we don't charge fast enough we run the risk of toppling our reserves. That is how we look out for each other. We offer pregnant women seats. Touch their gravid bellies like seers looking for any sign of life in crystal balls. The train hauls over loudly but not loud enough to drown our singing. Of course we sing on our way to a fight. That is another way we look out for each other. By keeping spirits up. Sharing morning stories of incapable husbands and children born to become cogs in the wheels of the trains that keep us battling. We've never known the waters, the breeze that comes off of them, the very red of wine that is best had smelling the sea salt. We blush by lusting over strange men on billboards. We exchange photos and videos and dreams in the safe of the engine siren like contraband. Before we were here in these carriages, before these trains and tracks were here, this city was one big forest by the sea. This is why we lose ourselves in the woods of sharing. Why we nourish ourselves with five rupee knickknacks from the hawker in the train. Buy scrunchies, earrings, garish, loopy chokers, only to toss them into the pits of our carry bags. So we can discover them after many days of nonstop war and remember the faint touch of nomadic friendships. *Amma* says that there comes a time every woman loses her will for combat. We too step out of our bodies, watch ourselves elbow, push, and jostle each other for space. Bicker over who stepped on whom, and who dragged whom, and much like all soldiers, beaten and haggard, we start to fall by first taking each other down. We become friends in treachery and for a short moment are this close to giving each other up when someone says something casual, a wisecrack or a particularly operatic movie dialogue to ease the tension and we fall for it and each other hard. I ask myself if the bodies of women are made to bear such beating but then someone reminds me that the state has always found a way to push down on all of us. And women have only just learnt to be considered a battalion, a squad, a troop, or whatever it is they are calling themselves for the revolution of the day.

At the Party

There is always a moment in the party when conversation reaches an impasse,
the music repeats itself like clockwork. The alcohol has stopped flowing
and is stagnant in half-drunk red cups. It is then that someone always
has the brilliant idea. *Let's watch television*. We huddle together like a secret
in front of a gigantic LED screen propped up on the wall. We cut through channels,
watch corny Bollywood anthems ironically, snicker at how the camera pivots
and shudders in soap operas, and somehow, always, land up on the news.
Watch the waifish body of a child dragged through barricaded army sections.
Watch men in camouflage rough up skinny boys in genuflection.
Watch how the beaten are always in prayer, palms pressed together appealing
for mercy. For divine intervention. That never comes. Watch batons land
on their backs with a noise that dissipates through the streaming. A thud
we can only imagine. Watch another baby / girl / woman / sister / mother /
girlfriend / and their story of an invaded body. Watch men in orange
with blood red vermillion masking their foreheads scream for national duty.
Scream for body count. Scream for a majority. Scream for national unity.
Scream for violence. Scream for thought control. Scream for one kind,
not for another kind. Scream. Scream. Scream. Scream. And when the call
for life gets too deafening, someone invariably pops the remote at the tv shut.
Makes the channel disappear. Someone invariably cracks open a joke
to whistle the tension away. And what can we do but not laugh.
How do we return to a party without laughing. Oh we're so sorry, but
we laugh every time. We cackle with full drunken bellies and exhausted hearts.

The Other

Like most children I come from two parents.

My mother, culled from all my deficiencies, scatters herself all over my papers.
You can only write well about your failings. I vomit my mother out and all my
inadequacies with her madness. I grow under her shadow a magnificent beast.

I am one of the many women who take after their fathers and become something
undefinable.

To speak of my father is to speak of my edge, the anger that sits on and burns my
tongue slowly, and how free my body can be from within its confines of breast and
hip.

I live and breathe like a man in a woman's body in a man's world which makes me a
very specific animal.

I wasn't to take after him, but his *ālāp* opened whole wounds for my body to pass
through. I knew then that I too would sing to survive.

Like the *ālāp* I take when anger belts my back with rushed strokes of red. My tongue
finding tune in beatings.

My father knows little poetry but knows that nights can sometimes metamorphose
into questions. He answers: कोई कनारा जो कनारे से मिले वो अपना कनारा है and
everything is the colour of honeyed sunlight. Even once-red bruisings.

I hear Kishore Kumar in my father's voice or is it the other way around? What
matters is that I try and sing as low as I can, my music rumbling from the pit of my
chest. And just like that, I fail my mother all over again.

I am a child hanging onto ageing arms. I am told that I can and must be one thing
only. But I slowly become another. I unknot the rules. The women squeal in shock.
My mother is angry.

This isn't a story of transformation. This is a story of wilful resignation. How
someone can reach the fork end of a road and decide, without a modicum of proof, to
go right than left. Just a mild decision with very little consequence. Right?

To become a father is to become territorial, angry, insistent. But it is also to step into large feet, and see the world through fresh eyes. It is to sieve through words and conditions, look around confused and ask, "You're talking to me?"

I ask my father the same question. He doesn't know how to hit back at a mirror.

My mother is in there too, somewhere in the back, crying.

I don't know how to say this without raising eyebrows. But I wouldn't have ever known how to play woman without becoming my father first. Without tasting that peculiar dish of freedom.

I am him, and he is me, and in that likeness is the shredding of any pretension of obedience. I am tactless, brash, unruly, a little ruffian. Whose fault is that? The father before him? Or the one before him? Let's keep playing this game so we never have to blame mine.

वो शाम कुछ अजीब थी, ये शाम भी अजीब है

We repeat ourselves. Atoms. Divine Words. Fathered daughters.

At the international terminal, my father cries the *ālāp* of a baby who has lost sight of its mother. Maybe that is correct. Birthing is a two way process. I too birthed my father at arrival.

I disappear through the gates and find my reflection sobbing, bent over himself, becoming a foetus.

Writing's on the Wall

There is a name behind every word
on this page, and the shape of a girl. Alive
and agitated. The world unveils itself to
her through a shameplant closed to touch
but open and inviting from a distance.
Condoms hidden under mother's sarees,
flagrant eyes at a bus stop painted red
like blood, her blood and its propensity
to stick into a long trail of autumn on
the insides of her thighs, a clump of hair
virulent to drainage, a longing stare on
a naked body shining through the gloss
of a magazine cover, the slap of skin on
skin like carnage, love and hate sounding
the same to the blind, how a moan is the
cry of pain come what may, how genuflecting
men can take you down with them, a veil
of ambiguity painted on godfull faces. All this
will make or break her. I build a chain
of painful memories, suture whole phrases
together to weave a thread and retrace my
path to this little girl, or that little girl. Offer
words like *probe*, *cleave*, *pierce*, *splinter*,
cut open, *godless*, *riot*, to crack all that is
known and built of a mangled world. So
everything can crumble one day. I can be
a cloud. And the girls—armed and waiting.

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No, Dear and Small Anchor Press are based in Brooklyn. More information about their projects and publications can be found at nodearmagazine.com.

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