

Host

diaspora

2G

movement

DIASPORA: THE CAP REVIEW REMIX

FEATURING

allen forbes

wayne compton

kyo maclear

EDITOR

peter hudson

SET IN AN UNASSUMING Frutiger and dropped on a mint-green background, an understated, skeptical “Black?” announced the first issue of diaspora.

I’d like to think that this tentative initial inquiry — much more, anyways, than “fuck ambiguity,” the editorial of the second and final issue — marked the magazine’s ethos. In retrospect, the idea of a Vancouver-based magazine of black politics and culture was ludicrous.

Even though the city’s unofficial mascot was Joe Fortes, a coonish, Zwarte Piet-like Jamaican who spent the early part of the twentieth-century saving white kids from drowning in English Bay, Vancouver is not a black town. Who besides the obligatory white liberals who love

this sort of thing, would actually read the magazine? What would it look like? What is the narrative of community that it would try to engender?

I was wide-eyed and energetic, fuelled by the beautiful vapours of life in my early twenties. If Vancouver's lack of black folks could aggravate a deep-seated insecurity about how black any of us on the Black Pacific actually were, I think it also enabled a sense of play and performance in how we imagined our blackness. We could shape a racial self in any freakish way we damn well pleased. Hence the question, "Black?"

Too, Vancouver's geography, with its clusters of cultural institutions downtown and on Commercial Drive facilitated this. One could easily jet from Spartacus Books to Bassix to Artspeak to Co-op Radio, to a Third World Alliance meeting to dinner at Nuff Niceness to the Shaggy Horse's Chocolate Milk and come out of it all with either an acute case of split-personality or an exhilarating sense of fusion.

Despite the Lotusland bliss, the magazine was actually birthed after a nervous breakdown caused by said youthfulness and the painful realization that the highs of fast-made friendships among like-minded politicos and artists does not necessarily make for community.

Diaspora was a therapeutic make-work project that helped me through this period. It's aesthetics were

inspired by the glossy mags that were an easy source of distraction for me: Arena, the Face, i-D, Bruce Mau-designed I-D, Straight No Chaser, Eye (under the stewardship of Rick Poyner), True, Don't Tell It, Frieze, Emigre, Raygun, and Plazm. I loathed the anti-aesthetic of zine culture, was thoroughly bored with text-heavy academic journals, and I realized that not only had the desktop publishing revolution of the eighties created an incredibly sophisticated visual literacy among the public, it had also made it possible for anyone with access to a computer to come up with half-decent designs.

While I didn't want to succumb to the kind of weightlessness that marks most mass-market journals, I realized that black politics have always been done in style, be it the afro-napoleonic pageantry of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, the sartorial genius of Malcolm X, or the radical chic of the Black Panther Party. I also wanted to think about what the aesthetics of a black magazine would be if it wasn't resorting to the clichés of Kente cloth and Black Power fists.

Editorially, the contents were shaped more by what material was at hand than by anything else. I had grand visions that diaspora would be the total print experience that African American critic Greg Tate once argued was missing from the contemporary political and cultural scene. Tate's new-jack journalism, alongside that

Non-black writers were more than welcome. White writers were not. Go figure.

of Lisa Jones, Lisa Kennedy, Selywn Sefu Hinds, the late Joe Wood and other writers in the Village Voice and Vibe, also provided a stylistic model. It was smart and street and well-versed in the rich encyclopedia of black culture and politics.

What actually appeared in diaspora was a mix of poetry, fiction, interviews, essays and artists' projects. It contained articles on the L.A. Rebellion, Cuba as mulatto paradise, black gay aesthetics, postcards from India, and black Canadian theatre. Interviews with the Rascalz, John Trudell, Apache Indian, and Spearhead's Michael Franti. Contributors included Andrea Fatona, Patrick Andrade, david nandi odhiambo, Wayde Compton, Melinda Mollineaux, karen/miranda augustine, Minister Faust, Allen Forbes, janisse brownin', hanif abdul karim, Mark Nakada, Celeste Insell, Terence Anthony, and Kimiko Maeba-Hawkes. Non-black writers were more than welcome. White writers were not. Go figure.

Killing diaspora was just as important as its initial birth. After my application for Canada Council funding was rejected, I realized that I could no longer sustain the magazine without driving myself into debt. At the same time, Vancouver began to lose its allure. Writing this from Toronto, where there are more pundits than poets, more administrators than artists, and where money rules everything, my take on Vancouver seems hopelessly romantic — even as I real-

ize that one of the reasons that I left the city was that its resources had been exhausted and it no longer offered the level of stimulation that I needed.

Still, that temporary geography of Vancouver has remained a model for a radically democratic, critically multicultural possibility. There seemed to be an energy for creative exploration and an ethics of living that I rarely come across here in Toronto.

For me, the word "diaspora" always signified movement. It seemed pointless — and antithetical to the project — to ask writers to add to the kind of self-indulgent reminiscing that I have engaged in here. Instead, my editorial policy for this section of the Cap Review is simple, though perhaps equally self-indulgent. I've invited three writers — Allen Forbes, Wayde Compton, and Kyo Maclear — whose work I have always admired. In all three cases, their work embodies a sense of restlessness, of a roaming intellectual and political spirit, that motivated diaspora in the first place.

*

A sincere thank-you to everyone listed in the masthead of both issues, to all the contributors, and to everybody whose subscription wasn't fulfilled. In memory of Joe Wood; in solidarity with all black and aboriginal prisoners.

Peter Hudson, Toronto, 2000

diaspora

Julian

A CONFESSION

By Allen Forbes

The Lord had shewn me things that had happened before my birth.
Nat Turner, 1831

I find it difficult to believe I'm here in jail.
Colin Ferguson, 1994

The following pages are excerpted from the undestroyed manuscript of Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin I Negro servant Julian Carleton, written at the Dodgeville jail, August 16, 1914.

