

Also by Dionne Brand

FICTION

At the Full and Change of the Moon
In Another Place, Not Here

NON-FICTION

Bread out of Stone

POETRY

No Language is Neutral
Land to Light On
Chronicles of the Hostile Sun

A Map to the Door of
No Return

Notes to Belonging

Dionne Brand



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*Dedicated
to the other dwellers of the door*

There are maps to the Door of No Return. The physical door. They are well worn, gone over by cartographer after cartographer, refined from Ptolemy's Geographia to orbital photographs and magnetic field imaging satellites. But to the Door of No Return which is illuminated in the consciousness of Blacks in the Diaspora there are no maps. This door is not mere physicality. It is a spiritual location. It is also perhaps a psychic destination. Since leaving was never voluntary, return was, and still may be, an intention, however deeply buried. There is as it says no way in; no return.

A Circumstantial Account of a State of Things

My grandfather said he knew what people we came from. I reeled off all the names I knew. Yoruba? Ibo? Ashanti? Mandingo? He said no to all of them, saying that he would know it if he heard it. I was thirteen. I was anxious for him to remember.

I pestered him for days. He told me to stop bothering him and that he would remember. Or stop bothering or else he would not remember. I hovered about him in any room in which he rested. I followed him around asking him if he wanted me to do this or that for him, clean his glasses, polish his shoes, bring his tea. I studied him intently when he came home. I searched the grey bristles of his moustache for any flicker which might suggest he was about to speak. He raised his *Sunday Guardian* newspaper to block my view. He shooed me away, telling me to find some book to read or work to do. At times it seemed as if Papa was on the brink of remembering. I imagined pulling the word off his tongue if only I knew the first syllable.

I scoured the San Fernando library and found no other lists of names at the time. Having no way of finding other names, I could only repeat the ones I knew, asking him if he was sure it wasn't Yoruba, how about Ashanti? I couldn't help myself. I wanted to be either one. I had heard that they were noble people. But I could also be Ibo; I had heard that they were gentle. And I had followed the war in Biafra. I was on their side.

Papa never remembered. Each week he came I asked him had he remembered. Each week he told me no. Then I stopped asking. He was disappointed. I was disappointed. We lived after that in this mutual disappointment. It was a rift between us. It gathered into a kind of estrangement. After that he grew old. I grew young. A small space opened in me.

I carried this space with me. Over time it has changed shape and light as the question it evoked has changed in appearance and angle. The name of the people we came from has ceased to matter. A name would have comforted a thirteen-year-old. The question however was more complicated, more nuanced. That moment between my grandfather and I several decades ago revealed a tear in the world. A steady answer would have mended this fault line quickly. I would have proceeded happily with a simple name. I may have played with it for a few days and then stored it away.

Forgotten. But the rupture this exchange with my grandfather revealed was greater than the need for familial bonds. It was a rupture in history, a rupture in the quality of being. It was also a physical rupture, a rupture of geography.

My grandfather and I recognized this, which is why we were mutually disappointed. And which is why he could not lie to me. It would have been very easy to confirm any of the names I'd proposed to him. But he could not do this because he too faced this moment of rupture. We were not from the place where we lived and we could not remember where we were from or who we were. My grandfather could not summon up a vision of landscape or a people which would add up to a name. And it was profoundly disturbing.

Having no name to call on was having no past; having no past pointed to the fissure between the past and the present. That fissure is represented in the Door of No Return: that place where our ancestors departed one world for another; the Old World for the New. The place where all names were forgotten and all beginnings recast. In some desolate sense it was the creation place of Blacks in the New World Diaspora at the same time that it signified the end of traceable beginnings. Beginnings that can be noted through a name or a set of family stories that extend farther into the past than five hundred or so years, or the kinds of beginnings that can be

expressed in a name which in turn marked out territory or occupation. I am interested in exploring this creation place — the Door of No Return, a place emptied of beginnings — as a site of belonging or unbelonging.

Maps

The rufous hummingbird travels five thousand miles from summer home to winter home and back. This hummingbird can fit into the palm of a hand. Its body defies the known physics of energy and flight. It knew its way before all known map-makers. It is a bird whose origins and paths are the blood of its small body. It is a bird whose desire to find its way depends on drops of nectar from flowers.

Water

Water is the first thing in my imagination. Over the reaches of the eyes at Guaya when I was a little girl, I knew that there was still more water. All beginning in water, all ending in water. Turquoise, aquamarine, deep green, deep blue, ink blue, navy, blue-black cerulean water.

To the south of this island on a clear day you could see the mainland of South America. Women and men with a tinge of red in the black of their faces and a burnt copper to their hair would arrive from the mainland to this island fleeing husbands or the law, or fleeing life. To the north was the hinterland of Trinidad, leading to the city which someone with great ambition in another century called Port-of-Spain. To the west was the bird's beak of Venezuela and to the east, the immense Atlantic gaping to Africa.

The sea behind the house where I was born was a rough country sea, with a long wide shining white beach. I recall waking up each day to discover what it had brought us, and what it had carried away. The word *gaze* only applies to water. To look into this water was to look into the world, or what I thought was the world, because the sea gave one an immediate sense of how large the world was, how magnificent and how terrifying. The sea was its own country, its own sovereignty. There was always some uncontrollable news from it. Either it had taken a fisherman or it was about to wash a house away. It was either taking a child or would take a child. To take a child away. That type of away was the most fearsome news. The sea was feared and loved, generous to a fault. Boats laden with kingfish, red snapper, lobster, and bonito came in with a fisherman who had cut

his foot on a fatal coral. Logs and stone which once were churches, sand which once was human, or animal bones arrived on surprising tides. "Never turn your back on the ocean," was the counsel.

Water is the first thing in my memory. The sea sounded like a thousand secrets, all whispered at the same time. In the daytime it was indistinguishable to me from air. It seemed to be made of the same substance. The same substance which carried voices or smells, music or emotion. The water misted the air in a continuous fine spray. It insulated the place where we lived so much so that when you entered Guaya from the bend in the Mayaro Road it felt like a surprise. A quiet, peaceful surprise.

Right there at the bend, the sea sighed as at the end of a long journey. Guayguayare is where the sea came to rest. You would not know that there in that place there were fierce quarrels and illicit romances. You would not know that old age did not limit your sexual encounters or seductions; I know this from the hushed whispers of my grandfather's infidelities. You would not know that runaway madmen lived there; I know this from the madman who so loved my grandfather he came to the door at night, his voice disguised as a woman, calling. You would not know there were men who fathered their daughters' children; I know this about the man named

Sonny who lived in the estate workers' barracks, fathering the children of his wife and daughters simultaneously. Sonny was the only one happy there. His wife and daughters always seemed washed with dread and exhaustion.

You would probably go past the small shop owned by Miss Jeanne and think the bottles of dinner mints and sweet plums dull. You would not know how dazzling they were on a Sunday to a girl in black patent-leather shoes and a pink dress stiffened with starch and pressed to perfection by a doting aunt. The perfume of roasting bakes and smoked herring lulls anyone into a thing like paradise; the sea and the bush multiplied a laugh into daylong echoes; and early morning smoke and mist could muffle the screams of children pleading not to be washed or combed. A braying donkey can be heard as if from far away, a horse's sneeze, a high-pitched threatening calling from everywhere, in men's voices, women's voices — a harsh ululation which was the waking-up sound of this place some mornings. As if one had to be cruel to approach the coming day, or be hard at least. But whatever human din and rumble, whatever unhappinesses or raptures, the sea took it in and flung it back like nothing.

It's difficult to live near the sea. It overwhelms. Well, not true. It owns. Your small life is nothing to it. The sea uses everything. Small things like bits of black bottles and rusty

bottle tops, smoothed transparent fish, fish bone, cockles against small rocks. New houses poised in concrete at its mouth could end up kilometres away days later. The sea can make a tree into spongy bits, it can wear away a button to a shell. It can wash away blood and heal wounds.

When I was small this is what I noticed. One day two men got into a fight on the beach at Guaya. They parried glistening, sharpened cutlasses. Their faces were chiselled and murderous. I cannot recall what the fight was about. I could not know anyway. People tried to part them, their wives and their friends, but they were relentless. In the end, people gave up and left them to murder each other. In their rage one man raised his cutlass high to lay it on the other's neck; the other slipped quickly sideways, slicing his own weapon through the muscle of the man's arm. A seam of blood opened over a long flap of flesh from shoulder to wrist, exposing for a moment bloodless white fat. The man looked down at his arm; the other ran toward land. Then the man with the bloody, limp arm fled for the sea, his cutlass still hanging from his other arm. The sea took his blood. He tried to cauterize the wound with the sea's salt; the sea became pink. I saw him standing there still enraged, his flesh wide open and the green wave with its swatch of pink steaming toward the beach. It wasn't over. In a small place nothing is ever over.

