## SHASTRI AKELLA

# POISON RIVERS

**OUR TIME** in the United States began with waiting. It wasn't until five weeks after our arrival that Attorney Hainey secured our appointment with an asylum officer, because that's how long it took to find the evidence our case needed. He opened his briefcase and presented me with a newspaper. An American newspaper.

As the only member of our family who could read English, I was tasked with performing, for my parents, a live translation of the article he pointed to. I was afraid of failing him, my fear undiluted by the self-reminder that he didn't understand a lick of my mother tongue.

The paper carried a grainy color picture of three women in red saris standing thigh-deep in the Yamuna River, a white froth coating its surface, as if an aquatic giant was handwashing laundry. "Women enter the Poison River to pray for the health of their husband," read the caption. As if "Yamuna" translated to "Poison River" in American English.

I started to read out loud the Hindi cousin to each English sentence. Two rubber factories located on the banks of the Yamuna, upstream from Agra, famous for the Taj Mahal, had been releasing their waste into the river for decades. The practice hadn't been banned despite widespread protests. A chemical foam started to appear late last year, strangling the river's fish and crabs, its fumes causing lung cancer and tuberculosis in those residing within a sixty-mile radius of the river, forcing them to flee. The article listed the towns that were affected, written in alphabetic order. It included my hometown's name. Saawan.

"None of this is new," Papa said, reminding Attorney Hainey of the clippings from *The Saawan Daily* we'd given him the day he introduced himself to us as our state-assigned lawyer, along with my English translation of the text that, apparently, a government translator had confirmed as accurate and unexaggerated.

Attorney Hainey said, "Asylum officers have seen people fleeing war, dictatorships, homophobia—"

"What's that?" Papa interrupted.

"When you're punished for loving someone of the same gender."

Papa's expression soured.

"This is new to them—climate refugees," Attorney Hainey continued.

"So they're relying on sources they know."

He held his hand out and I handed back the reliable newspaper.

"Tonight we pray to Ghost Bhairava," Ma said, touching the image of the frothing river.

Attorney Hainey frowned, confused. He didn't air his question, and the moment passed.

As he stood up and put on his coat, he said to Papa, "I'll come get you on Friday at seven. Gives us plenty of time for our appointment."

"I'll walk you out," I said to him, as if he was a doctor visiting a familial sickbed.

"It's getting cold." He paused to button his coat at the glass door that led in and out of the intake house that we'd been transferred to from Logan Airport in a blue van with barred windows, our interaction with our co-passengers—a middle-aged couple from Ghana, a young woman from Iran—limited to the geographic information we'd traded during our transit. We exchanged wordless greetings when we encountered each other in the dining hall and ate our meals quietly, separated from each other by the breadth of two empty tables. We wanted to show the guards and the cameras that watched us that we would be polite, heads-down kind of citizens—the kind America would give a chance to.

I said, "Our community worships ghosts, gods, and demons. Ghost Bhairava punishes those who don't speak up when they're supposed to. Ma believes he'll punish us because we fled our hometown instead of staying and protesting what was happening to our river."

"When I was eighteen," Attorney Hainey said, "the only things I talked about were baseball cards and *Call of Duty* Easter eggs."

What was *Call of Duty* and what did it have to do with Easter? I didn't ask.

"Are they treating you well here?" he asked.

The question always made me sad because it marked the end of his weekly visits. I told myself to smile like a normal person as I, out loud, thanked him for his concern and shook his hand. He turned and opened the glass door. The cold wind of the new world grazed my flesh and, abruptly, the lingering afterimage of Attorney Hainey's saluting hand was replaced by an image of Bhairava that bloomed in my skull: his skin midnight-blue, his bushy eyebrows hovering over all-white eyes: white pupils, white irises, his mouth a wide-open carnivorous flower, his sticky, red tongue ready to trap my brain.

**I WOKE UP** at three am to an image of Attorney Hainey's face hovering on top of mine, as we lay on a bed more comfortable than the cot that presently, through the thin mattress, poked at my spine; the blond tufts of hair that sprouted sparsely between his eyebrows magnified, in my imagination, by proximity. I couldn't quench my need: Papa slept to my left, Ma to my right. I couldn't go to the bathroom; the guard who patrolled the corridor lined with five rooms, each occupied by refugees, would see that my body had, as my former classmate Aki would say, pitched a tent. So I distracted myself, looking at the sole window, high on the wall, which emitted a dim moonglow, and recollecting the myth where a six-headed serpent spews its poison into the Yamuna's waters. Krishna slays it by dancing on its heads. The Yamuna, in that story, is poison-free ever after.

"Stop it," Papa groaned.

"What!" I protested, as if he'd caught me touching myself.

