

Clytemnestra

A reimagining of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, 'Leda and the Swan'

“A sudden blow: the great wings beating still

Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed

By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,

He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.”

Leda and the Swan, W.B. Yeats, 1865-1939

My little sister is born a month early, in a rush of golden afterbirth and crushed feathers. I stand over the tiny body on the rug. Feathers plastered flat against her still chest. Stiff, pale wings curling around her shoulders, like a plumaged cocoon to protect her from the faceless threat of the world.

“Can I –“ I lift her gently from the rug. Blister-hot skin, sticky with a sheen of gold amniotic fluid. Her neck is elongated, graceful, covered in a fine white goose-down. But a swan's neck cannot support an infant-skull, and her head lolls about limply, an engorged flower at the end of a stem.

Out of the darkness Mum's breath comes, hot and animal. “Take her away.”

“Are –“

“I don't wanta look at her.”

I bury her amongst the twisted roots of an old banksia, far enough from the shore that the tide won't reach her and deep enough that the dingoes can't either. Ocean salt thickens the air.

Her body is unbearably light when I lay it in the ground. Bird-bones are hollow, you know. It helps with the flying. I gaze down at her strange form and wonder whether she would have been capable of flight. The crescent-moon wings stiffening in the cool air; the smooth skin of

her forehead giving way to bird feathers; the swan-like neck arching into that terrible, magnificent question mark.

Her little fingers and toes taper into webbed talons, just like mine. There is a steady easterly whipping up off the ocean, and the wind catches in my left wing, the larger one, making it billow out like a sail. My other wing rests limp at my side, useless as an underdeveloped limb. Look at the body resting in the ground, then back up at me, and I suppose you couldn't pick the differences between us. Both twisted, hollow-boned, half-swan and half-human daughters.

The only prayer to mark the death is that of the banksia flowers, their whispery song a hymn rustling around us. I have no psalm for her. Mum says they listen, the gods, pressing their ears down close to catch the thread of mortal thoughts, scenting weakness like tiger sharks on the trail of blood. I cannot trust the kind of god who would answer a prayer from me.

I don't look back at the banksia as I walk down to the ocean. Debris has been swept in by the midnight tides; skeins of seaweed and rotting cuttlefish shells, scalloped shark eggs and the brittle exoskeletons of sand-stranded crustaceans. My taloned toes catch in a coil of fishing wire and I shake them free. Milky-white jellyfish drift past me in the current as I enter the ocean. I bat at them gently. In this light the webbing stretched between my fingers appears almost translucent, a tracery of blue veins illuminated within each membrane. When I dive beneath the surface, I stretch out my wings. In that blue-green, underwater world everything is briefly weightless, and it is possible to imagine that I am flying.

Mum is awake when I return home. She leans on her walking stick in the doorway, smoking a clove cigarette. Ribbons of lilac smoke wreath her gnarled hands.

"There's a storm coming," I tell her. A drop in the air pressure has made the feathers at the nape of my neck stand on end.

"Good." Mum breathes in deep, the end of her cigarette flaring up. "Swans can't fly in bad weather."

Dawn-light streams through the smoke, gilding her in a hazy golden gleam. It's easy to imagine her as a young woman, the daughter of a seal-catcher who spent her days prowling remote beaches. The kind of woman who might tempt a god to shift into the form of a swan, flying down to steal something irreplaceable. Then she coughs and spits phlegm into the sand, and she's once again just Mum, ruddy-faced, hunching over on her bad leg.

"How many days have we got left?" I ask. "The jellyfish are back."

"What colour were they?"

"I dunno. Yellowish."

Mum drops her still-lit cigarette onto the deck and stamps it out with her heel. "Summer's nearly here. I say we've got a few days."

"That's enough. You can get your strength – "

"I'm strong." The knuckles go white where she clutches her cane. I want to tell her about the small grave I dug by the ocean, where the bottlebrushes sing prayers and salt hangs thick as seal-blood in water. But the look on her face is that of a child awoken unexpectedly from a dream into a morning which is too cold, too sharp. When she turns to go inside, I follow.

The net spills from the kitchen table onto the floor, tangling around my feet where I step over it. Woven from spinifex grass, spools of red twine, fisherman's lines salvaged from the ocean, braids of Mum's hair. All that's missing is the hook and eye closure to fasten it shut.

Mum runs one hand across the edge of the net, the way she brushed the feathers from my forehead when I had nightmares as a child. "Need to find somethin' special to finish it off."

"A fisherman's hook?" My eyes are on the cradle that rests in the shadowy nook beside the table. Yesterday, when Mum felt her water break, I gathered daylily stalks and kangaroo paw foliage to weave a soft mattress for the cradle. Mum has already thrown the mats away; the cot sits bare and cold.

“It takes a stronger lock than that to hold a god.”

“I didn’t think nothin’ could hold a god.”

Mum’s smile is a small, salt-bitter thing. “I did. Twice.”

Mum’s told me the story before, of the god who came to her in the form of a swan when she was barely older than I am now. The wiry strength of the ocean sung in her blood, and she used that wildness when hunting alongside her father. Wrestling seals in the warm shallows, pulling their necks taut and opening up their stomachs. Perhaps that’s what tempted a god. Unnatural, for a woman to kill with such ease. Perhaps that’s why, nine months ago, he came again.