People here believe in uncontrollable passion, in mad rages, and in the brusque inevitability of death. Or damage. As if a face would not be a face without a scar, a finger not a finger without being broken, or a foot not a foot without a limp. Or a life not a life without tragedy. These things I knew before I knew they had something to do with the Door of No Return and the sea. I knew that everyone here was unhappy and haunted in some way. Life spoke in the blunt language of brutality, even beauty was brutal. I did not know what we were haunted by at the time. Or why it would be imperfect to have a smooth face, or why a moment of hatred would take hold so easily as if the sun had simply come out. But I had a visceral understanding of a wound much deeper than the physical, a wound which somehow erupted in profound self-disappointment, self-hatred, and disaffection. Someday the man with the bloody seam in his arm would catch the other man and do him the same harm. This I saw when I was small.

The sea would forever be larger than me. My eyes hit only its waist. I saw a wave's belly looking backwards, I saw froth rolling toward my feet as the sea moved into my spot on the beach. It always came in a jagged circle, frothing and steaming. It reduced all life to its unimportant random meaning. Only we were changing and struggling, living as if everything was urgent, feeling — the ocean was bigger than feeling. It

lay at the back of us, on the borders of quarrels and disagreements. It took our happiness as minor and transitory. My family was large and unwieldy, and then it also contained far cousins, and friends so old they shared the same skin and blood. In that place anyone could tell your family by the mere tracing of your hairline or tilt of your head or by the way you walked. How we ended up there in a place my family jokingly called "quite to quite" is unknown to me. Our origins seemed to be in the sea. It had brought the whole of Guayguayare there from unknown places, unknown origins. Unknown to me at the time and even more unknown now.

My grandfather, who knew everything, had forgotten, as if it was not worth remembering, the name of our tribe in that deeply unknown place before the trade. Derek Walcott wrote, "the sea is history." I knew that before I knew it was history I was looking at.

Maps

According to *Cosmas Indicopleustes Topographia Christiana* the world was an oblong shaped like the tabernacle Moses built. Beyond the earth lay Paradise, which was the source of four rivers that watered the earth.

The door is a place, real, imaginary and imagined. As islands and dark continents are. It is a place which exists or existed. The door out of which Africans were captured, loaded onto ships heading for the New World. It was the door of a million exits multiplied. It is a door many of us wish never existed. It is a door which makes the word *door* impossible and dangerous, cunning and disagreeable.

There is the sense in the mind of not being here or there, of no way out or in. As if the door had set up its own reflection. Caught between the two we live in the Diaspora, in the sea in between. Imagining our ancestors stepping through these portals one senses people stepping out into nothing; one senses a surreal space, an inexplicable space. One imagines people so stunned by their circumstances, so heartbroken as to refuse reality. Our inheritance in the Diaspora is to live in this inexplicable space. That space is the measure of our ancestors' step through the door toward the ship. One is caught in the few feet in between. The frame of the doorway is the only space of true existence.

Castles and forts, the most famous being St. George d'Elmina and the Cape Coast Castle, peppered the coast of West Africa for such purposes from the 1600s to the end of the trade. From Elmina in 1700, William Bosman, the Dutch chief factor dealing in gold and slaves, wrote in his letters home, adoringly, "... for to speak but the bare truth of it, for beauty and strength it hath not its equal upon the coast." All of those castles, their strong doors leading to ships, have collected in the imagination as the Door of No Return. Elmina sits there still. Whitewashed over the sea. There is a fishing village below. The harbour is filled with colourful boats. I've seen photographs.

For those of us today in the Diaspora this door exists as through a prism, distorted and shimmering. As through heat waves across a vast empty space we see this door appearing and disappearing. An absent presence. Though few of us have seen it, or consciously attach importance to it, this door in its historical connectedness was the point of departure, not only physical departure but psychic renting, of our ancestors.

Leaving? To leave? Left? Language can be deceptive. The moment when they "left" the Old World and entered the New. Forced to leave? To "leave" one would have to have a destination in mind. Of course one could rush out of a door with no destination in mind, but "to rush" or "to leave" would suggest some self-possession; rushing would suggest a purpose, a purpose with some urgency, some reason. Their "taking"? Taking, taking too might suggest a benevolence so, no, it was not taking. So having not "left," having no "destination," having no "self-possession," no purpose and no urgency, their departure was unexpected; and in the way that some unexpected events can be horrific, their "leaving," or rather their "taking," was horrific. What language would describe that loss of bearings or the sudden awful liability of one's own body? The hitting or the whipping or the driving, which was shocking, the dragging and the bruising it involved, the epidemic sickness with life which would become hereditary? And the antipathy which would shadow all subsequent events.

The door looms both as a horror and a romance, though. The horror is of course three or four hundred years of slavery, its shadow was and is colonialism and racism. The romance is of the place beyond the door, the Africa of our origins. Some of us reinvent these origins as a golden past of serenity, grandeur, equality — as one living in a state of dread invents its opposite for sustenance. Invention aside, any past without slavery would be golden. Some would simply like the relief of its existence, its continuity rather, its simple connection as a touchstone to our present. This door is the place of the fall.

4

When these Slaves come to Fida, they are put in Prison all together, and when we treat concerning buying them, they are all brought out together in a large Plain; where, by our Chirurgeons, whose Province it is, they are thoroughly examined, even to the smallest Member, and that naked too both Men and Women, without the least Distinction or Modesty. Those which are approved as good are set on one side; and the lame or faulty are set by as Invalides, which are here called Mackrons.

. . . When we have agreed with the Owners of the Slaves, they are returned to their Prison; where from that time forwards they are kept at our charge, cost us two pence a day a Slave; which serves to subsist them, like our Criminals, on Bread and Water: So that to save

Charges we send them on Board our Ships with the very first Opportunity; before which their Masters strip them of all they have on their Backs; so that they come Aboard stark-naked as well Women as Men: In which condition they are obliged to continue, if the Master of the Ship is not so Charitable (which he commonly is) as to bestow something on them to cover their Nakedness.

You would really wonder to see how these Slaves live on Board; for though their number sometimes amounts to six or seven Hundred, yet by the careful Management of our Masters of Ships, they are so regulated that it seems incredible: And in this particular our Nation exceeds all other Europeans; for as the French, Portuguese and English Slave-Ships, are always foul and stinking; on the contrary ours are for the most part clean and neat.

. . . We are sometimes sufficiently plagued with a parcel of Slaves, which come from a far In-land Country, who very innocently perswade one another, that we buy them only to fatten and afterwards eat them as a Delicacy.

When we are so unhappy as to be pestered with many of this sort, they resolve and agree together (and bring over the rest to their Party) to run away from the Ship, kill the Europeans, and set the Vessel a-shore; by

which means they design to free themselves from being our Food.

I have twice met with this Misfortune; and the first time proved very unlucky to me, I not in the least suspecting it; but the Up-roar was timely quashed by the Master of the Ship and my self, by causing the Abettor to be shot through the Head, after which all was quiet.

— Letter, William Bosman, 1700

5

Migration. Can it be called migration? There is a sense of return in migrations — a sense of continuities, remembered homes — as with birds or butterflies or deer or fish. Those returns which are lodged indelibly, unconsciously, instinctively in the mind. But migrations suggest intentions or purposes. Some choice and, if not choice, decisions. And if not decisions, options, all be they difficult. But the sense of return in the Door of No Return is one of irrecoverable losses of those very things which make returning possible. A place to return to, a way of being, familiar sights or sounds, familiar smells, a welcome perhaps, but a place, welcome or not.

6

The door signifies the historical moment which colours all moments in the Diaspora. It accounts for the ways we

observe and are observed as people, whether it's through the lens of social injustice or the lens of human accomplishments. The door exists as an absence. A thing in fact which we do not know about, a place we do not know. Yet it exists as the ground we walk. Every gesture our bodies make somehow gestures toward this door. What interests me primarily is probing the Door of No Return as consciousness. The door casts a haunting spell on personal and collective consciousness in the Diaspora. Black experience in any modern city or town in the Americas is a haunting. One enters a room and history follows; one enters a room and history precedes. History is already seated in the chair in the empty room when one arrives. Where one stands in a society seems always related to this historical experience. Where one can be observed is relative to that history. All human effort seems to emanate from this door. How do I know this? Only by self-observation, only by looking. Only by feeling. Only by being a part, sitting in the room with history.