Sir, you will have to excuse my ignorance of the dates and the season, but I have been down in this hole a long time, under the earth. The Master Wright would say of the earth, as I remember overhearing him say in many conversations about architecture and about his arcology movement, while I dispatched breakfast, lunch or dinner to him, his colleagues and acquaintances, would say of the earth. I cannot say that I came to Taliesin to learn architecture, but now after all I sincerely believe that architecture is the profession for which I had the most affinity, and could have practiced had it not been for my occasional nervousness. I can not blame it on my Negro blood, my failure to practice. Although my skin is dark, my lips are thin, my head is large, my mind likely as one might say of a lighter man's skin tone. Of course, I cannot claim to have come to Taliesin to learn the craft of architecture, as I have said. How I came to this unusual place in Spring Green, Wisconsin was quite by accident, on the recommendation of John Vogelsang, whom I had met in Chicago at a dinner party given at my former master's house in Oak Park. Mr. Vogelsang, a caterer of various Chicago parties and an accomplished Paris-trained chef himself, was so impressed with the blood puddings I had made that he inquired who in the kitchen was responsible for this masterpiece is what he said. In point of fact, I was beginning to feel anxious at the house in Oak Park. Gertrude and I were confined to the house, as pleasant as it was, with its climbing wisteria and sizable garden. But the city of Chicago was another matter. There seemed to be two unfortunate choices in the way of socializing: The fancy Negroes in the city, and their sporting life of pimps and whores, listening to the blues in the joints, drinking and carousing, fighting and stabbing one another. Or then at the other end of the Negro spectrum were the talented tenth as they call themselves, who possess even more contempt for the Negro than whites. Gertrude and I never

seemed to fit in with their debutante balls, their exclusive gatherings, their bourgeois pretensions. In fact, the bustle of the city had made me increasingly nervous, which caused my sickness to commence once again since leaving Barbados. It was Gertrude, who knows me better than anyone, who recommended, when I told her of this new opportunity, that the quiet of the country might allow me to relieve my mind of its introspection. It is the city, with all its distractions and thin culture, which forces one to turn inward, blaming the shallowness of others on oneself. Before long, we had made an appointment through Master Vogelsang for a weekend trip to visit the Wrights at Spring Green for an interview, and within three months we were at Spring Green. Mr. Vogelsang had told me that Master Wright was an architect. I admit I was naive about architecture at the time. **Buildings, I mused, someone actually designed them?** As I reflect now, the first few months were the most wonderful time of my life. Master Wright was pleased with my cooking, even the occasional Barbadian dish of fried fish and greens I would prepare. I remember the pride I felt when he would boast to one of his colleagues regarding my talent with fish of any kind. I was also surrounded by beautiful things, the Japanese prints, the original furniture, and Taliesin itself, Master Wright's masterpiece of spatial order. It had a living-dining room and bedroom projecting out from two sides of the east corner of the hill, sharing the south-east facing terrace between them. The low-slung, one-story design consisted of a private house which was separated from the drafting room and office by an open-air loggia, providing a spectacular view back across the valley upon entry. The courtyard opened to the south west, anchored at the corner opposite the house by the garage, stables, servant's quarters and service buildings. The house was entered directly from the loggia, and one came in from the back and along the edge of the fire place. Just ahead was the dining table, and a little further the terrace, to the left opened the living room with views out of three directions. The living-dining room had carpets carefully arranged in a diagonal pattern by Master Wright. The folded plaster ceiling opened to the right, while on the floor the rug moves left out to the terrace door. The dining table and chair seemed queerly placed, positioned slightly left of centre, while the Japanese screen behind was positioned slightly to the right of centre — nothing occupied the exact geometric centre. The terrace, piers and fireplace walls were built of flat stones from nearby hills and stream beds, laid roughly so that they protruded in small ledges as they had in their original condition. Stucco, made of the yellow sand from the Wisconsin river, covered the wood frame construction of the walls where continuous bands of casement windows wrapped around the main rooms, and the wood frame and cedar-shingle-hipped roofs over top. At Taliesin, Master Wright had constructed his utopia of Prairie Style. It was night and day compared with the Georgian homes I had worked in before, with

their dull mix of useless columns and stilted baroque accents. This was the individual expression of one man, a visionary. In fact, my nervousness seemed to be slipping away. I chatted freely with everyone who worked at Taliesin — Mr. Brodelle and Mr. Fritz, the two draftsmen and the farm hand too, including Mr. Weston, a big strong man who seemed to appreciate me helping him with heavy chores around Taliesin. Master Wright was also generous with his knowledge and expertise. Once, after a few months of my service there, Master Wright noticed me looking at a woodblock print on Japanese paper by Ando Hiroshige. He stood behind me for a moment before asking me what I thought. I am embarrassed to admit that it resembled a cartoon to me, but I was willing to understand. I knew they held an obscure appeal for Master Wright because I overheard him mentioning this to the draftsmen, Mr. Brodelle and Mr. Fritz, on a number of occasions when trying to illuminate an architectural idea, rather than explain it fully. For as Master Wright was fond of saying, beauty in its essence is for us as mysterious as life. All attempts to say what it is are as foolish as cutting out the head of a drum to find out where the sound comes from. I peered down at the

little white genius and said dully that I liked it, although I did not like it. How

could I like what I did not understand? He talked about its chastity, its austerity. The flatness of the picture left me cold. Perhaps, there was more I needed to understand? However, any affinity I felt seemed shallow, unlike the obscure significance Master Wright had placed on it. He talked to me of the common people, in the strict sense of the term he said, the infinite delight, the inherent poetic grace not of the Japanese nobleman but of the hard-worked humble son of Nippon of seventy-five years ago. The lecture seemed for my benefit, as if Master Wright were asking me, as he looked queerly into my eyes, to find myself in this terse Japanese print. He pointed out the face of one of the men seated on a pier with pots and women, his deeply furrowed visage with pleasant lines, the tanned texture and colour of brown leather. Yet this is art, he kept saying underlining each of his observations, as if setting off paragraphs in a hidden text. This art shows that he was a

man — not a slave! I continued to absorb what Mr. Wright was

telling me, but said nothing. In any case, it seemed a great deal for me to understand all at once. In the next few days when straightening up the living room, sweeping the Oriental rugs, I would take a spare moment and stare at the print as if looking hard enough would make it somehow erupt with meaning. It would not. And so it was thereafter that my days at Taliesin passed by rather peacefully, if now more thoughtfully. Gertrude would often laugh at my seriousness, my enthusiasm when trying to describe the details of what Master Wright had said to me about the Japanese prints. Even though Gertrude would laugh at me, in recitation, I had found that I could recall and

