Poetry and prose

In passing

The last time I saw my grandmother Po alive, she wore brown twill slacks, a thin apron, perfume of water lily, ginger, jasmine.

Now her face is bloated, rounder than I remember. Hair white at the roots, tips still purple from her do-it-at-home dye kit.

Tubes removed from her throat; the army of machines stands down. My grandfather bent over her body, anointing her cheek with tiger balm, repeating *yesterday we were shopping, yesterday we were grocery shopping*. I imagine them pushing a cart down an aisle of apples.

Grandfather’s fingers trace the deep lines of Po’s hands, the words come softly through his lips won’t be long till I am walking with you.

I see first Po’s bound feet under the sheet: crippled since infancy, finally resting. Obsolete relics, long abandoned.

How many times I unwrapped layered strips of cotton to wash her toes with mild soap, soaking them in warm water and chamomile.

Tonight, in the bathtub, I will bend my toes under, imitating Po’s bandages with a wet washcloth, releasing my feet back into the steaming water like freed fish.

Later I will learn how the doctors shocked Po’s fragile body on the count of one, two, three, the way she rose into the air, for a moment suspended like flying, like falling.

I am too young to know complicated tears. Motionless at her side I do only what a grandchild does for a grandmother before parting—I lean down to her cooling forehead and kiss it.

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