

 *Someone Else's Shoes*

At the Jin Pen Foot Massage Center,  
children from the province  
find employment, massaging  
the sour feet of the prosperous  
who think nothing of spending  
the equivalent of one attendant's  
week's worth of wages  
on their bunioned soles.  
As one of the inflamed sole sufferers,  
I stop upon passing through the provincial  
capital, peel from my wallet  
a crisp one-hundred-yuan note,  
prepare to finish a day of touring  
in a quiet room, shades down, on a recliner  
positioned beside a tabletop electric fan.  
The attendant, barely twenty, struggles  
up the stairs carrying a wooden bucket  
lined with plastic, steaming with an herbal broth.  
His white shirt sleeves, bunched at the elbows,  
expose scalded skin, the tender flush  
of the dishwasher, the launderer, those who work  
amidst the constant ills of vaporous heat.  
He keeps his eyes averted  
as he enters the room, wobbling once.  
Before he reaches for my feet  
to immerse them in the medicinal water,  
he pauses as if asking for permission,  
as if the heaving of the bucket up the stairs  
is a preliminary, menial task

to the work he is about to begin.  
He leaves me to soak for ten minutes.  
Feet first, and then the rest of my body  
softens like a bather stretched on a bed of sand.  
Somewhere down the hall, possibly,  
or from an adjoining tenement, a lonely  
radio flickers, and a frustrated listener,  
trying to catch a clear signal,  
turns the knob along the spectrum  
like working a lock without any luck.  
Outside the congested blare of the street  
recedes into a white foam of summer  
afternoons at the seashore.  
When the boy returns, he towels each foot  
as though handling a foundling.  
Surely his impromptu, off-the-street training  
didn't teach him this.  
I can hear the clinic boss's appraisal.  
Calculating the gifted boy's potential,  
he put him right to work.  
The boy bears down on my feet—  
fitting an arch over his kneecap,  
cupping a heel in his palm—  
like a virtuoso incapable of playing half-heartedly.  
Using his knuckles as rollers, he articulates  
the twenty-six bones of each foot,  
the twisted pathways the tendons have taken,  
as though diagramming the abuses, the neglect.  
His expression never wavers

in the face of so much humanity  
passing through his hands,  
each pair walking  
through them and out again,  
bringing for his discreet disposal,  
shards of pain  
hidden like crystals.