

Exile

Rowana

In the hush of dawn,
tiny fingers curl around a weathered thumb—
the hands that raised my mother
now steady me.

Lullabies carry the timbre of years,
their voices softer, slower,
laced with both love and longing.
They rock me not as parents do,
but as guardians of absence,
keepers of a promise made oceans away.

The air smells of boiled rice and old wood,
their warmth stitched into every blanket,
every whispered prayer against my skin.
I do not yet know the word *sacrifice*,
but I breathe it in their sighs,
taste it in the salt of their tears
when they think I am asleep.

Far across waters,
two hearts labor for me,
sending love folded in gifts across oceans,
dreaming of the day
their arms will claim what their parents now hold.

And I—

too young to understand distance,

too fragile to carry its weight—

simply nestle into borrowed arms,

knowing only this,

love can take many shapes,

but tonight, it is a grandparent's chest

rising and falling beneath my cheek,

a heartbeat that says,

you are home, until home returns.