

PARTITIONS



Amit Majmudar



ONE WORLD

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This is the sadhu. He is standing in a river. The water is moving, but the reflection he casts is still. His legs are thin enough to be a crane's. Like a crane's, his identity switches between the reflection and the body. He doesn't think of either one as home. His hand clutches the ragged saffron high, under the water his ankles like a child's wrists. He tucks the dhoti tight for bath and prayer.

Look closer. The river is sinking underground. It leaves him standing in a swathe of dust. A grain of rice falls from his tilak like a fossilized pupa. The red of the tilak scabs and flakes from his forehead. The saffron dhoti bleeds white.

The earth has shifted, too. He isn't facing the sun any more. The sun hangs skewed to him, off to the side. It has wandered away from his morning ritual.

The scene is still changing. A new river lays itself under him. Train tracks. On the tracks, trains. On the trains, people and their possessions. White turbans in a row, bowed in exhaustion. Long staffs that once clicked wealths of cattle out to graze. Lumpy bundles in widow-white sarees, knotted at the top.

The trains are snippets of river, in motion even as they stand here in the station, drowning, taking on people as if taking on water. Every living body is a tiny collection of flow. Blood, lymph, ions, breath. The trains are standing, but the sadhu knows the stillness is illusory. A river sweeps the trains, and everyone in them and on them, down and under. The outriders lock fists on the rust-pocked metal of the handrails. The

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children are stowed in baggage-niches, chins to knees, heels to buttocks, wrists to shoulders—everything that can bend, bent. The women hold their sarees across their faces to protect against the pestilence of gazes. The sadhu, too, is here, reborn in the body of a nameless villager torn up by the roots and planted on the steel roof of a train, staring motionless at three smudges of motionless black smoke in the distance.

They are all in the river. The year is 1947. The river is heading for the falls.

• One •

Connections

I know only three people in this infinitude. Two boys: one in a dark blue kurta with tiny golden beads embroidered around the collar, the other in a bright green one with silver beads, matching. Keshav is wearing the blue, Shankar the green. These are their favourite colours and these their best, most precious clothes, worn only twice, both times to weddings in Lahore.

I know these boys and the woman whose hands they are holding. A few hours ago, when the stray dogs took up a brittle, pulse-steady barking throughout the city, she gave the boys the choice, the trunk thrown open on the cot. The clothes they wore were the only clothes they could take. They didn't hesitate, and she didn't protest, simply tugged off their shirts and dropped the silk over their still-raised arms. It didn't occur to her that they might attract attention, that people might think she carries more than just a little barrel of hundred-rupee notes stuffed in her bodice. It doesn't matter. The dust of the journey will make sure the clothes don't attract attention for long. Besides, she wanted to give them this choice, this exercise of will. A small defiance to tide them over during the coming helplessness.

I know that cot, too, where the trunk still lies open. Its canvas rectangle. Two shawls and three blankets, and still I shivered on it.

There is no way she can manage even a small trunk. What with both boys to hold, she will need her hands free. All she carries are the rupees. Not even the lingam from the temple in the bedroom

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corner. They have to leave. This is Pakistan now. The land meant to be 'pak', pure. Pure of them. She knows the train is going to Delhi, and Delhi is better than where they are, but she has no one in Delhi, or anywhere. That is part of why I love her, that quality of being found, of having no origin. Portuguese missionaries had discovered her sleeping naked in a furrow, her body strangely scarred, no language on her tongue. Neither Muslim nor Hindu nor Sikh: some fourth natural creature sprung from the soil. All she had was me. So young, and still their teachings never really took. She swept the church and prayed where she was pointed. She was fifteen years old when I strolled past her and stopped and, trembling, put on my spectacles. The immense church bell was swinging over our heads. I found her, she found me. I had been alone eleven years by then, a widower, on good terms with my family and my late wife's, prosperous in my father's practice (I hadn't even got a new nameplate; his name was still over the office door). All until my second, shameful, marriage to a girl without family, without caste.

That woman is my wife, and those boys are my twins. Was my wife; were my twins. I am no longer with them. They lost me when the boys were a year and a half. But if I had a throat, and breath to push through that throat, and vocal cords to pinch close and shirr, I know what I would say.

I am here.

I am here because I am everywhere. I say I know only three people on the platform and in the trains, but in a sense I know all of them.

