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SO MANY WAYS OUR FATHERS MARK US
Alvin Pang

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so many ways our fathers mark us

(for kirpal and christopher)

so many ways our fathers mark us

each syllable of bone, phrasing of flesh, but also
the skin we put on, a way of letting our fathers speak
through and for us, with each other
always a hair's breadth away from refusal

and later the heft and weight of language
oar and rudder on the palate, finding our own
stained grammar in the wood-ash of their passing,
heaving the smoking axes on our tongues

as the shadowy wings behind our mothers,
reminders also that memory turns to seed

in beatings and beratings, in carefully counted cane-strokes
which sting on my thigh twenty years after their fading

he may tell you the names of angšana, balsam, cherry blossom
he may teach you the meaning of *bereft*

you may never become him
though you spend your life running to catch up
already he is in the distance, waving with his arms
(which you think beckon you forward): *go elsewhere*

each year you reach less to kiss him
there is less fur to tug at, and more snow

each year he takes one more step into the storehouse of images
he takes his place among the harried shopkeepers, the angels
and fallen kings, the sleeping heroes and carpenters

often we mark our fathers down
we put down the book and he is there
eyes on an elsewhere outside of you

only when you nudge the door open on an empty room
do you truly hear him
the dust whispers it; your footsteps form the vowels

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every day you relearn his name
as you clear your throat to speak

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