

KIRUN KAPUR

Basic Geography

i.

If you die in Varanasi, you go straight to heaven,
as my mother nearly did. Free

from grueling cycles of rebirth, you'll never
have to hold your daughter, crying all night,

watch her slip a ring on her finger and promise
to love another as much as she loves you,

mourn petals whipped from roses by a brisk fall wind
or the puddle curdled with oil,

sky darkened, weather turned. You will live
with Shiva and his radiant body, as he meditates

on death, desire—the long shining cloth
that was your life. High up on Mount Kailash,

you can ask the truth of anything—
but first, you must die in Varanasi,

burn your body in the ghat,
as my mother almost did, one February.

ii.

My father's mother understood
 why the Christian God had sent his son.
 Relying on the good behavior
 of your sons: it's what an Indian would do.
 But why a mighty God would have just one—
 this she couldn't credit. Of course,
 it ended badly: *an only child*
will always be a sorrow to his parents.

iii.

My mother's mother promised
 we would reach the Holy Land
 the year I turned sixteen.
 County Tipperary, she meant,
 a miracle of greens, site

of her mother's teen-aged annunciation,
 plagues of strained engagements
 and masonry accidents. When Dr. Sullivan
 explained about her liver, she waved it away:
All that cheap Communion wine.

iv.

At the Mahadevi Temple,
 I wanted to become the Lady,
 painted with patient eyes
 and skulls ruffling her throat,
 shied when the priest reached
 to bless my head—I swore
 his beard was alive. *Little daughter,*
have no fears. His hands
 were so soft on my face,
 I looked away, to find a brass pot

bristling with marigolds.
He stroked ash, sandalwood paste
above my brow— *Fear nothing.*
The fate of you and yours
is written here. I bowed
beside his toes—in socks
embossed with Playboy rabbit ears.
He was laughing, but
I held my head up straight,
felt him stake the holy mark
between my eyes,
an explorer, believing
he's the first to plant his flag.

v.

Pass down the nave,
through begettings
and crusades,
cross the transept,
we stand at the central mystery:
the flesh that isn't only flesh—
eating, sleeping, dying—
flesh that wonders, feels
betrayed, must be crowned
with thorns on a dry hillside,
or—between the lettuces—be

cudged by a brother with a spade.
Blood and body beneath the apse—
we swallow the incarnation's
exact longitude and latitude:
flesh and geography
dissolving on your tongue.