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In a passenger compartment, a woman is peeling an orange into a handkerchief. All this desperation around her, but she and hers are safely aboard, and tiny drops of juice spray as the rind rips off white, tenaciously fibrous. Through the smell of urine and smoke and stale metal and sweat comes this wayward note of orange. In this suffocation of bodies, it smells like an open field and wind. All the faces turn to the glow in her lap. Mine does, too.

I dwell in that woman's eyes for a while. I rest there and use her calm to collect myself, though I cannot taste the orange with her. A sandal interrupts my meditation, braced on the bars across the open window. The foot is dusty, its big toenail black and still throbbing from something dropped during the frantic move. The sandal pauses and angles slightly as the man's weight is placed on it. A crust of dried mud flakes off into the train. It's an unexpected sight to see a foot like that, at face level, but the usual relationships among bodies do not hold any more, underwater as we are. I slide through the window, outside again. All down the train, people are clambering from the platform directly on to the train roof. Sandals open off their feet and close again, soles worn thin, dark, smooth at the heel. Like the dark sinkholes of shadow around their eyes. When they look down, I can't see their eyes at all. All I see are holes in a skull.

A man on the roof waves for a clearing. No one moves. Once his brother forces his way up, though, accommodation is made. Bodies squeezed tight squeeze tighter, fine adjustments of the buttocks and tugs of bundles, half-inch shuffles and scoots. Space forms where no space was. Below, two more brothers have lifted a makeshift carriage, a wooden plank around which the corners of

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a torn green saree have been knotted. A figure entirely swallowed in it swings gently. You see only the small curve of the back. The brothers grab the plank ends and lift this delicate human cargo safely on to the roof. The plank is set down and the knots picked free.

The people around them expected a pregnant girl or crippled child. It turns out to be their grandfather, toothless, three days unshaven, staring at the sky through sky-coloured cataracts. No movement, and for a while no blink. The others stare. They are looking for life. Still no blink. Finally the mouth closes. The throat rises and falls. The mouth opens. The people are satisfied; to have made room for the dying is tolerable. Just not for the dead.

I turn. A child is crying atop luggage stacked six high, set there as if to mark these goods claimed. He cannot get down. So many people, but he is on an island. I am the only one who hears the siren of his loneliness. I cannot comfort him. I may be everywhere, but I, too, don't know where his family is. In places such as these, I am almost blind. Shapes of bodies smear through time and overlap. I can trace glowing, individual strands only outside the station. An occasional pensive still life delineates itself, like a figure posing for a daguerreotype against a moving train—the place where a body has paused long enough to despair, or sleep, or hold a wound.

Only a fraction of my attention roams among the strangers at the station. I stay close to my wife and boys because I know what is going to happen here. This far ahead, at least, I can see. Not all the way to the end, because the end is never promised. But I can sense the danger a few minutes in advance, the way animals

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sense earthquakes, and I need to be here for it. Not that I can keep those tiny hands in hers or elbow apart this crowd before it panics. I cannot make space for them because I occupy none myself. Already the undertow exerts itself, invisible in these human waters but strong: rumour.

This will be the last train out. The tracks have been ripped up west of here. There are no more trains.

I cannot pinpoint where it starts. The idea springs up all around me at once, a hundred staccato thoughts and impressions. Rage at the sight of someone's back. *This is the last chance. Move. Let us on.* A bony hand clutches a rail. Elbows dig along a shoulder blade or spine. *This is the last one.* Shoulders brace low and slam a stranger's side or back. A woman screams. *The Mussulmaans are going to find us and hack us apart.* A turban is slapped on to the tracks. It unrolls under the train, an unbearable outrage. *You know what they did in Rawalpindi. It's going to happen here.*

Steam hisses. Shouts, everywhere. Inside the compartments, on the train car roofs. Loudest of all on the platform, where a tidal surge of bodies flattens chests against the steel, and more bodies drive themselves up the clogged steps.

Get on. Get out of the way. Move.

