red & green

"What was it like?" I asked, lightly tracing her wrist. Once I tracked her pulse, I settled on a spot along the delicate landscape of wrinkles, feeling the pitter-patter of life while awaiting a response. "Green."

A homeland and a motherland bleeding. Two oceans rising, rinsing. No soil rooting us for very long. I wondered which shade of green she remembered.

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A red rose on a single patch of Miami grass slightly left-centered: the Bangladeshi flag.

I had a simple storm checklist: attend to my rose bushes in the corner of the parking lot. I did not give them water. The graying sky had already pledged them intense hydration. I instead offered them kind words and my sincerest apologies. To have to witness the upcoming downpour seemed brutal. To be forcibly uprooted, abused by the aggressive air. I wished I could bring them into the security of my second-floor apartment, elevated and barricaded. But I could not protect them, these rigid vessels of life that refused to migrate.

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"Where are we going?" The girl asked her mother.

"Sylhet."

From the roof, she could see all the young boys standing on bamboo rafts and all their mothers standing in waist-high water. She could name where the water came from, but she could not believe it. It was not good water. It was not light like the ocean. It was a muddied green that obscured the legs of good women. She helped her mother pack, and with several other families, they left the drowned coastline behind. In one of the most densely populated countries in the world, this portion of land would never again be home to much of mankind.

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I couldn't feel the wind, but I could see it. Hurricane Hanna performing on our stage. The palm trees would bend but not break. The spines of the seemingly thin and fragile were being tested, their leaves furiously pulled towards the spinning woman in the sea. The air carried plastic and paper and panic, but the palms knew this song. They danced their elastic dance. But the wind brought with it a roaring rain that poured over the landscape, covering the ground with more and more layers of wet that would only be undone when the woman in the sea stopped spinning. As the water swallowed the rims of tires, I worried the flowers already sewn over could not breathe for much longer.

We sat far from the windows and close to each other. Skin on skin on skin on our living room sofas. A mother, a father, two aunts, two uncles, three cousins, and a grandmother all watching the performance.

"Why "Hanna"?" I asked no one in particular.

Two skins away, my uncle answered. "They use a list of 21 names that gets repeated every six years. Hanna is the eighth name."

I looked at my uncle with the more-pepper-than-salt hair. His hair was slightly thinner from my obsession of plucking out the silver strands, but he didn't complain. He looked back at me, his eyes soft with the glaze of unconditional love.

"Does that mean she'll come back in six years?" Anjum asked.

My uncle looked at his daughter and smiled. "It won't be her," my uncle said. "The next Hanna will be a different patch of ocean."

Anjum pulled me and the younger two up for an intense round of Ring Around the Rosy. Aged 16 and 14 and 8 and 6, we surrendered to the whirling motion also known by ancient

waters. We twirled across the carpet, and my family lit up with applause, disregarding the more extravagant show behind the windows.

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The bus stop was a site of mourning, marking the death of a community. Families split to different parts of the country, some guided by financial prospects and others by distant relatives. Some families split within themselves, as well. Good mothers sent their sons off to find good jobs on dry land, the capital. Each bus converted wet hope to clean promise. Each route away from their drowned homes bearing endurance, trust. But dry land was a cruel anti-mirage. Doused in things more aggressive than water. The buses emptied as the village disseminated its inhabitants across the country, like a flower whose evolutionary intention is to spread its seed. The girls stayed with their mothers.

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My younger two cousins, frustrated that their cartoons were so frequently interrupted by the weather forecast, migrated to the kitchen. They created a dissonant harmony of clashing pots, cooking air rice to feed us for dinner. Anjum and I were patient instructors. “Did you remember to add the salt?” I asked the girl. She frantically dusted her pot with air salt, paused for a moment, and remarked, “And pepper!” She took the spatula from the boy and carefully stirred the pot to complete the air dinner. She lifted the blank spatula to my lips with eagerness. I took in her concoction of uncooked innocence and smiled.

