

Refugee

Last night you used the word sampan, said
you were frightened of maps, of bats and moss.
I held your hand, a cloth covering your brow.

Samisen and you plucked the air with three thin
fingers. Music under bridges, boats stalled,
boats drifting. The sea swills wind, turns it

into waves. Once you had a hat like a bowl,
a cup, a top that spun, fragile brim you broke
with a stick. Reeds beneath the surface, gull dead

in the bow of the boat. You cried and cried.
I didn't know you then. Maps make everything
so small you said. O sun behind the trees,

O wizard in the woods with a beard black as his
shadow. You had stories vague as pipe smoke,
legends of water mites, rivers turned yellow.

Wings that skim the surface, skipping stones,
fire held in flies. One sigh from you. Jade ring
circling a thumb, your eyes kept open in sleep.

At night you thought the sky lowered itself,
collapsed into trees. A village of geese flocked
at the shore, well with a ruby lodged in its wall.

You kept jars beside the bed, silkworms and moths
with four darkened eyes. Spinning and ailing.
Tongue of fur, once you cupped your hands

for river water. A few notes sung at dusk,
the lamps lit, a lion stalked the fronds. With a knife
you traced a house in the sand.