

POETRY

# Rooms :: Under Siege

by Elina Kumra



"Gnomic" by Kim Suttell

## I.

The shelter which is concrete-gray or maybe dust-white, and mattresses  
on the floor and little fists stick out of blankets and  
olive-brown cheeks and my ummi bent over. the shelter  
is never quiet and somehow milky and the child's nails  
scratch a bit when they grasp my finger. there is no  
clock on the wall but my ummi always knows —  
it's always time for prayer and it's not time for leaving.  
the keffiyeh has tiny stains on it. the walls have bullet holes.  
there's a crescent moon on my sister's bracelet and Allah  
watching over with infinite patience we cannot borrow.

## II.

my brother walks through debris to what was once his classroom  
where he is still the only dark-haired boy remaining  
and the only one who remembers more than one way of living  
and the classroom walls are now just chalky outlines plastered with  
Do this, Stay here, We did this and So-and-So is a Martyr  
and my brother cries refuses to step further i have to find a way  
look a bird somehow nesting look the alphabet scratched on concrete  
look a pencil case intact look so many colors in the dust  
my brother says he wants to go home and i cannot answer  
*Is there something I can do* there is a small plastic toy trapped  
beneath fallen ceiling maybe a soldier maybe some other figure  
and when the drone's whine returns my brother's hand  
squeezes mine tighter

## III.

in the exam room my sister doesn't look up  
this is how i imagine it she tells it differently  
qawaiy sumud endured it almost smiles  
when she says she kept writing even as bombs  
fell nearby our parents will be so proud when  
the teacher calls us from the makeshift school to say

she has excelled my mother blushes my father's  
face is flushed they just say alhamdulillah  
alhamdulillah my sister's face is dust-pale  
she later describes the room as shattered the test  
as meaningless

#### IV.

in another room my sister is examined by a doctor  
his cold hands on her stomach his tired eyes  
on her wounds she tells me it's so lonely  
being touched by metal in there so  
impersonal she says all this for an injury  
from flying glass proving something to herself  
she says Promise not to tell and i do and we don't  
the room is darkened the generator failing  
the room is metal the room has a ceiling  
which drips its bead  
of saline solution on the forehead and my sister says  
nobody will ever understand this  
her little fists clenched even in sleep

#### V.

where she meets her future husband the waiting area  
in the tunnel between neighborhoods in a clouded  
concrete shelter he offers her water and asks  
where she's from she's wearing her best hijab  
and so is he  
his cleanest shirt Janna she says  
and he laughs Paradise the story told over and over  
embellished with the brand of bottled water  
the color of his eyes but really she says  
I couldn't see him that clearly It was like being in a mosque  
a tiny darkened mosque no prayers no imam  
just breathing and pretending they were normal

when in fact they were all slowly being erased  
in that strange dusty place between destruction  
he gave her his mother's ring

VI.

my sister holds our father's hand he coughs  
and the bed shakes the pills rattle in the small  
brown bottle my mother looks away a nurse  
walks in there are no thermometers left  
walks out my sister tucks the bedsheets  
under the mattress looks down at her feet  
I think I'm pregnant she says I think I am  
I think and then she stops when my father coughs  
these makeshift beds so narrow like graves  
these grown-ups waiting and eating in silence  
sleeping  
forgetting our father helpless  
and tiny like a bird she tells me later  
in this hospital where being alive  
is both miracle and continued suffering

VII.

it's a girl khalas says my sister  
Only if she wants to be  
in the shelter in Room VII see how  
she's clenching her little fists  
against a world that arrives  
already broken  
my sister whispers to her daughter:  
under your skin little one  
we keep all our disappeared houses  
safe in your tiny perfect bones  
we've hidden all the rooms  
we've ever loved