

DI BRANDT

River People

for Tomson and Raymond

I have come now to live with the river people.
I was raised among the earth people, proud
dirt under the fingernails, long rugged silent
days of hoeing and plowing. Electric barbed
wire to keep the cows in, tin granaries bulging
with ripe wheat. Bright orange carrots rooted
improbably, juicy, green feather topped, in
cracked black soil. Meadowlarks perched on
the fenceposts along the gravel road,
announcing the morning with their cheery
trilling song.

I lived with the lake people for a while, sand
coloured beaches, blue grey water, sparkling
sky, no fixed borders anywhere. Ground
squirrels darting through the bushes. The
slow *put put put* of the weatherbeaten grey
aluminum boat. Pungent smell of rotted fish,
rustle of dead mayflies, flash of white wings
and sharp beaks. Shots ringing out. Midnight
feast for the whole clan. Too much drink.
Aurora borealis painting the night sky, and
the moon, the moon.

There were the years I lived with the asphalt
and cement people, dedicated to glass and
steel, and cars, and money, and speed.
Pinstriped linen suits over crisp white cuffs,
tooled leather briefcases, colour coded digital
presentations in fashionable Power Point.
Statistics, analyses, tables, maps, reports.
Hurry hurry, faster faster, more more. Belgian
raspberry cider in goldrimmed glasses.
Yachts and sailboats on the canal. Parched
ditches, car accidents, the singing stars
muffled behind inky clouds.

There were the years I lived in the air,
crowded cabins with TV screens built into
the seatbacks, dinners on plastic trays.
Smiling servants everywhere. Lipstick,
pantyhose, eye shadow, stilettos. Yellow
turbans and hand embroidered slippers.
Passports, hotel reservations, waitlines,
security checks. Fresh squeezed orange juice
for breakfast, crisp papaya salad for lunch,
piña colada at seven. Ambassadorial
receptions, keynote addresses, interviews.
Pictures in the newspapers.

I have come now to live with the river people.
We sit on the reedy shore and watch the water
flow by, urgently, purposefully, carrying the
continent's pulse and debris firmly along to
the bay we have heard about, on the edge of
a mythical northern ocean, with seal mermaids
and melting ice floes, far away.

We watch the people living on the other side
with their bigger yards and lush gardens
and louder dinner parties, knowing we live on
the superior wilder, slower, freer side. Don't
we? And they, do they feel pity, or envy,
looking across at us perched on our
unadorned rocks, with our fishing lines and
ragged sprawling nettle and burdock groves?

We chat with the geese. We watch the sun's
reflection as it's going down, a long wavering
red line slashing the water. We sing to the fish.
We scatter many coloured flower petals to the
spirit bones of our beloved remembered drowned,
the overdosed, the lost, the disappeared. The
deep heart's cry of *why, why, why, why, why*. We
pick wild berries, sumach, raspberry, blackberry,
on the shore. The smoke of our tiny backyard
fires, tobacco lit, spirals upward toward the heavens.

My fingers begin to remember how to weave
willow baskets and bright coloured shawls.
My lips begin to mutter the old songs in the old
languages, my tongue curling gingerly around
the strange and familiar sounds. I begin to hear
the babble and gurgle, the *gloog gloog gloog*, at
the earth's deep core. My mind begins to wander
the swirling galaxies. What could I possibly want, more?

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