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SHAAWATKE'É'S BIRTH

- for Káalaa Miriah Twitchell

x'óol' yáx yatee.¹

Whirlpool.

ax yádi.

ax yádi.

i eegáa kuwtuwashée.

i eegáa kuwtuwashée.²

In this house of chaos—your sister learning
language, your mother sleeping, sleeping in the back room

my father leaving, my mother arriving, phone ringing,
everyone needing a bath, the long hours of light

too bright. Listen: sometimes late, late at night
I place my hands on your mother's belly

place my hands on your skin house
and what my fingers see is your ears,

small clamshells, listening listening to the summer
rain of Lingít, the pattern of us, tapping into you.

¹ it's chaotic, like a whirlpool

² my child.
my child.

we were looking for you.
we were looking for you.

How shall I stack these words?
What is the first word to give you?

*wéidu i tláa,
i tláa áwé.*

*xát áyá, i éesh.
gunalchéesh.
gunalchéesh.³*

Then comes that long summer night
when we know you are coming.

Your rich river breaks on the rock
in the backyard, the rock under the cedar tree

and you are coming quickly quickly
in the birthing room.

And now your tongue is a salmon
swimming downstream, heading

for the ocean of sound, ready to take your first swallow
of saltwater, ready to taste your first vowels

rain on ocean, and your ear and tongue, coming now
and pain is here too, and your mother in pain.

³ there is your mother.
that is your mother.

me, i am your father.
thank you.
thank you.

wáanganeens
tlax lidzee áyá yá kusti,
ch'a haa kát uwagút.

haa yoo x'atángi yaa nanáan

i een áyá ku.aa,
kei guxlatseen.
kei guxlatseen:

haa Lingitx sateeyi.⁴

And what I know to do is this
and what I know to do is this:

I ask that we turn down the lights
I ask that no one speak. Your first

sound above water will be the language
of black feathers, the language of flight.

I ease into the water, feel your head,
feel its turning until a furled ear emerges

and another, your body coming
swimming into the sound, rising into the sound

of my voice. I hold the air around you.
I blow softly into your ear, to open its listening:

⁴ sometimes
this life is so difficult,
it has come upon us.

our language is dying.

but with you, though,
it will get stronger.
it will get stronger:

our Tlingit identity

woosh tudzix_án
haa yoo x'atángi een

woosh tudzi^xán
*haa yoo x'atángi een.*⁵

We love each other
and this is your language

we love you in this language
we love you and this is you

sliding wetly into my hands,
your seal-soft mouth opening

and you have the most beautiful
tongue I've ever seen. Strong organ

at the center of the world, strong
voice, at the center of my world.

gunalchéesh, gunalchéesh
*yéi áwé.*⁶

⁵ we love each other
with our language

we love each other
with our language

⁶ thank you, thank you
that is how it is.