**Winner – Forward/emagazine Creative Critics 2019**

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**Responding to Dubrovnik by Vidyan Ravinthiran**

**My mother, swimming**

Sometime far from now I will think of this: you, a pale line   
sketched into the blue, the waves holding you   
as any daughter would want to be held.

The day slips past like water trailing through a child’s hands,

and I want to be small again, swimming with you, not here,

but in the bathtub at home, sliding around like an egg-yolk

loosened from its shell. You’d put me between your thighs, opened

into curving brackets of skin, and I would not be thinking

of myself in the third person, but laughing in the way

I’ve now forgotten. There’s something about arriving

in the rain and it all quieting now to this: the sea,

wine-dark, you, its drawing in reverse.

I don’t want to think of when I won’t be sitting here,   
watching you swimming, so I think about your own mother instead –

how as she got older, her memory reached further back

into itself. How she told us that she remembered

being curled in the womb, the liquid, amniotic glow,   
and later, the face of her mother after birth.   
None of us believed her, but I think this is the same   
kind of swimming: a kick and a breath, holding on,

her daughters and their daughters encased   
like Russian dolls inside of her. We run home and in the dark   
of the garden I dream of you calling to me from the sea,   
your voice shouting as it throbs above us:

my daughter - I love you, I love you.

**Commentary**

Ravinthiran writes about watching both the present and the past through observing a loved-one: an ambiguous ‘you.’ The piece is titled ‘Dubrovnik’, but is as much about the echoes of Sri Lanka later in the poem, described in beautifully evocative images and subtle rhymes (‘bitten’, ‘smitten’) that tie the poem together. I loved the idea of the observer that begins ‘Dubrovnik’, and so have tried to respond to this by creating my own, who watches her mother swimming and, much like that of Ravinthiran’s, thinks of a past and future.

In Ravinthiran’s poem, there is a strong sense of two separate places, with the act of swimming as a bridge between them. I decided to write about multiple places that intertwine as a result, some more domestic and maternal – our bath at home, and ultimately the womb, all told through the inherited family memories Ravinthiran also writes of. I really liked the significantly implied female presence in Ravinthiran’s poem – he refers to two mothers – which I wanted to draw on myself, applying this to my own personal history of my mother and grandmother. I chose the same setting of Ravinthiran’s poem – the sea – which seemed apt, as a kind of mother to so many other living things.

‘Dubrovnik’ above all touched me for its beautiful and deceptively simple presentation of time passing. The poem jumps from the present to a ‘later’ to the earlier memory of Sri Lanka, and even the possibility of being ‘pulled in and under and lost forever.’ Both mothers at the end of ‘Dubrovnik’ act differently as the antitheses of each other – but neither seems less loving. Like my own mother and grandmother in this poem, two very different kinds of mothers, this poem aims to recreate Ravinthiran’s sense of tenderness in portraying loved-ones and motherhood.