“Better than my mom’s,” I told her.

She laughed confidently and rushed back to the living room to serve my family but came back shortly after. “There isn’t enough for everyone. Let’s cook more?”

Within five minutes, the power went out. The younger two abandoned their empty pots and clung to us. The storm sounded more aggressive in the dark, the wailing sky being shredded by an angry Hanna. Anjum and I drew the children to the family room, familiar enough with this kind of darkness to consolidate their fear. We assembled four chairs in a diamond formation and draped over them two green sheets from the linen closet. The young ones entered this secret space we built them, eyes bright with silky wonder. A tent on the outside, a universe on the inside. Anjum brought them cookies and crackers for sustenance. Their world now fully stocked for the storm, they spent the rest of the night within the 20 square feet that were entirely theirs. For hours, we could hear laughter bumping against the frail green walls, drowned but never diluted by the shredding sky. Anjum and I left the tent to find my aunts frantic to thin the darkness. The overwhelming aroma of artificial jasmine permeated through the thick summer evening. I secretly blew out a few candles whose light we wouldn't miss, leaving the smoke of burning flora swirling in the still air.

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"How will it be different, ma?" The girl asked.

The mother stroked the girl's hand, drawing a circle around each of her knuckles. "There will be less water."

The landscape was flat, but the roads were not smooth; the girl felt every bump the bus had to offer. "What else?"

The mother's gaze faded into a distance, the deep brown of her irises harboring a flood of their own. "This water will have different fish."

The girl paused. "Will they be bad fish?"

The mother blinked, and the flood retreated. "Not bad. Just different." The girl paused again, but the mother spoke first. Whether to her or to herself, the girl didn't know. "We'll never again taste fish from home."

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My grandmother sat by the kitchen table, chopping cucumbers for me and Anjum. Her fingers were slender and speedy, cutting confidently under the light of a single flame. She sprinkled them with salt, leaving the green of the cucumbers faint but slightly sparkling in the darkness. We finished them quickly, but we stayed with her as she chopped tomatoes and peppers and other vegetables we had less interest in. "You don't get scared of storms, Nani?" Anjum asked her.

She let the knife rest for a moment. "Not anymore. But I was not as brave when I was your age, my gulab phool." She walked around the table to bring us into a tender embrace, as delicate as the roses she named us after.

"Were the storms in Bangladesh like this?" I asked as she walked back to her tomatoes.

"We call them hurricanes and they call them typhoons, but the water spins the same."

"Do ours spin faster?" Anjum asked.

"Sometimes yes, sometimes no. But it isn't always about speed. Slow storms can be angry, too."

Anjum left the kitchen to grab a cookie from the young ones' tent, but she ended up an inhabitant of their world for almost an hour, evident by the sweet-sounding happiness pouring through the gaps in the sheets. I stayed with Nani in the meantime, rinsing carrots through the quieting typhoon.

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The power returned the next morning. The water on the ground retreated, revealing the flattened spines of fragile flowers.

"Some survive the cruelest of rains," Nani told me the night before. "They will learn to stand again." But that was not the water I should have worried about.

The news was confusing, even for my Miamian mother and my storm survivor grandmother.

"Can hurricanes do this?" I asked.

No one offered a quick response. My uncles were trying to find information online, and my aunt was calling her hydrologist best friend. They landed more data but less clarity. Anjum and I sat in the center of the living room, watching my family exchange ideas and solutions. The young ones stayed in their green world.

"The flood has salinated the Everglades, which when recharging the Biscayne Aquifer, has contaminated our drinking wells with saltwater," the anchor announced to our living room, her voice steeped in horror. My mom looked to the single pack of bottled water we had in the corner of our kitchen. "Do not consume your tap water. We do not know how long it will take to desalinate the aquifer. Text the number below to receive steady updates." It was news on every channel. Miami was uninhabitable.

