

**Cowrie: a riddle**

From a father of infrequent gifts,  
the smooth cream orb tucked in the mouth of her schoolbag.

What becomes treasure?

Do they keep with you,  
transactions which circle behind the back,  
the spirit of what you have let unravel,  
those hours lived in simple houses,  
when family meant a layer between the breathing and the gentle dead?

In her questioning hand,  
Xiaomei holds her father's final riddle  
before his body transforms into a new American man.



## **Xiaomei's Father, Again**

Here, in the song between two still bodies, is a new man she does not recognize.

Black Reebok sneakers. Faded blue jeans streaked with sweat. Plaid shirt stuffed hastily into the waistband. Over this, an olivegreen coat thick as snow.

Xiaomei's father, an ocean.



a battling cash register waiting  
for the munchies of college students  
or financial district secretaries  
on lunch break.

This face,  
I the only authority:  
translator,  
writer,  
communicant,  
sage,  
storyteller,  
shit-talker.

How would you,  
o foreigner,  
know the difference?

How do you not know I am not secretly in love with this face,  
which I have never hated,  
as you first imagined.

This secret society,  
an imperceptible nod we pass,  
a shit-talking language in which we say nasty things about all the  
foreigners we hate.

Even now, she is carving up her deep memories for me,  
I am scooping out her innards,  
that long imprint of my family before her,  
hand snaking up what she has stitched shut at the ass.

At the station, the old grandmother,  
mumbling poetic phrases in Mandarin,  
a wrinkled-faced woman who could have been my grandmother  
presumed I was part of her family.

Filial obligation

would move me to point her

in the northern direction towards our tribes.

And that bleak day,  
I wanted to talk loudly in another tongue,



bearing them forever into each new world.

I mention this because this woman with my face is meeting her end.  
I am still the translator, her fate within the shallow breaths of my hands.  
Her eyes ask me to tell her the honest brutality, the fate which only I can deliver.

Again and again, I am her murderer.

I have been training all my life to place each word in front plainly:  
Not to say without saying,  
as is the tradition of my family,  
or my tribe,  
or my country,  
or my people.

To love this only woman with my face.