7

Very few family stories, few personal stories have survived among the millions of descendants of the trade. Africa is therefore a place strictly of the imagination — what is imagined therefore is a gauzy, elliptical, generalized, vague narrative of a place. Many in the Diaspora have visited the Door of No Return at slave castles in Ghana or Gorée Island. They

tell of the overwhelming sense of grief and pain these visits give. One does not return to the Diaspora with good news from the door except the news that it exists and that its existence is the truth. Its perpetual “no” denies them relief, denies an ending or reconciliation. Some have recorded a sense of familiarity beyond the door; some have spoken of a welcome, or of no welcome. But their grief, our grief, remains unassuageable at a profound level. No seeing can truly verify the door, no real place can actualize the lost place. Not in any personal sense.

8

Flung out and dispersed in the Diaspora, one has a sense of being touched by or glimpsed from this door. As if walking down a street someone touches you on the shoulder but when you look around there is no one, yet the air is oddly warm with some live presence. That touch is full of ambivalence; it is partly comforting but mostly discomfoting, tortured, burning with angered, unknowable remembrance. More disturbing, it does not confine itself to remembrance; you look around you and present embraces are equally discomfoting, present glimpses are equally hostile. Art, perhaps music, perhaps poetry, perhaps stories, perhaps aching constant movement — dance and speed — are the only comforts. *Being* in the Diaspora braces itself in virtuosity or despair.

*Have you ever spent a whole day close to sea birds
watching how they fly? they seem
to be carrying the letters of the world to their destinations.*

5

I park my Jeep, smiling at the attendant, asking him, "Where?" The lot seems full. I point at him, pleading, asking, "Where?" Give me a break, I'm late, find me a spot, please. He is high cheekboned, all almond-shaped eyes, all tight Ethiopian black curls, slender. I say, give me a break, bro — reaching for a language from another time which he and I now share, our common language. He gestures to a spot. I quickly fill it, then lock the Jeep and speed toward him with my keys and money. He says, "No keys, it's fine." He takes the money. I ask him, "What's happening?" smiling, needing to leave quickly anyway, my question only to preserve the thin camaraderie of the Diaspora; really, only to speed him. He says calmly, "Look," gesturing with his languid hand, "Look, I come from one of the oldest cities in the world. The oldest civilization. They build a parking lot and they think that it is a civilization." Stunned, I burst out laughing. And he joins me. We laugh and laugh and I reply, "True, true." "The oldest civilization," he says again. "True," I repeat. I don't care if I am late now. Neruda's letter is in my hand, and this man's words are in my head.

*nothing they can do
but rent a room across the street, and tail us
so they can learn to laugh and cry like us.*

The city is a labyrinth of grim hurts and sweet ironies. Former citizens of old cities, failed translators of ideologies, speechless interlocutors of inexpressible feeling.

It is Monday morning, 9 a.m., at the courthouse on Jarvis Street. To get into the courthouse one has to go through the obligatory metal detector and pass by several policemen. Even though one is merely an observer one cannot help but feel an immediate loss of control and a sense of surveillance. The crowd standing outside waiting for the doors to open is mostly young . . . children. Here, they are called juveniles. They are anywhere from eleven to seventeen years old. They all look eight. Some of them are trying to look older, tougher. Some of them are scared. Most are alone, some with a grim-faced mother or grandmother. Some are smoking cigarettes nonchalantly. They are grouped in little packs, those of them without mothers or grandmothers, trying to appear unperturbed. But perhaps they are unperturbed; some of them are veterans. The doors open and we all troop in through the turnstiles and the metal detectors.

The corridors and vestibules fill up; there aren't enough seats in Courtroom No. 1 for the crowd. A policewoman stands at the door of the courtroom. She answers a few questions from those who don't know the rules. Most wait. She looks as if she thinks all of it wearisome — so do many of the children. They are urban children — cool and bored is their emotional attire. Baggy pants worn below the hips, underwear showing, skin-tight pants, belly buttons pierced; hair frosted, streaked, one curl down the side of the forehead; baseball caps — this is the outer attire, affecting that same cool, bored, knowledgeable-beyond-their-years look. And perhaps they *are* cool, bored, knowledgeable beyond their years. I don't know. A city can do that. The doors to Courtroom No. 1 open. The crowd walks in, filling the seats. The policewoman, joined by a policeman, instructs boys to take off their caps. We stand as the judge enters. Two court clerks sit below him to his right. They are Black women, one older, one younger, one in glasses. The judge is not formidable as one imagines judges. He is white. The Crown attorney and the legal aid attorneys look weary, and it's only 9:30 or so. They obviously know each other; they decide some dates, drop into the legal talk, settle what to do with the defendants. It is a routine they practise each day. They could probably do this asleep. As each case is called and a date is set or postponed the children walk to the middle of the courtroom, stand, then are instructed to go

to the clerks, where they are given a pink piece of paper with a new date. The charges aren't read out; this is only a court for setting dates and issuing warrants for those who haven't appeared. Before the judge arrived, six or so teenagers in cuffs were brought up from the holding area downstairs. They affect an even more bored look, glazed really. They've been in custody. They are either heroes or scarecrows to the other teenagers in the room. One by one names are called and I see the children at first tentatively stand, knees weak, and make their way the ten feet or so to the bar. Something curious happens to most of them in their walk up the aisle. They transform from scared and teary to bold and accomplished, as if this is routine, as if they did this yesterday. I see their backs straighten and their heads lift from shame to insolent dignity. Inside they're making some decision — some resistance — “this is what I am then.” Something else is noticeable in Courtroom No. 1. The defendants are Chinese, Hispanic, Portuguese, Italian, African/Caribbean, Vietnamese, Russian. But not really. None of them know these origins except through their parents or grandparents. They were all born in this city. Some are a mix of a few of those specifics, some are co-defendants across those specifics. As they go up one by one to collect the pink sheets of paper, emotions changing now from insolent dignity to ennui, the clerks who seem Caribbean in origin give each child a look of reprimand, as if they're disappointed in this bunch of children who have

wasted their parents' sacrifice. They look at these children like disgusted relatives, aunts who are fed up with bad behaviour. The bleached-blond Chinese boy, the red-streaked Indian girl take on these looks and swagger off, smirking, out of the courtroom. Three young women saunter up the aisle as their names are called. Candace Premdass, Stacy Zeballos, and June Nguyen. Candace Premdass is wearing a Catholic girls' school uniform, the plaid skirt hiked up to mid-thigh, blue calf socks, platform shoes. Stacy Zeballos is in a baggy sweatshirt; June Nguyen is wraithlike in bell-bottoms. Their transatlantic names are the mystery of this city, its hybridization. Candace Premdass, Stacey Zeballos, June Nguyen. They walk lazily toward the judge. "See what you can do with us," they seem to say, "deal with this." Candace and Premdass, Stacy and Zeballos, June and Nguyen. Other and other. How did they all get together, I wonder. Not just their first and last names but the three of them. Friends, co-conspirators, co-defendants. They met as outsiders, no doubt. Outsiders to the city and outsiders in their own homes; the homes, the families that gave them the last names, the same families that gave them the first names to protect them from the last names. What they did isn't clear: shoplifting, perhaps; fighting three other girls, perhaps. Anyway, three of them did whatever it was together. Candace has a swagger; June has a supermodel runway walk — she's the tallest; Stacey is the only one who looks mildly nervous. She stands between the other two. They keep each

other company in the desolate courtroom in the desolate city, this transatlantic space trio. But those are my words, my sentiments. For them, the city is beautiful and reckless, a roller coaster of laughter and lipstick, of talking and dissing and high-fiving and wide eyes of mock offence and wonder, of rap music and boys they cruise, and of just, well, cool. This courtroom is a rite of passage for these diasporic children; they would give up their lives like the boys in cuffs behind the Plexiglas with the guard from Mimico, just as soon as they will saunter out of Courtroom No. 1, relieved, and in the hallway giggle about how awesome it was. A date is set and they approach the two clerks, who give them each a reproachful look. The one giving out the pink slips puts them down on the bar, refusing to hand them to the girls. Candace Premdass snatches her paper, her posse right after her, and leaves the courtroom rolling her eyes in exasperation.

