

THE HURRY AND THE HARM

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for

MITHUN & DARSHON

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It takes a great deal of courage to see the world
in all its tainted glory, and still to love it.

—OSCAR WILDE

AFTERSCHOOL PIT STOP

Rain drips between red
slats on the Dairy Queen
rooftop, pools beneath
bolted picnic benches,
spills into the parking lot
of our chipped brick
apartment complex:
broken Happy Meal toys
and pee-filled water bottles
soak under the wooden
staircase. I stand in line,
unzip Barbie backpack
pockets for the stash
of tooth fairy cash:
the snap-closure coin
purse stuffed with sunken
half-dollars and Sacajawea's;
single bills folded
in a Scholastic book
order slip. Glass panes
with taped, faded
flyers: curlicue soft
serve waffle cones,
hot fudge parfaits, big
kid Blizzards, stomach-sick
banana splits, Brownie
Earthquake the size
of my face. I straighten
creases in a crumpled
dollar bill, slip it in
the slide-glass, half-cracked
window—spaced perfectly
for the chocolate-dipped,
popsicle-sticked Mickey
Mouse bar: his vanilla
toothless smile wide
like mine as the crisp,
chilled shell melts and
cracks with each bite.

HIGH STAKES

Awake beside the bedroom window
at midnight, staring at the casino skyline
of Atlantic City: the babysitter yelled at me.

I cried, told her I'm waiting for Baba
to come home from work. My arms and legs
wrap the body pillow dressed in Baba's shirt:

it smells like him. But I can't feel
his chest hairs tickling my cheek
through the pillowcase. Sugar cookies sit

in the kitchen so he can feel like Santa
when he's home. Sometimes Baba brings
circle pizzas wrapped in napkins

from the cafeteria at work and slices
of the cheese with holes in it: my favorite.
He wants me to be the smartest kid

in my class. I won the first grade spelling bee
this year and he was so proud; held
my trophy, a card from the principal

with a folded dollar, and a box
of scented markers. That night, I drew him
a rainbow and left it on the foyer floor.

Baba used to be a surgeon in Bangladesh,
but we came to America after I was born.
Bangali people over there don't like us

because we're Hindu. I wish they did,
then Baba wouldn't work so much.
He has a scar from a bullet that scraped

his arm, riding his bike in college.
I stroke it gently while he's sleeping
so it doesn't hurt him anymore. I wait

for his footsteps on linoleum—he takes off
cheap Velcro shoes and a used work
suit doused in stale cigarette smoke

after a shift at the casino. The Bangali
slot attendant hands out tokens
and directions, kneels to reset machines.

Pull back the pilled blanket—I won't see
crinkled lids, waned white hair,
gaps and deep cracks in healer hands.

LUNCHTIME IN ATLANTIC CITY

Lined up outside
the cafeteria,
fingers to lips,
clutched lunch tickets:
white paper money

with typewritten names
perforated edges
and hole-punched corners.
School lunch menu
taped to the fridge,

highlighted Fridays
for Ellio's and Domino's:
Ma finally filled out
free lunch forms. Quit
work after Dada

said I'd toss bits
of her half-eaten
food in the trash bin
after I waved to Tony
the tattooed custodian.

But I can eat cool
school lunch now:
tried a hot dog
for the first time,
ate beef by mistake,

confessed and cried to Ma.
I worried I'd die.
Don't do it again,
Mamoni! Shards of her
Bengali bangles

ricocheted off
my forehead. Today
I'll eat chicken nugget
lunch with my best friends:
we wrote Spice Girl names

on the backs of our tickets,
wore matching white
shirts and navy
skorts, rolled down
our scalloped socks.

Girl Power peace
signs paired with white
pantyhose and Payless
flats as we chant
boys go to Jupiter

to get more stupider!
Girls go to college
to get more knowledge!
We laugh, lock arms,
walk in, let go—

hungry hands grab
shrink-wrapped plastic
utensils, cardboard
chocolate milk cartons
and aluminum-lipped

juice boxes, shoved in
Styrofoam lunch tray
quadrants beside jello
blocks, tater tots
and packets of sauce.

