

2 Must We Go?

To place myself in my grandmother's shoes,
her chappals paired in the bedroom cool,

the mahogany dark,
lying by the prayer mat, facing Mecca,

awaiting her smaller, browner feet –
to plant my feet there,

or here, in a line of words
securely on the page.

*

To move house is one thing.
To leave your country another.

But to leave it
because it no longer wishes

to attach itself to you,
doesn't at all desire

to be the ground under your feet,
to feel compelled to leave it

for one which you had always known
to be a corner of your own,

but which has startlingly, deliriously
become another –

and which beckons
as if it had a hand to beckon with,

and which calls you,
as if a country had a single voice.

*

Amma they demand,
her protesting children.
Amma, must we go?

*Can I take my cricket bat to Pakistan?
And what about school?*

Only Athar has no questions.

*

The cards had been dealt
by a firm, if not a sure hand.

Ludhiana to India. West Punjab to Pakistan.
East Bengal to Pakistan.

Amritsar to India. Srinagar to India.
Lahore to Pakistan.

The Empire held fast like a sheet –
and shook out.

*

Doubt was an awkward thing –
there was no room for doubt.

At the margin of the great convulsion
her small household convulsed.

*

Pakistan was what it amounted to

Pakistan.

In the salting of lassi
in the knuckledents in dough

Pakistan.

In the pleating of a sari
in the sweeping of the hallway

Pakistan.

Between the question and its answer

Pakistan.

*

Rumours flew on the wind –
Nails of steel on the wind –

Infidels! Rapists!

Honour was the jewel,
not mother, sister.

To save their honour

bonfires were lit
and the women burned.

*They asked me to do this,
but I ran away.
I couldn't set fire to my sister.*

To protect their honour

ninety women jumped into a well.
There wasn't enough water
to drown them all.

*

And the rumour of a rumour

And the acting on a rumour

And the kernel of a rumour

*

The wisdom was to go.

Departure –
the desperate,

the unimaginable thing

*

Already

her neighbourhood was emptying –
whole families had stolen away.

Which way to face?

She wrote to her son in England:

*I pray for our safety at this time.
We will go by bus to Lahore.*

3 Better By Far

By bus?

Better by far a magic carpet,
finely knotted, richer

than blood, broad enough
to keep the family together,

islanded, apart
from every danger,

journeying smoothly
across the unsegmented sky –

not in the cauldron of summer,
but in the fresher feel

of the last of winter,
the lucid mornings,

the greeny tinge
of the evening air,

Nehru to wave them on
and Jinnah to welcome them –

my grandmother, her pots and pans,
her lamp close by,

her parcels of layered clothes,
like mattresses,