augment a great deal to what Master Wright had said. I had even begun to peruse the books on architecture in the library and articles published by Master Wright himself. It was after looking at several of the drawings in the architecture books and studying the drawings hung on the studio walls that I attempted my own drawings. My first attempts were crude, counterfeits, the details would need to be filled in. During the days, while preparing meals, I would think only of my dwellings, how I would add on to the spaces I had drawn the night before. Then I would stay up into the wee hours in the morning completing my sketches. I would analyze and critique them the next morning and begin all over again. Months went by, and after several sketches, some of my drawings had begun to look quite competent. I showed them to Gertrude, who told me they looked professional, which pleased me, even if she had never seen actual architecture drawings before mine. It was a dwelling for the two of us had I possessed the means to practice a profession to build the house I wanted. There were large open rooms, which flowed into one another, split levels that created new spaces that opened out onto terraces, which peered onto magnolia trees, a valley and a stream. But the keynote of the design was how I incorporated various blocks of granite, the most noble stone to me suggesting a Gothic style, with muni birds carved into it in a Kwacho motif. My Grandfather had told me a tale about the muni bird that has stayed with me all my life: There was once a boy who went down by the river to catch crayfish with his older sister. After the day was over, he had caught none, but she had caught an entire basketful. He cried for her to give him some of her catch, but she would give him none. Finally she takes a crayfish and puts it over his nose, causing it to change the colour of the muni bird. The boy begins to sing in a semi-wept, semi-sung tune. The boy never spoke another word. Gertrude asked me if I had shown Master Wright my plans, and I told her I planned to when he had more time. Master Wright had been working very hard on the Midway Gardens project. I had asked Mr. Wright on a few occasions, but he seemed very busy. After many attempts to get Master Wright's attention, I started standing outside his studio without much to do, seeming idle. At least, that's what Master Wright seemed to think. Sometimes he would even ask me: Julian have you nothing to do? Is there anything you would like? There is nothing else we need, thank you. He then began to pass me as though he were walking through a draft in the middle of the room. Before long, I discovered through Gertrude, that Mamah Cheney had asked her what was the matter with me; Master Wright was concerned. Mamah Cheney also instructed Gertrude to tell me to stay away from the studio. If there was anything that the men needed, Gertrude was to bring it to them for the next few weeks. **He was disturbed by my obstinate behaviour.** But I am very shy and proud, and

my occasional nervousness has always been an obstacle. He had no doubt wondered why I had been waiting outside the studio each day without saying a word, only hoping that I might find the right moment to ask him to look at my drawings again, I explained to Gertrude. That night, I had horrible dreams, the most horrible I've ever had, even during my worst sickness. I dreamed a muni bird had landed on my head and pecked at my crown until blood poured from the wound and onto my face. Then, cutaneous eruptions, blood oozing from the pores of my skin. I began to withdraw myself from the people at Taliesin, depressed about the last days events. Even though Master Wright had been very busy, he still set aside time to teach architectural drawing to Earnest, the 13-year old son of Mr. Weston. In the days that followed, Master Wright hardly seemed to be as unaware of my reticence as much as he may have been disturbed weeks before by my intensity. The next few weeks I could feel Gertrude's wary eyes cut on me. I believe she was especially relieved once I told her to tell the Wrights that life at Taliesin was too lonely for city servants, and that after lunch on the fifteenth, we would make arrangements to return to the city that I detested. I would say that the isolated surroundings did little to quiet my mind, as I had hoped. In fact, the isolation only turned my thoughts further inward. But returning to Chicago brought on even new anxieties. I continued to studiously avoid mixing with the others at Taliesin, and wrapped myself in mystery, devoting my time to fasting and melancholy. Or at least this is what they might have thought.

What is a man to do when others will not accept him for who he is, when others will only regard him with either indifference or mystery?

Master Wright had left for Chicago a week earlier. The children, John and Martha, had come back a week before. Mamah Cheney was delighted as ever to see them. My dreams continued to haunt me. One morning after serving Mamah Cheney, John and Martha their favourite breakfast of boiled eggs, toast, fresh figs and tea, I thought there would be no harm in visiting the studio for the first time in weeks. What could come of it? The draftsmen had gone into town and wouldn't be back until later that afternoon, so I went inside, rather casually like I had weeks before. On the studio walls several works in progress tacked on the wall. Some for Midway Gardens, others for a Japanese temple commission. But one drawing in particular caught my gaze. To my astonishment over Mr. Brodelle's table I saw a drawing for a new project, which featured a similar Gothic theme, with carvings of birds that appeared identical to my own muni birds in a similar Kwacho style. Had he stolen them from me? Had Master Wright seen these sketches yet? I left the room with many other questions on my mind. The nightmares

recurred again and again, until I was afraid to go to sleep. I spent hours lying on my bed, not able to sleep, restless, the images of the birds in my dreams. The next morning when I awoke, I told myself with a sudden and terrible resolve I cannot explain. I declined a game of Bridge with Gertrude, who seemed to be worrying about me, she seemed to fuss over me, about what I had eaten that morning, and tried to get me to eat, but I would touch nothing. Why had I not been eating lately, she asked me? I had lost my appetite, I told her. Gertrude would tell me, you look like a stick, Julian. Your eyes look yellow with jaundice. You must eat something. We were preparing lunch that afternoon for William Weston, the skilled carpenter, his son Earnest, who studied architectural drawing with Master Wright, Mr. Brodelle and Mr. Fritz, Mr. Brunker and Mr. Lindblom. I was preparing sandwiches and soup. I served them soup in the dining room, then Mamah Cheney and the children on the terrace overlooking the pond, before returning to the kitchen. There, I began carefully pouring the cleaning buckets I had filled with gasoline earlier that morning underneath the door. I locked the kitchen door from the courtyard, **I opened the kitchen door and quickly tossed a lighted match into the dining room where the astonished guests were eating.** I quickly closed the door, and heard a soft explosion, the sound a bed sheet makes when it is shaken out violently. I heard the men rush against the locked door. I then armed myself with the hatchet from the closet, ran out onto the terrace, where I saw Mamah Cheney, looking terrified. With the hatchet, I glanced her with a solid blow to the back of her head. She fell onto the flagstones and I stood over her to deliver a second glancing blow, which opened an enormous gash across her white brow. Blood oozed across her face and into her hair, pulsing to the time of her heart beat. I knelt down for the final stroke, which severed her head from her body. Raising the hatchet and driving down with all my strength, I crushed the dangling skull with the blunt end of my hatchet. John and Martha sobbed in the middle of a terrace, almost frightened to death. With my fatal hatchet, I sent them both to their untimely graves. The girl drew her hands up toward her face, fainted before I murdered her and then I finished off her brother in a similar one-stroke fashion. Next I saw the powerful Mr. Weston, who did not seem so strong in his panic, staggering into the courtyard, helping little Earnest along. I immediately seized on them, and dragging Mr. Weston out across the courtyard as Earnest screamed, half-blood curdling cries, half-whimpering sobs, dispatched repeated blows on Mr. Weston's head. I felled him first near the large oak tree along the wooden hillside, with several strokes of the blunt end of the hatchet, then finished him off with another stroke across his neck. I went around the corner of the house, where Mr. Brodelle, Mr. Brunker and Mr. Fritz had just jumped through the dining room window, their clothes on fire. On my approach they fled into opposing directions, but I soon overtook Mr. Brodelle who was trying desperately to put out the flames covering his body like

