My Life in a Coffee Cup

What I poured in

I drank—and what I drank
I became. My tongue led me
to taste the entrance to things—
my lips, split apart, in pursuit—
my eyes strayed to other eyes
when the cup overturned—
my nose drank in
the escaping mist—my ears
on their own foraged
save for instants of sip
and pour. First, letters fell
into the cup—then, words
canalized the mud
as I stirred in the milk
drinking it up, whole
phrases tumbled in:
it took many strokes
to hook and pull them out
clean onto the page—
white like the roughest sea—
as the words spilled out
the cup emptied until
night’s ink scavenged
the dark and refilled the cup
when I poured
and once more
drank down the world.
If I Told You

If I told you I am Roma, if I told you I am named after my great-grandmother Sabina and that Sabina is a Romani name, if I told you there is no DNA marker for Roma but I believe

my people are Jewish Roma. If I told you I feel Roma in my blood when I watch flamenco and I have a common Roma blood type, if I know how to speak every Romance language but Romanian and my Romanian-American grandmother who knew no Yiddish knew how to say Cum vă place? How do you like it? in Romanian. If I told you that proves nothing and everything.

If I told you I am related to a Hollywood gangster on my Romanian side and you probably believe Roma are gangster thieves. If I told you I am a thief and I am stealing my Roma identity, if I have never begged

for a coin never sat outside a subway or train station though once, stranded in Boston, asked strangers for a bed, ended up on a bench in the police station. If I told you I slept in a tent or under the canopy

of stars, if the rhythms of my clapping are Roma and my people are from Iași in Moldavia in eastern Romania, if I told you Roma played at Jewish weddings and Jews played at Roma weddings, yet during the Iași pogrom of June, 1941, Romani were caught laughing as they helped the Nazis. If this is when I have my doubts about being Roma.

If I told you the Romani part of me believes only in song and the Jewish part insists
on writing it down. If I told you
some Romani have light eyes and hair like mine.

If I told you that part of me never feels at home
and that part is a Romani Jew. That being
an outcast once, why not be an outcast twice.
Kafka’s Hands

Not the ones with which he wrote
and held lemon water and lifted up a spoon
to fletcherize his food
nor the ones with which he held Felice
at two hands remove

nor the degenerate hand of Leni
who tries to seduce K
but the one with severed thumb
pinky sheared off to the root
and a ring finger worthless to

hold a ring—to illustrate

the accidents that might befall
a worker using a rectangular wood-planing machine as opposed to
a circular plane. Who has a magic

hand that he can place into a machine

without it being torn and tossed aside by a thousand knives? These the hands—
manikin worker hands—deftly drawn

that drew me.
How Many Secrets?

I don’t know her name, the Chandigarh girl, who was raped by her uncle, and I don’t know that just because I, too, was once a ten-year-old girl in braids that I have any right to speak of her—but who will speak for her—she who had no right to her body, or to know that what bumped up inside her was not a kidney stone. If it is true we all begin as female before testosterone washes through the womb to make some of us male, isn’t she close to being the mother of us all? At six months pregnant, denied an abortion by the Indian court, denied to her parents, that is, who have not told the girl she was pregnant, who now has had the baby cut from her as she lay in numbed sleep—the baby girl unseen by her or by her parents.

Why did she finally tell them about her uncle—her stomach pains a month earlier? What did she make of the heaviness of her breasts? Now I see her stitched-up belly healing.

How she’ll have to go on when her whole life things have been done to her—for her. Now I can see her married off at fifteen, the stomach pains returning. When the anesthesia of not-knowing wears off, let her mouth unstitch itself even if it means knowing she has survived one cycle of suffering only to be borne into another.