

Fishing Fly

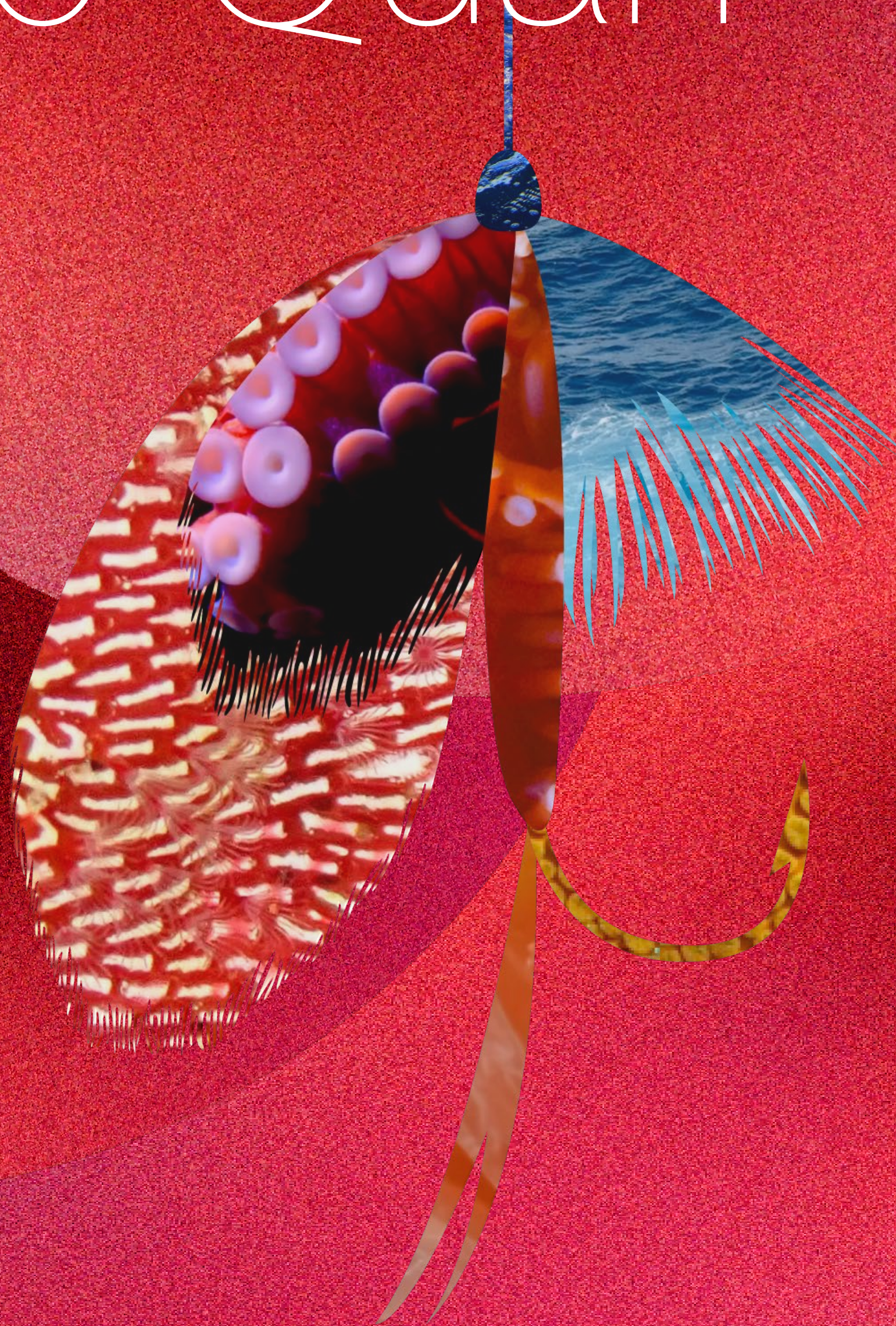
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RED

WATER

Amanda

Choo Quan



ISAIAH CUTHBERT, HOST: Welcome back to ATR's *By The Minute*. Everyone dreams of a getaway to an island paradise, but what happens when that getaway turns into a ghastly nightmare? Sheila, please tell us.

SHEILA BROOMBOTTOM: Right, so as I was saying, I visited Iago island because so many refugees had poured into it from the South. Iago actually isn't just one island. It's an archipelago, a cluster of over 100 islands. There's Little Iago and Sufrit and Prim, and privately owned ones like Value—

ISAIAH: Okay, yes, the islands, yes. But tell us about the mystery! Tell us about the murder!

