

the mermaid speaks

ok, it's true, everything they have said
I have eaten men as you would a tangerine
thoughtlessly, reverently, juice smeared about
my mouth.

perhaps you would blame me, call me bloodthirsty
along with the rest of my kin –the canaima
the ole higue, even the mazaruni. roust up a gang of the young
brave on palm wine
to come and stake me

and I laugh as surely as you weep on my shores (this
ownership you'll forgive me – I took it as the dutch
did your children). your forebears came on the same
hunt after I ate another man (your granddaddy?).
forgive me, he was lovely. ripe copper skin warmed
with the sun, singing among the white lotus as if he could
charm the roots of trees into fealty. I remember weeping
with my sisters below in our city, maybe he wept too
-its been so long, I can't be sure, and there is nothing
I want to pretend with you. so I did what was impossible:
swam up, struggling past the pleas of my own mother,
burst through the Pomeroun and beseeched
him into my arms. (yes I say begged without shame,
you know the men of your blood, what they can drive you to do).
and forward he came, fearful of drowning dancing into my naked red arms
and when i ate him, he urged me on, sang with delight as my teeth met
the cradle of his flesh. I have heard his wife crying
at our shores, hands tethered to her children, dragging them to and fro
as if her love could raise him. the fishermen say she
went mad with grieving, is this true?

the ole higue goes hunting*

legend holds that I am
ugly and stooped, covered in frightful
disdain. but rather I glory in my own
sight: naked black wrinkled flesh, breasts
low hanging ripe fruit, my
sex a shining damp shell. at nights while
you slumber, I go flying crowned
in blue fire above the mahaica,
my skin left sleeping in bed.
there are those who would
argue my midnight visits spur madness
report of women who cup machetes as
they would my breasts and do a violence
to their men. I say the taste of me
intoxicates, bewitches my beloveds
to cut what keeps them tethered
and sighing, toiling in heat for a
man that does little good. in truth
this way is no easier: boys
spread white salt and rice in
strict lines to bar me from my own skin
my own beloveds shy with fear
when they first see me
but then I reach out my hand, hold
them to my chest and sing the history

of old black women digging and crafting
this ancient earth into consciousness. I say
this is yours, take it, and they come
shuddering with power

moongazer*

*I will not ask you where you came from
I would not ask it
neither should you*

-Hozier

let me say this: i was human once
and so frail, the weight of a machete
could split my back working in these fields
we harvested cane all throughout the day
longing for the call of night, the
cool black hollow it would bring. even now
I remember my woman - mighty as she
was, crying after a day's work my own
hands trembling as we suckled stolen cane
together, that sugar the only thing that
cared if we lived or died. I buried her
in those same fields we slaved, then swooned
blindly into the sweet of a velvet dark
kept hearing my love
calling me deeper still. I grew wild
in my grief, dreamt her a moon
reaching down, until finally i grew taller
to meet her voice, a giant as mighty as her
oh, my god, what stories these white
men will tell! let them say i would
kill my own blood rather than let
them eat, stalk sugarcane fields
as i would my own heart. you
know me, what i have done
to find my love: look at her
crowned by nothing but the stars
in this bowl of sky. i've earned the right
to gaze on her.

*the moongazer is a bloodthirsty monster fabled to hunt those who come into the fields at night.
the dutch created the moongazer to stop slaves from stealing sugarcane after dark

Summoning the Canaima*

for Tituba

I feel the breath of the wolf in my ear
at night I close
my eyes and dream of what you will kill
the white crane, its neck barely torn within your
teeth, my master, his tongue splayed across that
thin angry sneer will you bring it to me? this unbearable
gorgeous prey, dragged bedside - bloodless
and still
in these godless hours
I lay wreathed in doubt

I could lose my soul for conjuring
evil like I have the right to call god
and demand an answer, I could
lose my man for what I've done
strung up on some tree as penance
for bedding a witch
his back flayed with a whip
in thrall with the secrets of his flesh
I could cause my child's head
to be dashed out on the stones
that stops the essequibo from flooding
this white man's plantation
placed by black
hands spilling black blood
I could lose my life for this, cause
my aunties to throw threadbare aprons
over their blessed heads and cry out for air

yet still, I want to open my ribs
take my ache
mold it like clay into death
a sickle to drive my enemies into
something past madness

give me a reason to leave them alone
arrest this sorrow inside me sealed
like I don't know what's nesting inside

**The Canaima is a mythological creature conjured by people to wreak revenge on those who have harmed them*

where does the story start?

with outrageous grief

so luscious so rare, we'll keep it for generations
bring it out at the finest of dinners, plant it in fields
and thresh its stalks at night.

