

The Year of the Dragon

My uncle was the black sheep; my mother
feared for me his fate: adrift, a man

who dreamed out-loud, on his way
to being down-and-out, a *marijuanero*.

At 13, I underwent what my grandmother
termed: the *Year of the Mule*, the stubborn

year. Why not the Year of the Ox, the Tiger,
the Dog? For me, it was a golden year.

I spent three weeks that summer at my uncle's
place, a basement apartment in the city—Logan

Square—intricately carved teak armoires,
textiles on the walls, wrought iron ashtrays,

a poster in the bathroom of George H. Bush
shaking hands with Saddam Hussein, sage

growing on a windowsill, the scent of bohemia
dripping off the bookshelves onto the floor

pillows. I walked out of a fluorescently bright
waiting room into a desert night and saw

the chainmail of stars dividing the heavens
for the first time. I served as a busboy

at the restaurant he managed, met his friends
at the Flatiron Building, listened to *Éthiopiennes*

Volume 1: The Golden Years of Modern
Ethiopian Pop. He taught me to carve wood

with a burning pen, to solder silver, to stretch
a canvas, and invited me to take home any book

I wanted; I wanted Magritte, Modigliani,
Picasso's sad harlequins, but I took

a paperback of Wordsworth's Complete
Works, slipped it into the front pocket

of my backpack. On the ride home, my mother
drew her eyes across the neighborhood, the empty

storefronts, the gangways, and decreed:

What a dump. Can you imagine living here?