

Excerpt from *Fire Wheel*

by Sharmila Voorakkara

Tow

You want some real bad karma, go into the towing business.
—Waitress, overheard

I'm not sentimental. I know enough
to work a man while he's hungry. Promise him a donut,
but save it for later.

I'm not the fast hook that falls from nowhere, but believe me,
when that fist arrives, it's loaded with quarter rolls! Life
is that wind-up without notice—and

wham! No, I'm not given to regret as the chain unwinds
like a woman's perpetual length of hair, then reels in
Buick, Chevy, Olds. In my rearview: a crying wife, screaming kids,

the weedy husband in boxer shorts
running out to demand—pigeon cheat with baseball bat, a shade
too late. Law says once the hook's in, it's

mine. I'm kept in the dark, which is best.
Good soldier, I have my orders,
and some things I'd rather not confess.

It's not sentiment that makes my little woman pound
the braid of my back, shouting *relax, relax*—but the ache
in my jaw when I think of my kid, pinning live

butterflies to a board, burning down the neighbor's
shed. His teachers tell me he's *tried things*
with the classroom hamster: *is there anything wrong at home?* Hell,

the small fires that start
a family. I wasn't always this man with bad posture, done in
by antacids and a bed-wetting

boy. God knows, I still believe
the quarter-loaded uppercut counts for something
in the character of a man! *Junior, I'd knock you*

from here as far as straightening—
but wait—
my boy's got something hidden in his hands. . . .

He looks nothing like me. Damned if I know what's mine.
But blood is blood, at least by law, and the word of the law is this:
if you must slit the throat of thine enemy, do it while he's sleeping,

oblivious in his boxer shorts. Tonight,
the apartment block is lit by the rapid fire
of my tow light, light of aneurism and flashback,

that sets this weedy husband in stumbling flight.
Does my heart ache to see you
raise your bat and swing at the air of my remove?

Do I wince at the sound of your wife's sobbing,
at the sight of the twelve kids I wake and strand?
You might recede in the rearview, but believe me,

you will all collect. Revenge is not exact. It isn't sentiment
that moves me forward. No.
I'm watching my back.