swarming wasps. As Mr. Brunker rolled along the ground downhill toward the valley, I leapt at him and dispatched repeated blows on the head, hacking away until I was certain I had delivered a death blow. He lay there, stopped half-way down the embankment, a scythe ablaze. With everyone dead or fatally wounded, I viewed the flaming and mangled bodies as they lay, in silent satisfaction, before skulking away into the woods to conceal myself. The bell in the Jones family chapel, at the foot of Taliesin's hill, began to sound the alarm. From a low brush underneath the trees, I watched a column of smoke rise into the sky, until dusk had fallen and I fell asleep. Early the next morning I returned to Taliesin surreptitiously for I knew there would be a posse out for me. I crept around back, where I found an entrance to the cellar, which was connected by a narrow passage to the furnace room. I stayed there in the crawlspace of the boiler. I felt my future was grim if the posse were to find me they would surely slaughter me. I swallowed a mouthful of muriatic fluid and waited in the hole to die. But I was found by the sheriff one morning and taken to the Dodgeville jail where I am writing this. The acid has begun to take effect. I can feel it in my guts now, eating away. I can still smell the smoke on my skin. And my lips are still burning. Even here in this cell, whence I've been transferred, and where I write this last note. Even though I am a murderer of my Masters the light-skinned guard here at the Dodgeville jail has been civilized enough to grant me this luxury of paper and pen, of last rites, for I will eventually surely die, either by the judgement of the law or by the cleaning product I have swallowed. Perhaps I should take this opportunity, here with pen and paper to tell you the story of my life, of my journey from Barbados to America? I can tell you my voyage from Barbados to America occurred without incident. I came over on a steamer, vomited every repast of the steerage gruel, and was glad when my wife Gertrude and I finally docked at New Orleans. You may want me to relate a history of the motives which induced me to undertake the late massacre, as you may call it. Perhaps I should tell you about the tropical surroundings in which I grew up, the white sand beaches, and how I had come to America for a better life, but found nothing but heartache — as you might read in the papers — for therein ought to lie the motives for my enthusiasm. How in my childhood a circumstance occurred which made an indelible impression on my mind, and laid the ground work of that which has terminated so fatally to many, both friends and foes alike, and for which I will soon atone at the gallows.

Three for a Quarter, One for a Dime

By Wayde Compton

For Jalil and André

In an old man stoop, a bow,
old man, rain in his beard,
dirty, hate to see scattered
all over the streets this way.
In a stoop like overboard.
Chanting his spare change,
shifting his cup.

At.

Drop.

»Where you from?

»Moses Lake, Washington, sir.

»Hey man, you wanna come in here? I'll get you a drink. It's on me.

»Thank you, thank you. What's your line, sir?

»Oh man, don't call me sir. I could be your son.

»Okay what's your line?

»I'm in representation.

»You a lawyer? Look so young.

»Naw man, I'm a scribe. (We'll have a pitcher.) You been in here before?

»Shit yeah, boy, I used to turn out a girl used to dance in this very spot. Shit I've done things. You should call me sir.

»I guess I probably should.

»What you want from me anyhow?

»Just sit and drink with me a bit, tell me what things you've done.

»How old are you?

»I'm twenty-seven.

»I'm not as old as I look. Think I'm an old man, don't you?

»Black folks age well. I don't know.

»Look: I've done things in this world.

»What's your name?

»They call me Boondocks.

»Why do they call you that?

»Why they call anybody anything?

»So what things have you done in this world?

»They wouldn't let me in here if I wasn't with you, you so white-looking. I know exactly where you from, my own daddy had eyes bluer than yours.

»My eyes are green.

»No man, that's what you want them to be, but they blue. I never claimed to be psychic, but I'll tell you something: you a West Indian.

»No I'm not, I'm from Vancouver.

»But your daddy a West Indian.

»No, he's from the States.

»Yeah, well, you been hanging out with those West Indians too

much or something. Because you got that West Indian way of looking.

»What do you mean?

»You anxious.

»What?

»You walk too fast, like you ain't been here long, but then maybe that's the white in you.

»Let me pour you another one.

»See that girl? She's a West Indian.

»Hey man, do you got something against them or something?

»No, sir, no. Just that I can see black people, really see em. I don't even claim to be psychic, but I say I felt you coming from blocks away. And I feel sorry for your generation, I truly do.

»What? Why?

»Cause you ain't got no sense, really. And I don't say that to make you feel bad. But you don't even know how to talk to women. Listen to this rap shit. Women don't want to be talked to in that kind of way. I used to have so many women — you wouldn't even believe it now to look at me. But I done

things in this world.

»When did you first come to Vancouver?

»What, you writing a book or something?

»I'm just asking.

»I came here to Vancouver same reason your daddy and your momma made you. And people used to know me round here. I'd walk into this place and they'd lay down the red carpet. Men would step out of my way and women would fall over each other to get in my way. You been hanging out with West Indians, that's why you asking me all these questions.

»What?

»West Indians always have this thing about, "Where you from?" all the time. "Where you from, where you been?" Maybe cause they had to travel so much, think everybody got to come from someplace.

