

## CYRIL DABYDEEN

(b. 1945)

I express the "other" in the Canadian milieu and spirit," says Cyril Dabydeen; "all that I am, and where I've come from, those narratives and the metaphor of the hinterland place, mind and consciousness. Caves of memory, too." Many of those memories evoke Dabydeen's East Indian, South Asian, and Caribbean origins.

Born in Berbice, Guyana, Dabydeen was already an award-winning poet before he emigrated to Canada in 1970. He studied English at Lakehead University, where he received a B.A. with Honours (1973), and at Queen's University, where he received an M.A. (1974). A resident of Ottawa for many years, Dabydeen taught at Algonquin College and at the University of Ottawa, and has worked with community groups, municipalities, and the federal government as a race relations professional. His commitment to community relations is strongly inscribed in his writing.

Widely anthologized and published in numerous literary magazines both in Canada and overseas, Dabydeen has edited *A Shapely Fire: Changing the Literary Landscape* (1987), one of the first anthologies of black and Caribbean writing in Canada, and *Another Way to Dance: An Anthology of Canadian Asian Poets* (1989). Poet Laureate of Ottawa during the period 1984-87, he has published eight collections of poetry, including *Goatsong* (1978), *This Planet Earth* (1979), *Islands Loveliter Than a Fission* (1988) and, most recently, *Stoning the*

*Wind* (1994). His poetry records, in his own words, "the changing landscape of the imagination, or the life in Canada as 'I quarry silence and talk / In riddles so that the maple leaf / Itself will understand.'" Although he bemoans the fact that, in Canada, some immigrants remain forever immigrants, at the title of one of his poems suggests, Dabydeen's writing reveals at once a commitment to Canada and concern with the alienating impact of Canadian society on immigrants and people of colour.

This creative process, which mirrors, as he says, "the extent to which I try to illumine experience . . . [and] to understand myself in order to grips with all others", also informs his fiction. His short story collections, *Silence Close to the Island* (1980), *To Monkey Jungle* (1988), and *Jogging in Havana* (1992), address in different settings—including his native Guyana—the various configurations of otherness, while avoiding stereotypes. His characters' unease both about where they come from and to where they find themselves displaced is similarly present in his novels, *Dance Swirl* and *The Wizard Swami*, both published in England in 1989. Dabydeen has won the Sandback Parker Gold Medal (1964), the Louise Plumb Poetry Prize (1978), the Okanagan Fiction Prize, and the Canadian Author and Bookman Award (1982).

## LADY ICARUS

'ordered deported—for the 5th time'

You fell, you  
fell from seven  
stories high  
tempting gravity  
from the Strathcona  
hotel

not skyward  
only landward

like a recalcitrant  
angel, Maria,  
all the way  
from Ecuador  
you came, wanting  
desperately to stay  
in Canada

so glorious  
and free—defying  
another deportation  
order when suddenly  
your rope

of sheets and blankets  
broke  
no sun now melting wax  
your hold snaps

as you plunge  
to sudden death  
no stand on guard for thee  
no so glorious and free  
O Canada O Canada

## MULTICULTURALISM

continue to sing of other loves,  
Places . . . moments when I am furious,  
When you are pale and I am strong—  
As we come one to another.

The ethnics at our door  
Malingering with heritage,  
My solid breath—like stones breaking;  
The railway station making much ado about much,  
This boulder and Rocky Mountain,

As I leave with a head tax  
As I am Chinese in a crowd,  
Japanese at the camps,  
It is also World War II.  
Panting, I am out of breath.

So I keep on talking  
With blood coursing through my veins,  
The heart's call for employment equity,  
The rhapsody of police shootings in Toronto,  
This gathering of the stars one by one, codifying them  
And calling them planets, one country, really . . .

Or galaxies of province after province,  
A distinct society too:  
Québec or Newfoundland; the Territories . . .  
How far we make a map out of our solitudes  
As we are still Europe, Asia,  
Africa; and the Aborigine in me  
Suggests love above all else—  
The bear's configuration in the sky:  
Other places, events; a turbanned RCMP,  
These miracles—

My heritage and quest, heart throbbing;  
Voices telling me how much I love you.  
YOU LOVE ME; and we're always springing surprises,  
Like vandalism at a Jewish cemetery  
Or Nelson Mandela's visit to Ottawa  
As I raise a banner high on Parliament Hill  
Crying 'Welcome!' we are, you are—  
OH CANADA!

