All That Divides Us

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IMMOLATION OF A STRANGER

for Ellen Liu (1937-1983)

It’s jade, flawed with brown flecks,
rimmed with narrow gold and not quite
the shape of our usual hearts, those
valentines with twin scallops we send
to hide and seek love. This one,
cool as a lilac leaf but heavy
in my hand, grows a third curve
where the chain holds—an odd
catch of the heart.

I close my fingers
around the green stone, remembering
the chilly gift shop in Beijing
where bored young women sold
silks and bamboo off-season. They
hugged themselves in the bitter air
and turned their heater’s flame so high
I imagined the fringe of my plaid
wool scarf catching fire for buying
something cheap to take home.

Ellen, my cousin and companion
that final day, watched me solemnly
as I made my small choice, guided me
with kindness through that gray city
she called home, looking even then
as though she were lost. Her eyes
and forehead—half foreign, half family—
made my face burn as I remembered
how my uncles, their necks flushed,
talked about their sister marrying
a Chinaman, disappearing for years,
only to come back at the end
to make claims on them.
But gentle Ellen,
who owned so little, claimed nothing
but what I felt from wearing
her mother’s face.

Now three years
later this thin letter from Beijing
tells me how the same grim illness
and death that took her mother,
my second self, has finished her.
I think of journeys, kin, distances,
home. Foolishly I wonder what
she took with her. If I could
send her something, I’d say, Ellen,
take this, my flawed stone heart,
and keep it green.