

## **the stinkbug dancing on my uvula**

Roma's mother gave birth to her in the corner of a black hole. Her thighs squeezed and squeezed, choking the breath out of her daughter's tongue, mimicking the movement men always thirsted for as they descended into the brambles of her nether regions, a constellation of neutron stars glimmering at her vulva. A gaudy, aureate galaxy was contained within the expanse of a 10.1-centimeter vaginal cavern – Roma held up a metal ruler to measure the space needed to let her go as she slipped through the ribs of the amniotic fluid and slid on out.

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I was born to an Indian housewife aged twenty-two.

At the age I was passing out on the sticky floor of a club, yearning to wake up in the sheets of randoms, and counting my blessings for the invention of birth control, at that very same age, a little girl with splattered dreams of medicine and artistry was doused in sperm and marital expectations, her shalwar kameez dripping with the blood of her second child – the acid pathetic Indian men pour over their burn victims while claiming that they had been fucked out of all utility.

My mother did try to abort me first.

But her husband decided that she must keep me and raise me and be for me who she never wanted to be.

My mother then spent her days wishing on healing crystals and chanting to any spiritual entity that would listen – hoping I would never turn out to be like her.

She made me swear off marriage until I made money and dispossessed me of any delusions surrounding men. Armed with a maternal, educational curriculum centered around the blood that I will spill each month, she drilled into me a knowledge of my own power.

At twenty-two, I immigrated to Canada – leaving my mother behind.

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Deconstructivist architect, Bernard Tschumi, in his research on the intersections between madness and architecture, writes, “Just as all collectivities require lunatics, deviants, and criminals to mark their own negativity, so architecture needs extremes and interdictions to inscribe the reality of its constant oscillation between the pragmatics of the built realm and the absoluteness of concepts...madness articulates something that is often negated in order to preserve a fragile cultural or social order.”

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2022: Two teen Dalit girls were raped by a gang of men in Uttar Pradesh’s Lakhimpuri District before they were lynched, and their violated bodies were hung from a tree. Their lives and their deaths, proof of our culpability and our ignorance.

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Roma’s first movements weren’t little gurgling wails bubbling from her larynx or a desperate need to lick her mother’s milk. Rather, she clutched her minuscule eyes shut. The almonds poking through her translucent lids, she clutched her eyes shut until they receded back into her

pea-sized skull, ready to explode, a grenade of desperation and that feeling, that feeling of being born in the wrong place to the wrong set of thighs – thrown in.

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Audre Lorde maintains, “The transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger. But my daughter, when I told her of our topic and my difficulty with it, said, "Tell them about how you're never really a whole person if you remain silent, because there's always that one little piece inside you that wants to be spoken out, and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder and madder and hotter and hotter, and if you don't speak it out one day it will just up and punch you in the mouth from the inside."

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“It’s a low-income, immigrant neighborhood”, I say – the line that prefaces any external entities’ entrance into my home. What I don’t say: I am the low-income immigrant. The very people I position myself against, the ones I view as below me, behind whose backs I vow I would never bring my children to this country just to live in Sherbourne – I am them.

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University of Southern California history professor Robert Weyeneth writes to a history of racial segregation rooted in architecture: ““We know much about segregation as a political, legal, and social institution but relatively little about it as a spatial system...Racial segregation was established architecturally in two major ways: through architectural isolation and through architectural partitioning.”

The architectures of division dictate that you sow an idea, you hint it to us – the people, and then you just wait and watch as we let it consume our lives, as we build the blocks for our segregation ourselves. Cinder brick by cinder brick, we will put up the walls to uphold the system and cordon our lungs and hearts and holes into boundaries you have barely dictated for us.

We embrace poison quicker than sustenance – a generation of the earth, a species of factory manufactured humanoids, intent on self-destruction. It is indeed human nature; after all, self-immolation is easier than living in a world rife with true complexity.

