

EXCERPT from The Water Remembers

by Rijaa Zehra Khan

Summers seem to arrive later now. April is still cool to the touch.

At the front gate, the vegetable man is carrying his assortment of red radishes, lauki, onions, bhindi, a bounty of sorts. I hear his wooden wheels turn over the bumpy road. My mother yells out the window in an attempt to stop him; maybe she will make lauki again today, for my aching stomach. I roll around in bed, holding my sides from the sickness still consuming me. The lights have gone out; I can tell by the smell of sweat. My upper abdomen tingles with something new and old; I press my fingers to my skin, to feel some sense of relief, but a nightmare holds me in between waking and dreaming. In my mind, the monsoon has come too early, and I am not prepared. The windows are still not boarded up. The seeds for summer fruit have not been planted. The chickens and their little chicks are left running, outside, in circles.

Uncle turns on the generator with a loud snap. I know it's him by his loud sigh and the click of his sandals. The lights and the fan whirr back on. He always maneuvers things with a sense of purpose; if it was my cousin, the generator would have taken multiple tries before giving in to electricity, to current.

I hold my stomach tighter. In ten years time, my uncle will be dead, and I will console my mom on a countryside road in Southern Ontario where hyssops bloom purple and bright. My sisters will be quiet in the backseat, unsure of what to do. *Mohabbat* by Arooj Aftab will play on in the car, and Arooj will go on to be the first Pakistani woman to win a grammy. Her voice, soft and mourning, will reverberate throughout the car. She'll sing, *Mohabbat karne wale kam na honge, teri mehfal mein lekin hum na honge*, and my mom will sing along. My mother will tell me that *Mohabbat*

was originally written by a poet named Hafeez Hoshiarpuri, during the early 20th century. This will be my mother's way of holding onto a small story, part of a much larger story. I will stroke the back of my mother's hand, humming along to the song, translating the lyrics in my head. *There will be no shortage of lovers for you, yet I will never be amongst your loving audience.* The song will seem like a love song at first, till it's not, till it's just grief. And I will wonder about the difference between the two.

But for now, I lie in bed in Karachi, and feel relief with the fan back on. Sweat trickles down my temples. The morning rolls in and out with dust and yellow light. I blink. Mohabbat is one of many words for love in Urdu, I think. The bars on the window, shaped into delicate flowers, feel like a cage. I hear my uncle say, *beta, are you awake?* And then, he is gone again. I want to hurl myself up and return downstairs, to be amongst the chaos of the chicks and yelling children. I breathe in and can finally move. The whole house is alive again, with something I could not hear before.