I hand my torn-
cornered ticket
to the kind-eyed
cashier, look back
at the long line

of school-uniformed
lunch-ticketed
Latino, Black
and Asian kids
disappearing

behind the nurse's
office: we will
never look like
the Spice Girls.
Cramped between

white benches
bolted into black
linoleum, mixing
condiments on
corners of trays:

mayonnaise
with mustard,
barbecue, ketchup:
colored away
in grade school days.

TEA PARTIES

Baba's holey tank top
dries beside scalloped
socks on the radiator,
seams split like sheets of
The Press of Atlantic City
leftover from the four A.M.
jitney ride, saved for Sunday
party decorations: the Peanuts
and Family Circus in color,
store ad collages on Scotch
tape walls. Coupons clipped
for Tetley and two-percent
Tuesdays—dry milk skin
boils brown in bent tin,
scalds thrift shop Corelle
cups, melts plastic Christmas
placemat seating for cracked
saucers, rusk tea biscuits
and cockroach Nesquik.
Sweet and Low settles
with the stereo: the end
of Barbie's cassette rewound
and bowtied at bedtime.

RICHMOND AVENUE DOLLAR STORE

Clammy palms jangle
pocket change as I greet
Lincoln face up outside
the storefront, ready to
redeem our rusty luck
from coin collecting
on cracked asphalt
parking lots and sidewalks
littered with loogie
smudge and cigarette buds.
I clutch sunken brothers
saved from stained seat
cushions in the dented
'97 Nissan. Heads in hand,
we draft our picks: pink
packs of bubble gum,
candy cigs, swirly lollipops
for Student of the Week.
Butterfly clips for cool
cats, foil fart bombs
for first grade boys:
culprits to the cubby
theft of Pokémon cards
and lunch cash hoarded
for Lisa Frank folders.
Tails short turn towards
the door as Abe tips his hat
at the school supply rack;
it won't be long till we're back.

LIPSTICK

I'd let her brush my hair,
but I was already dressed

for Nick Carter. *Boyfriends*
are for Americans. Barbie

sat on the dresser,
we leaned into store ads

unfolded inside a drawer.
Did she remember

the commercial, before
Ma walked in?

It's called *lon-jber-ay*
not *lin-jury*. She left,

I peeked for progress.
We stared in the mirror

together. Shared the same
straight bangs.

Slipped on the tiara,
unstrapped her dress

from the Velcro.
I had spandex

before zippers.
She remembers me

in a pink one-piece
with two socks

shoved down the front—
I wanted my own.

Would mine look like hers,
the ladies in paper?

Maybe if I grew out
my hair. *Bar-bee*:

she was cut in two,
I was pieced in four.

I wondered when
I'd catch up to her.

BIRTHDAY PHOTOGRAPH, 1997

Brown eyes fixate on a fudge cake bordered by white candle flames. Red sari threads pinched in polished fingertips, glass bangles dangle from thin wrists. Carnation lips curl like bobbed black Bengali hair: bangs veil the birthmark crescent; round *teep* from a sticker sheet fixed between bushy brows. White apartment walls pasted with past-worn *teeps* taken off at bedtime: constellations left behind in Atlantic City '97. Before Northfield—*go back to 7-Eleven, dot head*. Caught red-handed for being blue collar brown in a white town? *This is America, Arab*. Suburban September 11th schools? Here's your red locker: 9-11-21 is the combo for *the sandwich your mom made me at Subway*. Jerseys stitched in school spirit fade with the glory of exclusion. True patriots in red and white stripes stomp school halls, scream *bomb* at the brown, pound fists for victory. All eyes lock on a glossed, four-by-six toddler terrorist: *rip off the red dot, bitch*.

60 MILLIGRAMS

banana slices cut
with a plastic knife
spread on a paper plate
beside a spoon of Nutella
and two Milanos
she chews hears the saliva
smack in her mouth
gags polish-chipped nails
peel clammy palm clasps
three extended-release
amphetamine capsules
white-flaked lips part
crinkly curls crumble
rice paper cratered skin
and hollow nicotine eyes
swallowed whole
with Muscle Milk Light
for faster absorption
12 to 14 hour half-life
smooth uptake
without the withdrawal
two hours till she forgets
her appetite taps the scale
and sets to zero
steps on 125 and 5'5"
fingernails dig
into the protruding
curve of collarbone
tremble like EKG lines
pulse spiking teeth
grinding from the uppers

ROOMMATES

Claudia in fleece sweat suits, gray hair
sways while she powerwalks the hall.
Family photos, Nicholas Sparks
novels stacked on the nightstand
while she sleeps. She has the blue
pass: walks the hospital with her
husband. I can't

*because the police brought
you here.* Cops knocked, took an open
bottle. There's still more in the drawer.
Can I finish? Clutch on the flat iron—
I want to look pretty before I kill myself.
Couldn't put on deodorant, hid rat
hair under a hood.