SHEILA: Well, first of all, there wasn't any murder. At least, we don't know that. It's never been proven. But I was there to cover this refugee crisis. One of the world's worst and barely receiving any attention. I had to fight for it. I was told in no uncertain terms that readers were tired of hearing about immi—

ISAIAH: Right. But Little Iago. Such a fascinating story. What happened when you finally got there?

SHEILA: I found an informant who was kind of adjacent to a smuggling ring. His uncle was a fisherman who had shifted his business to meth. Igonians were exchanging food for drugs. Things were so bad down South, with customs and excise paid off by bigwigs, that it was cheaper to make meth than to buy food.

ISAIAH: Nasty, nasty stuff indeed.

SHEILA: I'd researched Little Iago—smaller than Iago, but bigger than most of the other islands in the cluster—and thought that it'd be a good place to meet this informant. All the locals I'd spoken to said it would. Jean, the lovely lady who brought me my meals, said it would. There are so many small resorts on all of these islands, I mean hundreds of them, and it was still the middle of the tourist season. So I thought it would be bustling. I thought we'd be hidden in a crowd. But I had a hard time getting a boat to take me there. When I said Little Iago, the boatmen squinted their eyes at me and spat on the ground. I didn't know what it meant.

ISAIAH: But you went there anyway. Quality ATR stock, you are!

SHEILA: Well anyway, when I got there, I realized I'd made a mistake—or Jean had. The island was empty. The resort closest to the pier had burned to the ground. All you could see from the boat was a row of jagged black stumps. It was chilling. I understood why the boatman had charged such an exorbitant fee. He tied up his boat at a broken down jetty while we waited. I was early. I thought we'd stay there and see my source as he was coming in. But he never showed. And it was getting darker. The fisherman suggested that we leave. But I wanted to stay. Just ten more minutes. While there was still some light in the sky. The boatman made a hissing sound at me. He motioned to undo the rope securing the boat to a

piece of rail. That was when we saw someone.

ISAIAH: Was it a smuggler? Was it your source?

SHEILA: No. It was...it was a woman.

ISAIAH: Was it a ghost? An apparition? Was she beautiful?

SHEILA: I couldn't tell whether she was beautiful or not, Isaiah. That she was even there was miraculous. Later the boatman would say that the island had been uninhabited for three years. Not even the smugglers visit.

ISAIAH: A recent mystery, then!

SHEILA: I kept calling the coast guard from my phone. And then, when we returned, I tried to get the attention of marina security. They all laughed at me. All the locals at the marina, too, when the boatman told them what we'd seen. I didn't understand it. He was white as a sheet. So was I, I guess. The hairs on my arms were still raised from what we'd seen. The boatman took out a tiny bottle of rum from the waist of his shorts.

"So, you truly believe that this woman is a ghost?" I asked, steadying myself by taking out my notepad.

He nodded sharply. A swig. Then he shook his head.

Garou, he said.

“What’s that?” I asked.

A shapeshifter, he said. A cursed being, stuck somewhere between living and dead, human and creature of the sea.

“She looked real to me,” I said. “She looked like a woman, about to—”

Then he explained it to me. What happened there.

ISAIAH: Oh tell us, Sheila, tell us!

SHEILA: There were multiple disasters that happened the same evening. First, there was the fire. No one quite knows how it was set. People in Little Iago were used to fires. In the dry season, things caught. They’d dealt with it before. There was a fire station. But this time the fire raged and burned. Someone had let out the water from the fire station’s storage tanks. And some of the firefighters had just disappeared. They realized later it had been somewhat of a diversion.

ISAIAH: Because?

SHEILA: In the rush to contain the fire with what little they had, they hadn’t realized what was happening at the hotel lower down the bay. People were wading into the water, as though under a spell. Men. Women. Children. All stark naked. Some of these people were the firefighters. Some were the servers at the restaurant. Some were the managers of the hotel. Some were

security. Some were guests. Some were children. Just walking, walking into the lapping waves of the sea. With purpose, as though they knew what they were doing, even though the onlookers did not.

People called to them and people wept, but they just kept on walking. Someone called for the lifeguards, but the lifeguards were in the water, walking too. So I started investigating. I learnt that there was nothing they really had in common, apart from working together at this resort. There were no torrid love affairs. They'd all come from different places—different resorts, different countries.

