

An *Ars Poetica* from the Blue Clerk¹

DIONNE BRAND

Verso 1.1²

There are bales of paper on a wharf somewhere, at a port, somewhere. There is a clerk inspecting and inspecting them. She is the blue clerk. She is dressed in a blue ink coat, her right hand is dry her left hand is dripping; she is expecting a ship, she is preparing for one. Though she is afraid that by the time the ship arrives the stowage would have overtaken the wharf.

The sea off the port is roiling some days, calm some days.

Up and down the wharf she examines the bales, shifts old left-handed pages to the back, making room for the swift voluminous incoming freight.

The clerk looks out sometimes over the roiling sea or over the calm sea, finding the horizon, seeking the transfiguration of the ship.

The bales have been piling up for years yet they look brightly scored, crisp and sharp. They have abilities the clerk is forever curtailing and martialing. They are stacked deep and high and the clerk, in her inky garment, weaves in and out of them checking and re-checking that they do not find their way into the right-hand page. She scrutinises the manifest hourly, the contents and sequence of loading. She keeps account of cubic metres of senses, perceptions and, resistant facts. No one need be aware of these, no one is likely to understand, some of these are quite

dangerous and some of them are too delicate and beautiful for the present world.

There are green unclassified aphids, for example, living with these papers.

The sky over the wharf is a sometimish sky, it changes with the moods and anxieties of the clerk, it is ink blue as her coat or grey as the sea or pink as the evening clouds.

The sun is like a red wasp that flies in and out of the clerk's ear. It escapes the clerk's flapping arms.

The clerk would like a cool moon but all the weather depends on the left-hand pages. All the acidity in the salt air, all the waft of almonds and seaweed, all the sharp poisonous odour of time.

The left-hand pages swell like dunes some years. It is all the clerk can do to mount them with her theodolite, to survey their divergent lines of intention. These dunes would envelop her as well as the world if she were not the ink-drenched clerk.

Some years the aridity of the left-hand pages makes the air dusty, parches the hand of the clerk. The dock is then a desert, the bales turned to sand and then the clerk must arrange each grain in the correct order, humidify them with her breath and wait for the season to pass.

And some years the pages absorb all the water in the air becoming like four-hundred-year-old wood and the dock weeps and creaks and the clerk's garment sweeps sodden through the bales and the clerk weeps and wonders why she is here and when will the ship ever arrive.

I am the clerk, overwhelmed by the left-hand page. Each blooming quire contains a thought selected out of many reams of thoughts and vetted by the clerk, then

presented to the author. The clerk replaces the file, which has grown to a size, unimaginable.

I am the author in charge of the ink-stained clerk pacing the dock. I record the right-hand page. I do nothing really because what I do is clean. I forget the bales of paper fastened to the dock and the weather doesn't bother me. I choose the presentable things, the beautiful things. And I enjoy them sometimes, if not for the clerk.

The clerk has the worry and the damp thoughts, and the arid thoughts. The clerk goes balancing the newly withheld pages across the ink slippery dock. She throws an eye on the still sea; the weather is concrete today, her garment is stiff like marl today.

Stipule³

Over the course of my writing I have tried to articulate what it is I think that poetry can accomplish. In my practice in Poetry I have tried to produce a grammar in which Black existence might be the thought and not the unthought; might be. What I offer here is a brief consideration of Poetry's diacritic possibilities for Black existence, for being in the diaspora: an *ars poetica*, a discourse on the art and practice of poetry, that performs the acts of reading and writing I am hoping to illuminate. It is but a partial look at Poetry's capacities for overwriting of the narratives of non/being in the diaspora. I am trying to think my own way through to these possibilities.

Much in the way that diacritical marks supplement certain alphabets changing the sound, tone, or meaning of certain words, Poetry, in my formulation, changes what I

see as the racist alphabets of narratives—the prevalent modes of speech and key impediments to Black being. I am proposing a radical indictment of Narrative. I think that for Black people, Narrative, as it is constituted now, is incapable of transmitting or sounding a tomorrow, beyond brutalisation. It is incapable of transmitting or sounding a present, a today, since our lived today is cluttered in frequencies of oppression and responses to oppression. In the presence of our bodies all narrative utterances are full of attention to racism, bracketed by racism, animated by racism; our language is noded, mined, secretly and publicly by racism. Self-reference, self-description, are circumscribed by the mined terrain of narrative.