In this parking lot of a civilization I meet a girl with a murmurous baby at the Mimico Youth Detention. She is waiting to see her boyfriend. She knows the ropes: she tells me where to put my ID for the guard, she tells me what noises mean, she tells me where to sit, she says the baby resembles her boyfriend inside. The baby's going to be tall like him. She hopes he knows he has to stop this, the boy is inside for possession. He can't be around bad people, she

says, and not expect to get in trouble, too. She sounds like she's fifty. She's seventeen. So's the boy she's waiting on. She's finishing high school; she wants a Jeep like mine. After we each finish our hour behind Plexiglas talking to the boys we know in detention there, making conversation we each try to infuse with a sense of the boys we knew on the outside — she perhaps accomplishing this better than I, she's younger — I give her a ride to the subway. She was, she wants . . . I can feel a never-going-to-be-sated hunger there.

We, she and I, move in this normal world of jail and babies and wants, thinking nothing of cumbersome baby strollers and teenage mothers in high school. Our families are full of rap musicians and basketball dunking champions, runners and comedians who father children, give up chances, make babies instead, live in leaky Ontario housing projects, hang themselves or take pills and leave their bodies for even more tragic aunts, uncles, and sisters to find floating in bathtubs. She and I live in the living of it.

What happiness, Miguel!

Are you going to ask where I am?

I'll tell you — giving only details useful to the state.

Here, Neruda, it is as if poetry does not matter. The state does not have to look for us. We walk to their building, give them

our wrists upheld. Muriel Rukeyser knew it, too. She said, "They say there is no penalty for poets./ There is no penalty for writing poems./ They say this. This is the penalty."

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. He is fitted into a box four feet or so by four feet in the middle of it. In the winter he has a heater. I imagine him on those ash-cold days beginning the desolate night shift, surveying "their" civilization. He himself has arrived at the parking lot probably spilled up by a war, lucky enough to have escaped it. Brooding over the parking lot he thinks of this chance, some mishap or fortune now indistinguishable, which has landed him here. He lives somewhere in the place called the "jungle" at Lawrence and Bathurst, or in the high-rises at Kipling and Dixon, but he spends most of these days in this unending parking lot, which is the sum of its civilization, laughing sardonically at himself and waiting for a woman in a hurry to listen to his joke. I do not come from any old city. My civilization is the parking lot, but for a

moment I recognize the attendant's "they." 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.

So much goes on in this city. Somewhere among its millions of people someone is sitting in a four-foot-square box and thinking about an older city, thinking, "They build a parking lot and they think that it is a civilization." He is shaking his head at his own predicament and laughing to himself. Someone else is walking toward a theatre, a concert hall, with the cadence of Neruda's letter in her head, and a joke from the man from the oldest city in the world. Somehow she is comforted by this joke, somehow it helps her make it across the street and into the concert hall, it makes her walk to the podium and read Neruda's letter with all the more certainty that there's a country with an old city and a letter.

Ossington to Christie, Toronto

In a new city there are ghosts of old cities. There are lies and re-creations. Everyone thinks that a city is full of hope, but it isn't. Sometimes it is the end of imagination. It is where

everyone comes to put a stop to the hard things in life and to become perfect. Those who are born there think they know perfection. What they know is useless after one hundred miles, unless in another city. But this uselessness humbles ghosts. Ghosts try to step into life. Selam Restaurant, Jeonghysa Buddhist Temple, Oneda's Market, West Indian and Latin American Foods, Afro Sound, Lalibela Ethiopian Cuisine, Longo's Vegetable and Fruits, Astoria Athens Restaurant, Coffee Time, Star Falafel, Vince Gasparos Meats, Eagle Travel, Taygetos Café and Greek Social Club, Pathfinder Bookstore, African Wings Travel, DEC Bookroom and Centre for Social Justice, PCI House-Internet Café, Khosla Travel, Greek Credit Union, Menalon, Asmaria Restaurant and Bar, Turkish Restaurant, Café Jose, African Paradise, Sawa, Manolito Bar Café, Wing Po Variety, El Jaroletto Restaurant, Ramon Humeres — Dentist, Universal Beauty Supply.

Beat

1

I sat in a dark smoke-filled bar in New York City wearing a black turtleneck sweater, black jeans, and black boots. My

hair was cut in a sharp pageboy, my eyebrows were plucked to arrows. I sat there thinking this thought: Journeys are perhaps always imaginary. This bar was filled with others like me, smoking cigarettes and drinking. We were listening intently (yet languidly) to poets like us who stood in a small spotlight declaiming on the ache in human beings. I snapped my fingers in appreciation, murmuring "cool" when some profound thought had been expressed. My hair formed a soft halo in the spotlight as I too rose to speak a glimmer of wisdom into the urban void. The bar, dark and spectral with smoke and enlightenment, snapped its approval. Then Ginsberg walked in and read "Howl" for the first time. Journeys are always imaginary.

I was twelve and sitting in Miss Sirju's English class. Miss Sirju called me Deanne and insisted that I answer to this name, which I had never been called but which a careless registry clerk had attached to my birth certificate when an aunt had gone to the Mayaro registry, some miles away from Guayguayare, where I was born, to register my birth. This clerk had not bothered to listen closely to my aunt or had thought my aunt's opinion on the matter of my name worthless. My aunt, I don't know which one of them, I don't even know if it was an aunt, my aunt did not look at the birth certificate, nor did anyone else in my family, nor did anyone else in any school administration or church or neighbourhood

or playground until Miss Sirju, my first form mistress. Not Miss Greenidge, my fastidious ABC dame school teacher; not Miss James, my primary school headmistress; not Miss Palmer, my standard one teacher, who would have had a perfect right to investigate me had she caught me cheating at poetry recital; not even Miss Meighu, my high school principal. None of these authorities had challenged the name my family had called me since I was born. None of them had questioned my authenticity or my identity until Miss Sirju, who decided to teach me my real name when I was twelve years old.

The transformation into the girl Miss Sirju called Deanne was distasteful to me even though there were many girls I had read of whom I was willing to embody. The girls in *Little Women*, for example, or the girls in Enid Blyton mysteries, or the girl in "Oh Mary, go and call the cattle home." But this Deanne seemed to be a girl without a story. When Miss Sirju called Deanne, I did not answer. I was not being wilful. I looked around like all the other girls waiting for this Deanne to answer. Soon enough the other girls looked at me as if the word *Deanne* were an accusation. Miss Sirju gave me a bad conduct mark for being rude and ignoring her when she called "Deanne." She somehow did not understand that I did not hear my name, my name not being Deanne, and therefore could not answer. Her class became a torture chamber for me. Some days I remembered

her problem and answered just to keep the peace. Some days I forgot this obsession of hers, my mind on my own life and not any fiction of Miss Sirju's. On the days that I remembered her problem, she played a cat and mouse game with me. After calling "Deanne" once, which I answered to when I was alert, she would call "Deanne" again unexpectedly to catch me out. Miss Sirju's English class was therefore a painful place. I could not concentrate on William Wordsworth or William Makepeace Thackeray, who were definitely Williams and never had to endure someone like Miss Sirju, I'd wager. So in order therefore to transcend Miss Sirju, I sat in a dark smoke-filled bar in New York City wearing a black turtleneck sweater, waiting to stand in the natural halo of my hair preceding Ginsberg's "Howl."

I had arrived at the bar following various pieces of information as to its whereabouts. A magazine, an arts report on the radio, a reading of a poem, a novel set in New York City, a piece of jazz heard on Radio Antilles, a glimpse over a shoulder at a neighbour's television set of people calling themselves beatniks. These led me to the bar, down the steps of a New York brownstone, a brownstone such as the one Paule Marshall described in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, describing a girl such as me living in New York City. Down the steps of this brownstone with a blue light small in its window on any evening there could be music — a solo

saxophonist or a guitarist. I also played the guitar from time to time in this bar. Sometimes a singer with a plaintive voice would sing. On any evening there could be extemporizing on the nature of life and the world; on any evening, pulling a menthol through my lungs, I could obtain cool — a oneness with the hard city and the uninvolved universe.

2

When you embark on a journey, you have already arrived. The world you are going to is already in your head. You have already walked in it, eaten in it; you have already made friends; a lover is already waiting.

