

CYRIL DABYDEEN

Animus

1

What lingers is the state of things: ducks swimming in the river, and a raccoon moving about in the grass—too swiftly for me to look at long in the city’s park. Now this man nearby, a scientist of sorts, pulls at shrubs because people must see things clearly, he says. “Owls snatch things at night,” he insists on telling me.

“Maybe so,” I reply, then dwell on another country as a man and woman—newcomers—who draw near, eager to talk about places far away, or it’s because of my being here in Ottawa they want to find out more about, if talking only about an AIDS Conference taking place in South Africa, and you see, President Mbeki’s words disturb them most of all, they quickly say to me.

I tell them about once meeting Nelson Mandela. “What a man!” the woman says; but her companion shrugs; and I’d also met Walter Susulu and his wife, Albertina: more I tell them about—and of our trying to get Ottawa City Hall re-name Sussex Drive—*Nelson Mandela Drive*—next to the South African High Commission, all during Apartheid, you see.

Africa indeed brings us all closer, like
 my recalling teacher-trainees in Guyana
 reading Chinua Achebe: about how things
 fall apart—echoes now by the Rideau River;
 and Winnie Mandela “murders” I’d also heard
 about, and a youth named Stompi—a name
 I repeat to myself at odd moments. “Winnie’s such
 a powerful woman,” the man says, his being
 originally from Capetown, don’t I know?
 “Ah, powerful is all,” scoffs the woman,
 Swiss-born, her remonstrance merely.

2

Will they remain long with us in Canada?
 “I can stay as long as I want,” the woman says,
 and shrugs. Animus, in silence; and they call me
 “coloured,” like a bad habit. Then, “It’s cold here.”
 And, “What can you write about Canada when
 it’s so peaceful here?” *Really peaceful?*

Distances, if places afar only; and soon after
 I head home to read Maxine Tynes’ poetry—
 remembering how we once shared the stage
 together in Halifax. *Woza Mandela!* she’d cried;
 and words ascribed to me in her book:
 “Thank you for bringing your poetry to me.”

The ducks still swimming in the Rideau River;
 and it’s what the scientist will insist upon—
 images indeed, being bent on seeing things
 his way, if it’s only a raccoon scampering
 along the river’s edge; or what my spirit longs
 for in a country I am now a part of—
 here in Ottawa’s Strathcona Park.