They are only a few steps from boarding when the panic and crush begins. The boys feel her yank them forwards. The force of surrounding bodies as much as her embrace holds them flush, their faces almost in her neck. Shankar and Keshav cling with both arms and legs. They are older now, boys, and her body is almost hidden under them. She is slight but she is strong. Her head is low. She uses the pushing behind her to weave through and up. She gets

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a foot on a step, loses it, gets it again and turns. A smaller child is handed bodily over their heads into the compartment, floating above the panic. He looks around curiously from his elevation. Relatives receive him inside. *My boys deserve that*, she thinks. They do. They deserve to float above this into familiar hands. She cannot get through the entry with the boys at her sides, so she slides them forwards and releases them. They want to help. Shankar pushes off the rail beside the entry, his hand feeling someone else's knuckles. Keshav pulls on the nearest shoulder for leverage, as if it were something inanimate. Another hiss. The train inches to the left. She has both feet on the steps. For a moment they are out of her arms, for a moment she has a feeling of liberation and future. She will hang here the whole journey if she has to, her boys on her neck.

This is when a hand I cannot slap down, whose fingers I cannot break, grabs her braid and pulls. Her head jerks back, and her body lifts.

Keshav shouts. The crowd closes over. The boys are submerged. They swim up again and see the narrow rectangle of platform has shifted. A new and unfamiliar crowd fights to board the quickening train. They are the only ones trying to get off. This is just as hard as trying to get on, maybe harder. They clamber on shifting shoulders. The people are packed that thick. The platform moves more quickly. Soon there will be dust and bare tracks. They do not have to speak to communicate what to do. The men who are hit or accidentally kicked by my boys shout and twist their faces as if this were the unacceptable outrage of the day. Finally, my boys approach the open air.

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What happens next happens clumsily. They force themselves downwards, pushing off the ceiling, and a few of the outriders shout and squeeze aside to let them through—to resist would be to risk being pushed off. The boys are small but wiry, full of frantic energy and hard boy bones. If the platform had been three feet longer, both might have landed with a few deep scrapes, but the platform vanishes just as they make it out. Keshav just makes it: forearms, stomach and right cheek scraped, and a cut on his scalp. Shankar, though, falls just a second later. He clips the platform on his way down, and it flips him bodily. He hits the tracks, tumbles and skids a few feet, and comes to a stop in the train's monstrous shadow. The sun flashes between the cars.

The instant they fall, I sense another fall, this one gentler, on the other side of the new border. Doctor Ibrahim Masud. He is tall and thin, his chest, in his slept-in white undershirt, no broader than a boy's. Half his face is covered in shaving cream. The other half is freshly shaven, the razor drawn down the cheek, swished in the basin, tapped, brought up again.

I go back and see the way his fingers flared off the razor as it approached his skin. Thumb and forefinger took over for the delicate work. His earlobes dripped, and still drip, from the wake-up splashes that preceded the shave. Half his face finished, he sniffed the air, called the name Dara ji twice, and, hearing no answer from his servant, investigated. The rooms were hazy. (For Masud to notice smoke, it would have to fill the house; he tends not to sense

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his environment, his attention a flashlight, not a lamp.) *Something*, he thought, *must be burning in the street*. Trash was usually burned at dusk to disperse mosquitoes, or at dawn to warm hands. This hour, eight in the morning, was wrong. Two milk bottles, on the steps beside his shoes, had not been taken in. He wandered on to the stones barefoot, bewildered.

Hot wind, as though a furnace had swung open. Ash flecks flitted on to his raised wrist. He heard a crack and looked up.

Now, backing away from his house through its cast-iron front gate, he trips on his own feet. He hits the ground at the same instant my twins, hundreds of miles west of him, land on the tracks.

Get up, boys. Get up.

Car after car sways past Shankar, brisk now. Face-like masks see him and assume he is dead—a feature of the landscape, indifferent, plant-like. Keshav, bleeding, pushes himself off the platform to retrieve his brother. To many, the sight of the boys brings up a surge of relief and gratitude—this is the kind of horror they are escaping. Then the train is gone, its rocking soft in the distance. Daylight again, and the uproar on the platform.

I feel Shankar's three broken ribs and the cut on Keshav's head. I marvel that Shankar's collarbone hasn't broken where he hit the edge of the platform. They cannot feel my hands. How will they travel? I have foreseen their courses, but I never saw these details, never knew they would be in pain, Shankar stabbed by every breath, Keshav's skin grated raw, no gauze, no plaster.

