

the fires across

we walked up to the rooftop
of our apartment in bushwick,
carrying a new bottle of chinese whiskey
that a friend brought back
from her trip to beijing.

it was fourth of july
and we wanted to see the fireworks across
the water.

we were still in our sleep clothes—
pajamas pants
or sweat pants,
something with elastic.

i remember this because
it was so easy to put my hand down her pants
and grab her ass
as a couple of neighbors,
who'd also come up to see the festivities,
stood by trying not to stare.

i took the first swig
and passed her the bottle,
a jug right out of a saturday afternoon
kung-fu movie
with badly dubbed english.

she twisted her face
because the whiskey tasted so bad
like medicine my parents

brewed in a crock pot
that we referred to as deer antler juice.

then we watched, the four of us,
and there was emotion, i think,
judy telling me how much she loved
the fourth of july,

the tears soon after
as she couldn't help but remember
her first week at nyu grad,
how they ran outside
then toward uptown
as the buildings came down.

i remembered something too—
there were two of us standing there,
a different two of us on a different rooftop,
this one in los angeles
on gramercy drive near 9th street,

our small hands on the cold bricks
that rose waist high,
and i held out the last watermelon now & later
toward her without turning
and i felt her fingers
on the palm of my right hand
as she scooped it away.

i listened
to the unwrapping,
to the slight breath as she opened her mouth,
unaware that she was sacrifice,
to her teeth sticking
in the chewy pink candy with her first bite,

and i closed my eyes
to feel the breeze against my face
without interruption,
remaining still
as i heard two more things—

her shoes scraping against the top of the wall
and that last grunt.

and when it was silent again,
i opened my eyes to find myself alone,
that smell of ash that remains after each loss,
the wrapper fluttering on the ground
an inch from my shoe.

it is the opening line of a song—
on a rooftop in brooklyn—
a song that is not mine
but this moment will become etched
eternally,

this moment
of a decision that i will make:
to hide my secrets from her
to not tell her about the history of my family
to not share with her
even one story about the night lights
and the disappearances—

hoping,
on the rooftop
with the bottle of chinese whiskey
that can't fix me,
the fires on the other side of the water,
unable to make the year stay

no matter how much i dig my fingers
into her skin,
that she won't mind
losing everything she ever wanted
to spend a few
listless
and unforgettable years
together.