Poetry, perhaps, with its capacities to deposit and unearth plural meanings, with its refusals of a particular interrogative gaze might cut out a space toward a description of being in the diaspora. If we think about the reading practices that attend these two shapes, Poetry and Narrative, I suggest that the reader interrogates Narrative but Poetry interrogates the reader. And here is poetry's power. The reader's response is tangential to poetry, whereas it is crucial to narrative. Poetry requires a deciphering of meaning whereas narrative enjoins, hails the known world. So I want to offer Poetry as a diacritical to Narrative. A diacritical, that is to say, an overwriting, a meaning displacement of what Christina Sharpe has called the "dysgraphia" produced by the (resonating) historical tragedy of the slavery of Black people in the Americas. The ongoing "dysgraphia of disaster" Sharpe writes continues to be disseminated "by way of rapid, deliberate, repetitive, and wide circulation on television, in social

media (and newspapers—the whole production of representation) of Black social, material and psychic death.”⁴ We know this dysgraphia as also produced historically and in the contemporary through an abundance of literary narrative, disquisition and dissertation.

I suggest that unwillingly and inadvertently, narrative attempts at response to and rebuttal of the dysgraphia by those of us who write against and in opposition to it necessarily imports, albeit in order to refute, the language of the dysgraphia. Narrative is, to my mind, almost always implicated in the colonial/imperialist/racist project—with best efforts one writes back to, or against, first the existence and then the persistence of the dominant narratives of coloniality, racism and imperialism. Character in narrative, in this sense, and landscape for that matter, are weighted with whiteness as a fundamental/originary category. The Black body in narrative is always spectacular, always spectacularised, marked. The dysgraphia, of dominant and of dominating narratives, unwrites, and makes incoherent, Black presence as presence.

Our bodies are always active, always enacting in the register of this narrative, or in the register of what I call in *Land to Light On*, “the hard gossip of race that inhabits this road.”⁵ So predicated this narrative language compels us to answer in the same language, struck through, enlivened by the action of our bodies in race. We are fluent in that language, we often respond in it, taking apart the attacks of raced language by employing the very dysgraphia. Interred in narratives of racism, we try to detonate them with counter-narratives. *We wait for narrative*

to do what war should or might do. This curious sentence. Yes. In a material war, had we summoned the equivalent of the literary ammunitions we have launched at racism our sovereignty would already have been won. We live instead in a language of convenience, of instrumentation, of stipulating the dysgraphia. We précis our lives and submit the text to the dominant culture for inclusion. We are people without a translator. The language we use already contains our demise and any response contains that demise as each response emboldens and strengthens the language it hopes to undermine. It is always as if we will live tomorrow, live if, live only, and live when. The apprehension of neverness, presentlessness, we experience; of presentness in another world. This chasm between ourselves and ourselves. In effect, we narrate non-being. It is our fluency in the raced vocabulary of narrative that makes us so alarmed when our ripostes are neither heeded nor understood, and, when they do not result in the desired life; a living. Narratives end in a rudimentary representation; continuous rudimentary representations of what Cornelius Eady so eloquently called the “Brutal Imagination”: a continuous recycling of character, already known, already read, already, already in the zoo, in the museum. If the premise of narrative is our location in the dysgraphia, the work of poetry might dislodge us from these accounts of non-being.

I offer poetry’s diacritical as a critique of and a remedy/cure for the fragmented Black body of narrative—whose modes of writing, modes of reading and modes of speaking, apply race language to Black presence, and in which, being in the diaspora, being in

history, is represented as impossible, and unviable

Since writing *A Map to the Door of No Return*, I have thought that the radical move would be to cease working in narrative altogether—to be silent; to see silence as the radical project—unresponsive to gossip, unmoved by violence, uninvolved in exchanging death for less death, which is the bargain of narrative. I had tried to describe a location of being in *Ruttier for the Marooned in the Diaspora*. This location I imagined as the ground from which a grammar might spring. I saw/see the Ruttier, then, as the ground of and the preface to the diacritical.

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 dis-inhabit 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.⁶

Stipule

Within the life that the Ruttier describes are the shifting grounds of provisional living, and half living. The being that comes into view in the Ruttier is a being who might be

unavailable to the rules of character, who is uninterested in the fixed raced definitions of modernity and who refuses the efforts to renovate narratives of coloniality and imperialism. This being owes no exposition for their presence, or actions, most certainly not to that spectatorship. The clerk of my forthcoming work emerges from the Ruttier making up a new inventory of the world ruptured by the door. The diacritical will write a true inventory beginning with small object and effects, with nouns and adjectives.

Verso 55

When I finally arrived at the door of no return, there was an official there, a guide who was either a man in his ordinary life or an idiot or a dissembler. But even if he was a man in his ordinary life or an idiot or a dissembler, he was authoritative. Exhausted violet, the clerk interjects. Yes he was says the author, violet snares. For some strange reason he wanted to control the story. Violet files. Violet chemistry. Violet unction. It was December, we had brought a bottle of rum, some ancient ritual we remembered from nowhere and no one. We stepped one behind the other as usual. The castle was huge, opulent. We went like pilgrims. You were pilgrims. We were pilgrims. This is the holiest we ever were. Our gods were in the holding cells. We awakened our gods and we left them there, because we never needed gods again. We did not have wicked gods so they understood. They lay in their corners, on their disintegrated floors, they lay on their walls of skin dust. They stood when we entered, happy to see us. Our guide said, this was the prison cell for the men, this was the prison cell for the women. I wanted to

