

I bought every inch of Chinese I know with English.
I traded in my “hi” for Auntie’s “ni hao”
 hi is a used car with
 rust on the doors and dust in the engine

Auntie recorded every inch of Chinese I learned using markings on a ruler
Chinese characters are whiplashes, standing up tall and black and forming imprints on the page below.
I drew them on my arms, almost like an artist’s hand inspiring new life because the feel of the thick ink across my skin made me feel and when my lips shriveled from absence of words I had the ones at the crook of my elbow to guide me

Auntie marks letters upon a ruler and lashes them across my palms where the clean edges of characters feel sharper against my skin

Wo is “me” in Chinese is the girl with black hair and letters strung on clotheslines running from ear to ear in her head
 from the day she was born she began to devour English books, letters hang on the lines in her head for days
 she runs her fingers along the curve of a’s and the shape of the q she hears them as they crescendo and capsize,
 ships in the rumbling storm pouring into the sea

Auntie who sells me Chinese picks out what she thinks are the best letters from her own head
throws away clothespins and wrings the letters dry
and she hurls them at me,
knocking the English from me
 my first language
 even the incomprehensible can reorganize itself when I say it in English but now in my head English has shattered and the remnants of a’s and q’s are sprinkled on the floor of my mind
 where they stuff my nose shower my eyes fall through my throat into my lungs and
 it gets a little harder to breathe.

The inkwell splashes against my fingertips

Her mouth never stops moving. Her Chinese is an endless trail that carves itself into me

She says *speaks, why don't you say something* but I am the color of rust and I keep coughing because all the letters of my name have disintegrated inside me

We were in a car. Car is "che" in Chinese she opened the door for me so politely letting me go first, she told me without uncertainty "don't you like walking?" The highway halted beside us twenty miles worth of rulers away from home

"che" is the first part of my last name and it begins Auntie's last name too and I wish it didn't

I keep flipping through the pages of my English books and I know all the letters and all the stories of the main characters, but sometimes they get locked up somewhere on the highway between my lungs and throat

I used to read English and now I breathe and bleed Chinese I used to have things to say out loud I am my own Harry Potter with a lightning scar upon my forehead and where are my words words word wor wo