THE HURRY AND THE HARM

Anuradha Bhowmik
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 Nesquick.
Sweet and Low settles
with the stereo: the end
of Barbie’s cassette rewound
and bowtied at bedtime.
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-jher-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 kazoo
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.

I always got stuck 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 hit some nice line drives in your day. Can you believe it's Sunday? I got my period, 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.
风险不能被排除。在市场上获得了一些免费样品：真正的FDA官员。

相对较新，只有几个月，内有少数道德。不需要告诉我两次，我知道在未成年人的路线。17岁时有良好的记录，有三件在我手：理想候选人。熟能生巧——打破了瓶子；剥开密封；让空气。让它发挥作用，贴在地图上。如果没有我，它仍然会放在工业货架上。我怎么知道的？没等太长。我发现了一个松散的，仍然在沙发垫上，尽我本分。用手指点一下就可以。品牌名称也要；不能让它落入裂缝。Max是80毫克（外套是粉白相间的，Lilly和一个四位数字的ID在上面）。可以肯定它在名字上，滑过喉咙。它有效吗？无从得知，可能在工作后；相当长的寿命。始终有B计划，但互动不是我的责任——工业不是一夫一妻制。我没有选择吞下它。我会承认这很烦人，每天吃：它在快速地老去。甚至一个上流，但我满意。有时我会把它放下（如果我懒的话）灰尘和摇晃来判断它是否仍然完好。检查制造商的缺陷：包插插页，黑盒警告。壳很硬，很光滑；舔干净。很快，就没有限制了。我会以非专利药，通过邮寄的方式，按订单购买。我有保险：90天的供应，全包。
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 *hokey 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.
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 sené; mixed with skin from butternut mishí 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 shak 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.