When I arrived at the apartment on Keele Street, Toronto, I was in America. Somewhere downtown was the hip fast world of jazz and poetry, esoteric arguments and utopian ideas. I had sat for six hours on the airplane, excited, air sick and afraid. Up the Atlantic, perhaps over the Bahamas, my resolve had dwindled, my plans had been thrown into crisis. America had seemed too big an idea for me. I felt small; who was I to plan such a journey? I felt presumptuous, forward, putting myself on this plane and believing that I could arrive anywhere that would require my presence. I was not used to the buffeting of air against steel, the slightest movement made me queasy. And just as a weak person would betray a cause, I felt like turning back. Of course, thankfully I had no

control of the plane so I sat it out, not because I had not weakened but because I had no choice. What in fact was I to return to? A dreadful house, a dubious future, an alienated present. I had made no friendships that I could sustain, no friendships that take one through life — friendships for me were a burden. I had been distracted the moment I heard the faraway BBC voice beckoning me; I had become dissociated the moment I had read *Jane Eyre*, the moment I had played Portia in the *Merchant of Venice*, the moment I had pranced about my high school stage as King Herod. The very moment I had walked onto the stage of the Naparima Bowl and recited, “No one was in the field but Polly Flint and me” from a poem I do not recall. I had been snatched away by James Baldwin, first to Harlem and then to Paris. So here I was on a plane, and my body felt weak and incapable. My plan to get to America now seemed shaky, as tendrilled as the sky outside, which I now could not look at. I regretted the window seat. It startled me that a little physical discomfort, a small inconvenience surely, would make me want to turn back. How was I going to handle the large inconveniences, the demonstrations, the sit-ins, the jailings I had planned to be part of when I arrived? But even in this depth, back was nowhere. Forward, if I did not die of fear, was America.

So when I arrived at the sixteenth-floor apartment in the west end of Toronto, I was relieved. I was in America.

America was a world already conceived in my mind, long before I set foot in that apartment, long before I ever saw it. In fact, when I saw it I did not see it; I saw what I had imagined. One knows where one is going before one arrives. The map is in your head. You merely have to begin moving to have it confirmed. My city was a city busy with people, with purposes. It was inhabited by lye-slick-haired dudes, as in Malcolm X's autobiography; there were dashikied cadres as in don lee's poem “But he was cool.” Mothers like Paule Marshall's, little girls like Toni Cade Bambara's, protesters at snack counters and on buses heading south, militants on courthouse steps with rifles. All the inhabitants of this city in America were African-American. I was prepared to speak on Nina Simone's “Mississippi God damn” and Trane's “Afro Blue.” I was longing to sit someplace and listen to James Baldwin warn of the fire the next time. Owusu Saduki was to come from Buffalo to speak in my city. I was already living in my city long before boarding the air-sickening jet to make the journey. The plane landed in Canada, but I was in America. I had come to meet my compatriots at the barricades, to face the dogs and the water hoses of Bull Connors, to defy George Wallace. These moments were my city.

3

In a newspaper in another country, any country is a monograph of energetic and elliptical dispatches. This I had taken

note of while discoursing my way along latitudes of newsprint, making a compendium of the salient points. In fact, I had memorized the monograph itself — the streets it sketched, the particular contours, the landmarks. So when I embarked, I was already its citizen. I was dressed in a leatherette suit, approximating as well as I could under the circumstances the iconography of a woman in my situation, my hair was bursting from its orthodox perm, my family was already not my family, my road was already laid down. My city was a city in my imagination where someone suddenly and plainly appears as if belonging and not belonging, where someone may disappear also into nothing or everything. When I landed in Toronto I put my luggage down in the apartment on Keele Street and headed for Harlem, the Apollo, 125th Street.

4

I stepped into the cool opening of the Door of No Return. My feet landed where my thoughts were. This is the trick of the door — to step through and be where you want to be. Our ancestors were bewildered because they had a sense of origins — some country, some village, some family where they belonged and from which they were rent. We, on the other hand, have no such immediate sense of belonging, only of drift.

Maps

In 14th century Songhay books were sold for more money than other goods. At Jenne, gold, ivory, skins, pepper and rubber were exchanged for cloth, salt, glass beads, iron, copper and manuscripts.

Ezio Bassani, in *Circa 1492*

Museums

This novel begins in a museum. A small white museum which once housed eighteenth-century British colonial military. It is a small building with two floors, wooden and creaky. It has the smell of all colonial buildings, a yellow handwritten papery mustiness which reminds one of khaki breeches, white sea-island cotton shirts, endless reams of paper, carbon duplicates, and ink wells. It reminds one of interminable waiting. You arrive at the small white museum by climbing or driving up the steepest hill in the town. Up this hill was once a fort. Fort King George. Laid down around 1783, this fort was named for George III of England. You come past the once regiment buildings, and the once domed iron jailhouse which rests in one side of the hill. You imagine eighteenth- and nineteenth-century

prisoners baking in this iron prison atop this highest of peaks in the town.

On the other side of the narrow road up the hill are flamboyant trees, ranging, graceful, and red. As you crest the hill, there is the ocean, the Atlantic, and there a fresh wide breeze relieving the deep flush of heat. From atop this hill you can see over the whole town. Huge black cannons overlook the ocean, the harbour, and the town's perimeter. If you look right, if your eyes could round the point, you would see the Atlantic and the Caribbean in a wet blue embrace. If you come here at night you will surprise lovers, naked or clothing askew, groping hurriedly or dangerously languorous, draped against the black gleaming cannons of George III. At night it is cool and breezy here, and dark; in the daytime it is stark and chalk white and hot, except for the ever blue sky and the flame trees — at their torrid best in the dry season. This book begins in the small white stone museum to the left of the cannons. As you enter there is the sound of a ceiling fan, whirring somewhere in an office upstairs. A clerk asks you apologetically for five TT dollars and ushers you in. On the first floor are bones, shells, stones, small carvings, arrowheads, broken amulets of the first peoples who inhabited this island. It strikes me that on the first floor of all our consciousness, all our imaginations in the Americas, there are these particular bones, shells carvings, arrowheads, broken amulets

of the first peoples who inhabited this New World. The legends on the glass cabinet seem unsure of dates, names; there is not enough money to investigate details, the curator says. To enhance the exhibit the curator has installed a carved boat from Guyana or Surinam, the kind these peoples must have used two or three thousand years ago to make the trip by water to this island from the South American continent. Already this novel is about forgetting. Several millennia have been consumed in the airless small room of this exhibit. This small wreckage of broken stones, bones, and carvings strewn in a glass case without classification or dating is what is left of millions of journeys, millions of songs, millions of daily acts, millions of memories that no one remembers.

On this hill with its wide sumptuous view of black glittering water at night, its blue forever in the daytime, this museum's vain attempt at recollection is visited by few. Guilt makes me want to stop longer at the glass cabinet even though it is possible to see all there is here in a matter of minutes. Fear of disrespect to something quite old makes me linger but then sheepishly move on. Out of the corner of my eye I see a wicker sack where bitter cassava was drained of its poison; I see an arrow whose head might have been tarred with woorara. I make a note without even knowing why and I walk away.

Glancing away from the glass cabinet's debris is looking away from history as well as being filled, uneasily, with history. Moving away is escaping it and this novel is escaping as well as succumbing. Edouard Glissant, the Martiniquan critic, says, "History is destined to be pleasure or distress . . . is capable of quarrying deep within us, as a consciousness or the emergence of a consciousness, as a neurosis and a contraction of the self." This novel begins as I move to the staircase to the second floor. The staircase creaks before my weight has time to rest on it, it creaks from the thought of another body weighing it down, inquiring. The feeling that I carry from the glass cabinet to the stairs is already in the novel — discomfort. This novel will not breath on those bones; if it does it will be brief like the brief rain the Caribs disappear into on this work's second page, it will be brief and therefore mythic. Those bones warn me that everything after I have made up, I have invented in absence.

Moving up the staircase to the next rooms of the museum where this novel begins, I am distressed, in Glissant's sense, and also curious, which is pleasure. The rooms above contain maps, the works of eighteenth-century cartographers growing more and more skilled at forgetting as time passed, maps, ascertaining courses and distances, astro-nomic observations made on the land, latitudes taken at sea, soundings of banks and harbours and bays, bearings for

ships. These cartographers, they were artists and poets. They were dreamers and imaginers as surely as I. On a *Chart of The Antilles, or Charibbee, or, Caribs Islands with the Virgin Isles* by Louis De La Rochette, drawn and published in 1784, there are angels, or cherubs, mouths pursed, blowing the trade winds west on the Atlantic. You must remember this is one point of the middle passage. People are to be lost here, drowned here; people are to be sold, backs and hearts broken; those cherubs, their sweet lips pursed, blow a rough trade. Only an artist could render an angel here. Wonderful wind roses adorn these maps, ships under full sail; cartouches of sovereigns, great explorers, and welcoming nubile natives.

