Walking here is to be swallowed by the sky
• For the Topaz Museum opening July 2017

1.

bits of wood and wall board outline a family in the dirt

   it is important not to become bitter  grandpa said
   as his eyes looked away to a time where the ground

   turned to terrible soup when it rained snow falling through slats

   then he died  his sons went back to see what became of youth spent
   with barbed wire and dog’s teeth  a man shot for walking

   too close to the wires.  now the wind has nothing to be outside of

   this desert has nothing to stop it
   it can’t happen here again, you say

   no more huddled bodies, no more small boys throwing rocks at the fence

2.

If you can only think of twin towers falling, remember Topaz internment camp
opened on Sept. 11, 1942, its mouth wide as the desert sky.  Open
hate shoving suitcases spilled onto the sidewalk.  Slurs
tracked into the fields like fertilizer.  Splash
of green on slate rocks and white dust.  Epithets
scattered everywhere like the bits of trash  no one bothered
with coat hangers, broken cold cream jars, kids’ marbles when they left
piles of nails crunch underfoot weeds tumble between buildings
no longer there, a testament to what people believed could change

millions of years ago this desert was a sea, and at night with nothing
to do but fear my grandmother made seashells into necklaces
they keep trying to tell you looping
I once was wet, grew fish with iridescent scales now stark
memories are powdered bone in a cage on a string, whorls
break the hinges let all these silent birds
fly home to roost
The decimal is a heartbeat; it can stop itself, or repeat

The first thing to know about this language is how it laces up memory, cinches memory up in a bale, hay golden across an umber field.
You know how much you can carry in your hands?

_The first one’s a string, a cat’s cradle crisscrossing all the lines on your palms._
You know how much you can carry in your purse?

_The second one’s an integer, crammed with usefulness and shine, too much nail polish on these numbers; when you cry they won’t break._
You know how much memory you packed in the back of a Honda Civic, fleeing the next broken bone, jealous rage, crashing bottle? Remember how infinity went, lines of the highway hugging the land like a sister?

_That last one’s the float, up to and including the rounding _
of the sun that set over the shitty motel you hid at, then sped to some town that smelled of batter and burning tires,

_integers like miles pouring into the horizon._
Okuri Inu, or the sending-off dog demon

Japanese legends say you will meet your dark dog like a friend, like a man too concerned for your welfare, like a host with a wooden lantern who can only light part of your way together, sending you off only so far as it is safe. But unlike a host who returns home, certain he knows good girls and bad, certain how soft the road is, certain nothing dire could ever come to you because you don’t deserve it, the dark dog follows.
The dark dog does not talk of deserving, he grins and growls for all, metacarpals matching you tread for tread, pad-fall for footfall, bushy tail wagging behind like a wolf’s. Perhaps he is a cute puppy who follows as if in love, as if trailing to make sure you get home. Chi, chi, chi trills the yosuzume, bird-certain that a slavering heavy beast follows you through the dark, urges you not to stumble.
Twisted roots conspire to catch toes and heels on each step on the path, the canopy of what people don’t want to see at night blocking the stars, the moon. Few could believe someone so kindly as he’s been, has teeth. Then you slip, and the world is as black as the inside of a closed mouth, hot and sticky with blood from a bitten tongue.
The night is as frantic as the breath through your nostrils. As rapid-fire as the word no. Nonononono. The lore advises to fake the fall if you stumble, pretend intent, rest your panic out until you can keep going. But little sister I can only tell you what I know: I did not keep my steps perfect. I met his eyes with my knife, and complicit silence with anger. I became more than his mouthful.

Because you know and I know what real friends do, and by the dog’s body still lying on the road, what he did was not it.