

My ancestors came from saltwater.
Their tears cried me into an unknown future.
My mother's body filling up with salty water for me to grow in,
filling and swelling until she burst open,
brine spilling onto the hospital floor,
wet and screaming.

Because of them, the ocean lives inside me.
I can taste the salt of my sweat on tear-stained cheeks;
lick my fingers.
My people say that water is their country,
boats the islands, theirs the biggest on this blue planet.
They were here before the land.

My father was a fisherman.
He lived where the dull sandy foam washes ashore, bringing gifts of driftwood,
sour-smelling seaweed,
and dead sodden birds for the scavengers to pick apart;
pecked bones and eyeballs, rotting flesh unrecognisable.

The beach is not beautiful for everyone.

He built me a boat from the driftwood so I could sail backwards in time and
left me directions written in the sand.
He said it was the salt that made my hair curl like the waves.

My mother cut my hair short,
"Too hard to comb... too tangled...too messy."
"It's easier this way"
and the tide rose with her words and washed the sand away.
"Don't swim too far out girls."
She was frightened of the water.

My placenta was put in a contaminated waste bag,
and my mother's blood washed clean
with disinfectant.
We moved far away from the sea,
to red-brick suburbs with barking dogs
and supermarkets with no air conditioning.

If I am the ocean, why am I drowning?
Waves crash onto deserts in my sleep;
I dream I am swimming, but wake choking on sand instead;
dry heat and confusion,
headache in the back of my neck,
the cat scratching at the back of the door.

No one can sleep in this heat
and a sweet moment of loving you, is like the reprieve of an ice cube
run down the back of my spine.
You remind me of him
standing there in your sunglasses, but you can't come
where I am going in my driftwood boat.

My father's arms
were strong and brown,
lifting my broken body
the day I fell
from the fence.
I had caught two flatheads
and was pretending I was a pelican.
Head cracked open,
vomit stained cement,
a limp fish gulping for air.
The wounds oozed clear fluid for a week;
mum washed them in sea water to get them to heal.

"What makes the waves curl like my hair papa?"
"It is the tears of Ranginui"
"But why is Rangi crying?"
"Because he lost his love to the embrace of another"

How do we let go
of the things we love?
Life turning like tides,
never still, ever-shifting.
Sometimes I am those rotten birds being pulled to pieces on the shoreline,
sometimes the shore itself.

My father taught me to swim in deep water,
how to sit on sharp rocks and
suck the yellow creamed eggs
warm and raw from the belly of kina.
He could turn into a fish himself,
or a sea monster,
an evening rain storm,
or the closing hour man
going to clean bent cigarette butts
and spilled beer off the pub floor at 1am.
Always raisins in his pockets and fish scales on his boots.

The day he died
he turned into a fish one final time, lungs filling up with water he swam away
from me.

I let my hair grow long now and never comb it.
You like it that way, and say it reminds you of instant noodles, and
waking up together in the back of your van,

and something from your childhood,
or maybe before your childhood,
a shadow you can't find in the back of your mind.

Your tide is coming in,
while mine is running out.
Our grandmothers would giggle at us now.
They reach forward towards us
from that small town on the east coast, where mine brought sugar and tea
from the shop your grandfather built.

I drag the driftwood boat from its high ground, across the seaweed
dried and sharp, slicing skin on my bare feet.
The bone hook I wear around my neck
becomes the anchor.
Strips of flax and woven stories my sail.

A black and white dog runs at my feet.
Drenched sandy fur.
He lifts his head to smell the salt in the breeze, lips curled.
Does he see all those generations standing behind me?
Is that why he barks at nothing into the air?
Does he know that even though I am alone;

I can never be lost when out at sea.

Image description for video: Footage filmed underwater looking up towards the light, rays of light and bubbles filter down towards the camera. Dream like images of Maori carving from bow of waka, new born baby, fishing net being cast into ocean, shoreline waves, children playing on a beach, woman filmed from underwater turning in circles and swimming, fade in and out of view, merging with the waves and underwater images. Images continue to fade in and out from the water as the narration continues - woman with curly hair, silver fish swimming, view of mans legs walking barefoot in shallow waves, image of Māori female ancestor, dog barking and archival footage of groups of Māori women singing and doing kapa haka. Final water image fade to black.