

KIRUN KAPUR

Light

The only aunt I know would tell me,
This is how you knead the dough.
I don't remember the old stories—
Make sure it doesn't get too tough!

Knead carefully to make the atta.
Good girls know how to make good puris.
Make sure the gluten doesn't toughen,
A puri should be light and golden.

Good girls know how to make good puris.
They don't ask for the old stories.
A puri should be light and golden,
Like your cousin's and your cousin's cousin's.

I overheard the stories
When all the women shared a bed.
My cousins and my cousin's cousins—
The older women slept still dressed in saris.

When all the woman shared a bed
The fan chuffed through a cloud of talcum powder.
Still fully dressed in saris,
They whispered names I'd never heard before.

When the fan chuffed sandalwood and roses,
I raised my arm above my head.
They named the aunts and daughters.
I caught hold of my cousin's hand.

I raised my arm up in the dark.
There was a niece who could have been recovered.
I held my favorite cousin's hand.
Her name meant light, like mine.

There was one niece who could have been recovered.
My grandfather had her traced.
Her name meant light, like mine does.
I've tried not to imagine her face.

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Somehow my grandfather found her,
But her brothers refused to take her back.
I imagine the row of our faces,
Women in bed in the dark.

Her brothers refused to reclaim her.
This was after the riots and trains.
In bed, in the dark they could say it:
This is what broke us apart.

After the riot of years,
How should we remember the old stories?
What will break and what will toughen—
The only aunt I know would tell me.