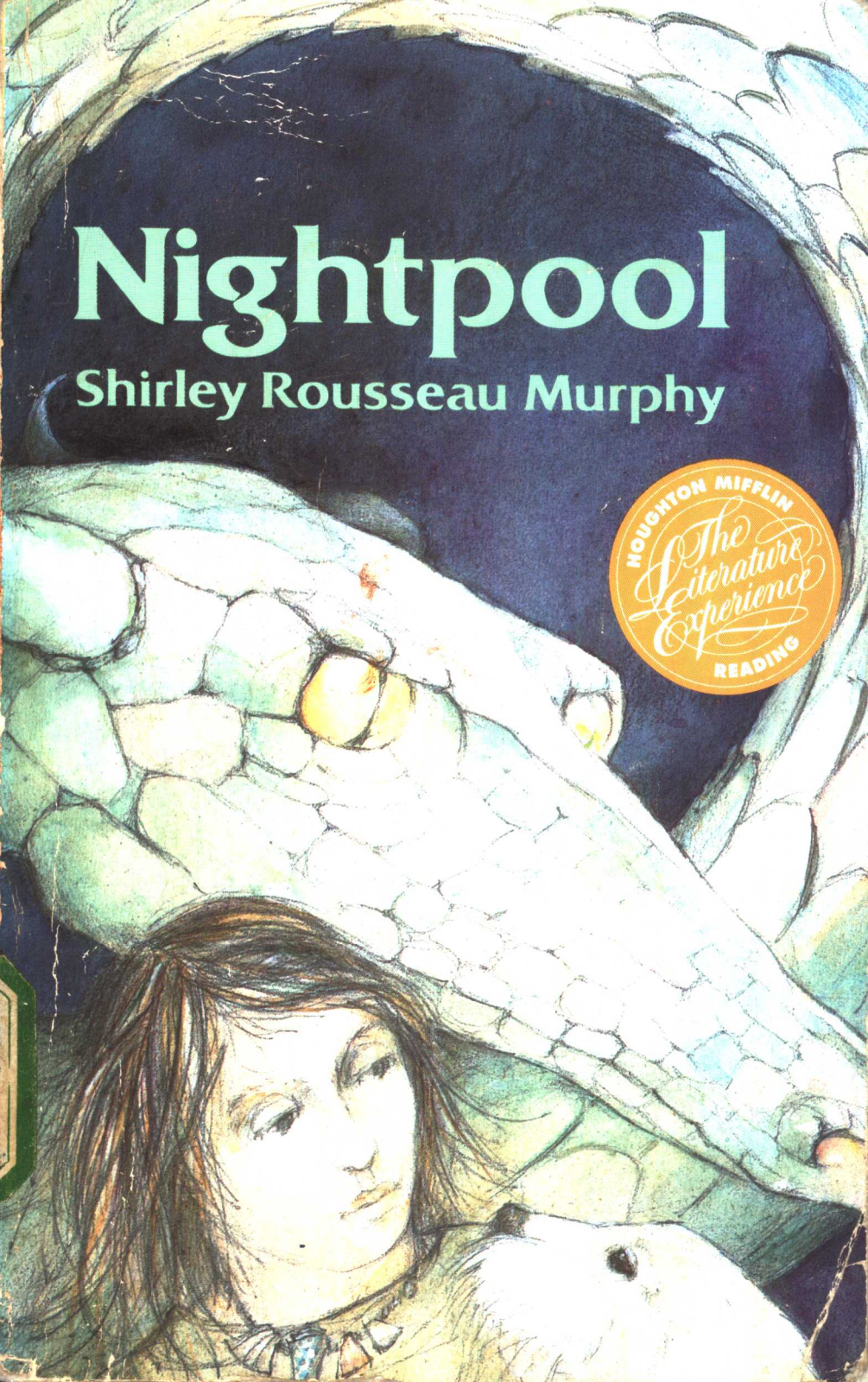
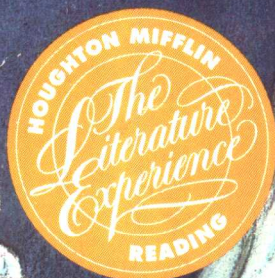


