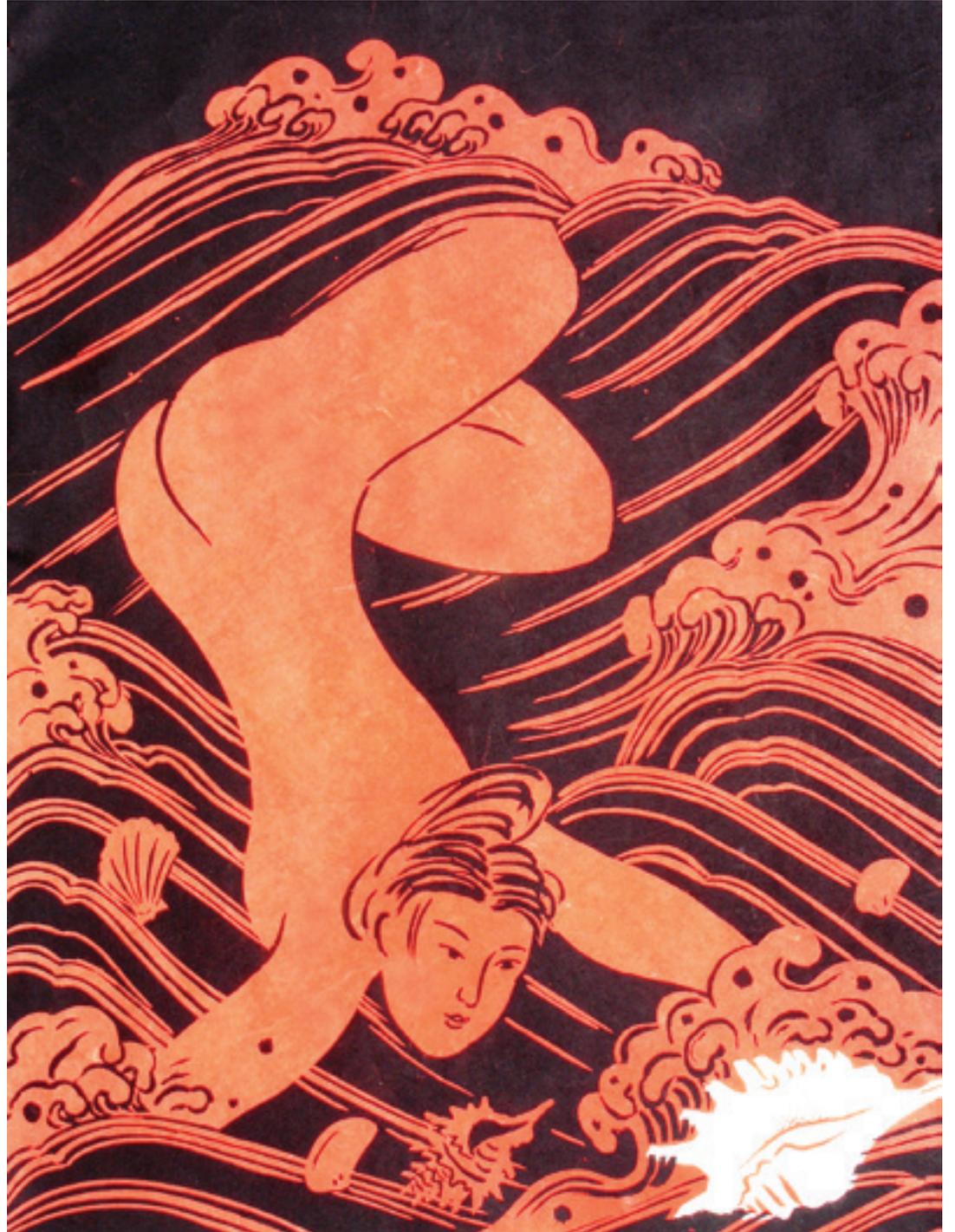


BY CARRIE GROSSMAN

For Want of Blood



PAINTING: MERCIFUL SEA-DARK DEPTH BY MAYUMI ODA

1.

I rest supine with spread legs, gray blinds staring me down
in my distress while she hovers, ghost-like.
Her sterile fingers slip inside
the half-open paper gown to check my breasts for lumps.
She fidgets with speculums, Q-tips, and rubber gloves,
scraping my dark cantaloupe of womb for cells.
Soon, the pulpy walls accept the humming
ultrasound and there, on the screen, my insides:

uterus with lining thick as porridge,
ovaries that float like two fistfuls of pebbles.

Inside, cysts stew like tiny prunes
and tears never shed hang like icicles
inside holy chambers.

The gynecologist says it is hormonal, but I know it is a lack
of self-love, not science. In India, the psychic recalls a trauma—
in the 1600s I was raped, a French peasant girl
tortured by a tinker who sliced out my fertile
jewels as prize; my ovaries endure the scars.
The energy healer asks what I see—
Don't know, I say, lots of little bubbles and I am trapped inside.
Ah, yes, a little girl; let's hold her if we can.

The internist assures me it is in the family, genetic recipe
passed down from mother to daughter like china, like rocking chairs.
Others say karma, the result of actions from lives gone by.
I nod, foreigner in the pastures of my own flesh.

I cry for want of blood.

2.

Before the discovery of fire, before spears were chiseled and roads carved,
the most ancient of all bloods streamed from our shelters.
Menstruation, like a sorceress's charm, frightens the men.
Insides open wide, like a fully bloomed lotus beckoning sun,
ready to give back to wild earth what was never ours.
It is we who die every month and watch with wonder
as birth is found in death's remains.
We place flowers in our hair and soothe the soil
with our savory sap, a ritual that comes by grace,
a monthly Sabbath for the soul.

For centuries we have been called dirty for the blood that leaks
as pomegranate nectar, in a pulse.
Still, for some, bleeding provides days perched on mossy stumps
and hours singing in the moon lodge
or crying as exfoliation strips us empty.

My sisters used to smear lifeblood on their skin, dance in sacred circles;
now we fold our blood in plastic, plug ourselves dry.
Neglecting the soft hum of our animal forms, we turn off our organs
with pills and draw the shades at night, blanking out the moon.



3.

The body, keen little creature, is laden with tales, feelings lodged
deep in the liver and spleen. Always moving forward,
we ignore its calls: resentments that throb in temples, sadness
we blow out our nose when a cold appears.

The body sings, but who listens?

In my ovaries the fear breathes quick and silent.
Eggs transform into sacs of discontent, their membranes
scribbled with the language of loneliness
so close I can barely see. Some days, out of love,
the endometrium lets go like a silty river,
opaque with the sediment of grief.
The pain is charged, a live wire of human suffering internalized:
it mourns the death of a million trees, the empty belly, the turning
typhoon of losses, both yours and mine.

Other days there is nothing but rage.

4.

I once swam among wide, shiny kelp, and the coral-strewn beings
shared their stories with me. *Your body is water*, they whispered, *fluid
that is gentle, potent as beet juice*. I allow this liquid to flow between
my thighs.

Now I speak kindly to myself when doubt charges at my heart
like a bull with foolish words that harm and bruise.
Now I invite the love that is omniscient to envelop me
like fimbria do ovum. I know that these wise cysts do not belong to me,
for when they are ready they will gather and burn like tinder
in flames of compassion, scatter like ash, and leave me simple.

The pain that guides me homeward will remind me always
to surrender plenty for breath.

(2001)

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