

2 Must We Go?

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

the mahogany dark,
lying on 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
~~as~~ to be a corner of your own,

but has become swiftly and deliriously
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 clamouring children.
Amma, must we go?

*Can I take my cricket bat to Pakistan?
Will we go to school?*

And what about school?

Only Athar had no questions.

My grandfather, himself a doctor,
had travelled far and wide,

taken him to the best physicians,
but none could cure his son.

*

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

Ludhiana to India. West Punjab to Pakistan.
West 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 *downy*
in the sweeping of the porch
Pakistan.

Between the question and its answer
Pakistan.

*

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

Honour was the jewel,
not mother, sister.

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.*

*

*90 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 noble,
fruitful,
hopeful 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.*