Diwali in the HIV Ward

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She wears her festivals
on her ears, hair, arms, on
gilded gold parrot cages dangling in crisp miniature
from earlobes, on freshly plucked jasmine buds in her hair
and a thin plume of its scent that formed a trail behind her,
in a magenta skirt, blouse, shiny with a silver *zari*:
and in the green-glass translucent bangles that drew me
and clinked every time she gesticulated.

She wears her inheritance, like her festivals
on her ears, hair, arms, on
the scarab-like lesions above silver anklets,
on her neck a scaly black pendant,
on her reedy, hollow frame, in her blood
where tiny insects exploded off ballooned cells,
each other, multiplied, grew legs, and stomped
deep through her veins, leaving a swath of destruction.

Come again, she asks. Yes
I answer. But playing a fast reel in my mind
are questions I cannot ask;
What if,
in the morning, the rickety, metal bed with peeling
white paint, is stripped of sheets clean
—the blotched brown rubber mattress showing
at angles, and the floor below being swept?
Or worse, is occupied
by another little girl, who on her ears, hair, arms
also wears her inheritance?

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