"Stop mumbling to yourself." His voice was raw with grogginess.

Papa was a light sleeper even under the best of circumstances. I was eighteen and obsessed with men even under the worst of circumstances.

**PAPA RETURNED** from his meeting with the asylum officer, shed the black coat Attorney Hainey had given him, and sat down. He told us, after he unsealed and gulped bottled water down, that we were granted a probationary approval. For three months, we'd live rent-free in a government-owned property and receive a monthly pension. We had to use that time to prove, with Attorney Hainey's help, why relocating to a different part of India was not an option—why we needed the U.S. to grant us asylum, a word that felt to me like a discordant synonym of the safety promised by permanent residence. The only other usage of the word I had heard was "Radha Mental Asylum"—a psychiatric institution in Saawan that was notorious for the inhumane treatment of its inmates.

We didn't know how react to this news, located on the border between immediate relief and its potential erasure. I felt a pang of homesickness for the intake house, our home for five weeks now; its reliable meal schedules, the unchanging face of its walls.

"Let's be grateful for our uncertainty," Papa said when he'd seen me despair at the stagnation. "It's safer than being put on a return flight."

"Be conservative with hope," Ma now cautioned. "Too much hope jinxes things."

**"THE FREEZER** isn't working," said Officer Matthews, after she gave us a tour of our house. "I'll send someone to fix it."

For the first time in my life, I had my own room and I could drink water directly from the tap, comforts I decided to savor without getting attached to. That night, I belatedly brought my body to its desired state of exhaustion and felt a wave of remorse when, the next morning, I stepped out of my room, saw Attorney Hainey, and reciprocated his guileless greeting.

"You have good heating," he said, pointing to what he called a "radiator." I went up to it and breathed hard. The hot air it released smelled of rusted iron and the gurgle of Yamuna rose, like a ghost from memory. It was a sound the river no longer made, its throat clogged with chemical debris.

I asked, "Is there a river close by?"

"There's a reservoir," Attorney Hainey said. "I can take you. Bundle up first."

I pictured holding a bundle over my head and hurrying after him like a coolie at a railway station. I turned toward him. He gestured, with a sweep of his hand, at a suitcase. He'd gotten us warm clothing.

**I SAT NEXT** to Attorney Hainey in his car, nervous and cold. I clenched my shoulder and jaw to mute my shiver.

"The heat will kick in soon," Attorney Hainey said, turning a vent toward me.

I looked out the window, noting the street names, white letters on green boards, so I could make my way back. Trees flanked the road.

"Sycamores," Attorney Hainey said.

I asked, "Why were we brought here and not, maybe, someplace in New York?"

"Good question," he said. "The towns around Quabbin are where they're bringing climate refugees—even from within the United States."

I noticed a paper, nailed to one trunk, flapping against the bark.

Attorney Hainey turned a corner and came to halt about six minutes after we left my place. He pointed to a road guarded by a small wooden gate.

"Follow that path," he said. "You'll be there in ten minutes—give or take."

"The reservoir?" I asked.

"The Quabbin—I'll tell you its story, in brief," he said, bringing his gloved thumb and pinky together. "Then I got to get going."

Give or take. Get going. Why didn't my English teacher speak like that? He made us spell complicated words in those quizzes he routinely subjected us to in junior high. *Czechoslovakia. Guillotine. Umbrage*. He would've made us spell 'Quabbin' if he'd heard of it.

Once upon a time, the ground where the Quabbin's waters now stand had four towns. It was the ideal location to hold water for the city of Boston and its suburbs. So people were relocated, their towns were flooded, their buildings not removed.

"What were the towns called?" I asked.

"I don't remember. I'll bring you my bicycle. You'll get here quicker."

"You don't need it?"

"My girlfriend doesn't let me use it anymore. She's worried about my knees."

I thanked him and stepped hastily out of his car. As if he'd choose me even if he was like me, I thought, as I heard him drive away.

I followed the red arrows painted on tree barks. The ground, covered with red-orange leaves, released the smell of sweet rot. I halted when I inhaled a heightened dampness. I turned and saw a clear circle of water, its surface reflecting the clouds, the trees on the opposite bank, a hilltop. I pictured a church underneath filled to the rafters with water, a school of fish floating past a door jamb on which pencil lines marked a child's changing height.

I remembered when I would leave home early and take the long road to school, walking along the banks of the Yamuna to listen to the fishermen sing as they took their boat out, their voices reverent as they called their oars a pair of wooden wings that let them glide over the river's surface. Their consonants were smooth as pebbles tonsured of their roughness by running water, their vowels patiently rounded, their voices melding with the burble of the Yamuna as it curved along Saawan's silted edges.

