

2025 Tom Lee Poetry and Spoken Word Contest

First Place Winner: Katie Phan

What Kills a Wife

she's not dead yet
but I often find myself writing my mother's obituary

i see how she flinches every time a man comes near her
the life inside her eyes extinguishing just for a moment but eternally burned into
my mind
whenever my father grows angry, he gives my mother kisses (wounds)
and then he holds her in his arms (the ones that struck her moments before) and
offers sweet (fake) apologies
mama, is this what is killing you?

i see how she refuses to treat herself with gifts
in fear of proving my father's diction of gluttony right (gold-digger)
scared of the sneering she would receive from family if she was ever caught
shopping for herself and not her husband
never receiving flowers on any holiday because my father always said
“don't buy yourself flowers. flowers die anyway, so they're a waste of (my)
money.”
mama, is this what is killing you?

i see her ashen skin, the result from a restricted diet (controlled by him)
fearful to become undesirable to a man (she doesn't love)
she thinks i don't notice her quietly stealing my makeup at midnight (to cover the
bruises)
the way she cinches her waist with a belt
in an attempt to conceal the rolls of flesh that make her imperfect (human)
thinning skin covers sculpted synthetic plastic implants carved into her flesh
so that he doesn't reject her (perfectly normal) haggish (aging) body
mama, is this what is killing you?

i see the way she buries herself in hypothetical theories
every time he returns home late (“from work”)
reeking of beer and another woman's perfume
claiming that she's just “imagining” things (evidence)
busying herself with household chores to distract her
from the blatant answer (divorce)
mama, is this what is killing you?

i see how she listlessly cleans the sheets
in foolish hope that he will choose their (her) bed to sleep in
his lust murders years of (unhappy) marriage
resulting in hushed arguing at night
because they think i am asleep
always ending in the sharp slamming of a door and our truck engine revving
mama, is this what is killing you?

she's not dead yet
but i often find myself writing my mother's obituary
or rather my witness statement (at last) to an
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