

SPEAK X

She taught me how to say *hello* and *goodbye* in Khmer—
sounds I no longer remember the feel of in my mouth,
like the broth she once poured over my tongue, something

of salt, spice, heat, or the incense she burned each night
before a small brass god whose many arms gestured toward
many exits, or points of arrival, the places I'd never been:

Here, she said, dropping her finger on a globe to a country
of blue and green, its hills warming beneath her hesitation
before *all the way to here*—sliding over mountains, oceans,

memory, to the classroom we shared for hours each day,
waiting for bells to ring us home. *In Cambodia, January*
is a dry season, she once said of our birthday month,

And in summer monsoons make floods. I imagined blue sky
soaking up green fields, the sun an orange fingerprint
blotted in the air, like the small, round scars on her belly

that she saw me see when we undressed to dress for bed.
Cigarette burns, she admitted, once we turned out the light
and our four arms rested beneath her thick blankets.

But I was small, my Mother says nothing to... but she finished
the sentence in Khmer, a language, and also a word meaning
speak x and *I love you*, depending on how your tongue hits

the consonants and where the vowels are placed: above,
below, in front of, after. In English, her last name was Oak,
spelled like the tree. Her first name: the memory of flight.

HOW TO PRAY

Almond branches, wilting over
the girl, look as if
they are bowing, and the line of her neck
follows—or perhaps, it might be too much to say—

they follow. She's only a girl, after all, walking
without permission beneath a dangerously dim
sky, in a grove large enough to lose
a girl in—

a girl's body in—the roadside fruit stands
shut up and emptied by now. Only a few cars
heading home.

It's 1964 in southern California
and my mother's run away.

She's packed two pears, her new white dress, and a bible
in the basket at the head of her bike, ridden
until the lots stretched so vast they couldn't
be contained by fences, the sidewalks

sprawling into gravel alongside the highway. She's gone

looking for Canaan, or someplace closer to promise
than Orange County, a dirt backyard
enclosed by cyclone fences, her tanned brothers brooding
on the back porch, their large, dark eyes
already done.

She wants an angel to arrive.

She wants sleep without
the dream of a distant house on fire,
across a narrow valley, smoke rising so quickly
it blackens the sky. She can't yet read

the gathering clouds, the fever
of consummation. In the almond orchard,
her head bowed, wilted
blossoms scent her long, dark hair,
her damp skin. My mother doesn't know how

to pray for what she wants, only to imitate the wind
in her breath. Irrigation ditches

draw long, dry sighs. The blooms
threaten to catch fire. Between rows, dirt is mapped
with tiny tributaries—not the lines that lead

to Canaan and its burdens—not water,
but a promise of water.

Where water will run when it rains.