One day, the Wednesday after Holi, eight months before river started to froth, in place of the song I had come to expect I heard four cops inform the fishermen that a hundred dead fish had washed ashore in our neighboring village, each sliver of a gray body yellow and bloated with poison. They let the fishermen know they couldn't take their boats out for a week. A Health and Safety directive.

A fisherman got to his knees and pressed his forehead to his boat's curved prow. A cop attempted to humor him. "It's not forever."

The fisherman sat on his haunches and shook his head. "It's gone, I can feel it."

"What's gone?"

I lingered, afraid of the cops, but wanting to know his answer.

"The thread that connected me to my river, my fish," he said. "It's gone. I can't feel it."

He rubbed his chest vigorously as if attempting, with friction, with violence, to will the absence back into being.

"Hear that, Ramu?" said the cop. "Fellow felt a *connection* with the fish he murdered."

The cops broke into a raucous laughter as the fisherman got to his feet and joined his companions, their pinched faces producing a sensation of cold moistness on the nape of my neck.

The *Saawan Daily* announced, three weeks later, that Health and Safety made the ban on fishing in my state permanent.

My eyes started to water as I sat before the Quabbin, picturing a sandbank blistered with the dead fish of the Yamuna.

"Boy shouldn't cry," Papa always said. "But if it happens, think your eyes are watering. Makes crying less shameful."

On my way back, I paused at the paper nailed to the sycamore. It had the face of a young man. Printed above him was the word "Missing." Underneath was a phone number. His hair was red as the tree's leaves. I traced his jaw with my thumb. Of course my brain, that was every register of ridiculous when it came to men, had immediately chosen someone else to fixate on. Massachusetts, unlike Saawan, had clean water, and here boys like me could find their fairytale ending without being called "black fairy," the name Aki called me by. I couldn't hide the fact that I was the darkest boy in my class, but I tried and failed to conceal the nature of my desire. Aki once said if he was horny and couldn't find a chick, he could, in a pinch, come to me and with his eyes closed call me by a girl's name when I went down on him. Will he go down on you, one of his lackeys had asked. Who's giving *it* a choice? was Aki's reply that was met with catcalls. I imagined his unclean cock pressed against my lips, its smell, like that of an unflushed urinal, entering my nostrils. One moment I was standing amidst my classmates, bile rising up my throat, hot, granular, the next I watched myself standing in their midst. After a moment, the two merged—observer, observed—and I told myself to laugh. So I opened my mouth wide and let out a tearing laughter, because a man's laughter came from his belly, not his throat. Aki was surprised I could take a joke like a man; he half expected me to whine like a girl, he said, and clapping me on the shoulder. The group dispersed. The rest of the day passed without incident.

**A BICYCLE** was leaning against the porch pillar. Inside, the house was quiet. On the table was a single plate, covered with a cloth; when I picked it up, the smell of home hit me: coriander seeds sautéed with turmeric and added to a red lentil curry. How long before we ran out of the rations we'd gotten from Saawan? My parents napping in their room: facing each other, their legs curled, their knees touching, their mouths, like the door of their room, wide open.

**I CYCLED BACK** home from the Quabbin one afternoon to an air of jubilation. Papa had received our first monthly allowance, and "if I convert the amount to rupees," he announced, " it's what I made in three months in Saawan."

Attorney Hainey had given Papa a ride to the farmers market for a grocery haul, and the table was lined with paper bags full of fruits and vegetables. He helped Ma with buying the spices that she needed from a website called Patel Brothers. He paid for it using his credit card. "My housewarming gift," he said, waving away Papa's money. Was Missing Boy as nice as him?

Ma insisted that Attorney Hainey have dinner with us. I helped her in the kitchen, detaching florets from a cauliflower, chopping onions and adding them to the pan of sizzling vegetable oil. After a long time, I heard her hum.

**IN THE WEEKS** before we left India, smog perpetually hung in the air. We were fined if we left our houses without a face mask; we found out later that it was a mandate lobbied for by insurance companies frustrated with one too many payouts for clients stuck in towns like Saawan. My school and the foundry where Papa worked were permanently closed. The factories that poisoned our river bought all the land and houses of Saawan. As reparations. For a fee that cost us all our savings, a man who called himself Sher arranged our tourist visas, bought our flight tickets to Boston, and told us that once we landed in the United States, we had to tell the immigration officer who checked our documents that we were seeking asylum. He trained us on what to say in the interview that would follow. The rest, he said, is in the hands of God and America. Driving us to the Delhi airport, Sher told us that our houses would be torn down and a massive, fully automated automobile spare parts factory would take their place. I pictured robots, unbothered by the smog-clogged air, making spark plugs, tire hubs, radiators.

