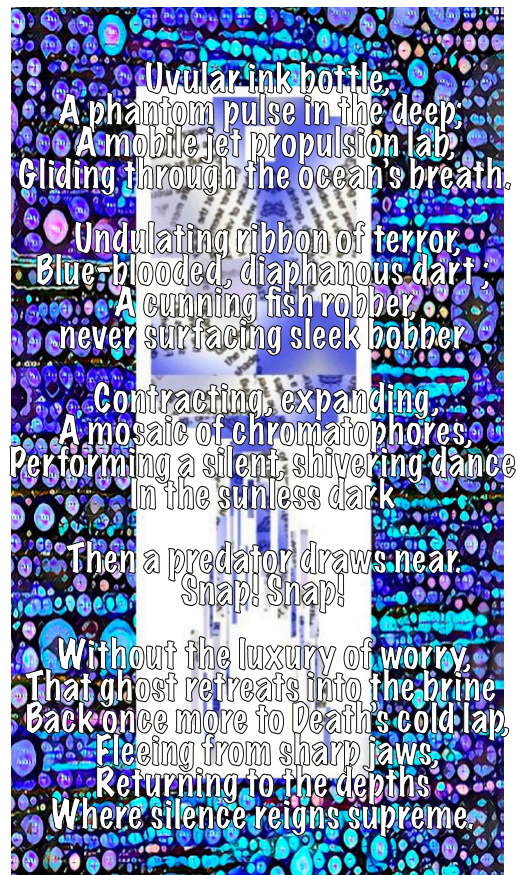


SQUID:

The Cephalopod's Shadow



The hum of the ventilation system felt like the rhythmic pulse of the creature in the poem. Soo broke the silence first, a sharp, ironic laugh escaping her lips as she leaned back in her chair. "Some of my best friends are squids," she quipped, eyes twinkling with a mischievous light.

Andrei didn't look up from his notes, but he raised a single, skeptical eyebrow. "Aren't most politicians in that genus?"

"Precisely," Philyra interjected, nodding with deliberate gravity. She mimicked a cloud dispersing, hands swirling through the air. "Utterly spineless—but adept at squirting ink."

Ellesha's brow furrowed, her expression darkening as she scanned the circle. "Sober up and stop 'othering' the leaders," she countered, voice dropping an octave, The heaviness of truth filling the space. "For the most part, we manufacture our own monsters; Look closely enough, and you'll find squids swimming within us."

Ning adjusted her glasses, voice clinical, detached as if lecturing from a distance. "This strikes me as an apt illustration of what Said termed 'othering'— The psychological act of setting oneself apart to feel superior over nature."

Vidhya groaned, throwing her hands up in an impatient gesture that nearly toppled her water glass. "C'mon! It's just a poem about sea creatures. Why the exegesis? Can't a squid just be a squid?"

Ning remained unfazed, a mask of pseudo-seriousness Making it impossible to gauge her sincerity. "Because, Vidhya, every time we 'other' a fragment of existence, we lose a piece of ourselves in the process."

Vidhya sighed, shoulders slumping, staring at the floor beneath the weight of their words. "I wonder," she whispered, a genuine weariness in her tone, "Why don't more people notice that?"

- T Newfields

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