INARA CEDRINS

Inara Cedrins is an artist, writer, and translator who went to China to learn to paint in Chinese ink on silk in 1998 and remained five years teaching at universities, using poetry as a vehicle. Her first anthology of Latvian poetry was published by the University of Iowa Press in 1983, and a new three-book Baltic anthology was published by the University of New Orleans Press in 2013, with her prints as cover art.
FROM CHICAGO FACADES

XXV.

What's the difference between a caterpillar and a centipede? someone asks, watching the centipede on the basement floor of the shelter, they're built about the same, like a stretch limousine. He's told, one becomes a butterfly. I ask how to translate I am formidable because of the light in me into French, because I want to use the word formidable, and Aytl tells me it just means wonderful in French, the nuances we attach to the word won't translate. I don't agree, but don't say so. I can go along with that, I answer smiling. She thinks the word for light, lumiere, is ugly; it doesn't seem so to me, but she suggests saying fire. That'll work. It's to go with the calla lilies in the conservatory, one unfurling, one revealing its stamen like the wick of a candle in an alcove. Aytl's fussing about the word lumiere reminds me of my dislike for blue, and a teacher saying to me, blue's not a bad color. Burnt sienna wash under my paintings, the hotness of Venetian red. I have revived, my battered feet rested, the walk to Lincoln Park not as long and much more pleasant.

XXVIII.

The Chinese phrase bu keqi means don't be formal, don't be polite. Xihuan brought lichees for me today, and we companionably peeled and ate them while the lunch was being set out at the South East Asia Center. Styrofoam cups of milk, a little bowl of clear bean soup, and then we were served dinner plates of rice and peas and braised fish. The tinkling of Chinese music, we picked meat from the bones. “Catfish,” Tou Min said with satisfaction. Her eyes are like tea-colored marbles, luminous. In her country she was a mechanical engineer. They feel easier with me now, we went back to our exercise: “shrimp is more expensive than catfish.” They thanked me for teaching them and I said mei wenti, no problem—explained that the formal response would be ‘you’re welcome’ or “it was my pleasure.” It really was a pleasure to be with them and to resuscitate my Chinese. Still on the lam, I roam the city. The citizenship test questions include, are you a member of any club, organization? and they snap no! It's not bad to be a member of a club, I try to explain. Have you ever been arrested? Arrested means when the police take you to jail! one of them tells me, and I'm startled, try to say, in America they can't do that—but realize they can and do.