

## WHEN YOU WISH UPON A STAR

### I.

In the backyard, evening splits yolk-like over the sea of switchgrass.

A lone dandelion shoots up from the porch slats. I crush it in my fist &

blow. I am thinking about Mother, about Unborn Sister, about storks

that chuck babies from the sky into eager arms — the homes they miss,

or the baskets that are empty to begin with. Winter two years before I was born,

Mother cast a wish on a star long dead, and that is why I am the eldest

instead of Leela, whose sonogram she still keeps in a shoe box.

### II.

Once, Father told me of his grade school days spent scaling rooftops. All to steal glances at the lone television on the block, flickering in his neighbor's window like wildfire.

I picture him fresh-faced, youthful, breath caught like a guppy in a fisherman's reel each time the credits rolled. Now, he buries away after dusk, action films droning and

I imagine he sees a supernova in every fight scene, a jaw shattering into a million constellations, colliding with another's knuckle, the space where his fist could've been.

He says: *it wasn't written in my stars.*

He says: *there's no use pining.*

But hurries to the theater every

weekend, basks in the screen's glare like  
sunshine on a cold afternoon.

III.

Once a month, Cousin calls to ask if she can  
visit, says she can't stand the empty cavern

of her one-bedroom apartment in Detroit,  
the wedding band glinting on her finger

like the scales of a python coiled tight  
around prey it will not kill, but choke.

She's forgotten the slope of her husband's face,  
my cousin. Like last year, his visa denied.

I picture them both as mantids: eyes bulbous,  
upturned, fingers clasped & reaching.

Same sky, same prayer.

IV.

On the porch steps now,  
I thumb the lines fraying like  
roots on my palm, gaze  
at the freckled expanse of night.

Trace constellations.

Orion. The Little Dipper.  
Can't decide which part  
of this poem I hate the most:  
the way they sigh or  
the way they hope. The way  
they hold my gaze like a  
promise, like something they're  
owed.

V.

Another life, perhaps.

[letter to durga]

*“KAH-mah-la, Kah-MAH-la, or Kamala-mala-mala. I don’t know, whatever.”*  
— Senator David Perdue

dear durga,

i visited you in the temple last tuesday. to repent.  
again, i witnessed an execution. again,  
i stuffed a fist in my mouth & wept.  
they wanted kaolin consonants, easy to bend. easy to bite,  
but when i spooned mother’s name,  
it flopped between gum & tongue, a writhing eel.  
aboard the butcher’s block, they syphoned each syllable,  
mouth muscle splitting pink & raw.  
i will never forget  
the howling. our language, how it twitched.  
like an earthworm dredged  
from dirt at the edge of monsoon,  
drowned in the open sky.  
nevermind the sacrilege, i will kneel  
in front of you each time it happens & beg  
for forgiveness. are you ashamed of me, durga?  
at how good i am at living  
in the moment before crows descend upon carcass,  
the mob bursts through the barricade,  
the match sets the forest aflame.  
look: below me, there is a jeering crowd  
flashing teeth, so forgive my foolery, this tightrope  
i walk without faltering. they crown me spectacle,  
& i let them. i know it is a sin.  
i envy you, durga.  
you, & all your divine wrath, kohl billowing from



**SIGHTSEEING**

we could be anywhere,  
really     who can tell

highway-glint *here* from *there*  
not me, not at this time of night

at every toll booth,

drunkards swarm like  
mosquitoes   our headlights

oust them — boys with sunken

basins rising tidal over cheekbones,  
eyes feral, too young for this routine:

rickshaw driving & catcalling

we hurtle through

maize & crabgrass sway  
idyllic   i hold my breath

the driver slows near an underpass  
in chatanpally, voice loud & frantic

as drum beat:

*that woman, the one who was*

*you must've heard it on the news*

*her remains found*

& he points, eyes alight   heads turn,  
combing the darkness for shiny

tokens of tragedy

& my fists pale,  
white as clouds

the land opens like a palm

grazing cows are kept on

leashes & rabid dogs run  
amok this is how i know

we've neared village: disorder

in every storefront, homes  
a motley mix of taffy pinks

& baby blues, mothers sitting squat

in open doorways, lighting  
deepams, chanting hymns

to birth sons & keep  
daughters alive i roll

down the window the sky smells of rain

& toil, street vendor  
sweat & early musk

we reach grandmother's house  
just as the sun comes up

TRANSLATIONS

*rickshaw* — passenger vehicle

*deepam* — oil lamp