

**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.