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
each eyelid like smoke. you, a wildfire cutting
through conifer — scorching footprints, unearthing grass.
in the war years, they say villagers chanted
your name while spinning freedom songs, tongues thrashing
like gators, willing your glory into the night.
durga, dress what rage i have in wind & gas
so that
next time, i, too, may whisper your name
under my breath, like a sword to brandish
when the day snarls
& i want to snarl

back.

TRANSLATIONS
durga — Hindu goddess of war
kohl — eyeliner worn by South Asian women
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

   
   

deeplams, 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