POETRY

Rooms :: Under Siege

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"Gnomic" by Kim Suttell

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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

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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

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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

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