

Divine Animal



poems by Brandon Wint



Write Bloody North

writebloodynorth.ca

DIVINE ANIMAL

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Incantation:
Memory of Water

I say ocean
as though I mean Atlantic,
bucking and feral: a horse casting
its dark mane into the shadows
my body makes in water.

In Jamaica, I say sea
as though I only mean the memory
of walking its pasture of shells and stones
until my feet nearly bled
and I wore the sea
like a cardigan
blue and tight around my neck.

I mean oceans too, of teeth and eyes,
of faces and bracelets lost. Bodies. Entire bodies
whose names are drowned. Who groan
in the imperfect recall of textbooks
whose sunken lips tableau the lost languages
that make me say Barbados and Jamaica
in their absence.

I say ocean
and mean reams of paper, nautical ledgers,
notebooks whose black ink tinted amber,
whose scripts became my imagination,
whose names became my names.

I say water
and mean, in part,
the books I wade through, not to recover anything
but to measure
the length and depth of what I've lost.
To say: how far away is Africa?
and know without tallying kilometres.

I say ocean
and mean witness,
too-silent bystander, whose waves only lathered
the creaking skin of slave ships,
whose shores held with patience
the coastal ports into which lives disappeared;
whose storms were toothless, whose white mouths, frothing
with bubbles, for three hundred years
rebuked too few wars,

belched too much blood,
were voiceless against the shackle's gnashing jaw
and whose plentiful eyes, whose muscle of cyan apertures,
withheld and withheld the vigil
that might have shamed the war lust of African kings
who raided neighbouring cities, littered dust with spears
and the grotesque busts of impaled warriors
and sold the prisoners of battle
beyond irretrievable doorways. Who turned their cousins,
my cousins and grandmothers to the cargo
that swelled the new world.

I say ocean and mean
the passive spotlight of the moon:

too cool, too forgiving to inflame a cane field,
to emboss in fire the pale legions of cotton
blooming while slave masters slept.

I say water and mean myself,
full of currents, reconciliations I can touch
but cannot hold.

It would be easy to say

as someone who cannot swim,
that an ocean is a soprano, full-throated,
in a chorus from which my ears
gather only a hissing of bubbles,
snapping open at the tug of the moon.

As if the ocean were not unto itself a history,
a keeper of record and accountant
of the weight and spills of blood.

The water, I'm sure, pities me for belonging
only vaguely now
to any known history of land,

as I pity the ocean
its three-hundred-year adolescence sliced
by slavery's distending wave
which births me still
and becomes my nation
even as it cannot be named.

Tonight, a strand of my great-grandmother's hair
sashes an amber beer bottle discarded by a tourist.

A white thread of my grandmother's baptismal robe
is a bangle on a wrist of kelp
waving its arm on St. Phillip's eastern coast.

The ocean does not hunger
but its mouths gape and hold, like errant flecks
of salt, my long-travelled molecules:

I am everywhere the water has been.

It is my skin, too, my great-grandmother washed
and scrubbed with smooth stones
until it gathered the softness of zinnia petals, the sun lust
of bougainvillea vining.

With her name, Christina Hayes,
I could comb through the birth records of her small country,
lift sun-gashed leaflets of fading ink
from archival folders.

But I crave my palm open in the ocean mouth
from which her children were fed,
the prosody of a wave
returning her extinguished pulse,
for a moment, to the blood she made.