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Roma's doctors from the Black Hole Institute of Health spent hours thwacking her back and twisting her plum-coloured nipples. They kept hoping she would just open her mouth or do a tiny yawn and vomit out the light she had been holding in. They even yielded her little body to her mother, hoping that she would comply in the loving warmth of maternal nuzzles. But Roma's palms singed her mother's breasts, leaving behind sizzling raw meat where pure, pearly flesh had once been.

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2019: Three Muslims, suspected of carrying beef, were tied to trees, and beaten with sticks by self-proclaimed “gau-rakshaks”. The irony of cows needing more protection than humans in India, is lost on the minds of too many. The victims were then forced to chant slogans of “Jai Shree Ram”, an act of blasphemy impugning their religious freedom and India's constitutional status as a “secular” state.

2023: An imam, an Islamic religious leader, in Maharashtra was assaulted and had his beard hacked off for refusing to chant “Jai Shree Ram”.

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In speaking to her bout of cancer, and the thoughts her illness sparked, Susan Sontag shares: “So if you don’t think about things, you’re likely to be the vehicle of the going clichés, even of the more enlightened ones.”

A lack of critical questioning of our existing norms, of the beliefs that are ingrained in us from our years of naivete and youthhood, are an illness of their own kind. They spread and corrupt – infect and inflict.

“Nietzsche was right about guilt, it’s awful. I’d rather feel ashamed. That seems more objective and has to do with one’s personal sense of honor.”

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I spend hours each day sitting skin to skin with unknowns: their tattered nylon jacket to my denim sweater, my shoulder to their shoulder. They are factors I don’t understand, and factors whose lives aren’t real to me.

Her brunette curls and the silver ring circling his ear stand out, the red leggings she wears with the floral lace patterns I’d see on my grandmother’s tablecloths at Sunday lunches, maybe I’ve seen her, him, all of them before – but how will I ever know?

Sheila Heti wrote: “One only has to travel on a subway during rush hour and pull into a station and see all the people waiting to get on and off to be struck by how many of us there actually are

in the world. One is a reproduction of the human type – one sleeps like other humans, eats like other humans, loves like other humans, and is born and dies like all other humans. We are gestures, but we less resemble an original painting than one unit of a hundred thousand copies of a book being sold. Now the gestures we chose are revealed as cheating. Instead of being, one appears to be.”

Her lips pursed, she stares down her gold rimmed glasses at the phone in my hand, her beanie something my sister would crochet me, bands of red and beige crowning her salt and pepper curled horns.

Their faces all bleed, blending, unmemorable, save for the black, cropped, leather cupping her torso, I sneak glances at her, silently wishing I could inhabit her. My consumerist indoctrination into our capitalist traditions erases depleted heads resting against the train windows, or the balled-up fists and eyes as shifty as mine – only the outfits remain.

I look at her, with her Jansport backpack and boxy glasses and am immediately filled with an overwhelming sense of superiority. She’s definitely Indian, but too Indian for me. The oiled back hair and cheap shirts — what in the internalized fucking bullshit am I?

The poor Indian stereotype doesn’t fit me in my own country, my privilege is undeniable. But the Indian looking down her nose at the very people she calls her own in another country, is one I don’t want to fit into.

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Tingles ran up newborn Roma’s appendages as she lay in the filth of her cradle back home.

Craters and flashes of inky thunder charged at the toes of her resting place. The pinpricks within

her left aching chasms the size of pennies in her chubby muscles and thighs – from which light yearned to shed its chains and rid itself of its imprisonment.

Scrunched up besides her sweet daughter, glancing at the twitching of her wispy eyebrows, Roma's mother knew that Roma was meant for a place less carnivorous – but she wondered where it could exist.