strangle the guide as if he were the original guide. It took all my will. Yet in the rooms the guide was irrelevant, the gods woke up and we felt pity for them, and affection and love; they felt happy for us, we were still alive. Yes, we are still alive, we said. And we had returned to thank them. You are still alive, they said. Yes we are still alive. They looked at us like violet; like violet teas they drank us. We said here we are. They said, you are still alive. We said, yes, yes we are still alive. How lemon, they said, how blue like fortune. We took the bottle of rum from our veins, we washed their faces, we sewed their thin skins. We were pilgrims, they were gods. They said with wonder and admiration, you are still alive, like hydrogen, like oxygen.

We all stood there for some infinite time. We did weep but that is nothing in comparison.

Stipule

And after that what do we need language to do? What might language be capable of if we think in and with it differently? What is

and might be the grammar of our being? Poetry's diacritic force (like Coltrane's Venus, or Charlie Parker's Ornithology) allows, breaks open, explodes the language of race power, registering the sounds of our living in the diaspora, the sounds of the always possible world-space one lives. Poetry's densities of multiple and new meaning trouble the dysgraphia. The poem is concerned formally with the qualities of time, materiality, and meaning and has no obligation or need, like the citizen of the Ruttier, to attend to linearity or the representative as is often the burden of narrative. There's no compulsion to construct a world within which character is loaded with the preeminent, presumptive, preemptive, precondition of narrative. Story cannot account for existence in our case. At least not story in the present dysgraphia. The citizen of the Ruttier is inattentive to the gaze of the reader. Other questions arise from poetry: when-ness, how-ness, what-ness. What poetry allows is the removal of parts of speech so that a life may make sense to itself. In verblessness for instance ...

... from Ossuary 1⁷

after consideration you will discover, as I,
that verbs are a tragedy, a bleeding cliffside, explosions,
I'm better off without, with vermillion, candles

this bedding, this mercy,
this stretcher, this solitary perfectable strangeness,
and edge, such cloth this compass

of mine, of earth, of mourners of these
reasons, of which fairgrounds, of which theories
of plurals, of specimens of least and most, and most

of expeditions,
then travels and wonders then journeys,
then photographs and photographs of course

the multiplications of which, the enormity of this,
and the drill-bits and hammers and again hand cuffs,
and again rope, coarse business but there

some investigations, then again the calculations,
such hours, such expansions, the mind dizzy
with leaps, such handles, of wood, of thought

and then science, all science, all murder,
melancholic skulls, such fingertips,
these chromatic scales, these calipers the needle

in the tongue the eyes' eye, so
whole diameters, circumferences, locutions,
an orgy of measurements, a festival of inches

gardens and paraphernalia of measurements,
unificatory data, curious data,
beautiful and sensuous data, oh yes beautiful

now, of attractions and spectacles of other sheer forces,
and types in the universe, the necessary
exotic measurements, rarest, rarest measuring tapes

a sudden unificatory nakedness, bifictory nakedness,
of numbers, of violent fantasms
at exhibitions again, of walks, of promenades

at fairs with products, new widgets, human widgets,
with music, oh wonders,
the implications

then early in this life, like mountains,
already pictures and pictures, before pictures,
after pictures and cameras

their sickness, eye sickness, eye murder,
murder sickness, hunger sickness,
this serendipity of calculators, of footprints

with fossils, their wingspan of all time,
at crepuscules' rare peace time, if only,
like water, in daytime, no solace, so, so different

from solitude, all solitude, all madness,
so furious, so numerous, the head, the markets,
the soles of the feet, so burnt, so thin

and the taste, so meagre, so lightheaded,
the cloud flashes, the lightning geometry,
the core of reflectivity so vastly, vastly vast

the wait now, lumens of aches, such aches,
the horizontal and the vertical aches of lightning,
its acoustics, loud pianos, percussive yet

strings and quartets, multicellular runnels yet and yet,
the altitude of the passageway, its precipitation
and grand arithmetic, the segments

the latitudes of where, where and here,
its contours, its eccentric curvatures,
so presently, angular and nautical, all presently

just fine my lungs, just fine,
hypothesis absolutely, but just fine,
why lungs, strange theory

oh yes and the magnitude of jaundice, trenches,
like war, continuous areas and registers, logarithms
so unexplainable, rapid scales, high notes

besides, anyway so thermal, atmospheric,
wondrous aggressions, approximately here,
elaborate like radiation and seismic, yes all over

the bodies' symptoms of algebraic floods,
weariness actually,
weary with magnetic embryos

petals, yes petals of sick balm please, now yes,
for my esophagus, analgesics of indigo,
of wires, of electric shocks, why eucalyptus leaves

of course lemon grass, labernum, please, lion's claw,
remedies of cloves, bitter bark,
still birdless though, worldless

asthma with blueness, then music,
gardens truthfully, truthfully nauseous gardens with
tensored numbers, volumes of fibres, embroidery

and hair nets of violence, blue,
like machine guns, of course knives, extensions
of blueness, then wherever

same radiations, lines in the forehead,
tapers, electrodes, invisible to the eyes,
official hammers and corkscrews, official grass

official cities now for appearances after all this,
all these appearances, generous, for certain
scraggly, wan and robust appearances

assignments and hidden schedules of attendance,
a promise of blindness, a lover's clasp of
violent syntax and the beginning syllabi of verblessness