**I LOWERED** my cycle to the ground, sat down next to it, and took out of my shoulder bag the snack Ma had prepared for me. Pan-fried potatoes inside a roti wrap. As I scarfed it down, I noticed the rippling waters of the Quabbin bringing on their currents an object that was red, white, and round. With my mouth still full, I dusted my hands and made my way toward it. I knew what I looking at, but it took a moment for recognition to sink in.

A head. A human head.

It came and struck my ankles. Its red hair brushed my shoes like seaweed. Its cheeks, white-bread pale, squished against one boot then the other. It smelled of stale fish.

I turned and vomited the way Ma taught me, to avoid splattering gunk on my shoes. Back bent, head low to the ground. I wiped my mouth and stood up straight. I gagged, this time only releasing a sound that tugged painfully at the back of my throat. I turned toward the head again, now swaying left to right, as if saying no.

Yes. It was the face under Missing.

As recognition clicked into place, I was overcome by a sensation like vertigo, and I gained an aerial view of myself, standing on the banks of the Quabbin, watching myself watch a head animated by water. Then came a state of sharpened awareness, as with the first hit of caffeine. I heard myself thinking that this was a ghost-given opportunity: if I brought the missing man's news to his family, I would give them an answer to their seeking, an end to their searching. I would speak. Bhairava would grant us deliverance, his blue skin aglow with benevolent forgiveness.

Where was the rest of him? With a hand above my eyes I scanned the waters. I discerned no body bobbing on the river's surface. I bent down and cupped the head in my hands. His skin was slippery. I firmed my grip and drew him up. His flesh squished against my digits and I felt as if they'd breach his surface. I yelped, dropped him, sent water droplets splashing into my eyes. I screwed them shut, then forced myself to open them and blinked rapidly to rupture what felt like a second skin on my pupils. I needed a different tactic.

Stepping back, I freed my neck of the scarf wrapped around it and spread it on the ground. Then I reached for him again, keeping my eyes away from his neck, where flesh and bone had been sliced to separate body and head. I extracted him out of the gentle grip of the waves that made a gulping sound as they relinquished their treasure. Slowly, very slowly, I

stood up straight. I looked from the closed, wafer-thin eyelids, with lashes as fine as the legs of a spider, to the crabby tufts of hair on his chin and jawline. Did he shave the day before his beheading? He wasn't rotting yet.

I withdrew from the water, turned, and lowered him onto the scarf and covered his face with one edge. Then I carefully rolled him until he was embalmed in the length of the green, woolen fabric. I whipped my shoulder bag until its mouth was wide open, lowered him inside, and made my way back.

**MY PARENTS** emerged out of the curtained darkness of their room and into the bright living room where they found me seated. Their lower lips shivered.

"You opened all the windows," Papa observed.

"You'll fall sick, son," Ma said.

Papa said, "If they think we're sickly they'll send us back."

"I know how to earn Bhairava's forgiveness." I pointed to the missing person notice on the table. "I found him. Let's tell his family."

"Found how?" Ma asked, her eyes twinkling the way they did when she was proud of me.

"Where is he?" Papa asked.

"Here," I said.

Papa scanned the room until his eyes settled on the door.

"Outside?"

I stood up, wanting to talk my parents through my decision of fetching not a person but a part of him. But I failed to find the words I needed and regretted not preparing my sentences before I faced them.

"He must be cold," Ma said.

"Start a kettle for tea," he said to her, his teeth chattering, then turned to me. "Bring him in. I'll call the cops, they'll inform the family. Something official like that will look good for our record."

I watched Papa walk toward a window. If the house got warm again, the head would start decomposing.

"Wait," I said, pointing to the shawl, the green of it soaked through. Papa stopped.

"Hainey-sir gave you that," he complained. I needed to act.

"You need to hear me out before you jump to conclusions," I said, starting to unroll the shawl. The moment for dialogue had passed.

"What do you mean?" Papa asked, eyeing the shawl warily. Ma joined him.

"When will they fix our freezer?" I asked, panicked.

A squishing sound and the stench of stale fish filled the air. The back of the head faced us, his wet hair darkening the red to a shade of brown.

"What on earth," Ma said, stepping away, her breath catching.

"Is that a dead animal?" Papa demanded, his voice raised. "You brought home a dead animal!"

"No, it's him," I said, my voice placating. "We'll tell his family and Bhairava will forgive us and all will be well, you'll see."

I turned the head over.

Ma pressed a palm to her parted lips. The scream that ripped through her throat came out sounding muffled.

My finger moved from face to paper. "See? I found him."

Papa stepped forward, raised his hand, and struck me across the face. I nursed my lower lip, afraid and furious, unable to feel where fear ended and anger began. Why couldn't he see what I saw: a ghost-given opportunity?