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2023: Indian police officials in the state of Punjab launched a manhunt for controversial separatist preacher Amritpal Singh. Singh was petitioning for a separate homeland for practicing Sikhs, in line with the outlawed Khalistani movement. More than 100 “preventative” arrests were made to maintain harmony in the state and mobile internet access was slashed for the entirety of the state, plunging 27 million people into a communication blackout. “Separatist tactics” are not tolerated in this new India of repression and imposed quietude.

The Khalistani movement was outlawed in the context of the 1984 Sikh Genocide in India. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi launched Operation Blue Star to silence demands of Sikh autonomy, and army officials stormed the Golden Temple resulting in the death of 400 civilians. In retaliation of Gandhi's resultant assassination, human rights abuses were committed against tens of thousands of Sikhs, men beaten before being burnt alive.

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If you walk out from the main exit of Sherbourne Station, you are proffered two options. Turn left into Sherbourne, into the community housing and the apartments filled with subsidized living for patients with mental health issues, frequented by the addictions counselor you know – or

keep your stance resolute. Walk straight on into the sprawling, industrial brutalism of Bloor Street.

A seepage once occurred that I couldn't much comprehend. Massive jeeps and trucks, hoisting orange flags with a black crest thrashing the air, launched down the streets of Sherbourne and into Bloor. Shouts, screams, chants of "Khalistan" oscillated across the buildings, striking glass, reverberating higher and higher up into the gloomy, burgundy sky.

I wondered if I could ask my boss about it; she'd told me that she and her sister ate langar at her gurdwara at least once a week.

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In the eyes of the other we're all just some kind of coloured.

I wonder if anyone can tell that I need to take the most massive shit right now...if they can see me unhook my pants as the chain bites into my intestines, pushing the bolus further along in its charge for glory. I begin to pace around the subway car, calculating the time, the space, the Zen I would need to make it to the next bathroom.

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2022: A 46-year-old Dalit man, Kishanlal Bheel, was beaten to death with rods and sticks for attempting to draw water from a tubewell banned from use for the lower-castes, and casteist slurs were hurled at him.

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Speaking to the expansion and remodeling of Columbia Hospital of Richland County during the Jim Crow era, Weyeneth writes, “Although the collection of buildings on Harden Street shared a parcel of land, white and black space was functionally separate.”

With desegregation, he continues, “Colored water fountains were removed from buildings, basement toilets became janitors’ closets, and signs over doorways were repainted...Desegregation represented a campaign for spatial reform as much as for social, legal, economic, and political redress.”

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Growing up in the bosom of the black hole, Roma’s life wasn’t all that awful. Like clockwork, she shat each morning of each day, the centrifugal force of the black hole rising through the pot and almost sucking the glands out of her anus; she spent a couple hours angelically napping on trains curling, twining, spiraling through the loops of the hole, with her hands nestled under her head and her legs poking the citizen sitting closest to her, who in turn worried about the cosmic dust sweltering under Roma’s skin; and she came home to a mother marked by the demon of birth.

Her mother would hand her the Black Hole Chronicle daily and make her recite the list of names for people who had been released by the event horizon. They were now little free freckles polluting the solar sky, mourned by the others in the black hole but perhaps – finally free to explore the universe. Roma wondered what the world outside looked like. Was it a deluge of bodies, flitting around under the truanting vote of gravity? Did their fingertips turn a blossoming blue-black? Did the darkness that spreads through struck corpses ornament their chests and necks and upper jaws and eye sockets?

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“White men and women are beginning to have a shared understanding and a shared vocabulary for what’s going on,” Claudia Rankine says in an interview with TIME Magazine. ““I don’t feel like I’m starting at the beginning in these conversations.” Despite this progress, however, Rankine knows that the country still has miles to go in terms of fully confronting its racist past, especially with a current leadership that often defends white supremacists.”

The problem being, in India, upper-caste and upper-class people refuse to even acknowledge an underlying issue. Dalits are killed each day for daring to touch the water sources of upper-caste people; Dalit women are raped, lynched, and dehumanized, their bodies a mapping of casteist violence and greed.

