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*LIVING IN EXILE*

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All the poets know I will be here now; they have been waiting for me. Waiting for years, it seems; and indeed my being in the Great White North (as it's sometimes called: the veritable Arctic, as many in the tropics think). See, Ottawa's the coldest capital in the world, isn't it? Colder than Moscow or Vladivostok, some say. And I've been living a clandestine life, sort of, all these years, retreating to the attic where I daily write my verse: "composing," I call it. Words etched, my thoughts flitting back and forth: the images sometimes coming to me in a sustained reverie. I focus on where I was born, of all other places tied to it.

How I seethe. Maybe I am exotic, too; don't I know? See, it's also my special sense of the English language, my sprung rhythms. Really? It's my sense of origins, where I will live longest. It's my destiny, I've concluded; and geography is destiny, I hum to myself. Why not? The East in me, I figure, yet contemplating beginnings, if not endings, longer.

Now I am indeed here to tell those who have come to hear me read for the first time in this restaurant about places faraway, South and North America, you bet! And other places too, all being one. Frisson, I experience. Ah, they've indeed come to hear me read and to read their own work: to demand an audience, more like it. The dilettantes, poseurs, I say to myself, even if there are genuine poets among them, earnest souls with their haiku and villanelle, or with their syllabics-free verse form ... their strutting it all out, more or less. So loud. All in the open-set, before the microphone – they will outdo, well, Dylan Thomas, no?

With T.S. Eliot, I say, a poet's aim is to "purify the dialect of the tribe." Ah, what tribe?

And am I a modern-day Khalil Gibran, or Rabindranath Tagore, because of how I am, and how I may be received? Nothing to do with the East in me, or sheer skin colour? Words etched! Rumi in me too, or Sufism. The ghazal form, from antiquity no less, as I see it. See, I am versatile, and maybe everything is masked in my iambic pentameter: poetry I've been writing in cold Ottawa. How the wind blusters outside.

Strange, now I sense all the artists of the North are in one place, here in this basement of a popular downtown restaurant.

February it is, the weather forecasters have been steadily at it on the TV and radio. The local poets will yet rant, rage, inured to the blustery weather outside. It's all about failed loves, existentialist angst, self-reflexiveness. The performance ones, calling themselves hip hop and dub artists. Ah, aficionados, all. And maybe it's because they know I will be here, my one reading they've been looking forward to, and no doubt they also want to impress me with their own "stuff." Oh, you bet:

I am an outsider. Do I really belong here?

Applause follows each recitation. I balk. And let it be known that over the years I've regularly been published in the literary magazines. Maybe vainly, if not with too much conceit, I see each of my new poems in print as the literary talk of the town. My

special lyricism. See, I've often thought of coming out before. The wind hurls, the bitter cold ... it's becoming more blustery outside.

And the poets, government workers mostly, though they will want to deny this – are indeed here; poetry is a salve to their spirits after the mind-numbing work in the bureaucracy: letters, memos, reports, all about policies and programs; everything bloodless; effete, even.

One long-haired youth, different from the rest, is now at the microphone, belting his stuff out. A languorous-looking female with willowy reddish hair, I turn to, look at sideways; we make eye contact. A pre-Raphaelite she is, seated forlornly, alone, in a corner; she's not a groupie, I can tell. Or is she? Victorine ... her name? Maybe a government type, I figure. And she too will read ... so I can have a good look at her. She will have a good look at me, too, later. Oh, she's come to hear me read, you bet!

And in my poetry I bring worlds together. Memories, I dredge up, everything my soul can offer. I also conjure up palm trees; and jamaon, guava. The Monkey-apple and the starapple next. Symbolism. Origins in South America ... Africa, Asia, the Mediterranean. Poetic moments, all. So exotic.

This one young performance artist is yet raving, fizzy stuff coming from a bottle in his hand. "My last climax," he yells, and grins. Victorine casts a glance at me, she can't fool me.

Ah, poets pretending to be who they are not! How I seethe. Does it also have to do with climate, being here in the temperate? Victorine looks away from me. The amiable host senses what I'm thinking; he's an impresario (as he calls himself): this older-looking man with a paunch; he wears his hat at a tilt, a different direction each time; he's enjoying his own presence: it's his "show".

Now it's Victorine's presence too, for me. Next it's haiku, sheer minimalism, if not lyricism. And some in the open set have come from Cornwall, Pembroke, Kingston. Applause ... as the last open-set reader sits down, with "greatness" achieved.

Victorine's turn? Once more our eyes connect.

Suspense. The host is good at it. Wind howls outside; a real storm is in the making. And I am the only "tropical" one here. See, I've indeed been living in the city for years, if only closeted: I've kept above the fray.

"We welcome you," says the host, revealing that he's been writing his memoirs. Victorine and the others, maybe, are in awe of someone writing his memoirs. Victorine, more languorous, is self-conscious. It's as the host wants it; he's an old hand at it. Victorine, in the government, accustomed to her posh office on Sparks Street. Someone ... who in another situation (or circumstance) will have government written all over her. Not Victorine? A ripple on her face, as she reads, and the audience is with her.

She wants me, more than anyone else. I think.