»So why do they call you Boondocks?

»Look, we used to sing to women, not yell at em like you.

»I don't yell at women.

»Well, rap at em then, same difference. Just steady yelling and calling them names. You got to talk to them proper. Yeah, you should be paying for my drinks, cause I'm gonna tell you how you can get the

women. I know I don't look like much, but I got all they need here. You got a woman?

»Well. I guess. Yeah.

»Just one?

»Yeah!

»She's a white girl, ain't she?

»Yeah.

»I don't claim to be psychic — but see? Well, sing to her then. See if I lie.

»No, I don't sing, really, I don't.

»I know, but you black right? She'll think what you do is good even if it's halfway good. Make sure she knows you're black and she'll be ready to think you can sing before you even open your mouth.

»Did you ever sing?

»No, I couldn't sing or dance. I just dressed good. I'd stand there or just walk into a place, and the men would want to fight me and the women would want to learn my name.

»And then you'd say, "My name's Boondocks," right?

»Listen, I don't particularly like how you're talking to me. I could be your grandfather, remember that.

»You're not that old.

»Nobody knows just how old I am, understand? You could be my natural son, god damn it.

»Okay, okay.

»Women call me by my Christian name, but you should call me sir, you so young. You West Indians always have to act up.

»I'm not West Indian.

»Your friends then. I bet you the type to get into a fight and headbutt a guy. Actin' up all the time.

» "Three for a Quarter, One for a Dime."

»What's that?

»Archie Shepp.

»I don't get what you're talking about, and I don't like beer anyway, I like wine, so thank you sir, and I'll see you later. I appreciate it, but I got a place to be. Where you. Ain't.

diaspora

What Sound is Made of Too

By Kyo Maclear

I can hear Baba's voice as he speaks to himself, trying to take hold of the vertigo that is his life, a vertigo sudden and unexpected. And I hear him pacing back and forth, back and forth, in a tiny room on Parliament Street, while his pregnant wife Françoise looks on in puzzlement.

It's 10:00 am and Baba has come home early from the café. Françoise would like to stand to greet him but feels that it is best to wait for a signal. Besides that, she is feeling a bit queasy.

The back of her mouth still tastes like Neem toothpaste, the only thing that went past her lips this morning. She pats her dry hair down, then stops herself, sensing that her appearance is probably the least of her worries. She isn't feeling well at all. If only he would stop pacing for a second. She can feel each step in her bloated belly. Inside and outside. Something pounding.

Hear that?

That is the sound of a man slowed down by anxiety and anticipation. It is the sound of slush on the floorboards and squealing radiator pipes and rotting wallpaper. The sound of a dull but portentous interval. The sound of a nauseous but concerned wife squishing her long, bare toes into a thick wool rug to regain her balance. The sound of a fingernail raked repeatedly along the belt of a terry cloth bathrobe. It is the sound of a man talking himself down. It is the sound of morning sickness. The sound of a man and a woman folded inside the same uncomfortable event. It is the sound of waiting.

Did you hear that?

And to think that just a few hours ago, everything appeared normal.

what some people call "lip service," and Françoise calls "tokenism," but even the dumb pieces don't stop him from listening. He finds it soothing. The world is changing fast. So fast sometimes it feels like you're standing in a vortex, knees quaking at the centre of the world. It's stabilizing to listen to a story. A voice.

You're in for a treat. The voice swings gently. Today we have a tribute to Gordon Lightfoot. Baba admires the warmth and neatness of the voice. Goodness, it is saying, I remember where I was when I first heard that wonderful song Gordon wrote —when would it have been now? that song, you must remember it, who can forget? It was called "If You Could Read my Mind". Baba doesn't know

Baba doesn't know Gordon Lightfoot.

First thing Baba did this morning upon entering the café was turn on the radio. For the past two years he has started his chores the same way every day. He always comes through the back door, which leads directly to the kitchen. He always hangs his coat in the alcove leading to the basement. And for the past year, at least, he has always set the signal to CBC. (Before that he listened to college radio.) It's not simply that he's a man of habit. It's that the pudding of tedium that is his life demands structure of some kind. And the teak voices of the CBC hosts happen to provide him with the ballast he needs. Especially in these numbing winter months. In fact, he finds that the more he listens, the more habitable January in Canada becomes; the more weather begins to feel like culture, both edifying and soul forming.

Baba likes the way the CBC ties together the loose ends of the country —gospel singers in Halifax, drummers in Nunavut, birdwatchers in Clayoquot, all connected in a common radio weave. He suspects that some of the stories are obligatory,

Gordon Lightfoot. But he feels that he knows the voice of the host. Its vertical posture. Wire-frame glasses. And now my daughter is listening to the disco version of that very same song. A blue striped shirt. Things certainly do change. Although I suppose you could argue that music is a kind of connector between generations. Maybe a bowtie.

Baba empties the dishwasher and carefully composes the forks, the knives, the spoons. He has a scalloped profile; every feature spoon sculpted and perfectly polished. Dark brown skin, flawless except for a tiny red ledge on the back of his neck where the hair is shaved to velvet. (Baba is handsome, but he seems to be quite unaware of it.) Only his hands are weathered. A million tiny cracks line his chapped skin.

One might think that the life of a dishwasher is eventless, right? Just the same shift every day. An endless, soggy cycle resulting in puckered fingers. But Baba would tell you otherwise. After almost two years at the same job, Baba can still feel the gradations between the mess of the morning shifts. On good days, he glides through the prep-work. On good days, he can take an hour before

the wait-staff arrive, and relax magisterially in the dining area with a newspaper and a coffee with three sugarcubes. Good days, to put it plainly, are capacious.

Today is a good day. The kitchen is almost ready. The Gordon Lightfoot song is reminding him of warm gravel and that is reminding him of his present happiness. He lets the emotion of the music fall onto him. He can feel everything clinking into place. His recent wage increase, an imminent promotion to sous-chef. His wife's pregnancy, now approaching the third trimester. Their new refrigerator, a double-door Frigidaire with ice dispenser. Everything is fine.

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The hidden life demands a diligent reader who can see beyond the mischief of appearances.