TO ELI LILLY & COMPANY, WITH LOVE

I'll never forget the moment I felt
 truly patriotic: inflation was dead.
 Milligrams replaced currency. I renovated
 my home with 30 pounds, made my first
 transaction for the American Dream:
 green cards for blue slips, swallowed

the old red, round and whole—bondage
 was my homeland abbreviated. Now
 I'm an American citizen: I hold onto
 purple pride for pocket change.
 I'm the alpha bitch. I told Betsy Ross
 I'd tear stitches and stain her boyfriend's

teeth purple. I'm the rag to riches bitch—
 call center to call girl, an ugly kid in the jungle
 till I shaved with the second amendment.
 I bought ammunition as an adolescent
 with 80 milligrams. Now Congress calls me
 Pocahontas in bed. Pharmacies carry

concealer to replace broken seals
 with tamper evident protection. The census
 named me the universal unit for sexy
 after we started going steady. I ride
 the preamble with one nation behind me.
 I am the standardized constant. Chemistry

took me in a test tube, asked students
 to solve for Delta: find the formula for pounds
 to drop dead at a gorgeous rate.
 With convenience stored behind me, I run
 the meatpacking industry. I sell roast beef
 sliced and tell Hindus I don't want them.

I teach the color spectrum how to sing
 while it eats purple. Let freedom ring
 till the touchtone response tells me,
 pull back the curtains; it ain't over till
 the fat kid eats. In my firecracker popsicle
 fantasies, I blew party favor kazoos

at birthday parties. Now I'm a modern day
muckraker with a picket fence mouth.
I shed purple on forever stamps
to make up for first times and missed
calls, because it's always the Fourth of July
in my mind. Kids spot my face on TV

and cereal boxes; enter the sweepstakes:
This Reality can be yours. Join today.
Watch Tony the Tiger carry me
on his shoulders, listen while I eat
Frosted Flakes through wires.
Sparks fly priority postage

with scratch and reveal seals:
stare at my eyelids' undersides;
picture my ugly kid fantasies in pounds—
I thought a picket fence was the only protection
I'd need. Play the right way to win,
till I twirl tassels through my hair.

I take firecrackers to the mouth,
and swallow whole.

COLOR ME HAPPY

I'd turned twenty a couple weeks before,
but coloring sheets and crayons became
my company. Traced shapes in tessellations,
outlined and shaded pale. We got ice cream in
Styrofoam cups on Friday nights: vanilla
'cause we'll go crazy with too much variety.
Wore baby blue socks with white non-skid
bottoms. The old lady with grey mermaid hair
sat on the linoleum, wiped the wet cup brim
inside-out with a bed sheet. Told the nurse
to fuck off when she came with a paper cup
(then a spoon) before bedtime at nine: sassy
at sixty. She held her grandkids' hands.
Said thank you when I told her the flower
drawing was pretty.

SEASONAL

Hindu Santa stashes
boxes of Just for Men
under the bathroom

sink, bare scalp painted
black with faded tooth
brush bristles. Barbasol

thick on a fluff tip, aloe
slathered smooth on salty
cinnamon scruff, snow

scraped with disposable
Gillette green, tapped clean
in the cracked pink sink:

glean under the warm
jet of a speckled faucet.
Hands soapy from a dollar

bar of Yardley, hardly
saw the Barbie bubble bath
in the back cabinet corner.

SCOREKEEPER

Almost smiled when the white boy
 in plaid pajamas said I was pretty.
 He didn't stick around though—
 walked off the field with delusions
 at halftime when the goalie arrived:
 my (cuter) white boy in flannel
 came late during commercial break.

