JULY LETTER, TEN YEARS LATE

The smell of soy sauce reminds me
of that steamy third-floor studio
riverside. I busied myself

with stir-fry, breading wedges
of tofu, splitting cherry tomatoes.

You cleared your throat
and for the last time
insisted it would never work.

What good did it do, your staying
the night? Those last long hours?

It took the whole pavement-hot summer
for me to stop drinking at Cleopatra's
Needle near your borrowed apartment.

I have a daughter, a husband now.
I wish he were you.
MINOR TERRITORIES

From any train in Germany,  
where my not-yet husband was stationed  
after the war, on both sides of the track  
I loved to see miniature gardens,  
their toy sheds spilling a warm glow  
onto rickety bamboo fences meant to keep  
sweet pea vines from smothering strawberries,  
cabbage, beefsteak tomatoes.

Ten years ago, in Baltimore with the man  
who’d bring me lilacs for no reason,  
I knew this German kind of joy  
in a park flush with daffodil lion heads.  
After such an arduous winter,  
it felt good to go barefoot,  
to plant our feet in the wet new grass,  
and pass a Frisbee between us.

Now I know they’re Schrebergartens,  
plots of land let by the government.  
Almost every German city or village has one.  
And even if you build a shack  
you cannot sleep there. Less romantic,  
but think of all those people  
studying the fickle clouds, gauging rain,  
for whom the past is never past.

Note: the last line alludes to William Faulkner’s quote: The past is never dead it’s not even past, Requiem for a Nun.