Stipule

This is the space of poetry, the space that cuts through coloniality. What is the language that describes this space; that language that does not take the address to modernity's dominant canon as its motivation; by that I mean it need not underwrite its legitimacy through the various ways one (the author) strives for this legitimacy by constantly making reference to eighteenth- or nineteenth-century English literature and by inserting the enlightenment's marking of the Black body in an attempt to receive/procure a judgment of human on that body. The assignment of the poet is multiple—to bring that Black body into focus *in itself* and *for itself* in a language for recording the space/time of that body. While the dysgraphia speaks of the body's fragmentation, poetry has the capacity to speak of its presentness, its integrity.

Verso 1.1.1

When Borges says he remembers his father's library in Buenos Aires, the gaslight, the shelves and the voice of his father reciting Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale*; when my eyes lit on Borges' dissertation on poetry, I thought, I had no Library. And I thought it with my usual melancholy and next my usual pride in being without.

And the first image that came to me after that was my grandfather's face with his spectacles and his weeping left eye and his white shirt and his dark trousers and his newspaper and his moustache and his clips around his shirt arms and his note books and his log books; and at the same moment that the melancholy came, it was quickly

brushed aside by the thought that he was my library.

In his notebooks my grandfather logged hundredweight of copra, pounds of chick feed and manure; the health of horses, the nails for their iron shoes; the acreages of heliconia and yams; the depth of two rivers; the length of a rainy season.

My grandfather with his logs and notebooks lived in a town by the sea. That sea was like a liquid page to the left of the office where my grandfather kept his logs and his notebooks with their accounts. Apart from the depth of the two rivers, namely the Iguana and the Pilot, he also noted the tides and the times of their rising and falling. And, the rain, the number of inches and its absence. He needed to know about the rain for planting and for sunning and drying the copra. And too, he kept a log of the sun, where it would be and at what hour, and its angle to the earth in what season. And come to think of it he must have logged the clouds moving in. He said that the rain always came in from the sea. The clouds moving in were a constant worry. I remember the rain sweeping in, pelting down like stones. That is how it used to be said, the rain is pelting down like stones. He filled many log books with rain and its types: showers, sprinkles, deluges, slanted, boulders, sheets, needles, slivers, peppers. Cumulonimbus clouds. Or, Nimbostratus clouds. Convection rain and relief rain. Relief rain he wrote in his log book in his small office; and the rain came in from the sea like pepper, then pebbles then boulders. It drove into his window and disturbed his logs with its winds, and it wet his desk. And he or someone else would say, "But look at rain!" And someone else would say, "See

what the rain do?" As if the rain were human. Or they would say, "Don't let that rain come in here." As if the rain were a creature.

Anyway my grandfather had a full and thorough record of clouds and their seasons and their violence.

From under the sea a liquid hand would turn a liquid page each second. This page would make its way to the shore and make its way back. Sometimes pens would wash up onto the beach, long stem-like organic styli. We called them pens; what tree or plant or reef they came from we did not know. But some days the beach at Guaya would be full of these styli just as some nights the beach would be full of blue crabs. Which reminds me now of Garcia Marquez's old man with wings but didn't then as I did not know Garcia Marquez then and our blue crabs had nothing to do with him; it is only now that the crabs in his story have overwhelmed my memory. It is only now that my blue night crabs have overwhelmed his story. Anyway, we would take these pens and sign our names, and the names of those we loved, along the length of the beach. Of course these names rubbed out quickly and as fast as we could write them the surf consumed them.

What does this have to do with Borges. Nothing at all. That is not what you meant to say, the clerk says finally. I walked into the library and it was raining rain and my grandfather's logs were there, and the wooden window was open. As soon as I opened the door, down the white steps came the deluge. If I could not read I would have drowned. Now you are sounding like me, the clerk says. I am you, the author says.

