

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?