

dragon boat racing

in june, grandma tells me it doesn't matter how immigrant stories start. only how they end. & so she reminds me of these things:

rockets at midnight. goldenrods to live forever. you, dragon boat racer, remember that you are always a creature of your own consequence. remember that to be loved is an insult – when the river blood runs red, a hurricane will come from the east. there, monsoons and mid-autumn boys exchange suicides like scatterjacks. remember the sharpness of your tongue & how it must never be used. because when the birds tip forward into flight it will not matter how frail their heartbeats are. only the depth of the night. only the levels of newer violence. the american war runs thick with sin. you cannot be a victim again.

so imagine yourself a maiden from home. wrapped up in red laced sheets and sold to the highest bidder. shipped to a land of more beautiful things. imagine the mid-autumn moon not silken but a prayer. imagine the monsoon season not drunken but an obituary.

grandma tells me, do all this & america is yours.

INTERPRET

a haibun

last night, I dreamt it was the fourth of July
and your birthday. we were beautiful and
only once: when we were swimming in Thailand,
stuck in the translucence of our childhood. when I scraped
my knee on the concrete floor as you lifted me out of the pool
and you scratched at the lottery ticket your parents bought till
the aluminum was underneath your nails. how will I tell you
that things made more sense in my dream? when the fireworks lit up
the hot summer sky and fireflies buzzed through the front yard grass
of the hotel, when the stray cats wandered through the halls and your mom's
lipstick faded into the chlorine water. I pressed my heartbeat back to home. I grieved
for you that night as the maggots would, eating bark and the decayed as though fevered to do so.

you told me you felt like you could swallow the world whole. often, I looked at you and thought
you were a god. now I know it was only a symptom of being a child. that night,
we were everything unborn again and more, only bodies in the summer air, only starlight &
millions of fireflies. this world was unswallowable. and you, replaceable.

today when I listened to old songs on my cassette player, I thought I was there again: still young,
clawing out of my body that didn't belong to me, looking up at the hotel lights like I belonged there,
always. when I exhale, my fingers interlocked over the scar on my knee, I see you there again too,
screaming like the day you were born, the last time in our lives before we could feel shame.

you smiled back at
me, and I saw only a
thousand miracles.