THE RIVER

HAS ROOTS

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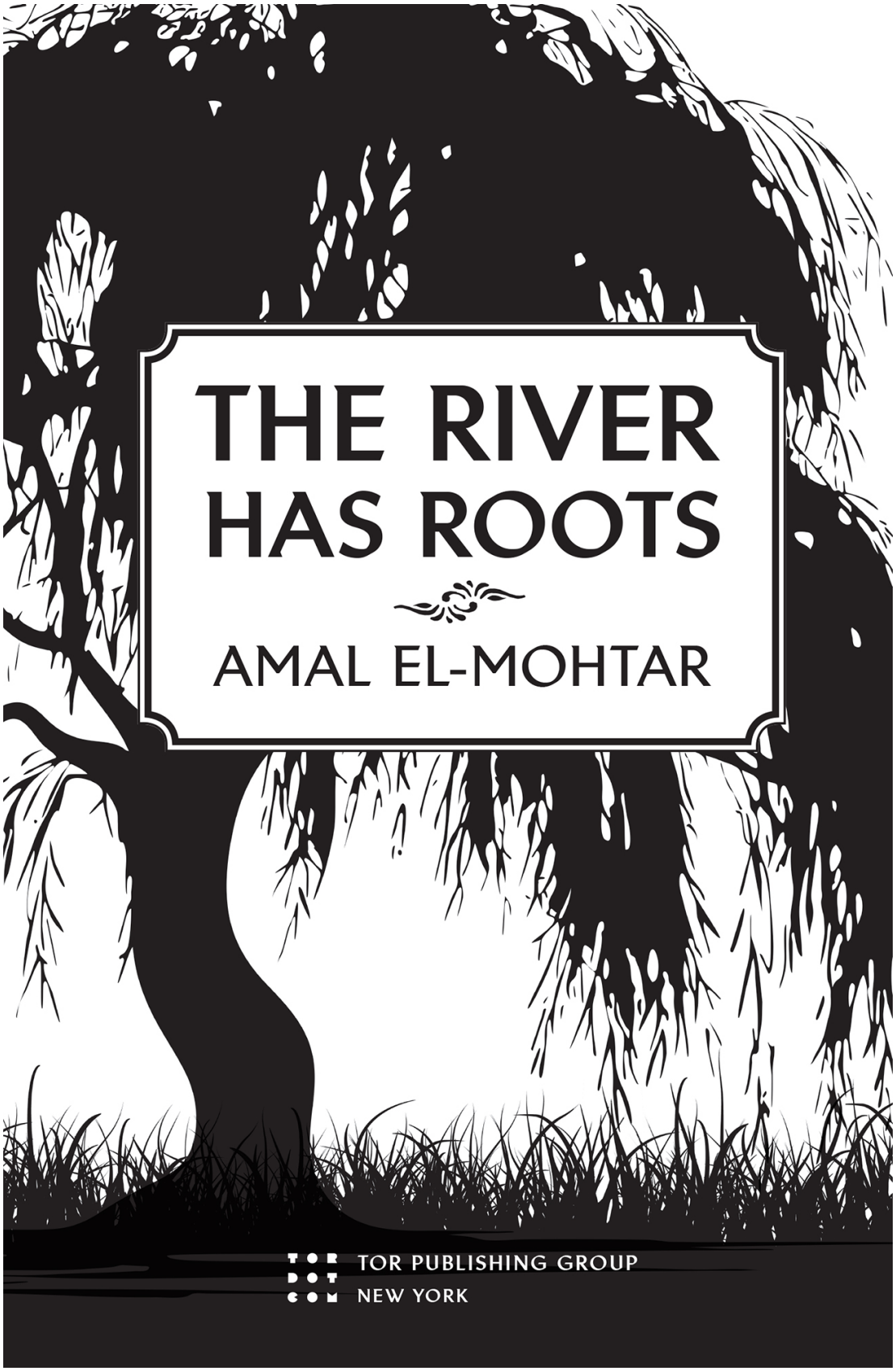
THIS IS HOW YOU LOSE THE TIME WAR

AMAL EL-MOHTAR


THE RIVER HAS ROOTS
AMAL EL-MOHTAR
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For Hoda Nassim,
who taught me to play,
and for my sister Dounya,
who taught me to sing.

(What is a river but an open throat; what is water but a voice?)

The River Liss runs north to south, and its waters brim with grammar.

