

DIONNE BRAND'S WINTER EPIGRAMS

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DIONNE BRAND, THIS SISTER, Toronto out of Trinidad, carries her verse with the clear sharp relaxed tension of Sistrén and for much the same reasons: poor, hungry, cold, exile, inhabit the verses with a warm feminine all-embracing sense of womb: of hope, that is, and home and him in all his glaces. Her fourth book of poems *Winter epigrams & Epigrams to Ernesto Cardenal in defense of Claudia* has recently (March 1983) been published by Williams-Wallace International of Toronto; and with it we can at last begin, with some confidence, to see and overstand what the voice of the Caribbean woman poet is telling us, doing for us. How the line of that tradition begins to reveal itself from Nanny through the fias of all those slave revolts to the 1930's to the flagwomen of so many carnivals to Miss Lou, to Pandora Gomez. And Dionne, perhaps because she is our first major exile female poet (sorry about all those qualifications) helps us to make a start.

the epigram form helps too; getting her (and iani) closer to the nerve, to the bone, to the clear wide integrated circuits of her meaning; circuits of blood, that is, not stereo. And what else, what more a fitting form, we ask at the "end" of the reading, for exile, for loneliness, for such bleak loveliness, the winter of the mWorld's sense of present discontents and that quick radicle of green from which the poems spring . . .

Winter Poems

we begin in autumn, in early September in fact, with death coming down from the North; the world of white (re)-asserting itself in the city:

1

A white boy with a dead voice
sings about autumn.
who knows what he means!

2

no one notices the tree in the front yard
of the next apartment building
is dead, again

3

ten months in the cold
 waiting
 I have forgotten, for what!

this is where McKay was in 1925, in New York, with for him, too, the winter coming down. Forgetting he looked (back) home. Dionne looks out her tight apartment window in Toronto:

they think it's pretty
 this falling of leaves.
 something is dying!
 (W4)¹

every september, about the first week
 a smell of infirmity clasps the air,
 it is a warm lake like an old hand
 trying to calm a cold city.
 (W6)

and ?pretty soon it is her ark against the arctic:

cold is cold is
 cold is cold is
 not skiing
 or any other foolhardiness in snow.
 (W8)

and we find her, trying to keep warm heart, warm hope, warm mind, warm friendship, at a Harbourfront poetry reading; with others, too, trying to shay no to snow:

a coloured boat
 sailed on a frozen lake
 at Harbourfront
 two northern poets, thankfully rescued
 by this trip to Toronto, read
 about distant grass
 about arctic plains
 who wants to see, who wants to listen!
 (W7)

already the voice establishing itself within the enigmatic diary and the first ?cold "lyric" follows:

I give you these epigrams, Toronto,
 these winter fragments
 these stark white papers
 because you mothered me
 because you held me with a distance that I expected,

BRAND

here, my mittens,
here, my frozen body,
because you gave me nothing more
and i took nothing less,
i give you winter epigrams
because you are a liar,
there is no other season here
(W9)

but the theme of exile, we understand from the start, isn't going to be conventionally rootless, conventionally protest, conventionally shivering. Poet & place interstand each other; each in ijs own space; each at ijs learning distance. So she is *here*: poet, yes; and vulnerable woman:

I am getting old
i know.
my skin doesn't jump any more
i am not young and in the company of people;
i am old and in the company of shadows.
things pass in the corners of my eyes
and i don't catch them.
what more proof do you want, look!
i am writing epigrams
(W10)

form and "condition" meshing

winters should be answered
in curt, no-nonsense phrases,
don't encourage them to linger.
(W11)

so she goes, this young woman of the III World tropics, to the winter discos "where you get to dance fast / and someone embraces you" (W12); or to the bookstore where "I can buy books / which i do not read and cannot afford / and make plans for them to / carry me through my depression . . ." (W19); or she takes a trip out of town but the click remains locked and she is like licked within the winter solstice:

I've never been to the far north/cold,
just went as far as Sudbury,
all that was there was the skull of the earth.
a granite mask so terrible even
the wind passed hurriedly.
the skull of the earth I tell you,
stoney, sockets, people
hacked its dry copper flesh.