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When the bus stopped for the night, the girl sat on a bench with two mothers and their two daughters while her mother in a group of others approached the fisherman by the port. They wrapped their scarves tighter as they walked, shielding their skin from the wind or the gaze or both. Her mother stood the closest, leading the conversation with a series of determined hand motions. The water was crashing below them, obscuring the content of the conversation from

where the girl was sitting. The neutral look of a rigid merchant was quickly stained by the uglier shades of desire. After he responded to her dialogue, his mouth curled upwards the way those of only some men, the worst men, could. Her mother's hands froze for a moment before drawing the other mothers away from dark water and darker intents. "Why didn't you buy fish, ma?" The girl asked when her mother returned, scarf loosened. "Some men like to charge women more than they should." A pause, and then another comment the girl wasn't sure was directed to her. "Let us pray we never have to pay such a price." The girl witnessed the unsightly smirk of that fisherman be reincarnated on the faces of several men across her lifetime, each time wondering how many good mothers they had robbed.

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The world was kind the morning after the storm. Other Floridian cities infused Miami with their own water supply, and we had a temporary taste of Tampa and Tallahassee. Biologists from all over the country flew in to save the freshwater species of the Everglades to the limited extent they could. A smaller victory: the tourists left quickly, leaving the city to itself for the first time in a long time. We had the beach to ourselves, and though we didn't visit it, the breeze travelled further beyond its quiet coast. In the strong summer wind was the salt from our sinks.

Though my roses were well hydrated, I brought them a few drops from each of the foreign waters. They had known best the tastes of Sky and South Florida. I wondered if they knew the difference. If they even cared for variety after last night's aggressive wash. I hoped they did.

When I went back upstairs, my family's frenzy had subsided. They let the young ones switch the TV back to cartoons. The phone calls were more pacifying others' stress, assuring friends that this was temporary, that our water would be fine and we would be, too. Nani went to

the kitchen and offered to make everyone chai. The frenzy had fully settled when she went to fill the kettle, letting its lips meet the mouth of our tap.

"NO!" The young boy yelled. He rushed to her side and pulled on her skirt. "You can't make salty chai!"

With that, our living room was alive with laughter. Nani also laughed but was slightly embarrassed, her quick fingers slow to put the kettle back down. Maybe we were laughing at how new and unknown the water crisis was. Or maybe we were laughing at the quick thinking of the youngest in our bunch. Or maybe we were laughing to distract ourselves from a slightly older crisis. This wasn't the first time Nani had been forgetful.

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As the journey waned on, the goodbyes became heavier with each parting family, every absence an added weight. When it was the girl's stop, she watched her mother remove the line of bright ruby bangles from her right wrist. She gave one to each of the women on the bus. She did not hug or kiss them. She simply handed them her goodbye and settled the girl on new soil. "Why did you give away your bangles?" The girl asked. "Don't confuse sharing and relinquishing." As they approached the mother's father's house, the girl received a bangle and further commentary. "Think of it like splitting rose petals. It is better for many to have part of the beauty than for one to own it all." Every time the girl saw a rose, she remembered the resilience of those mothers in the many somewheres they ended up, each carrying a blood red testimony of their shared survival story.

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In freshman biology, we learned how marine heatwaves can cause sudden changes, like species migration and food chain disruption, that cause decades worth of slow damage. The

unraveling of Miami was not unlike such an oceanic disaster. A month after Hanna had left us, the Everglades had not yet healed, and our aquifer was still being redone. The generosity of our neighboring cities was thinning, and the hydrologists were in a rush to restore the Biscayne.

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I wasn't sure how the young girl came to believe she could handle a knife, but teaching her how seemed brighter than teaching her she couldn't. It wasn't a sharp knife, but it was enough to chop cucumbers. She stood level with the countertop, staring intensely at the vegetable board ahead of her. I watched her chop with extreme precision, trying her best to sustain equal thickness across her cuts. I loved this about children. The endearing concentration endowed unto little things.

