

THE MEANING OF THE COLOUR BLUE

by Taina Chahal

There is a city here where I walk to see how others live. I could, I suppose, see about myself only. I could be unaffected. I could come to the easy belief that, really, what is there to speak against? I could develop that voice so full of cold address to beauty. I could with some self-defacement go about the business of making my living. I could say in that way many do: oh, it's not so bad, your writing need not show your skin, it need not speak of trouble, history is a burden after all. But Neruda summons me, is waiting for me at the end of every sentence. I cannot ignore my hands "stained with garbage and sadness."

~ Dionne Brand

A MAP TO THE DOOR OF NO RETURN

The language of the birds outside my bedroom window has to compete with the sound of traffic seeping through the brick walls that becomes a part of my day, like the canned music that fills my ear when I'm once again waiting for a real voice on the telephone instead of a "press three" for hours of operation.

Getting away from traffic in Toronto is almost an impossibility. Traffic leaves its filthy print everywhere; my fifth floor window is covered in the black dusty exhaust of commuting and mall'ing. In the morning, I draw the curtains open and look out a permanently stained window and see the sky already shrouded in smog, despite the new dawn. I turn away, downcast; the rays of the sun diffused behind a curtain of yellow fog.



Traveling one hour east of Thunder Bay, the cold, early morning air convinces the warmth of late summer to leave the depths of Lake Nipigon and hang a curtain of silk over the surface of the water. On the other side of the road, backed by glacier carved cliffs, St. Sylvester's church stands a silent, abandoned witness. And past the black sands of Orient Bay, unseen behind the boreal forest, lies an Ojibway burial ground where small, white wooden crosses stand, unsilent witnesses whose silence is deafening

We pass a small town named Tunis on Highway 11, the northern route that carves its way up from Lake Superior through the Canadian Shield, curves, then cuts straight across northern Ontario through muskeg. Think of Samira as we pass Tunis, but she's nowhere in sight. After the point where all waters flow south, we pass a town named Moonbeam.

In Rosegrove, named to defy the struggle of wresting plants from the oldest, hardest rock on the planet, we pass unpainted, weathered wooden homes left abandoned, doors ajar, hope having run out one night down the road.

We travel past Wabewawa Road, lined on both sides with a climax forest, its dark green broken here-and-there by paper birches with

no branches or leaves, with thin, wind-bowed trunks. The black spruce have waited patiently for the birch to die, for their turn in the northern sun. Farther on, in the overgrown grass in front of a small, red, wooden mummon-mökki that has white tape slapped haphazardly over the three large cracks in the front window, we pass a sign: House for Sale. And up the road from Net Lake, stuck in the gravel at the side of the highway, right after the turnoff to the Constance Lake Indian Reserve, almost unnoticeable, a small black-and-orange sign: Garage Sale.

I thought to turn around and tell them that they should've stuck the sign before the turnoff, not after, because by then it's too late.

After swamps and bogs and blow-downs, fens and beds of reeds standing in still waters choked with bulrushes, mirror lakes reflecting clouds bottom-heavy with lilacs on a rainy day, the boreal ballet of tilting, drunken forests, and creeks disappearing into the sky, we stop at a gasbar with no gum, no mints, no chips, no chocolates, no cigarettes.

A gaunt teen swipes my card and his hair. I look across the room from the cash register and see a sign taped on a glass door leading to a roomful of empty tables and upturned chairs: Restaurant Closed.

Highway 17 winds up and down steep cliffs, providing spectacular views of Lake Superior, from miles and miles of windy shoreline to uplifted cliffs of granite and gneiss that are the remnants of the mountains that flouted the glacial river of ice. Its dramatic beauty makes it a popular route for travellers and tourists. And with the railway now gone, it's busy with transports and truckers beating deadlines.

The northern route, on the other hand, is almost deserted. It has a sneak-up-on you charm. Travelling Highway 11 is like turning a cut-glass prism slowly between your fingers and, within the slant of pink light, seeing clear as crystal into the mirror of your mind and... there you are, a drop of dew weighing down an early-morning spider web.

The northern highway, like the stillness of the morning bush while blueberry picking, underfoot, blue-dusted berries among the crunch of pale green lichen.