I AM NOT

I  
i am not West Indian  
i am not—  
let me tell you again and again  
let Lamming and Selvon talk of places  
too distant from me;  
let me also recover and seethe  
& shout with a false tongue

if I must—  
that i am here  
nowhere else

let me also conjure up other places  
as i cry out that all cities are the same,  
rivers, seas, oceans—  
how they swell or surrender  
at the same source

2

i breathe in the new soil  
engorging myself with wind,  
yet flaccid—

i inhale the odour  
of rice paddy  
cane leaves in the sun  
& birds blacker than the familiar vulture  
circling my father's house  
with a vague promise

amidst other voices  
i come together with you,  
crying out  
that there are hinterlands,  
other terrain

3

we fashion new boundaries  
and still i do not know,  
i do not know,  
in the cold, this heat  
of the insides—  
wetness at the corners of the mouth

skin grown lighter,  
& once the giant lake,  
foamy whiteness of my Ottawa river—  
now Mohawk or Algonquin . . .  
whither Carib or Arawak?

i breathe harder  
with my many selves,  
turning back

ing in through the floor of the truck. But I just sit there till the water starts to leak into my boots and I turn and look out the window on the woman's side of the car and I see the wild mustard blooming on Nobah Naze's field.

Then there is ringing in my ears like a saw blade hitting a nail in an old fence pole and Oata pushes me away and schluffs off to the phone with her pink stockings on her feet just. I hear her say 'Hello,' and 'Yes' and 'Oh' and then 'Oh' again. Oata comes slowly back into the moonshine by the sofa. She steps on a pink shoe and she falls me beside on the bench. I take her around with my arms and she leans her head on my chest. I stroke her hair a little and she starts to shudder. Then the fears let go and I feel them when they run off from her cheek into the hairs on my belly. And there's nothing to say. Nothing to see. Just to feel. Nobah Naze Needarp is dead.

## JIM WONG-CHU

(b1 1948)

Jim Wong-Chu felt compelled to write when he was about twenty-five because, as he says, "I had so many stories about so many people that the stories would die with me. I felt I had to write them, I had to put them down." The stories he wanted to put down, but could not because he "didn't feel that I could write English properly, were about the old Chinese-Canadian people he met while doing volunteer work at the Pender YWCA in Vancouver's Chinatown. It was his interaction with these people that helped him come to terms with his own Chinese-Canadian experience.

Wong-Chu, born in Hong Kong, arrived in Canada as a 'paper son' when he was four-and-a-half years old. Because between 1923 and 1947 the Chinese Immigration Act prohibited the Chinese (except for diplomats, children born in Canada, students, and merchants) from entering Canada, many people would create a son on paper, which paper was then given to a nephew, and this poor guy would have to assume an identity. It was, as Wong-Chu says, "like living a borrowed life." This is how Wong-Chu himself came to Canada—as the nephew-son of an aunt. It was years after he was shipped at age eight back to his real family and then again to Canada that he added Chu, the name of his biological father, to Wong, the name of his adoptive parents. While growing up in Vancouver and during his four years in Hong Kong, he 'always felt as an outsider' both because of his alienation from his Canadian

and Hong Kong families and because of language problems: his Cantonese dialect was not the Chinese dialect spoken in Hong Kong, and by the time he returned to Canada his English was getting very rusty.

Wong-Chu worked as dishwasher, potter and delivery boy in relatives' and friends' restaurants in Merritt and Prince George, British Columbia, and in Chicago before he settled in Vancouver's Chinatown. He was one of the 68 individuals who formed the media-based collective Pender Guy that produced weekly broadcasts on Co-op Radio, Vancouver, from 1976 to 1981. After studying at the Vancouver Art School for four years, Wong-Chu produced *Pender Street East*, a major photographic essay. A founding member of the Asian Canadian Writers Workshop, he began writing poetry in his late twenties. The poems of *Chinatown Ghosts* (1987), which include those that follow, evoke, as Wong-Chu says, "paintings": "Very simple, very stark and with very austere words, but fully packed, they mirror the concise and economical way of his Cantonese language as well as his intimate knowledge of life in Vancouver's Chinatown.

Wong-Chu continues to live and write in Vancouver. His poetry has appeared in many literary magazines and been translated into Portuguese, German, and Chinese. He is the co-editor of *Many-Mouthed Birds: Contemporary Writing by Chinese Canadians* (1991). He works as a letter-carrier for Canada Post.

### TRADITION

I grasp  
in my hand  
a bundle of rice  
wrapped in leaves  
forming triangles



a new rule was made

the chinese must ride  
the front two cars  
of the trains

that is

until another accident  
claimed everyone  
in the back

(the chinese erected an altar and thanked buddha)

after much debate  
common sense prevailed

the chinese are now allowed  
to sit anywhere  
on any train

## PIER GIORGIO DI CICCIO

(b. 1949)

I've been labelled a surrealist, a romantic, a social-reformer, an ethnic writer, a moralist,' says Pier Giorgio di Cicco. In any case, most of my work has been fuelled by a discomfiture with dualism.' Di Cicco, even as the editor of one of the earliest ethnic anthologies, *Romanzi Canades: The Discovery of Canada by Seventeen Italo-Canadian Poets* (1978), expresses his scepticism about the dualities that might inform identity, especially those that might define one as an ethnic Canadian. As he says in his introduction, 'I'd been a man without a country for most of my life.'