Silence ... everyone's captivated. Victorine wipes a tear. Or does she? She raises her voice suddenly: it's her pain, her outrage; a strange excitement now; it's hilarious, too. Her poem's energy, she calls it: she still has a strong sense of herself, this government worker!

I listen to her as I listen to no other. Poignancy in the air, her deeply felt pain. The blustery weather outside doesn't matter anymore. Oh, Victorine, who are you really? The host's eyes are locked with mine. Heads turn, looking at me. Victorine ... she has made an impact; she's a genuine poet, after all. A poet, believe me.

Let me say it: I am used to being comfortable with my verse, dwelling on tropical images, if only. Worlds coming together, in solid metaphors. My own! Applause after my first and second rendering. The host applauds loudest. Victorine and I again make eye contact. On stage, I take in everyone with hand gestures, more spaces covered as I read. Arcs of feeling, everything coming closer, yet far away. Victorine is far beyond her government office now with me, beyond her Internet connection, telecommunication gadgetry; we are traveling into the farthest regions of the soul. We're also into deeper regions of Canada: the Maritimes, Quebec, Ontario, the West Coast, the Prairies, where no one has ever been before. I evoke the genuine Heartland. How we travel, she and I.

See, it's also the tropics, where I've come from!

Wider seas, where I haven't been before. I am Rumi and Khalil Gibran; and ghazals becoming distinct; my iambic pentameter masked as free verse. A villanelle too, in the wink of an eye. A sonnet celebrating journeys never taken before; it's a song more than Coleridge's "Kubla Khan".

Victorine's sustained pre-Raphaelite air I sense on impulse. I invite her on stage. With me. The host applauds. His memoirs, remember? The other poets are indeed from across town: now from across Canada, I imagine: from places like Thunder Bay, Wawa, Winnipeg, Calgary, Edmonton. The coulees, stronger winds. A dinosaur rampaging in the Badlands. Buffaloes jumping to their death. Is there really a Buffalo Jump? A Moose Jaw? The ground swirls beneath my feet. I conjure a bear's image in the clouds. A coyote too, because of an Ojibwa's presence. The Great Spirit invoked, talking to all Canadians. Victorine's lips tremble, because of what I am reciting. The audience is in awe.

The host-Impresario scribbles an immediate note. His tone and his tremor of voice, as he travels with me on the Trans Canada Highway. Not the Caribbean or South America? Am I really an exile? I am also back in my attic; I haven't yet come out. Imagine, eh? How the wind blusters, here in Ottawa, the real North.

Victorine also applauds, wanting more, I hear her say; and maybe my exile is over. I step down the "stage", Victorine with me – like the most natural thing in the world. We listen to the other poets in the ongoing open set, like a repeat performance. See, I am obliged to listen; I've inspired them, too. Poets from every corner of Canada are here now.

But I am also amused. No, it's angst more than anything else. Then the wind dies down. Impulsively, I take Victorine's hand. Fingers twirl. The places we will yet visit, as she's again on stage with me, in her long sigh. She now wants to bring more of the government to me, Canada whirring in my ears!

I am an exile, I remind her.

Insiders or outsiders ... we are yet one. See, I mustn't deny anything. Victorine wants me to acknowledge her eyes' inner glow; as she's temperate and I am tropical, the twain meeting! It's poetic time, if nothing else.

What else is there to know or experience?

I will no longer write verse; not for a while, I say to myself. I've been transformed. After my meeting with Victorine, I am no longer the person I was before. I will now come again to listen to the other poets, the poseurs, the dilettantes. I will listen keenly as they read their stuff, strut again, as I contemplate their energy: like my own special act each time.

Poetry, the rhythm of inner beings, feelings – all my very own. I'm aware of deeper instincts, where I've come from, where I intend to go next ... even if it's only to my attic, solitary, alone; and yet visiting places: Pembroke, Cornwall, Kingston. Not Moose Jaw any longer? It's myth in the making.

Believe me! Believe you?

I tell Victorine all this when I see her again. And the host-Impresario joins us at our table and talks about what he has discovered in his long "sojourn" in Canada. He has escaped the Gulag of Castro's Cuba, he says. It's now all too much for Victorine; she will want to hurry back to her government office to find solace. Not in the language of officialdom? More reports, memos, letters to write. She reads poetry silently in her office, maybe a volume by Tagore or Gibran. Then it's the impulse to discuss the images with her Deputy Minister. All the while, I persist, remaining here; as the host and I are deep in conversation. We talk of loneliness, and the ability to dream in our own melancholy ways ... it's my own exiled state, as the newspapers say.

I wait another turn at the microphone, as I must declare who I truly am, and expect Victorine to come again to listen to me, if just to be on stage by my side. Maybe she will come with her Deputy Minister; I will hear their almost mute, yet distinct, applause.

Ah, words I yet put down and read loudly to myself in my attic. My latest haiku. Victorine, see ... is in the tropics with me.

Again it's blustery snow outside; I am indeed here in Ottawa. This alembic of Victorine's eyes as I keep writing. Ah, now Victorine has come to realize who I am. Her Deputy Minister also realizes who I am ... here in Canada no less. No where else! And let the open-set readers tell it all, again and again, as I listen to them. Victorine, well, she takes my hand. I pretend to squeeze her fingers.

It's all – as the Impresario no doubt expects from us – from one like me – a true exile he yet says ... who I am.

I truly am!