The Azalea Eaters

Sally Wen Mao
Mother begs us not to eat the flowers.  
We scrape the pots for blubber. Fat scalds our dreams, broils our sweat.

Softly, azaleas kill our hunger.  
Because we believe in pink spadix, the fragrance pollinates our tongues.

Before the farmers bulldoze them, we smuggle fistfuls into our knapsacks. Now we are sick but only as sick

as the river that fed us golden tadpoles. 
The river is a gutted diorama: the dire wolf, awakening, spits out teeth and fur.

* * *

In our retching, we summon the aphids. We enter the malnutritive night. 
Stag beetles and horntails

swarm the wax leaves, calm the poisons in our too-hot cotton mouths.

In our fevers, we summon summer.  
Weevils swim the length of lake. Toads tease us with their fat slime.

No water makes us believe we have gills.  
Frogs hatch from fuzz. We pity their birth.

* * *
It’s the eleventh season of hunger. Ding dong, belts the frog in the muck. Ding dong, sings the salamander.

Fetal and feral, we curl in our beds.
Fetal and feral, we drink in the dusk, hands damp with loam. Old cures for sadness don’t work anymore—

* * *

ailing, we lean against the window, mother’s ailanthus, & mother, panicked, wilt on the sill. We grow red welts.
We ask her will we grow red whiskers.
We ask her will we grow red feathers.

She covers our mouths, breathes hush hush. How will we fall asleep now that the skink has grown a new tail?

* * *

We’ve eaten toad, weevil, roe. We’d eat a houseplant or your pet. We’ve kissed poison flowers and retched it all but we’re hungry still. In the forest we pantomime guns with our hands. Bang, bang: let’s kill the deer, drag it by its hooves to the fire pit. Gather its juices, grease the grasses. O, hunger strikes—our teeth, our laughter. We eat & eat & eat: it is our rebellion and our disaster.