

ANATOMY OF A WAVE

Reprinted in *When the Light of the World Was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through: A Norton Anthology of Native Nations Poetry* (2020); originally published in *LitHub* (2018)

It had everything and nothing to do
with mettle
 fire before flint before

*How many bodies will a lead ball move
 through?*

How many can one stand in a row?

When the tide went out, they had nowhere to run
 but that was many years ago, and if they have not died they live
happily still.

 But you and I know that's not how the story goes.

I wake more ghosts each morning:
 when I was born my mother and father
 planted a tree west of the garden.

 We ripped it out when I left home—
 its roots never took,
 its limbs harbored mold in the sticky east wind.

We used to think a weak spine
was inherited
 but consider the shark
 how some will stop swimming
 in their sleep.

How does the forecast change?

We make weather with our teeth.
Why should I be afraid of the sea?
Let the toothed skin lie
 if it asks too many bones.

Wait for the waves
 to start skipping,

Tie down the drifters and stretch the stomach before the fall.

Don't turn your back on the water.

What else grows on an island

without trees?

*The need to make
makes body—*

Others have seen water act this way before,
it was many years ago,
how many bodies a single wave can carry,
how many relatives, casually.

They tied their boats to the tops of trees
so the water wouldn't lose them,
so the story goes.

Some say it was a boat that killed them, Vasiley and Akelina. Bad heart, *traumatized*. Accidentally.
I'm telling you what happens. Nikifor missed the boat.

Imagine what it might be like
when the waters come
to be a fish
to be twelve strong, to be six, two hundred, or forty
sharks swimming toward you—