

## Riverword

J. S. Hunter

A young girl in perfect solitude. Sitting on the rock. Looking out onto a magical stillness of the distant jebel in the hazy plain. Like seeing her own reflection. Melting into the heat of the afternoon. Her life in stone. Stillness. But the movement of heat. Forcing water out of a stone the image breaking into a sweat of tiny broken pieces. Where does my life begin and where does this rock end.

Old woman dreams. Her mouth wide awake. The last remaining teeth exposed like those of a yawning hippopotamus in the vastness of the Nile flow. Round like a stone the water lapping on gray skin. Laughing deep-bellied at the dawn and flimsy boats long-windedly crossing the river struggling in a wide arc against the current. Life is long as long as my breath passing out between these sparse teeth. My husband I know you. I am laughing because I have outlived you. How short was your life and my unhappiness. The sun smiled on you while you had your teeth and your sleek warrior image. Women were so many goddesses you pretended to worship with your milk and honey eyes while all the time you cropped them with your sharpened harvest gatherer. And daughters flowed like time from out my dangling breasts. You wet your lips on their untasted youth. You thought you were a god and would live forever in the reflection of their glowing skin. Rapacious of beauty you failed to see when your own image in me was drifting away and out of your control. You fled my anger to the mouths of those who had not yet learned to speak. What man are you. Just useless dust. One lonely male seed you planted in me. And you didn't even live to see me raise it to a child of our own. What is love with no helper to help it grow. To witness in the circle of your eyes this life rounding in me. The dream is sucked dry. Dust settles in the corner of my eye. On the track of the grief. When my eyelids fall down after dark I remember that one night when truly I thought you had the power to make me die. Oh life. You did not revisit me. Instead you bled me dry. My face has become wrinkled with sadness like an empty stream bed in time of drought. Sadness washed into the cracks. My eyes were lonely fish in the stillness of shallow water. I kept this yellow handkerchief you tied around my head as a token. So faded now. I

have to close my eyes to feel your hand laughing as you touched me and tied in the knot. The clouds come to nothing when a breeze sends them away. Let this grief untie my heart—I have eaten bitterness too long. The sun has come round again and you are gone. I have reached the distant mountain from where I can see even across the plains the reflection of myself waiting alone on my rock for you. But there was ever this distance between us.

I went to the sacred pool when the sun was a rising disc of silver on the unbroken surface. Five times I bent my face to the water and threw a shimmering cape of droplets around my shoulders. There was no-one to see my beauty. To see me cast off these dusty rags, to sink my breasts in the water to touch my feet on cool sand. To watch the shining pearls run down the braids of my hair. My totem crocodile welcomed me. Each time my head rose above the water I was crowned by the day. The eye of the sun looked on me. Life was promised to me and I threaded my fingers in its silent flow, the images of which like floodwaters spreading on the distant plain I pulled up to my lips. It is day and the stars are in their graves. I believe in nothing but the word of this river on my skin. My limbs are stones worn smooth and round by the chatter of its flow. The ash I rubbed on my skin in the public gaze is carried away and the wailing of my heart falls silent under the spell as memory dissolves into an ocean of blackness.

## Mudir

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Mudir was thrown into the tiny cell, his hands and legs still tied together. He was naked. Why did they not kill me? They say they want to kill my wife. I said to them, "You are killing me." They applied the wires to my testicles. They kept telling me they would kill my children. I screamed, "Kill me! Kill me!" I have no children. They kept asking over and over "Have you dug up the bones of your father?" I was confused. I am not sick. They beat the soles of my feet until they bled on the floor. I remembered my wife when our hope of a child died within her. She lay in a pool of her own blood. Her own blood and that of our child mingled in the darkness of the hut. "The child is dead," she cried, "Dead." When she recovered her strength, she said there was nothing left. She knew she would not bleed again. She swept the hut and swept it again, removing all trace of the blood. Then the dust from the floor was placed in a small pot and in the corner of the hut she buried it. And placed over that a pot of stones. The child came to her in dreams, teaching her the ways of rain.

In the corner of Mudir's cell was the body of a man wearing women's clothes. Lying on its side with the knees bent and the hands placed under the face that was turned towards the window where the early morning sun came in. He knew the man was just pretending. Pretending to be his alive-dead wife. He drummed his two bound fists on the door, tears streaming down his face. In the silence, after he gave up, he seemed to hear a whisper from the body.

—Shsh, shsh my father. Do not beat the drum for me. I am sleeping now. Do not beat the drum. I am born into a new life now. Let me go in peace.

The pain in Mudir's belly became acute, ripping open his insides until they heaved and threw their meager contents on the ground, spraying the dead body. Mudir passed out. When he awoke he could see blue sky again through the bars on the high up window. His hands and feet were untied. The body was gone. Only the filthy

dress was left to mark the spot. And some grains of millet, undigested, from where he had vomited. He spat into his hand, rubbed it in the dust and smeared his face. Then he put on the dress of the dead person. He put his hand on his empty belly.

—Who has taken her bones? My wife who had rain in her womb.

He scraped the floor with his fingers. Looking for her burial place so that he could sit on the grave and wail. But the floor was packed hard. There was no place where it was loose. There was a narrow ledge underneath the window. He managed to stretch up and feel along it. Nothing. The door to the cell was briefly unlocked and a plate of gray millet porridge was brusquely deposited on the floor. Mudir licked the tip of his right forefinger, put it in the porridge

—Water, I need water. How can I eat this earth if I have no water?