

# North America

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*The solemn & inexhaustible eloquence of rains and mountain.  
O the playful heaves and tumble of lines in the hills here.  
We are first green and then grey and then nothing in this world.*

DENISE RILEY



## Heatwave

Stop now. Hold it there. Balance. Be beautiful. Try.  
— And I can't do this. I can't talk like any of this.  
You hear me not do it.

DENISE RILEY

She almost makes it  
through the first week.

They've stacked his boxes  
by the curb; one night

it rains, diaphanous sheets,  
she knows she should feel glad —

feel something —  
but all she can picture is

his set of Vonnegut;  
damp pages clinging

like tentative hands.  
She wishes now

they'd gotten to Mexico,  
stunned into quietude

by bougainvillea's brightness,  
conspirators in the mosaicked heat.

Given the choice,  
they would travel by train,

fumbling over the stacks of bills  
smelling of sweat and a thousand palms;

the small man behind the wicket  
sunning, early siesta.

They'd cram the bags  
in overhead bins,

old diesel engine panting,  
part with nickels for mangoes

and nip back the pungent skin.  
Trace the palm lines of hills.

But the rain, now;  
that dampens everything

past repairing.  
How could she have told him

it's really about  
the way light falls in a high room

midsummer, the wind picking out  
the scent of lemons and beeswax

from old furniture, the lawn lounging  
uncut and insouciant.

The heat is what he doesn't understand —  
that, and the way sunlight cuts

whitely through unsashed windows;  
how she likes to stand with the glare

refracting over her. Stripping her clean.  
Something about

being prismatic.  
Asking nothing.

## Berrying, Gabriola Island

we follow the scent    blackberries  
roped across the headland  
panopoly of August fruit

they reach hard canes  
into this impossible soil  
thrust down fingers  
and root    unstring themselves  
along cliff edges  
spined    taunting

under their canopy  
the bruised grass where  
deer have gathered  
anxious    for windfall

this fruit has been known  
to scupper boats  
in the Narrows    women  
ploughing ashore  
sans oars    sans tow line  
eyes fixed  
on scarab berries

we eat  
beneath a rivalry of  
late-season wasps  
canes bent  
to mouths hard and  
bright with need

starvelings at  
one Tree or another

# Arrow Lakes Ferry, 1995

*In Memoriam: Nan Norwood*

two cars on the late crossing  
above the pier    ospreys in blotted kohl  
    the perfunctory dives of the merlins  
    their malachite eyes

on deck    we eat herb salad  
dredged from the morning garden  
tarragon and lime  
thick curls of basil  
with their verdigris sheen

all this undercut by  
the winch's semitone hum  
inexorable pull  
across a skin of water

## Granville Island, 1997

dusk condensing tenebrous  
interstitial sweep of shadows  
pockmarking brickwork

Madeira shingles the tongue  
assuages salt rasp  
    blue jazz over a harbour  
    traced in lights

stolen minutes  
between quarter-tones

certainty of your leaving  
brilliant as stars  
    white-hot  
    above umbels of streetlamps

threat of your absence  
unassailable as the moon  
shatters itself  
over stones

# Sandon

the tenacity of this town  
held back the mountains

at night  
the swaybacked hills  
limned licentious red

brothels thick with  
cassia sandalwood

this morning  
we negotiate spent slopes  
at limping pace

rear tire blown  
on gravel the spare  
stuttering like  
a second-rate heart

on the western rise  
the town crooks in its joints  
furls its old prehensile roadways

expired mineshafts cough  
gouts of tailings  
oblivious to the shift of  
itinerant granite

this town undone at last  
by a slip of river  
nudged free from flume  
silver heft of water beneath the floor

the impeccable certainty that  
one must rise  
or drown

# Homecoming

these are the rivers  
of my childhood

we lay  
hidden in reeds  
on August afternoons  
cupping plums  
    fragrant blue gems

the roiling eddies  
of the Bow  
seamed with minnows and  
twists of hay  
from the homeward pass  
of the threshers at dusk

North Saskatchewan  
swollen with pack ice  
    ragged jigsaw in spring  
    gnawing bridge anchors  
sluicing away over  
the occasional corpse  
blank and blue-eyed  
embracing the sky

these are the torrents  
that thrill in our veins  
    that drive us forth  
        that carry us home

# Winter Highway

november we descend  
from permafrost north  
camp on the ice

fire on a bier  
above the river  
poplar logs green and sappy  
snow pitted from  
the flankers' fall

all day we follow  
the trucks gone before  
chancing thin ice  
for tea white bread  
ten-pound sacks of potatoes

fifty kilometres upriver  
men detox on the trap lines  
wait for the trucks to return  
for their friends to come through  
with rum with whiskey

all summer  
the settlement has sunk into itself  
feral bald-toothed

squatted by the river  
squinted blearily into  
the hazy sunshine

waited for the ice

## Kerouac

his family heaved a sigh of relief  
the day he hopped a train  
and disappeared from their lives  
at least until the following Christmas

under the trees in the woodlot  
his meditation place grew over threaded with wild blue flax  
they mowed it under in September for hay

never a postcard  
although once a slip of paper  
with lines from Hanshan  
which his mother pretended to understand  
justifying its place on the mantel

out in the Arizona night  
home a thousand acres of desert sand  
shot through with shadows  
the Mexicali girls  
brought port  
danced unafraid by the tracks

woke to his absence  
and the dawn cinders of the Express

watched the slow sunlight  
enter the imprint of his body  
and obliterate his passing

## Chilies

summer you picked  
them first thing after sunup  
brought them to me steaming  
the greenhouse wallowing  
at the end of the garden  
some opaque bereft pearl

those chilies we devoured  
on the seawall where  
your house dangled its stilt legs  
over the Strait

lime and coarse salt our lips  
insensitive with heat  
the cove's soft limbs  
clambering up from tideline  
that thin bright rim  
brushstroked with herons  
their sanguinary calm

and the rinds spangled  
with seeds sucked  
to vanishing point  
cusp of the bay

hot and shining  
some sort of  
meteor shower our mouths  
scalded into brightness

## Ghost Highway (Route 61)

they line  
the sides of this road  
like touchstones  
    worn ropes  
    of sunwarmed rock  
stubble of towns  
landscape punctuated with  
clapboard    ravenous willows

    achromatic prairie clarity

somewhere past  
the nap and fold of grain  
shadow of these towns  
in hairline tracery  
    buried    perhaps  
    under cranesbill  
    pungent wormwood

nonetheless    there

# Cutline

cold-air crackling  
    warming gut  
    expanding sinew  
ash rackets  
confound the drifts

    hieroglyphic  
        sparrowtracks

intervals of paper birch  
black and     white  
striating winter pines

buckle-kneed deer  
betrayed by whiskeyjacks  
    ruffled     circling

    wings pressed softly  
    against a fretted sky

# Salt Spring Island

*In Memoriam: Lilo Berliner & Wilson Duff*

in your words  
a certain sirocco

brackish emphatic heat  
prelude to vacuum

i come to this knowing  
by reading i acknowledge  
your absence his

the blunt vegetal heft of  
these racemes of paper  
their importuning tongues

in the meditation garden  
Shiva's limbs a dour Esperanto

i begin to see you  
less clearly more truly