Verso 14

Coltrane's Venus and the Ossuaries' tercets

In Venus there are two basic elements the author says, the horn and the drums. They are working with doubleness all the time. There is one statement at the top. And then they begin to deconstruct the statement. The drum serves as pacing for the horn, but it has its own investment in the statement. So it holds underneath, but its own project is to also find deconstructions. The drums, played by Rasheed Ali structure the horn and is in turn structured by the horn. Coltrane works on the first declarative syntactical unit. It is not declarative, the clerk interject, it is provisional, speculative, let us at least try to be as precise as we can since... Fine says the author he works on deconstructing that speculative, provisional statement, structurally, and breaks it down technically. What is done becomes undone. Then he also deconstructs its emotion. If you listen to it, it is romantic but mournful, sophisticated and worldly; it is elegant. And he pulls these notions apart also, he tears the elegance to its limits, he mocks the mournfulness as not mournful enough and he drives the other worldliness to its outer-worldliness. To my way of seeing says the clerk it is more elegant when it is, as you say, torn apart. So both emotionally and structurally, the author continues, ignoring the clerk's interruption, hearing it only as a faint sound from the clerk, he pulls the statement apart. There's a point in the middle, four or five minutes of it where the project takes hold of him, where the music is fully realised as separate and

sentient on its own. There is an uncontrollability to it, and you can hear it wobbling out, out, out, into distances and into a kind of unspeakable. At least in your language, the clerk objects. The former statement tries to return, to recover itself, to recover that line, and it can't—so much structural and emotional change has already been accomplished. Happened you mean, says the clerk, so much has happened, says the author that the statement itself is now indescribable without its fragmentations. It rejects its former self, as well as it accepts that somehow that self like a shadow is embedded in it, in him, at that moment of complete disintegration. *Venus* is an experiment, like two travellers going out to an unknown, not the unknown, says the clerk, they are both moving toward another, much more open statement at the end.

To me, this is like our poem *Ossuaries*. The tercets are like Rashid Ali's drums, consistent, sheltering, pushing; the three lines are completely steady. They perform a range of acts of pacing. The tercet is conducting the ideas—the horn, the *Ossuaries*. You know nothing about musical structure, the clerk says. But I can hear the author says. I hear it as a liberatory rhetoric. Then should I be still here on the dock, says the clerk rhetorically, shouldn't the ship have arrived, shouldn't this shoreline disappear?

The author ignores her again. The bittered-ness, the global violence, one's own violence, the tercet anchors (anchors, anchors, anchors. The tercet anchors). What disrupts the tercet is the meaning. It is not regulated by rhyme or equal metric length of line but by the sense of infinity or possibility, in-between-ness. It is indivisible by anything other that

itself and one. The tercet is light, light as well as heavy. It can hold weight, and surprise.

But if I haven't said this already ... You have said it, *ad infinitum*, mumbles the clerk ... tripping along giddily, like a tercet. The tercet has guile. Like the body of a snake. Or on the other hand a triangle, or, less ambitious, the clerk joins, but more cunning, a bit of elastic. I could use a bit of elastic. The next time you come by. I would dye it blue like this paper. Only a small bit of elastic the clerk says. But the author is drifting off.

You don't know when it begins, and it ends yes as you say, but it doesn't conclude.

Verso 16.3

Museums and corpses

The poet's position, is only to point that out, not to say how we should go forward with it, but just to point out that all these laws so far only ever address one arm, or one foot, over the long term; they address one leg, one mouth; where one can sit, where one can eat where one can travel and so on. They leave us, perhaps, just one-legged and one-footed, one-armed, sewing our vaginas, clawing our faces, cursing the presence of our bare heads.

I do know that the bodies that we inhabit now are corpses of the humanist narrative. Awful corpses. And when we appear on the street, that is what we are appearing as. So, I can only give you this view of it. We inhabit these bags of muscle and fat and bones that are utilised in the humanist narrative to demonstrate the incremental ethical development of a certain subject whom is not we. We leave the psychiatrist's office like the figure in Remedios Varo's painting, *Mujer saliendo del*

Psicoanalista, with a little container of our true possible selves held out at arm's length in a plastic bag.

My job is to notice. Even as you are a living object of dead bones, you can notice it. You can't sustain that double seeing for very long, otherwise, the body would truly collapse. The nineteenth-century human zoos; the categorization of human bodies—that is when I left you, the clerk says, that is when I created you, the author says, that is when I created you, the clerk says, that is when you left me the author says. It is a short step away, from how we perform these bodies in the present. You are exaggerating and these exaggerations only pile up. The author says. I am exaggerating? Look at the sky, the clerk beckons. You are living your life, don't be naturalistic, the clerk says. Where is the great arctic, the endless dark days the endless day-lit nights? However, if you were to stop for a minute and observe yourself, you are merely the container for a set of cultural knowledges and practices which go on without you, but which you are never without. They are like a bag of ... a heavy bag on you. How do I get out of this zoo?

