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LAYLA MASCARENHAS

From 0 to 9

When did I get the right to call myself “me”?
Was it at birth, or was it before?
When did I acquire the right to have rights?
Was it at birth or 9 months before?

The State has a duty to safeguard its people.
When was I big enough to claim that right?
Was I a “nothing” for months in her womb
And suddenly a “something”, or so I assume?

When *exactly* did I become “a person”— a being, not a thing?
The switch must have been momentous,
Boom!
Instant winter to spring.

When was I old enough to be called “human”?
When *did* the powers decided to give me that name?
“A bunch of cells”, “A blastocyst”, “A potential”, “A child”...
Is it language or law that decides the game?

Who can assure me that I had a *right* to be born?
A right to the perfect ecosystem
From 0 to 9?
Or did her duties cease at conception and begin at birth?

I shudder to think just what might have been
If mother had chosen to discard the unseen.
I’m glad she practiced what those pro-lifers preach
And gave me a chance to have rights within reach.

Upper Age Limit

Dear Prime Minister,
It would be nice
If there was no upper age limit
For ladies seeking government jobs.
You see,
There's a lot for us to do.

Childbearing, rearing,
Cooking, cleaning,
Nursing, shopping,
Dropping, picking.
The years roll by, nay, they fly,
And soon we find, the kids say bye.

Take up a job, say the well-wishing sages,
Turn a new page in your stay-at-home-mum's life.
So hither and thither we scan the pages
Of papers and web and good acquaintances.
No jobs, they say, for older ladies,
It's the rule that 40 is the upper age limit. Period.

So, dear man, all girls must marry
And hurry and hurry,
Babies, and elders, and all dependents,
And be free at 40.
Is it logical that every woman
Will fit this pattern?

Men have bodies that are simpler than ours,
Keep those limits for genders
That never need to pause.
And open the gates for hard-working mothers,
Those prized government posts,
Could do with someone tough like me!

Your Life is Not Your Own

“Maaaam, I don’t feel well,” said the young student miles away,
I knew the sound of pain, it was a cry for help.
“Why, what’s happened...what is happening to you,” I said, trying to keep calm.
She told me she wanted to throw her life away.

My balance was running low,
The long-distance call would get cut off without warning.
“Child, I’ll tell you a story, listen, your life is *not* your own...
It’s a gift God gave you to use, treat it with care.”

“Give me some money,” said six-year-old Krish,
“Don’t bother me now, I’m fixing breakfast,” said mother,
“Ask dad.”
Krish padded off to the hall to ask dad for dough.

Brows raised, dad was amused, “What do you need money for, son?”
“To buy you a birthday present,” he said.
“How much do you want?”
“Twenty rupees,” said Krish.

“What do you want for a gift, papa?”
Papa told him.
The little boy rushed off to buy the gift.
“Here, papa, here’s my birthday present for you!”

I watched in wonder as the father lifted the child in pure joy,
“Thank you, so much, my son...what a beautiful gift!”

...The phone call ended abruptly, cut off right in the middle.
The girl lived,
And graduated.
Her life, a gift, still in use.

BIO-NOTE

Dr. Layla Mascarenhas spent 19 years raising a family of four while working part-time. She now works full-time as Assistant Professor of English at V.M. Salgaocar College of Law, Panjim, Goa. She has also worked as Visiting Faculty/Guest Faculty at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, BITS Pilani, K.K.Birla Goa Campus for six years. She researches Children's literature, animated films, and teaching-and-learning methods for Higher Education; and writes poetry.

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