But Reginald stayed, shook
 his hand, already warmed up
 from walking the hall. Dedicated
 player with persistent performance;
 always promised to give me
 the chocolate. Preferred shared
 space, didn't trust secrecy. Kept
 his slippers and gown on during
 the pregame evaluation: he couldn't
 stop fidgeting. Stared empty-eyed,
 pointed to the nurses' file cabinet.
 He missed the City—I *see flashes*
of colors and images in every object—
 told me I look like Alicia Keys.

Stroked his tamed beard, swayed
 wide-armed toward my nerdy
 goalie. Stopped on the sidelines,
 blew me kisses, sang to me—*streets*
will make you feel brand new, these
lights will inspire you.

NOTICE OF BAGGAGE INSPECTION

Do you think I'll pass with flying colors?
Girls like me
are so smart, our brown mothers
made us promise to get A's everyday.

Can you tell I'm from out of state? It's okay, most people give up after the first guess. No, I don't fly first class, just domestic.

I'm a Best Available kind of girl. You think I'm one of the guys? I didn't play baseball, just softball. Where will we practice? Okay, I'll follow you.

Are my hands high enough?
I found the home stretch. So this is what
playing second base feels like.

at shortstop, Ma never let me wear slider shorts to practice. I still keep leggings on before landing. Do I get extra points for that? I like elevation. You look like you've

line drives in your day. Can you believe
it's Sunday? I got my period,
hit some nice
packed a stash.

Did you check the forecast? Cloudy with a chance of Cheetos.

Will that cause turbulence?
Better to be safe than bundled up too tight.

Great weather for a sports bra. Sometimes you need to break locks, let loose. Nope, no stains on those panties. You thought I'd do that?

I know, you're only looking out for our safety.
Girls like me take so long to pack, I forget

what's in there sometimes. Did you find it? You're really sweet for checking. I shouldn't have packed so many snacks. I know how scary that can be.

I see your number on that slip you left there. You must be shy. Thanks for complimenting my ID earlier, I like the guessing game.

Where are you headed
for the holiday? Come and meet me here
where X marks the dot.

GIRLS, INTERRUPTED

we were overflow:

 you stayed there before
on your period. I got shifted

from psychotic disorders
 to female-only in the middle
of the night. they made space

for us in a corner
 of the maternity ward.
you prescribed generic Vaseline for

chapped lips from
 the crackers & condiments
drawer, to be applied while

the auto-adjust hummed paper
 shredder lullabies. you took
two cups of pills for the HIV

from the crack addiction
 when they checked our vitals.
you said pretty girls are

the craziest, get your life
 together while you're still
young. your things in storage,

apartment empty; you called
 halfway houses from the ward
phone. did you make it

to Raleigh? you kept relapsing
 in Chapel Hill. I search for
your face in classifieds,

blanks in obituary space, your
 daughters on cardboard.
we blow-dried our hair

while we could. played games
 from the self-help shelf,
watched The Ugly Truth

from the TV cemented
into the wall. you told me
I could pass as the Cuban

to your Costa Rican, shook
your finger in the nurse's
face, said being Hispanic

doesn't mean I'm stupid.
told me, never let people
walk all over you. taught me

how to order takeout
on the menu. we scribbled
our selections in marker.

CATEGORY C

Risk cannot be ruled out. Got some free samples on market release: real FDA official. Relatively new to the game, only a few months older. Don't have to tell me twice about ethics; knew the route as a minor. Good track record at 17 with three under my belt: ideal candidates. Practice makes perfect—popped that bottle; peeled that seal; gave it air. Made it count, tacked on the map. Still be sitting on an industrial shelf if it weren't for me. How'd I hear about it? Didn't wait too long. Found one loose and still on a couch cushion, did my duty. Pinch of a finger is all it takes. Brand name too; couldn't let it slip through the cracks. Max is 80 milligrams (coat cut pink and white, Lilly and a four-digit ID on the side). Bet the name's still on there, sliding down a throat. Does it work? Not sure, maybe after the shift's finished; pretty long half-life. Always a Plan B, but interactions aren't my responsibility—industry isn't monogamy. The seam stayed locked and strong-jawed when I tried to split it. Had no option but to swallow whole. I'll admit it's tedious, taking it every day: it's growing old real fast. Not even an upper, but I settle. I get impatient. Sometimes I'll drop it (lie there if I'm lazy) dust and shake it to know it's still intact. Check for manufacturer defects: package inserts, black box warnings. Shell so stiff and stainless; licked clean. Soon enough, no restrictions. I'll buy it generic, mail order in bulk. I've got insurance: 90-day supply, all covered.

