

Dionne Brand
Maps

01/02

An oral ruttier is a long poem containing navigational instructions that sailors learned by heart and recited from memory. The poem contained the routes and tides, the stars and maybe the taste and flavor of the waters, the coolness, the saltiness; all for finding one's way at sea. Perhaps, too, the reflection and texture of the seabed, also the sight of birds, the directions of their flights. This, and an instrument, 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

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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 color. 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 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.

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Excerpted from Dionne Brand, *A Map To The Door of No Return* (Vintage Canada, 2002).