Nightpool

Shirley Rousseau Murphy



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1



It was early dawn when a swimmer appeared far out in the dark, rolling sea. His face was just visible, a pale smear, and his hair blended with the black waves. He dove suddenly and disappeared, then was hidden by scarves of blowing fog stained pale in the moonlight. Moonlight brightened the crashing spray, too, where waves shattered against the tall, rocky island.

The swimmer popped up again, close to the island's cliff. He breasted the waves and foam with strong strokes and leaped to grab at the sheer stone wall. A foothold here, a handhold, until his wet naked body was free of the sea, clinging like a barnacle to the cliff. A thin boy, perhaps sixteen. He climbed fast, more from habit than from need, knowing just where the best holds were. Above him, the cliff was honeycombed

with caves, this whole side of the island a warren of dwellings, but no creature stirred above him. Not one dark, furred face looked out at him, and no otter hunted behind him in the sea; they all slept, after last night's ceremonies.

He climbed to his own cave and stood in the entrance dripping, his head ducked to clear the rough arch of the doorway. Then he turned back to look out at the sea once more. Behind him, his cave echoed the sea's pounding song.

He was bony and strong, with long, lean muscles laid close beneath the flesh, a thin face with high cheekbones, and his dark hair streaked and bleached by sun and sea. The skin across his loins, where the breechcloth had grown small for him, was pale, and the white scars on his back would never tan. His eyes were as dark as the stone of the island. There was a white, jagged scar across his chin, where a wave had heaved him against the cliff when he was twelve. He stood trying to master the flood of emotions that still gripped him, though he had thought to swim away from them out in the cold, dark sea. Homesickness was on him even before he departed, and he wanted to go quickly now while dawn lay on the sea and the otters slept, wanted no more good-byes, because already his stomach felt hollow and knotted. A part of himself would never go away, would stay on Nightpool forever, a ghost of himself still swimming the sea with Charkky

and Mikk, diving deep into undersea gardens, playing keep-away in the waves.

He longed to be with Mitta suddenly, gentle, mothering Mitta, who had cared for him all the long months he had lain sick and hurt and not knowing who he was, cared for him as tenderly as she cared for her own cubs. Maybe he could just slip up over the rim of the island and into her cave, and lay his face against her warm fur as she slept. But no, the good-byes would begin all over, and they had said good-bye. Maybe the worst part of leaving was the good-byes, even in the warmth and closeness they had all felt last night at the ceremony.

He thought of the monster he meant to seek, and fear touched him. But he felt power, too, and a stubbornness that would not let him imagine losing against the dark sea creature. And once he defeated it, his real journey would begin, for he went to seek not one, but two creatures, as unlike one another as hatred is unlike love.

His head filled again with last night's scene in the great cave. Before the ceremonies began, while he and Thakkur were alone there, the white otter had stood tall before the sacred clamshell pronouncing in a soft voice the visions that gave shape to Teb's searching. The gleaming, pale walls of the great cave had been lighted by fire for the first time the otters could remember, five small torches of flaming seaweed that

Charkky and Mikk had devised in Teb's honor. Teb thought of Thakkur's blessings and his strange, luminous predictions, the old otter's white sleek body stretched tall, his attention rooted to the shell.

"You will ride the winds of Tirror, Tebriel. And you will touch humankind and change it. You will see more than any creature or human sees, save those of your own special kind.

"I see mountains far to the north, and you will go there among wonderful creatures and speak to them and know them."

As Teb stared out now at the dawn sky, he was filled with the dream. But with the knowledge, too, that no prediction is cast in stone, that any fate could change by the flick of a knife, or the turn of a mount down an unknown road.