KNOWLEDGE OBTAINED FROM DATING A WHITE BOY

I discovered
the Theory of Forms
during occupational therapy.

Inches away from me,
I witnessed
Play-Doh transform

into a crack pipe.
Two days later,
I was still inspired.

I read my fate
in the Cosmo—
try physical activity

to reveal your ideal Form.
I walked the hall
to lift my spirits.

Could it be,
I'd see the true
manifestation of my

Self in three weeks?
I increased intensity,
crossed into far depths

of the common room,
turned off the black
and white reflection—

these were cognitive
distortions. What is reality?
One must follow

his intuition.
Thinking in extremes
will destroy creativity.

It will hinder one
from achieving his
full human potential.

Tell me, why shall I
watch TV when I can craft
a collar from the wires?

ROLE PLAY

Betty Boop said I should change before breakfast. *You don't want to draw too much attention here.* Bare backs with twill tape ties were too sexy. Didn't even need that Victoria's Secret strapless. Bras are for bitches, not the admitted. Dr. Barbie had touched up her lashes, decided I'd spend a few days. *You can have a room upstairs and shower too!* I didn't sign up for five stars. She called it involuntary, filled out paperwork already. Barbie never saw a racist card till she met me. I stepped out the room, knocked on slide glass for service. *Quiet Hours, No Calls.* I flipped Barbie's sisters off too, doll faces dumbstruck. *Here's your cup,* swallow. Compliance is silence. Betty, your girls got me to strip last night. Bitches love the brown: that 34B, those faded thread bracelets, that broken bead anklet. *People before you did all kinds of stuff. Strung things together and choked.* Guess I won't be wearing leggings.

CUSTOMER SERVICE EVALUATION

Did you know how hard
geography class at noon
would be when you spent
the last four days coloring?

I had no amphetamines
for company. I'd sit and stare,
count the curls of hair
in front of me. There's always

hope when you've got creativity
to cope, right? I'd stroke my thigh
mindlessly, feel my inner
cartographer come to life.

I carved topography with six
dollars at the pharmacy,
kept my tools in two's—
one for the road, one at home

in argyle tights. I had roadmaps
on lock, knew secluded hot
spots like the back of my hand.
Who needed God when you could

create your own rivers and roads
on your torso? Which Interstate
would take me to heaven
the quickest? I could make road trips

during bathroom breaks, clean
muddy tracks in the shower.
Shoot for the moon? Fuck the moon.
I'll find my own craters

and still taste the stars. Locate your
center of gravity? Follow your
inner compass? Make Great Lakes
from the craters. Measure

the depth of the Mariana Trench
in your belly button. I'll excavate my gut
till I feel my core. Wise Mind says
I've found my profession.

PART-TIME VEGETARIAN

How much for a pound? Meat doesn't talk back, weigh those slabs on the counter. Slice them thinner. Do I want white or dark meat? Which tastes better crumbled over a crisp tongue, carved with the letters C-U-N-T? Stores best below-freezing, stays fresh unlabeled, sealed in plastic film and Styrofoam? Flesh is endless ammunition, convenience stored smooth and skinned. You don't eat beef? *You're basically white anyway.* A stare slices the same in any weather. Whet that blunt before it's too late—no, throw it out, get another from the pack; just six dollars of pocket change. Choice: no pills in this one? Never had it—I'd let it simmer on the stove. No use being resourceful now. A stainless steel smile gleams with each incision. Slam and chop, clean and dry. Look at that lean: fat all cut, white all gone. I give it a Grade A (great to marinate). You know about spices, right? I don't have a type. All meat is red and raw in the end. But if you want it white without paying for Prime (a real dime piece) make sure it's Well Done. I only put out on Select: call me a connoisseur, a real carnivore then. Who's keeping count anyway? This isn't *Bong-luh-desh*. Sprinkle some salt on it. Take the rag, clean up. See how easy that is? You can only get white meat when you ask for it.