Miles to go is a falsehood when it comes to the privileged of India, we haven’t even entered the arena of striving for equality – let alone begun running the marathon.

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2020: A 19-year-old Dalit teen from Hathras, Uttar Pradesh attempted to report her sexual assault at the hands of four upper-caste neighbours.

A BBC journalist writes, “Her mother told me she had found her on 14 September in a field of tall millet crops, battered and bruised, barely conscious and naked from the waist downwards. Her spine was broken, she was bleeding and vomiting blood.”

The families of the accused men, a village chock-full of the guilty, showed up to protest against their arrests, demanding justice for the vile men. The police denied allegations of any rape

despite the victim's repeated reports. She fought and lost the battle for her life after over two weeks in a hospital in Delhi, only to have her body cremated by the police without the consent or knowledge of her family. All evidence of her existence was erased from the face of the Earth – she was not afforded the dignity of a proper Hindu cremation with all its rituals. Instead, her body was expunged by the death of democracy.

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The next time I'm on the subway, my fingers curl around the wispy strands of my hair. I bunch them up with both arms raised in the air, turning the flimsy bundle of sticks round and round in a cyclone before trapping it up with an elastic of noir.

My brother worries that I'll bring bedbugs to his home ruining his brand-new peach couch. He worries the dirty olive and ochre sofa I got off someone on Facebook Marketplace for \$0 is wracked by insects and mites and bugs, secreting their juices into my pores, their excreta dripping down my back.

My roommate tells me not to sit on the TTC – the bedbugs will get me. I spend 3 hours each day scratching away at my eyebrows and the fleshy cartilage of my ear outcroppings, fearing they're crawling up the seams of my white trousers and up the lip of my underwear and through the fibres and stains to unhinge the lock to my soul. I spend three hours each day inundated by the bugs asexually fissioning on the pocked red seats of the Toronto Transit Commission's various malfunctioning vehicles, deluding myself into believing that three hours of hair tornadoes will appeal to the cynic in the bugs who will deem me unworthy – and venture off to find a new home.

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Unflinching anti-caste writer, Meena Kandasamy argues, “For a non-Dalit, and especially someone who has no link [to] or understanding of the anti-caste struggle, it is just a noun; there is no history, no anger, no story to be told...The middle class in India has something similar to “white guilt,” [which] it overcomes [with] tokenisms...What I mean here is that they want Dalits to remain Dalits—they want them to remain impoverished, unhealthy, [and] oppressed so that it maintains their own status quo and allows them to offer their sympathies. Rarely do we see them celebrate Dalit resistance in the same way. Rarely do we see them consume a Dalit manifesto or war-cry in the same way.”

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2018: Indian revolutionary poet and activist, Varavara Rao was arrested under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, an anti-terrorism law under which obtaining bail is almost impossible. He was imprisoned along with 14 other Indians for “inciting anti-caste violence” at Bhima Koregaon village. In 2021, the 82-year-old was finally released on medical leave; he was denied not only medical assistance in prison but also access to basic amenities required to alleviate his Parkinson’s disease.

Earlier in 2021, Stan Swamy, an 84-year-old tribal rights activist arrested under the pretense of the same case, died in prison. His condition had deteriorated so deeply that he was unable to bathe or eat by himself.

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Kandasamy mourns, “This is the caste society that has pervaded for a long time, which has annihilated the history of the Dalits. It is important to write the lived stories of the Dalits into history, so tomorrow people cannot completely erase...their stories.”

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Fast-forward to twenty-two years spent petitioning to escape the great plains and people of the black hole – Roma had been denied a visitor’s visa to the great federation of the Earth once again, no rhyme or reason furnished to her, as always.