ISAIAH: Wow, I—

SHEILA: I guess the only thing that linked them was that they were all drifters in a way. Little lagoon tended to attract that type, with its distance from lagoon proper. People who were all kind of, well, unmoored. Nobody there really had a past of any significance. The bodies of all forty people would never be found, but what struck me was that the bodies would never be claimed. The government of lagoon had a mass, state funeral. An old lady showed up who had taken a liking to one of the pool boys, and some conspiracy theorists. I interviewed all of them. They were all nutty, of course, including the lady. She said that he was an angel, an angel taken from her too soon, and that she knew he was angel on account of his shapely calves and a birthmark on his back. People kept talking about things like alien abductions, mass

suicide, and murder, even though the inspectors couldn't figure out why or how. But none of those nuts, as kooky as they were, ever went back to the island. Media barely covered it. Everyone thought it was cursed.

ISAIAH: Wow, I—

SHEILA: I never went back to the island, either. I buried myself in the work I'd come there for, the serious stuff. But I could never forget what I saw there with that fisherman on the first day. It was a woman who, yes, Isaiah, most people would not call beautiful. She was stocky, broad-shouldered. When she dove into the water from the cliff, some eighty or ninety feet I would say, way, way up, her movement was as fierce and as casual as the rain's. There was such purpose in her body, such desire. I thought that it was death that she desired, as any sane person would think. But I was wrong. It wasn't death. It was transformation.

On Value Island, they call my mother Red Dragon. They whisper it.

“Aquí llega la bestia,” Louie, one of the cleaners.

“You mean, the bitch,” said Josanne, the other.

It makes my mother angry, because she isn’t a dragon. She is a shark. We both are.



We came here a little while ago, after the rest of our pack joined the sea. We were very proud of them. Especially Mother, who nearly forgot me. I wonder what happens to their skins when they’re stripped away. Their human skins, I mean. I wonder if our ancestors treat them any differently from the real sharks, the ones who were never human. I can’t ask my mother. It’s blasphemous to think that our curse to roam the earth either taints us or makes us special. It’s the humans who blind themselves with questions, she says. We are animals. We find weakness. We bite. We are satisfied. There are no further questions.

Sometimes I do not think I am a shark, even though I have the tell-tale white scar on my back, where my dorsal fin was removed when I was a baby. Mother has the same scar—we all do. Did. There’s a name the doctor called the condition, the extra flap of skin along my spine. Mother can’t remember what it is, but it makes her howl,

that they always think it a deformity. It makes me angry, that they take away a part of us. That they don't understand who we are. That we can't force them. Aren't we predators after all?

"Yes," Mother says, shaking her head. "But that is not how we hunt."

Mother is often disappointed in me.

I bow my head and stammer when a customer is rude. I do not know how to hint to the boy who washes the grime off the kitchen floor that he is the wrong species. I don't know how to look at people like her. I don't know how to make them recoil.

But worst of all, I am afraid of water.

"Just put your head in," Mother says.

"I can't."

"Put your head in," Mother commands. Then she grabs me by the shoulders and drags me down with her. My locs swirl around my face. Heavy with water, they sink. The sea rushes into my nose, my ears, like I am the enemy. Water fills up my training goggles. I scream before I reach the surface, and break it coughing and wheezing like a baby seal. Baby seals are food for sharks.

Mother gives me one tired look and dives in, streaming underwater like the fish she is. When she rises again, she is far away. As far away as she

can get, her back leaning against the net that protects the bay of the resort from the rest of the Atlantic.

Her head is the size of my fingernail, but I can still see her disgust.



Our boss' name is Mr. Paul.

He is only at the restaurant for half the day, after which he retreats to his hut—the biggest of all the huts on the resort, even the ones for the guests—and watches wrestling re-runs on television. He likes to watch Mother too, as she winds between tables carrying plates of fish and chips for the tourists. Most of the time, those tables are empty.

His work station is the last booth in the back, where he's stacked bills and books and things, all easily readable should anyone care to look. This is where he sits and pokes his head out to look at her whenever she's working her shift.

"Can I get you something?" I said the first time I caught him, crashing into his table and making him jump.

"Huh!" he said, forming his hands into little fists, as though a wrestling star himself, gearing up to fight. I shifted my weight to my other leg. I was carrying a broken coffee machine, a broken tape deck, and

a broken plate into the kitchen.

“Oh,” he said. “It’s you.” He sort of pushed me to the side, so that he could see her better.

“Can I get you something?” I asked again. He was in his sixties, with wrinkles on his neck that ran vertical instead of horizontal, like the folds of a turtle’s.

