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.