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With Keshav's help, Shankar gets up, holding the side where he has broken his ribs. The pain is the worst he has felt since the time he sprained his ankle last year, but he is not crying. If he saw his mother, he would start; there would be someone to cry to. Right now he and Keshav are too scared. They hold each other, saying nothing as they look for a way back on to the platform. Keshav blinks and tastes his own blood. Shankar, seeing the cut on Keshav's scalp and the hair wet over it, daubs his brother's face with his sleeve. The pain doesn't stop him. It is an older brother's gesture, though he is actually only a minute older. An older brother's gesture, or a father's. The silk soaks dark.

Their faces are identical, but their bodies aren't. Shankar grows into Keshav's hand-me-downs. Other kids tease Keshav about stealing his brother's food, even though Shankar has the bigger appetite.

It wasn't always so. I remember when Shankar was too weak to suck. It was a cycle that started from his first hour. Weakness kept him from sucking, which made him weaker, which kept him from sucking. When his arm worked loose from the swaddling, it hung down. The skin of it slid loosely under the thumb, no baby fat to swell it taut. I could not bear to see the arm dangle like that. I would tuck it up like a broken part and fix the cloth. His palms, his lips, the skin around his lips, and the soles of his feet deepened in colour as he cried. Blue, bluish purple, purple. His colour returned to grey only after his mewl slackened into sleep.

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I carried him a lot those first few weeks. The kohl Sonia used to rim his eyes made him look sicker. His brother slept, pink and blissful, after the breast or a bath and rubdown with coconut oil. Shankar was a minute older, but everything gave him a look of age. He had a full head of silken womb hair, while Keshav was baby-bald, just fuzz. What little milk Shankar could get down, he didn't keep down. His oval face hungered from the hour he was born and drew no succour from breath or breast. The shape of his face was another thing that made him look older, especially next to his brother's, a perfect circle broken only by the bulges of his cheeks. I shook my head at the contrast of destinies. By week three, Keshav had put down roots in life and taken. Shankar fitted on Sonia's palm and upturned wrist. She held his sleep like a beggar showing the empty bowl.

My marriage to Sonia had contaminated me, in the opinion of my Brahmin family. So my children by that marriage were likewise impure. Because Sonia had no kin of her own, no one had been present for the birth. My mother had not come, or had been forbidden to come.

I still believed they would all soften, my father included. I half expected, whenever I answered the door, to see them as they had been before, before my contamination. After all, hadn't my father incurred contamination, too, when young, by sailing overseas to the Royal College to study? And by seeing, in his

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office, patients of every caste and no caste at all, cupping their cracked heels to test the sprain, or kneading their abdomens to find the culprit organ? His choices had been controversial in his day, for the son of a Brahmin family as high and orthodox as his. My grandfather forgave him only because he was second-born. The elder son had memorized the slokas and become a pandit like his forefathers; everything was not lost. A pandit and a ceremony purified my father when he came back. At the train station—this train station—he arrived all those years ago, shoulders sloping asymmetrically, a light bag on the left, on the right a new trunk, filled entirely, it turned out, not with gifts from England but with textbooks. He wore English trousers beside the Vedic fire. Still, certain ideas of blood and caste had never left him. They were objective realities to him, like the height or weight of a person. I know because that is how I thought of it, too, until Sonia.

No quantity of rice or Sanskrit could exculpate me. My betrayal was total, and my contamination was total, my sons' as well. What my family would have thought a divine blessing in other circumstances—twin sons, like Shri Rama himself—now struck them as animal fertility, slum fertility. What caste but the lowest, they reasoned, would have originated my orphan wife? The churches thrived off the people Gandhi was calling 'harijans'. Untouchables: everyone knew what they did to girl children they

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didn't want—killed them, abandoned them, or sold them to the Christians, who were always in the market for souls.

My elder sister Damyanti visited us once that first hectic month, a shawl over her head and her bag tucked protectively under her arm. It must not have been easy for her to sneak out to us. We had moved to a poorer—that is, Muslim—part of town. The neighbourhood's very name, Nizam Chowk, had a harsh, foreign, faraway sound in our house. It could have been on the other side of a border. Yet she arrived to name my boys. For weeks, Damyanti had tasted names like the sweets a caterer lays out to court the bride's parents. When she learned they were twins, the rules changed, and she tested rhyming names, alliterative names. The meanings, too, were important to her. She could not bear the frivolous Leena-Meena of her best friend's twins. So she settled on naming my boys after Shiva and Vishnu, the destroyer and the sustainer: Shankar and Keshav.

