

breathing out

a collection of poetry and prose

by maalvika bhat

an ode to the women in bathrooms

an ode to the women
laughing and loving
and grieving and singing
wearing glitter on their eyelids
and rings on their fingers
an ode to the women cursing out
their exes
and each other's exes
an ode to women cursing

an ode to holy sink water
and the beautiful women around it
to the prayer that is
all these women
together
to the tampons, gum and hair ties
to the women offering what i need

what i did not need to ask for

british men call women "birds"

birds like tiny feathered things
you're so pretty, baby,
let us cage you
let us teach you how to speak
repeat-after-me

birds like bird-watching,
like hunting, birds like game
that you can never win,
your blood, their sport,
their teeth in your delicate neck

birds like flock mentality, like
walking each other home,
going to the bathroom together,
watching each other's drinks
like hawks,

a group of crows just trying to
prevent each other's murder
birds like you can clip our wings,
keep us in cages,
& still,
we will not be silent
still,
you will hear us
sing in the morning
like sending our location,
letting our girls know
we made it through the night

birds like migration,
like flight, like searching for
someplace we won't be prey
someplace we can
finally
be safe

*sometimes, on the bad days,
i remember myself a small girl*

she was all soft.

all sticky fingers and tangled
hair. no one (but nani) could
brush it.

to brush was to hurt was to cry
was to stare in the mirror at
her reflection so she could know
exactly what pain looked like.

she always wanted to name all her
feelings. the gentlest girl. never
apologizing for what she felt.

she hadn't yet been sorry for her
heart. or her stomach. or the hair
on her legs. hadn't yet skipped a
meal or a night's sleep.

she was the loudest little voice.
didn't know about loss.

if there was a staircase, she
could climb it just so people
would look at her.

she loved to be looked at. she
loved to be held.
always begging for arms and
attention.

so, on the bad days, i touch my
skin. find the knots in my hair.
look at myself in the mirror.
there are traces of her. she is
leftover in me.

how could i hate the body she
built?
how could she be unworthy?

not to be a hedonist but

pour hazelnut creamer into your
coffee fill it to the brim
with sugar and smile into the
sweetness eat a basket of
blackberries take an afternoon
nap in the sun in the park on
the beach on the foot of your
bed kiss as many lovers as will
kiss you back touch as many
faces hold as many hands soak
up the smell of freshly baked
bread and eat it warm with
butter or jam or both

buy pretty stationery and then
more pretty stationary tell
your friends about levity fall
in love again and then again
and then again fill your
cabinets with handmade ceramic
mugs laugh and then charge
your crystals under the full moon
toast to everything always
because you can and you should
and celebrating feels good all
the way to your bones

not to be a hedonist,
but it *should* feel good

all of it

commodifying the cosmos

i'm an engineer
and i've worked at nasa
but the truth is
i don't know much about stars
or outer space
or anything, really

what i do know is that
i'm tethered to this rapidly-dying
rock

i know the stars don't respond to
the names we give them
but we keep naming them anyway

*the world is going to shit and the
billionaires are going to space*

i know the cosmos is not a
for-sale thing
and i know everything we do is
just one more pathetic attempt at
control

still,
we all have to believe in
something

the man with big pockets and a
house on every coast
believes in selling us pieces of
the infinity

and in our desperation
we believe in buying them

i could be your dream girl

i could swallow all the jagged
pieces of my heart
and never tell you of the blood
behind my smile

i could walk with you,
always follow three paces behind
and never once mention my aching,
blistered feet

i could laugh away each broken
promise as though i've forgotten
you ever made them
i could bend myself in half to fit
into your open palm

i could be the softest thing
you've ever touched
don't get me wrong

i could be the softest thing
you've ever touched
don't get me wrong
i could be
the glimmering thing
i could be the daydream

but what will be left of me when
the sun has set?
who will i be with the lights off?
where am i to go
if i have drawn paths to only you?

so don't get me wrong
i could be your dream girl
but i'm writing to tell you
i won't be

i am writing to tell you
i will be mine instead

growing pains

i was 7 and you were 8
we made lemonade for our imaginary
friends
and drank until our lips puckered
we didn't know how to eat ice
cream
without it dripping through the
cone
we covered our hands in paint
and played outside until our shad-
ows puppets faded into night

when did it all get so hard?
when did the lemons become rent &
utilities
and the imaginary friends become
analysts & consultants
(& other things i don't get?)

*when
did
you
grow
into
wine
tastings
and
outgrow
me?*

i'm still counting down the days
to summer vacation
i'm practicing eating ice cream
without making a mess,
me & my puckered heart,
we're running this lemonade stand
in the darkness without you

*in elementary school, we had
to take voice lessons.*

we had a music teacher.

in a music class.

and instruments: percussion, string,
and brass.

our teacher taught the boys how to
speak in falsetto, all high
they refused, said it sounded too
girly, they were shy.

but when they did well,
our teacher would yell,
“bravo!”

and that was the last time anyone
praised them

on doing something,

“like a girl.”

she taught us girls how to speak low,
like a man does,

with no cower,

from a place of power.

she had to spend extra time with us
though,
because you need to let your belly go
to sing low, in alto.

the strange thing is
she needed to teach us ten-year-olds
how to unclench our stomachs.
because after years of sucking it in,
we had no idea how not to do it.

our music teacher said if we couldn't
let our tummies go,
we couldn't tap into our power.

imagine that i never did?
imagine if no one ever told me
that the words we say to our bodies
take lifetimes to erase.
that my body came with decades of
systemic brainwash as a fee.
that sucking it in
for the rest of my life
would suck the life right out of me.

*summer comes
and i think of the fig*

i think of how it's pollinated
i think of the wasp that crawls
into the fig
and dies for the sake of summer
fruit

there is something so violent
about the way
one living thing must be digested
before another can find itself
between my teeth

summer does not dwell on this
she tells me not to think so much

she tells me
*“things are prettier once you
stop needing to know everything”*

i ask summer why she hangs the
sun in the sky
only for it to rot
that which she planted herself

she asks
“don’t you do the same thing?”

i am JUST Like other girls

i mean, i wrote this poem with an
iced coffee in hand

i mean, sometimes the shape of my
own body haunts me

i mean, i keep picking at scars
knowing that won't let them heal

i am JUST like other girls and by
that, i mean, i'm bleeding

i mean, i am not here to make you
comfortable

i am just like other girls and by
that, i mean when i was thirteen,
i was afraid

i mean, i am twenty-one and still
afraid

i mean, i never learned how to be
anything else

i mean the flowers on my desk are rotting

i mean, i tend to hold onto lifeless things because they used to be beautiful

i mean, there's not a thing i love that i'm not all tangled up in

i am JUST like other girls and by that i mean, sometimes i. am. so. much. woman. that it makes you sick.

i mean, sometimes it swells up and spills out of the margins and the poem stops being what you asked it to be

i mean, let the poem be messy in the middle

i mean, i do not owe it to you to make this pretty at the end

i mean, i never owed it to you to make this pretty at all

