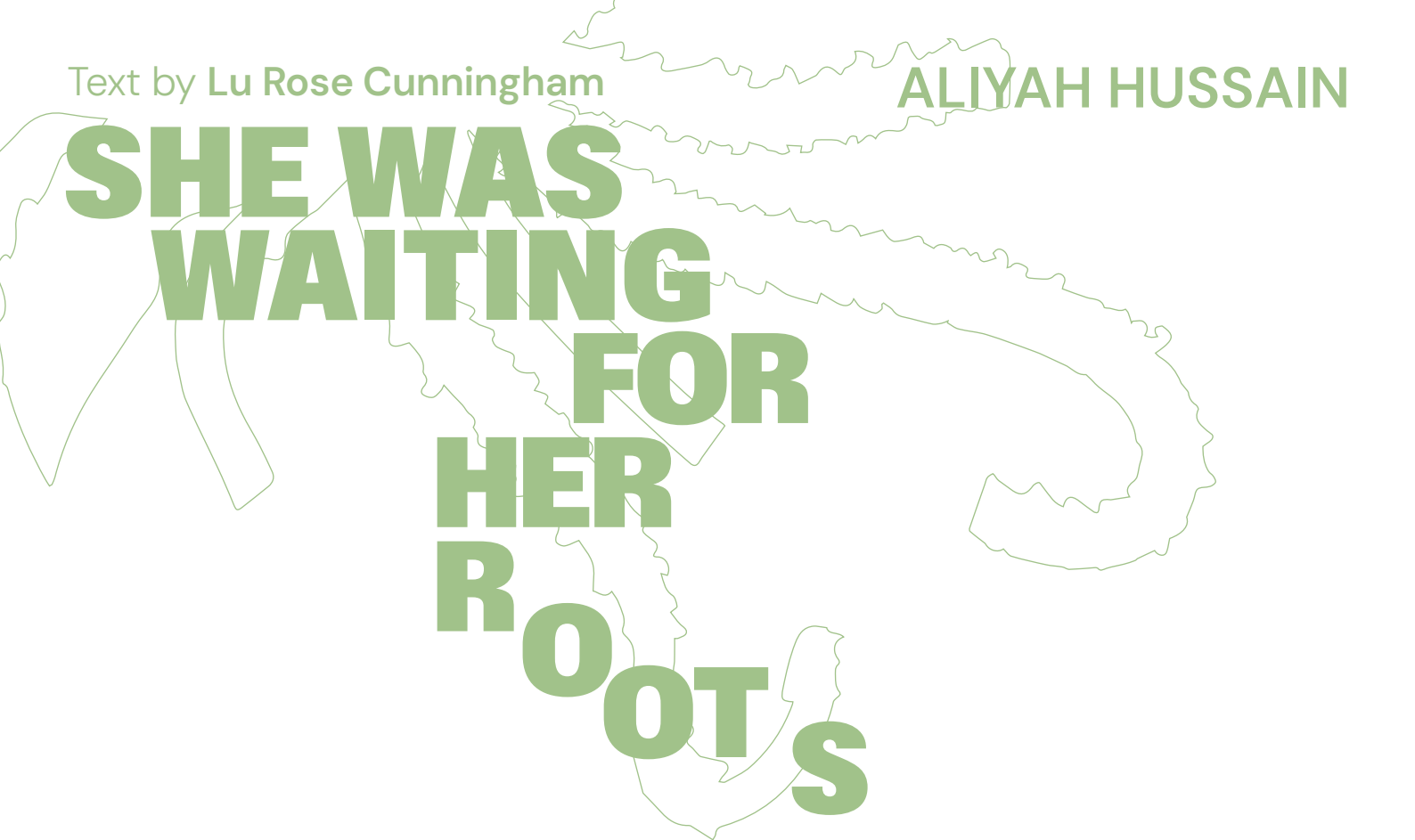


Text by Lu Rose Cunningham

ALIYAH HUSSAIN

# SHE WAS WAITING FOR HER ROOTS



Snaking outlines gleam, like snail skin<sup>1</sup>, the forms' intimate sheathing both glassy and undulating, abrasive and somehow soothing. They unnerve a little. Stretched and warped in places. She tells you they are the result of clay passed through an extruder or hand-built, made of sand – you learn such sand is *grog* – folded into clay. Emerging sticky sweet with glaze, slime-coated entrails spreading. **Tendrils / tentacles / terrestrial** roots. Writhing spines with tiny ripples of liquidity present in them, resinous. Sweat beads perhaps – you acknowledge the temperature keeps rising – or language unspooling, syntax uncertain as you navigate your **self / sexuality / certainty**. Sibilance as sensuality, decomposed and viscous. Seconds **held / suspended / watched**, for a moment. Slippery fluidness with coarse gritted ridging, the sign in the studio reading *bone ash*, a history crumbling as time passes, as earth and plant mulch peters. Discomfort and tension between joints, a constant navigation of the body and the space it resides, hypersensitivity of where and how the body posits itself, what it **gives / does / performs**.

Time and body growing; both their shifts captured, the formations of new skeletal structures – sleeping, wilting, ageing, re-forming. The forms traverse floor and wall plane, slipping at times unnoticed beneath and above door frames to the rooms beyond. Bodies read as an ancient kinky parable, inspecting the bonds from human to non. Inspecting life as abjection. Feeling like an odalisque on a damp forest floor, wanting to merge closer with the burning peat, depart humanness. The want to photosynthesise with the morning's light, lie in a garden, medicinal. Sap on bark moves like slip on clay, a Tenmoku glaze staining it brown, before greenish-blue to pink crackles through. Even the room in which the forms reside, where you are gradually nestling into, is cloaked russet – like over-fired terracotta just before it melts, like simmering red soil.

Reverberations surround, resonating notes and chimes; **humming / exhaling / calling**. A vibrato note wavering like cilia hairs inside the ear, like slowly unfurling fernscoiling inside and out. Like song through watery marshland. A voice that seemingly comes from outside *and within*, the voice of keratin growing and buds opening. A flower rising up through an organ pipe. Notes evolve, modulated synthesis, becoming sonorous and metallic like a breeze passed through a wind-chime, as though ricocheting through a trachea or tree-trunk. Percussive pulsing like wavering heart beats, stringed like striations in a stem. Listen closely – the captured score of a body once more pried open, adopting another **stance / scent / signal**. A contemplated selection of sounds alluring you – **viewer / intruder / lover / unknowing** familiar – to come closer.

