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HEAD OVER HEELS

By **Emtithal Mahmoud**

They hand me the microphone as my shoulder sinks under the weight of this dress;
The woman says,

The one millionth refugee just left South Sudan, can you comment?

I feel my feet rock back and forth
on the heels my mother bought
Begging the question,

do we stay, or is it safer to choose flight?

My mind echoes through the numbers:
One million gone, 400,000 dead in Darfur,
two million displaced

and this lump takes over my throat as if each of those bodies found a grave right here in
my esophagus.

Our once country—
all west, and south, and east, and north—
so restless, the Nile couldn't hold us together
and you ask me to summarize?

They talk about the numbers as if this isn't still happening,
As if 500,000 didn't just die in Syria,
as if 3,000 aren't still making their final stand
at the bottom of the Mediterranean,
as if there aren't entire volumes full of factsheets about our genocide and now you
want me to write one?

Fact: we never talked over breakfast because the
warplanes would swallow our voices.

Fact: my grandfather didn't want to leave home
so he died in a warzone.

Fact: a burning bush without God is just a fire.

I measure the distance between what I know and what is safe to say on a microphone.
 Do I talk about sorrow, displacement?
 Do I mention the violence?
 How it's never as simple as what we see on TV?
 How there are weeks' worth of fear before the camera is on?

Do I talk about our bodies? How they are 60 percent water, but we still burn like driftwood?
 Do I tell her the men died first? Mothers forced to watch the slaughter?
 That they came for our children?
 Scattering them across the continent
 until our homes sank, that even castles sink at the bite of the bomb?

Do I mention the elderly? Our heroes—
 too weak to run too expensive to shoot?
 How they would march them hands raised, rifles at their backs into the fire?
 How their walking sticks kept the flames alive?

It sounds too harsh for a bundle of wires and an audience to swallow; too relentless,
 like the valley that filled with the putrid smoke of our deaths.
 Is it better in verse? Can a stanza become a burial shroud?
 Will it sting less if I say it softly?
 Will the pain leave when the microphone does?
 If you don't see me cry will you listen better?
 30 seconds for the sound bite and now 3 minutes for the poem. Why does every
 word feel like I'm saying my last?

My tongue goes dry, the same way we died—
 becoming ash without ever having been coal.
 I feel my left leg go numb and realize that I locked my knees,
 bracing for impact.

I never wear shoes I can't run in.