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A Poem for Grandmother

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A POEM FOR GRANDMOTHER

A door. A stair. And two steps inside that dark,
the straight-backed chair my grandmother sat in,
a lace net draped across its mahogany arm.
And on the table, a volume of stories
open at the flyleaf, its tissue quill-scarred.

The photographs seal her in a shell of relations:
the sepia corset would have her no more
than an empress delegating domestic chores;
in this room, imagine her gravely accepting
tributes of porcelain and sparkling brass
or setting tiger lilies afloat in bowls, or stocking
pots of pickled mango in the attic of summer.

But the wrong word kills, and *empress* is wrong,
an acrid graft on a delicate stock. Empire
was never her creed: grandmother had to learn
the principles of governance from practiced hands.
She had to whet the brusque words of command
on waspish crones in the inner courtyard,
had to tame the peacocks in the garden
and dry the raisins of tact with aunts-in-law,
invalids who ruled from brass-bound chests
and serene beds of illness.

She grew up with her children, kept house
in a city of merchant ships and parade-ground strife,
made a home in the rain-gashed heart
of that world in whose lanes stowaway Chinamen sang
the praises of their silk, and coolies peddled
cartloads of spices plucked for colder ports.
Like the poets of that city, she wrote in two languages,
spoke a third in polite company, the lines enjambed
over the trellises, the words trapped in porous stone.

She died giving birth to a daughter
on Armistice Day, 1931.
She grew into the earth, then, a storied fig tree
whose roots shot to heaven and branches burrowed
so deep they seeded a forest.

Giving consumed grandmother. Connected to her
by nothing more substantial than a spiraled thread
of protein, I wake some nights to find her eyes
staring at me from the mirror:
grandmother when she died, younger than I now am,
cut in half by the streetlight's glare.

Hoard your powers, she says, do not give
from the core, my son, do not give.
Giving spites the flesh, corrodes intention.
Most unreliable of barterers, most memorable of sins,
giving kills. My son, do not, like Karna,
rip off the armor that is your skin.

GROUP PORTRAIT

The afternoons shuttle by, slides in the magic lantern
behind his eyes. Waking at teatime, he will neglect
the flavor of mint, brush the sandwiches aside.
First, he must compress his lore, replace each slide
with the true chronicler's unhurried finesse
in its allotted tray. And as they fog,
the old man wipes his half-moon lenses
with the soft cloth of evening.