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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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