I've heard of bears and wolves
 but that skull was all i saw.
 it was all I saw I tell you . . .
 (W18)

and as you would expect, at this heart of the ice, the icicle act, the insidious
 implosion:

the superintendent dug up the plants again,
 each june she plants them
 each september she digs them up
 just as they're blooming,
 this business of dying so often
 and so soon
 is getting to me
 (W23)

but watch now, at the same time, from the very bottom of the pit, the lovely
 handled anti-line:

It was not right to say
 her face was ruined by alcohol and rooming houses,
 it was still there, hanging on to her
 cracking itself to let out a heavy tongue
 and a voice (if you could call it that).
 her eyes opened not out of any real interest, not to see
 where she was going, but out of some remembered courtesy,
 something tumbled out of her mouth
 a Black woman walked by,
 one who could not keep a secret . . .
 (W27)

for it keeps closing in: rape, pornography, a man in a window showing her his
 penis (W46, 48, 51); where the green; where the love?

If one more person I meet
 in an elevator in july says to me
 'Is it hot enough for you?'
 or when standing, cold, at a car stop in november,
 'How could you leave your lovely sunny country . . .'
 (W26)

I can wear dirty clothes
 under my coat now,
 be who I am in my room,
 on the street.
 perhaps there'll be an accident though.
 (W13)

it's too cold to go outside,
 i hope there won't be a fire.
 (W15)

I've found out
 staying indoors makes you horny,
 perhaps winter is for writing
 love poems.
 (W16)

and love, in all its various guises, its remarch of voices, is what these poems (in addition to their major ojer themes, connected, disconnected) are "about." And no, not turtle dove; not even Russe/Zhivago love. But something that a sister comes to understand from as I say the Hill Queen Nanny, the rebels at Montego Bay, and those her mothers of the Middle Passage; from Caribbean daughter who does not (yet) forget to change her underwear . . . (W13)

Epigrams to Ernesto Cardenal in defense of Claudia

the force-fields here are complex. Cardenal (he was the one in line on TV when the Pope visited Nicaragua; the revolutionary priest taking off his beret and kneeling to kiss the ring with the Pope wagging his finger at him. One of the finest poets of Our America. In *Apocalypse and other poems* (trans 1977), Ernesto, alive to the blandishments of Claudia, the Cocoa-Cola girl, one of the problems of Our America, wrote

They told me you were in love with another man
 and [so] I went off to my room
 and I wrote that article against the government
 that landed me in jail.

(quoted in McTair's Introduction)

and Dionne picks this up; becoming herself Claudia, taking note of that male arrogance against the "other," herself so different from that Claudia, yet sharing in the common gender, the oppression, and at last the love: for in the end the Revolution cannot be only politics, but heart & whole: from which the heal itself may one day come. But before that, Ernesto, too, must understand that

Often . . . ,
 little girls are quite desperate.
 (E11)

and

How do I know that this is love
 and not legitimation of capitalist relations of production
 in advanced patriarchy?

and

so we spent hours and hours
 learning Marx,
 so we picketed embassies and stood

at rallies,
 so it's been 13 years agitating
 for the liberation of Africa,
 so they still think, I should be in charge
 of the refreshments.
 (E14)

and

can't speak
 for girls of the bourgeoisie,
 But girls like me can't wait
 for poems and men's hearts.
 (E16)

and

Beauty for now, is a hot meal
 or a cold meal or any meal at all.
 (E20)

and, in direct response to Cardenal's poem :

so I'm the only thing you care about?
 well what about the incursions into Angola,
 what about the cia in Jamaica,
 what about El Salvador,
 what about the multi-national paramilitaries
 in South Africa,
 and what do you mean by 'thing' anyway?
 (E21)

and

If you don't mind,
 can I just sit here today?
 can I not be amusing please?
 (E22)

so

Dear Ernesto,
 I have terrible problems convincing
 people that these are love poems.
 Apparently I am not allowed to love
 more than a single person at a time.
 Can I not love anyone but you?
 signed,
 'Desperate'.
 (E27)

but she can speak like that, has earned the right to speak like that, because the

same way she knows her place as woman, she knows her place as revolutionary, as
mWorld 20th-century person & persona:

when I saw the guerrillas march into Harrare
tears came to my eyes
when I saw their feet, a few
had shoes and many were bare
when I saw their clothes, almost
none were in uniform.
the vanquished were well dressed.
(E23)

Carbines instead of M16s
manure explosives instead of cluster bombs
self criticism instead of orders
baskets full of sulphur instead of washing.
(E24)

