

1.

One month from today,
I'll wake to a team of
 makeup artists—
 hair stylists—
buzzing outside my door.

At Nani's command, they'll
 swarm.

They'll
 poke
me with their glittery swords;
 paint
me with their honey.

I'll fight the urge to scratch it away,
because I'm
 Sudasa the obedient
and I must keep my fingers
gluedtogether
like the dolls
Asha and I
left buried under my bed.

When the artists flee,
the designers will inch into place.

They'll

spin

me in their silks;

garnish

me with their golds.

They'll lift me onto an easel;

wait for Nani

to stamp me

DONE!

After that, I'll be placed upon

an elephant—

the only creature who'll appear

more ridiculous than me.

She'll deliver me

to a temple with

no god.

Then Nani will send me

down the aisle with

strict

instructions

to keep my

gaze

off my

beaded shoes.

The people of Koyanagar will

Watch me.

Question me.

Love me?

Hate me.

Hate me for not marrying

their son.

For not bearing

his ~~children~~ daughters.

For not guaranteeing

his future.

At the end of the aisle,

a boy—

squeezed into a black sherwani—

will sit on a chair,

his spine as rigid as its spindles.

He won't look at me;

won't dare.

I won't look at him either.

Will look at the woman

in front of him.

The one with the stole of

red.

The color of love?

No.

The color of blood.

Blood of birth. Blood of death.

The only things that matter
in Koyanagar.

When I stop in front of the woman—
Koyanagar's only marriage officiant—
she'll scan the papers in her hand.

Commence the same speech
she must utter for the
 two hundred girls
who turn seventeen this year.

Her first words today—
they won't be for Papa.
He doesn't have a say. Can't give me away.
How could he?
You can only give away
that
which is yours to lose.

No. Instead, she'll tell me to
↓ sit ↓
then she'll motion
for the flowers to come.

Long garlands of lilies.
 Orange lilies.

The flower of purity.

(Or some say, pride).

She'll ignite the fire

of butter and wool.

Tell the boy and me to

stand.

link our hands.

She'll tell us to take

seven steps. Accept

seven blessings. Spend

seven seconds

to circle around the fire.

When we're done,

she'll present us to the audience.

Me

and my husband:

the *boy*.

Only she won't call him that.

She'll call him a name.

A name I will not know.

Until then, he'll be a

n#mber

from the Koyanagar Registry.

Not a boy named

Ravi.

Jamal.

Shahid.

Not a fiancé.

Or a friend.

A n#mber.

Today,

before any of this can happen,

I have to get out of bed.

Have to put on my sari.

Have to open my door.

Have to accept Nani's advice.

Have to pretend Mummy gives some too.

Have to get in our carriage.

Have to ride through the crowds.

Have to sit in the theatre.

Have to wait for my turn.

Have to follow the rules.

Have to smile like I agree.

Have to

Have to

Have to

Have to

Choose him.