Di Cicco, born in Arezzo, Italy, arrived in Montreal with his parents in 1952. In 1958 they moved to Baltimore, Maryland, after a short period in Toronto, but di Cicco moved back to Canada in 1968 to attend high school. He studied at the University of Toronto, where he received a B.Ed., and years later a Masters in Divinity (1990). He was actively involved with various literary journals, and his poetry has appeared widely in many magazines.

With his first collection of poetry, *We Are the Light Turning* (1976), di Cicco began a prolific poetic career, publishing a total of fourteen books in twelve years, among them *The Circular Dark* (1977), *Dolce-Amaro* (1979), *The Tough Romance* (1979, 1990), which was translated into French, *Flying Deeper into the Century* (1982), and *Women We*

*Never See Again* (1984).

In the 1980s, with the help of a Canada Council grant, he began reading widely in philosophy and quantum physics, looking for new cosmogonic paradigms, rather less interpersonal and more cosmic, paradigms that would embrace ultra-social ecologies as well as the human. The various routes he pursued during this search are apparent in *Virgin Scienze* (1986), the collection that includes the poems that follow. The figure of the poet in this volume functions, in di Cicco's words, as a 'true meta-physician [who] alchemizes dualities with a sense of humour, experiential duality, that is, paradox.' Using metaphors that come from the language of sciences, these poems offer at once an ironic critique of Protestant attitudes in Canadian society and a Christian perspective; about the latter, as di Cicco says, 'There's no alternative to sacralizing what you humanly make in order to elevate it to the realm of human value. In that sense alone, to be poetic, you can redeem matter, or the inert. . . . It is through human love that the world is animated and knowledge released.'

Di Cicco, who received the Italo-Canadian Literary Award from Carleton University in 1979, became a Brother in the Order of St Augustine, and is now a priest in Ontario.

### WAKING UP AMONG WRITERS

I am so lucky, so ridiculously  
lucky; luck oozes from my palm tree,  
my fashionable view, sony tv,  
lucky in luckiness, lucky in the hands  
of the clock, I wheeze luckiness,  
lucky in talent, lucky in friends,  
lucky in Toronto, lucky to be in Canada, not  
Zimbabwe, lucky in health, contacts,  
money, I am so lucky—never did an honest

What he really wants to do is wear white at the wedding of the world, but this is the only job he could get in a protestant country.

SYMMETRIES OF EXCLUSION: DUO-GENESIS

*'Teach us to care and not to care'*  
—T.S. Eliot

Heisenberg's uncertainty principle has been a thorn in my heart for years. It is a physical justification for all symmetries of exclusion. I can still hear my mother saying I can't have everything—that I have to choose. Subtler phoenicians of the real world said I couldn't be in two places at once, that I couldn't have a modern woman and a traditional woman. Things seem to slip from between your fingers unless you pay no attention to what you're doing. Art is the science of duplicating accidents. That is why artists exhaust themselves at cause and effect, dragging their bodies or burning themselves out. What is left over is nonchalance. It's what you fool matter with to make it act natural.

Heisenberg was a wit. His marital situation should have alerted him to the either/or behaviour of particles. The obvious escaped him, not unlike the knowledge of either position or momentum.

The choice of the world 'complementary' is poignant. The word palliates the dogged acceptance of polarities. It's as if his love-making had crept into his scientific-linguistic underwear. That's mean. But why be patient with Calvinists? Let them get to heaven on their own time, without sacrificing the superluminal potential of the race.

MARY DI MICHELE

(b. 1949)

My status as an ethnic writer is conferred, right? was Mary di Michele's ironic response to an interviewer questioning her feelings about her status as an ethnic writer. She finds ethnic labelling and the hyphens that come along with it to be limiting and discriminatory. 'I but hyphen, she says, is the rift in us all, perhaps. One which is typographically evident in the language. . . . You run into me in Italian-Canadian writers' conferences because I know how important it was to me as a writer to find in literature an imaginative construct that contained and reflected some of my own kinds of experience.' This involvement, together with the encouragement she received from novelist Joyce Carol Oates, has facilitated her shift from 'the negative aspect of [her] academic training. . . . [that] concentrate[d] primarily on intellectual information' to her own experiences and background.

