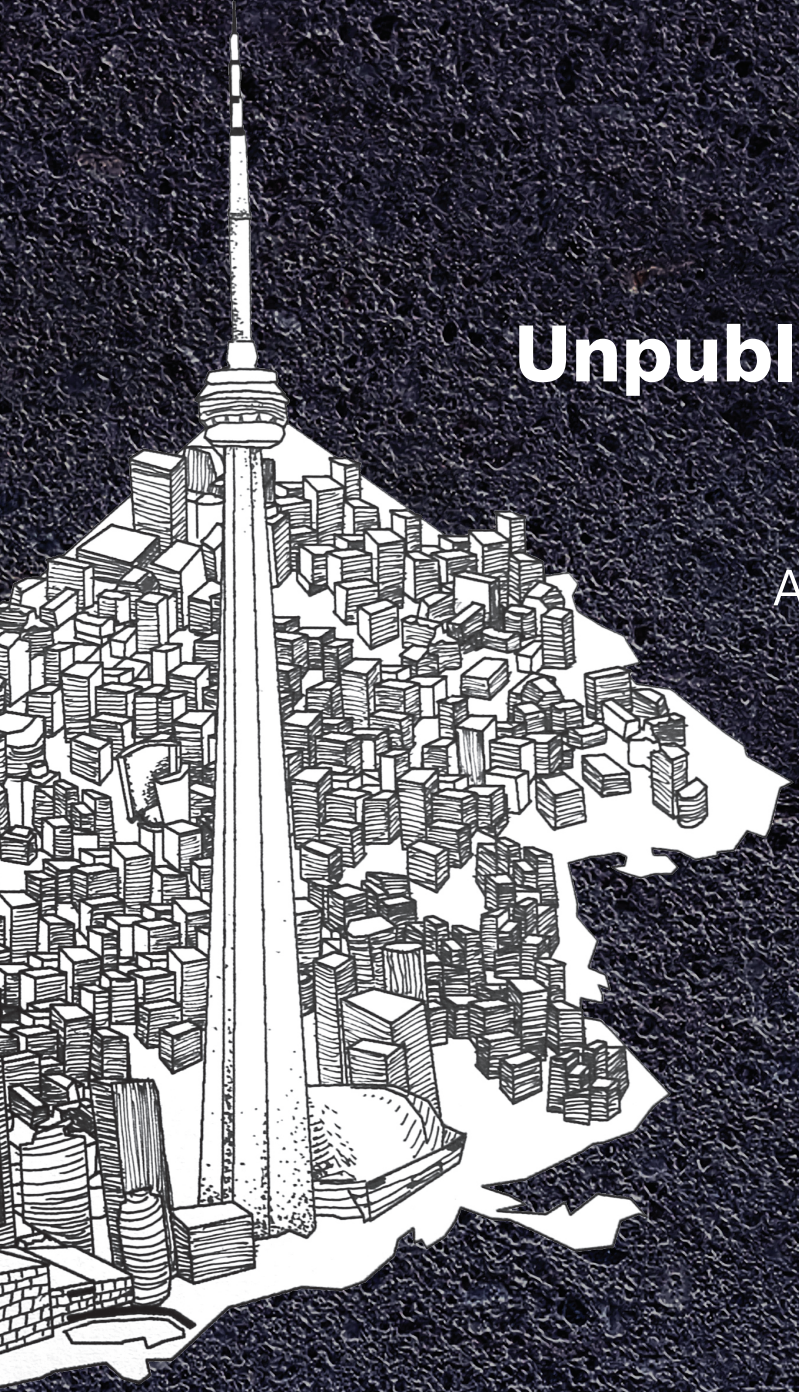

The Unpublished City

Anthology

THE UNPUBLISHED CITY

Curated by Dionne Brand

BookThug 2017

FIRST EDITION

The production of this book was made possible through the generous support of the Toronto Arts Council (TAC) and the International Festival of Authors' (IFOA.org) Toronto Lit Up programme.

Toronto Lit Up, spearheaded by the TAC and IFOA is designed to spotlight Toronto's writers and empower local artists with book-launching presentations.