The boys were napping when she arrived at our door, shook off her sandals, and started crying softly. I peeled back the blankets to show her. The showing didn't last long enough, with the swaddling and the caps, for her to see the difference.

She couldn't carry out a full naming ceremony with guests and a pandit, but she did take out a tin that had a single piece of my mother's gajjar mithai. Sonia hovered in the kitchen, and my sister didn't call her over. Eventually Sonia did come out with a tray and a glass of water, but Damyanti declined it. When Sonia was back in the kitchen, my sister looked at me and whispered, 'But I am thirsty, Roshan bhaiyya.' I knew what she meant. I went into the kitchen and, without looking at Sonia, ladled a glass with my

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own Brahmin hands and brought it to Damyanti. I stood halfway between the two women, Sonia's retiring shadow and Damyanti with her nose turned up, pouring the water into her mouth without letting her lips touch the rim. Between my own two lives. All this she did in my home, to my wife, with a perfect sense of justification—but when she told me the names she had chosen for my sons, I bit the sweet she held out to me and thanked her. Sonia, too, accepted them. This was how newborns were properly named, and I was grateful my twins' names originated where they should have, with the father's sister. It was as though she had salvaged something of their birthright and delivered it.

Keshav started crying and woke Shankar, who had cried longer and so fallen asleep later. Damyanti asked to hold them. She wanted to hold them at the same time. When she had them both in her arms, the first thing she said was, concernedly, looking down at Shankar, 'Isn't she *feeding* this one?'

Sonia sobbed, just once, from inside the kitchen. It did feel, in those early days, like her own failure. She had no one to tell her otherwise, not even me. I won't pretend to some kind of enlightenment back then. I never really understood how she felt—having become a mother without any example of motherhood to refer to, or any older woman's counsel. I expected the know-how to come physiologically, with the milk to the breasts.

So when I took Shankar away from Damyanti, I did it to defend him, not Sonia. To own my firstborn son—not my wife—in proud, defiant love. Of Sonia I was still, in some deep part of myself, ashamed. But Shankar, I sensed, was the victim of some higher malice, and this malice was enough, it was all a creature

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could bear. I would protect him against every human addition to that malice because I had declared the suffering he was born to suffering enough. So I took him away and held him close, as though my sister had wounded him. Sonia, emboldened, took Keshav back. The boys were screaming now, our agitation contagious. Damyanti gathered her shawl about her, shut the empty tin and put it in her bag, and left. Her sandals clacked down the stairs and vanished over the dust.

Between my two boys, I could have guessed Shankar would get the broken ribs, the worse injury decided by a matter of inches. This is one more piece of bad luck for him I will never understand, no matter how much I read about karma.

It was all I could do, when he was a newborn, to throw my arm out in time and block the curtain rod that fell, without provocation, across his cradle. Later, when he started walking, the house had every corner and edge out for him like knives. I knew the difference because his brother had started walking two months before. I remember Shankar walking into a ball and chasing it, laughing every time it skipped away from him. A scorpion darted from behind our framed portrait of Bala Krishna, and I had to scoop Shankar off the ground.

Even after my sickness started, I was always on the lookout. His face had a strangely grown-up, serious, almost worried look. He sensed the same malice in the cosmos that I did. But when he laughed, I saw his mother's eyes in my own face, eyes that

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narrowed and curved into darkly shining arches, and I knew the deal I had made with the Gods was being honoured.

The razor drops from Masud's hand. He has forgotten his half-mask of shaving cream and overnight stubble. He looks down. His foot is bleeding, the cut straight, oblique, shallow. The razor is close by his foot, in the dust. He lifts his foot and puts it down, not knowing what to do. A weak gesture, as if to show someone the calamity. The flames have used treetops as a bridge on to his terrace. No one is there to see it with him. The other houses are empty; they had means, and they left in time.

Standing beside him, I stare at the smoke over his house. Shapes of smoke curl, hold, and release: a woman is underwater, her hair, undone, floating vertically; a man's face turns aside and splits down the middle; two children embrace until parted by a wind. Blacker, thicker smoke rises and curls into itself. Everything is prefigured. Masud sees smoke. I see what I have foreseen.

