

Origin

By Kiana Rawji

Longlisted, 2020 CBC National Poetry Prize

(<https://www.cbc.ca/books/literaryprizes/origin-by-kiana-rawji-1.5765644>)

This is just the beginning.

As I stand here,
watching waves course between shores
like blood,

I think maybe there is a reason
that my skin is Indian brown
but my veins are Indianocean blue.

And I do not know why I am at sea,
what brought me to this vessel
or where I am going

but then maybe I never knew,
maybe I was born here,

maybe the salt in my tears
is proof that my body was made
from the salt in the sea,

maybe ocean is my origin.

I hear the whispers of my ancestors
carried across the water by winds
that whisk the past out of its hiding place
and throw time to the waves like
glass against a brick wall,

sending the broken pieces
flying across centuries,
finding their way to me,

they tell me
the soul of a wanderer may waver
between worlds, but her blood remains
resolutely in the veins of its inheritors.

I never asked for inheritance

but I smile anyway

at the thought
that something belongs to me

and my belly swells anyway
with the weight of what never lived there,

I inhale the fresh aches
of a nineyearold greatgreatgrandmother,

her whispers pound through me like a pulse,
her cries so greatgreat
they scorch holes into my own womb,
where the echoes of her birthpains will collect,

forming small, fiery pools that will hang low and
hot at the bottom of my belly
until their contents seep into the ears
of my own daughter

so that before she knows what pain is
she will have memorized what it sounds like.

I imagine the minutes after the painsounds,
when the nineyearold
takes into her arms
a legacy she never asked for

and maybe for a moment,
she smiles at the thought
that something belongs to her

even if it will always remind
her of what was taken from her,

and maybe the baby smiles back
with her mother's dimples,

and waves away, the same dimples
are here, carved into my cheeks
like craters,

and I wonder if I am imagining
or remembering
but then maybe the two are not so different,

after all, the parameters of the mind's imagination

are defined by the body's memory
and the body never forgets its own blood.

Water, too, has memory,
the imprint of each moment
is a ripple sent drifting across a laketop,
a wave sent hurdling across an oceantop,
a dimple in the timorous cheeks of the sea,

dignity or bone,
something is always breaking, the
snap
 crack
 crush
reverberating across the water,

but maybe the whispers frothing like
foam at the tips of insidious waves
form the quality of our bone tissue—
whispers weaving themselves into
armor,

and though we wonder on which shore we will land
and when
and how
much water will take us there,

we are dimples like craters
stamped into the burgeoning flesh of the world.

Flesh is the vessel that carries
lifetimes and lifespace
across oceans,

when my ancestors died,
they did not turn to dust,
they turned to skin,

sheets of old skin,
rolled up like letters in bottles
and sent to sea,
unfurling into new bodies
atop moving water.

Maybe we do not return to earth
when we die,

maybe we return to each other.

Maybe history is a homeland

and this is just the beginning