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In the areas of alacrity and reliability, Baba is peerless. He carries himself as very few people do, appearing casual and responsive no matter how stressful things become. There have been times, for instance, when the restaurant is especially busy and Baba is asked to help the waiters clear tables and take drink orders. Amid the pandemonium of flying trays, spilled drinks, and tetchy customers, I have watched him. He always appears to be the model of equipoise.

Now, I don't want to give you the wrong impression of Baba. I hope I haven't made him appear too saintly and unruffled. I simply want to point out that from our very first handshake, he has always seemed to me to be a certain kind of person. Yet, judging from the way things turned out, my image of him was woefully inaccurate. I had misjudged the constancy of his personality, taking his calm exterior for a peaceful mind.

Nothing I had known or assumed about Baba presaged what he experienced next.

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When Baba finishes in the kitchen it is a quarter to eight in the morning.

The city is moving slowly because of a blizzard that began at five o'clock the previous evening. There are very few people walking along the street. One or two cars pass, then a garbage truck; their headlights beaming yellow through the swirling snow.

Inside the café, behind a glass window veiled by soft sheets of condensation, Baba enters the front dining area. He is humming to himself, when he comes upon a terrible, and, in his words, "shocking" sight. The first thing he does is drop the canvas bag he has been holding. Whatever thoughts he was thinking before evaporate as he stands there, frozen and slack-jawed.

"A thief!" he gasps.

Judging by the mess along the espresso bar, the cutlery and paper strewn around the emptied cash register, the thief is an amateur. Among the sundry items left behind are a large cleaver, a shattered wine glass, variously splintered pieces of wood, and a broken cabinet. There are also cigarette butts and an empty matchbook. The torn corner of a twenty dollar bill. And, inexplicably, an ice tray, which is now thawing on the counter-top.

Amid this wreckage, Baba stands motionless. His eyes slowly pan the area. The taste of wet cigarette ash, the smell of it, clamp his lips against a rush of saliva he can feel welling up in his throat. He spits into a napkin.

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What comes next is the scene of a man coming untethered. A man delinking from reality as he succumbs to his own internal chaos. It is a scene of warped proportions. I say this, not in judgement, but because the crime seemed at the time to be so petty and prosaic it could have been written off as bad luck. Yet somehow, through an alchemy of various forces and emotions—a compression of assorted needs and misdeeds, causes and effects—the crime inflates to such an extent that it threatens to consume its witness entirely.

Why this happened remains a puzzle to me. There are people who have countless worries, people who

collect worries the way some people collect trinkets, with a curious lack of discretion. Baba is not this type of person.

Having dropped his soiled napkin onto the counter, Baba retreats to a chair in the middle of the room. So seated, his head is flooded by a loud and confusing fuzz. He is stuck in sound. And the primary note resounding in his mind is the voice of Françoise, his beautiful wife. He attempts to pluck out her words. What would she say in this situation? He is dying to know, but her roiling-French tongue, often a source of comfort, is moving along the eaves of his brain in a wavy pattern. He thinks of her lying in bed. Her full white breasts puddling on the mattress. A flush of warmth passes through him.

At this instant, he can feel every hair on his head popping out of its slick brilliantine hold. The wetness at the back of his neck is now moving down his spine. Moisture gathers in the creases of his belly, between his toes. He leans back in his chair, eyes studying the cracked ceiling tiles. Wipes his forehead with the corner of his apron. The sweat coming off him is audible. Each and every drop.

The voice on the radio can be heard from the kitchen. The subject is now farmer subsidies, a protest on Parliament Hill, a Farm Aid concert, intransigent leaders, impossible demands. The protest organizers are interviewed briefly, short of breath because of Ottawa's January winds. Baba can feel his own body cooling. His extremities are tingling, and now the chill of sweat is entering his core. He rolls down his shirtsleeves.

Somewhere in him there is a whisper of doom, though he finds it difficult to pinpoint its source. It dwells upon his mood, it simply sits there, growing.

A dishwasher, a good husband and decent friend, a trusted employee, a favourite among the regulars. His life up to that moment has had a delicate balance to it, which he can feel slowly tipping.

Should I leave now?

Shall I call in sick and pretend I

never came in?

And if the owner arrives?

Could I make him a gift of my wallet?

There is no mistaking the tenor of the questions. Having discovered the theft, he feels snared. Those evidential clues that might distance him from the crime never even cross his mind, or if they do, he doesn't admit them. Fear quickens. It adrenalizes. It makes the heart beat faster. It puts a bend on reality. Adds an odour. The only thing he can imagine ahead of him are the blue-black shapes of police officers crashing through the door.

The facts as he sees them are simple: It is an insider job. He has tested all the doors and not one of them discloses any sign of a break-in. He knows the place better than anyone. He is the last person out every night and the first to arrive in the morning. This assortment of facts — flimsy, tenuous facts — is enough to fill him with unrest.

As he stands to leave, he moves back toward the cabinet, where he opens his palm to touch the broken glass. Before he realizes what he has done, before he can draw back his hand, he has left his prints on the surface. He is thankfully uncut. Yet instead of relief, he takes his clumsiness to be further proof of his weak and unreliable character. How can he expect anyone to trust him? He is leaving his suspicious mark on every surface of the world. Who will ever believe him? Perhaps in response, perhaps as a small and unconscious act of defiance, perhaps because he is hungry, Baba takes the opportunity to pocket a package of biscotti he has spotted on the shelf. His hand is shaking as he exits the room.

In the kitchen he hurriedly puts on his duffle coat, locks up, and walks toward College Street. It is still only eight thirty. He eats his first biscotti while waiting on the traffic island for the streetcar to arrive. For a brief interval, the time it takes for him to digest his first bite and pick the almonds from his back teeth with his finger, his panic subsides, and he experiences a momentary feeling of emptiness. For thirty uninterrupted seconds, he watches several birds beak-dive from the telephone wires

and land precisely on a newspaper box. The pigeons are greyish and the sky is also grey. Those driving by see a man who looks casual, even relaxed.

But they are not looking at the muscles in his jaw. They do not hear the way he clenches and grinds his back teeth. The racket of his self-scrutiny. If they did, they would observe a man who takes his predicament very seriously: he has let a good job slip away. He is done for. It isn't clear, still, where this sense of doom originated, why he feels fingered for something he hasn't done. Perhaps it is his younger brother who, in a gin-inspired rant, once told him of a friend who had been arrested on the basis of some smudgy, amateurish police drawings.

