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Always Moving

Trilby Miller Plants

In the Christmas package my mother sent,
I found a tiny flannel dress and
red shoes covered with tiny sequins.
The shoes evoked vague wishes of homecomings
But because I lived in many places,
I never could decide where I should wish myself.
But I remembered my mother's stories.
Lost memories live in her words:
countless graves in Arlington and
fence deep snow in Michigan and
California orange groves frosted with first time snow;
the Bakersfield earthquake and another in Montana.
She recounts our family's milestones and our tragedies
with verbatim conversations.

And because of her stories
I remember Tripoli in 1949:

My mother on the balcony
of the building where we lived.
She shades her eyes against the fierce Mediterranean
sun and crosses herself and gazes north
toward where my father flies his C-47 into Berlin.
Mocked by the empty cry of gulls,
she searches the brittle sea of sky,
and says he'll call when he lands in Benghazi.

And I run to the door to go to the beach
and play with the English children who taught
me how to sing "God Save the Queen."
On the way we talk in a shadow of a
statue of Romulus and Remus suckled by a wolf:
two little boys who guard a city
bisected by a wall and a clash of cultures.

The wall is ancient, rough stones laid,
my mother says, by Roman soldiers.
And there on the wall a hanged man
with hooded face swings in the *gibleh*
that sweeps the Sahara's hot breath into town.

"Don't look," my mother says and pulls my hand.
"It's not for us,." And those we pass
aver their eyes and no one looks.
But I see ropes that bind his hands and feet
and the dirty cloth that covers up his face.

In the marketplace the Arab shoemaker
says the man was not a thief
or the justice of Islam would only take a hand.
I hang on his clumsy English.
"Bushwa," he says and shrugs. "It's nothing."

My mother asks for the sandals for my Halloween costume.
But he didn't understand that I was to be
a poor Arab child of the streets.
The shoes are camel hide and red velvet
covered with shiny red sequins.
"Only child of a sheik has shoes," he says.
"So I make them for such a girl."
I wore the shoes and the shabby dress,
with a shawl over my head like the little Arab girls.

When I was older, I never lived
in one place long enough to make good friends.
I always wished for someplace I could say was home.
I know now that home is in my mother's history.

Trilby Plants