Children muttering over their schoolbooks today think little of grammar. Grammar is tedious, difficult, slow; grammar is a shackle placed on language, correcting *who* into *whom, can I* into *may I.* Grammar and grammarians are constables, sternly watching while you split infinitives, narrowing their eyes at spliced commas while smacking semi-coloned truncheons against their palms.

But that is not the truth of grammar. There was a time when grammar was wild—when it shifted shapes and unleashed new forms out of old. Grammar, like *gramarye,* like *grimoire.* What is magic but a change in the world? What is conjugation but a transformation, one thing into another? *She runs; she ran; she will run again.*

Now where were we. Ah yes.

The River Liss runs north to south, and its waters brim with grammar. From its secret sources in Arcadia it rushes, conjugating as it flows into the lands we think we know. The rocks over which it tumbles shiver into jewels of many colours. Along its banks nod flowers and grasses, but out of all season or sense: spring bluebells mix with autumn asters, and towering cattails scatter frosted seeds over beds of blooming marigolds. Sometimes the river bends like an elbow, and sometimes it stretches broad and straight as a shadow. So long as you can hear the waters, everything seems possible: that the sun is the moon, that a star is a cloud, that dusk is dawn, and everything is both hallowed and haunted at the same time.

Until, that is, the river meets the willows.

Two tremendous trees, taller and thicker than any willow you've ever seen, stand on either side of the River Liss, and they bend towards each other like dancers, or lovers, reaching out to clasp each other. Their roots knobble the water's surface from beneath, twist together into a braided sort of bridge; their branches above tangle and pleach into a vast, vaulting canopy.

Willows are great grammarians. Their roots are uncommon thirsty; like tightly woven nets they sift gram after gram of bucking wildness from the

water and pull it into their bodies. The river may conjugate everything it touches, but the willows translate its grammar into their growth, and hold it slow and steady in their bark.

South of those two great trees—let us call them, as the common folk do, the Professors—the landscape stills and settles. Seasons know their place. A long procession of willows, diminishing in size and strangeness, lines the banks of the River Liss in even, coppiced stitches, so that by the time the Liss reaches the western edge of the bustling town of Thistleford, its waters are quite tame.

But if you were to stand and behold those first two trees—if you were a stranger to the land, and unaccustomed to the sight—you might hear a kind of hum in the air, or feel it as a thickness in your chest. You might think that something about the shape of those trunks, the sweep of their twisted crowns, reminds you of something, or someone, you've lost—something, or someone, you would break the world to have again. *Something,* you might think, *happened here, long, long ago; something,* you might think, *is on the cusp of happening again.*

But that is the nature of grammar—it is always tense, like an instrument, aching for release, longing to transform present into past into future, *is* into *was* into *will.*

At the time of our story the willows of the River Liss belonged mostly to the Hawthorn family, whose holdings hugged both sides of the river's length from Thistleford to the Modal Lands out past the Professors' roots. Those shifting, shimmering lands stopped at an assemblage of standing stones folk called the Refrain; beyond it was Faerie, and everyone knew it, even if no one spoke in words so plain. No one looks directly at the sun, for all it illuminates the world, and Faerie being the source of so much grammar made folk apt to speak of it in a kind of translation. They called it Arcadia, the Beautiful Country, the Land Beyond, Antiquity. And if they sometimes meant things less pretty than those names suggested, well, there are always things lost in translation, and curious things gained.

Despite their name, the Hawthorn family's work was willows, and had been for as long as anyone alive could remember. They tended, they planted, they coppiced and harvested the trees, making good use of every part: the leaves for tea, the bark for medicines and baskets and cordage, the wood for furniture and instruments. Grammarians wanted the wood for their wands, and the common folk wanted it for its more passive enchanted properties: a willow flute might lead rats from a barn, while a willow bed might ease the weary into lucid dreams.

But a foolhardy few, armed with willow-bark nets and shallow baskets of tight willow weave, crept carefully beyond the Professors' roots to pan for raw, unfiltered grammar. Carefully they combed the water to catch at small, thick chunks of enchantment, taking great pains not to wet their own skin. If they caught so much as a single undissolved gram, they could make a small fortune—even after subtracting the king's duties in Thistleford—by selling them to grammarians for conjugation. Grammarians tended to clump together like clauses at the universities of the east and north, breaking language into their meanings, and received grammar for their projects only once it had been refined and made regular; few ventured into Grammarye towns, and then only

grudgingly, like potters with a disdain for mud. Middlemen thrived in the trade.