"That's how they get you. Not at the border. Not at immigration. They net you at the mall, while you're walking down the street. You gotta watch your back, brotherman. You gotta learn to take it all personally. Sometimes I worry about you, all trusting and open the way you are..."

Baba is not what you would call a nervous person, but his mind is thrashing about wildly, without aim or target. To the ordinary observer, his reaction would seem overstated. But let's linger awhile. Let's first assume that his concern is warranted, that his jumpiness — dormant before the fact of the robbery — was set to a hair-trigger. We might then wonder along with him: Now what? What does a laid-off immigrant do for the rest of his adult life? We might also wonder about the fragility of our own happiness and well-being. Is it really surprising that he has tied himself

Baba and Françoise moved into a low-rise apartment building eight years ago and stayed there. Twice fires forced them to move out and twice they moved back. During this time, they also survived two miscarriages, a burst appendix, a year of unemployment, and a minor car accident. They are acquainted with misfortune. One could say it has brought them closer. Yet in the hurtling capsule of Baba's mind, the familiar is forgotten. Those well-built mooring points, those emotional determinants and vicissitudes, that seemed to secure intimacy in the past are whizzing away.

As he enters the apartment, he feels self-conscious. How should he walk? Stand? Speak? Should he hold himself upright or kneel on the ground before her? Should he grasp her by the thighs or keep his distance?

Françoise is lying on her side, her belly pushes up against a billowy blue nightgown recycled from her sister's last pregnancy. Her long stemmed body full of milk. In the half-light of the bedroom, she awakes to see Baba filling the doorframe. She can see right away that he is shaken. Rising as he approaches, she pinches the flaps of her robe together, and reaches to touch him. He can feel himself melting. It is her hand touching his heart, against his ribs, aware through her bloated fingers and wiltedness.

He has towed something into the room, like a drag-net of grief. She can feel its heft. It is apparent in the way the skin is creased around his eyes and the way his shoulders hunch. She pulls his coat off, tugging the quilted-down sleeve over his listless arm. She

How can he expect anyone to trust him?

into knots?

What happens when you're reduced to helpless, full-blown perception for a short, hallucinatory moment? Do you feel like a trapped moth, aching for the light, or a bee without antennae?

takes his hand, thinking him, feeling him, not knowing how else to communicate. She wants to speak and tell him what has been on her mind now for several days. To share with him the stillness that lies inside the tidal pool of her belly. She wants to know: Does it live? But now is not the time to ask. There will be time later.

Baba sits on the covers, back

turned, shielding her from his shame. She does not know this yet, but he is waiting for the police to arrive, fierce in his conviction that his life is taking a shape, reconstituting itself around events beyond his control. He stares ahead at the pine dresser. If he closes his eyes the noises will overpower him so he keeps them open.

"You're shivering Baba. Why are you shaking?" she asks. "Do you want me to heat up the kettle?"

He nods with a weak smile, stands for a moment to flatten the seat of his pants. They are dark tweed and in need of a press. He notes a little tear in the cuff. He would like to be prepared, to be dignified, if — no, when — the police arrive. As Françoise pads off to the kitchen, he fixes on an anniversary photograph of Françoise's parents, their flushed cheeks, her mother's church hat, the house in Chicoutimi.

"Is the tea too weak, Baba? Shall I steep it a little longer? Are you sure? Well, if you're sure."

He hears, not for the first time but with a new sense of affection, aspects of Françoise's speech accentuated, a vowel stretched here, a verb twanged there.

Perhaps they can move to Quebec for a while. Françoise is always insisting that he would fare better with his asthma if they left the city. At that moment he feels prepared to watch another world vanish; to step into a place he neither knows or is known in. Resettlement is familiar. He knows its havoc. (It is the wreckage of self-esteem that feels impenetrable.) His shoulders are beginning to have the stooped curvature of an old man's.

He cups his hands around the chai she has prepared from an old masala tea bag. Their tastes are strangely intermingled. Being together has overcome a possibly shameful need to ameliorate the effects of their respective foreignness.

Slowly, like a leaf twisting toward the sun, he looks at her. Somewhere between vision and view, his eyes hover. She feels her heart flex. But his eyes reveal nothing, not interest, panic, or pain, just suspension. What is she to make of this total absence of recognition? Is the blankness directed at her? Is he experiencing a stroke?

After nine years together, she is shocked to find an expression that is completely new to her.

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He is thinking about packing a suitcase when the phone rings. The sound jangles through him. One. Two. Three rings and Baba lifts himself off the bed and edges slowly toward the night-table. Françoise watches.

From this point on the story takes a turn.

Baba is on the verge of making a confession, asail on his own delirium, when something snaps him back into the waking world. It is the curve of the voice at the other end of the phone. It does not align with his dread. It is not an arrow of accusation or fury. The voice he hears is a vessel of warmth.

As far as the café owner, Michael, is concerned, the proof of Baba's innocence rests in the canvas bag he had dropped on the floor of the café that morning. The issue is more-or-less settled. As Michael puts it: "What thief would be crazy enough to leave a satchel of evidence in plain view!?"

Baba doesn't like to throw things away, even small things like grocery receipts, old lottery tickets, and streetcar transfers, and all these scraps are found tucked inside his address book.

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By midday, Officer Gibbens from 51 division has arrived to follow up with an investigation of the premises. He begins by examining the door-frames and hinges for signs of distress, then moves on to the sticky espresso counter, where he takes considerable time dusting the cash register and observing the surrounding detritus. A broken glass and cigarettes are among the objects he seals in a plastic bag for lab analysis. Over the next two hours, he judiciously notes what he finds on a standard issue report form.

This simple exercise of authority sharpens the curiosity of the staff. (Everyone is present except Baba who

has requested the rest of the day off.) They gather in anticipation as Gibbens finally removes the gloves from his broad hands, casting them aside for dramatic effect. An odd sense of merriment prevails, as if together they are about to expose the culprit. But to their huge disappointment he has very few details to offer. They already know that most of the cash was in twenties, a little more than the regular float because the banks were closed for the weekend. They also know that Baba was the first person to discover the crime.

Nevertheless, there is something momentarily placating in Gibbens tone. He speaks in a slow, jowly voice.