It's not that Masud doesn't know what has happened to the Punjab. He owns a radio—not a good one, but the radio would have to break completely before it occurred to him to replace it. Even if he didn't, there was no way not to hear, if nothing else then at the clinic. The BBC has been discussing the issue for some time. He knew this great event was coming, but he understood the new border only in the abstract, an understanding as simple as a mapmaker's or an Englishman's. A line demarcating jurisdictions,

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not identities. He cannot hear the radio's static for what it is—the border's cupful of acid, flung hissing into the soil.

Congress and the Muslim League had pounded their tables and made their speeches. Why should it alter his routine? His day has been unalterable for years now. His life takes place almost entirely inside the clinic. He gets in at nine in the morning and stays twelve, sometimes fourteen hours, even though he could leave earlier. His stammer and intense shyness keep him from easily navigating any interaction more complicated than question, examine, advise. The rare times he goes out to buy toothpaste or tea, he points with his middle finger, furrows his brow, nods or shakes his head in great, exaggerated rolls and jerks. He is pious, on the surface of it, but his prayers are merely one component of a larger, daily routine. The mind stays quite blank.

Masud is an innocent. He has seen these people, Sikh, Muslim, Hindu, only as parents worried about their suffering children. Vulnerability, compassion, devastation. They have waited to see him shoulder to shoulder, drawn to his name from nearby villages. The children from the villages are always far gone before they get to him, their abscesses the size of his fist, diphtheria swelling their necks like a sounding toad's. He has always seen the parents mixed democratically along the overcrowded clinic corridors, backs chalked with whitewash where they sat leaning against the walls, stroking the meek, sleepless heads in their laps.

A turn of his head, then his whole body, shows him the extent of what has happened overnight. His block is not the only one burning. The city is bleeding smoke into the sky. It's taken the smell of smoke to prove to him he isn't Ibrahim Masud to any-

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one but himself now. His profession, too, means nothing. *Muslim*: that's suddenly the defining thing about him. The only detail, everything around it effaced. When did this happen? The official line is that he can stay if he wants or leave for Pakistan. His choice—stay here in India or shift west. Just over there. Like crossing the aisle on a bus.

Masud hurries inside, skipping once from the pain in his foot. The smoke stings his eyes. His cough sounds at different points in the haze. Trousers, shirt, money, glasses, shoes. These are to be expected. But he also takes his black doctor's bag. As though he could let the house burn but must not be late to work. He will go to the clinic because the clinic is the only place he feels safe. It feels protected from further suffering because of the suffering already there. Violence would not trespass on the dominion of illness.

His bicycle seat and pedals fit themselves as always to his body, and he cycles, his speed no different than on any other day, down his usual route. The only difference is that no one is out, and broken glass and smoking trash heaps litter the street. His pulse has just gone calm, given this pacifier of familiarity, when he rounds a corner to find vultures. At least three dozen of them crowd the street and rooftops. At regular intervals down the street, they pose atop the street lamps the British put up fifteen years earlier. Some groom themselves, others meditate. The death here is old. This convocation is thick as seagulls along a shore.

A dog trots past and weaves among the bodies as though to show him a way through. One shoe on the ground, one on a pedal, Masud looks back, around the corner, wondering about the smoking heaps he has passed. He gets off and walks the bicycle.

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His progress is slow up a crooked runnel of limbs and wings. The chain clicks. He keeps his eyes on the passage between the bodies, not the bodies themselves. The vultures poke, shuffle to a more suitable angle, and poke again. He thumbs his bell. They make way, a fluster of wings, a reluctant hop. He thumbs the bell twice more, turning the handlebars, stepping carefully. The road was never so long. It takes whole minutes of walking this way before he can get back on and pedal. He stands on the pedals because everything feels uphill now. At last, he stops before his clinic. He gets off and holds the seat a while, looking. Finally his hand slides to his side, and the bicycle tips away from him. He lets it fall. The rear wheel turns slowly in the air.

This is the clinic where, years earlier, we had travelled with the boys. Dr Ibrahim Masud had a reputation that had travelled as far east as Delhi and as far west as our own city. Sonia's midwife, Haleema bibi, who had over several visits fallen into the role of grandmother and counsellor, spoke of his knowledge with the same voice such women use when speaking of their superstitions. He alone, she declared, running her ancient hand over Shankar's head, he alone would *know*.

I had heard of him from my own father, years ago. In his final year in London, my father had been introduced to this young Punjabi who was just starting his studies. Masud was, at that time, only seventeen. My father had expected to take him for a fitting at the nearest tailor's and help him find Indian food; to warn him

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which instructors would be hostile to him, which ones indifferent; to speak their warm home language after a long day of anatomy Latin.

