

POETRY

My Mother Tells Me

by Binh Anh Khoa Ngo



"What is Behind" by Tamzin Merivale

My mother tells me time and time again
That when her breathing stops and eyelids close,
That when her body must heed Fate's command,
I am to let it happen, easing her to sleep
By being there, by holding onto her
Hand as I would a child's and help her cross
Into the next stage where she will transform,
No longer bound to her cold earthly shell,
And I am to forgo the rituals for
Her burial, the sutra, songs and chants,
And ceremony that take too much time
Away from peace and silence wherein one
May sit, reflect, and mourn, and celebrate
A life well-lived, a life well-loved, a life
Fulfilled with scarcely any lingering rue.

My mother tells me time and time again
That when her spirit knows it has outgrown
The limits of her mortal flesh, I am
To place her body, once a sacred shrine
To house her spirit, vacant at long last,
Inside no coffin made by human hands,
For she so often emphasizes that
She's lived her life in boxes of all shapes
And sizes, in the trappings of a woman
Bound to traditions, by the offices
Of her own station, tethered to the rules
And mandates of societal norms in life,
And thus, she asks only to be released
From all the chains and boxes when she's gone,
From all the weights irrelevant to her rest.

My mother tells me time and time again
That when her body's stiff, I am to warm
Her up with calming fire, helping her
Return to dust, to which I must not cling;

Instead, I am to cast her essence into
The air and let it go where Fate may lead:
Towards heaven where it'll join the circling birds,
Towards oceans where it'll ride the dancing waves,
Or towards the trees and soils to grow anew,
Far from the man-made jungle's boundaries.
All this she tells me, time and time again
As her face glows with peace, as her wide smile
Pulls at her lips, accentuating all
The time-dug trenches on her once smooth skin.
All this she tells me, time and time again.