You might well ask, why would these prospective gram catchers be so few? Why didn't every latecomer rush out beyond the Professors' trunks to drag baskets through the wild waters of the Liss for a chance at great fortune?

And you might find, after asking, that the Modal Lands between the Professors and the Refrain were peculiarly thick with strange wildlife. You might find your attention caught by small grey rabbits with uncommonly human eyes; you might see your name spelled out by a clump of nettles waving in the wind; you might feel a deep ache in your breast while hearing a bird singing with a dolorously human voice, the pain of which no one, not even the willows, could translate away.

Marred is what people called the unwelcome actions of grammar, and like paper torn by the press of a pencil, there was no way to set them right.

What the town of Thistleford gained from its proximity to Faerie was obvious: prosperity, merriment, uncommonly good weather. What it lost was negligible—the cost of doing business.

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But we were speaking of the Hawthorn family, weren't we, and their willow work—their coppicing, their basket-weaving, their management of this enchanted resource. Here is a secret that isn't, really, for everyone knew it even if they didn't understand the custom: the Hawthorn family's true work was to *sing* to the willows. By ancient treaty this was only required four times a year, at the turning of the seasons; by long-standing tradition, it was done every day, at sunrise and sunset, the way one bids one's family members good morning on waking and good night before bed. Just as beekeepers tell their hives all the news in thanks for honey, the Hawthorns sang to their trees in thanks for their translations. But none had ever taken to the task quite so vigorously as Esther and Ysabel Hawthorn, the latest daughters of that house.

When people say that voices run in families, they mean it as inheritance—that something special has been passed down the generations, like the slope of a nose or the set of a jaw. But Esther and Ysabel Hawthorn had voices that ran together like raindrops on a windowpane. Their voices threaded through each other like the warp and weft of fine cloth, and when the sisters harmonized,

the air shimmered with it. Folk said that when they sang together, you could feel grammar in the air. If they sang a stormy sky, the day clouded over. If they sang adventure, blood rose to the boil. If they sang a sweet sadness, everything looked a little silver from the corners of the eyes.

Esther was two years the elder, with hair dark as the December of her birth, and if this story were a folk tale or an old song, she'd be certain to have a disposition as frosty; Ysabel was the younger, and because her own hair was bright as kings' coins or summer corn, you might think she was given to chatter and merriment. But this was not the truth of them, singly or together. Esther was thoughtful and gregarious, and while Ysabel had a laugh loud and easy as barrel-tumbled apples in the fall, she was in fact very shy.

They loved each other utterly, and everyone in Thistleford knew it.

Though their voices had the sheen of grammar, Esther and Ysabel were not themselves grammarians, and in truth, they felt nothing especially uncanny about their home. The silver-green of willow leaves was familiar comfort to them, and the sisters read their moods like weather. The willows themselves felt like ancestry, like kin. They cherished the Professors in particular, for their height and their shade and the sound of the wind rustling through their leaves like chimes—but they loved even more the stories told of them, of how the Professors came to bow their leafy heads together over the River Liss. Their father told them that the Professors loved each other in a forbidden love, and they were driven from their homes into the river, and conjugated into trees; their mother said they'd made some great sacrifice for the good of their families, given themselves to the river in exchange for a secret gift. But whatever details blurred and shifted in the telling, the fact that the Professors had been and still were lovers never came into dispute; they had *professed* their love, hence the name.

From their earliest days, Esther and Ysabel never shirked their duty, singing the required hymn with great solemnity at the changing of every season. Strange to tell, it wasn't in English; they couldn't say what language it was, only that the shape of the words fit so differently into their mouths that they felt their voices shift in deference to it. Their mother told them that *her* parents had thought it was Welsh, until the day a Levantine woodworker staying with the family had said it sounded to her like Arabic, but a dialect she'd never heard. Either it was older than her, or from a place she'd never

travelled (“or,” their mother said, ruefully, “my accent was too atrocious to understand and she was too polite to say so”).

But the woodworker had been able to explain some of it; it was, their mother told them, a song about the North Wind opening doors and carrying messages to and from a beloved in exile. So the girls knew it as the Professors’ Hymn, and though they didn’t really understand it—they argued, sometimes, about whether the North Wind *was* one of the lovers, or merely a messenger—they enjoyed improvising harmonies into the repetition of nonsense *la* sounds in the long refrain, inflecting it slightly differently depending on the time of year, and how likely the North Wind was to blow.