Thomas Jefferys, geographer to the king, George III, writes, in a strangely elegant prose, his observations of this island with the small museum and the cabinet of bones:

The currents near Tobago are very strong and uncertain especially between this island and Trinidad. At the full and change of the moon the sea will rise four feet perpendicular. The North east trades blow all year round. The numerical figures denote eiy depth of water in fathoms where eiy anchors are exprefed it is good anchorage Man-o-War Bay, Courland, Sandy Point and King's Bay are for vessels of the largest size. Tyrrel's Bay, Bloody Bay,

Parlatuviers Bay at Englishman's Bay, Castara Bay and La Guira's Bay have safe anchorage for vefsels of 150 tuns or under. Halifax Bay is very safe and snug for ships under 250 Tuns but there is a shoal in eiy middle of eiy entrance that makes a Pilot necessary. If you make Tobago toward evening and are afraid of running in with it you must not by any means lay to but fstand to eiy southward under an easy sail otherwise eiy current which always sets to eiy North west or north east will probably occasion your lofsing sight of the island and if it set north west would perhaps carry you so far to eiy leeward that you should not be able to fetch it again. Vefsels sailing from eiy eastward for eiy south side of eiy island, must keep well to eiy southward, otherwise the current round Little Tobago which run always to eiy North west will sweep them away to eiy northwest. To the South west there is nothing to fear, till you come to Courland Bay but what shows itself, except Chesterfield rocks . . .

This novel begins most assuredly here in this sublime narrative. I am stunned as I read it with its lispings, I am fascinated by its unintended irony, I am in love with its cadence; what movement in, "[Do] not by any means lay to but stand to under an easy sail." I am envious the way it speaks so gently to its readers, so surely. Its authority in apprehending what others cannot apprehend, its command of the

geography of the oceans — How wilting! How majestic! This gorgeous prose dissembles, it obstructs our view of its real directions, it alludes, it masks. But it points, it says, there, that is where you land the ships bringing slaves to this island. It says that it is possible to do this and still maintain gifts of erudition, or intelligence, even playfulness. Language is so wonderful, so deceitful. Which is why 230 years later I wrench it from his pen, I tear it from the wall of this museum, I cut it into pieces — one piece for the title of this novel, *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, and the rest I give to my Kamena, who escapes the slave plantation at Mon Chagrin in this novel and who in this novel is searching for Terre Bouillante, a maroonage; who is searching in this novel for a place he will never find. He must instead take Bola, the child of a woman named Marie Ursule, a woman who at the beginning of this novel is about to commit suicide; he must take this child Bola and care for her until she can make generations who will inhabit our century. He never finds what he is looking and longing for, it eludes him, it dissembles, all of his directions lead him nowhere. His observations are unearthly. . .

Kamena's unending and, as history will confirm, inevitably futile search for a homeland is the mirror of the book's later generations — their dispersal, their scatterings to the extreme and remote corners of the world: Amsterdam, New

York, Toronto. Their distraction and flights resound in him and back to him. It is their condition of being. This is what they give all cities; they inhabit temporariness, elsewhere — thinking of something they cannot remember but thinking furiously. The journey is the destination.

I use Jefferys' observations not as he had, to show the way to slavery, but to sail my characters into the late twentieth century. The unholy paradox of it does not escape me, I cannot undo Jefferys' words, which might look like simple directions to some; I cannot unhappen history and neither can my characters. When asked, as in Derek Walcott's poem, "Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?/ Where your tribal memory?" my characters answer as in that poem, "Sirs,/ in that grey vault. The sea. The sea/ has locked them up." My characters can only tear into pieces, both history and Jefferys' observations, they can only deliberately misplace directions and misread observations. They can take north for south, west for east. Anywhere they live is remote. They can in the end impugn the whole theory of directions. They inhabit everywhere, mostly the metropolises of North America and Europe. Their lives take any direction at any moment.

In this museum are records, books, lists, names of the enslaved and their age, sex, and physical condition. This novel begins in the jumble of names I've read. I look down

each list, I try to imagine someone writing these lists. Would they have written them down at the beginning of the crop, at the end of the crop, or would they have kept a running record? Would they have had a cup of tea before going to the job or would they have stopped in the middle, gone home to have an afternoon nap, and returned thinking what a nuisance paperwork was? Or would this someone have written these names quite happily, with flourish in the wrist, congratulating himself or herself on the good condition and quantity of their livestock. I cannot help wondering at the personal while reading these lists. What did May, girl, ten, sickly, look like? Or Alfred, man, twenty (?), good health? There are no ruins of slave houses on this island. Their lodgings were so poorly made, so transient, nothing is left of that. Perhaps that is all to the good. Forgetting is a crucial condition of living with any peace. But the records of what and how are in the living, in our habits, our tastes, our styles — a sweet tooth, a love of starchy foods, a sudden hatred of fields, a desire for big cities, an insistent need for loud colours, beautiful shoes, excesses of all kinds whether we can afford them or not.

I scour this museum to understand what is already written in this novel, what is already written in this novel writing itself. I scour many museums. In these museums are signs of exits from the Door of No Return. In another museum,

on another island, I find an eighteenth-century prison dress once worn by a woman who was a slave. It is hanging on an iron mannequin in a dank room in the belly of another eighteenth-century fort. It is stiff, mildewed, and for one moment I wonder why, why have they kept this since there seems to be no reason in the assortment of items here, sugar boiling coppers of various sizes, saddles, ladles . . . Why this dress? A dour dress, as any prison dress might be in any century, doubtless, but a dress as if waiting for this novel to inhabit it, to give it life. Writers, I know, are egotistical sad beings but this dress was waiting for me, it was waiting for the fiction of my Marie Ursule to inhabit it. Looking at this dress I felt a chill, a determination which I could never have myself; I could not be that single-minded or have that much conviction or perhaps that much love to last several centuries to inhabit a novel. The memory of this dress arrives one night along with a memory of V.S. Naipaul's *The Loss of Eldorado: A History*. In it he tells of a woman, Thisbe, who was a slave and the main suspect in a mass death by poisoning on a plantation. After being on trial for several months and tortured throughout, she was sentenced to death. Thisbe was "hanged, her body mutilated and burnt and her head spiked on a pole. At her hanging she was reported to have said, 'This is but a drink of water to what I have already suffered.'" My character, named Marie Ursule, wakes up on the first morning of the novel heading

for that dour mildewed prison dress and those words which Naipaul snatched from history and which I receive from him, gratefully. And the novel begins, "Marie Ursule woke up the morning, knowing what morning it was and that it might be her last."

This novel begins in a memoir of Père Labat, a French priest who went to Martinique and the French colonies in the seventeenth century. There, in cheery recollections of his adventures and life among the colonists, I find two Ursuline nuns, Mère Marguerite de St-Joseph and Soeur de Clemy. They have a convent, two novices, a plantation, and nineteen slaves. They are very good businesswomen because, according to Père Labat, when they die without consecrating their novices into nuns, the Jesuit priests claim their estate. Père Labat's sanguine account of all this, his own travels and business dealings, the ways of planters, the workings of capital machines, his fascination with and disdain for the rituals of the indigenous peoples, his enthusiasm for the whole matter of colonizing, makes you understand just how plain and ordinary this all was, how commonplace and regular — and not in the least bit extraordinary — brutality and exploitation are. And how god is tied up in it up to his neck. The nuns sparkle in Père Labat's narrative even though he only deals with them briefly. I imagine them moving calmly and ghostly among

the teeming crowds at the docks in Marseille in 1680 or so, their habits dragging on the ground, their barrels or bundles carried by the novices, making passage on the ship called *Tranquille*. They are going to the colonies to convert savages. When I meet them in Père Labat's narrative I write them into ever. In the novel they are hundreds of years old. They hover over the work.

This novel flees from that century. It does all it can do to make distance between itself and those catastrophes — Marie Ursule, the nuns, the cartographers. It makes haste through the hurricane of 1875, when a boy is swept away from all his might-have-beens. Another boy goes off to the First World War only to find himself digging latrines. One woman has a sudden and great lust for the glint of gold things and fine cloth. The descendants of those early narratives cross to the mainland of South America, step back onto the archipelago time and again, unknown and known to each other, aware and unaware of their history. Some make their way by water and guile all the way to North America and Europe. That eighteenth-century cartographer's theory of directions is unravelling in this novel. By the end of the twentieth century what the lines on Jefferys' map have conspired to hold in has burst out. What he had not counted on was Marie Ursule, but Marie Ursule had counted on nothing, just whim, a decision to let her child Bola escape with Kamena. Counting on

her own theory, the theory of nothing, she had opened up the world. In every city in the Old World are Marie Ursule's New World wanderers real and chimeric.

Museums; museums are not only enclosures of and for the dead. They are also wide vistas and dark alleyways, car rides across the backs of cities and bodies wrapped in cold coats. This novel begins with the living in Dam Square, Amsterdam, 1992.

