

The Night She Left Lahore

The night she left Lahore
an unstained moon
had risen over the compound walls,
Soon it simplified the sleepless city
plating dross, grime and rage
to the patina of silver. War-cries rolled
across the hot plain. Indians coagulated
into their religions - Hindu, Muslim, Sikh.
A new country spawned
its amoebic shape within the map: Pakistan.
“Hurry up,” whispered her husband.
“They’re coming.” No time to mention
the loveliness of the moon.

She reached for his turbans, stiff with starch
upon the clothesline, folded them
by lantern light. Locked them into trunks.
Helped him carry them into the go-down.
He loaded the guns, gave one to each
young man he’d mustered. And when
they stood ready, one at each window,
some crowded on the roof, he shouted
“Jaldi kar, jaldi!” when he saw
the dark mass of the mob coming.

She needed to clean the ashes
from the clay oven. Wanted to sweep
the veranda clean. But she ran
to collect a little money, jewellery,
tied it in a bundle.

In the lane, the horse pulled
at his traces, snorting
in the blood-scented dark.
Her husband gave the reins
to their eldest son, helped her in.
“I’ll send for you,” he promised,
as soon as it’s safe again.”

She needed to wash her hands,
needed to pray. Perhaps
she should have tucked
more valuables out of sight
wiped the ground one last time,

lovingly, but she remained
breathless in the loaded cart.

He brought their little ones. Dream-laden,
their weight moved from his shoulder
to her lap. His hand brushed her cheek,
his palm cupped each child's face.
He flicked the reins
in their son's hands.

So she left, and he stayed
And the border
came down.

More than fifty years later,
she wonders, would they not
be together now, had she lingered
to wash her hands
had she lingered to pray
If she had found some corner
of the veranda to clean again.

But then, the children.

From leaden nights
on her charpai in Delhi
she lofts her question
across the border to Lahore:
“What shall I do now
with the loveliness of the moon?”

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