Excerpts from *Mother Octopus*

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Welcome to America,

where the children play

cage to cage.

*We’ve taken back our country*,

my countrymen say from the sunny side

of empire, while mothers in airtight cages do time,

their babies playing mercy in nurseries lined

with steel bars, each day their captors

ho-humming away their nine-to-fives.

And when the president,

in another televised scolding

into the sequined air says,

*Over the border, they’re sending explosives!*

he means *missives,* but it’s all the same

to him, and they are all

the same to him.

Some configurations of my mother tongue,

cage that it is, bring such shame.

The myths become muscle memory,

but anyLand of the Free,

any opportunity with a deadbolt

is a head game.

Immigrant, you know the game’s

rigged, and the bullets on your bones

were never meant to be even,

and the state will have its way

with your body.

Immigrant: hide away your hope

with its bubble sheen in your lunch tray,

store your soul behind the pellet-

hard peas, for safekeeping.

I’m afraid to map my heart

in these badlands, this sad land

where they say I *belong*, meaning

at its root

*to go along with.* Let me not

belong, if this is belonging.

Field Guide for the White Naturalist

or: The Trees Speak a History I Did Not Know

Instructions with a Disclaimer: If you bring this guide into the field, keep in mind that it is best read with a wariness of white spaces, identifications, and curations. Carry a pen and a pair of scissors; you may have to fill it in and undercut its whiteness as you read. Do not trust what you think you know.

*~~Lapdog (canis)~~*

Description: known to runaway slaves as a bloodhound or savage dog; a tracker of skin oils & cells; trained to fight until the death; slaves traveled through muddy water or wore rabbit grease on their feet to throw the dogs off their scent

*what did the dogs know?*

*what omissions*

*what skins*

*what odor of terror & rabbit,*

*what curse*

*what coercion*

*Migrating birds* (migratus)

Description: a cue for flying north; a summoning

*what does it mean to take flight*

*your heart a bird*

*smacking*

*against your rib cage.*

*When from the sky,*

*a sign*

*Oak Tree (quercus)*

Description-America’s ~~national~~ tree; ~~wholesome and~~ strong, likes full sun; in the night: a hanging tree

*to set out in the night*

*Ocean (oceanus)*

Description-a middle place; a passage; “there was hardly room…some went mad of thirst and tore their flesh/ and sucked the blood…”

*With such thirst*

*Pine (pinus)*

Description-a medicine used by slaves; an antiseptic; “Fer de lil’ chilluns and babies [grannies] would take and chew up pine needles and den spit it in lil’ chilluns mouths and make dem swallow”

*babies & grannies*

*Riverbank* *(ripam fluminis)*

Description: a road north; as in salvation

*followed the river*

*Sage (Salvia officinalis)*

Description- a medicine used by slaves; a balm for fever and chills; antioxidant; taste: bitter, earthy; from the Latin word “salvare,” meaning to be saved

*saved themselves*

*Salt* (*Salis*)

Description: a preserver; a corroder; as in seawater, a body of water

*preserved*

*their bodies*

*Stars* (*Stellae*)

Description: an escape map; as in follow the gourd, go underground, seek out the call of the “owl”

*sought out*

*a voice*

*from the dead calm*

*A hoot*

*a beckoning*

*Can you trust with your life*

*a who*

*in a moonless wood?*

Mother Octopus

Much is made of the final months of a mother octopus.

Dandle the lacy funk of a hundred or so serried eggs

on your arms for fifty-three months while wasting away

and *National Geographic* is guaranteed to have a field day.

Wed motherhood to martyrdom like mimic octopus

to damselfish disguise and anything less is pap.

But if you remove her optic (pituitary) glands,

she’ll give up fasting, abandon her eggs, hunt and feed again.

Survive. Which is to say so much of mothering

boils down to hormones in the end. Which is to say surgery

can bend her unyielding essence. All this to say your self-sacrifices

and post-curfew headaches, line-in-the-sand declarations

stem from chemical messengers you can’t see or hear

inside of you. All this to say you never had to lose

yourself for me. I wish we could clear some space,

start fresh, share a few cocktails over dinner.

We would have had so much in common: me, a paradox

in flesh, just another entry in a book of baby names

and friend to you. Here’s to you, Mother,

flourishing, freed, afloat with possibility.