"It may take us a few days to analyze the prints. In the meantime, please keep your eyes open for anything unusual. Take this. It has my precinct number on it. Call if you notice anything. Anything at all."

He places his card on the counter, buttons his coat and leaves.

The conversation moves on to other things. But the air is filled with a sense of restlessness and agitation. As Baba predicted, several of the waiters cannot dispense of the idea that he is somehow embroiled in the incident. The idea that he abruptly left the scene of the crime because he was too upset to wait around sounds unlikely and suspicious. Why didn't he call the police immediately? In the absence of answers, some begin to speak their doubts aloud. While others

"Just be sure to keep your valuables on you at —"

"Where did he come from? Does anyone know?"

Is it boredom or plain spite that causes the speculation to crest in his direction? The gossip is spreading by late afternoon. In Baba's absence the outline of his character is blurring dangerously.

"For crying out loud, can't you guys just give him a break?"

When Jenny, the manager, catches wind of the chatter, she doesn't conceal her disgust.

"I mean, hasn't he gone through enough today without you putting him through a fucking witch-hunt. And he's not even here to defend himself. What a way to treat a co-worker."

Open speculation about the theft has been banished, so people begin to speak of it only in whispers.

Two co-workers are standing in the alley emptying garbage into the dumpster. It has all been asked before, but they ask it again:

"Where did he come from?"

It depends on what you mean by the question. His immigration papers tell you he comes from Kandy, Sri Lanka via Frankfurt and Gander, Newfoundland. He is Tamil speaking. But what comes after his nation his colour his accent?

They are acquainted with misfortune.

wonder quietly to themselves.

"Maybe he did it," the first voice begins.

"Or maybe he helped someone else do it."

"The way I see it, he leaves suddenly and —"

"He has a damp handshake. His forehead shines, even in wint —"

"— that's irrelevant. I'm talking about the broken cabinet"

"You honestly think —"

"Well, he just took off. He didn't leave a note or call anyone."

"It smells like a scam to me."

He walked in one day off the street with a new pair of lace-up shoes, and a request to see the manager.

"What's his real name?"

Roshan Anand. (I don't think anyone had any idea until the question was asked. Now something has been exfoliated, peeled away to reveal evidence of another skin, another life.)

Poor Baba. The protracted conjecture about his background probably caused his eye to tick convulsively.

Baba is accustomed to being regarded as a dependable man, a man

Roshan Anand, nickname Baba, former newspaper editor, journalist, informal Marxist, poet, immigrant, cab driver, gardener, mortuary assistant, Wal-Mart retail clerk, husband, dishwasher and soon-to-be-father—he is also a man who can be said to have a prodigious love of French New Wave movies.

without obvious faults or virtues. Now he is being lifted away from the neutral background as though considered for the first time. What is surprising is how the current interest in Baba reveals a prior lack of curiosity. No one had wasted the effort of a question before. It's not that he wasn't well liked. It's just that prior to this morning there was nothing specific to know. What could a twenty-five-year-old waiter with the taste of cherry lifesavers in his mouth, his mind tuned to the upcoming Beck concert, his awareness dulled by a permanent sense of futurelessness, have in common with a Tamil immigrant from Sri Lanka? Nothing in his experience would suggest that intimacy was necessary, let alone desirable.

The sudden interest in Baba has acquired an unbridled momentum. It

is galloping away. The time has come to tame it. It must be made manageable, it must be assigned a precise colour and shape so that it can be handled, so that it loses its infinite, entirely abstract blankness. Now is the time to ascertain the truth: Where is he how did what is his real name from when did he come?

Roshan Anand. Born in Kandy in April 1961. Third child of academic parents. From what he has been told by his mother the birth took 36 hours. She was convinced that he didn't want to be out in the world. Eventually he had to be pulled out with forceps by the doctors. This may explain the unusual shape of his head, and the tiny scar at the base of his skull.

Roshan Anand, nickname Baba, former newspaper editor, journalist, informal Marxist, poet, immigrant,

cab driver, gardener, mortuary assistant, Wal-Mart retail clerk, husband, dishwasher and soon-to-be father — he is also a man who can be said to have a prodigious love of French New Wave movies. He has seen *Breathless* no less than fourteen times. The film is in French, with subtitles that get bleached out everytime the scene is too light. Both he and his wife Françoise agree that there is something extremely watchable about characters that are so devouringly self-engrossed.

For the past two years, he has worked full-time at the cafe. He is a minimum wage; the others are his fellow-minimum wagers. And at certain moments when they are laughing or talking together, a kind of golden light of solidarity descends, and his entire anxious struggle with the question of how to fit in just disappears. He reads these moments like a thermometer of acceptance. In his experience, it is better to feel ordinary and even non-essential than to be the focus of too much exclusive attention. Baba is a man who wishes for the immunity of plainness.

These are the mind-boggling particulars that form his life.

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"Dear Officer Gibbens. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to write this statement. I feel more comfortable than if I had to say it out loud. You have asked me to start at the beginning and summarize my impressions of today. So let me begin by saying that my birth name is Roshan Anand. I am named after a poet that read at my parents' wedding. Named after a man who was poorly equipped and almost in rags when he arrived at the ceremony. But it didn't matter because he was elegant in word if not in appearance. I think my parents have always hoped that I would grow up to be like him, and acquire his eloquence. I fear they would be disappointed if they knew how tongue-tied I have become in Canada. And they would be even more disappointed to find that I had fallen into a disreputable situation that has required me to clear my name." Baba is seated at a small pine table in

his kitchen and he is writing without pause. A slight draft is leaking through the window, but in his concentration he doesn't notice.

He feels relief now that he has the paper to speak to. The pen to release him. A comfort has settled itself in his stomach and a kind of fluency has taken over. The details of his life are flowing, flowing. Everything that has been folded into the quiet seam of memory is now untucked, and fidgety and clamorous. There is a volume to his written words.

The more he records, the less burdened he feels. It is intoxicating. He believes that once he has sealed and delivered his letter to Officer Gibbens, his familiar life will commence again. There is nothing any longer to hide. Just as quickly as he fell, he will be restored.

It is past two o'clock in the morning and the streets below are quiet. The only sounds are coming from Baba.

I can hear him smiling and thinking. Everything is fine.

diaspora