

2nd Place Senior Poetry
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Paper Dolls
On Primo Levi's Survival in Auschwitz

The rules of origami are simple: one sheet of paper,
no cuts, and no glue. Simply transforming the paper
through folds alone. The origamist works with serene
precision, almost severe manipulation.

He specializes in paper dolls. He spends his whole life
folding, each unique and lively. After every doll is complete,
he tosses it in the ever-growing pile. There is nowhere left to sit,
so he perches on the pile of six million dolls, still folding.

I am a paper doll, a figurine of cellulose fibers, a flexible sheet
masterfully bent and twisted into a spindly marionette.
The world sees us in immaculate shadow boxes, contorted in a twisted ballet.
After all, a doll does not have a consciousness.

Behind the crystalline glass, the rules are being broken.
The origamist uses scissors on his paper dolls,
cutting, snipping, shaping to perfection. Trapped in a frame,
The rules are broken, we are broken, but no one sees.

Washing paper is a delicate task. The slightest flinch
destroys it in the process. Already with so many tears, rips, shreds
is it worth it to wash a paper doll? Better to leave me dirty but whole.
Would I live a minute longer with a wash?

Steinlauf leans against the opposite wall, letting the water evaporate
from his already fragile paper limbs and paper torso.

I stare at him. Incredulously, I ask him,

“Why are you doing something so unnecessary?” So frivolous?

“We’ve already been deprived of every right,” he says. “You’ve forgotten
what we are. We are human. Not paper dolls of folds and cuts,

But human, so we must wash – for dignity, propriety, to be alive.

It is the one power we still possess. To live is to contradict the origamist.”

The words rang in my paper ears, no, my human ears.

I look down and see thin legs, dirty skin, hands of flesh, and I realize.

I must walk straight in the eyes of the origamist.

To live is refusal enough.