Coloring Book
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I once tried to color an Indian blue
and discovered
that my own skin was yellow.

This was fifteen years ago in Singapore—
my art teacher shook her head
and plucked the fat blue crayon
from the smallness of my hands.

I can still smell the crushed pastels,
the sweet smear of crayon on my thumb,
staining the memory of my fingers.

She looked at my incomplete coloring
of the four smiling figures,
standing shoulder to shoulder,
our little flag of political correctness that also showed
the tension in its threads.
The slant eyes behind the bespectacled Chinese face,
the big nose, curly hair of the Indian,
the Eurasian with his hybrid features—
eyes from Austria between his Asian ears.
And the Malay, standing at the far right,
almost at the picture’s edge,
marginalized in our little country,
as in a coloring book.

The artist drew in these subtle clues,
etching them onto our young brains,
fearing that six-year-old boys with crayons
could not decipher
the colorless outlines.

My art teacher pointed to the drawing
of the smiling turbaned man
and handed me the brown crayon—
this is for the Indian.
My wrist moved over the paper,
shading in his arms, his face—
his life story, in which he gets drunk
every night on the cheapest beer
and comes home at 4 am to beat his wife.
She, for one, is glad for her dark Indian skin—
the bruises are not *that* obvious.

And so it is with the Malay,
eventually a cleaner, a chauffeur,
a moral of the story against laziness,
for the master narrative of the Chinese.

And the Eurasian?
“Just mix any of the colors,” she said.
This, a primitive exercise in gene recombination
for a six-year-old god with crayons.

Fifteen years later in Pittsburgh,
I am tired of the wasted metaphors
about color and race,
in a country where the man who steals your stereo
must be black,
where the man who steals your nuclear secrets
must be yellow.
It seems only the minorities are thieves.

But the black man isn't actually black—
his skin is a deep brown coded by some one hundred genes,
one hundred out of the forty thousand human ones,
and not one is a gene for stealing stereos.

We're so hung up on race,
trapped at these one hundred genes,
that it makes us incredibly stupid.

We wrap our bodies in the uncolored
double helix of ourselves,
surrounded by strands of skin color,
writing poems, flogging the P.C. carriage,
when all we need to do
is to let a six-year-old boy
color as he pleases.