Where the Tiny Things Are: Feathered Essays

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She was a student in Nancy’s class, not mine. I only saw her because she was visiting the writing center and I was working at the writing center although I don’t write there all that much. She was wearing not quite a burka but her head was swaddled and her dress was a robe, trailing on the floor. In the desert, the robe makes some sense—it keeps the sun from burning skin. The long hem of the skirt skims sand, rushes air up, underneath. On that side of the world pointing fat side to the sun, long and covered yet light and breezy makes sense. The headscarf translates to Flagstaff weather. In the winter, you want to keep your head covered, especially in the morning when the temperature blips between plus one and minus one, plus one and minus one. But those skirts drag in the snow. The edges soak. Melted snow inches up the robe. All day long, you become wet in a way you fear might offend Mohammed.

She hadn’t felt the baby kick for three days. She is eight months pregnant on the other side of the world from home and she does not know what this means. This is her first baby. She came here because the Center for International Education invited her husband, and her husband invited her. She is a student of English and yet the word “kick” doesn’t translate here. She wonders if it’s the cold that’s slowing the baby down. She wonders if it is the thin air here. She wonders if it is the way the earth contracts away from the sun, this far north, at this elevation, like a Gap girl tightening the belt on her low-cut jeans. Nancy asks me if it is normal
for babies to be so quiet for three days. I say, sometimes, when it’s warm, the baby doesn’t move. But I don’t know what I’m talking about. When I was pregnant I was cold all the time and the baby came early—before the eight months pregnant she is.

Later that day, she sent Nancy an email. She had gone to the health center as Nancy had suggested. At the health center, in a language she was studying but couldn’t quite say was her own, she heard the nurse practitioner tell her that the baby had died. Inside her, as she had walked through snow, the baby was already sloughing off cells. The baby was already decomposing under that veil of dress and skin. Under that skin, the baby that had made the skirts billow forth, the stomach that had made its own equator, collapsed and contracted. The baby that she was supposed to be holding up fell down. She couldn’t tell her husband, any more than she could tell her mother, that it was the baby who had kept her gravitationally erect. Now, baby-shrinking, head collapsing, skin-sloughing, her skirts weighed more than the sun itself. The equator shrank. She slips across the now-flat of the world as if upon ice.