That is how we took Algiers and Ho Chi Minh city and Muputo and
Harrare and Managua and Havana
and St Georges and Luanda and Da Dang and Tet and Guinea
and . . .
(E25)

I wanted to be there.
(E26)

for such a person/poet, as for Cardenal, there can be no separation: woman from
her senses, artist from her life, politics from heart

cow's hide or drum
don't tell me it makes no difference
to my singing,
I do not think that histories are so plain,
so clumsy and so temporal . . .
I want to write as many poems as Pablo Neruda
to have 'pared my fingers to the quick'
like his,
to duck and run like hell from numbing chants.
(E34)

these are the *Ars Poetica* poems of the collection; like (11): '*on being told that
being Black is being bitter*' — the very heart, not so, of so many of our fruitless
Caribbean post-Prospero debates

give up the bitterness
he told my young friend/poet
give it up and you will be beautiful.
after all these years and after all these words
it is not simply a part of us anymore

it is not something that you can take away
 as if we held it for safekeeping,
 it is not a treasure, not a sweet,
 it is something hot in the hand, a piece of red coal,
 it is an electric fence, touched . . .

it is the generation that grew up and died with Walter Rodney, knowing that it
 will have to go in & go through with it over & over & over again

it is not separate, different,
 it is all of us, mixed up in our skins,
 welded to our bones
 and it cannot be thrown away
 not after all these years, after all these words
 we don't have a hold on it
 it has a hold on us,
 to give it up means that someone dies,
 you, or my young poet friend . . .

'so be careful,' she says

when you give up
 the bitterness.
 let him stand in the light for a moment
 let him say his few words, let him breathe
 and thank whoever you pray to
 that he isn't standing on a dark street
 with a brick,
 waiting for you.
 (E35)

and so we find her in Managua ('"Managua in the evening sky" . . . memorious
 and red' (E39); and in St. Georges . . .

there are hills, I hear,
 to make me tired
 and there is work, I know,
 to make me thinner.
 (E38)

and carefully tuned "I hear" balanced against "I know" is part of the careful
 craft of these epigrams: a sense of verse & line present in all her books of poems;
 as with this very Caribbean woman in Transkei:

you can't say that there's rationing here
 you can't complain about the meat shortage
 we have a good democratic system here in Transkei
 you can't say there is only so much milk or so much butter
 you can't bad-talk food on this bantustan
 you can't put goat-mouth on it just like that.

If you don't have a cow you can't
say there's no butter.
(E37)

BUT ALWAYS (BACK IN TORONTO) there is still the "no end,"
the "half-home," leading to the not unexpected negative explosion, the poem
coils in into itself to make its meaning:

The night smells of rotten fruit.
I never noticed before
the cicala's deliberate tune,
something about it frightens me
as always,
as when hallucinating with a fever
I saw the mother of the almond tree
shadow me in my hot bed.
say say stay, say go say!
The night decays with fruit
dense with black arrangements
(E41)

McKay dreamed back to warm deciduous Jamaica. Dionne, so much more —
and so much less — the exile — confronts with household mask:

I've arranged my apartment
so it looks as if I'm not here
I've put up bamboo blinds
I've strung ever green hедера helix
across my kitchen window
I've bought three mexican blankets
to put on the walls . . .
If only I could get York Borough to
pass a city ordinance authorizing
the planting of Palm trees along
Raglan Avenue . . .
(W37)

and

Two things I will not buy
in this city,
mangoes and poinsettia
I must keep a little self respect
(W53)

seen? and at the extreme perhaps of vulnerability

Spring?
 I wait and wait and wait;
 peer at shrubs,
 the neighbours don't know what to make
 of this crazy Black woman
 rooting in their gardens
 looking for green leaves;
 in only march at that.
 (W33)

and it can she knows get to you and lonely lonely is the word for it as in

shall I do it then,
 now, here,
 a riddle for februarys,
 shall I,
 here, under this mexican blanket
 clutching my dictionary (Vol. 11 the shorter
 Oxford Marl-Z),
 Shall I do it before falling asleep
 before the summer comes
 before seeing the Chicago Art Ensemble again . . .

like

maybe if Betty Carter never sang,
 or Roscoe Mitchell never touched a saxophone . . .