And not all Thakkur's predictions had been of wonder. "I see a street in Sharden's city narrow and mean. There is danger there and it reeks of pain. Take care, Tebriel, when you journey into Sharden.

"And," the white otter said softly, "I see your sister Camery, tall and golden as wheat, and I see a small owl on her shoulder." This was a happier prediction, and Teb vowed again that besides fulfilling his own search, he could find Camery, too, and those who traveled with her.

When Thakkur finished his predictions, Teb took his paw and walked with him down from the dais to a stone bench, where they sat together until, a little

later, the crowds of otters began to troop in. "Camery is alive," Teb said softly to Thakkur, and studied the white otter's whiskered face.

The white otter nodded briefly. And then, partly from old age and partly from the strain of the predictions, he lapsed into a sudden light, dozing sleep. Soon Teb was surrounded by otters and drawn away into a happy ceremony of gift giving.

Each otter had brought a gift, a shell carefully cleaned and polished, or a pawful of pearls, or a gold coin from the sunken city of Mernmeth, that had lain drowned for so many lifetimes with its treasures scattered across the ocean floor.

Now, as he stood looking out at the sea, the ceremony of gift giving began to form a song in his mind. His verses came quickly, pummeling into his head, and each made a picture of the giver, holding forth a treasure. The song would remain in his memory without effort, creating sharp, clear scenes that he could bring forth whenever he wished. Just so did hundreds of songs remain, captured somehow by that strange, effortless talent that set him apart from other humans. Always he carried in his mind this hoard of color and scenes and voices from the past.

He would carry with him on his journey, as well, a stolen leather pack, a stolen knife and sword, and the oaken bow that Charkky and Mikk had helped him make. He would carry the gold coins and pearls for trading, but the rest of the gifts would be left in his

cave as intended, as good-luck omens to bring him back again, each carefully placed on the stone shelves carved into his cave walls, where Camery's diary lay wrapped in waterproof sharkskin. He had read it until he had worn out the pages.

He would need to steal a new flint for fire making, for he had given his to Charkky and Mikk. And he would have to steal some clothes, for he had only his breechcloth and his old leather tunic with the seams let out. He had no boots, and the cliffs and rocky, stubbled pastures would be harsh going. He would steal, not trade, until he was well away from the lands where he might be known.

He lay down on his sleeping shelf to measure his length and pressed his feet and head against the stone, then drew himself up small, the length he had been when he first came to live in this cave. He sat up and touched the woven gull-feather blanket at the foot of the shelf. The blanket had been Mitta's first large weaving; many otters had gathered its feathers, and she had labored a long time over it. The otters had done so many things for him that they had never done before; many that were against their customs. It didn't seem right to have brought such change to the otter folk, then to leave as if he cared nothing for them, or for the way they had sheltered him and taught him.

He had brought change to Nightpool unwanted by many: the planting of crops, the way small things were done, the tools and weapons of humans. He had brought

fire, brought the cooking of food, so that even last night the ceremonial feast had been of both the traditional raw seafood laid out on seaweed—clams and oysters and mussels and raw fish—and then a pot set over the fire to steam the shellfish, too.

The stealing had been the biggest change, and many otters had been angry about that first theft, though Charkky and Mikk had thought it a rare adventure. And even Thakkur, later on, had been very keen about stealing weapons, covering his white fur with mud so he could not be seen in the night.

It pleased Teb to know that no one else, no human, would take his place in the otter nation; no other human would sleep in his cave or dive deep into the sea among a crowd of laughing otters. Thakkur's faith that he would return pleased him. "You will know your cave is here, Tebriel, waiting for you, filled with your possessions." Yet Teb knew well enough he might never return, in a future as malleable as the changing directions of the sea.

But once he swam the channel, once he stood on the shore, then climbed the cliff to Auric's fields, his commitment would be made. Once he defeated the sea hydrus—if, indeed, he could defeat it—he would not return soon to the black rock island, to Nightpool's sea winds and the green, luminous world of undersea, to the weightless freedom of the sea. If he could defeat the hydrus, he knew he would then be drawn out across the wild, warring lands of Tirror. Deep within

his being the call grew even stronger, and his need to give of himself to Tirror grew bold.