"When did you learn to cut things?" She asked, gaze still focused on her even slices.

"Last week."

Then our laughs tangled together, smudging the gap between her uncooked innocence and my half-cooked maturity.

Our cackling suffused to the family room, drawing my nani towards the commotion. Her smile morphed into mortification when she saw the knife.

"Take it away from her!"

The girl laughed. "It's okay, Nani. Watch." She demonstrated her capacity with two cuts and gave a slice to each of us. The tension on Nani's face softened with this, her eyebrows releasing their creases and her mouth trying to conceal a satisfied smile. "Well done, jaan."

The three of us split the rest of the evenly chopped cucumber, the tangled laughter now also including a fully-cooked wisdom.

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The girl noticed that the mothers in this new land moved faster. They were not used to the drag of walking through water. They did not know what it was like to have legs hidden by a muddied green flood, or so she thought. By the next month, more water found this land. They were far from the ocean, so she could not name this water. She did realize, though, that the water rose only to the calves of mothers. It was only when she stood on wet soil again that she could recognize the universality of women. These were not the mothers from her homeland, but she could see similar goodness sparkling in their flooded eyes. Mothers bearing the burden of their land and their children and their land's children.

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Over the course of a minute, the laughter turned to a thud, and the thud turned to a quieted kitchen. The young girl held on to me, her small hands enveloping me in a tight embrace. Skin on skin, our fears melted into each other as we looked at our nani face down on cold tile. The young girl shredded through the quiet with a scream, and my uncle came rushing into the kitchen, pulling Nani into his arms and out to the living room. After he laid her down on the sofa, he looked back at us, still clinging to each other, with his soft glaze of unconditional love. He called my aunt to tend to Nani and gently guided us outside. "Let's get some air, shall we?"

After several minutes of renewed quiet, my uncle answered the question I hadn't asked. "She will be okay. Your ma called the doctor."

The two of us sat on the edge of the sidewalk while the young girl collected flowers. "What happened?"

The quiet settled again, and the salty wind from the emptied coastline swirled into the stillness. "We don't know," my uncle admitted weakly. We sat in more silence. After a while, he took my hand and pulled me up. "Let's look at your roses."

It had only been a few days since I saw them last, but their petals were duller now, the crimson very subtly bleeding out. “But it’s been a month since the storm. Why are they getting darker?”

My uncle evaluated the rose bush with a frown. He plucked one out and brushed his fingers along the slightly wrinkled edges of its petals. “Maybe the soil is still salinated.” I nodded then plucked another to give to the young girl. We walked back to the apartment, and she gave our now-awake-yet-slightly-dulled Nani the flower. She smiled at the offering. “Sprinkle it with the tap water,” Nani said. “Even if it dies, I think it would prefer to be reminded of its own, even if slightly salty.” The girl smiled and followed her instructions. I didn’t think to check on the rose after that.

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The girl looked at the pocket-sized Bangladeshi flag on her grandfather’s desk. The deep green is of our lush landscape, he told her. Over the years she returned to this flag, placing her red bangle over the slightly left-centered circle. Like creating a frame to fit the faces of the mothers from her homeland now scattered across the country, so she would not forget their sparkling goodness. The red remained radiant. But every few months she would return to find the green paler than it was before.

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Another two months passed, and the aquifer was finally desalinated, ending Miami’s drought. As soon as clean water hit the tap, I drowned my roses. I did this with an overdose of hope. By then, the wrinkles on the edges spread to whole petals. The vibrant red leaned more towards brown. I didn’t trust what Hanna brought with her flood. If she poisoned my roses, only holy water would save them now.

By the next week, there was a different disappointment. The quietness we loved so tenderly in the early days of the water crisis led to the city's undoing. The tourists never returned. Our vitality depended on the aquifer but the city's vitality depended on them. On the loud beaches and crowded coastline. On the salty wind never making it past the sand. The quiet that was pleasant for us was bad for business, so the smaller corporations packed up and left. Headquarters abandoned, skyscrapers cleared out. My two uncles and two aunts were on standby, their companies still deciding their fates. Employees were being laid off or told to relocate. I was unsure which of the two options would be worse.

