

## Caricatures

### *i. congee*

I confess:

I want a voice the texture of liquid cavalry and lemon alcove  
play baby's cradle in the arms of syllables, the alphabet,  
things in orbit around an english rotational inertia  
as syllables breathe poreless smooth down my neck,  
the way it's meant to be.

I want the girlhood, the *xiao long bao* basked in steam bath,  
the four's *si* and death's *si* tangle harmony against my tongue  
so my body is an axis as silky as jiao zi skin in my grandmother's palm

### *ii. conulariida*

grandmother calls me *juiju*,  
pearl,  
and we dance against the lips of *zhu jiang*  
in a tangle of heat and impermanence.  
but in no world does my body feel like jewel,  
only hollow mollusk shell dissolved into  
calcium carbonate  
spread tissue-thin against fossil conulariids  
as the words  
play *jian zi* with my tongue

### *iii. concentric*

synesthesia paints America bubbly,  
like sparking water or setting powder  
or other things tasteless  
odd, that ephemerality dazes me with its  
six-syllable crescents, yet acts puppeteer with my strings  
whisking away the pearls and identity in its harvest  
I play fishing wire with my lips in hopes  
that one day I will be plaited between *si* and *si*  
four bowls of congee against death's bitter melon

so that the mirror doesn't feed me a caricature,  
wordless and home-starved,  
to return American

*footnotes* // *xiao long bao* – soft steamed bun filled with warm broth.  
// *si* and *si* – four and death, known for the similarity in pronunciation  
with a curve of the tongue. // *jiao zi* – dumplings; my grandmother  
taught me to knead from scratch in a spice-filled kitchen // *zhu jiang*  
– the Pearl River in Guangzhou // *jian zi* – a game that involves keep-  
ing a weighted shuttlecock in the air with one's body.

Tina Mai