Truthfully, this novel begins because I have lost my luggage on my way to Amsterdam. In Glasgow I search and search for my suitcase until the plane to Amsterdam is about to leave. I board my flight to Schiphol feeling somewhat bereft. I have the clothes on my back. I am in Europe with only the clothes on my back but I have my passport and my money and thank goodness the volume of poetry I am to read from the following night. My most horrible nightmare will not come true. The nightmare where I am at a poetry reading and I discover that I have forgotten my book at home and I cannot remember a single line of my poetry. My luggage . . . to be without luggage. I wonder if this is how they felt in that other century, no familiar thing which would suggest that you decided to travel, you have a destination, a place where you will land and open your suitcase and put your things away and then go outside and see what is there. You

will be a traveller, you will look at your surroundings as a place to discover, you will decide what to eat, who to speak with, where to sleep. You will expect recognition and interest, even fellowship.

I land at Schiphol, Amsterdam, without my luggage. Unlike Jefferys. I have no compass. Nor do I have a dispensation from a king to map a shoreline or, in my case, a city. Anyway, it is 1992, and travel is now different though sometimes the same. I am a traveller but I do not travel to the New World (as travellers do today) to encounter a shaman who will take me to my inner soul, a shaman whom I will consume with the greed of a Coca-Cola drinker, a shaman who will disappoint me eventually and inevitably since in the grand narrative the outcome of such encounters must confirm the fallibility of the shaman's magic and the infallibility of my Coca-Cola. I travel to the Old World to be . . . well . . . to be an exotic. I am not a traveller then; I am an exotic in the best of circumstances, an out-of-place nuisance in the worst. The mythology is already known, already in place, my travelogues will not be sent home to make maps for science and commerce. I cannot reflect, question, demonize, or assimilate the monuments of Europe. I have no centre which domesticates the periphery. I do not even have my own luggage. I do not know Amsterdam; I do not have a map. The ex-policeman

conciierge who told me that he had been to Canada to a police convention gestures in the direction of a flea market where I might find some second-hand clothes to wear. I should not be coy here, there is no prison dress waiting for me, only haunting me. It will take a day or two to get my luggage. It has apparently gone to New York. Following the ex-policeman's directions I wander over to the flea market, buy a shirt, then wander about other streets looking for clothing stores.

I walk along the canal, getting lost, losing my bearings, until something else takes my eyes, a window. A woman is in the window, she is standing next to a table, she looks at ease. I say to myself, "Oh, of course there are Black people here, Curacao, Surinam, the Dutch West Indies." I stare at her; she stares back until I feel that I am intruding. I miss my step like a gazing child. When I look up there is another window with another woman, then another, then another. It dawns on me slowly as history, "Oh!" How artless of me. Oh yes, it's Amsterdam. I am struck by the fact that all the scenes in the windows are domestic. My character Maya stares at me impatiently, waiting for me to recognize her, then as if having no time with my innocence she goes about her business. This window and this woman, the one sitting so casually, find their way into the novel.

Eduardo Galeano writes in *Walking Words*, "I'm alone in a foreign city, and I don't know anyone, nor do I understand the language. But suddenly someone shines in the middle of the crowd, shining suddenly like a word lost on the page or any patch of grass on the skin of the earth." In Dam Square I spot my character Adrian. It is night; he is walking busily back and forth in a jerky walk. He is wiping sweat from his face with a distracted hand. His body is light and wind-bent though there is no wind. He gathers his coat up around his ears though it is summer. But he is cold from something missing in his veins. He is trembling. With my usual preciousness at first I do not catch the play for some minutes. Then he shines. That is Kamena's boy, the boy lost to directions. Then I am sad on Dam Square. All the way here, all the way here to look so dry faced on Dam Square. I feel like sitting there, right there beneath the statue covered in pigeon waste, I feel like sitting there and crying, I feel bereft. I feel abandoned by Marie Ursule to city squares and windows and public places where I am on display and must make a display, like exotica. I feel marooned like Kamena. Marooned now in outposts and suburbs and street corners anywhere in the world. I am adrift, spilled out, with Adrian and Maya at the end of this century in any city all over the world with nothing as certain as Marie Ursule coming. We are all abandoned, all scattered in Marie Ursule's hopelessness and her skill.

This novel doesn't begin because of any of this. It begins because I am a writer. I like the way a word can bloom a whole other set of words, and I like the gesture of an arm on a street corner or in a church. I like the faint whiff of perfume, a hip-shotted walk, a trail of cloth, dappling light off a tree through a curtain at a window, strong coffee artichoke hearts and dry white wine. The novel begins because I am sitting in a two-storey pine house in the middle of winter in Burnt River drinking coffee, and a spider is figuring out how to catch the flies buzzing on the windowpane and by this time I have no other skill so I begin to write.

Maps

An oral ruttier is a long poem containing navigational instructions which sailors learned by heart and recited from memory. The poem contained the routes and tides, the stars and maybe the taste and flavour of the waters, the coolness, the saltiness; all for finding one's way at sea. Perhaps, too, the reflection and texture of the sea bed, also the sight of birds, the direction of their flight. This and an instrument called a Kamal which measured the altitude of stars from the horizon.

Ruttier for the Marooned in the Diaspora

Marooned, tenantless, deserted. Desolation castaway, abandoned in the world. They was, is, wandered, wanders as spirits who dead cut, banished, seclude, refuse, shut the door, derelict, relinquished, apart. More words she has left them. Cast behind. From time to time they sit on someone's bed or speak to someone in the ear and that is why someone steps out of rhythm; that is why someone drinks liquor or trips or shuts or opens a door out of nowhere. All unavailable to themselves, open to the world, cut in air. They disinherit answers. They owe, own nothing. They whisper every so often and hear their own music in churches, restaurants, hallways, all paths, between fingers and lips, between cars and precipices, and the weight of themselves in doorways, on the legs of true hipsters, guitars and bones for soup, veins.

And it doesn't matter where in the world, this spirit is no citizen, no national, no one who is christened, no sex, this spirit is washed of all this lading, bag and baggage, jhaji bundle, georgie bindle, lock stock, knapsack, and barrel, and only holds its own weight which is nothing, which is memoryless and tough with remembrances, heavy with lightness, aching with grins. They wander as if they have no century, as if they can bound time, as if they can sit in a café

in Brugge just as soon as smoke grass in Tucson, Arizona, and chew coca in the high Andes for coldness.

Pays for everything this one, hitchhikes, dies in car accidents, dresses in Hugo Boss and sings ballads in Catholic churches, underwater rum shops. This is a high-wire spirit laden with anchors coming in to land, devoluting heirlooms, parcels, movable of nips, cuts, open secrets of foundlings, babes, ignitions, strips of water, cupfuls of land, real estates of ocean floors and steaming asphalt streets, meat of trees and lemons, bites of Communion bread and chunks of sky, subdivisions of stories.

These spirits are tenants of nothing jointly, temporary inheritors of pages 276 and 277 of an old paleology. They sometimes hold a life like a meeting in a detention camp, like a settlement without a stone or stick, like dirty shelves, like a gag in the mouth. Their dry goods are all eaten up already and their hunger is tenacious. This spirit doubling and quadrupling, resuming, skipping stairs and breathing elevators is possessed with uncommunicated undone plots; consignments of compasses whose directions tilt, skid off known maps, details skitter off like crabs. This spirit abandoned by all mothers, fathers, all known progenitors, rents rooms that disappear in its slate stone wise faces. These people un-people, de-people until they jump overboard, hijack buildings and

planes. They disinhabit unvisited walls. They unfriend friends in rye and beer and homemade wine and forties.

She undwells solitudes, liquors' wildernesses. This drunk says anything, cast away in his foot ship, retired from the world. This whisperer, sprawler, mincer, deaconess, soldier is marooning, is hungering, is unknowing. This one in the suit is a litigant in another hearing gone in the world. This spirit inhaling cigarettes is a chain along a thousand glistening moss harbours and spends nights brooding and days brooding and afternoons watching the sea even at places with no harbours and no sea. This one is gone, cast off and wandering wilfully. This is intention as well as throwaway. This is deliberate and left. Slipstream and sailing. Deluge. These wander anywhere, clipping shirt-tails and hems and buying shoes and vomiting. These shake with dispossession and bargain, then change their minds. They get trapped in houses one minute, just as anybody can, and the next they break doorways and sit in company mixing up the talk with crude honesty and lies. Whatever is offered or ceded is not the thing, not enough, cannot grant their easement, passports to unknowing everything.