My Nani fainted five more times over the course of those two months. The doctor adamantly prescribed bed rest. He finally told my family what it was, but they never told me, and I never asked. It was not something to be healed — I knew this much. I could see in their interactions with her the same confusion from when the water crisis began. Of handling this new and unknown catastrophe. But mixed in was the delicate nature with which they approached her bed, the soft voices with which they spoke to her. There was no need to coddle the strong, the surviving. I was also guilty of this, crying only when I was out of her scope. There was no need to burden her with a new saltwater.

I spent most of those mornings with her. It was a time just for us, when the adults were at work, and Anjum and the young ones were still sleeping. Every morning was the same exchange. I would bring her chai, and she would deliver stories from Bangladesh. It had been many years since she was there, but she was the only one who truly knew it. I would lie down beside her, absorbing the tales of a young Nani and an old country. I didn't have any questions. Then my family would return or awaken and fill the room to claim their own part of her day, but I was content with my mornings. The collection of memories only I would know. Of a woman I loved

dearly in a land I knew little of. This routine sequence of my nani and me — this blossomed into some of my own best memories.

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Eventually, the girl became a woman, and her mother's father's land looked very similar to that of her childhood. The water again rose to the waists of good mothers, her now being one of them. She married someone's son who had long ago been sent here for a good job on dry land, but since the land had become drenched, the migration she had lived all those years before had to be repeated. But instead of a bus, she took her daughter on a plane. "Where are we going?" The daughter asked. "America." The daughter asked no further questions.

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On the last summer morning, the roses were dead. Fully bled out, browned and burned. I expected it, but I was angry still.

"I should have built them a barrier," I told my mom, feeling the dried, crumpled petals between my fingers.

"It wouldn't have made a difference," my mom said, squeezing my other hand.

I dropped the dead flowers and rested my head on her shoulder. I let a few quiet tears escape. "Why not?"

She pulled me into a hug. "We are powerless against Nature's work."

I cried a little harder as the salty wind carried away the burned petals that could not, as some travelling flowers could, spread their beautiful seed.

On the last summer night, a third of the apartment was in boxes. My uncle got notice that he was being relocated to Orlando. I worried who would keep his hair from turning to salt all the way, but I could teach Anjum the mechanics of preserving youth later. My uncle tried to slow

down the process as much as he could, but his company was getting aggressive. If he was not in the new office by Monday, he would be in the laid-off category with my aunt. Nani knew this, and perhaps she knew what she was doing when she decided to fade a bit quicker. Maybe Nature favored the will of strong women. Another storm was coming that weekend, but we did not care to call her by her name just yet.

In the evening, I had no guaranteed alone time with her. Yet, there was a quick gap when my uncles went to buy flashlights and my aunts went to prepare dinner and my cousins escaped to their green world that it was just Nani and me. The gap was only 10 minutes. Soon after that, my family flooded in and prayed intensely and sobbed profusely. But of that night, I remember most vividly my 10 minutes.

I felt anchored by her pulse. A skin-on-skin promise of life. She did not have a story for me, so I finally asked her my questions. “Do you miss the green?”

She smiled, her eyes glossy with an ancient peace. “Yes and also no.” She paused, but before I could ask another question, she added more. “The colors here are much brighter.”

I told her about my dead roses, but she did not return my hopelessness. “It isn’t the water,” she told me. “It’s the soil. Sometimes the land can no longer harbor life. Plant your roses somewhere new, and they will be red and radiant again.”

She reached into her bedside table, pulled out a small, velvet case and handed it to me. She gave me her last kiss and motioned for me to open it. I was afraid of finality, of the intent of this gesture. The blending of our stories. In the case was the blood red testimony of many women.

A single ruby bangle that would never fade.