

An Unknown Girl

By Moniza Alvi

In the evening bazaar
Studded with neon
An unknown girl
Is hennaing my hand
She squeezes a wet brown line
Form a nozzle
She is icing my hand,
Which she steadies with her
On her satin peach knee.
In the evening bazaar
For a few rupees
An unknown girl is hennaing my hand
As a little air catches
My shadow stitched kameez
A peacock spreads its lines
Across my palm.
Colours leave the street
Float up in balloons.
Dummies in shop-fronts
Tilt and stare
With their western perms.

Banners for Miss India 1993

For curtain cloth

And sofa cloth

Canopy me.

I have new brown veins.

In the evening bazaar

Very deftly

An unknown girl

is hennaing my hand

I am clinging

To these firm peacock lines

Like people who cling

to sides of a train.

Now the furious streets

Are hushed.

I'll scrape off

The dry brown lines

Before I sleep,

Reveal soft as a snail trail

The amber bird beneath.

It will fade in a week.

When India appears and reappears

I'll lean across a country

With my hands outstretched

Longing for the unknown girl

In the neon bazaar.