This spirit's only conveyance is each morning, breath, departures of any kind, tapers, sheets of anything, paper, cloth, rain, ice, spittle, glass. It likes blue and fireflies. Its

face is limpid. It has the shakes, which is how it rests and rests cutting oval shells of borders with jagged smooth turns. It is an oyster leaving pearl. These spirits have lived in any given year following the disaster, in any given place. They have visited shutters and doors and thermal glass windows looking for themselves. They are a prism of endless shimmering colour. If you sit with them they burn and blister. They are bony with hope, muscular with grief possession.

Marooned on salted highways, in high grass, on lumpy beds, in squares with lights, in knowledge plantations and cunning bridges grasping two cities at the same time. Marooned in the mouth where things escape before they are said, are useless before they are given or echo. Marooned in realms of drift, massacres of doubt, implications. Marooned where the body burns with longing for everything and nothing, where it circles unable to escape a single century; tenements and restagings of alien, new landings. Marooned in outcropping, up-crops of cities already abandoned for outposts in suburbs. Deserted in the fragility of concrete rooms, the chalked clammy dust of dry walls, the rot of sewer pipes and the blanket of city grates.

Marooned in music, dark nightclubs of weeping, in never-sufficient verses, uncommunicated sentences, strict tears, in copper throats. Where days are prisons this spirit is a tenant.

She moves along incognito on foot, retreating into unknowing, retreating into always orphanages, dew light, paradise, eclipses, bruised skies, atomic stars, an undeviating ever.

So if now and then they slump on beds in exhaustion it is hallowed pain. If they sink in the ear it is subversions that change their minds even before they are deployed, unexpected architectures of ambivalent longing, cargoes of wilderness. It is their solitudes' wet desolations. If they finger a string across a piece of wood and a tremolo attacks a room, toccata erupt, coloratura saturate the walls, it is their lost and found dereliction. If virtuosity eludes them, relinquishes them, cast away to themselves only, gaping limbs and topographies, it is just as much spiritoso, madrigal, mute chirping, ululating twilight unvisiting.

It is now and she, they whisper in Walkmans, in cities' streets with two million people gazing at advertisements. It is now and he, they run his fingers over a moustache flicking frost away, breathing mist like a horse. Cities and public squares and public places corral their gifts of imagined suns and imagined families, where they would have been and who they might have been and when. Cities make them pause and wonder at what they might have thought had it been ever, and had it been dew light and had it been some other shore, and had it been time in their own time when

now they are out of step with themselves as spirits are. Electric lights and neon and cars' metal humming convince them of cultivated gateways and generations of water, of necessities they cannot put back together. Their coherence is incoherence, provocations of scars and knives and paradise, of tumbling wooden rivers and liquid hills.

Maps

There is an old man who walks back and forth at Shuter and Parliament. He has all his belongings in a bag on his back and another in his hand. Every time I pass by, year in, year out, he is pacing, pacing back and forth. The story goes that many years ago he used to live with his daughter, who struggled to keep him with her but eventually had to give up. He had Alzheimer's disease. His daughter finally and reluctantly brought him to the mission to stay, as she could no longer care for him. He, not understanding that he now lives at the mission, paces back and forth with all his belongings in readiness, waiting for his daughter to return and take him home.

Maps

It is not a question of rootlessness but of the miracle of roots, the miracle of a dialogue with eclipsed selves which appearances may deny us or into which they may lead us.

Wilson Harris

1

Vancouver, 2000. Waiting for the bus at Granville and Robson. The bus arrives. A Black man is driving it. This city has few Black people. So few that when they meet on the street they nod to each other in surprise, perhaps delight, certainly some odd recognition. Two stops along a Salish woman gets on. She asks the driver for directions — if she is on the right bus, if she is headed in the right direction, where she is situated, how much does the fare cost . . .

This road along which the bus travels may have been a path hundreds of years ago. This jutting of land through which this path travels has lost its true name. It is now surrounded by English Bay, False Creek, and Burrard Inlet. And Granville Street, whose sure name has vanished, once was or was not a path through. That woman asking directions might have known these names several hundred years ago. Today when she enters the bus she is lost. She looks into the face of

another, a man who surely must be lost, too, but who knows the way newly mapped, superimposed on this piece of land; she asks this man the way and sits down. The man driving the bus is driving across a path which is only the latest redrawing of old paths. He is not from here. Where he is from is indescribable and equally vanished from his memory or the memory of anyone he may remember. He is here most recently perhaps from Regina, Saskatchewan, where his mother arrived with her new husband from Toronto, and before that Chicago and still again Bridgetown. And then again the Door of No Return, El Mina or Gorée Island, somewhere along the west coast of the continent, somewhere safe and deep enough to be a harbour and a door to nothing. This driver knows some paths that are unrecoverable even to himself. He is the driver of lost paths. And here he is telling the Salish woman where to go. The woman from this land walks as one blindfolded, no promontory or dip of water is recognizable. She has not been careless, no. No, she has tried to remember, she has an inkling, but certain disasters have occurred and the street, the path in her mind, is all rubble, so she asks the driver through lost paths to conduct her through her own country. So the driver through lost maps tells the woman of a lost country her way and the price she should pay, which seems little enough — \$1.50 — to find your way. The woman with no country pays and sits down. The man with no country drives on.

It is only the Granville bus, surely. But a bus where a ragged mirage of histories comes into a momentary realization.

I am sitting on the bus driving along Granville with a friend. She and I observe this transaction. We just made a similar one ourselves with the bus driver of lost paths. The bus is full, but there are really only four of us on it. The driver through lost paths stops and lets someone on and someone off, people who don't realize that the bus is empty but for the four of us. The four of us pause at these intrusions, but we go on. We have perfected something — each of us something different. One drives through lost paths, one asks the way redundantly, one floats and looks, one looks and floats — all marvel at their ability to learn and forget the way of lost maps. We all feign ignorance at the rupture in mind and body, in place, in time. We all feel it.

2

I am going to Seattle. I have just crossed the Winnebago Indian Reservation and the White Earth Indian Reservation. It is not my fault that I notice the earth is scarred. Crow Indian Reservation, Little Belt Mountain, Big Baldy Mountain, Custer's Battlefield Monument, Yakima Indian Reservation. This continent's ancestry is beneath this aircraft.

I will talk in a room in Seattle about another ancestry, of which I have none.

3

It was said in my family that my grandfather was part Carib. The parts of my grandfather which were part Carib were his cheekbones, which were high, not in an African-high way but in a square flat way — a Carib-high way. Then there was the tawny hue sometimes visible under the dark brown of his skin. Then the occasional straightness of regions of hair on his head. The rest of my grandfather, his height, the remaining territories of his hair, the dominant colour of his skin, the majority of him, was African. There were, too, indefinite parts of him which either hegemony could claim. But there was no war, there never had been, both had settled calmly in my grandfather. They shared a common history. The Carib part grateful for its small survival in my grandfather's face. A survival once recorded in a letter by Pero Vaz de Caminha to Dom Manuel I of Portugal as "bestial people, with little knowledge . . . they are like birds or mountain animals . . . brown men all nude with nothing to cover their shameful parts." The African part of my grandfather carried him as a courtesy and a welcome obligation and perhaps also in gratitude himself for sharing with him the knowledge of the islands. My grandfather was an agriculturist.

My grandfather came from a country which was devastated by a volcano. This was the island where my grandfather collected the Carib in him. He left when he was a boy. Perhaps the Carib in him, after 2000 years of knowing islands, felt the tremors of Montserrat and propelled my grandfather to a boat heading south a lifetime earlier. My grandfather came from a people whose name he could not remember. His forgetting was understandable; after all, when he was born the Door of No Return was hardly closed, forgetting was urgent.

4

I've seen that castle in photographs, the one at Elmina. I've seen it from the angle of the sea, whitewashed and sprawling. There are photographs of what look like narrow low-ceilinged corridors; bats hang in these corridors' dark reaches. I know that if I go to that place I will be destroyed. Its photographs take my breath away. Places like this are dotted along the west coast of Africa. These places became known as the Gate of No Return, the Door of No Return. Does all terror become literary? These are the places that made everyone who went through forget their names. Here, walls ate the skin, footsteps took the mind. My grandfather's forgetting was not personal. It had been passed on to him by many, most especially the one in my family who stepped through the Door of No Return. It was a gift. Forgetting.

The only gift that one, the one bending reluctantly toward the opening, could give.

5

To travel without a map, to travel without a way. They did, long ago. That misdirection became the way. After the Door of No Return, a map was only a set of impossibilities, a set of changing locations.

6

A map, then, is only a life of conversations about a forgotten list of irretrievable selves.