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Group Portrait

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She died giving birth to a daughter
on Armistice Day, 1931.
She grew into the earth, then, a storied fig tree
whose roots shot to heaven and branches burrowed
so deep they seeded a forest.

Giving consumed grandmother. Connected to her
by nothing more substantial than a spiraled thread
of protein, I wake some nights to find her eyes
staring at me from the mirror:
grandmother when she died, younger than I now am,
cut in half by the streetlight's glare.

Hoard your powers, she says, do not give
from the core, my son, do not give.
Giving spites the flesh, corrodes intention.
Most unreliable of barterers, most memorable of sins,
giving kills. My son, do not, like Karna,
rip off the armor that is your skin.

GROUP PORTRAIT

The afternoons shuttle by, slides in the magic lantern
behind his eyes. Waking at teatime, he will neglect
the flavor of mint, brush the sandwiches aside.
First, he must compress his lore, replace each slide
with the true chronicler's unhurried finesse
in its allotted tray. And as they fog,
the old man wipes his half-moon lenses
with the soft cloth of evening.

Scattered items gather on the programme he opens.
A city of onion domes folds out, a Ptolemaic cosmos
circling in orbits of brilliantined satraps,
tiers of bearded divines yearning for the next world
and shaven beaux beside them, crushed by the roses
of wit. Angelic orders, they die to the tunes
of a phonograph pining for the beloved and spring;
and when the beribboned band strikes up a march,
whiskered hussars return from campaigns and riots
to court gracious gowned ladies with necks like stems
drawn out by the glass-blower's fatal art.

The sun will not set tonight,
they promise themselves. The sun will not set
on the potted palms, the tiaras, the ostrich plumes,
the mock sabers of a venereal nobility.

Nor will it set on the hunt:
the one foolproof way of mapping a country
that exists only in mezzotint plates,
with slight variations from shoot to shoot.
Invisible artists arrange the *mise en scène*
for the shikar, but the swarthy beaters
scowling at the edge of the frame
almost give the game away.
The sahib does not see them: focused on the camera,
he plants one foot square on the felled tiger.

This light-eyed lord of the animals
is a finer man than the assorted cast
of princes, syces, liveried footmen
fawning on me, the Resident thinks.

Light-eyed lord of the animals, noble savage,
my ruthless double, fellow imperialist.

What plainer tales can portraiture tell?
In forty years, even Kipling's flashbulb
will have lost its charge, his pictures faded.
And these slides in a sleepwalker's head,
frailer even than art, are conceits
treasured by our courtly parents, despised
by us, their metequé children: prints ransomed
from the sun's dusty albums.

MOTHER GODDESS

Objects are lessons: from bowls, brooches, hairpins,
you learn of forgotten lives. The stories say
my grandmother was a fever tree:
two birds sat on her, one pecking
at a grape, the other singing an aria.

What history's bookkeepers do not show
is the tremor down the spine she felt,
the tendril of blood that coiled in her nose
when the whistle of a train announced
her husband's return from a tour of duty.

In the stories, her branches shadow-box
with a rough-wrestling thunderstorm.
Actor and pilgrim, she slips through brick walls,
treads a theatre of scrubbed floors and ember beds.
She leaves me

a loaf of shortbread in the oven,
a page of couplets I'll never read.
And wrapped in a peel of green appleskin,
a Dutch teacup with a windmill
glazed on it, the last one of the set.