The freeways in Toronto are unlike either Highway 11 or Highway 17. No muskeg, no rockcuts. It's an area of low relief. The metamorphic rock has been eroded by something even more powerful than a two-mile thick, moving ice sheet: a car culture that has carried away much of the region's topsoil. There's not much to see out your window except other cars zipping by, transports and tankers, and cement walls that zip you in like a straightjacket. Grey folding in upon itself. An asphalt sky; aground in grey. Nothing more alienating than hitting the highways in Toronto.

I'm looking for my blueberry patch but I can't find it.

Yet, there is an understory to pavement too. There is an understory to this city found on the right of sunrise. When the surprise of blue breaks through the clouds.

A Friday in October, the month of the hunter's moon. I've had enough of shoebox existence, and despite my undone work, I leave North York with Fataneh and Shukria, and head downtown to listen to Dionne Brand read from her memoir, *A Map to the Door of No Return*.

The club on College is crowded; filled with women and a handful of men, most black, a few white (like myself); there is laughter and the clink of glasses; a temporary camaraderie emerging from our collective anticipation.

Brand reads from "The Man from the Oldest City in the World", a passage about her chance encounter with a parking lot attendant while on her way to read at a PEN benefit. She speaks the absurdity of a man who comes from one of the oldest civilizations in the world (Ethiopia) being reduced to spending his days inside a small box in the middle of a parking lot in the middle of the city among new, glass buildings:

The man from the oldest city in the world and I are shaking with laughter. Then I walk toward the theatre. Its glittering glass doors, its self-conscious newness, its disposable modernity. Years ago it, too, was a parking lot; in another decade it will become one. Around me is the parking lot, the great parking lot temporarily occupied by buildings. This is what he looks out on every day, his curly head shaking. (Brand 2001: 109)

She talks about the laughter they share, about their momentary and unexpected meeting ground, about finding a point of human connection among the asphalt landscape of the city, of laughing at "they" of the "civilized world" yet recognizing that she is also of the civilization of parking lots: "It is a grim laughter we share. Yes, it is at the ironic circumstances of belonging to this civilization of parking lots. I am the citizen of the parking lot" (Brand 120).

Brand looks closely underneath the workings of Toronto and finds the garbage that fills its corners. She exposes many of the troubling injustices of the urban landscape, particularly the racism and

the disregard and unequal treatment meted out to many who are not white, yet paradoxically, her words enable us not to lose faith but to dream for a better place. Her words bear witness to the ugliness of the city - its racism, its alienation, its asphalt soul, its parking lots and corporate towers, and bring to light that which many don't notice, indeed, what is tossed aside, carelessly. She speaks of the garbage she finds on her hands through language birthed in the "fortunate and unfortunate" (Brand 2001: 193) beauty in which she is immersed.

Her words give utterance to the divine found in small moments tucked right beside the ugly of Toronto. They tell of sweetness and pain, despair and beauty, and evoke hope within hopelessness. Her words tug at my conscience in a bitter-sweet way, their clarity re-kindling an anger towards the injustices that occur in this city on a daily level, and that are not equally borne. Hearing her read nudges me out of myself; her words set me adrift, clear-headed, breaking through the grey clouds that had been showering rain on me all week.



Walking back to the subway with Fataneh and Shukria, and weaving between the crowds of people streaming by, we pass sidewalk cafes and vegetable grocers and Vietnamese shops selling huge bunches of basil for \$1.99, mangoes as big as melons, slender Chinese eggplant, and the surprise of blue tulips. We buy apples and milk and a cauliflower to bring back home. We pass Italian butchers with ham in the window and Portuguese bakeries and Fantasy Cleaners. We pass 2-4-1 Jazeera Falafel, Vicki's fish and chips and thai food, Irene's Tarot Readings, The Golden Loonie Dollar Shop, and Jacinthe's Hair Shop, no appointment needed.

We are reminded that there is texture in the street.

The storm clouds have cleared; the moon is shining overhead. We talk as we walk all the way back to the subway about the words that we've heard and about the city and the big urban sprawl that is Toronto and how to find a means of not just getting through it but finding a space so that we can do our share.

The moon casts her magic on us, warming our talk. The greens of vegetables and the yellows of fruit, the shuffle of feet and the sweat of the street stream through us and skip like a stone on the waters of our souls. Our strides lengthen and quicken; our steps are weightless; in this "civilization of parking lots" we touch ground together, and laughing, run barefoot to a midnight blue sky.

REFERENCE

Brand, Dionne (2001). *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada.

