

## DARLENE MONTONARO

### THE CRANE

1.

*Begin with a square of paper*

Vera spills the wrapping-paper birds  
from a plastic shopping bag.  
Silver wings and pink swirls,  
origami cranes. Japanese ancients,  
she says, believed the crane lived  
a thousand years.

2.

*Valley fold the side flaps to center crease*

To fold a thousand cranes, Vera tells us,  
brings good health and long life.

This information  
comes too late. Had I known in time,  
I would have begun right then.  
Like Kakamura's cranes  
released after battle  
each with a prayer strip on its leg,  
I would have made each fold a petition,  
each bird an augury.

3.

*Mountain fold side flaps*

Twelve-year-old Sadako Sasaki,  
dying slowly of radiation poisoning  
from Hiroshima, is told the legend—  
*Fold a thousand cranes, her friend says,  
and receive from God  
one single wish.*

I see her small hands  
folding and believing, the way Kath believed  
that rosary beads passed through her fingers  
make a divine chain to the heavens.  
How many beads, we wonder,  
will be enough?

4.

*Valley fold the model in half*

This is what we do, take our lives  
folded down to half, then half,  
then folded down again. Against my fingers  
the papers slice, resist, crack.  
I try again and again  
to get it right.

Sadako's brother  
hangs the cranes she makes in chains  
from the ceiling of her hospital room.  
I make, remake Kath's bed  
in the cancer ward, squash fold,  
petal fold, pull the sheets tight  
and smooth. Precision, I think  
will bring order.

5.

*Valley fold the pointed flap*

Origami is a craft  
of precision. Each corner  
must neatly meet the next.  
One slip, one lazy fold,  
and the architecture is doomed.

6.

*Valley fold the pointed tip,  
which is to become the head*  
Despite what we know  
the talisman becomes a sweet seduction.  
Rosary beads, medals,  
stones etched with 'hope'—  
we hold them in our hands like charms.  
Fragile as paper cranes, moving against  
the hospital's recycled air.

7.

*Mountain fold the model in half*  
There is a place on the mountain path  
the seeker knows the summit  
has been reached. Descent is inevitable.  
To make a mountain fold, the paper—like hope—is halved,  
and halved, then halved again

Sadako sleeps. Her hands  
are idle. Childhood friends press her on and on  
knowing they cannot do the work.  
They push paper beneath her fingers.  
Sadako sleeps.

8.

*Pull head and neck into position.  
Press the creases flat. Adjust the head  
and press it flat*  
Sadako dies. She completes only 500 cranes,  
one half a wish, one less petition with which the gods  
must concern themselves. Her classmates  
finish folding the rest. The cranes  
are buried with her.

The beads  
fall from Kath's fingers. In the dark,  
while we sleep to the sound of oxygen,  
the metronome of a Geiger counter, cancer  
takes her hands, her feet, and then her speech.  
Her lips can no longer form the prayers.  
Who knows how many Hail Marys  
she fell short? There is no legend to guide us  
no way to tell, in the way of origami,  
which corners we failed to match,  
where our attempts proved to be unequal.  
The beads fall. We place them,  
hard wood, against the satin.

9.

*Finally, the finished crane.*