

YOU HAVE A BIG IMAGINATION

or 400,000 ways to cry

By **Emtithal Mahmoud**

I am a sad girl, but my face makes other plans
Focusing energy on this smile so as not to waste it on pain

The first thing they took was my sleep,
eyes heavy but wide open
Thinking maybe I missed something,
maybe the cavalry is still coming

They didn't come, so I bought bigger pillows

My grandma could cure anything by talking the life out of it and she said I could
make a thief in a silo laugh
in the middle of our raging war

War makes a broken marriage bed out of sorrow
you want nothing more than to disappear,
yet your heart can't bear to leave

but love, love is the armor we carried across the borders of our broken homeland
A hasty mix of stories that last long after the flavor is gone
And muscle memory that overcomes even the most bitter of times

My memory is spotted with days of laughing until I cried
Or crying until I laughed
Laughter and tears are both involuntary reactions
Testaments of human expression
So allow me to express, that if I make you laugh,
It's usually on purpose
and if I make you cry, I promise I'll still think you are beautiful

I learned love in France
My cousin Zeinab bedridden on a random afternoon
Dilated fibromyalgia –her heart muscles expanded until they no longer functioned

I hadn't seen her since the last time in Sudan together
And there I was at her bedside in a 400 year old hospital in Paris

This is for Zeinab who wanted to hear poems
Suddenly, English Arabic and French were not enough Every word I knew was
empty noise

And she said, well get on with it



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POEMS

I recited everything I could

It was the most important stage I've ever been on—
 surrounded by family, by remnants of a people who were given as a dowry
 to relentless war but still manage
 to make pearls of this life

Who taught me not only to laugh
 but to live in the face of death

Placing their hands across the sun and saying, *See that, I'll meet you there!*
 and for Zeinab who on her death bed wanted to hear poems

Most days I am only sandstone, but
 in her arms I felt like gold
 And we laughed and we loved, and I asked,

Isn't it strange that the only problem is your heart was too big?