In Aliyah Hussain's imaged landscape where dreams and waking moments curdle, breath and its spores emerge as a milky emission, like glistening fungi underbelly. In this dream-wake state, bodies tentatively transform. Vocal cords twist to stems with active elasticity, ventricles unfurl to xylem, a delicate network. Moss in the lining of armpits. **Observing / assessing / propelling** towards these snaking outlines, you regard your own twisted veins and ventricles, the lines in your palms and the lay-lines you move by. Consider how you see another and how they

**see / feel / creep up**, around and (almost) inside you. Hussain effortlessly conjures something deeply erotic, you and the forms not touching one another but dwelling in synchrony. Both to be **probed / biopsied / examined**; to be reshaped and relished, the disembowelling of desire itself, to explore the freakishness of the way desire grips, how sexuality can alienate one from oneself, when desire is new, queer, ever-changing.

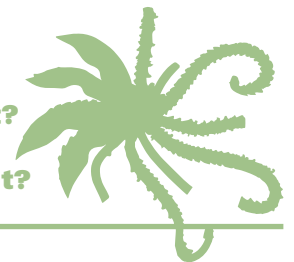
To shift from human to plant being, leaning into each room's stimuli, gesticulating and experimenting toward changing light and atmosphere. Hussain's offerings present themselves alive, the blurring of skins inherent in her plethora of colour application, surface and shape – inorganic to organic and back. Reciting *The Sleep of Plants*<sup>2</sup>, one might recall Anne Richter's tale, in which a young engaged woman – finding the pressure of marital expectations too much, wishing to exist unruly – wilfully turns herself into a plant. Growing gradually from a potted plant into a tree, to then blossom at the end of the tale, her fuller, flowered form presents an assertion of her sexuality on her own terms after calling off her engagement. Reconciling with this feminist refusal and transformation, Hussain implicitly aligns plants with the feminine body – both entities exploited, naturalised, and subjected to social and (bio) political control throughout time. By becoming plant, growing with perennial power, Richter's character and Hussain's viewer locates themselves outside of or in opposition to societal norms, seeking potential for ever-evolving, self-fulfilling existences.

