Gelid air whistles through an alleyway, whipping at the back of a young boy hurrying home and deafening his wool-covered ears. The first blizzard of the season courses down from the mountain and the air feels to the boy frigid enough to snap bones. He had placed a bet, amidst the school house banter that children engage in, as to when it was going to snow first, and the fates have favored him, gracing the top of his *karakul* hat with flecks of fresh, white powder of the sort not coveted by the local poppy farmers. And glad he is for the *karakul,* and the insistence with which his mother put it on him, saying *ṭhaḍa hai bheta*, and wrapping him with a scarf for good measure. The boy is walking through the back-alleys on his way home from a friend's, had left early when the broadcast of the Bollywood soap the two had been watching abruptly disconnected. They tried the next channel and the one after that only to be met with static. The circumstance was unusual, so the boy left for home, to tell his family and try their TV. The wind dies down as the boy emerges onto the boulevard from the last of the alleys. A rupture punctuates the night. Before him, the grocery store collapses. To his right, Soviet tanks of the sort he sees on the news, displayed as the powerful reserves of a government ally, roll through the destruction, but on whose side it is unclear. Where his house should be, all the boy can see is flames engulfing the night, licking the air and dissolving all they touch — hats, flesh, snowflakes.

> *"To know, for example, that in Farsi the present perfect is called the relational past, and is used at times to describe a historic event whose effect is still relevant today, transcending the past" – excerpted from* The Master's House *by Solmaz Sharif*

The analog clock on the wall behind me ticks with the interpellating imperative of a schoolmaster in study hall. S*ection two of the loan application contains the legal description of the property.* I am in an office in a Manhattan brownstone on a sunny, September morning, reviewing for an exam that no amount of preparation can make exciting. A quick search of the brownstone's address in the New York Department of Finance City Register yields this building's only interesting detail, a deed in the name of one William Cosby, Jr. The room is generically beautiful, with off-white marble floor tiles, creamy accents, and overhead lighting the tint of which is closer to a law library than an office. *Rent credit is used in a purchase transaction when the seller credits a portion of previous rent paid as a source of downpayment.* The sign on the wall facing the entrance is characteristic of boutique, Midtown firms: frosted glass, flowery lettering, an insignia. This one displays an icon of a torch and the slogan "Integrity First." It hangs next to the glass-walled conference room and above seats where clients wait, flipping through *The Real Deal* magazine or *Fortune*. *Under title theory, title to the security interest rests with the mortgagee. In a title theory state, the bank owns the property until the debt has been paid off.* On the phone in the cubicle adjacent to mine, Boris is explaining the terms of a loan to a buyer in the soft tones and guttural, flowing syllables of Farsi. *A judgment is a non-consensual lien placed on a property upon victory of a lawsuit often wherein the plaintiff is awarded a money judgement for debts not paid.* Across the room, Phillip has the bank on speakerphone — ensuring each of last weeks' cheques has been deposited into its corresponding business's account, correctly — while he tallies profits from his employer's various businesses on a spreadsheet. Under Phillip's gaze, every sum, figure, receipt, invoice, bill, cent is accounted for, for to account is the *modus operandi* of this edifice, the *sine qua non* of the scales balancing.

Included in this cacophony of business is an associate attorney conversing with a young couple in the conference room; the two have a baby in a hand-carriage on the floor next to them and looks of consternation on their faces. From the bits of Punjabi I can pick up — and the smattering of interlaced English — they're concerned about purchasing homes given their immigration status. Though they've been given the answer before, the political climate and having a newborn has kept them anxious. Through the glass of the conference room I see Sunil massage his brow; this is the third of this sort of meeting I've overheard this week, and it seems not to have gotten easier. *The Home Mortgage Disclosure Act requires financial institutions to maintain, report, and publicly disclose loan-level information about mortgages.* While Phillip counts and Boris informs, Sunil advises, and others process. All component fixtures of real estate — literal in so far as they've been pronounced LLCs — congregate under this roof, echoing the domesticity of the trade house of old.

