

Poetry

S S M N I A L R E L

A poem

Towani Duchscher

towani@shaw.ca

University of Calgary

Abstract

In this poem, I examine issues of racial identity, Canadian identity, and racism through reflecting upon a lived confrontation. I question what it means to be Canadian and how our often limited understandings of the Canadian identity perpetuate the marginalization of some and the inclusion of others. This poem also addresses the ambivalence of living in the hyphen between two races. I consider how the challenges of defining our personal and national identities are often thrust upon us when we least expect it.

The man at the gym is watching me.
I catch him watching me and he smiles.
A warm, welcoming smile.
He seems like a friendly face.
In the crowd of inward focused individuals, isolated by iPods,
each on their own treadmill,
racing toward or away from their own goals or fears,
his smile promises a connection back to humanity.
A human connection.

“What’s your name?”
“Towani.”
“Oh? What’s your nationality?”

My nationality?
My husband, with a distinctly German last name, white skin, and straight hair,
is never asked his nationality.
But an African name, brown skin and curly hair somehow instantly excludes me from being what
I am... Canadian, born and raised.
And I am faced with the same old dilemma of how to respond.
If I say, “Canadian” I will have to endure a lengthened discussion,
punctuated by exasperated expressions and the phrase,
“You know what I mean.”

Yes, I know what you mean.

You mean, you find my caramel skin enticing.
You mean, you find my curly hair intriguing.

You mean, you find me fascinating because of “my” differences.
 And you also mean, because you look different from me, I can’t be Canadian.
 You mean, Canadians don’t look like me.
 You mean Canada doesn’t belong to me.

Not wanting the lengthened discussion, I choose to answer the question he is really asking and say,
 “My father’s background is Trinidadian. And my mother is of British decent.”
 In my response about ethnic backgrounds, I know he will find his answer...
 half Black and half White.

He smiles and responds,
 “Oh, you’re a cross breed.”

Cross
 Breed

He looks at me and cannot see our similarities.
 He sees my skin and choses to categorize me with terminology reserved for animals and beasts.

“Crossbreed: Noun- An animal or plant produced by breeding two animals or plants of different species or varieties;
 A hybrid.
 For example, crossbreeding a male donkey with a female horse
 Will produce
 A mule.” (“Crossbreed”, 2014)

I feel sucker punched.
 I can’t breathe.
 I can’t think fast enough to come up with all of the witty and intelligent responses
 that I develop hours and days after the fact.
 And so I just stand there looking at him,
 feeling awkward.

Later, I berate myself for not realizing that the smile was really a snarl.
 The curved lip and white teeth tricked me.
 There is a fine line of distinction between the smile and the snarl.
 A snarl is a smile with a spiteful secret.
 Curved lips holding in venomous malice behind clenched teeth.
 This fine line tricks me into dropping my guard.
 I would have been prepared if he was wearing a white hood.
 I would have been prepared if I’d seen a swastika tattoo on his arm.
 I would have (should have?) been prepared.

But the smile and the promise of humanity sucked me in.
 I let down my guard for a snarl
 disguised as a smile.

Reference

Crossbreed. (2014). *Dictionary.com*. Retrieved from

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/cross%20breed?s=t>