

Dowry

I.

Like flocks the dust flew off the timbered hatch
When she sprang the hasp on the dowry chest
And plunged in, elbow-deep, her hand a perch
Swimming in mothballed waters, now a guest
Where once it ran host, rummaging for things
That keep slipping the fingers: a fawn brooch,
A ruched scarf, a blouse raging with sequins;
Until it gleans her wedding saree, scorch-
Ing as that day she left home in a spray
Of pulse and flower, the tears soldering off
Her cheeks and her father looking away,
His eye drilling holes through a stubborn bluff
Estranging like this stranger, drift-boned, shy,
He handpicked for the apple of his I.

II.

Now swatch by torrid swatch, i feel the dream
Unwind in her hands to be wound again
Years down the track by aunts who tack and seam
And smother her girlhood in silk, the skein
Reeling in their present as the past un-
Reels in mine. Amid the insinuating
Chatter, the laughter, I watch her reef on
A doubt, the future a nightmare drifting
Like crockery on a newspapered shelf.
How I want my dumb art to scream, to say:
"Mother, swim out into your doubting self.
Plunge in against the current. Go astray.
I will your life to heave like a van Gogh
Brushstroke, like verse, like poplar leaves. Go."

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