Vixen

Once, my mother peeled her skin from her bones, a woman possessed by the maladies of history. Perhaps she had been born a fox, a *huli jing* that transformed into a woman under the alignment of stars, her face unfolding beneath the pale sliver of moonlight, her hands small and delicate, but smaller still her broken feet that had once been fox-paws, bent and twisted.

She had spent her whole life among humans, encasing herself in a silk mother-of-pearl *qipao* that glittered faintly with stardust, those slender human limbs that drove men to madness, and a shadow that was persuaded to take a woman’s shape. At night she would take off her dress and become whole again a fox-woman with her vulpine eyes, vanishing into her own body, the lines of skin where the Yangtze flowed through her curling arteries, and dripped onto the nightingale floor.
Nanning, 1995

I have never returned to China. It is not the place

where I will be buried

Nanning

in all the tourist photographs it looks like heaven

when people die they go to Nanning

I tell my mother we will meet again in Nanning

At the hospital steps where you placed my kaolin body

perhaps you waited in the darkness

or did you walk away and

not turn back?
frühlingstraum

standing outside a concert hall in a cheap party dress
i ask a boy too old for me about tancredi
and alto saxophones. i am strangled by my own ambition.
it hurts, to talk about opera. i do not know what to say
to spring, do i answer in german
or forget to take the subway? i am trying desperately
to become a woman. it takes too long,
this crushing of the ribs, this
falsification of flesh. my figure barely the curve
of a violin, dreaming in treble clef until i was sixteen i almost
still remember how to play. i do not know how to wear high heels.
i am young, so young and my father says
i will never die. maybe he’s
right. maybe i can hold this high note forever.
not all tragic heroines
have my name.
Shui Hu Zhuan

We have cast our ruin over the flowerbeds and

into the winding sunset knowing

that this day too, our water margin, will flow outwards and into

the river where we immured ourselves

we have called its name and it has called us back to the sea

what did I say when you buried me I said

nothing will become of this, this open shore

and the lacuna of our forgetting.
Like all pianists, I have my secrets
inscribed in my hands. My wrists
stained with ink, the cadenza piercing
in perfect pitch. We call out “Maestro, maestro—”;
drinking in the scent of rosin, the devil’s laughter
a perfect staccato against my rabbit heart.

I am crowned in ivory and wire. The concertmaster
turns to me, his hands strangling
the slender neck of his violin. Exhaling

his own counterpoint, like thunder before
a lightning strike. Our bodies electrified, our mouths
stuffed with glass. Elegiac, orchestral; so this too

will ruin me. Tell me why the conductor
toasts us in A minor, because
there is no language for silence.