Verso 19

Poema, poein, *related to the Sanskrit cinoti, cayati, to assemble to heap up, to construct*

You've left out a whole lot. Brathwaite, Carter, Carpentier, Spoiler, Kitchener. And *where you been last night Caroline*.⁸ I can't do everything. That is what someone assured me. She said, You can't be responsible for remembering everything. But those are strange things to forget. Like heliconia and ginger lily? No, like your fingers. Well

of course one forgets one's fingers. They simply do what they do. I suspect other motives, the clerk stabs.

Well, I think that poetry can expose the heterogeneous qualities of a life, or of life, in an age when all efforts seem to, both corporate and State, seem to make homogenous. So, I think that poetry has the capacity to blow oxygen on a stiff existence, right? I mean, I'm saying that, but if you think of all the mechanisms of communication and all the availability of information, you're thinking, well, that's not particularly homogenous or that's not particularly stiff, or needing of a type of oxygenation. But, not true. I think it is stiff, because it is a repetition of the same thing, over and over and over again. All the information about what a life might be, what a life might look like, how a life ought to be lived, what one must want and desire, all those roads are quite flattened out into certain needs and certain tastes and certain wants. And that person, that human, has now become fairly describable, as someone who is striving not to think too deeply about very much, because everything is available to them. All information is available, all history is available, all thought is available. Consuming is the obvious answer to life. This availability exists, but it really exists in the brain; it doesn't exist in the mind, and one is not actually living. One is rushing over it, or one has a landscape, but it isn't a lived landscape, all the details aren't lived. I'm not sure where that was going ...

No, because I think that poetry does a number of things on a number of levels. Like, a line of poetry does about five things, whereas a line of prose can do five things, but it has a full stop. You seem obsessed by

the full stop, the clerk has beckoned with her dry hand, why not just leave it out of the novel. I think the imperative, in a certain sense, for prose to satisfy chronologically and story-wise, makes prose unavailable to the generative possibilities that a poem has; that obtains in poetry. You have never been able to articulate this well or convincingly, each time you attempt it, I end up with this incoherence and this uncertainty. The clerk beckons to a thousand files, they groan with a sweep of her hand. I can think of hundreds of novels that contradict you. A baby was born next door, the clerk continues, as if we are talking about the same subject. I'm thinking about making him my assistant. It is not that prose can't do it... I am being careful here, because as you say there are many, many works... I have written prose, and I know that it is possible to perform these generative moves, these imaginative... all those moves in it, but essentially, you still owe something to the reader, you know, understanding, in ways that in poetry, you don't owe them that at all. It generates and generates and generates and generates. It is a negotiation between what is said, what is written and what is withheld. And you are always balancing this; so, if prose is on the continuum between what is written and what is withheld, it would be, perhaps, somewhere in the middle, and poetry would be three-quarters of the way along that line in terms of the possibilities of its withholding, and the possibilities of its revealing. What was the question again? I can't remember.

Poetry has that ability to reconstitute language in different associations: metaphor, trope, it uses that space. So, it can make you see the then and the after, or the now and

the after, in interesting ways. It has no obligation to the present.

Verso 9

To furrow, a row, a file, a line. Inventory

The clerk is at the end of the wharf, the weather is as aggressive as a metaphor. The metaphor, she's talking to herself clearly, the metaphor is an aggressive attempt at clarity not secrecy. The poem addresses the reader, it asks the first question, it is not interested in the reader's comfort nor a narrative solution. It is not interested in your emotional expectations, or chronologies. It is flooded with the world. The great interrogation room is the stanza, you are standing at its door.

The clerk is at the end of the wharf, and the end... the weather is as aggressive as a strophe. The strophe is a turning and a turning and a resolute turning. After, after, after the world is different. And after still, and after.

"Tell them I'm living in the world," the clerk shouts at the author. "I'm talking about it next," the author insists.

Verso 10.1

The idea of an Inventory⁹ of this overwhelming came to me since an inventory would be capacious enough to carry what the poet knew or could know. An inventory is *agape*. One need only open a new logbook, the items may be the same or disparate, one's only job is to list. That seemed the least I could do given what I saw.

The grim list of the clerk begins, "We believed in nothing/ the black-and white american movies/buried themselves in our chests,/glacial, liquid, acidic as love."¹⁰

Stipule

Without the violence of Narrative, she might unmoor meaning in this terrain, she might make Black life legible, make Black life live. Incandescent smoke of a luminous flame. Let us begin here.

Verso 13

Blue tremors, blue position, blue suppuration. The clerk is considering blue havoc, blue thousands, blue shoulder, where these arrive from, blue expenses...the clerk hears humming in her ears, blue handling she answers, any blue she asks the author, any blue nails today? Did you send me as I asked blue ants? The author asks, blue drafts? Perhaps blue virus, blue traffic would make a sense says the clerk, blue hinges, blue climbing, these would go together under normal circumstances. The author actually doesn't hear a thing the blue clerk says under these circumstances when the blue clerk sits in the blue clerk's place making the blue clerk's language. Systolic blue, any day it will be blue now, reloading blue, blue disciplines. The blue clerk would like a blue language or a lemon language or a violet language.