ANONYMITY

Did Webster's Dictionary outline
the rules of *bokey pokey*? When Pocahontas
was my favorite Disney princess,

I lived her doppelganger; next door
to the homonym. John Smith fulfilled
my Backstreet Boys fantasy, scripted

from GeoSafari and the solar system.
My favorite food was *paneer*; John chopped,
called it blocked cheese. He talked spices

and never ate aspirated portions
like I pictured Aladdin would—call me
Roddy now. *This isn't Bang-luh-desh* anymore,

Aladdin wouldn't want me now.
I forgot the *Bong* when I licked paper
accents with a tame palate; it didn't matter.

I wasn't Hindu anymore. I was brown
when I bought bangs with a buck. Free
to upgrade twice; with a bombshell bra,

with yoga pants sans panties.
Free to purchase with ObamaCare.
Why punctuate *paneer* and punani?

I'll call your therapist. John spotted
sparkles shackled inside my smile
with binoculars, like the paraplegic

doctor who checked for pubic hair
in fourth grade. John couldn't find
the river bend to differentiate

contraindications for Ritalin
from the systematic inability
to orgasm. I never had it in me

to do the doctor route.
Webster and I didn't have time
to learn the Richter scale. I was told

an earthquake held more than dirt
beneath fingernails. I'd imagine shifts
in the crust and core, post-Pangaea.

How could I practice triage without
an earthquake? I privileged shelter.
John banned hardwired machinery

so tectonic plates could come off
the hinges naturally. John retreated to
trench warfare: in case of mechanical

failure, an ascetic in missionary fasts
on Thanksgiving and keeps tallies
with a refractory machete.

Smith earned accolades for exorcisms
and the invention of voodoo.
Just around the river bend,

he staged a classically conditioned
cringe with Operation Doggy Style.
When will the guns fire?

You don't appreciate me—
spread sails for Columbus Day,
salt rims parted twice.

COMORBIDITY

Grey matter is prime time TV; road kill is on your family dinner table. Listening to the Nutcracker soundtrack, I couldn't snort—

I had shaky hands and metal cavities. You can't believe your eyes—I clawed out mine when I saw my insides. Started scratching my corneas at nine.

I took bites on bone; you held the bibs; I never dropped acid because I wanted kids. Category B or C, birth defects can't be fixed. Betty Crocker told

white boys: pussy tastes best boiled; blood evaporates without a trace—now you've got white chemical meat without charcoal. A Southern boy

taught me *Joy-sey* doesn't have the barbecue genre. We cooked calamari veined: make a wish, tie knots, bake Philly soft pretzels. If you poke

a heart, a pebbled spine swells. After frying broken eggs over-easy; lick juice off your teeth; clean up with a crinkled newspaper. Dr. Seuss

released Spam for your kids' lunches; make a hoagie with cut chunks of ham and mayo. I'll teach intestines where

dinosaurs came from. The real boar's head is the living room mantelpiece prize, dried cob

in the mouth after guys' night out. It could've been pork roll. It could've been wholesale. If only you

kept it cool in the freezer. What a waste of money.

FOUNDING FATHER

The card catalog contains
 a new form of math
 in the works, developed
 by Professor Big Dog
 at Third Floor University.
 He didn't need SATs,
 earned his credentials
 through an affiliation
 with the Blue Gown
 Society; our membership
 benefits include stipends
 for three-day retreats
 with subsidized health
 insurance. Selection is
 determined by strength
 of personal character,
 with decided emphasis
 on the broken oath.
 The ringleader is believed
 to keep Catholic under
 a coonskin cap, taking
 sabbatical every three months
 to repent, recalibrate church
 and state: our organization
 is committed to coping
 with cognitive dissonance;
 our success rate is pending
 dialectical behavioral approval;
 we offer Equal Opportunity
 to all qualified applicants.
 Big Dog is an active sweatpants
 sympathizer, a Cornucopia
 for All advocate. His manifesto
 recounts the Tears Gilded
 the Politics of Respectability
 Age, when white guys couldn't
 go after the colored girls.
 With miscegenation on
 the forefront, Big Dog enacted
 a love declaration for his
 Filipino Queen (effective
 immediately), issued a lunch invite
 to my white boy: chilled Coke
 reinforcements, private bolted
 block seating; fine Southern
 hospitality at Fort Carolina

during peak hours of maximum
occupancy—when the enemy
camps in medical maroon,
stationed for fireside chats
by Bruno Mars over walkie talkie,
we root for our white scruff
watchdog: he'd bite a bullet for us,
hand on the Bible style for us.
Big Dog lied for our aberrations
in the line of magistrate; he earned
tenure track on the stake.

