

## fin de siècle

Pressing knees to living earth,  
prostrating, you may see them:  
    cicada shells, molted skins,  
    amber brown and wisp-fragile  
    as if the air shaped their angles,  
as clouds are sculpted in the wind.

I place them on an outstretched palm  
    gaze at their empty insect eyes,  
    staring till shuddering wakes me.

In a valley in Madanapalle,  
    lie the ruins of a white tree  
where Krishnamurti's mystic palm  
    once touched towering bark.

"*She had a stroke*" my father's voice,  
"*cancer*," unseen, for months or more.  
    He says come home.

"*This tree has stopped speaking to me*," he announced.  
    Soon, it was a shambles, rotted from the inside out.  
    No one saw until it collapsed.

I read *The Post Office* in the airport  
    waiting to board my flight.  
    Spoiler alert: Amal dies,  
    dies before the flowers arrive.

In the vale of Kashmir,  
Zain-ul-Abidin, Persian king  
    smashes Sharada to pieces:  
    goddess who breathed poetry  
    for one thousand years.  
    The valley is silent.

I am shaking in the airport...  
    You'd think from epilepsy;  
    I know she will die.  
    No one told me.

He says the goddess forced his hand,  
    ignored his pleas, commands  
    stood mute while he broke her.  
    But pilgrims say she went away  
    when Harsha desecrated shrines,  
    leaving only her wooden eyes.

She has aphasia, her body betrays her,  
    speaks in tongues on its own,  
    while her mind pleads to no one.  
    Nobody hears.

The anti-barbarian faction is rising,  
troops massacre wives and children,  
    furious fathers rampage the coast,  
    emptying villas, marching to Rome.

She places a hand onto hers  
palm to palm, again and again  
    looking down in confusion.

A hundred years before Rome falls  
    the Victory Altar is dismantled.  
The Senate votes to silence the gods.  
    Anyway, the gods are dead.  
    When Alaric arrives,  
    the poets only speak of Christ.

I watch her damaged brain insist  
that her body is half gone,  
is a stranger's, a living ghost.

I know about trauma,  
I know about aphasia,  
we spell the words,  
letter by letter.  
The doctors bring charts,  
we hold them close.

In the hospital, I talk to my mother.  
She is learning to move again.  
The doctors say she will come home.

We know the star-crossed are killed off,  
we watch them go, take in the show.

It is Thanksgiving and she is home.  
Though aphasia jumbles words,  
we are reading *An Astrologer's Day*  
out loud. I think she cracks a smile.  
We are like Pyramus and Thisbe,  
speaking winks and nods, conspiring.

Back in the hospital,  
something is wrong,  
she is feverish, doesn't respond.  
They hook machines to her lungs,  
they glance at us, they look back down.

I am sitting on the floor,  
knees bent up against my chest.  
A man stands, talking at me  
planes smashed into Manhattan, he says.

My grandfather's Sphinx face, long and sad, recalls:  
invasions of Afghanistan portend a fall.  
"Haven't you read *Toynbee and Gibbon?!?*" He demands  
to know what sort of education I am getting.

The great age of Latin poets  
lasts three generations,  
then echoes, then simulacra.

In Texcoco a poet sings,  
*Tico, toco, tocoto,*  
*the smoking stars conspire,*  
*the one who cares for flowers*  
*is about to be destroyed,*  
*the one who cared for books wept,*  
*wept for the beginning of the destruction.*  
*Tico, toco, tocoto.*

Some say Nezahualcoyotl,  
wise tlatoani, Acolhuan noble,  
sees the end in the vanishing dew.  
What good are his tears?

In the Warsaw Ghetto, orphans are performing a play.  
Dr. Korczak knows they will be sent away to die  
when the Nazis decide. He lets them pretend for a night.

Wu Sangui's army is heading to Beijing,  
from the North to save the Ming.  
They trudge along the wall to Shanhai Pass.  
They do not know the emperor hung himself.  
Beijing already fell to the rebels.

La Serenissima is gone.  
Eleven Venetian ships remain  
when the French invasion comes.  
The doge wanders the streets in silence  
pelted with insults until he dies.

Napoleon is in St. Mark's Square,  
building an emperor's residence,  
his subjects float through sewers in coffins,  
and the greatest Venetian poet  
speaks of sepulchres and the dead.