In the back office, replete with natural light and ornate certificates, is a small table with photographs. There are a series of professional family portraits, and as the pictures' subjects age, the cut of their cloth improves, such that in the most recent photo, all are donned as if the dress-code in the portrait studio is black-tie. Behind the periodic family portraits is a more candid photograph, with the saturation of an early-millennium camera. It's of a young woman with a beautiful visage sitting on the grass of Ellis Island. Eclipsed from the shot's frame is Lady Liberty's striding foot, a myriad of oxidized pennies carrying the weight of freedom. The man who photographed that scene, sits behind a desk discussing with a partner the financing of a hotel near the World Trade Center. He has a kind smile and an impeccable suit, the cuffs of which elide the absence of a watch and make noticeable the tattoo of creation on the back of his

hand. Where the watch should be, there's a memory — of this man teaching me to tell time. It's early in the day and in life, and I have jumped onto my father's bed, onto his buddha-like stomach. It was a Sunday, which explained why he wasn't already at work. This was in the days he wore glasses, which suited who he was then, and a watch, which did as well. The glasses had a wiry frame and round lenses; the watch, a brown strap, roman numerals, and dollar green hands — a relic from when he worked in imports. This was not something he spent money on. *This hand measures the hours in a day*, he began, *and this one, minutes*. I had some familiarity with digital clocks, in the customary system of half-time, 12 hours before the meridian and 12 hours after. Still, the visual depiction and steady moving hands puzzled me: who anthropomorphized these objects and why do we need them if we have numbers and LED lights? *First you measure the big intervals, the hours, and then let your minutes fill those in*. My father eventually stopped wearing a watch; stopped wearing a tie, too, except on the rare occasion he argued a case in court. Both objects were frivolous, both wrapped around him, and thus bound him. He denies the obvious metaphor in these decisions, and yet the only pieces of adornment he still wears are his rings: one from my mother, and another from his father. Despite the lack of a watch, he always makes perfect use of his time.

The man finishes reading aloud the terms of a contract and hands the document to his business partner across from him. His hands turn over casting his tattoo in the overhead light, and I hear the hum of a train and the didactic tones of my father teaching a card game. His hands snap back up, flashing his tattoo as he deals the last card to the floor, commencing the opening parries of a game immemorial. *To win you must take points, and to take points you must control the floor.* The locomotive on which we ride courses through the Italian countryside, ferrying

tourists on the strength of the Euro and the residue of empire. The housing market is at its peak, and so we sojourn and play. What begins as a card game turns quickly to a lesson in bookkeeping and accumulation. *To secure your tricks you must lock them into houses, and remember what cards have gone by.* He takes all but one trick by the close of the first half, and as he deals the remainder, my eyes catch on his tattoo and I imagine a six-year old boy in hysterics being dragged by his father through a dusty *bazaar* to an old woman with ink and a needle. Like his brothers before him and his father before them, the cosmic symbol of consciousness is etched into his skin as a ward against conversion. The train slows for a stop, and I fare no better in the second half of the round. Forgetting that all the aces have gone by, I misplay a trick and lose a house. With a smile, my father jokes that if *dada ji* had seen my mistake he would have lectured me for hours with an obstinance that seems to have skipped a generation. We pass the night, and in urging me to remember and count, he recounts, and memory endures to grant me endurance in urgency, a passage through nights.

The business partner parts from my father, passing, on his way out, an incoming client whose rain boots clomp against the marble and whose eyes rest level with a diploma on the wall behind my father. It is from Virginia Episcopal School, a preparatory school in Lynchburg, Virginia, my father's first home in this country. After having flown to New York and taken a train to Virginia, I imagine him arriving to school at night, stepping out of a taxi, not a boy but not yet a man. His disheveled hair and unkempt beard match the lopsided, sloppy way his tie rests against his new, linen shirt. He stands on the quad with Jett Hall before him, its Early American columns jutting out like a beacon. The oddity of the situation does not get to him, how strange it is for his foreign body to be in this city homonymous with the word for the murder of dark-

skinned people. Rather, he spends that year striding to and fro across the quad, unperturbed by the cotton boys and anemone white girls walking back and forth between classes with pants of pastel pink and skirts of lilac blue. In that year the boy-not-yet-man passes the bush where Greg Booth hides his six-packs of Pabst Blue Ribbon and the tree under which Charlotte Lane and John Paul Davidson will profess love to one another. He becomes a part of these quintessential stories of American life, yet what of his own? Once a week he attends services in the chapel to the right of Jett Hall, walking underneath an inscription that reads "Toward the Full Stature of Manhood" in order to get inside. The question of whose ideal of manhood is not one he gets to ask. In November of 1981, clad in a uniform, he sits for Sunday services; all in the pews around him eagerly await Christmas, and as they rise to take communion, none think to wish this scrawny boy from Kabul a happy Diwali. An ocean away from home on the day Ram returned from exile, he wonders, over the lilting chorus of Amazing Grace, if anyone left the lights on for him.

The chatter of the office has subsided as people settle into their morning routine. My father steps out of his office to show his client out and get a cup of coffee. He dons his sun hat as he steps outside. Turning south on Park he looks up and in the distance he sees an airplane and a plume of smoke.