

For My Grandmother

I.

and then, with shivering asphalt, the black
washes into neptune blue, stars pitching themselves

into the city. In my dreams, I can never
hear the wind —

just the occasional leather-tongued clarinets,
their voices snaking through dreamscape trees,

the stove humming as I prepare mung bean soup
late at night, the taste of two o'clock wistfulness.

Years ago in childhood, I feared death would drive
her way into your lungs or heart any minute. Instead

you took death by the neck and held her,
cleaning dishes while my mother took classes

at the community college, roping your way over
on the laundry line of dusk to shoo the dark away

from the corners of the kitchen, the rims
of my uncratered mind. As if you could drink

moonlight, almond-rinsed, and spread it through
the house with a flick of a hand towel. Sometimes

I ask God to lace my sleep with you: bullet-eyed,
nocturne-lipped, fingers lighting up dry night

like burning saints. But in this sleep, I sink fast
without asking. Into this sotto voce breath,

I resign. In this dream, I don't need to hear your voice —

only see that it is more likely you stirring
the mung bean soup and kissing me gently

as the tremor of the metropolis beneath us settles
and into the bruised city you depart.

II.

Though your language was a music box I could never crack open
and mine one you couldn't even touch. It was near the end

when I came across two photos of you young: at a piano bench,
poised — then hugging the old golden retriever, your lips

red-ribbed, your eyes sentries. Could, for once, *grandmother*
not mean *gab* and *granddaughter* not mean *growing up*

indefinitely, just until I found a way to let go of this year's
liquored autumn. Could I have scraped out my broken Chinese phrases

when you asked about school because I knew whatever
I said you would have taken home by the neck and held

in the hours until you slept. Yesterday I found you
lying in bed on your back, stone-stomached and beached.

I latch on to these pieces of you. The flavors of glass noodles
and all the words I've ever said. The old Honda

you drove me home in that is now mine, the purple hair tie
you always brought to lunch for me, to pull out of your purse

when my hair fell too close to my plate. At some point
I stopped giving it back. Now I use it to string up

the wax moon that insists on slipping down my bedroom walls,
skin igniting as easily as my own.

III.

8:40 p.m. The backyard's resident frogs shoot
their voices into the stewing dark. I have started

washing dinner's dishes, green liquid soap foaming
into bubbles, chopsticks clacking as I rub them

between my hands like a prayer. Maybe when you go
you will sing among the frogs in their evening spectacular,

present your favorite Chinese song in the courts
of the cricket king. Maybe you will retire to your bedchambers

in the alcove of the moon. Maybe you will still drive
the dark away from the kitchen corners, infuse the air

with the almond light of the moon, speak softly
as you lead me to bed on August nights and I fall asleep,

dreaming of a blue city train track that doesn't end. And I
will try to unbind my Chinese so I may send you off

with mung bean soup, a coat for the road
and a kiss, a poem that is ready and ripe.

Spring

On Uighur internment in Eastern China

In Xinjiang, hands collect unfelled promises
in government compounds and the wind picks up
dust and leaves from poplars that give

and give. The trees open like an orchestra,
and their branches, fluted ribbons, thrash. A man down
the corridor sews ashes over his body. No one remains

the same. No one predicts how hunger whittles citizens
into dancers. No one knows they only spare the dead.
See: a mother handed her infant son's corpse. Guards return

another girl to the cell in the cavity of night, her skin
stamped black and black and blue. Electricity: the silk
of muscle and bone, a flowering of fiber optic cable bulging

at the throat. A forest of tiger chairs earth these paper bodies.
They are your brothers and sisters. They are mine. The wind
is picking up speed. Like orchestras, the poplars open.

Self-Portrait in the Hall of Mirrors

After Jessica Abughattas

In the broken carousel of my brain,
the music doesn't stop. The kids

want to get off. I watch the glittering
dragon and five-tailed horse turn,

restless, rising and falling to the same
raw, red tune. Here is a night circus

that won't punch you in the throat,
only hold you with silvering fingers

until dawn wraps around the horizon like a dress
too thin to hold down. I keep the kids hostage

with the promise of beasts. One sewing wings
to its front hooves and a kite to its back.

One gathering the bruised, virgin stars with its elephant trunk
and eating them like painkillers. One licking

its dying cub and one ignoring its cry.
We beasts, we girls, undermined.

There's nothing like trying to fly
only to have these wings burned through

with a wick of my own making. Trying
to protect myself against this ornate chaos

only to wonder which beast is me
or whether they're real at all. All I want

is to see a friendly face next to mine
late at night in the hall of mirrors.