Ms. X’s Ocean

poems

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Prologue: Ms. X’s Ars Poetica

Inside, their arms
like bladed wire
cut off memory.
Outside, the past’s
a stapled wound
long as a snake.

Body-cave of old wounds,
memories drawn in scars—
the pictures bloat
and sink with each breath.
An asphyxiating ocean.

Sisters, visit me
where I left
the children. They’re all
steel bones
clanging shut.
Ms. X, Trick Baby

In the photo, rhinestones sparkle around your mother’s neck. The play of ocean’s behind her. In the foreground, her john’s dress blues blur into a night of endless water.

When she got you, your moby-dick father climbed up from the sea of her creamy belly, blinked away sight of her, wiping himself raw with the sheet.

Crosslegged on the Motel 6 mattress, your seventeen-year-old mother slipped on her glasses, tucked dark strands behind her ears to smooth the greasy fives in her lap.

Zipping the bills into her shorts meant another week of bread and milk, a couple of burger dinners, the box of tampons she wouldn’t open.
Wake Up

I.

He hit me—
a bottle I’d made,
beads worked at the neck,
a gift.

She saw my face,
called the black eye *penned*,
meant my face was a story.

We’d move, they decided.
Try the desert, LA,
maybe somewhere in Oklahoma.

II.

In the parking lot of a Tahoe stop,
a kitten climbs down my hand.
Later, he shows me one flattened in Nevada:
*Your kitty*, he laughs, pointing.

That flat sign meant my life.

Road gone to black water,
I hug my ribs in the back seat,
their cigarettes burning
all the way to Phoenix, Arizona.
Bonemeal

My granny was a weaver. A drinker, she had my mother’s liar tongue. The only time I touched her,

I was four, come to visit her country. She found me locked inside the greenhouse calling like a small bird.

Her hands shook at the door’s white panes. Talking me through the sliding of the inner lock, she muttered, Stupid.

I emerged at last, in my rumpled dress. Bare trees tearing the sky above my head, she shook me. Shook me like a sack of bonemeal she’d turn into her garden.
Figs and Fish

When Ms. X was a girl,
her brother called her Beast.
He called her outside
to the boys’ club under the fig tree
where they’d stashed a cardboard mattress.

Under their sign that read No grownups. No girls,
they lay her on the slippery box face up,
her eyelashes catching fig dust.

Open her fish, they told each other,
making cowboy whoops you could hear all over.
They said she was the Indian,
the dirty damned enemy.
She had to die.

Under the fig, she saw an arrow
through each boy’s head, his face
above hers grinning like a dog
humping against her thigh.
Ms. X Kills the Rabbit

When I was fifteen, in my blue uniform and hard black shoes, a man held my face in the cutting dirt.

He plugged his dick in. Left, running.
The fading suck
of sneakers on wet sidewalk
swallowed by morning,
I got up,

shoved balled underwear
to the garbage can's bottom,
walked off. Pressing sticky thighs
together, a trickle of red salt
threatened skinned knees, white socks.

Later: the hot gym,
stink of meat lunches,
droning weeks of Civil War history, my stepfather's hot stares
on my aching breasts. No blood gripped my gut.

Child soul of what I could never be
sucked from me.