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2022: Eleven men from a Hindu mob, imprisoned for the gang-rape of pregnant Muslim woman, Bilkis Bano, and the murders of 14 of her family members, including her 3-year-old daughter, were pardoned, and released by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Bano appealed to the state government to undo the damage they had done and return to her the right to live without fear. “How can justice for any woman end like this? I trusted the highest courts in our land. I trusted the system, and I was learning slowly to live with my trauma. The release of these convicts has taken from me my peace and shaken my faith in justice," she wrote.

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Tshcumi explicates: “For architecture only exists through the world in which it locates itself. If this world implies dissociation and destroys unity, architecture will inevitably reflect these phenomena...In this analogy, the contemporary city and its many parts are made to correspond with the dissociated elements of schizophrenia.”

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The bed bug in me sprays its larvae across the streets of my boss's car as she tramples all over Toronto – she's a real explorer.

Four nights every week are spent with the bed bug in conversation with my 50-something boss and my 40-something colleague. They are both divorced Indian women; my boss came to Canada when she was merely a kid giving birth to her own kids, and my colleague is a woman who'd lived in cities across Thailand, Spain, India, and now Canada. We are educators, my boss, my colleague, the bed bug, and I. We teach little kids the sound of the long-a and the pronunciation of specific irrationalities. We pretend to have the answer to their questions, as we google the meaning of troubadour on the side. We teach in a neighborhood of Toronto populated by affluent immigrants.

As I wiggled into the front seat of her car one evening, we reached the topic of Muslims, I don't recall what got us there, but my boss's voice rang out irrespective, "I toh don't understand these Muslims. I really don't like them. We'll be in the middle of an enrolment meeting in my office and these Muslims will just get up, whip their hands up to the sky – and start praying. No sense of time or place, in my office, I just don't like them."

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Rankine writes, "there is a history behind all of our decisions—and we should make them with the full consciousness of what that history is."

Indian journalist, Rana Ayyub has been fighting a losing battle against the Hindu extremist government of Narendra Modi. Among the last bastions of Indian freedom, Ayyub has faced

trumped up criminal charges, threats of death and rape, and defamation from government officials and the common public alike.

She is flooded with hate each day, messages like “you guys should go to Taliban as you praise them so much”, “Bloody randi”, and allegations of her closeness to Pakistan have been used to launch a smear campaign against her brave reportage.

United Nations experts called for India to protect Ayyub and investigate the fervent abuse cast at her. Instead, new charges and travel restrictions have been leveled against her by state governments; she was unable to travel to her home state of Uttar Pradesh to be with her dying grandmother out of fear of arrest.

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At her mother’s deathbed, Roma watched her monologue, “The problem is everywhere, we are the problem and so our world and our lands are fighting back, escaping or attempts at escape are foolish endeavors my Roma. We must speak up within, we must change within.”

Roma shuts her silly mother up, the raspy ramblings of a dying woman caution no one – not even the giggling fruit flies foaming at her rotting mouth.

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2022: Gregory Stanton, founder of Genocide Watch warned of early signs of genocide in India; he stated that he had predicted this with Rwanda and now – he was doing the same for India.

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I went home to my Muslim roommates and Muslim boyfriend that night and narrated my boss's islamophobia at them. I didn't address the silence that the coiled worm in my mouth forced me to keep; it's my job, she had whispered to me.

When they cackled at my boss's words, their eyes squinting and mouth frozen in ardent smirks, as if challenging her to insult them more, I defended my boss. I insisted that she is a good human – she gets me Indian mithais and lunch meals all the time.

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Weyeneth concludes: “More often than not, custom rather than law defined the racial dimensions of these spaces. The idea of behavioral separation meant that whites enjoyed access to a full range of activities in a shared space, while black behavior was significantly constrained... [African American travelers] relied on a unique genre of travel guide inspired by Jim Crow: handbooks that listed accommodations and restaurants where African Americans were welcome to stay and to eat. One of the most popular series... advertised “Assured Protection for the Negro Traveler” and “Vacation Without Aggravation.””