“Kola Tonic and water,” he said. He lowered his voice. “And put a nip of a little something extra.”

“What something extra?” I asked, stepping closer so as to block his view. The guests were putting in their orders for dessert. Mother was running them through the menu, telling them what wasn’t available, which made for a long list.

“Oh, they know in the kitchen, they know.” His combover refused to flatten and was sparse and wiry like the antennae of a shrimp.

Mother bustled in through the kitchen doors, her notepad in one hand and a pencil behind her ear. She glanced at me disdainfully, a slight thing that was almost invisible. Mr. Paul blushed hard. Then she was gone, the blue doors swinging back behind her, as though she had never been there at all.

Mr. Paul sucked his teeth and looked at me. They were splotchy, like the slick back of an eel. He tried to brush his hair over his bald spots, an assertion of power after that embarrassing display, but

the strands refused to obey him and stood at attention instead, like a stringy, confused army.

“Isn’t it time for your lunch break, kiddo?” He asked, frustrated. It wasn’t a question.

I set down my plates in the kitchen and grabbed the sandwich I’d made that morning. The busted restaurant fridge smelled of warm, damp seafood. In the alley behind the restaurant, Mother was having a smoke, even though her lunch break was in an hour.

“When are you going to do something about him?” I asked between bites of lukewarm tuna salad and bread that was both brittle and soggy.

“We are apex predators,” she reminded me. “He is a wimp. And anyway, he pays me three extra dollars an hour.”

“Three?” The other waitress said, sticking her head out the kitchen door. “I only get one.”

Mother ground her cigarette under her heel and pushed past the other waitress, her swinging hips proving her point.



When I take my lunch break, I don’t always go to the alley behind the kitchen.

Sometimes I go to the jetty, where I can see the gulls swoop for fish in the murky water, prey swallowed before it even knew to fear its death. I lick the slightly sour mayo off my lips and pray for the day Mother and I will leave this place. That I know the date makes it worse.

Sometimes I follow our jetty to the road that leads to the group of staff huts, and then to ours, separate from the rest, on the cliff that forms Value Island's westernmost tip. True to its name, the resort is very small, but my lunch break is very short, so I still have to be quick.

It's round and wooden, with one big space for everything—kitchen, bedroom. If we want to bathe we have to use the kitchen bathroom at night, and we have to be quick about it so the guests don't see.

Good thing there aren't many of them, anyway.

In the small closet there's a chest of drawers we take everywhere we go. It's short and old, older than me and Mother both. As old as our tribe, which stretches back to the very beginning. The wood is peeling. On one of the handles, there's a sticker of a smiley face I smacked on when I didn't know any better. Mother tried to scrape it off immediately, but she couldn't overpower the adhesive. So some of the sticker stayed, still grinning, but on the face of something inhuman.

The chest takes up so much space in the closet that our clothes are in a pile on a floor with all of

my books. It's okay. All we wear is our uniforms, anyway.

I stick my hand behind the third drawer down. The underwear drawer. The bad underwear are in there, like the ones that are too stretched out to wear at any other time but in the night. My mother says this is likely to defer perverts, by which I guess she means Mr. Paul.

Behind the drawer is a hook. It opens another compartment that you can't see from the outside. You can only open it if you know how to twist it. A trick drawer. Magic. Inside of it is a small chest. Like a bigger version of the plastic kind you see in a tiny pirate ship in a fish tank. Lucky that Value Island has no fish tanks. With my mother around, they would've been gone in a day.

But this chest has got the muddy, burnished look of the ones you see in underwater dives on the Discovery Channel, which they do not have, I might add, at this awful place. There are writings on it that our tribe could no longer decipher, swirls and exclamation marks (maybe those were added later).

Luckily, there's also a carving that's pretty self-explanatory. It's of a bull shark with spindly, human legs.

This is the Great Mother. The First of Us. Zambi.

On the front of the chest is a smooth panel of dark glass, like the solar panel on the calculators

at work, or on the roof of the resort where I was born. I liked that one. There were baby monkeys that you could pet, even though Mother, turning to me with my outstretched, chubby baby hands, said that petting wasn't appropriate for apex predators.

I press my thumb against it, and it clicks open.

Inside is a VHS of *Jaws*, some folded up pages of printed computer paper, black sand from the bay where the First of us took her First Step, a vial of the pack's blood before they transformed, dried now and clotted to the sides of the glass, a shriveled fin and a shark's tooth, for transformation is never easy, a device similar to a remote control, but with a screen showing a beeping red dot, and a tiny, smooth clay bull shark. Unlike the chest, this is not a thousand years old. It was carved by Pax, the cook at the last resort, who also carved watermelons into swans.

