Halwa

I still remember when the four of us would gather
into our tiny green Corolla, Mom and Dad, me and Shiraz Mamu,
the blackness of night indistinguishable despite the streetlamps
we passed, so that only potholes jolted me to the stream
of words exchanged between them: Aap deke kya hua store
meh? Aur Bank meh paise dale? And of course, from behind
the blockade of dual seats, my constant interruptions,
until we reached the Desi Store, four as one, filing into the spicy
air, me passing through towering aisles
to find chai and my favorite chips (which I'd have to beg for
but would ultimately get to keep). My dad would approach
the counter, where a man sat behind a glass case,
selling paan leaves and calling cards, of which dad would take
three each, while Mom disappeared into the freezer
section to place an order with the butchers, who mostly barked
at one another between the beats of the blade. And Shiraz Mamu
could be found at the restaurant in the back, ordering chilled
raas malai and warm carrot halwa, two boxes of each,
so that after meeting at a table and consolidating
our goods, we'd open them up in pairs, forks digging in
as we broke and soaked the spongey raas malai
in its milky, sugary sauce, and blew on the soft orange crumbles
of halwa before they reached our tongues. The darkness outside
never really reached this place, and when I say this happened
once I mean it happened many times, and that it doesn't
happen anymore. It's just as true, but intangible, like the stillness
we find in movement, in repetition. After I burn my tongue
because I want to inhale this moment
so desperately, I remember Mamu's laugher,
like a giddy kid on a trampoline. His smile
from the side is the only thing I'll ever describe as sweet.

No Space

I.

Minutes before it happens, in a summer
class about cultural representation, minutes

after you learn that a fountain represents power and red bricks
allude to stability and that the Lego company is racist

for portraying Asians yellow, the White teacher asks about materiality
in your life. You feel comfortable and you speak, you

share that still at age seventeen you shop
with your mother, because bringing her means

justifying the money you spend,
and you had expected other students to agree, at the very

least but the teacher speaks up, glancing at you briefly
before chuckling, *What? That's not really*

how things work
here.

You see everyone
moving the discussion

forward, and as your eyes look across the oval circle of desks
at the only Black student

in the room. Her head of spiral curls leans back
as her lips part to show the whites of her teeth.

II.

And after some time you think maybe it's not an immigrant
problem, maybe it's a poverty problem.

And after some time, you think that maybe it's also a racial
problem. Because two and a half

years later at an inner-city elementary
school in Decatur, as a tutor you walk

into a first grade classroom and see a Black teacher separating
the only two Mexican students from the rest,

giving them a desk to share in the corner of the room
and complaining because they are holding her back

from attending to the rest of her students. *Thank God*
you're here, take them off

my hands. And for the rest of the year, while you sit
with Diego and Maria, who cannot focus

on a language they don't know,
as you pathetically spin flashcards

in their faces of the alphabet and subtraction,
as you eat lunch with them until the teacher notices

and forbids you to, as they get shocked when you tell them
you don't know Spanish even though you sure look like one

of them, as they teach you *uno*
to *cien* and excitedly call you Miss Anushah while wrapping

two snot-filled hands around either of yours,
you realize that maybe there are too many

problems for you
to even count.

III.

And when the expert on cultural representation berates you for writing
something *traditional* too *by the book,*

holding up a long, milky finger,
you say nothing, you look

down, because if you're upset, you're
melodramatic, and you can't say

that your tendency for neurotic perfection
is a result of years of beration to learn the American

way, the educated way, so that you vowed never to give him
a reason to doubt your ability. What he doesn't realize,

still, is that *there is an even playing field but the playing field is still white* and you have still never done anything

on the basis of what you wanted,
but on the basis of how the white

man will, if he looks up, see
you.

Body

I can't write
about it like you do

you, who don't have to think
about color about anything other

than what you see
shape symmetry width

length measure my pain
My body is more than a shell more

than birthmarks I complain about or love
handles I can't shake In my chickpea skin

I sense you My body
does not belong to me when you look

Your eyes see its shadows
universal history disgust different

tongues I am brown brown
like sand in the shade my body a series

of prints and marks Did I tell you
my mother forbid me from protesting?

It's not worth the risk
to have a presence to reveal myself

to you. But if not me then who?
And if voice is the extension of body she said

don't use that either and don't use what
we've named. No Anushah Abdul Jiwani

on résumés or announced
at graduation. Anushah Jiwani

is foreign *enough. It's okay, Mom This is*
a liberal place People want to hire

minorities now as if that's a relief
I think of Abdul Dad telling me his name

means servant of God I can't fathom
how dangerous it must sound

You tell me you are angry at the President,
who forbids transgender people

from the military I am envious
You are lucky to own your anger.

When he wanted to document us I didn't feel
a thing No surprise fear You say anger, I hear

ownership of body right You say write
like it's your calling But why

do I only feel purpose
when I feel pain? Worthy

living to document Playing the victim
here see I hate

My body: skin
like rusted grain

keeping
silent.

Thank You for Being Thankful for my Suffering

When you asked me to talk about classrooms
so that my experience as a person of color
would verify your thesis in sociology, I said
yes. Not because I wanted pity, but because
I wanted to see change.