Blue arrivals. Oh yes.

Verso 18.4.2

Lemon the clerk has collected: watch lemon, bay lemon, rare lemon, lemon distance, lemon steps, given lemon, lemon knot, lemon reach, lemon fast, lemon documents, lemon ethic, lemon funerals, lemon hold,

taken lemon, lemon elegies, lemon summary, lemon pulley, lemon factors, lemon archives, what lemon, lemon acts, lemon nails, lemon steps, lemon crevasses, written lemon, lemon vanishing, lemon deposit, missing lemon, lemon contents, lemon debris, lemon gains, unassailed lemon, lemon sinew, uncertain lemon

Stipule

The poem is concerned formally with the qualities of time, materiality and meaning and has no obligation to the linear or the representative as is often the burden of prose narrative. There's no preeminent or presumptive compulsion to construct or transport your reader, only, simply to address them. Story cannot account for existence. Other questions arise from a poem: when-ness, how-ness, what-ness. The clerk recites this from the author's memoirs. When was I that naïve? asks the author.

Stipule

To calibrate sound, sense, discipline, passion, line, syntax, meaning, metaphor, rhythm, tone, diction, pressure, speed, tension, weight. Everything, everything, everything, the whole thing, in one line, in one moment, the clerk's recitation continues. I depend on something so thin, says the author, so thin.

Verso 18.4.2

Violet the clerk has collected: violet hand, violet notes, violet coolness, violet edging, violet halls, violet finger, violet region, violet

fuel, violet metre, violet breath, violet written, violet hatreds, violet hammer, violet bed, violet wires, violet arms, violet apples, violet digits, violet washes, violet thyme, violet dialysis, violet records, violet scissors, violet palms, violet onion, violet speed, violet construction, violet fog, violet lane, violet yield, dry violet, half ton violet, cord violet, violet management, violet sleep, written violet, hung violet, violet suspension, violet carburettor, violet labour, violet genocide, violet mud, violet lizards, violet chemical fences, violet chill, violet intended, violet taken, violet ambulances, violet incarceration, violent shoving, violet February, violet field, violet episode, violet rails, violet reply, violet brassiness, violet blind, violet brick, violet cancels, violet spite, violet profession, violet shame, violet limb, violet smoke, violet chest, violet rains, violet jars, violet pays, violet haunch, violet sticks, violet coast violet vein, violet teeth, violet gorse, violet escarpment, violet hoarfrost, violet museum, violet rues, violet recovery, violet creek, violet carpool, violet requirement, violet plans, violet openings, violet empties, violet asylum, violet criminal, violet angers, violet manuscripts, violet introduction, violet terminals, violet maintenance, violet fame, violet probations, violet hours, violet snares, violet whimper, violet officials, ample violet, violet chained, better violet, same violet, violet x-ray, violet becomes, hidden violet, violet blunder, violet early, missed violet, violet itself, violet prescription, scabrous violet, violet thumbs, violet belief, violet riot, never violet, violet spur, intended violet, pinned violet, violet respiration, violet staples, day violet, exhausted violet, greyed violet, opening violet, violet gravity, violet help

Verso 18.4.2

Lemon the clerk has collected: watch lemon, bay lemon, rare lemon, lemon distance, lemon steps, given lemon, lemon knot, lemon reach, lemon fast, lemon documents, lemon ethic, lemon funerals, lemon hold, taken lemon, lemon elegies, lemon summary, lemon pulley, lemon factors, lemon archives, what lemon, lemon acts, lemon nails, lemon steps, lemon crevasses, written lemon, lemon vanishing, lemon deposit, missing lemon, lemon contents, lemon debris, lemon gains, unassailed lemon, lemon sinew, uncertain lemon

Verso 13.1

The clerk goes on. Black arrivals, oh yes, Black valves of Black engines, Black charges, Black spins, Black numbers, Black options, Black equilibriums. Condensed smoke of a luminous flame.

Verso 48

Violet. This is what the clerk thinks. Violet hand, violet notes, violet metre, violet hammer, violet bed, violet scissors, violet management, violet speed, yes with violet speed, violet washers, violet sleep, violet percent, taken violet yesterday, violet incarceration, violet ambulances, immediate violet, violet labour, intended violet, violet transcripts, suspended violet for now, violet cancels, blind violet, violet schemes, reply violet

Verso 8

Two enigmatic bales of pages arrived one day. The clerk was adding up the

countervailing duty as she usually did on Mondays. Mondays, because Sundays are a bad time for the author. Just the sound of Billie Holiday alone accounts for this. So this surprising Monday when the clerk had expected the usual empty Monday of additions, two bales, one violet and one blue arrived. The blue was not like the blue of the clerk's garment rather it was a blue like the blue off Holdfast Bay on the Indian Ocean. The violet was indescribable. How can you describe violet? It melts. There were no consignee marks, except blue and violet.

