

Cashmere

says its own softness
in the sound of its name, the cajzh
sliding over the tongue
like a pansy's petal, only warmer,
the mere like the whisper of your first love's name
something half-forgotten,
tucked away in the drawer lined with tissue paper,
redolent with grandmother,
she who stuffed nylons with dried rose-petals
and hung them from light bulbs to release their scent.
And why does this memory
drift back to me now? Because I want
that hundred dollar sweater, marked down
from a hundred and forty
but still way too much,
still out of reach as the touch
of my grandmother's cheek,
gone for decades now, her powder and woe.

Because I have never seen the cashmere goat,
bred in the hard-fought Kashmir valley,

goat who is neither Muslim nor Hindu,
she of the cherished silky, double-layered coat
deliberately picking her way
down the rocky path of the Himalayas.
Because I have not met the herdsman
or seen the place where the wool is carded,
washed and spun, nor sat with the women, weaving,
or heard their stories and songs. Because I have not sipped
their smoky tea in the dimness of the hut,
or lifted my eyes to the ring of mountains ranging me
wondering why the work of my hands may fly
where I cannot, I crave the expensive sweater.
Or perhaps
it's the ancient cleft between worlds I want,
the agility of the goat's quick step,
the way she lives at the edge of a cliff
without falling off. Or then again it could be
the strength and softness of those unknown women.

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