

New Poetry by J.S. Alexander: “Sabat”



AWAY HE STAYS / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Sabat (Loyalty)

Dead bodies stop looking like bodies
after a certain point.

The face, like a popped milar balloon
with all the air blown out the top,

the legs, oddly angled, their bottoms
looking for all the world

like tubes of children's toothpaste
unevenly squeezed.

No, the dead here never arrive in an orderly manner, like in the movies.

This is Afghanistan, so they show up carried in blankets or what's left

of clothes, bandages waving like May flags.

But they all go out the same way.

The mullah works systematically, washing and praying, singsong in his labors.

Next to him, a step back Mortaza watches them prepare his brother for the next life.

Mohammad Gul was the pride of Ismail Khel.

Young, handsome, brave. Funny. Everyone said he was funny.

You don't hear that much in Afghanistan, someone being funny. As they lift what's left

into the particle board box that looks like an Ikea desk repurposed

hands seek to guide Mortaza out. But he pulls away, he stays.

He watches as they wrap Gul's head in cotton and prop it up on

pillows of cheap foam. They spray him with Turkish perfume from the bazaar, and then

drape the Afghan flag and the prayer rug over his box, taping it down with rolls of

scotch tape. Mortaza sniffs back a tear, both for his brother and the debt

he knows he'll now have to pay. He's not scared, just tired, and knows

that somewhere, out in Lakan, is a man he's never met but will kill, as the way demands.

When we walk out, together, my boots slip, squeaking and squishing on the sodden, dirty tile.