

## 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