it starts with a ring of jeweled mermaids beckoning
great uncle harold from solid ground to a golden city
submerged in shining black water,
his wife weeping and weeping at the shores among
his rough nets, harold's boat empty and rollicking in the middle
of a river. him rising after seven days towards the pomeroon
sun, pulled up wailing by scaled lovely arms.

it starts with the jumbee, dead slave children hungry for friends
pining in the winds behind great granny's house, drawn
to salt and fevers of blue fire. it starts with broken
glass, the surprise of blood in a wife's waiting mouth
my great grandfather's hand curled in a fist. it

starts with a riot of stubborn love more drunk than the pastor
at my baptism, with one lie, then another, then another, until a whole
world is born, and we wait, a revolt of black girls

cook up walks

the way you think a man with a machete in his
6 passenger van should - all sinew and black amble
his women are a tribe of big dark angels in tight dresses with
breasts like freshly buttered bakes, cook up falls in
love at least twice a week and he drives them mad
with his stories of the jumbees he's fought off in the
interior, his hands roving a velvet spell against their hair.
women, they come look for he at the drink shop all hours of
the day, darla and yvonne fought over him - cook up
grinning like a mad king in the corner, in a tore up white shirt
and bare pants, eating prawns and chow mein, while pretty
darla wept *why you keepin anudda woman so*, yvonne
creeping up behind her with a rock and knocked darla so
hard upside the head, the skull split like meat, and
darla keeps crawling wailing *i'll giv' yuh my blood* till
cook up leaves with yvonne only to steal away again
during the early morning chorus of toads. darla's mummy
thinks yvonne set an evil eye on her, darla can't stop
weeping, just dreams of cook up and his knives
inside her, cutting, cutting, until he loves

cook up meets god

and she is a big big black woman thick
thigh meat all dark knotted hair, lips a smashed ripe heart
there are months where he forgets her, chases
after other sweet women and drink, she lays in a
locked closet weeping into her sister's shoulder
holding her arms, the bare skin shining a bruised plum

sometimes he love she too much, bangs on every
door and window in her dark house till he
can break in. swears off the rum shop, and whirls
round the kitchen till a feast erupts, prays at
her feet for grace, then pulls god in closer
whispers *who else yuh love but me* enters in
between her legs and feasts for days. god
drunk in his light

cook up loves

at age 13

his mummy, her face a waxing yellow moon, the chin
a dark field curled and twisted. every sunday
cook up tends this garden with her, tweezers in hand
a slight silver mirror grasped in her palm the color
of ripe plantains hissing in a pan. each follicle loosed
from her flesh more stubborn then the next, black hair
encased in a bulb of white. cook up loves her beard
and the flesh that rears it even when she weeps declares
herself *too ugly* to go to church and even look at god
curses her stubborn blood that makes new things
grow even when she has killed it with her own hands.
cook up loves reginald from section k
their lips firm against each other in the one shadow
old lady wong's house provided. the pleasure
their tongues reared in each other. cook up loves
reginald even more when he and
a gang of boys beat him for walking too sweet to the
cricket field. the calls of *faggot* bleeding
through the air, cook up's fists joining with reginald's
chest again and again. how reginald kept rising to his feet
stubborn and bold, till the boys left him be, and cook up
leads him home, sat reginald down in his own bedroom
and wept before him, *why i hurt yuh?* their hands
growing into each other, rushing to seal the wound.

cook up goes hunting with granny

age 6

loud nights in the interior, the blade
foreign in his baby palm, granny's knife
strapped between her soft dark breasts,
a machete trailed back in war
with one silver and black braid, that her man
Shakespeare will unbraid every evening
and weep *so sweet so sweet*. Shakespeare hunts granny
like the meat they catch, he wants her black and trembling,
trapped *a ghost an angel a bitch fuckin' cunt*.
cook up wants her too, promises granny big big golden houses
where blood stays in the body, draws pictures
of her laughing like a spell. how granny weeps
at the river, cook up's baby arms
round her neck, his hand a waiting fist.

cook up laments

begins to cry at the bar,
tears falling onto the crisp linen suit
darla takes him home
a blooming house all lace and pink bougainvillea,
serves curried lizard sweet and ripe on flowered plates, she
smiling and smiling as cook up drinks more spiced rum, talks
so about his granny and her knives, the one room and bed
they slept in at the corner of a big dark water, how he
could press against her when the cock crowed and
she smelled of tea and night. the men she loved who
beat her left the cupboards bare

cook up takes darla to her white bed, and eats
her for hours, holds her like he would his granny
arms curled round her form like a shield
weeps as night falls for how her heart will break
when he leaves her, weeps for the man he adores
and could never touch like this, weeps for
the warm cradle of darren's skin, knows he would bury
a machete like love into his belly, if darren ever
called out to him on a crowded street
darla's bed nothing but a river for his ache