

The Bedouin Dress

It hung in my mother's closet,
black and heavy as a cloak,
embroidered at the breast
with deep red stitches,
reminder of our brief life
in Beirut. My father had
unfolded the rolled bills in his palm,
haggled for it in the desert heat.

Empty on the hanger,
it seemed filled with the presence
of the woman for whom it had been woven.
Sometimes, I slipped into it,
my arms vanishing
into the length of the sleeves,
the extra yardage pooled at my feet.

I liked to brush my cheek
against the roughness of the cloth,
run my thumb over the maze
of raised threads,
inhale the world hidden within.

And though it's been twenty years
since our house burned to a pile of ash,
I go there in my mind,
walk through the rooms, remembering,
touch the dress, again,
feel it in my palm,
the way we all visit our losses

in the ruined house of the past.
The way I visit my brother, still alive
in the rooms of our childhood,
rooms of oak and grass, sky and sand.

The way the woman who once wore the dress
must sit over an evening fire,
heating the water for tea, remembering a child's hair,
black as a birdwing, or her husband
singing under the moon, his voice thinned
by cigarettes.

Who knows if she ever thinks of the dress?
A dress she danced in. A dress she wore over the curve
of her growing womb, a dress she smoothed
with the palm of her hand before
setting out the evening meal.

She slid it on in the morning,
then pulled it off over her long,
unbraided hair at night.

A dress she wore when she lived in a village
to which she can never return,
a dress she carried under her arm as she fled.

Garment of dust, of smoke,
of memory, garment of exile,
still hanging in the burned room.

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