from tissue paper magnolias

i. we wander the streets of jing’an district
and you ask me to tell you a story.

from blossoming yulan magnolias
grow memories i’ve never lived:

a boy plucking petals in the schoolyard,
a girl peeling a persimmon from its navel,
a woman with a heart as slippery as moonbeams.

you tell me to stop thinking
about a life that isn’t mine.

ii. my father grew up on a street nestled
between alleyways.

cigarette stubs jut from cracks in stone,
facing the old man who sells
popsicles and paper kites in the summertime.
statues clutter the entrance,
overgrown with ivy and shaded
by blankets hung out to dry.

i've never seen him love a place
as he loves the crumbling courtyard
of his first home:

a first love vibrating with the chatter
of swollen cicadas and sweet
adolescent nostalgia.

the last time we visited,
the walls were marked for demolition
and flowers littered the cobblestones,
trampled by the gentle padding
of stray cats.

iii. the first time my grandmother forgot my name,
i held her hands and cried.
i shaped flowers from red tissue paper
and thought about immortality—
atrophy remedied by life eternal.

her fingertips were translucent and
her words slipped from breath to air
like the spinning of silk.

she asked about her old home
near the city temple:

   i told her it was blooming
   at this time of year,

   then prayed to the gods
   for forgiveness.

iv. the next time, my grandmother
forgot everything.

she kept my flowers (unchanging)
by the bed and asked me about
the woman who lives on the moon:

    i told her she was waiting
    for the stars to bloom.

v. we stumble into an alley strewn with
lanterns overhead.

i tell you how the story ends:

    to close lunar new year,
    we light lanterns and let them burn.

    i carve magnolias into mine
    and watch them float away.