

Warnings & Fables

Be careful when you cross the street.

Don't just look both ways—look up and down
as well. The ground opens in mysterious places. A sinkhole

at the corner of Franklin Street and Maple. I've seen the sky issue funnel clouds
without provocation. A bank robbery. The teller says go home,

they made off with everything we had.

I watched my own hand catch fire
just for coveting an aspirin. Five perfect flames,
pouring from my nail beds. It isn't much of an exaggeration. blue light

You can still smell the smoke.

I'm telling you these stories to illustrate a point.

My mother choked on an apple core: five shining seeds
that tasted like blossom,
sweet as cyanide.

When they buried her, what do you think grew
from her grave?

A thicket of nettle, a tangle of jewelweed.

The tragic column in the Sunday paper is nothing to me
but a black and white warning.
What you take and leave—

the fable of a child who drowned in a bucket of dishwater.
Silver spoons and soap bubbles.

It was a pretty death
as such things go.

Self-Portrait in a Chinese Fable

I devote myself to the study of Chinese calligraphy—
a bamboo brush with the hair of a weasel.

Plain walls, white wainscoting rises from the baseboard.
Light bulb swinging from a wire.

I practice self-imposed isolation,

semi-cursive lies,
black slash, elongated curve

that means love is never the word
you're looking for.

I wear barely nothing: a curtain wrapped
around my body, tucked and folded
at my breasts.

Sheets of rice paper tacked to the wall billow
in the breeze from the open window.

These are the noticed details—an eight-armed star,
a black pebble, dry pigment,
an old mustard jar.

What matters most is precision, the fine line
the open palm.

My hair uncombed, twisting in all directions.

The only eyes that see me
are the eyes I paint: a mural
on white walls: black dragons, pupil-less.

(*Both of these poems first appeared in issue 36.1 of *Cream City Review* in 2011)