Yet Ibrahim needed no companionship and felt, it seemed, no homesickness at all. He had got the year's textbooks while still in India and was able to recite them rocking back and forth, as religious students did the Qur'an. A recording, impossible to converse with. The chapter on chronic pulmonary phthisis from Eustace Smith's *On the Wasting Diseases of Infants and Children* tumbled out fluently. Ibrahim's own name, though, came out 'Ib ib ibbbbb', like uncontrollable hiccups.

Years later, my father came across Masud's study of plague deaths in the Amritsar and Kasur districts, published in the *Indian Medical Archives*. It was the writing my father would have expected of him: meticulous accounting, like a census-taker's, but no interpretation, no commentary. Data without an idea, more tables than words.

I bring it before my vanished eyes and read. This is how Masud's mind worked. Something verbal, perceptual, emotional was missing. For all that, his mind contained his field. The two best-known paediatricians in Lahore shook their heads over Shankar and pointed us east to Masud.

The boys slept well on the train. Our arms and the compartment embedded rocking motion inside rocking motion. We took the same Amritsar-bound train, at the same hour, that Sonia and the

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boys would try to take years later. They would be separated from their mother only four compartments over.

At one point, the boys woke and started crying. It wasn't that one woke up the other. Rather both boys threw out their arms as if dropped from a height and couldn't be consoled for some minutes. Finally the breast calmed Keshav, who drank his fill and drowsed with his mouth in place. Sonia and I traded babies so she could try the same with Shankar, who sucked only a few seconds, burrowed towards her, and fell asleep. I wonder if the moment they woke was the moment we crossed the as yet undrawn border between Pakistan and India. Did they sense something seismic there, a future rift in the earth, the way animals get skittish before a coming earthquake? Did they sense the fault line?

I can still picture Masud warming the cup of his stethoscope in his hand as he stroked my son's head. The doctor had trouble speaking, it was true, but only to adults. Around the children, his stammer eased. Sentences, short ones, came out whole, two sometimes in succession. And so the child became an intermediary through whom he could communicate to the parents, even if the child were Shankar's age. He spoke facing Shankar, addressed his questions as if directly to the infant in my arms, and I answered—how often his skin went blue, whether he took small feedings frequently or none at all, whether his twin had any such troubles. When Masud brought up the stethoscope earpieces, I noticed the gentle fringe of hairs along his ears. He listened using the bell and the flat to

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Shankar's chest and back. My boy propped in my lap, with the blankets and clothes undone, I realized anew how tiny he was. Even the child-sized stethoscope, its bell no bigger than a coin, seemed large against his ribs. Sonia must have seen him bare like this every day when soaping, rinsing, drying him, a droplet of oil in the palm enough to rub him down. I closed my eyes and felt relieved, when his examiner sat back, to wrap his starvation-thin body.

'Your pappa is a doctor, hm?' Masud said.

I nodded.

He looked at Sonia and raised a finger to tell her to wait there with Keshav. Then he led me, Shankar in my arms, into his personal office, and said in English, pointing at his heart, 'Blue disease.' He tilted books down from a wall of them, books so thick the highest ones had to be caught on the other palm.

Diagrams of the heart and great vessels showed the red aorta curving through the chest and sprouting branches, and the pulmonary artery, painted blue, splitting in half. He angled his fist against his chest and began to explain, the fingers of one hand splaying, the fist opening and closing. His speech became fluent as he quoted the texts laid out before me. I nodded, but I was only pretending to understand, the way I used to as a boy beside my mathematics tutor—so much passion, so much desire to communicate, that I felt ashamed it should be wasted. I wanted to reward the trouble taken over me.

I understand it now, of course. I can see inside Shankar's chest, past the three intensely painful broken ribs. I see the narrowed corridor through which his blood must pass on the way to his

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lungs, and the tiny new vessels his heart has desperately let down, like banyan shoots, to get the blood where it has to go. I lay open the book of his chest.

Back then, in spite of my own medical training, I understood only that something deep and unreachable in my son was flawed. I am not sure if Masud had finished speaking when I asked, 'Is he going to live?'

