

KIRUN KAPUR
At the Tiki Lounge

You've got a pretty face, he said.
I thought he meant I seemed likely

To listen. Thought he might explain
The way he lost half his friends and leg.

Instead he's on to market day in Basra. Sweet
Apples there the size of knuckles. Curtains made

Of Chinese lace for sheikhs' car windows.
Then, this old guy asks us in, he says,

The granddaughter serving up behind his shop.
It was disgusting. Hot stringy meat, some gritty

Sauce. Worse even than our army shit.
But you don't piss the locals off.

Hearts and minds, you know.
And hospitality's a bitch out there.

So we keep eating. The granddaughter's just piling
servings on. You have the look of them, he says,

I mean, you look a bit like her. Our drinks are up.
I'm free to pay and go. I don't have anything to say to this.

Then, the old guy—shit—the old guy starts in laughing. I sit
to hear the end. I don't know what I owe or who I owe it to.

He's busting up. We don't know what the fuck to do.
It might be camel balls or some real toxic shit.

Lt. keeps asking, but the bastard won't shut up.
Everyone gets nervous. Everyone starts shifting around.

I thought J.B. was maybe gonna pop him one. Then,
The girl just throws the spoon. She hits Lt. and runs.

Here, he leans toward me, gently pinning my wrist.
Next day, one of our guys is sick.

Some skeeb starts joking that the old guy fed us
Parts of kidnapped journalists. That made J.B. get mad.

He pauses as he pays the bartender for both our drinks.
And then, he says, the CO showed and broke it up.

I let my breath out in a rush. Turn my hand so it's palm up.
So nothing happened? Nothing really happened that day?

I feel his forearm tense, tendons tightening fingers and wrist.
I'm telling you what happened, he says, pushing my hand away.