Born in Lanciano, Italy, she received her B.A. in English from the University of Toronto (1972) and her M.A. in English and Creative Writing from the University of Windsor (1974). She has held the position of writer-in-residence in many places, including the Universities of Toronto (1985-86) and Rome (1991). Her poetry won the First Prize in the CBC Literary Competition and the Air Canada Award for Writing. A professor of Creative Writing in the English Department, Concordia University, Montreal, since 1990,

di Michele has published many collections of poetry, including *Tree of August* (1978), *Bread and Chocolate* (1980), *Minnesota and Other Poems* (1981), and *Necessary Sugar* (1984).

'All my poetry, she says, 'is meant to be heard as well as read. The voice, the music and rhythm of the human voice, is the animator, is the animus, of the poem.' Much of her earlier work addresses, in her own words, 'a sort of Houdini-like wrestling with the values of her traditional immigrant background, with 'bonds which are sometimes restrictive, sometimes repressive . . . but which are also bonds of love, like family ties and sexual relations.' In her more recent poetry, di Michele writes out of a strong sense that 'gender is the stronger factor in identity for me over ethnicity. The body, she says, 'is the more powerful sign.' The poems in *Immune to Gravity* (1986) and *Luminous Emergencies* (1990) reflect 'how our bodies write our lives. . . . This is central to me, she says, 'a desire always to incorporate, to make part of the whole body, not to amputate, but to find, through a process which is not either-or, but more like yes-and-no.'

Di Michele's poetry has been widely anthologized and translated into Spanish. She is the editor of *Anything is Possible: A Collection of Eleven Women Poets* (1984). Her most recent books are *Under My Skin* (1994), a novel, and *Stranger in You: Selected Poems and New* (1995).

LIFE IS THEATRE

OR

OTO BE AN ITALIAN IN TORONTO  
DRINKING CAPPUCCINO ON BLOOR STREET  
AT BERSANI & CARLEVALE'S

Back then you couldn't have imagined yourself openly savouring a cappuccino, you were too ashamed that your dinners were in a language you couldn't share

with your friends: their pot roasts, their turnips, their recipes for Kraft dinners you glimpsed in TV commercials—the mysteries of macaroni with marshmallows. You needed an illustrated dictionary to translate your meals, looking to the glossy pages of vegetables *melanzane* became eggplant, African, with the dark sensuality of liver. But for their even eggplants were exotic or unknown, their purple skins from outer space.

Through the glass oven door you would watch it bubbling in pyrex, layered with tomato sauce and cheese, *melanzane alla parmigiana*, the other-worldliness viewed as if through a microscope like photosynthesis in a leaf.

Educated in a largely Jewish highschool you were Catholic.

Among doctors' daughters, the child of a fruit vendor.

You became known as Miraculous Mary, announced with jokes about virgin mothers.

You were as popular as pork on Passover.

You discovered insomnia, migraine headaches, menstruation, that betrayal of the self to the species. You discovered despair.

Only children and the middle aged are consolable. You were afraid of that millionth part difference in yourself which might just be character.

What you had was rare

and seemed to weigh you down as if it were made of plutonium.

What you wanted was to be like everybody else.

What you wanted was to be liked.

You were in love with that Polish boy with yellow hair everybody thought looked like Paul Newman.

All the girls wanted to marry him. There was not much hope for a fat girl with good grades.

But tonight you are sitting in an Italian café with a man you dated a few times, fucked, then passed into the less doubtful relationship of coffee and conversation.

He insists he remembers you as vividly as Jean-Crawford upstaging Garbo in *Grand Hotel*. You're so melodramatic, he said. Marriage to you would be like being in an Italian opera!

Being in love with someone who doesn't love you is like being nominated for an Oscar and losing. Truly great performance gone to waste. Still, you balanced your espresso expertly throughout a heated speech, and then left without drinking it. You're an Italian, after all, he shouted after you, in a theatre.

AMERICAN WORD: TRADING IN ON THE AMERICAN DREAM

Listen, whatever I write here, what you read, is safe. It's between us. In North America writers don't disappear. They are not tortured. They are ignored. People are not arrested. They are illiterate.

Entertainment has become an industry, hybrid of boardroom and circus. How can we be touched by what the video screen dissolves into show? It's a cold country. Sitting on the floor, writing in my notebook, I can see under the table the network of spiderwebs holding up my printer. Displacement.

How can we be touched? is vision. How can we be touched? The NASA planes from Punta Arenas, Chile, measure the damage to the ozone over Antarctica. There is a growing rent in the sky. The blue we will view as through coffee skulls. But not bovine, our own. Our skin and our children's will burn and fester. On the network the voice-over, with the gravity of an anchorman, urges the nation on. 'To survive is not success!' it proclaims. Images of executives, Wall Street grey suits, Rolex watches, leather portfolios, men scrambling to work: 'So America has been made GREAT!'

Over the planet the ozone is thinning, over the earth where to succeed is not to survive.