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Shanghai

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JANNETT HIGHFILL

Shanghai

Imagine we two found an apothecary shop
in the alley behind the Temple on Nanjing Road,

a shop barely the size of a dragon's head
in a New Year's parade
so filled with resins, husks, and viscous
distillations that even from the street
a tourist chokes and gasps for breath

at the apothecary's most transcendent
compounds, a golden powder with aftertaste
of almond that eases memory of pain
and those crystals of seasalt and cobalt
that uncloud remembered joy.

Imagine as we entered that cramped
emporium the silence of the Temple
clung to us and moved the apothecary
to generosity: two packets apiece
containing the blue and the gold.

Or would we strangers once home scatter
these five thousand years to the winds

as if the Middle Kingdom had never existed?