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Roma could have been anything – a doctor, a metallurgist, a tax evader, an imperialist, a physicist, a loving daughter, one of those people who studied the bones buried deep in the core of her black hole. But instead, she chose to be a failing escape artist, just bitter.

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2023: Rahul Gandhi, the leader of the Indian Opposition, and the primary competitor to Narendra Modi's reign was expelled from parliament. His elimination and the end of healthy political debate came 24 hours after a defamation conviction for a statement he made in 2019, implying that Narendra Modi is a thief.

233 of 539 Members currently nestled in the Indian Parliament, freely slobbering up the sanctity of their seats, have criminal charges raised against them – including those of rape, murder, and kidnapping.

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Chris Kraus illuminates the nature of our societies, “Things are not subjective. There's good and there's bad, and those things are not negotiable. It's not my good versus your good.”

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All Roma had ever wanted was to leave behind the blinding ambiguity of the singularity.

Had that been too much to ask? Why was leaving so impossible?

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Every moment I have spent on the outside has been consumed by a silent holding together of my palms in incessant sweaty prayers to the gods of immigration, to the powers that be, that they just leave me be.

But now I am realizing – maybe I never left after all.

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Kandasamy insists: “I [also] don’t believe that writing can exist in a vacuum; even if you say that you aren’t writing for . . . society, you are making a choice—a conscious choice to distance yourself from . . . society as something about it makes you step away from it. After all, everybody is within . . . society, nobody is outside it.”

The rigid Indian refusal to speak up, speak out, and speak against, to acknowledge that there are things that matter beyond our own good, has led to the dissemination of our ruthless bitterness to every corner of the world. We, in the diaspora, we pretend to be on the outside, but there is a sore epiphany we do not notice creeping in.

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2022: The Twitter handle of the Bhartiya Janta Party’s Gujarat unit, posted a caricature of Muslim men in skull caps being hung in hordes at a noose, as the Indian flag bellowed supremely in the background. Gujarat is the state our beloved Prime Minister Narendra Modi spawns from. The Bhartiya Janta Party is the righteous ruling party leading India to patriotic triumph. They defended the image as only being a representation of the truth.

This is the India we have become.

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The intersections of pain and surrender come together in the knot of veins coalescing under the sticky molt of the bug, the metacarpals squeezing and squeezing closer together until they pop – the clump of nerves absorbing the pressure of the world’s depression.

The metaphorical and physical come together to surrender democracy at the feet of its beholders. We don't question hard enough the people and cockroaches that possess control of our body, they creep up the stream of red blood cells in our veins, and we let them chip away shard by shard, splinter by splinter at the humanity of our existences.

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Brecht makes clear a sentiment we have too often come by, but more often ignored, "The first time it was reported that our friends were being butchered there was a cry of horror. Then a hundred were butchered. But when a thousand were butchered and there was no end to the butchery, a blanket of silence spread. When evil-doing comes like falling rain, nobody calls out "stop!" When crimes begin to pile up they become invisible. When sufferings become unendurable the cries are no longer heard. The cries, too, fall like rain in summer."

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My mother never wanted me to turn into her, and yet, somehow, I came out so much worse. Maybe she wanted to end me before she had me because she could no longer hold onto the cruelty of the world: our spreading of hatred like cum all over the streets of the globe, painting our lives white and red for nothing – but power.

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Something-something feels truly wrong inside me doc, my brain feels like it is rotting away from the contagion, the panic-the sepsis is setting in.

The doctor, she – diagnoses me with a post-colonial mindset.

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Roma would spend her life as an uncontrolled beam of light who would never be permitted escape (did it even exist?). Instead of confronting her life in the black hole, she would let her desperation and anger destabilize her. She would permit the glimmering photons that made up her flesh and bones to mutate into lances of light. She would bounce around the meaty, inner ramparts of the black hole's event horizon, unforgivingly lashing her fellow citizens of the hole – until even infinity gave in.

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