

THE END OF FATHERS

There, at the edge of the shore
 where there is no water,
 but a promise of water,

where the sharp moon changes
 into a full, round absence over
their shoulders as they walk, one-by-one,
into the sea that is
 not the sea—

And each carries a conch, the mollusk
 still at home inside, still whispering
the sounds of waves when the fathers
lift them to their ears to call, but then
 forget to call, or believe
 the number has changed, the line
 gone dead, their wives

remarried, their grown children speaking
 nakedly to their lovers at night of a heavy-worn
 memory, how colors blur
 at the edges of photographs, how faces

look different from different angles, and family resemblances
 are lost, even in the eyes and conversation
 of distant relatives. Maybe they never existed,
 as their mothers would like to believe—

The fathers can't hear it, but
 know it as they walk deeper and farther from
 the shore, the voices of their mollusks
 drying out—their steps careful into

the caverns, trenches, across empty
intersections, where signals change in cycle
 without traffic. And, even if they didn't smoke before,

each father lights a cigarette to make the caverns
 seem warmer, more open—to watch the moon
 attenuate through a haze of smoke, each
 blaming another for the lack of light, the endless walk,

the way the moon turns
 away from them, and because each
is in some way a likeness of the other,
 blame themselves.

PLUM

“The scent of plum blossoms comes from surviving the bitter cold.”
—Cheng, Tiesheng

At the end of the platform a woman plays cello, the low notes
echoing through the tiled station, and up the stained cement stairs,
out through the turnstiles, it is early February and plum blossoms
open on their black limbs, ready

for something I am not. It's morning and already
I imagine walking home in darkness, unlocking
the door of the building while my landlady, who lives in the apartment below,
watches, her eye on me from the threshold as I climb

the stairs. Go in. Stand there in the hallway—
no one to speak to. I watch water tremble
between rails of an approaching train. This is a practice of longing.
I want to hold it the way I hold returned letters, the citrus taste of skin,

stars so deeply imbedded in sky I can't see them. Lunar New Year,
and plum blossoms carved into jade to signify
resurrection. On the lower east side, people are sweeping their houses
of last year's bad luck. This is the shallow knowledge I bite down on

like the strip of wood issued to ancient Chinese soldiers, used
to clench between the teeth to ensure against speaking in a surprise attack.
The expression for this is *xianmei*. But the translator—a native speaker
of Chinese—misread the character as *mei*, and against

sense and warfare, took the meaning to be *hold a plum*
in the mouth. Imagine the soldiers, lineal and steady, silently
climbing the stone walls of the enemy, only moonlight on their smooth foreheads,
their black hair—each with a plum in his mouth. Imagine

the overripe taste disintegrating into sweet granules, the tart skin
slipping over your tongue as you try to taste it harder, wear it through
to nothing, because it reminds you of something you can't quite—
distracted by the wall, the great thirst for spring that gathers

at the back of your throat. And now you see how I've made you a soldier—
myself, the sleeping enemy. Take pity on me—take the pit
from your mouth. Leave it on the threshold of my door,
untranslated. Tomorrow, we'll have something to make sense of.