Now he and his mesh hairnet are in the ocean forever. And soon, we will be, too. I know I'm not ready yet for when they come.

I still can't breathe underwater.



When I was younger, I went to school.

The classroom was in the back of that resort,

near the kitchens. The walls were painted with worn, peeling murals to match the animals at the petting zoo on the property—monkeys that grimaced, rabbits with no heads. I'd run my fingers along the cracked edges of the paint. I liked painting and reading and writing and feeling plasticine between my fingers. It wasn't like the bread the cooks made in the kitchen, the chunks of dough resting under damp cloths that would spring back at you when you poked them.

Plasticine listened to me and did what it was told. If I wanted to stick a head on the body of a fish I could do it and Mother would never know. And if I wanted to give that body long red hair and a beautiful long tail like Ariel's from *The Little Mermaid* there was always red clay to use, because I'd always volunteer to get the packs from the library's small shelf and pocket it first, then give all the kids who saw me do it the stink eye.

And if Mother ever chanced to pass on her way to the kitchens, I could always squish what I'd made in the palm of my hands quickly, and take some more clay and make something else. But anyway, she never looked.

The teacher was Ms. Sherry. She had long thick dark hair and also helped to look after the animals at the petting zoo. I liked her because it always seemed like she didn't belong. All the staff at the resort were hippieish, which was kind of the theme, with long hair and scruffy clothes.

She dressed as though her dream was Disney

some day, with a uniform that was always freshly pressed and a regard for the children that was always large-eyed and slightly confused. To be fair, there was a boy named Timothy who always hooted like an owl (a pale comparison), and I of course was an actual shark. She opened the same classroom door day after day, but always darted around the room like a goldfish, startled as though she'd somehow swapped the zoo for students, or if where she wound up was not where she'd intended.

But I liked her, and I think she liked me too. Once I brought her a baby bird that fell off a tree, and she knew exactly what to do. I thought that she was going to take it in as her own and feed it with a bottle like I'd seen her feed the runt of the neighborhood dog's litter, happier and calmer than I'd ever seen her with human kids.

But no. "Show me," she said kindly, but quickly. I took her to the ficus tree the bird fell out of, pointed to the nest above. She strode quickly and more purposefully than I'd ever seen her move, and put the squirming thing back. We watched as it still gave signs of life.

"With nestlings, the best thing to do is to put them back," she said, "and let their mammas take care of them." She rest her hand on my shoulder briefly, and we walked back to the classroom. She paused.

"I always thought," she said, more to herself than anyone else, "that it's our responsibility as humans

to take care of every other species.” From the classroom, Timothy hooted like an owl, then burst out laughing. All the other kids hollered.

“I thought that’s what makes us different, that it’s possible for us to believe in things like responsibility.”

She stooped down toward me, and took me by the shoulders.

“But birds have mamma birds to take care of them. If we, as humans, take nestlings in and nurse them, they’ll never learn to be birds. Sometimes all species need are their own. And the best thing we can do as humans is leave them be, and take care of ourselves.”

She smiled and gave me a little hug.

“You’re a smart kid,” she said. “Stop stealing the red plasticine.”

And then she walked to her room, packed, and left.

Mother mentioned to me that she became a singer on a low-budget cruise line. When she told me, years later, I cried. No one had ever hugged me, not even a little.

“She is human,” she said. “They do the little things that they want. They disappoint. They leave.” She shrugged.

“She was never a good teacher anyway,” she said.
“And the primates always smelled.”

I wondered what it was like to be on a cruise ship singing, floating on top of the water and never needing to go in if you didn’t want to.

“Do you think I can sing?” I asked Mother.

“No,” she said, frowning, as though I’d asked her whether a shark could fly.



On the days I go to the house and visit the chest, I am always late when I return to the restaurant.

Even though the manager is gone—on the trail back down, I can hear the brutish sounds men slapping each other, the thuds of their bodies against the floor of the ring, and Mr. Paul shouting “Hey-o!”—one of the other Value Island workers always tells him. Sometimes it’s Josanne or Louie.

Sometimes it’s Omar, who wears a cross around his neck and whispers at me whenever I pass by as he’s cutting the grass.

Everyone knows that we come from Little Iago, the cursed island.