He stood listening to the voice of his cave echo the roaring beat of the sea. There would be no cave song on dry land, only the voices of land animals. And the voices of men, very likely challenging him.

When he turned from the sea back into his cave, the white otter was coming silently along the narrow ledge, erect on his hind legs, his whiteness startling against the black stone, his forepaws folded together and very still, not fussing as other otters' paws fussed. Thakkur paused, quietly watching him, and Teb knelt at once, in a passion of reverence quite unlike himself. But Thakkur frowned and reached out a paw to touch Teb's shoulder; their eyes were on a level now, Thakkur's dark eyes half laughing, half annoyed. "Get up, Teb. Do not kneel before me." Then his look went bright and loving.

Teb stood up and turned away into the cave, embarrassed, and busied himself readying his pack, then pulling on his tunic.

"You have grown so tall, Tebriel. It was not long ago that I was taller than you." The look between them was easy, a look of love and of sadness. "I have come to say a last farewell. Not good-bye, for I know you will return to Nightpool."

"No prophesy is absolute."

"This vision is strong. You will return, I have no doubt of it." The white otter's dark eyes were as deep

and fathomless as the sea itself. "But now the time has come, now you must go, and from this moment you belong not only to Nightpool, but to all of Tirror. Your fate lies upon Tirror now. Both Tirror's fate, and our own fate, travels with you."

They embraced, the white otter's fur infinitely soft against Teb's face, and smelling of sea and of sun.

"Go in joy, Tebriel. Go with the blessing of The Maker. Go in the care of the Graven Light."

Teb took up his pack at last and lashed it to his waist. He gave Thakkur a long, steady look, then stepped to the edge of the cliff and dove far out and deep, cutting the water cleanly and striking out at once against the incoming swells. As quickly as that he left Nightpool, and his tears mixed with the salty sea.

At a safe distance from the cliffs he turned north, and glancing up between strokes, he caught a glimpse of Thakkur's white form on the black island; then the vision vanished in a shattering of green water as he made his way with strong, pulling strokes crosswise to the force of the sea, up toward the north end of the island.

He could have walked across Nightpool and swum the channel from the mainland side, but not this morning, not this last time. As he passed the lower caves at the far end of the island, he could hear water slapping into the cave doors. At the far end, beside Shark Rock, he turned again, toward land this time, and set out in an easier rhythm with the tide, to cross the deep

green channel. And it was here that suddenly two brown heads popped up beside him, and two grinning faces. Mikk and Charkky rolled and dove beside him, escorting him in toward the shore.

They leaped and splashed and pushed at him, rocked him on their own waves and dove between his feet and under him, and Charkky tickled his toes. Teb was not wearing the precious sharkskin flippers; he had left them safe in his cave. Charkky came up on his other side, dove again, was gone a long time, and came up ahead of Teb and Mikk with a sea urchin in each dark paw, busily stripping off the spines with his teeth. He tossed one to Mikk and one to Teb, and they were into a fast, complicated game of catch. Then when the game grew old, the two otters rolled onto their backs, cracked the urchins open with small stones they carried on cords around their necks, and ate them live and raw. Teb tried to outdistance them, but without the flippers he hadn't a chance, even when they only floated idly kicking and eating.

They left him before the sea shallowed onto rising shore, embracing him in quick, strong, fishy-smelling hugs and dragging their rough whiskers hard across his cheek, their eyes great dark-brown pools of longing and of missing him, and of love, and of silly otter humor all at once.

"Fly high, brother," Mikk said hoarsely. "Know clouds, brother, as you know the sea." They studied one another with love and concern.

Charkky just touched his cheek, softly, with a wet, gentle paw. Then they were gone, diving down along the bottom, dropping deeper, Teb knew, as the shore dropped, swimming deep toward home.

