MEHNDI

Sati Mookherjee

DIAGRAM 25.3

for Shakira Fazal Saahibah

Karachi, 1971

Hina, mignonette,
lawsonia, privet.

The mother mixed a slurry
of atta and water

pasted brown paper
on the windows, closed

the sea green khadar drapes
printed in paisleys

nested each
in each.

The mother
poured powder

into a bowl of water
and let it sit.

Stirred another paste.
Put a soft spoonful

into each girl's palm.
I closed my hand

and made a house
… *Why did I say 'house?'*

I meant 'fist.'
The mother wrapped

the hands in cloth
and plastic. The girls

slept in happiness.
We thought

it was magic.
In the morning

the mother took off
the wrappings.

In their hands
a carp, a *mahseer*

a butterflyfish.
The mother unwrapped

the windows
(the petrol depot

bombed in the night)
to henna blossoms

dahlia and carnation
on the soft palm of sky.

New black shoes
by the beds.

The mother dissolved
sugar

in lime juice
stroked it with a finger

across the skin
to make the color stay.

Smoke
swam through

the cut outs
in the concrete wall

down the throats
of the children

blooming
in their bronchioles.

We coughed
for weeks

coughs
sharp as roses.

I don't remember
fear.

The mother roasted
cloves in a little oil

for the small rise
of smoke

that the girls
might wave

hands in it
to make the color stay.

Running girls
flashing fish

swimming
room to room

Petrol fumes
in the sea green drapes.

Glabrous sky,
clouds stained reddish

so much smoke
the color stayed.

The house. The mother.
The sisters and brother.

The sky, war-colored.
The father. The fish.

Leaf of hina
and mignonette

everything
the mother kept