Taughannock Falls Haibun

Here, the theater of bird-shadows against cliff face, with its infinite joints and fractures, heightens the catharsis of waterfall. In this former sea, a stratigrapher’s dream, turkey vultures play ring around the rosie with my body, while a crow riffs off the echoes of his caws against the gorge. I pause in this caesura in earth, while from the watchtower of slick rock, hundreds of feet above, an agile bird—a peregrine? No, here they were wiped out with DDT—contemplates her next nose-dive. Maybe a hawk? Sate your wanderlust and call your mother, she kak kak kaks; it’s been weeks. Translate this lithic extravagance, this pre-rain scent and kettle warm-slag. If you’re brave enough, work in the memento mori of your species, the fumes and plastics, that will be read in the strata by some future race. Mention too the love letter that is tucked into the same nook where vultures split their time with sky. Breathe in pine and brush up against deep time; swoon under their spell. And take note of the once-nomadic ribbon waving from a crack in a spinal cord column of limestone. When a breeze knocks loose a spark

shower of rocks, watch

how red cedars cling on for dear life

in the nick of time.

Salt Lick

You’re my salt lick, and sometimes a white tail

hedging the dawn, and always a wild child,

standstill and spellbound in the forest,

translating blue-green moss and fern hair mood.

You’re my snag at the heart, my cave of secrets,

and in the grotto the still, still pool. You’re my season

of strawberries, my sun-bathing dreams.

You’re that bolt of heat lightning, that flash within me.

You’re a record of me, and I of you,

but in the years before the law let us marry,

we needed no proof. No stamp of approval.

And try as they did to part and reprove

us with DOMA, to tame our love with ICE,

we’re the ecosystem that outlasts their cages;

we’re the exchanges between wind,

sea, and air. The fossils of your tears

crystalized inside me somewhere

after all those years of salt and waiting.

Self-Portrait as Barred Owl

When you stopped breathing,

I pushed off the dock

of my life and left all the goods

for the crows. I faceplanted into brick-

heavy depths, dragged the floodwaters

of my tears for some kind of sign

of the woman who raised me

to believe in miracles

of spring salamanders under frosted

boulders and pocket-sized forests

of moss and fungi in campfire beer bottles.

When you stopped breathing,

I shriveled to a shadow (yours?),

then an owl, meaning my face

curled into a jumbo-

ear. My fingers: the clenched X

of talons. My thoughts: switchblades.

When you stopped breathing,

I disinherited all your defend-the-nest

instincts, waited for more kitchen knives

to fall from the sky. I stormed, made camp

beneath glints of steel. Begged for your call.

Whatever outpost you’re on, whatever outer

limit, cry or call; I’ll be ready, poised

over the backwoods of my grief,

the hitch of my ongoingness.

Nudge me with your song or signal,

the song of your signal (*who-who-who*

*cooks for you?*), or out of place sound—

scattershot chitters or whistle calculated to reach me.

Grief is a vigil of earth and atmosphere,

and the closest to heaven is upending

boulders and bottles. Stricken

into silence, your daughter to the end,

I’m listening, testing the lengths

of your love again.

Diet and Feeding Behavior of the Hagfish, Practicing Witch of the Sea

I’ve heard it said that hagfish, with her love

of dying flesh, can enter wounded whales

and fish, and feast from inside out. Above

the ground, I’ve heard it said that this entails

slime, gross amounts of it, and hunger huge

enough to scare away her rivals. Rue

the day I realized that it was too late

to flee. Already hurt, I bit the bait;

I flit too close again. This time: a flash,

a chokehold, slime, and me, her meat. Best to stay

away. But she—evolved to dine and dash—

is all-devouring. When you pull away,

you’ll have to play dead. She needs to feel you slack-

en. Your calm will be your counterattack.

Fowl at Large

What honing dial set awry

or false hunch or storm of the century

drives the accidental bird

or dreaming poem to surface?

As for me, I had disavowed hope’s

candle-to-egg devotions, spike-heeled the idea

of someday. Speaking of chicks, newbies,

and baby tortoises, if you sentence

a beehive to a bell jar, those hourglass

bees will one day spill like lava

over every lip and crevice. I swear,

I’ve seen those little torpedoes of joy and sting

meet and greet every goldenrod,

every marigold from here to long

after cocktail hour. Like a cacophony

of cats, so many I’s without apology,

screaming their heads off,

I’ve lost all sense of grace,

thank god. My thirst is deeper;

it shrieks for that kite slicing through unseen

geographies, lost, windstorm-dazed,

her compass needle wild as a roulette wheel.