Teb stood up in the shallow water and walked up the shore. The beach was narrow, steep, and rocky. Above him rose the tall cliff, and against the sky lay the lip of the rich high pastures of Auric, a green thatch hanging over the edge. His father's pastures, he thought with sudden emotion. His father's land—his own land these four years since his father was murdered, though he had no way to claim it. I am King of Auric, he thought bitterly. And I stand on Auric's shore naked and alone, and the dark warriors would try to kill me if they knew. If Sivich and his soldiers knew I was here, they would ride down from the castle to kill me. He smiled and felt his sword, and almost wished they would try.

Then he shook himself, stood a moment to dry in the wind, and began to climb the cliff.

It was steep, but the outcropping stones and tough hanks of dry grass helped him. As he pulled himself over the edge, something snorted, and a band of horses shied and wheeled nearly on top of him, and pounded away across the hills.

Why hadn't he been more careful? Why hadn't he looked before he let himself be seen? He might have had himself a mount now if he'd used his head. And what if it had been soldiers? It was not a good begin-

ning. As he swung up over the lip of the cliff, he resolved to take more care.

He stood looking out across the rolling green hills and at the little villages far distant along the west turning of the coast. Inland to the west, between two familiar hills and a grove of almond trees, stood the towers of home, stood the Palace of Auric. His memories crowded back, sweeping him away into scenes that were, each, a stabbing pain. It all flooded back, the beatings and the leg chains from which he still wore scars, the cruelty of Sivich and his guards. He stood brooding and angry, filled with the pain of his father's murder, with the helpless fury holding him now as if no time had passed, as if he and Camery were still prisoners in their dead father's palace. He remembered it all in every detail, the pain, the stink of the unkempt palace, remembered as if he were twelve again, chained in the cold stone cellar. Remembered . . .

2



He had been barely twelve years old, a small, thin boy sleeping on the stone floor of a prison cell so deep in the cellars of the palace you could not tell night from day. It was near midnight when the guard's boot nudged his ribs. His eyes flew open; then he squeezed them closed in the bright lantern light and curled tighter beneath the thin blanket he had doubled and tucked around himself. When the boot nudged harder, insistently, he scowled up into the light again and into Blaggen's sleep-puffy face, lit from beneath by the swinging flame. Blaggen smelled of liquor, as usual, and of leather wet from his own urine, for he had dirty ways. The two guard jackals pushed closer to Teb, mixing their own rank smell, like spoiled meat, with Blaggen's, their little mean eyes red in the light and

their wings dragging the floor with a dusty dry sound. They were heavier than Teb, and pushy. They slept in his cell and followed him in all his serving duties, their slaving grips eager for him to try escape.

Blaggen kicked him again, so hard it took his breath. Teb squirmed out of the tangle of blanket, confused and clumsy, but could not tear himself fully from sleep.

"Get up, son of pigs. Sivich wants you in the hall. There are soldiers to serve, thirsty from a long ride." He emphasized *thirsty* with another nudge. Teb wanted to hit him, but knew better. The welts on his back still pained him from his last outburst of fury. Blaggen belched into his yellow beard and, tired of watching the boy squirm under his boot, jerked him up by the collar, jerked the cell door open with an echoing clang, and shoved Teb before him down the narrow black passage. Up three flights, Teb stumbling in darkness on the stone steps, the jackals crowding close.

In the hall the torches were all ablaze, and a great fire burned on the hearth. The room was filled with warriors, shouting and arguing and laughing. Sivich paced before the fire, his broad, black-bearded head jutting like a mean-tempered bull's. Weapons were piled beside the outer door that led down to the courtyard: heavy swords; long, curved bows and leather quivers filled with arrows; and the oak-shafted spears.

Teb crossed to the scullery at once. Old Desma was there, yawning and pushing back her gray hair, doubtless dragged from sleep in the servants' quarters just