"I was upset too," I said. "I am still upset. But his family will know now. Bad news is better than no news, right? We have to tell them."

"You stupid? We're not wanted here," Papa said. "They'll pin this on you and deport us."

Ma held the edges of the shawl between the fingertips of one hand and covered her nose with the other. She flung the shawl over the head and stepped back. I saw the phone that the state of Massachusetts had given my parents on the bedside table in their room. I made a dash for it. Papa lunged toward me, wrapped one hand across my chest, and slammed my body against his own. I writhed against his hard corners, struggling to break free of his grip.

"Don't just stand there," he said to Ma, breathless. "Go!"

Ma ran into their room and locked herself in. Papa dragged me to my room, my heels scraping against the floor. He flung me onto my bed and said, panting from his exertions, "Don't make me lock you in."

I glared at him and wiped my cheeks with my fist.

"Stay here until I call for you, understand?" he commanded.

"I hate you," I said, hating the childish petulance in my voice.

"Hate me all you want. But tell me you understand."

"Fine!" I lay down, my back to him.

**PAPA CALLED** me for dinner. I came out and saw my parents at the table on which two pots were steaming, filling the room with the smell

of steamed rice and aloo-gobi. They were gone: the shawl, the missing person notice, the head.

"What did you do with him?" I asked Papa.

"Don't worry about it."

"What if I went missing and someone had news about me but didn't come forward?"

He blinked at me. "If he was a refugee, I won't begrudge his silence."

You are lying, because it's convenient, I wanted to say. I wanted to believe he would privilege apprehending my whereabouts over a stranger's safety.

Ma said, "You must be hungry."

I wasn't. I sat down.

Papa said to me, "I went to Hainey-jee's house today, he wanted to go over our case over lunch at his place. Guess what? His girlfriend and he live together without getting married!"

Ma said, "What about the part where he actually helped his girlfriend cook and set the table, huh?"

"And wash the dishes," Papa said, horrified, like it was a scary sight.

Abruptly, Ma started to describe a future I couldn't see: a college degree, a job—in America.

"Soon you'll have an American passport—imagine that!" Papa said. "I would've killed for an American passport at eighteen."

He would've killed for an American passport. He was concealing death for mine.

**IT WASN'T** until later that night, as I lay down sleepless, that it hit me: I'd reduced the dead man as an offering to Ghost Bhairava. I hadn't thought about what had turned him to a head afloat in a reservoir. What about his family? How was I different from Papa? I bit into my pillow and didn't let my eyes water to keep my shame from finding its freedom.

**I WOKE UP** to a shrill sound. In the streetlight, refracted by the curtained window, I noticed that my room had steamed up. I got out of bed and opened the curtain. A man was jogging with his dog. It was three am.

The radiator in my room was producing all that noise and steam. I couldn't sleep with the racket it was making, so I searched for the switch to turn it off. I found, to one side, a steel knob. I turned it. The sound

escalated to a shrill screech. A plume of blue vapor shot out the radiator. I recoiled and fell back. A thought tore through the grogginess of sleep at predatory speed.

Blue. Bhairava was here!

I clambered onto my bed and pulled the covers over my head. My breath trapped in a cocoon of white cotton. I heard what felt like the heavy thump of footsteps. I screwed my eyes shut and my heart thudded to the rhythm of Bhairava's chant that drummed against my temples.

*run! hide!*
*I'll sneak up on you*
*wearing a different face, a different hide*
*ha-ha, ha-ha, ha-ha*
*hahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha*

**A CORKBOARD** appeared in our living room. Pinned to it were three notecards that read "regionalism", "casteism," and "ageism+class". Under each were cutouts of articles published on the topic in the UK and the United States over the last four years. Attorney Hainey would use this material to prove why we couldn't relocate to a different part of India: as blacksmiths from Saawan we wouldn't be able to pursue our profession in another part of the country ("regionalism"); we couldn't pursue a profession that wasn't ours ("casteism"); Papa couldn't make a career in a multinational where his caste and region wouldn't matter because paying for the English-speaking courses and renting in the cities where they were offered made it a cost-prohibitive option ("class"). Besides, the American and British organizations that had set up offshore operations in India hired, almost exclusively, people who were thirty-five and under, because it was easier to extract fifty hours of labor per week from the young ("ageism").

Would Attorney Hainey help us if he knew if we'd concealed the whereabouts of his countryman? I remembered the first three numbers of the contact on the Missing poster. I searched for them—517—and learned it was the area code for Michigan.

I stopped going to the Quabbin, certain that it was haunted by the ghost of the Michigan man whose death we, as a family, chose to dishonor. He would have questions for me, and what answers could I offer that might satisfy him?