As Esther and Ysabel grew, as singing became their favourite pastime, they began to play with adding new material to their repertoire. It did the trees no harm, and seemed even to do them some good; their parents observed small shifts of colour in bark and leaf, though any other effects were too subtle to track without a grammarian. But if any grammarian would stoop to such common work, instead of the fire and crackle of conjugation in the king’s service, they hadn’t yet wandered towards Thistleford. Or if they had—and only one had—they tended towards Arcadia, and never came out again.

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Taste is a kind of language, and siblings speak it with a forked tongue. As entwined as Esther and Ysabel were, there came a point in their childhood where their interests diverged, and, like the Professors, they loved each other across the gap between them. Ysabel loved pickles where Esther couldn’t abide the smell of vinegar; Esther took to foraging while Ysabel preferred gardening; Ysabel was fascinated by boys and their company while Esther found them tedious and enjoyed being alone.

Where music was concerned, Ysabel loved flutes and murder ballads best, while Esther favoured harps and riddle songs. They often teased each other over their favourites, argued over what kind of music the willows preferred while gathering branches or stripping bark.

“All I’m saying,” mused Ysabel, bundling long strips of bark together into tight coils, “is that if I had died for love, I’d like to hear William and Margaret songs best. Songs of love winning out, of holding each other forever, even at the bottom of a river.”

Esther was weaving a basket, but paused in her work to look up and squint at her sister in amusement. “Bel, really? Do you love murder ballads because you want to be murdered? Or because you don’t, not really, but you get to have it safely in six stanzas and a looping refrain?”

Ysabel laughed. “You’ve turned it backwards! I’m saying if I *were* murdered, the ghost of me might still like to hear murder ballads!”

“Or,” said Esther, “you might go off them completely. I’d certainly find them less thrilling from the receiving end of a penknife.”

Ysabel rolled her eyes. “Fine, fine. What do *you* think they like best?”

Esther looked at the trees thoughtfully. “Travelling songs, like their hymn. Sea songs. Songs that bring news from away.”

“So, Miss Hawthorn,” Ysabel said, raising an eyebrow and deepening her voice into a pitch-perfect mimicry of an insufferable headmaster from their school days, “it is your contention that people must in fact most ardently desire that which they cannot have? You don’t think that songs of travel are liable to sadden those rooted into the earth? Besides”—she smiled, reaching up to touch one’s trunk—“surely the river brings them all the news worth telling.”

“Only from one direction,” said Esther, watching the water flow. “That’s just it; I think they’d welcome news of mortal lands, mortal work. And there’s no singing in Arcadia.”

Ysabel went quiet for a moment, then worked her fingers into the grass. Too lightly, she said, “Did Rin tell you that?”

Esther nodded, then bent her gaze back to her weaving. Ysabel waited for more, but her sister stayed quiet, so she shrugged.

“Well, Rin’s wrong. *We* sang in Arcadia, when we were lost.”

Esther paused, again, and looked at Ysabel; it was so rare that she mentioned it.

“But we’re not Arcadian. It’s not that it’s forbidden,” she said, carefully. “Arcadians just … don’t. Or can’t. They play instruments, but they never sing. And if I were ever to live there, Rin said I’d eventually forget how.”

“But,” said Ysabel, “you said Rin loves your singing.”

Esther looked back to her weaving, nodded. “They do.”

Ysabel narrowed her eyes, reached for her sister’s hand, and twined their fingers together tightly. “Well. Rin can think what they like. If you were ever

in danger of forgetting how to sing, I would simply have to come and remind you."

Esther chuckled, but Ysabel went on, teasing. "Every other week. You'll come here, then I'll go there, and there won't be a week we don't see each other, and sing together. I don't care how golden and honeyed Arcadia is, I won't let you forget a single word of 'Tam Lin.'"

"Ugh," laughed Esther. "Mercy! That tedious tune! We always leave off a few verses!"

"We won't anymore! In fact, we'll invent new ones! I'll make you learn them!"

"Fine, fine," said Esther, reaching out to pet her sister's hair. "Thank you, Bel. I accept your proposed tyrannies. And anyway," she said, aiming for lightness and missing it with a thud, "you know—you do know I would never leave you for Arcadia."

Ysabel smiled like a page turning. "What shall we sing to the trees?"

They settled on "The Dowie Dens of Yarrow," and if the willows bent their branches towards them as they sang, trailed them even lower into the water, the sisters never noticed.