Young Abhimanyu is slaughtered.  
He will never see his father again.  
He will never see his unborn son.  
Bishma lies silent,  
waiting for the winter solstice to come.

The family gathers, seeking darśan,  
they frown, they arrive with questions,  
they see a body, fevered, sweating,  
they wait for it to speak something.

I've arrived in New York.  
I am working at a firm.  
Lehman is bankrupt.  
I think of Catullus' cobweb purse.

They tell us the money was long gone  
the economy was picking its nose,  
eating the pickings, feeding no one.

I learn new words:  
"mark to market,"  
"quantitative easing,"  
I stare at the ceiling.  
I think I see the eyes of the cicada  
its dead skin, silent, waiting.

The doctor is talking at us,  
about benefits and costs.  
She can't survive, not for long.  
Just one pull could end it all.  
"*We believe,*" my father says,  
"*in the soul. We cannot.*"  
He squints, he finds us quaint, he nods.

When jihadis flew planes into buildings,  
killing thousands,  
did they know there was nothing inside them?

In Brooklyn, we lounge on a sectional couch,  
sipping beer from Mason jars.  
"*He will win,*" I tell the laughter,  
"*he will win.*" They are angry now,  
they require explanations.  
No one told me. What can I tell them?

Bishma, last scion of Bharata,  
took a terrible vow, had no children.  
Now the sons of a fisherwoman  
fight over nothing.  
He knows all this, he keeps his silence.

Bishma lies on the battlefield,  
pierced with arrows, watching the sky.  
In Kurukshetra, brothers fight  
over birthright, a game of dice,  
nine million warriors will die.

The war is done, Yudhishtira comes,  
the new king, pious grandson,  
to seek Bhishma's final counsel,  
to learn to rule a land of ghosts.  
After all, it is a farce.

The Great Game is afoot, the Young Turks cheer,  
But the Sultan whispers in the Sick Man's ear,  
a seductive solution: purge secularism,  
restore the glory of the Ottomans.  
In the streets, thousands chant,  
"*We want sharia!*" "*We want the Caliphate!*"

Kara Mustafa nearly took Vienna,  
his failure strangled in silken scarf.  
No one thinks of daring now.  
They bicker over empty coffers,  
soon the Caliphate is abolished.  
The Ottoman empire has already fallen.

Piye the Nubian conquers Egypt,  
he will restore the old ways,  
he will take Assyrian lands,  
he will make Egypt great again.

He is instituting the rites,  
he is building pyramids,  
performing scripts of the past.  
Soon the dynasty will collapse.  
After millennia, they are the last.

We rush to the hospital,  
the machines are giving out.  
In the frenzy, my aunt gasps:  
*“Trayam bakam yajaa mahe . . . .”*  
She wouldn't want to go this way.

A miracle: the beeps return.  
Months later, I will tell someone,  
she died, a general on the field.  
Because she did not leave us then,  
I think of Bhishma who bides his time.

She is crying, leaving her brother's home.  
I ask no one: *“why didn't you cry when we arrived,  
knowing then that you would leave?”*  
I am an insufferable child.

No false alarm, this time.  
We have gathered to watch her die.  
When it comes, one trickle of blood  
from the corner of her lip:  
the only sign of life within.

Troy runs red and black with blood and ash.  
The Trojan king Aeneas begs for death.  
This is Lucretian prophecy at work.  
The wild winds will rip the universe  
atom by atom, until all that's left  
is howling and dust, howling and dust.

The fountains of the deep break heaven's light,  
heave up to breach the windows of the sky.  
They wreck the Trojan fleet on Libyan shores.  
Its refugees limp into Dido's court.  
The king Aeneas conquers Dido's heart.  
In a cave, he consummates his lust.

Dido is burning, the pyre is burning,  
she is watching the ships receding.  
She begs him to return,  
she pleads with no one.

Dido is dead, laid in earth.  
Aeneas' sons will return:  
*“Carthage must be destroyed!”* they'll shout.  
They will burn it to the ground,  
they will rub salt in the soil,  
Carthage will never rise again.

I understand now, the cicada's skin.  
Life is pretend, a brief rebellion.  
The truth is dying, only dying,  
everything dying, everywhere dying.  
Death is the epitaph.