**PAPA INSISTED** I join him on his grocery haul. There was a country fair he wanted me to see. I walked my bicycle next to him, our black coats identical. In the orange tents set up on either side of Prospect Street, vendors sold sweaters made from American sheep and cast-iron pans produced in American forges. Made in USA, every stall proclaimed. American honey, American mushrooms, American baby clothing—for American babies only?

"You're starting to look sickly," Papa said. "Our hearing is coming up. We all have to appear before the judge-jee, you remember that, right?"

Attorney Hainey had asked us to memorize the American national anthem because the judge deciding our future might test our love for America. Would he also give us a grade?

"Stop it," Papa snapped. And I understood I was mumbling to myself.

We entered Prospect Mall. The Produce Junction was on the first floor. A man with a blond scruff brought an eggplant to his mouth, frowned, and started to croon. Next to him, an older woman laughed, open-mouthed. Papa dropped potatoes into a paper bag and weighed them on a scale.

When the singing blond and the woman stepped away, I saw a flutter of red strands. I looked from hair to face. It was a delusion, I told myself. I was a foreigner to whom all white men looked the same.

No. It was the same face. A spitting image of *that* redhead. His lips moved rapidly as he showed a picture to a vendor who stroked a melon and shook her head. It was Bhairava, I was convinced, in the guise of the dead redhead. *I will appear wearing a different face, a different hide*, he warned, in the chant he had given to our ancestors by smearing their cracked lips with his damp thumb. They woke up in the wee hours, deliriously intoning the chant, and passed it down, one generation after the other, driven by reverence and fear.

Papa turned left. I followed him reluctantly. In the minutes he spent selecting red peppers, I felt as if I'd aged by a year.

When he was finally done, four paper bags packed to the brim with vegetable and fruit, and we were about to leave the mall, I said to him, "Could I stay, look around maybe?"

"I knew you'll like it," Papa beamed. He pushed American dollars into my coat pocket. "Get yourself something nice. No ice cream, though. The freezer is still broken."

I looked for the redheaded Bhairava: in the Produce Junction; out-

side, in the country fair. I found him talking to the cast-iron vendor. He caught me staring. His eyes were, blue, searching. I looked away and stared at the locally made moisturizers made from ethically harvested ingredients that promised glowing, wrinkle-free skin, under pictures of smiling white faces. From the corner of my eye, I saw him turn away and walk indoors. I followed him.

His copper-red hair, now that I had my gaze fixed on it, was hard to miss. He paused once before a candlemaker, once before a woodturner, resuming his walk after he ran a tentative finger along the curve of a bowl. When he stopped at the maple syrup stall however, with his back to me, he showed no signs of pressing on. As if maple syrup was the purpose of his quest that took him one stall to the next, armed with a photograph, with swiftly moving lips. In India, Bhairava loved honey, bowls full of it left at his altar. In America he had acquired a taste for maple syrup.

People walked around me and, feeling like a roadblock, and not wanting to draw attention to myself, I moved reluctantly past him but not before noticing that all of me, body plus head, reached his shoulder. I stooped when I saw a farmer selling made-in-Massachusetts okra that was purple streaked. Ma's favorite vegetable.

"Eight dollars a pound," he said. "How many pounds?"

I showed him four fingers and made a quick mental calculation: that was thirty-two dollars, two thousand three hundred and four rupees. I gasped.

"Let's say twenty even," he said.

I placed a twenty-dollar bill on the table. He weighed and bagged the okra. I turned, paper bag pressed to my chest, and ran straight into Bhairava. My bag fell to the floor and the okra went spilling. Together we kneeled and picked the green-purple stalks.

Once my produce was secured, he said, "You've seen me before?"

Which "me" did he mean: the ghost that he was, the guise of the human he had taken?

He squeezed my shoulder.

"You haven't seen me," he plainly stated.

He extracted from his pocket a picture and showed it to me. In it were two men, their faces identical. Their hair the same shade of red.

"But maybe you've seen him?" His finger isolated one man in the picture. "My brother."

It took a moment for meaning to click into place. Then I understood Bhairava hadn't taken a human disguise. He'd given me another chance to speak. So I spoke.

As we sat squatting on the floor amidst the commerce of produce, I told him that I had seen a part of his brother. His head. I let those words leave my mouth before I lost the courage to say them. I insisted that I'd found him in that condition so he wouldn't think I had caused him harm. I expected him to react with violence of some kind, to at least seem perturbed or upset by the information. But he simply nodded, seeming more sad than surprised, as if accepting news he'd expected with resignation.

"Found where?" he asked. "Take me."

**"MASON,"** he said, when I asked his name, and I responded with "Raj."

We were on the banks of the Quabbin, watching the waters lap at the shore.

