The Lowland
Also by Jhumpa Lahiri

Unaccustomed Earth

The Namesake

Interpreter of Maladies
For Carin, who believed from the beginning,
and Alberto, who saw me to the end
lascia ch’io torni al mio paese sepolto
nell’erba come in un mare caldo e pesante.

let me return to my home town entombed
in grass as in a warm and high sea.

— GIORGIO BASSANI, “Saluto a Roma”
East of the Tolly Club, after Deshapran Sashmal Road splits in two, there is a small mosque. A turn leads to a quiet enclave. A warren of narrow lanes and modest middle-class homes.

Once, within this enclave, there were two ponds, oblong, side by side. Behind them was a lowland spanning a few acres.

After the monsoon the ponds would rise so that the embankment built between them could not be seen. The lowland also filled with rain, three or four feet deep, the water remaining for a portion of the year.

The flooded plain was thick with water hyacinth. The floating weed grew aggressively. Its leaves caused the surface to appear solid. Green in contrast to the blue of the sky.

Simple huts stood here and there along the periphery. The poor waded in to forage for what was edible. In autumn egrets arrived, their white feathers darkened by the city’s soot, waiting motionless for their prey.

In the humid climate of Calcutta, evaporation was slow. But eventually the sun burned off most of the floodwater, exposing damp ground again.

So many times Subhash and Udayan had walked across the lowland. It was a shortcut to a field on the outskirts of the neighborhood, where they went to play football. Avoiding puddles, stepping over mats of hyacinth leaves that remained in place. Breathing the dank air.

Certain creatures laid eggs that were able to endure the dry season. Others survived by burying themselves in mud, simulating death, waiting for the return of rain.