Masud did what he did whenever the answer was no. He showed the backs of his hands, as if in namaaz, and looked at the sky. In that moment, when he referred me to heaven because there was no hope on earth, the bargain was made. In my heart, without the formality of prayer or the striking of a temple bell, I offered all I had. What was surrendered would be collected, and what was granted would be distributed, very slowly, over the next year. But at that moment, imperceptibly, my son began to thrive, and I let in my sickness unto death.

Masud's hands are now crossed over his mouth. Broken glassware, forceps, two steel basins and several boiled-sterile scalpels clutter the stone walk. They have been thrown from the room upstairs where he lances abscesses and extracts splinters. He limps inside, his left shoe soggy with blood from the razor cut. It doesn't occur to him to check if the people who did this have left or not. On his way upstairs, he passes a sink and mirror and sees shreds of shaving cream still bearding one cheek. An intense flush goes over his

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face and neck. The world has gone to havoc, but his person must not surrender to it. The taps still work. Carefully, in the ruins of his clinic, he tries to finish his interrupted shave. A scalpel off the floor serves as razor, not a kind edge to use. Two fat drops of blood spot the sink. He stops and splashes off the shaving cream. So his face remains divided, one side clean-shaven, shadow on the other.

Upstairs, a tall steel cabinet's linens and towels have been scooped on to the floor and kicked about—no other quick way to vandalize towels. A crowbar threads the handles, paint scraped bright from the rough force-through. Inside that cabinet, a muffled voice.

'33 Firoza Bagh,' it sobs. '33 Firoza Bagh, just past the Ganesh temple . . . please let me out . . .'

The address is Masud's own. He recognizes, after a moment, the voice of Gul Singh, his errand-runner and gatekeeper. He draws out the crowbar. Gul Singh has been stuffed into the bottom shelf, half his size; his body, once it writhes on to the floor, seems to expand. 'I'll tell you, my brothers, I'll tell you where . . .'

His face turns up to see Masud through eyes nearly swollen shut. He stops speaking and hangs his head.

Masud kneels. Gul Singh raises his head.

'I didn't tell them, doctor sahib. I swear.'

He is telling the truth. The proof colours his cheek and eyes black-purple. Locked in the cabinet, he grew scared they would set fire to the clinic—so he gave up the address, but after they left. He is ashamed nonetheless, and Masud cannot bring him to his feet.

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‘You have to go,’ moans Gul Singh. ‘This city isn’t safe for you.’

Masud gestures at the room. ‘This? This?’

Gul Singh explains how it is the same all over the city, every Muslim shopfront a blown-in cavity of ash, flanked by intact Hindu or Sikh shops. Small photographs of Sikh women mutilated in Rawalpindi pass from hand to hand. Their naked backs or foreheads have been scrawled upon like the walls of a demolished gurdwara: *Aslam Khan ki biwi*. ‘Wife’ of Aslam Khan. The group that came through looking for the rich Mussulmaan doctor spared Gul Singh because of his kes and kara, but loyal silence earned him fists to the face. He knew two of the boys—Sukhdev Kang’s sons, though they didn’t admit to knowing him. They are pious sons of a pious father, and, for all his personal loyalty to Dr Masud, there is a part of Gul Singh, too, that believes what is happening is necessary. Some killing must be done. It is a form of communication, the only kind that can cross the partitions between this country and its neighbour, between this world and the next. Their enemies must hear the deaths, and know fear; their dead must hear the deaths, and know rest. This Mussulmaan, this one, is a good man, thinks Gul Singh—this *one*. With his arms around the doctor sahib’s bony knees, he begs him to leave the city.

Outside, Masud’s bicycle is being tilted upright by three children. One gets on the ledge behind the pedaller, but the smallest child needs to sit in the basket. Masud’s black doctor’s bag, after being shaken out curiously, is tossed on the road. The children

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do not think of this as stealing. They figure whoever fell off the bicycle has long since been dragged away.

The city isn't safe for any Mussulmaan, Gul Singh is pleading, much less a rich doctor. Hadn't they come this morning especially for him? He must leave—but not on the trains. Gul has been hearing about it since last night, there are plans for the westbound trains. Gifts to Pakistan.

Masud bites his lip, looks around, and nods. Part of him wants to start putting everything back where it was, sweep up the glass, fold the towels, boil the scalpels clean. A broken window cuts his gaze as his gaze goes through it. It shows him the once-familiar street changed, the city itself changed, the country. He must go. He has nowhere to go. He must go.