

VERSO

Dionne Brand

The Blue Clerk

ARS POETICA IN 59 VERSOS



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*Ars Poetica in 59 Versos*

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THE BLUE CLERK



ONE



STIPULE

*A small leaf-like appendage to a leaf*

I have left this unsaid. I have withheld. What is withheld is the left-hand page. Nine left-hand pages have already written their own left-hand pages, as you will see. They are chronic. I have withheld more than I have written. Evergreen and deciduous. Incurable. And uneasy, and like freight.



VERSO 1

*The back of a leaf*

What is withheld is on the back. A stack, a ream.

There are bales of paper on a wharf somewhere; at a port, somewhere. There is a clerk inspecting and abating them. She is the blue clerk. She is dressed in a blue ink coat, her right hand is dry, her left hand is dripping; she is expecting a ship. She is preparing. Though she is afraid that by the time the ship arrives the stowage will have overtaken the wharf.

The sea off the port is roiling some days, calm some days.

Up and down the wharf the clerk examines the bales, shifts old left-hand pages, making room for the swift, voluminous, incoming freight.

The clerk looks out sometimes over the roiling sea or over the calm sea, finding the horizon, seeking the transfiguration of a ship.

The bales have been piling up for years yet they look brightly scored, crisp and cunning. They have abilities the clerk is forever curtailing and marshalling. They are stacked deep and high and the clerk, in her inky garment, weaves in and out of them checking and rechecking that they do not find their way onto the right-hand page. She scrutinizes the manifest hourly, the contents and sequence of loading. She keeps account of cubic metres of senses, perceptions, and resistant facts. No one need be aware of these; no one is likely to understand. Some of these are quite dangerous.

And, some of them are too delicate and beautiful for the present world.

There are green unclassified aphids, for example, living with these papers.

The sky over the wharf is a sometime-ish sky, it changes with the moods and anxieties of the clerk, it is ink blue as her coat or grey as sea or pink as evening clouds. It is cobalt as good luck or manganite as trouble.

The sun is a red wasp that flies in and out of the clerk's ear. It escapes the clerk's flapping arms.

The clerk would like a cool moon but all the weather depends on the left-hand pages. All the acidity in the salt air, all the waft of almonds and seaweed, all the sharp, poisonous odour of time.

The left-hand pages swell like dunes in some years. It is all the clerk can do to mount them with her theodolite, to survey their divergent lines of intention. These dunes would envelop her as well as the world if she were not the ink-drenched clerk.

Some years the aridity of the left-hand pages makes the air pulver, parches the hand of the clerk. The dock is then a desert, the bales turned to sand, and then the clerk must arrange each grain in the correct order, humidify them with her breath, and wait for the season to pass.

And some years the pages absorb all the water in the air, tumid like four-hundred-year-old wet wood, and the dock weeps and creaks and the clerk's garment sweeps sodden through the bales and the clerk weeps and wonders why she is here and when will a ship ever arrive.

I am the clerk, overwhelmed by the left-hand pages.  
Each blooming quire contains a thought selected out of  
many reams of thoughts and stripped by me, then presented  
to the author. (The clerk replaces the file, which has grown  
with touch to a size unimaginable.)

I am the author in charge of the ink-stained clerk pacing  
the dock. I record the right-hand page. I do nothing really  
because what I do is clean. I forget the bales of paper  
fastened to the dock and the weather doesn't bother me.  
I choose the presentable things, the beautiful things.  
And I enjoy them sometimes, if not for the clerk.

The clerk has the worry and the damp thoughts and the  
arid thoughts.

Now where will I put that new folio, she says. There's no  
room where it came from, it's withheld so much about . . .  
never mind; that will only make it worse.

The clerk goes balancing the newly withheld pages  
across the ink-slippery dock. She throws an eye on the still  
sea; the weather is concrete today; her garment is stiff like  
marl today.

## STIPULE

I saw the author, her left cheek, her left shoulder agape,  
a photo of her washed in emergency, a quieting freight, a  
grandfather, a great-grandmother, one stage of an illness, on  
the rim of a page without verbs, bullet-ridden and elegant,  
a boulder beside her, the things collected in her brain, green  
lacewing larvae, mourning cloak, bryozoa, aphids (aphids),  
ladybird, *Echinopsis* and wisteria and rooms, the manifest  
green, unclassified ways of saying let us go, the small blue  
book of the author's thoughts to decipher, gradations of  
violet, blue and black, the clerk, I, need lemon, a spanner,  
a vehicle, a bowl of nails, a wire, a cup, a lamp, the clerk  
knows where the salt, where the sugar, where the flowers,  
the museums and corpses, same number with the  
following, are we not human unnumbered, pignard case,  
a horse, a plummet

VERSO 1.1.01

When Borges says he remembers his father's library in Buenos Aires, the gaslight, the shelves, and the voice of his father reciting Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," I recall the library at the roundabout on Harris Promenade. The library near the Metro Cinema and the Woolworths store. But to go back, when my eyes lit first on Borges's dissertation I thought, I had no Library. And I thought this thought with my usual melancholy and next my usual pride in living without.

