

they think I am from Pakistan

Joginder would always wonder why he did not feel the world shake

He would always wonder why he did not feel the ground snap and crumble under him, why he did not see the dust rise as a line was carved into his home, why he did not hear the whispers of the screams that were to come, the feet that fled in their millions from the places they had been rooted all their lives

As he stood at the edge of his village and watched the horizon, he wondered if he could see the start of his country

The place that, until today, had spread over 300 000 miles in the opposite direction

That had cradled him from birth and rocked him into childhood

A place that lived under his eyelids

This was not that place anymore

This was a new place

A new word

A new name

He now stood in this new place, though he had not moved

A new country that he had never visited, even though he could trace the placement of every stone in his mind

Should it not look different? Should it not have a new sky? One that curled around new clouds? That was smattered with new stars at night? Should they speak a new language and be given new names to match?

This place where his body had been moulded from the soil underfoot, where his hair had grown from the seeds of its rain, and his teeth had been carved from the bark of its trees

A place that he was now a trespasser in

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Joginder would wonder how it came to be that he became a refugee whilst standing still

How he had never decided to leave his home, only watched it dissolve beneath him, and they were left scrabbling to grasp the country that moved, that shrunk and twisted until it did not hold them anymore

Suddenly he was running to catch up with it, reaching forward to grab at the invisible line that meant he was no longer welcome where he stood

When they made themselves vanish away in the night and forget where their home had been, when they hid and clutched at each other in the wrappings of darkness he wondered if his father meant to put down the warmth from his eye and pick up the fear that he replaced it with

When he felt his body shaking beside him, he wondered how long it would be until he saw his mother again

walking

He wondered how many miles make a border? How could they know where safety was if inches of dry land became oceans of intrusion

Uncertainty crawled around his ribcage, bled through his lungs, coated his tongue, curled up under his fingernails, feeding fear that clung to him in desperation

walking

He saw it in others

In the son tearfully begging his mother to eat while her gaze glossed over him

In the brother who cut his sister's silken lengths of hair short, covering her scalp with a promise of protection

The crying crying crying of babies being imploringly rocked

Whispers of

At least we aren't on the trains

walking

In the glances at the ground hoping to see some glimpse of solidity

Of reality

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And even when they had stumbled into the arms of safety, the uncertainty crept in behind them, poking needles into eyes that scratched him up and down, trying to unpick his story from the seams of his pockets, searching in his hair, in his trousers, in his name, endless bullets that named him a liar

who are you
where are you from
tell us
is your hair long
are you hiding it
who are your people
are you muslim
tell us
are you sikh
prove it
show us
take them down
show us
tell us
are you muslim
are you muslim
are you

The uncertainty

It hung over them all

Uncertain if the next train would hold the outward sigh of relief, or if only death would stroll out, carrying half of an unfinished journey

Uncertain how the girl tripped into the well, pulled out as a broken body with the ghosts of handprints on her thighs

Uncertain if the child the mother clung to with white-knuckled vacancy still had a heartbeat
Uncertain if the home that they had folded up and left behind would ever unfold again

Uncertain why it was folded at all

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And now, Joginder walks in unfamiliarity for a second time

He has left his chorus of safety and love yet again, walking away from the smiles of home, stepping instead onto straight lipped suspicion

This time by choice

His feet now fall in a place where he used to shiver in his bed, curling his body around the memory of sun

Where he watched his brother weep as he carefully cut the hair he had seeded and nurtured and grown all his life, twisting it around his fingers as he severed the roots he had flown across the sea with him, telling him

there is no work here for the turban man you know

Where he tried not to buckle under the weight of accusing eyeballs on his shoulders once again, filling his pockets with whispered hatred

Where he chose a house in front a park where the grass reminded him of Chandigarh, not Lahore
Where the names of his children that slip like silk off his tongue congeal in the throats of their neighbours

He walks in the rain of a different sky, the pavement reflecting the grey of his beard

When the command rings in the air, the jagged word that is flung at him from a boy who fancies himself a crusader of purity

He wonders

Have they have ever had to cross a wall they could not see, that dipped away from them in a spiteful dance for an audience far away

He wonders

How can they know who he is, and where he is from, when for so long he could not know for sure where his feet would land the next day

He wonders

How can they see the turban on my head and not understand that there was a time when it could change its shape to mean refuge or death

And he wonders

What they would say

If he poured the words that sat stagnant in his mind onto his tongue and flung them back at them

your country

took everything

from my country

you came and turned the stones, you stuffed them into your mouth and chewed them into dust

you dug your hands into our ground and clawed it up, bathing in its mud

you sucked the soil into your lungs and wiped your lips with our words

and when you had finished trailing your tongue between the bricks and lapping up the dust of us

when your stomach was full to bursting of our rocks and lakes and trees and sky

*you split it down the middle and let us fall into the cavern
you sliced the flesh of our home and then told us the wound was self-inflicted
you left us to build over your cracks*

*you forced age into my childish soul, and now my skin sags from my bones and I wear within the lines
my history that you only choose to forget*

*I walked a road of broken bodies to catch up to my country that you left to wither and die, reshaping
it and drawing lines where there were none*

and we reshaped ourselves around what we had seen

what we had left behind

and yet

you say I am from Pakistan

and you tell me to go back