

from CURB

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*CURB is an artist's book commissioned by The Press at Colorado College, designed and printed by Aaron Cobick. It documents the assault and killing of Indian-Americans and Indian immigrants in public spaces in the United States. It will be published in 2019.*

CAST IN PLACE: SRINIVAS KUCHIBHOTLA

लुका छुपी बहुत हुई सामने आ जा ना  
कहां-कहां दूँढा तुझे  
थके है अब तेरी मां

Enough of the hide & seek, come before me.  
I searched for you everywhere.  
Your mother is now tired.  
“लुका छुपी” from Rang De Basanti. Prasoon Joshi / A.R. Rahman

1.

February, 22, 2017. I had been carrying her  
six months. Within  
me, she could open  
her eyes, she could tell  
dark apart from light. She could know  
when daylight filtered  
through the cathedral, a ray breaking  
the sticky pane  
cranberry stained  
glass womb.

2.

When I read the news  
of the shooting, this belly  
plumed into an apse — it distended  
upward, a balloon hollow  
but leaden, these lungs lifted  
here — this diaphragm fled, bore through  
a tent made of ligament  
& rope. The billow screeched  
in these ears, pulled here — these legs apart  
these toes went numb & cold. The ground  
beneath me collapsed, turned to dunes  
& the sand quickened. Here — this belly  
carrying those pounds of flesh  
began to take flight  
in seconds it was  
in — here — this mouth, pressing against here — these teeth —  
a pear balloon, hot flush  
with wet wings beating, with wet wings thrashing  
in these lungs. The breath  
an ocean of blood. This skin  
here — a dam, detonating. A pulse, here  
pulling history  
towards these feet.

3.

When I read the news  
of the shooting, I was standing  
in our library & this — here — this face fell  
into a hundred sheets  
sheaves of visas lost in monsoon floods  
a long queue dispersing after bad news

passes through breath & beard  
a susurrus of shaking heads, shrugged shoulders; this — here — this face fell  
apart in the quiet hum of the air-conditioning  
soft surplice, lipping off me, the bone simply giving way  
the skin curling back, the cartilage of this nose spilling  
a bib over this — here — old nightshirt.  
I needed this face  
to stay; I wanted  
this face to flee  
to abandon me the way rats do ships  
to stave off a starvation by drinking water  
to make it to any shore, baby in mouth. I needed this  
— here — face because it was on my visa.  
I gathered it up — these knuckles  
driftwood; these palms  
sailcloth. These finger-tips  
branched apart; each phalange dangled  
— cheap pens at the mall's Western Union  
chained & paranoid about being taken elsewhere.  
The nails scratched the deck & that sound  
drowned the sough of crowds  
migrating within one.

4.

When I read the news  
of the shooting, it was warm & bright outside  
the cumin spun into rasam, the curds set just right, I called  
my mother, it was dark & cold  
where the news stained first, where the choke cleared  
brushwood for a pyre  
where she was. I called out  
to my husband; I thought about my father  
but I did not call him.

5.

When I read the news  
of the shooting, the blowback  
was a flight from the fear of ever seeing  
a photograph  
of my father's rib shattered, his blood  
staining the pocket of his faded navy pique polo —  
    the one he wears on Costco runs for bananas & two-packs of Windex.  
was a flight towards the pale band of skin on his wrist, where he keeps time —  
    how he looks older, more lost when it isn't hidden by his watch —  
I pocketed this band for the alms I would offer myself  
    as I begged, in the months to come, for a place  
    on a curb not wet with blood, of a question not always cocked  
I remembered my father's future  
as a passport-photo hung from an elm tree  
as a headline  
as a statistic gently rolling on a marquee.  
That brown face, a stain  
between kin & ken  
between breech & brotherhood  
on a floor near the boots  
of citizens, Americans, men

6.

When I read the news  
of the shooting, these palms  
began speckling; small white patches  
bloomed & turned to face me  
curds splotchy with pale pink mulberries  
stamped & dragged, red & unripe, between skin  
& muscle. This — here — body had crushed itself  
while reading the news.

The she in me turned; faced herself. Cherry feet  
fluttered at a sweetsop bladder; a migrant heartbeat  
clattered like a clay pigeon.

The middle of the sky was pressed pause.

7.

When I read the news  
of the shooting, these ears rang  
the phone-lines of the dead, called  
for the knowing trill, the scatter  
of sugar, of a spoon circling  
a milk tea for one  
on the other side  
of the world.

8.

When I read the news, the she in me  
was swollen & pressing, & I saw  
her dropping to kneel her  
brown belly  
collapsed to a city's curb  
her skull crimson in the clouds  
her sweet ear flung & clinging  
to a parapet. & at that cleft  
for the first time, I saw  
— here —  
her as mine & then, hearing canons  
sung in double-time  
I knew being mine  
would clip her life. So I slipped  
this burning hand  
into a place

where this body hammers at its heart  
& I singed its edges & with shame I  
scorched holes into the photograph  
of an ancestor, blotted her dark  
eyes out to whiteness, charred  
her skin to a pale ash, turned  
her folded hands into smoke, & I looked  
within this — here — belly  
for those eyes that could tell  
dark apart from light, & I wished  
out loud  
so she could survive —  
*live, I said, in any skin, live.*

February 22, 2017. Srinivas Kuchibhotla was shot in a bar in Olathe, Kansas, by a white supremacist who believed that Kuchibhotla was an illegal immigrant from Iran. The shooter yelled, “Get out of my country!” before he shot & murdered Srinivas. After shooting & murdering Srinivas, the shooter went to another local bar & bragged that he had shot an immigrant. Srinivas’ mother, speaking to reporters at his funeral in Hyderabad, said: “My son had gone there in search of a better future. What crime did he commit?”