Verso 8.1

Violet rails, violet cancels, violet management, violet maintenance, the violet bale began. Blue search, blue proceedings, blue diastole, blue traffic, the blue bale began.

Lighter than usual, the blue clerk tried to figure out what to make of these.

Verso 19.1

Adjectiveless, the clerk thinks, balance, daily, no qualification, ink perhaps, sincerely. Dear. File 65. Attempt 197. The clerk needs a spanner, a vehicle, a bowl of nails, a wire, a cup, a lamp. A lamp? Bring file 267. Attempt 501. Handles.

Verso 0.2

Have you seen these, said the clerk. Some years ago you collected them. They are rich with something. I don't know what. Of course I am being coy. You, as you say, live in place, but I, I live in time. The heaped and waiting life.

Verso 47

Why do you talk like that? Where did you get that voice? It is evening on the wharf. Crepuscular, as in Thelonious Monk's *Crepuscule for Nellie*. I collected it, said the author. Gathered it. From everything, from the walks to and from schools, past funeral homes, past dumpsters, past canefields, past ladies selling flour, from gazing, from listening, kicking surf, being tumbled in sand, being cut with nails and broken shells, from running barefoot on hot asphalt, from quarrels, in noisy bars, in suicidal quiet, past gloom, with sugar, past trees with rangy leaves, pierced ears, with sour cherries in the throat, wasps, ants, scraping ice on a windscreen, past water, cutlasses, sewers, after Wednesday, after spoons, when sleeping I collected the end of breathing, then salt, then oranges, light switches, farine, from funeral parlours, from cemeteries, from little streets, past long grass, razor grass, fever grass, brilliant muscles oiled in sweat, from water, from hearing, donkeys, bananaquits mostly, from the loneliest most poisonous smell of *Cestrum nocturnum*, from the sound of shaved ice with red syrup, bottles, broken bottles, green broken bottles, cane chairs, peppers. Stop. Why? You and your endless lists, why? I don't fully know why. Must I? Why don't we take it on the face of it? Lists exist and they may be consecutive or serial or alternative on the other hand they may be important as exquisite objects on their own or as an alternate spelling of everything. As you say. I thought you would like the idea of lists. To continue then why do you speak that way? Because of water, the reef out there, the *Fregata magnificens*, look at the boiling turquoise, the sea's albumen, because the throat fills with thick reeds, drowned fine

pebbles, because of stairs' gradient, the way corn is disappearing, steep terraces. Grapheme teeth, on the cold walls and the stringy aortas, a thousand musics. It is morning on the wharf, the author has gone on this way well into the night and now it is morning. The author and the clerk spoke in their sleep. At times nouns were hunted by prepositions followed by an adjective. They sat up suddenly like the dead, then lay down with the anxiety of the thought that they were alive after all. The dock creaked, the papers bloomed blue letters. Their sleep was the jittery sleep of birds. They had long arms. Long, long arms. If only. Alphabets were used up and used up and lay flat and slumped, and disheveled of their normal shapes. It's useless to speak any other way, the author says in a morning voice. Useless, says the clerk. The night passed in more nouns.

Notes

1. This *Ars Poetica* is taken in part from the longer forthcoming work, *The Blue Clerk: An Ars*

Poetica (Forthcoming 2017). The work is a conversation, a discursive poetic, between the Author and the Clerk about that which is withheld and that which is written. All Versos included are part of the work cited here.

2. A left-hand page of an open book; the reverse of something; the underside of a leaf.

3. A small leaflike appendage to a leaf, at the base of the leaf stalk; the condition, the proviso of this *ars poetica*.

4. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

5. Dionne Brand, *Land to Light On* (Toronto, ON: McClelland & Stewart, 1996).

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

7. Dionne Brand, *Ossuaries* (Toronto, ON: McClelland & Stewart, 2010).

8. Roaring Lion, *Where You Been Last Night, Caroline*.

9. Dionne Brand, *Inventory* (Toronto, ON: McClelland & Stewart, 2006).

10. Ibid.

Dionne Brand is a renowned poet, novelist, and essayist. Her poetry has won the Governor General's Literary Award, the Trillium Prize for Literature, the Pat Lowther Award for poetry, and the Griffin Poetry Prize. Her 10 volumes of poetry include: *Land to Light On*, *No Language Is Neutral*, *Inventory*, *thirsty*, and *Ossuaries*. Brand was poet laureate of the city of Toronto from 2009-12. Brand is also the author of five works of fiction. Her critically acclaimed novels include: *What We All Long For* (winner of the Toronto Book Award), *Love Enough*, *In Another Place, Not Here*, and *At the Full and Change of the Moon*. Brand's non-fiction works include *Bread Out Of Stone* and *A Map to the Door of No Return*. She is Professor in the School of English and Theatre Studies at University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada.