

FOR THE SHEPHERD WHO IS ALSO THE PATH THE SUN MAKES IN DAYTIME

A good shepherd is a wonder in *contrapposto*, an artist
mapping the Serengeti with kingdom lines.

A good shepherd angles a lion's eye, traps gazelles
in dry fields, copies a cheetah's spots one leg at a time.

A good shepherd does not give you stones
when you ask for toast, does not ask you to work

without a burning bush—but owns a gate, uses a gate, pulls
the weeds and leaves the wheat on an altar of choices.

A good shepherd is a prince of peace when terror finds its full echo,
a creator in the wild where a predator, providentially, becomes prey.

BIRTHDAY GAMES

Before the sun hits, there is a piñata, the sprinkling
and gushing of gifts, musical chairs, round and round
as voices mouth a melody for cake. There is a donkey
kid who breathes in the icing and licks the bottom
of the candles before asking. There is also the donkey
and its tail, red eyes marking his own surprise
for missing parts, this distinct part of him that left
and never returned. Still, each kid walks up proud,
dons on the blindfolds, and becomes an instant
cheat. Can we fix what we can't see? The sliver of light
tempts. *You can't peek*, someone big says. *Make sure
you close your eyes*. A small scrunched face, growls: *Why
can't I do what I want to do!* And we all become beasts.

AN AMERICAN

Every Diwali, I explain
to my friends at school
why I am so tired—*garba*
it's like dancing—pujas? I guess
like praying—

I explain in fragments
because even we don't know
why we wash statues with milk,
why worshipping God takes
so many coats. I don't ask,

just sit beside my mother
when she sings. My sister and I
watch our father struggle
to cross his legs; his laughter
resting on his lifted knees.

He closes his eyes, pretending
to pray. We believe my mother
made this temple herself,
found pictures and tiny *murtis*, gold
coins with Shiva, rice and turmeric

stored in tiny steel jars. Only she knows
where everything goes and how to use it.
I have sat at that temple many times,
looking at Krishna's blue face
and pleasing smile framed inside

where life is easy—

My mother tells me he is blue

because he is so dark; *we would not be able to see his face otherwise*, she says.

Every time I close my eyes to pray,

I see Jesus on that cross and taste pennies. His blond face like the girl in music class who told me not to take the Lord's name *in vain*.

I feel guilty wanting to

have stew and tuna sandwiches instead of *kichree*. So when my Ba showed up at school this afternoon in her maroon and gold sari, and called my name, I didn't answer.

I walked past her to the car, slid between my sister and her white friend.

I wanted to believe that I was still American, hiding in the back seat like a crumpled sari.