

JIANG HAO

What Shape is the Sea?

—Translated from the Chinese
by Chenxin Jiang

Every time you ask me what shape the sea is,
I should bring you two bags of seawater.
This is the shape the sea is, like a pair of eyes;
or like the shape the sea is that eyes can see.
The way you touch them, it's like you're brushing away
two burning tears.
That's the shape the sea is too. Its transparency
comes from the same, deeper soul.
Even if we pour both bags into one, that doesn't change
its breadth. They're still fresh,
as if two antfish could swim out any minute.
You use its flour like fine sand
to temper bread, and that's the shape the sea is too.
Before you can cut it open with a sail,
it's already departing like a vanishing steamship.
The pair of plastic bags left on the table
are also the shape of the sea. They're becoming flatter,
like the tide slowly receding from the beach.
When the real tide recedes,
the salt it offers is also the shape the sea is.
You don't believe me? I should bring you a bag of water,
a bag of sand. This, too, is the shape the sea is.
You agree, disagree, but don't agree,
don't disagree? You can conduct your own repeated experiments.
It's your shape too. But you say,
"I'm just my own shape."

Jiang Hao was born in Chongqing, China, in 1971. He has worked variously as a reporter, newspaper editor, university lecturer, and graphic designer in Beijing, Chengdu, Ürümqi, and Hainan Island, off China's south coast, where he now lives. He is the author of six poetry collections, most recently *Poems of a Wandering Immortal* (2016).

Chenxin Jiang translates from German, Italian, and Chinese. Her translations have received several awards, including a PEN Translation Fund Grant and the Susan Sontag Prize for Translation; her most recent translation from the Chinese was of Ji Xianlin's *The Cowshed: Memories of the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (New York Review Books, 2016). Chenxin is the senior editor for Sinophone writing at *Asymptote*, a journal of contemporary literature in translation.

TABITHA SOREN

Panic Beach (06734-20), 2012
Archival Print, 30 x 30 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST