

July 4th

As a child I didn't watch the sky. I kept my eyes down,
on black tablets scattered on cement. Breath held tightly
as the match, I watched the snakes uncurl in yellow smoke.

Down the street a ginkgo shuddered itself bare,
leaves scattering like sparks.

My fingers tightened on another ashy life.

I found you between unwashed sheets. My body
lengthened, ligaments uncurled.

That year we missed the show.

After, we drank white wine from unmatched mugs.

You poured some on my still-raw flesh; I screamed.

You thought many things were romantic.

Now I can't remember independence. Fires in Arlee
plume the land in smoke. You say this is a day
that we should spend together, though I am leaving you.

I drive past Hungry Horse, families in broken lawn chairs,
bottle rockets by the road. A boy crushes a beer can, kicks it
on a sailing chase. The sky a purple alchemy of fumes.

Inside your house, we are mostly silent. Words are sooty shells,
empty or live. My hand is on the knob. But the door opens
to the sound of bombs. I slam it shut.

We are alone, with only a thin wall against the night.

Left only with the space between us.

Watch it grow.

Io

What we know: A girl, pummeled by others' lust
and jealousy until her skin was tough
as leather, bleached whiter than Zeus's cumulus
throne. We know her eyes grew muddy and her bust
widened, and that she was, even in that lowing prison,
beautiful. We know of her captor, with the dozen
dozen eyes, but we do not know what she read in
even one. We do not know what it is to be taken
to a mountain, and feel wind on swollen teats.
Or what he did with his one mouth. How sweet
it might have been, to know only weeds and sky
and the gray-breeze graze of watching eyes.

In Our Lady's House

All the time I lived in that house
the walls never did stop crawling
with their shells.

Chinatown red and as hard as luck.
The windowsills seethed.
I swallowed cubes of sugar whole,
but it never helped.

We tried spackling the cracks
with mirrors, and slept on the roof
under a citronella moon.
The poison under our nails sparked.

Their bodies smelled like
the wet side of a knife.
I climbed into the hills
to get away. On the breeze
I could still hear their wings.

One day we lay out in the grass.
Wind whistled in through the valley's
fissure, the gash in the land
we would follow out. I watched
a red shell crawl from your ear.
I slipped it under my tongue for luck.

The Girl and the Owl

The white-throated owl weaves nights out of velour.
He brings her flowers that bloom at dusk, and she grows drunk
on nectar thick as melted popsicles. He keeps her
amid his softest feathers. Soon she cannot tell his plumage
from her own soft down. But owls cannot see what is right
before their eyes. In those few inches they are almost blind.
Over time, she feels her features start to blur.

In the shiny eyes of mice she sees herself. They warn her in a tiny tongue.
At dawn, when she and the owl sleep, she dreams of his wide mouth
opening like dusk over the sky. She tells him her legs feel strange, like music
played very far away. He says she doesn't need them.
In a dream she sees a perfect package sputtered from his throat:
her body tied in fibrous strings. There is her spine, her femur,
stripped whiter than the moon, and wrapped in mouse fur like a cloak.

The next morning she stays awake. His wing feels cold and hollow.
He swims backward out of sleep. But the light is very bright,
and she jumps in the direction of the sun. He blinks and blinks. His call is a scream,
heard from under water. It is a sound like her name, from very far away.