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Origami

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Origami
For Barbara Newton
(11/20/43 - 12/24/95)

Deep in her eyes I see the particle
of death. Blood vessels, memory
cells, words tattooed on the cranium
vanish. Her cheek hot against mine, I drag
her to her bed. Her breath smells of angels
and onions. I massage her withered
left arm, a useless bird's wing.
She strains towards me, her love green
in her eyes. Holy water lullaby.
Saltwater prayer. Your face, my face.
Your bones, my bones. Your grief, my grief.

Outside, the rocks are metaphors for tumors.
In the thick and dizzy air, each wave
sounds like Buddha falling on his head.
Two scruffy doves perch on the tangled viscera
of bare branches. The clouds have sharp,
raven wings. I stand in my shadow
and smell a dead sun. Must I, God, let go
of what I love? The blue-green sea, clouds
scattering the sky, plovers swerving
around the rocks, hibiscus sparking
orange and pink in a mauve sky,
succulents under my body. The pale green
of her eyes. My friend beside me
whispers, The orchid glistens in a dark spot.

We strap hope onto our smiles. Our hearts
unfold in the house where paper birds
swirl in the breeze and sunlight
through the dust motes sings like a child's
eyes. We feed her pureed chestnuts
and brown rice. We build an altar:
rosaries and rose quartz, Kwan Yin
and amethyst, three emeralds at the Buddha's
feet—the rivers, the mountains, the wind.
We are three sisters flying light
on the curling air, like blue and green
streamers on a kite, outstripping death.

For a while the amethyst works magic.
She wobbles to her feet. The sun and moon
regain their shine; the earth regains its color.
A kingfisher sparks off the water
like grace, like the it that needs no
reference. We talk of what will be.

Then death wipes out all future
tense. The tumor returns, more ravenous
than ever. The world has no more miracles.
Christmas trees and poinsettias assault
us. A cold wind polishes our bones. I point

at a sick moon—bloody and ragged
and dripping insincerity. Words thump
heavy on my ear drum. Buddha's rhythmic
breath wafts into the distance, not touching
my cheek. The restlessness of expectation.

In my dreams, she visits my dark room
and touches my arm with her long forefinger,
thin and gnarled like a twig. We have all
died, she says, and returned bearing cells
of everyone else who has died. I sweep
her from my room, clearing away silvery ghosts
and yellow turnings, making the room just me,
asleep and dreaming. Still she returns, her finger,
translucent in the moonlight, pointing at me.

The morning light shines through the skin
of a calla lily. We learn to breathe
and wait. We encircle her bed and chant,
like monks around the Buddha's tooth.
Clutching her rosary, she begins the journey
home. Wild horses paw the ground, waiting
for her. Angels flare at her elbows. She wears
patience like a nun's white habit,
looks across to where, in the dark, shines
a pine branch, a poem, a home. The angels
swear there will be no time. A ladder
of leaves leads to a house where the night ends.

The weather changes for her funeral. The waves
are like licks of flame, like the folds
of Kwan Yin's robe. Lotus flowers rise
from the mud. She dances above the altar, above
the box with her ashes, above the white spray
of mums and gladiolas. She gallops
with the wild horses, their manes flaming
with wind. A silver cross glistens
like a tear on my friend's black dress.

Twenty-three days dead. I throw
your amethyst into the sea and prepare
to tackle the everyday chore of breathing,
my heart corked and barely pumping.
A rainbow hangs low over the mountain
like a deep sigh. Everything is a metaphor.
The spot on a dove's neck, enlivened by the sun,
is the eye of memory, an iridescent fire,
the shudder of violins. The waves chime
your spirit, flowing, laughing, crystal
clear. And everywhere green I feel the rush
of a wild horse, happy you're home.

—REBECCA LEE
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