FOOD COLORING

Friendly's on Friday, when kids eat free: browns and their discounts. You point to my clear sundae cup—*Didi, you're coffee brown, and I'm chocolate brown.* Blanks in the blocks on your kid's menu crossword: predetermined. Colored letters look better inside white space; hot fudge tastes best on vanilla—you scoop up white with a silver spoon. For now, you can pretend. Almost missed myself: brown backwash melted into the whitewash. Sketched self-portraits on display in a first grade classroom: dark chocolate brown lost in a Crayola box with peach and apricot. Color your skin softly, use Brown sparingly: don't press too hard now. Six year-old crayon scribbles streaked like chocolate sauce—smeared across your face, smeared across mine. The way we'll be defined, denied, wiped off the mouth.

POSTSCRIPT

Memory would reveal
the soft fibers
of the white crochet blanket
on top of the green couch
in your basement, where we'd drink
Layer Cake red wine
out of cracked, clear plastic cups.
I'd wear your sweater
that we picked out at Goodwill
with green and brown squares
all over it; you'd pull my bracelets
up my wrists to see the tan lines
beneath them, and trace
the outline of my lips
as they parted ever so slightly;
and when we'd sit crossed-legged
on the beige carpet,
our noses and foreheads
pressed against each other—
I could feel you laugh.

PAPER DOLLS

Strips of masking tape stick to white cement walls,
pastel Multicultural Day flyers fall to the polished

fifth grade floor. Bulletin board trimmed, paper
garland tacked, cardstock hands linked by craft

fasteners. *One family*: laminated cutout kids;
ceramic skinned, chapped cheeks cold

and red. Freckled brunettes lipglossed with tousled
tresses, push-up bras, and polka dot dresses. Pressed

and folded: my paper figure wedged in a locker door,
the crinkled class worksheet scrawled with *India*.

One community: unscathed scissor lines, crayon scribbles
in the cookie cutter head. Gingerbread face burnt

brown, crisp-edged like scabbed *gorilla legs* masked
in threads of black bang curtains, drawn back

for a torn hole target. Red spots of spit spill
from lip cracks, *Hindus eat rats* drips on toilet paper

sari scraps, stuck to the monster in the magnetic
mirror. Tucked under a taped-up, Avril Lavigne poster:

modification modeled with clean polished fingers
to fit flawlessly in a bleached chain. Sink and retreat

from the squeak of Air Jordan feet—cheerleaders
arm-lock the slack-jawed snickers of scruffless football

players. Fist pumps for the *dot bead* destined to drop
bombs on dominoes falling to the floor, slamming

the door: red, code-locked like letter blocks printed
on rolled-up shorts and jerseys, branded on the hallway

banner for *One school*. Fanned flyers become balls,
crumpled by the clutch of paper dolls.

ROOTS

Search the thick Super Saver paper
for sales on top soil, gritty Miracle Gro,
and cow manure that Baba turns

with a curve-blade *seni*; mixed with skin
from butternut *mishti lao* and bitter, warty
korola: crunchy rind now a yellow puree.

Cold hose mist washes pollen off white
flowers, split lima bean seams, and long
squash strings: fingers he twists to grip

onto the canopy net, draped over steel
stakes dug into dry clay clusters. We pop
cubed okra and green pepper pods

out of black plastic trays, scatter red leaf
data shake seeds. Stalks sprout straight
and I fall behind, holding the roll

of heavy-duty thread that Baba ties to
low splintered stakes for cherry tomatoes
and slender lavender eggplants

inside wire cone cages. He bends to mend
broken plant stems and drops the ripe
and rotten in the torn plastic thank you

bag in my hands: knees cracking,
heels of his feet slipping and sinking
into the mud-caked earth.