When I told you in the lackluster
classroom, our chairs facing perpendicular
to one another, immovable—victim
to a maze of rows left behind by conversations
from earlier in the day, before the sun had resigned,
before the chalkboard had been gifted
with its blank slate, which I stare at now—

When I shared with you, more like discovered
in your presence, that behind the doors
of my excellent elementary school I was never accepted
as an immigrant, but made to strip away
the foreignness, as if I could remove the colored
layers from my skin to reveal the blankness of white,
when I shared this with you, you accepted it, and thanked me.

Before we began this conversation, I stared
into the chestnut eyes couched within your milky
skin, the baby fat still lingering on your cheeks. After,
your eyes failed to return the gift of your gaze, didn't notice
my eyes filling up, or the tears dropping, uncontainable, down
like boiling water that scarred my cheeks.

Your response, before you thanked me, and days
later when your chestnut eyes came to life and thanked me again
in the hallway for such an incredible story
to put into your thesis, was *mhm*, *this is such good stuff, keep
going!* and I did. I was happy to validate your theory
of suffering.

Freud believed that to master my trauma I must *act
it out* with repetition, or *work through* it with words.
But unfortunately for me, both methods involve *reliving.*

What you are reading has come out
of pain. I don't want you
to clap.

It Is Eid al-Adha in Little Rock

I drive through the dark, its body hollowed
by smoky cream shadows
across the bridge.
Between Little Rock and Maumelle,
the phone rings. Next to me,
Sehrish, illuminated by the glow of her own
device, glances over.

Hey Mom, I speak out, my voice captured
by Bluetooth. In response, static.
Another call, another pause. Voice.
Hurried. *Hello? Anushah? Nana's on
the line.*

. . .

Ya Ali Madad, Nana! I say, but it's obscured
by his ancient blessings, transcripts
of Ismaili prayers cast to us
from Noorabad Colony.
Each occasion is always marked
by his voice, his string of Gujrati rhythms
that mix with the golden pulse
of the streetlamps. In and out
his voice goes, a call
and response, *Mawla tuje sukhi salamat
abaad rakhe –*

ameen. That's all
Mom and I could say
to his duas, requests
to God for my well-being.
Mom tells him that I submitted dasond
for the first time, two hundred dollars
out of my first paycheck. Then, recalling my protests
from earlier in the day, *You did
do it, right?*
Yeah, of course.

This prompts another round
of prayers from Nana. The rumble
of his voice and the road causes my vision
to blur.

I ask him what he did for Eid.

I see our visits to extended family
all across Karachi, recall Eid's sweet
air and stink of goat meat.
But he reminds me that he is ten hours
behind, in an earth turned
backward. I should know this by now.

When I lived with my parents I would say bismillah
hir rahman ir rahim before eating
or driving, and dua three times a day.

I ask if he and Nani still went for walks
each morning. *Of course.* He asks
about school, or work, or something
else, garbled maybe because of the distance
or maybe because Sehrish is now giving
directions to her house, *Turn by the McDonald's*, *first right*

on the roundabout. In my silences, Mom jumps
in, explaining that I don't understand
his words. I've defaulted to saying
Ha(n),
Yes.
to everything. I feel I've cheated,
been cheated.

On Eid in America I see clarity
in the morning air, the sun brighter
than usual. Tonight, I will eat
karai gosht with Sehrish's four siblings, and Mom
will thank her for this.

When we ask for dua we raise our hands
and cup them together, our tasbihs collecting
blessings that fall from above.

Time, the road, curves. The call is
not aged forever like dua, despite its place
in my memory.

Taut, the line he cast across land
and time. His voice is fragile,
like beads on a tasbih.

It dissolves. I want to shout
so he can hear me through the earth.

Arz Kiya Hai

I grew up hearing Abida Parveen's ghazals mixing with Mom's cooking in the kitchen. The beat of the tablas grounded her yearning for her spiritual beloved. The sitar resonated with each beat.

Dad is haunted by Mehdi Hassan's ghazals. On quiet Sundays, his voice echoes them. His forehead wrinkles in devotion. He is lost in childhood memories, tapping fingers to the beat.

On TV, the ghazal is revered in performance. Musicians sit, half circle, on a fabric-wrapped stage. The kurta-clad singer somberly sways towards the microphone, counting the beats.

At gatherings overflowing with family-friends sipping chai and telling jokes, an auntie interrupts, raising a cupped hand, bowing her head. She says, *Arz kiya hai*. With shy eyes she waits a beat

before reciting two lines that tease her husband. She pauses, anticipating laughs. Then she repeats the couplet and offers two more lines expressing her love for him, regardless. No beats

separate her end from our laughter and praises of *Wah, wah*! Clever shayari earns our respect. In America these moments are a novelty, re-creations of old habits that were beaten away

by time and distance. When Dad visits Pakistan, he gathers all the younger cousins. They pray and sing all night, praising Ali until sunrise. When he hears ghazals, does his heart beat back

to younger memories? The swing of his motorcycle, his broken family's first huddle around the color TV, the meditative hours spent with Dada before death? Anushah yearns to know. Beat.