I have told too many people now. My words weave a story which I must hold away from my body to retell. It is about women I know and don’t know.

On the screen, in a workshop, I saw a small girl in Africa. Her dress was raised, legs parted to reveal the small mouth at her centre. An old woman, who loved her, seemed to say a kind of blessing. Then a razor blade flashed, like the old woman’s teeth, and the girl began to scream. Tiny, hooded (like a foreskin they say)—that small bud. The tip of the tongue women keep between their legs to speak of desire. It is as passionate as a kiss, innocent as a woman reading out loud, powerful as a defiant child.

Men say that tongue talks to women too much. But the Koran is silent on the matter.

The child unzipped my spine pulled it loose. My womb shifted, blood and urine leaked down my thighs. In the bathroom, I huddled in a cubicle. A small-voice—the child which still lives in a corner of me—was crying. Alone and frightened. But at six and a half, I only had cystitis. Just didn’t understand the burning pain.

In the classroom Monday morning I see my lovely Somali student. She is elegant in aubergine and indigo—her grey eyes shine from caves rimmed with kohl. It is our last week together before she graduates. She gives me a gift, a green scarf—gauzy as a veil—to match my eyes. She is full of joy because she can read her name on the certificate. I see a child in her face. Recall the three sorrows of Somali women which I have learned:

The day of circumcision when her lips are also excised.

The wedding night when her husband pushes into that carefully sealed place.

The birth of her first baby when the scar tissue tears away.

I lay my palm against the cheek of the child in her face. Hug her a moment too long.

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