“You stink of fish,” Omar tells me, as he turns off the wacker for a moment. He never says this

in front of Mother. Instead, he grips the cross dangling from his neck. I don't know what he tells the rest of the staff. I know they aren't as fervent as he is, but that doesn't mean that they like us, either. It's something I forget sometimes, that humans can form their own packs.

When I am late, Mother says nothing, even though she knows exactly where I've been and what I've been doing. Isn't she the one who says that in the animal kingdom there are rules? We aren't in the water yet. And what if I screw up, and I don't learn to swim in time, and we miss them, and we have to stay? What if she decides to jump in and leave me? What if we're fired?

When I'm late, I'm always flustered. Mother always laughs with another of the workers, and points her chin at me. The same workers who talk about us behind our backs. For all Mother says about being a shark, sometimes I just don't know what side she's on. Whichever it is, it isn't mine.

I shouldn't want a Mother who loves me. We are sharks, after all, not humans.

And anyway, these small jabs are Mother's way of getting back at me.



On Thursday, a man we have never seen before sits us down in Value Island's conference room to

make an announcement. I didn't even know they had a conference room. It's never been used and smells like an open can of beans.

"Yo pensaba que esto era un armario de escobas," says Louie.

"Same as me," says Josanne.

"OKAY EVERYONE!" the man at the front says too loudly, even though only the two of them are speaking. A second later, the staff staring back at him in silence and him staring back at us, he claps his hands for emphasis. Then he steps back a little, seemingly surprised at his own nerve.

A little dog is nipping at the hem of his tracksuit. There's sweat under his armpits.

"LUCILLE," he says, but it seems to excite her more. He's about to lose this crowd, too. My mother is gazing out at the water, almost lustfully. Then, she snaps at attention, giving him a menacing look.

The others, looking at her, follow.

"My name," he says, backing away until he's almost at the door, "is Mister—Mister—"

"His name is Mr. Value," says a woman who walks through the door and takes her place beside him. "He is the owner of this resort." She picks up the dog and strokes it. Immediately, the dog shuts its trap. Maybe it trembles a little, too. I look at my mother. She raises an eyebrow. The woman

whispers something to Mr. Value, who steps out of the room gratefully, maybe a little fearfully, like the dog. We never see him again.

“Where is Mr. Paul?” asks my mother. We all knew that he wasn’t the owner, but maybe it was a resort that was owned by his family? Or a money-laundering scheme? Nepotism or crime were the only reasons for him to be in any position of authority.

The woman straightens the collar of her blazer, two sharp points. “Unfortunately,” she says, as though it is neither fortunate nor unfavorable, in fact, as though it is nothing, really, “he has been removed from his position.”

“HEY-O!” we hear Mr. Paul say loudly, from behind the door, and then a couple of thuds, as though something or someone is being kicked. And then nothing. It sounds as though she meant it literally.

I wonder how many men are taking him away. No new boats arrived this morning.

We do not see Mr. Paul again, either.

The woman’s cellphone rings, but she silences that, too.

“My name,” she says, “is Anne-Marie. But you may call me ‘Sir.’ I am Mr. Value’s assistant.”

My mother narrows her eyes at this woman, and in my mind I see the image of a shark lazily

moving in the shadows, curious. Humans are not a shark's first preference for food. They just aren't as fatty enough as a baby elephant seal. They are just too tough to be appetizing.

"There will be some strict changes around here," Sir says, running her finger down the perimeter of the ancient whiteboard and flicking the dust off distastefully. "Mr. Paul stole quite a bit of money from Value Island."

"Like how much?" asks Josanne, taking her headphones out of her ears.

"Like a lot," Sir says. "He had a disconcertingly inconsistent way of dispensing salaries, for one."

All the other staff glower in an easterly direction, which is also where my mother and the other waitress are sitting.

"Second, you might notice that there is no cable television. No toilet paper in the bathrooms. Only two things readily available on the menu. No fresh fish, despite the very clear excess of seawater around us. And no guests," she says.

Someone knocks on the door. It is a white man with a rumpled Hawaiian shirt and a liquor-red nose.

"I've been at the restaurant for an hour? Something like that," he slurs.

The cook nodded at Sir and then runs like fire,

slamming the door behind her.

“One guest,” Sir said. “Also, Louie and Josanne, pack your bags. We’re getting lean around here. Maybe we survive. Maybe we shut down. Either way this place is a dump, and you were responsible for cleaning it.”

Louie is from the South and doesn’t have his documents. In a past life, he was an anesthesiologist. He once showed the staff a frayed picture of himself in hospital scrubs next to a wiry, respectable looking machine. I watched from the back. We were all quiet for a while, even Mr. Paul.

