

Things you can keep

It's the small things you can keep:

a piece of soapstone carved like a peaceful mountain,

a jade rooster, a tiny dish of a thousand faces

– articles of loss from your mother's home.

A sandalwood dragon-boat from your father,

old photos of places only half known in the bottom of a drawer.

These things are pieces of memories from a place where your
face and voice aren't foreign.

But even there you would be alien.

You are the stranger on all sides.

Your friend is the seawater that caresses the
rough edges off all of the continents.

Your wife complains that she can only speak her mother's
language like a child, and her child
doesn't know it at all, would rather you
kept quiet in public.

And it has been a long time since you gave
a true opinion to a friend, wasn't confused by a country that
holds not only your past, but the bones of your grandparents,
the very earth is ground from your aunts and uncles.

The faces smiling in those photos are the soil under new
highways, shopping malls, cities that are
stranger to you than this island with its seas washing away at
stony beaches you can walk, or perhaps call home.

Today you found a dead butterfly on the windowsill,
more fragile than paper or old silk,
too perfect to ignore so
you lift it with a piece of paper and a feather,
slide it in where those few small things are kept –
the a glass fronted cabinet in the corner.

For a moment you were afraid to open it
as though it held the very air of the past that will dissipate
with the smell of jasmine and sandalwood.

A block of Kwan Yin's breath incense, still sits undisturbed
in a teakwood box where your mother put it.

That's where this small, bright English butterfly comes to rest.

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Poem in response to *Canterbury Tales on a Cockcrow Morning* by Maggie Harris