

Nine River Ghazals

Di Brandt

The Forks, Winnipeg

1

October. The poet is dead. The leaves of Manitoba,
you gotta admire them, turn yellow, sigh once, and drop.

On the banks of the Assiniboine we sat down and wept.
Maddie, Maddie, muddy river dog. Shh, don't talk.

Tenacious little ash tree, hugging the bank.
Archeology of cars. Biology of art. Theology of scars.

My hands that used to be heartshaped fluttering leaves
have become thick roots, gnarled in soil.

Orange-streaked sunset. Calcified bones.
The flood marks of '58, '97, '05. See? Wild geese.

2

After the pope's visit, the river keepers went on strike
and the ferrymen got drunk. No more funerals.

So did I. The mice in the park huddled under hay.
That was the summer of the return of the dinosaurs,

Roaring along the highway at full throttle,
scattering the wheat. Flap of thunderbirds in the air.

That's the thing of it, the fertilizer ends up in the river,
choking the fish. What will the lake say?

The raft trip of a lifetime, Devil's Lake to the Locks,
sweet baptism in the holy Red River.

3

We shot the shaggy buffalo through the heart,
the bullet entering at an angle, just behind the shoulder.

Ask me the question. Ten cents per gopher tail.
Two dollars a mink. Every farmer's wife's ten children.

Beer bottles, chipped cups, rotting mattresses.
Wild spirit sky dance, 3 a.m., multicoloured.

Our horses were just as wild and excited
as we were, chasing the buffalo.

Those were cows that now are sludge,
bloated hides bumping against the bridge.

4

The houses of our mothers grow smaller and smaller,
diamond rings lost in the drain.

Dragon boats, flaming, tossed by wind.
The moon laughs behind the curtain.

Should we declare capitalism a crime against
the cosmos? The stars hold court.

This place where two rivers meet, smoke signals,
birchbark, carnival, touch of skin, danger.

You don't know who Gabriel Dumont was?
Slender hands flashing. Well.

5

O thou sweet sugar beet. Diabetic kids.
Worm eaten bunkers at the end of the field.

You want to talk about human rights?
Don't put your junk in my backyard,

my backyard, my backyard.
Bags of hide in our Dachau farmyards.

Brainless chickie nobs, crafty pigeons.
Sure, it's hell to work in the abattoir, poor things,

Let them drink cheap rum on weekends.
See now the scorned Furies rise out of the deep.

6

Red and yellow, black and white.
Our mouths are wet with blood. Is it the blood we'll live by?

Nausea: the dance of your lost singing soul.
It's no longer a question of avoiding disaster, is it.

On Saturdays she teaches salsa, rumba, bolero,
on Sundays she rehearses despair.

When I think of Calí, I think of you, Estéban, your face
lit up, head over heels in love with your grandchild.

Which would you rather have, salsa or cars?
The veins of the earth, granite, flesh, breathing.

7

Pay attention, if a white horse rides into your dreams,
you will be blessed with a heroic life.

Child with no name, your shrill voice pierced me
to the quick, your 80-year-old face, raptor eyes.

Same for the elephant, the wolf, and the eagle.
Squeaky wooden wheels trampling the sweet grass.

The wonder of sea legs, in the middle of prairie.
At night we worshipped the stars, gorgeous dark

echoing in our minds, gasp of infinity.
Invasion of loose strife, toxic algae, free trade.

8

The museum as mausoleum, hallmark greeting card.
Dear mom, we would have been here.

Pity citizens with oil under their houses
as the petroleum economy comes crashing down.

Could there have been another way?
Ghengis Khan gallops away across Mongolia.

The music of the spheres is out of whack,
vibrating to engine motors instead of hymns.

Sing it, little sparrow, Leonard Cohen. From bitter
searching of the heart, we rise to play a greater part.

Kissing X was like kissing rubber. I miss your kiss,
angels descending and ascending the staircase of heaven.

There are hard times acoming, Jesus.
What are we observing if not the daily kitchen.

Now let us practice both jubilation and restraint.
I river, I river, I river.

The mice were right, hay makes the best insulation
against winter. Smells nice too.

Poor Tom's acold. Winnipi is furious.
We should have ta'en better care of this.

Acknowledgements

- 1.7-8 Adapted from Dorothy Livesay's "Disasters of the Sun V," in *The Woman I Am* (Guernica 2000): 50.
- 6.2 Quotation from John Thompson, "Stilt Jack 15," in *Stilt Jack* (Anansi 1978), 25.
- 8.9-10 Quotation from F.R. Scott's "Villanelle For Our Time," *Overture* (Ryerson 1945): 79, set to music and performed by Leonard Cohen on *Dear Heather* (CD 2004).
- 9.6 Quotation from Erin Moure, "Gorgeous," in *Furious* (Anansi 1988): 80.

Commissioned for the Winnipeg International Writers Festival, 2006, and featured in the commemorative chapbook *Voices from Oodena* (2006). Published in *Arc Magazine* 2006, with interview by Tanis McDonald. Shortlisted for a National Magazine Award (2007).