but Betty sang like Billie before her and Bessie and Roscoe Mitchell burns it on
 from all those ancient tranes; and so these names are not commercial shopping
 lists, but ikons: they mean and they protect — like all the other names within
 this poem. So that within the mWorld circle of their fire, the voice recovers,
 eremite & wry: apocalypse too kaiso for utter ruin . . .

losing my life like that though,
 mislaying the damn thing,
 and right in the middle of winter,
 me!
 and it gone
 flown
 shall I chew the red berries
 which I collected before the freeze.
 (W45)

IT IS THIS STUBBORNNESS WHICH reaches Spring, which is
 the spring round which the poems curl & curve to Cardenal again & Claudia but

Claudia at last that Cardenal must understand in all her equal hope & fear & reason: woman, now defined, of isle & exile, art & heart & politics.

Claudia dreams birthday cakes
and mauve bougainvillea
Claudia dreams high heeled shoes
orchid bouquets, french perfume,
Sel Duncan Dress band,
the Hilton hotel pool, rum and coke,
commercials of the 'free' world
and men civilised by white shirts.
(E48)

Yet a woman is always alone,
a case of mistaken identity . . .
(E49)

or, less unmistakably

you say you want me to . . .
to what?
no I can't tap dance
at the International Women's Day rally.
(E47)

or to show that there's no hard feelings either way; that even Africa doan mek it so; (even though, that is, she's "a Toronto Black poet"): this unMagnificat:

his name meant ruler, king in Yoruba
or god or something . . .
and even though I was an atheist
and a socialist, I went with him,
not holding his name against him,
liking it because it wasn't
george or harold — slave names! I spat —
what a love! this Yoruba name:
Olu fisoye Ojo Ajolabi!
beautiful for introductions and greetings,
venerable and original,
grandiose and lyrical as mother earth . . .
a name like adire cloth
a name like asoke weave
Until he said: 'the poor want to be poor,
nothing's holding them back, they're just lazy.'
then as serf of his majestic name and tradition
of beaten gold,
as serfs will, I shouted at him:
colonised lackey! comprador! traitor!
adire cloth turn to shreds!
death of a closet monarchist! (served me right)

beautiful appellation of contradictions!
 I could not live with him
 even though he would have paid the rent,
 and, well, it was never personal anyway.
 (E45)

it is this woman: person:poet: this other sister Claudia: coming from all those years, from all those journeys, winter singings, that Cardenal must come to deal with, deals with Cardenal, until the equal is achieved, until the one & one is one is recognized; as in *Ars Hominis/the manly arts*:

Since you've left me no descriptions
 having used them all to describe me
 or someone else I hardly recognize
 I have no way of telling you
 how long and wonderful your legs were;
 since you covetously hoarded all the words
 such as 'slender' and 'sensuous' and 'like a
 young gazelle'
 I have no way of letting you know
 that I loved how you stood and how you walked . . .
 (E30)

and as the negatives are worked with, worked through, like the cold, like the winter, like the snow, like Toronto, like exile, like massa day done . . .

then, when at last she can not simply say but sing that heart need not be half & half but home; that if one place be prison, the world that she inherits — no — the world she earns — is not is not but is — that then and only then within these winter epigrams — the green begins

Cardenal, the truth is that
 even though you are not a country
 or my grandmother
 or coconut ice cream
 or Marquez' Autumn of the Patriarch
 or Sarah Vaughan
 or cuban music
 or brazillian movies
 or Kurosawa
 or C.L.R.'s *Black Jacobins*
 or Angela
 or Guayguayare
 I love you . . .
 (E54)

and with that quiet even handed tone which is so much the poem

here!
 take these epigrams, Toronto,

I stole them from Ernesto Cardenal,
he deserves a better thief
but you deserve these epigrams
(W22)

NOTE

¹ W = *Winter Epigrams*, E = *Epigrams to Ernesto Cardenal*, the number referring to the poet's numbered epigram.

GOING UP

Seymour Mayne

No, he couldn't have had a knife
in his right hand,
just the stick that helped
him up —
and so few words. I asked
and asked: Are we there yet?
How much farther?
Won't it get dark
before we get there?
And he nodded, his thinning
white hair brushed
in place with his left hand
wound with the donkey's tether.

He didn't want to go
through with it,
I can be sure.
His heart wasn't in it.
But father,
why didn't you have
something to say?
Why didn't you look my way
and share a smile
as the shadows
that followed us
lengthened and pierced
the light falling
on juts of rock
and sharp stone.