And the first image that came to me after that was my grandfather's face with his tortoiseshell spectacles and his weeping left eye and his white shirt and his dark seamed trousers and his newspaper and his moustache and his clips around his shirt sleeves and his notebooks and his logbooks; and at the same moment that the melancholy came it was quickly brushed aside by the thought that he was my library.

In his notebooks, my grandfather logged hundredweight of copra, pounds of chick feed and manure; the health of horses, the nails for their iron shoes; the acreages of coconut and tania; the nuisance of heliconia; the depth of two rivers; the length of a rainy season.

Then I returned to Harris Promenade and the white library with wide steps, but when I ask, there was no white library with wide steps, they tell me, but an ochre library at a corner with great steps leading up. What made me think it was a white library? The St. Paul's Anglican Church

anchoring the lime white Promenade, the colonial white Courthouse, the grey white public hospital overlooking the sea? I borrowed a book at that white library even though the library as I imagine it now did not exist. A book by Gerald Durrell, namely, *My Family and Other Animals*. I don't remember any other books I brought home, though I remember a feeling of quiet luxury and a desire for spectacles to seem as intelligent as my grandfather.

And I read here, too, in this white library a scrap about Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, though only the kind of scrap, the kind of refuse, or onion skin, they give schoolchildren in colonial countries about a strange skinny man on a horse with a round sidekick. The clerk would say I could use this, but I can't.

The ochre library on Harris Promenade was at the spot that was called "Library Corner" and it used to be very difficult to get to because of the traffic and the narrow sidewalk. But I was agile and small. And I thought I was ascending a wide white-stepped library. And though that was long ago, I remember the square clock tower adjacent to the roundabout. And I can see the Indian cinema next door, papered with the film *Aarti* starring Meena Kumari and Ashok Kumar.

My grandfather with his logs and notebooks lived in a town by the sea. That sea was like a lucent page to the left of the office where my grandfather kept his logs and his notebooks with their accounts. Apart from the depth of the two rivers, namely the Iguana and the Pilot, he also noted the tides and the times of their rising and falling.

<i>moonrise</i>	5.34 a.m.	
<i>high tide</i>	5.48 a.m.	0.82 ft
<i>sunrise</i>	5.56 a.m.	
<i>low tide</i>	12.40 p.m.	0.03 ft
<i>new moon</i>	4.45 p.m.	
<i>sunset</i>	6.23 p.m.	
<i>high tide</i>	6.33 p.m.	0.56 ft
<i>low tide</i>	12.02 a.m.	0.16 ft

Spring tides, the greatest change between high and low.  
Neap tides, the least.

And, the rain, he recorded, the number of inches and its absence. He needed to know about the rain for sunning and drying the copra. And, too, he kept a log of the sun, where it would be and at what hour, and its angle to the earth in what season. And come to think of it he must have logged the clouds moving in. He said that the rain always came in from the sea. The clouds moving in were a constant worry. I remember the rain sweeping in, pelting down like stones. That is how it used to be said, the rain is pelting down like stones. He filled many logbooks with rain and its types: showers, sprinkles, deluges, slanted, boulders, pebbles, sheets, needles, slivers, pepper. Cumulonimbus clouds. Or, Nimbostratus clouds. Convection rain and relief rain. *Relief rain* he wrote in his logbook in his small office, and the rain came in from the sea like pepper, then pebbles, then boulders. It drove into his window and disturbed his logs with its winds and it wet his desk. And he or someone else would say, "But look at rain!" And someone else would say, "See what the rain do?" As if the rain were human. Or

they would say, "Don't let that rain come in here." As if the rain were a creature.

Anyway, my grandfather had a full and thorough record of clouds and their seasons and their violence.

From under the sea a liquid hand would turn a liquid page each eight seconds. This page would make its way to the shore and make its way back. Sometimes pens would wash up onto the beach, long stem-like organic styli. We called them pens; what tree or plant or reef they came from we did not know. But some days the beach at Guaya would be full of these styli just as some nights the beach would be full of blue crabs. Which reminds me now of García Márquez's old man with wings but didn't then as I did not know García Márquez then and our blue crabs had nothing to do with him. It is only now that the crabs in his story have overwhelmed my memory. It is only now that my blue night crabs have overwhelmed his story. Anyway we would take these pens and sign our names, and the names of those we loved, along the length of the beach. Of course these names rubbed out quickly, and as fast as we could write them the surf consumed them. And later, much much later, I learned those pens were *Rhizophora mangle* propagules.

What does this have to do with Borges? Nothing at all. I walked into the library and it was raining rain and my grandfather's logs were there, and the wooden window was open. As soon as I opened the door, down the white steps came the deluge. If I could not read I would have drowned.

Now you are sounding like me, the clerk says. I am you, the author says.