

WHEN AMA WAS A FIRE-OWL

Before she enters her garden
my grandmother bends her knees
and touches her forehead to the ground.
She then places one hand on the copper gate
to pull the weight of her years—upwards.

She looks up to the sky, unfolds her arms
like a crane and whispers words I can't make out.
I watch her push her fingers into the soil
as she remembers China—
the drowning years. Before red

was the color of *happy*, before men
were given mountain and river names,
before tree spirits undressed in early morning—
their skin made of sky script scrolls
colored in gold.

To her left, the strawberries, redheaded sisters
dangling under a cluster of long green echoes—
coiled, waiting to suck on the brotherhood
of blue blooded berries and their round muscles
of sugar and peel.

To her right, ear folds of bok choy, faces of ginger,
and a chorus of tree-dwarves humming a hush-hush
memory of Uncle Cua, his mandrake teeth sinking
into Aunt Lai-Lai's neck, our quadruped who pacified
the village from demons—so boys like me will never learn

the *Courtesy Dance* from my twin aunts who ascended
into an opium heaven just before the Fire-Lion year.
This is the China that slipped through my fingers,
the tenderness of elders—the firm years of milk.