I expect more from them, given their frequent dialogue. But they say nothing as they both shuffle toward the door. Josanne pats Louie’s arm as if to say that it will be alright. Louie nods, gently. As he walks in silence, it is the first time I notice how exhausted he must feel. And I wonder, with Mother and I and the staff, who cast the first stone. Was it Mother’s iciness, that they didn’t like us? Was it them? Was it Omar, now looking at Sir, horrified? I don’t quite remember how the feud began.

Louie and Josanne close the door behind them.

Someone sobs.

“That’s life,” Sir says.

“But Louie lived many,” Omar pipes up. “And he

was tired.”

“Now he can rest,” Sir says, shrugging and petting Lucille as she trembles.



In the middle of the night I wake after an uneasy sleep (beep-beep-beep, goes the tracker in the cabinet).

The sea laps lazily against the rocks along the shoreline. My mother is not in her bed next to me. I panic. I walk down the hut’s wooden steps and see her outside, standing near the edge of the cliff.

In the sea are cargo boats and cruise ships, visible only by the stacks of dots signaling lives far away.

“Tomorrow,” she says, looking at the Value Island T-shirts she washed in the bathroom sink, a weak yellow in the night light, swinging on the clothesline. “You go back in the water. You learn to swim. We cannot stay here. Not with that vile woman.”

I don’t say anything.

“If you want to talk, talk,” she says, turning toward the water.

“Do you think she is a shark?” I ask, wrapping my arms around my thin nightgown.

“Oh no,” she says, batting my question away as though it were a spindly insect. “Pure human, that one.”

“How do you know?” I ask, taking her side as we look at the moon’s reflection on the still water. “What if she was beached too long? What if she lost her way?”

I was going to add like us, but I can’t. We are still on land and it’s my fault, as she keeps reminding me. I see a bit of softness in her eyes, then anger, then nothing.

“Definitely a predator,” she says, ridding herself of her clothes. “But land.”

“But how do you know?” I ask, as she prepares to launch.

She pauses.

“Humans enjoy the game of capture,” she says. “I do not like to play with my food.”

She runs a bit, leaps and dives over the cliffs, an arc into the water, some fifty feet down.



At sunrise, we continue my preparation.

Beep-beep-beep the tracker goes, its pauses

getting shorter by the second. We unroll the stiff, faded computer paper and peer at the wiggly lines marking borders of land and the straight lines indicating the names of seas. Lines that will mean nothing to us once we are in the water, guided by the heat of the ocean and the mystery of our new bodies.

They will arrive in two months exactly. It's my fault that so much time has passed without progress. I hang my head in shame. My mother lets me, saying nothing. She doesn't have to tell me how many times, after our pack escaped to freedom on Little Iago, blessed by Zambi and taking their final form, she went back without me, to the burnt island, to try to do the ritual herself. Whorling and turning her blood-smearred palms to the moon, facing the direction of the trade winds, her locs whipping about her face like a marooned Medusa.

She swam to the island, hoping to retrace some of their steps. She wandered into the sea from the bay as we all had together, hoping to feel the sweet, unbearable pain of transformation that had been denied to her. And when it didn't work, she leapt from great heights into the water, hoping that Zambi would acknowledge her display of power, even as a human. She cared nothing about whoever saw her, or whatever tales the fishermen told themselves about the burnt island.

She hoped and hoped and hoped and hoped. I could see it when she returned a couple days later, her only vacation days for the year spent. But Zambi didn't listen. The message hadn't changed

since the day the rest of them disappeared, when they walked into the water surrounded by flames. One of us could not perform the ritual alone. We needed to be in the company of another.

When she heard me coughing and sputtering water that day, nearly drowning, I will never know what motivated her to turn back. Whether it was compassion or pity or disgust or that Zambi had whispered regret into her ear, one thing I never knew Mother to feel. Or maybe it was love. Maybe.

But she'd turned back nevertheless, even if she hated me for it.



My mother holds me down in the water.

Water rushes at my eyes, my nose, like it is intent on filling me up and taking me down.

“It doesn’t want me,” I say, rising, bending over and gasping for air. “I’m not a— ”

A slap on the side of my face. My mother looking at me, blurry. I blink a few times; the salt stings my eyes. Mother looking at me, angry. She stands up and the water reaches her waist. Shallow water.

