Origami

Rebecca Lee
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 swirling around the rocks, hibiscus sparkling 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
Honolulu