

Monk at the Mall

PUNEET DUTT

I am shopping for something I think I need. When I see
a monk at a restaurant with his back to me

turn his shaved head, and patches of his scalp
catch the light, tonsured devotion—oily and pale

as a diya lamp. His course-cloth robe the color of clay.

I become ashamed, my bags frothed with tissue paper.

And think of my parents arriving in America with what

they could carry. Socks balled into shoes, shoes
sandwiched between sarees and pugrees

they would never wear again. What does a monk want

at a mall?—*Green tea*, because the waitress repeats—
Green tea, you got it. Of course monks thirst, but before him sits

the cup he doesn't reach for. Steam swirls, and I wonder
if I'm witness to a test. Something long after he is through

he will return to, rest easy knowing he had forgone

temptation. The monk removes from his burlap sack: glasses
and a phone on which he plays a video—and I hear

my mother in my head say: *we came for a better life, something better.*
Who amongst us hasn't chased the tail of this?

Exhausting our whole lives, tooth and nail for this better—

and when his food arrives—the waitress says, *your usual.*
We can't take back coming into this world with our mouths

open. Dumplings with pork and shrimp, braised karaage,
tofu with karashi topped with scallions, and as a reed he bends,

ever so slightly—so slightly, enough that he is able to

look down, then back up and see the world around him as it is.