Mason said, "My brother, Stew, he had brains. High school was about as far I got; he got a full ride to Harvard. Thing is, he was also clever enough to hide his sickness from all his brilliant teachers and classmates."

I raised a hesitant hand and squeezed his shoulder. Mason accepted the touch.

Then he tilted his head and lowered his voice, as though we were in a crowded room and he didn't want to risk being overheard. "He was convinced that in his past life *he* had flooded the towns under the Quabbin. He spent forever researching these places. Told me he heard the ghosts of the people who died here—said they came to him at night and whispered to him."

"Whispered what?"

"They wanted his head in the Quabbin. So he could hear their stories."

We were quiet for some time.

"You looked after your brother?" I asked.

"Yeah, because back in Michigan they worked Mom to the bone, until she got sick of course, and out here she's got four jobs because everything's so expensive, they didn't tell us that when they moved us. So Stew, he opened up to me, and now I wish I'd gotten him help instead of assuming he'd get better if I was just there for him. It worked before."

"He's done this before?"

"Disappear? Many times. But he always came back. But this time, it felt different."

Different how, I wanted to know, but Mason responded to my question before I posed it.

"We share a room, shared, sorry, and I woke up one morning and touched his cot and it was cold. Really cold."

He ran his hand over his chest.

"The thread that connected you to him, it was gone," I said.

He met my gaze, his eyes brimming over, grateful that I had understood. It was impossible for me, as a single child, as someone who had formed no deep friendships, to fathom what it meant to lose a sibling, let alone an identical twin, someone you shared a room with. I sat quietly next to him, offering him my silence, my presence.

Mason looked at the sole hill that rose over the Quabbin. "He left with his laptop so I couldn't look through his search history, but I went to our local library where he spent a ton of time. The librarian let me look at what he borrowed."

Mason took, from an inside pocket of his coat, a copy of the essay titled "Suicidal Decapitation by Guillotine." A paragraph circled in ballpoint described a blade as long as a sword held above a sheet-metal frame with an elastic band pulled taut, a safety catch triggering its release—its swift, fatal descent through the frame's rails.

I pictured the blade catching sunlight as it sank, there, on the edge of that hill, and Stew's head' tumbling alongside the cliffside, the cold wind whipping his red hair until, with a splash, he met the water, sank, releasing a flurry of bubbles, resurfaced. Did Stew go to such lengths to deliver only his head to the Quabbin because the ghosts would refuse his body their stories? Bhairava, I thought, was a kinder ghost, a benevolent one, even, who demanded not a sacrifice, but a rectification of errors.

"This machine. You think it's on the hilltop."

Mason shrugged. "How he hauled it up, if he did, how he got the money for it, who knows? Maybe he sold his laptop?"

I sensed that he didn't want to or couldn't speculate more about Stew's unwitnessed actions. So I asked him a question to return him to safety of history.

"You said they moved you here from somewhere?"

He nodded. "A factory poisoned the river running by our town. This was a long time back, and the EPA said they got it all sorted, but turns out there was this element that they missed because it was buried in the riverbed all along. They said it was dormant. But the water's been running dry these last couple years,ß and being exposed to the sun for so long activated it somehow. I don't remember the scientific jargon. Stew did."

"But that's what made your mom ill."

"She worked in a factory right by the river." After a moment, he said, "When I took her to the hospital, we waited two days for a bed. It was already full of folks in need of IV. So when government people offered to move us here, well."

I didn't press him for the details he'd skipped, like the nature of her illness. "She's better now?"

"Tired, but better."

"We're also here because they poisoned our river," I said. "Back in India."

Mason turned and, to my surprise, hugged me. I'd never been held like that, his chest pressed so hard to mine that his heat and heartbeats leaked into my body.

I too lowered my voice now, because my mouth was close to his ear, and said, "I recognized him from the missing poster, and I wanted to call, I did, but Baba, my father, he was worried that the cops would think it's our fault and send us back."

I heard him gulp before he said, "I understand."

I pressed my fists to his back and tightened my grip. He set his chin in the hollow of my neck, his stubble a soothing scratch against my skin. One of my fists left his back and my fingers gathered his hair. He cupped my head in his palm.

I allowed myself to think, "I am crying."

**WE WALKED BACK** from the Quabbin, passing the sycamore to which the missing notice had been nailed. When we got to my place, I saw Attorney Hainey was pasting passport photos to a document with a glue stick: my father's next to my mother's, underneath mine. Our slightly widened eyes, in those pictures, conveyed a sense of bewilderment. He looked up at Mason and me and said, "You have a friend."