“Is this what you want?” she says so thinly it’s a whisper. She gestures to all of it—to the flickering

neon sign on the hotel that says “ALU HOE,” to the wooden shacks with their thatched roofs where the guests stay when there are guests. To the rickety gazebo near the beach where the paint is peeling off chairs that are puzzlingly metal, and always hot, set alongside a peeling wooden picnic table where an empty, forlorn can of coke stands.

The wind comes and blows the can off the table.

“I c-c-could be a doctor,” I said. “If I’d finished school, I could be a doctor.”

“So human,” she spits, “to say if.”

“Don’t spit in the water,” I say. “There’s a sign.”

“Do you think Louie said if? Do you think Josanne said if?”

“They said it all the time,” I respond, remembering. “Josanne said ‘if her mother was dead, she could sell her house and move out of this shithole.’”

She grips me by the shoulders. “And now where are they?” she shouts and shakes me. “Look at me!”

“I don’t know,” I mumble. “They didn’t like us. I don’t have their numbers.”

“Do you think Josanne is in medical school?” she asks. “Do you think Louie is a doctor now?”

“He was,” I say. “Where he’s really from.”

“Where is your father?” she doesn’t say it like it was a question.

I don’t remember his departure being anything fantastic. His own mother had been a shark and joined the sea. So had his grandmother. He wasn’t afraid of the water like I was. He’d been a mechanic. He always woke up at dawn, just at this moment, for a morning swim. It wasn’t so much that he was afraid of being a shark. He was afraid of being a father. He’d always look at me, inscrutably, unable to fathom how I’d got there, and when and whether I was going back. One day, he just left, but not for the sea. He drove off on land in the middle of the night. He was always afraid of my mother. And I guess he was afraid of me, too.

She held my face in her palms. I looked like her, like all the sharks, I suppose. With our blunt noses and our brown skin and the one strip of lighter flesh running down our backs where our dorsal fins had been long ago, before civilization.

“I don’t understand you,” she says. “Humans feel so much. When we are sharks, we will feel nothing.”

“I don’t know if that’s true,” I murmur, but she is already under the water.



Later that day, a construction worker bangs a sign into the sand on the beach. "GUESTS ONLY," it says, even though the last guest had checked out. "NO EMPLOYEES ALLOWED."

My mother squints her eyes at it as she serves a couple of day-trippers. I scurry outside during my lunch break to get a closer look. I see Sir strolling with a man in a blue jacket and a yellow hardhat. He is holding a big sheet of paper that looks like a map of the island.

"...take out the trash," she ends her sentence, with a passing glance at me.



Days pass and the tracker's beeps become more frantic. Still I don't make any progress. We run water in the bathroom sink near the kitchen and I try to hold my breath. When this doesn't work, my mother prays over me, and I dunk my head in again. I panic and trip as I rise and hold onto her, both of us sliding to the ground.

"Weigh me down," I say. "Tie me down, then. Leave me behind." If she dives into the water with the pack, she'll transform. I can find my way. I can find more sharks.

I want her to say no. Instead, she says nothing.



Later that day, a new sign goes up near the bathrooms. “EMPLOYEE WATER USE WILL BE MONITORED,” it says.



Mother finally decides that Sir needs to be stopped. But Sir is nowhere to be found. She has slipped off the island mysteriously. The workers with the hard hats have set up cameras on every hut, in every corner. My mother paces as the beeping of the tracker, installed in the bodies of our pack, becomes so quick it’s a single note. Maybe we should steal a boat and join them somewhere else. But the tracker doesn’t work both ways—either they meet us here, at the day and time we’ve agreed, or nothing. By next year, they might be too shark to remember us. They might eat us alive.

The secret I’ve been hiding is that my panic has disappeared a long time ago.

Maybe I will tell Mother. Maybe I won’t.

Fishing Fly #1: Red Water

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Fishing Fly is a serial publication of short fiction that animates vernacular and futuristic conceptions of marine life and human relationships. In the midst of shuffling the widespread disconnection with the ocean, the gathered fiction stories reconcile care, respect, and consciousness of possible more-than-human relationships. The state of the ocean and the marine life are also a reflection of human behavior that has often tended to extractivist, abusive, profitable, speediness, and selfish approaches discarding precious situated knowledge including fishing and cooking craft and the powerful rituals of storytelling. This series of short fiction infuses into the actions transmitted through generations to connect us with the salty waters and its many lives.

This series is conceived and edited by María Montero Sierra and published by TBA21–Academy that has also generously supported the eponymous ongoing research of marine and human relationships through the prism of eating.

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