

Sara Afshar

## KEROSENE

In the corners of the room, old neighbors  
chatter, *it's a strange time for a wedding.*  
*A winter marriage, here in Kashmir?*  
The bride wears three shawls and keeps warm with tea,  
the groom, a stranger, stands with his brothers.  
They watch her father pay a man for more kerosene.

The whole room is lit by the kerosene  
lamps, white glass borrowed from old neighbors,  
still whispering about the strange brothers,  
and the mother expected after the wedding.  
*The mother will come from Iran, they sip into their tea.*  
*I wonder if she will like it here in Kashmir.*

*Of course she will. Where is better than Kashmir?*  
They muse 'til night ends. Servants pack the kerosene  
for the newlyweds' home and dump the cold tea.  
The night is over, the bride is frozen. The neighbors  
leave remarking, *that wasn't such a strange wedding*  
*after all.* The bride stares at the boys, new brothers,

and wonders how she will care for them. The brothers  
tell her, we don't want to live in Kashmir,  
they cry for their mother. After the wedding,  
on the new stove heated by kerosene,  
she cooks for them all, aided by the neighbors  
who leave gifts of spices, sugar, and tea.

The mother arrives, back to the bride, they drink tea  
she brought from Iran for the groom and the brothers.  
*What a strange woman,* remark the neighbors  
when the mother, in the next days, won't see Kashmir.  
*She's left the house only once, to fetch kerosene,*  
*and never did she ask about the wedding.*

Poor, mother. No one ever asked about her wedding.  
So she decides to walk to the stove for more tea,  
and strangely raises the tank of kerosene  
and pours it, while staring at the bride and brothers,  
on her skin. She strikes a match and illumines Kashmir.  
*Her whole bloody body in flames, say the neighbors.*

*A shame, the neighbors say, so soon after the wedding.*  
The old Kashmiris come over to pray, *dear... put on the tea.*  
Someone sends the brothers out for more kerosene.