The cradle gapes empty between us.

“It’s nearly sun-up.” Mum’s brushes a hand absentmindedly down her hip, the one that still twists in an odd direction even after we reset the broken bone. “The pup’s will be coming out to sun themselves.”

I hesitate for a moment, waiting for her to turn to me and frown. I can see it; she’ll tilt her head, her eyes as sharp and dark as a magpie’s. Then she’ll press her lips thin, and ask, “Well? What are you pissing around for? Dinner won’t catch itself.”

But she doesn’t turn, and her magpie-gaze is instead fixed upon the cradle. As I walk out the front door I listen for the familiar sound of her slow, uneven gait on the floorboards. It never comes.

The sand still holds the damp breath of the midnight tide beneath my feet as I walk down the beach. I can see the seal pups in the water, sunning themselves in the shallows. Pale underbellies. Shivering whiskers lazily scenting the breeze. I stretch my arms and calves taut as I enter the water. When I lower myself down against the seabed, the heat of the day alights on my bare shoulders. It is as warm and familiar as Mum’s hands, gripping the back of my neck all those years ago when she taught me how to hunt. It was the day after my blood first came. I remember the twisting in my gut, like sea-sickness. And beneath that there

was a tight, hot fear at all that came with becoming a woman. Mum showed me where to pick peatmoss from the secret hollows of fallen trees, the way to dry it on the rocks, fold it up, tuck it between my legs. And then she took me to the end of the beach. This was before her swan came for the second time. Her leg was untwisted; her hip still strong. She whistled beneath her breath as she led me to the place where the seals slept belly-up in the ebbing tide.

Now, as I crawl through the water, I whisper her advice to myself. “Tummy down, like a mulga snake. That’s it. Flatten your spine, head low.”

A gull is wheeling overhead, shadow dancing across the still waves. The seal pup lies supine, its long throat a sinuous streak of white. It does not have time to twist away as I leap upon it. Everything sharpens; briny water bitter under my tongue, the triumphant screams of the gull circling overhead, the slip of soft, supple skin beneath my fingers. I press the seal tight against my body, spine-to-breast, and for a moment the walls of flesh between us pare away, and we share the same frantic, animal heartbeat.

I threw up in the waves the first time I saw Mum cut a seal’s throat. She pressed her hands to my cheeks, hard enough to hurt.

“Look at it, Clytemenstra.”

I squeezed my eyes shut.

“No. You’ve got to look. Look. Good – there. ”

Under the blood, the seal’s underbelly was as white as baby-breath flowers in autumn. Mum placed her hand on my forearm and squeezed tight. There was blood beneath her nails. Beneath mine. The seal tossed dead in the waves, helpless in the current.

When I kill the seal today, I do not cry or retch. I drag it up the shore, and I use my talons to pin it down as I pare the skin from its steaming body. Blubber coats my hands and catches in my feathers like oil slick. Cut back the sinews and muscle. Slice the softer flesh into thin, weeping strips, lay them out across the rocks to dry. Collect jars from beneath the front porch

to hold the fat. Keep the iron-rich heart, the brain, the stomach. Discard the liver and kidneys. Strew the guts out across the sand to distract the gulls and dingoes.

The ocean froths pink around my ankles by the time I am finished. Dusk light creeps up over the lip of the horizon, as if the sky is a door sliding closed. The seal is stripped bare to the bone. There is something deeply unsettling about its skeleton, unsheathed from its jacket of flesh and muscle. The cathedral arch of the spine and the thin, five-pronged bones of its flippers are strangely human. I lean down and trace my fingers around the dome of its skull. The eye sockets swallow light. The jaw bone protrudes, blunt and square.

Mum is sitting on the bed when I come back into the house, her back to the door. Even in the dim light I can see the two even rings of pinprick scars at the back of her neck, as if something has bitten and held her there.

I sit beside her, careful not to knock her cane where it leans against her knees. She does not look up as I press the seal's jawbone into her hands. I have washed it in the shallows until the gristle and blood stripped away. The bone gleams like a strip of moonlight cast on a still ocean.

"Look." I take Mum's hand in mine and push her index finger against the sharp, serrated edge of the seal's canines.

She runs her finger across the teeth, feels the heft of the bone in her hand.

"What does it look like to you?"

She turns her head away. The pads of her fingers hold the indents of the teeth like scars.

"No, Mum. You've gotta look at it. It's a hook, isn't it?"

Her head is bowed low against her chest.

"It's a hook. A hook for the net. We just need a closure, and then we can fasten it shut. And then we can -"

The unspoken words tremble in the air between us, as heavy as the prayers I could not voice as I buried my sister.

Mum presses the jawbone flat between her palms. When she lies down upon the bed, she tucks her knees tight to her chest. I curl up behind her. There is the silvery sweetness of eucalyptus wax in her hair. Outside, beneath the evening song of the herons and cicadas, I hear things that are silent in the day; the cries of whales breaching through the ocean's dark skin, the patter of leeches under leaves flipping end-on-end, the hum of a storm approaching, bringing with it a slippery, magnificent electricity that settles deep in the pit of my stomach. We lie spine-to-breast, and it seems that the walls of flesh between us shed away so her heartbeat echoes back through my chest. Together, we wait.