NEARLY

It’s nearly twilight as our bus rattles from the airport through narrow streets on the outskirts of Beijing, dodging shadowy pedestrians and scattering bicycles like mice in a gray pantry. We rub frost from the window panes with gloved fingers and beg my half-Chinese cousin, returning in his western suit, to tell us what we see. He points out courtyards smoky behind brick gates, small markets choked with people waiting to buy cabbages under yellow light. He says they hurry to get home and dinner before dark. To just such a market he used to rush, to wait, to buy pears for his mother. We nod, flutter our guidebooks and wave to children in padded coats clustered like bells beside doorways. Looking for familiar faces, they keep their hands curved in their sleeves. Workers stamp up and down in long queues puffing the air blue with cigarets and cold. At the curb a student ties green onions to his bicycle, clutches a bag of pears. He careens into traffic, trying to steady an old woman against his back. Our bus honks its way through the crowd. We press our foreheads to the windows. But beside me my cousin makes a low sound in his chest. Turning, I find his face drawn, white. He whispers, “In the market I saw–myself.”