

THE BALLAD OF LILY MAGNOLIA

after Hua Mulan

My ancestors are buried in our backyard. My
mother says it is comforting to have them all

in one place, but it is more of a burden to me.
I am a girl with bones made for war, but my mother

dreams only of a horizon-future. She, too,
has nails of steel and a skeleton wrought of iron.

For us honor is quiet. Is obey. Is *thank you*.
Women eat their own tongues every day. We are left with

full stomachs, empty mouths. Smoke rises from China's
mountains, black like oil, dragon, want. It is a warning,

clanging steel and red snow on the ground. My grandmother
told me, Flower, this world will kill you unless you are

ruthless. She said, your ancestors are woven
in your clothes. She said, you are never alone, even

when you are someone else. I do not look too hard at
my father and he does not look too hard at me.

His old armor fits. This is his approval.
Lily magnolia, the earth screams. Flower.

Their graves say *keep close to us*.
This is your world now.