

ELEGY. 1998

I first heard the American pronunciation of my name in kindergarten. We practiced handwriting with chunky Ticonderoga pencils and three-lined paper: two solid green lines with red dashes in between. I wrote Anu over and over: my *dhak nam* at home meant bright star in Bangla. My blonde-bobbed teacher wrote INC for incomplete, attached -radha in red pen. *You need to practice writing your name, Ann-uh-rah-duh.* Radha was the Hindu goddess of love and good luck. I told the teacher my name was Oh-nu-rah-dha, Oh-nu for short. *Don't talk back to me.* The first language I spoke had eleven vowels. Ma and Baba spoke broken Bangla-English. They mailed letters to Bangladesh in orange envelopes: the return address in jumbled capital and lowercase, extra loops and curls in the letters. I learned about abbreviation. When I got my first B in handwriting, the report card comments noted U for unsatisfactory. I practiced my penmanship till the letters straightened, the pages clean of eraser residue. I crafted my American name inside Lisa Frank folders, wore a Barbie clip in my black hair for the Lifetouch portrait. I lost the aspirated last syllable of my name when I was six. In the American alphabet, it did not exist.

DECEMBER 1992

Mymensingh, Bangladesh

Ma was 31 that winter. She scheduled the due date a week early: Caesarian section, sans labor pains. Took a four-hour bus

to the city hospital with a bloodbank. Gynecology was her specialty: she knew the female body, its hollows. Prepared for its complications.

Ma waited two hours in the delivery room with Baba. Did it feel like a lot of time back then? There was sunshine at 10:06 AM. I weighed

seven pounds, two ounces. A moon-shaped birthmark on my forehead, “Hindu” on my birth certificate. Ma went back to work a week later.

Red Cross was called Red Crescent. She saw patients in a tin roof clinic with cement floors. Performed abortions for rape victims.

What did she keep in her exam room? Anatomical diagrams of the vulva & vagina seemed too vulgar. What did the walls look like,

broken down & dented in? *I'll kill you & your husband, kidnap your children.*

Dada was two years old. He smiled when he first saw me,

thought I was a doll: dressed in ironed pink cloth, handmade from soft fibers.

Marionette strings cut from thick placenta. Ma bled—

botched stitches sewed her loose skin in quadrants. We left four months later. At the American embassy, I vomited—

expelled the aspirated portions of my Bangladeshi name.

I was not meant to be cradled.

ELEGY FOR THE SURGEON

Baba's lace-up leather shoes from Bangladesh had needlepoint patterns pricked in the skin and bands of lentil-sized eyelets. He'd never tell me the truth about our American life in the early 90s, but he slipped up from time to time: powdered milk, trash picking, pocket change, etcetera. While he tried on Velcro shoes from the Kmart clearance, I walked toward the aisle of Barbie Jeeps. Soon he traded laces and fine stitches for double straps and casino work. Hid the black Bata brand shoes in a latch-lock suitcase with our Bangali birth certificates, stethoscopes, spare passport photos from first grade featuring pigtails he tied with rubber bands. I cut my hair in layers when I turned twelve, to look like the popular girls who smoked ganja after school. *So your dad wears skirts?* He went barefoot at home, traded his *lungi* for trousers when Americans came over. The black leather dress shoes creased at the toe. They weren't cost effective like the ten-dollar Thom McAn's: scuffs and dry sweat coated with ultra-shine shoe polish and Dr. Scholl's insoles. He never noticed the embossed Size 9 and Made in Bangladesh fade from the inner leather lining, the unfastened eyelet lost in a crisscross. He kept a shoehorn handy by the door, until the cheap rubber soles wedged thin and lost grip.

AMERICA. 1997

During the April Fool's Day Blizzard,
Dada's jacket gripped his wrists too tight,
and his hand-me-down coat was mine.
We kept tallies of charter buses crossing
the Atlantic City bridge in winter,

back when jitney rides were fifty-cents
from the landlord's brownstone to the bus station.
The Greyhound took us with perforated
tickets to New York. Dada and I crawled
under the subway turnstile while

Ma and Baba trailed behind with tokens,
rehearsing routes to Ms. Rhona's office.
After political asylum interviews
with Baba and Ma in broken Bangla-
English, she played counting games

with Dada and me, and we raced to recite
numbers he learned in kindergarten ESL
as she flashed her fingers. Baba passed handbills
out for an electronics store that winter,
and fought frostbite in Salvation Army

wool gloves when the U.S. Immigration Office
lost his naturalization papers in a flood.
That April Blizzard was the first time we saw
snow, blown in heavy heaps with high winds
that left hundreds of thousands without power.

And we walked white city blocks back to
Mrs. Clark's brownstone, and cold bit
Dada's bare ears red and left infection
and fever, and cold left my red Bangladeshi
ballet shoes without grip in Dairy Queen's

frosted parking lot. Dada passed me
chicken pox from school when we got approved
for green cards. Baba thanked his good luck charm:
the bright star, Radha and her love—and I shaped
my Bengali name in shaky uppercase

for the social security stub,
while its aspirations were still intact.
Ma and Baba thought a picket fence
was the only protection we'd need.
I was young enough to believe.