

Birthing

CHISOM OKAFOR

*In memory of Akin, beaten to death on 17 February 2016, in Lagos, for
being homosexual*

*Someday, a soul will come out of the field to (re)claim it
and then, we will know.*

– Kwame Dawes

I.

HERE, SEVEN NAUTICAL miles away, we let our canoe
trail the direction of wind.

Here, where all things take their roots
from this body of water, the crashing of waves
like colours strewn on palettes,
the fishing lines and their miracle of sounds
breaking through her glassy shimmer.

Here, we become pilgrims advancing by sight.

II.

When my companion casts his net,
 I see the hands of a javelin thrower and
 I want those hands in exchange for mine.
 To hold and be held like mine, on nights when rain clouds gather,
 and I'm looking up at the stars and not finding them there.
 But there is no constellation overhead now,

and we're rowing to the shacks on the other side,
 lined up on dry land in a solemn procession,
 and we're pitched on both ends of this canoe, paddling away,
 past boat parts in disuse, past tired retreating fishermen,
 past floating fish traps to dry land
 where bamboo pillars find their footing, straight as soldiers on parade,
 ready for the mating call of whistling thrushes hoisted unto a dais
 on the riverbank.

III.

From this distance, my lover swears he could trace the scape of the
 highlands
 far into the village beyond,
 the ridges stretching so thin, disappearing into the sunset.
 There is serenity in water that builds nests in my head,
 shatters only when he grips his paddle again
 for one more stroke like the swing of a broken racket,
 before we let us drift downstream with the tide.
They can't follow us to this place, he tells me.
You can't lynch who you don't see.
Consider that all waters spring from an unseen circuit.
That love is water, which means that mine is a summation
of thick droplets, a rainstorm.

That love smells like loam washed clean at sunrise.

That love is sunrise,

*which means that mine is the petals of freshly watered rose
blooming in the sun.*

That love is a flowing stream.

That here, on this body of water, is where lovers—
boys left for dead by the wayside—
find their names again.