

Sally Wen Mao

The Spring of Terrible Fevers

*"oh you who are young, consider how quickly the body deranges
itself..."*

—D.A. Powell

I.

In February, a fortuneteller
ran her fingers over my palms
& said, *dear, you're cursed. let me help you*

fix yourself. When I recoiled,
the season began: a slow,
beating bicycle.

II.

That spring I learned about Ginsberg's
foreign lover—the one from Shanghai
who pan-fried their suppers on winter nights.

Later they'd lie on the cot like a pair of hatchets.
The ginger & chives he tossed into the wok,
he tasted on his lover's breath.

III.

In March I caught a horrible disease,
my windpipe catching fire. For twelve nights
I retched into the sink, cast in a spell

of bloodless quivering, this heat-filled dreaming
about somebody's faraway music, prophetic
between heart/liver/tourniquet.

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IV.

That spring I learned about Chairman Mao's
propensity for virgins. He called each girl *mei mei*,
& coated their bodies with plum jelly.

Their cries kept his skin ruddy like Buddha's.
To each ear he crooned metaphors of fruit:
pears/peaches/avocados/apples.

V.

In April, my fingers cold as chess pieces,
I salvaged heat, miserly, hopeful.
Sick boys & girls marched beside me, asking:

When to touch?
Where to navigate? Why this roiling
inside the blood?

VI.

That spring I learned about flesh, its riverbeds
of silt. I ate spicy gooseberries to still
this oxytocin – the chemical of trust. Next to me,

an androgynous boy played the piano, smiling
with cold olives in his mouth. And I tried
hard to calcify.

VII.

In May, the windows opened, washing
our bodies of thirst. His teeth-scrape, his *shhh*
left me barren, spiritless. I kissed him goodbye

on the stone rotunda, follicles
stinging, skin molting like a lizard's,
& how I wanted to run.