Inspecting the forms – you are growing more comfortable with the meandering matter – each mass offers a fauna-like cross section. You learn – continuously re-shaping your own internalised substance – the forms' clay has been passed through custom steel dies in shapes extracted from botanical drawings, the plants chosen for folkloric associations. Variations in the steel dies cause the clay to stretch and drag, creating repetitive tears and curls in the medium, a rhythm inherent to the process. The resulting shapes are then stretched, curved and sliced, not one form the same. Fired to bisque, any broken clay **pieces / tissues / joints** are gathered and fused and glazed again, connected back to the remainder of the pieces – a bionic growth healed and reworked.

There is something tender and desperately human configured, the want to remould the fractured shards we amass. Tender and plant-natured too; you regard plants' morphological potency, their roles as a self-generating network that relink and redirect, that 'usher humans into a new spatiotemporal reality.'<sup>3</sup> The blurring line between our most human impulses and our most vegetal obsessions.<sup>4</sup> Here, Hussain's vegetal beings carry pod shapes that one might view as akin to vaginal forms, or those of the womb, glazed tissues of birth/re-birth. Continuations, connectivity. Beings that refuse long-standing distinctions between outside and inside, between us and another; our environments present within us. Hussain points to a mode of imaginative fiction, of speculation, moving beyond the notions of 'self' and 'other' amidst this time of global capitalism. Her works exist with an evocation of line and movement that brings together human and plant, fostering a sense of collectivism, each form the figure of process-driven rhythm and its distillation.

Other vegetative forms in the room have been grown through plaster press moulds taken from garden cuttings – Aliyah shares how she has been learning through and from the soil, forging a tactile relationship. Finger-tip to earthbed. Oxeye daisies for bruises; houseleek to ward off lightning; yarrow as protection charm; lovage for a love potion; elderflower for luck; broad beans for ghosts and the dead.<sup>5</sup> Traces of lives in transit, evoking sensations of wanting to come **closer to / inside / adopt** another being. To be a single evolving sheet of skin, a transcendental morass. Hussain speaks to the wish to anthropomorphise, to (be) plant and nurture together, to flee imposed constraints, to question. Visions of tendrils come, blushed florals curling around and within this body's ear, asking, **what can we live with**

**or without; what fictions  
must we reject, or embrace?  
What is real and what  
is possible today -  
at what cost?  
What do we  
desire most?**



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**Lu Rose Cunningham** (b. 1997) loves winged creatures and wetlands. Cunningham has written for and exhibited performances at Leeds Art Gallery, The Hepworth Wakefield, South London Gallery, Wysing Arts Centre, and HuMBase, Stuttgart. She is the author of poetry pamphlets *For Mary; Marie, Maria* and *Interval: House, Lover, Slippages*, both published by Broken Sleep Books, the latter featuring in *PN Review 2023*. Cunningham has also written for Glasgow presses Pala Press, SPAM and MAP Magazine, and more recently commissioned by arts journal *L'Essenziale Studio*, Milan and *émergent* magazine, London.

1. Jenny Hval, *Paradise Rot* (Verso Books, 2018)
2. Anne Richter, *The Sleep of Plants* (1967) found in *Sisters of the Revolution: A Feminist Speculative Fiction Anthology*, eds. Ann VanderMeer and Jeff VanderMeer (PM Press, 2015)
3. Antónia Szabari and Natania Meeker, *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction* (Fordham University Press, 2019) p.146
4. *Ibid.*, p.167–168