America is a country made of immigrant stories, whether we like it or not. Today the dominant story is one of the criminal encroaching on borders to steal jobs. On its flip side is the story of the good immigrant, the hardworking family person who has arrived on these shores seeking a better life. In the story of the good immigrant, the protagonist struggles against cultural barriers, language acquisition and socioeconomic pressure, eventually overcoming these obstacles through assimilation. At the end of this story, the immigrant is transformed into an American, and can collect her reward: the American Dream.

In both of these stories, the immigrant does not exist until the moment of arrival. The first life, the life of the immigrant before she becomes an immigrant, is only shadowy backstory. Americans often read into this backstory various traumas—poverty, violence, political persecution—a flattened victimhood. The first life, when it emerges, serves to give depth and meaning to the frontstory of the new life, just as shadows define and give dimensionality to an image.

In *Little Gods,* I wanted to invert frontstory and backstory, to tell a story of the immigrant story *in negative*. In photography, a negative is the inverse of an image. In a negative shadows are bright and light is dark. In film photography, the negative is a foundational phase through which the image must pass in order to be captured. Negatives highlight what is not there and underexposed. For the writer for whom home exists as an absence, writing a story in negative made perfect sense.

Little Gods is about a Chinese immigrant with a ferocious and blind belief in her ability to create herself anew, for whom the American Dream ultimately fails. The idea of writing the story of her failed assimilation bored me—I had begun to distrust the narrative of assimilation. Why did immigrants have to obliterate their histories—themselves—in order to become American? The more I wrote, the more I found myself interested in the first life, in what happens before the moment of arrival. This was the life my parents and I had lost, and so the life that haunted me.

This was also the life in which the full humanity of my protagonist could be revealed. Anyone reading headlines today can see that in America immigrants are treated as second class citizens or much worse—systemically, socially, day to day. This treatment is partially due to a willful ignorance of the first life: the fact that the immigrant, before arrival, possessed an entire world rich with particular joys and sufferings, conducted often in a non-English language, that did not include America in any way. I wanted to write a story in which I did not just illuminate the darkness of whatever trauma propelled the decision to abandon the first life but the full self that existed in another language, another place, another framework of meaning, before the violence of immigration fractured the self and forced it to recreate itself anew. The failure of the American Dream became my premise and starting point, and the new life the backstory that inflected and informed the story of one woman who decided to leave.

—Meng Jin, Author