Papa stepped out of the kitchen, the phone pressed to his ear. Papa will recognize Mason, I thought. But he only looked confused by the presence of the stranger in his house as he said, "I'll call you later" in Hindi and cut the call. I made introductions. Pleasantries were exchanged. Attorney Hainey left. I invited Mason to have lunch with us.

We felt like two couples forced to sit at the same table in a crowded restaurant. Ma spoke to Papa, I spoke to Mason, Ma served Papa and herself, I served Mason and me. They ate with their hands, we with spoons. The underlying tension occasionally stifled our conversations, producing a silence that felt like a balloon filled with too much air, renderings its skin translucent, on the verge of explosion. When we finished

eating, Mason set down his spoon and addressed Papa.

"I'm sorry to impose," Mason said. "I'm here for my brother, sir."

"The head," I said in Hindi. "Where is it?"

Ma looked at Mason, her eyes widened.

"Rotten child," Papa said in Hindi. "You'll have us live by the poisoned river."

Mason said, as if he'd understood the phrase "poisoned river", "Our river was poisoned too, sir. Everyone who lived or worked next to it got sick or had to move or both—which was practically the whole town. But people like my mom, hardworking people, who had to live and work in filthy basements, we were the ones who got hit first."

Papa's expression went from rage to astonishment.

The walls, Mason explained, emanated the dampness of the infected water, and the workers who breathed that air in, day after day, began to feel on their lips a perpetual taste of salt. Every morsel, every beverage that crossed the barrier of their mouth and entered their body felt heavily salted. Salted beer. Salted muffins. Salted coffee.

"So just they stopped eating salt altogether. But it was all an illusion, you know? And a body losing all its salt in factories but not getting it anywhere else? It's no good."

I said, in Hindi, looking at Ma, "They didn't have a bed for his mother at the hospital. They were also moved here, like us."

Ma went and got a paper from a drawer in kitchen. She unfolded it on the table and looked from the face on the missing person notice to the face in front of her.

"I only want my brother," Mason said. "I will tell them that I was the one who found him. You have my word."

Papa got up and opened the freezer door. A gust of mist blew out.

"I didn't want to do anything until our residency was granted," he said.

**MASON'S PHONE** buzzed. "My cab will be here soon," he said. He looked at my parents. "Good luck with your hearing." He looked around, as if wanting to memorize the details of our temporary residence. "Your home has nice heating. One day I'll rent Mom a home with good heating."

We got up. He picked up my shoulder bag, heavy with his tragic treasure, still frozen.

"Do you know the names of the towns under the Quabbin?" I asked as we stepped out.

Mason replied, "Dana, Enfield, Greenwich, and Prescott."

"I am going to go look for my brother," he said. And I understood he needed his hilltop quest to be a solitary one. "But call me. Just give me a week or so."

"I don't have your number."

Mason said, "You do. It's on the missing ad."

He craned his neck toward the street. We saw a red car slowly coasting down our road and I posed a question, driven by the urge to delay his departure.

"What do you do for work?"

I immediately regretted it. As if I hadn't just handed him his brother's head; as if we were, instead, recently-introduced acquaintances, filling the finite amount of time we were poised to spend with each other by creating a courteous impression of interest in one another's lives.

I was about to apologize when I met his gaze and found that it reciprocated the warmth I felt for him—the warmth that instigated me to pose my question.

"I'm a plumber, not a mason," he said, with a hint of a smile on his face. It made me wish I had a camera or a phone, so that I could capture it and look at it later.

"I hope you get your mom a home with good heating."

His cab pulled up in front of our gate. Mason stepped forward and showed the cab driver his index finger.

He turned to hug me. I smelled the musk of his body and the mustiness of his unwashed hair. His breath warmed my ear, a slow, accumulating heat that, I felt, would reach the point of burning. The cab driver met my gaze, then looked down, his face brightening—perhaps with light from his phone. His patience was a gift I accepted. And I closed my eyes.

He stepped back. With the heel of my palm I wiped his wet cheeks, realizing they must've felt soft to him, a plumber. Hands that had never learned the language of labor.

"I want to know what brought you here. Will you tell me, next time we meet?"

I nodded, finding myself incapable of speech.

The bag, pressed to the side of his thigh, was starting to gray with the first hint of dampness. He noticed as well; there was an urgency to his step as he turned away.

Long after he strode out to the driveway, through the gate, and into

the cab that took him away as he waved, leaving on the air an afterimage of his hand—splayed fingers, veiny backhand, arm lean—I stood there, my ear holding the warmth of his breath like a thumbprint.

**"BHAIRAVA** has forgiven us," said Ma when I came back in. "I can feel it."

Ma and I started to clear the table. She shared my surprise when Papa started to help us. The hope that Papa was capable of other kinds of change in the new country was mine alone to cradle.