ISBN 9781771663731

WILTON STREET | 1984
Ian Kamau

It's the time of day when the sun casts long grey and blue shadows on the pavement and the light filters softly through the air that drifts around in the lavender sky. It is warm, but the warmth is periodically sliced by the sharp edge of abrupt gusts of wind. The cool breeze tumbles through every open space and around every corner. There are orange and yellow leaves collecting in corners where the building meets the sidewalk, and where the sidewalk meets the street. They are held in the cropped green grass of David Crombie Park that is laid out in front of us. Fallen from the trees that are placed throughout the park the crisp leaves make a delicate scrapping sound as each gentle gust drags them across the red brick and over the grey cement. They scrape the pavement skipping and shivering as they go. It is early September.

There is a borrowed car with a door swung open over the sidewalk, colourful parking stickers in the windshield, the rear seats pushed forward all the way, the trunk exposed. The space behind the drivers seat is filled with an assortment of mostly beige coloured cardboard boxes sealed with clear plastic tape stacked from window to window floor to ceiling. My mother shifts her weight from foot to foot watching, has cut each section of tape that seal these boxes with scissors and labeled each box according to its contents. Each second-hand cardboard box, collected from the Pilipino corner store or the No Frills grocery close to the corner of King and Jameson has a dry smell, some with a slight aroma of its former contents; tropical fruit, a broken egg, spilled Coca Cola from a punctured can.

Just as my mother has cut each piece of tape with a pair of silver scissors, or ripped it with her teeth when the scissors were not immediately accessible, she has also written carefully on each box. The writing is in marker on the top flap of the individual boxes, it is sometimes red, sometimes black, and sometimes green. The bold and sweeping handwritten script reads: "living room," "bedroom," "kitchen," "Roger books, living room," "Claire books, desk," "Ian's room, toys"; my mother organizes and executes this system. There are plenty of boxes labeled "books," more than any other; their contents are predominantly my father's.

My parents, Claire Prieto and Roger McTair, both in their late thirties, stand on either side of me talking through the moving process with each other on the shallow slope of the red brick sidewalk in front of a ten-story medium-rise apartment; it is 1984.

My parents have made their first film and are in the process of working on two more. My mother a film producer, my father a writer and director: they are two of the first three black filmmakers in Canada, my mother the first and only black woman to do so thus far. She is taller than your average woman, possibly an inch shorter than my father. She is slim with a golden brown complexion and a mass of tightly curled hair pulled off of her face by a scarf that covers part of her forehead and half of the crown of her skull, letting the hair explode out of the back in every direction.

My father is slim but muscular, "sturdy" as my mother would say, with a beard that is carefully pruned which frames the dark skin on his round face. He is average height, with a short afro that he pats down to keep its shape, casually dressed with a pair of rounded and slightly oversized glasses that rarely leave his face for more than a moment. He wears a t-shirt, a

pair of jeans and a simple silver bracelet that never leaves his right wrist and must be bent if it were to be removed.

My parent's volley words above my head infused with pronounced Trinidadian accents which hold a distinct Caribbean melody. My father is laid back, the move will happen as it happens; he enjoys the social aspect of the moving experience. My mother plans to get the job done as quickly and efficiently as possible, her mind is not fully at rest until she completes her chosen mission: all of the boxes in the apartment before the sun disappears below the city skyline in the west. She attempts to influence my father to focus more on the task at hand and to galvanize his friend to execute the task quickly and effectively. My father's friend moves boxes from the car to the sidewalk, from the pavement to the lobby, through the glass doors where they sit by the elevators. They exchange words and joke with each other while shuffling back and forth, speaking in sugary Trinidadian tones, laughing buoyantly and mischievously. I quietly peer around the Neighbourhood, bursts of cool air push by whispering as they go, swirling and circling gently around us. The wind sways the tiny hairs on my arm over my skin like the branches in the trees and blows through the big curls on my head.

My mother, noticing the temperature, crouches down, one knee placed lightly on the brick below, and pulls the zip on my little blue jacket upward toward my neck. The motion is quick, making a soft metallic sound like a wasp buzzing up a windowpane trying in vain to find a way out. I pull my chin to my neck for fear of the metal zipper pinching my skin; my brow tilts downward, my eyes straining to see the tab that is too close to view clearly. All I see is my mother's gentle hand, her long fingers forcing the stubborn tab upwards over my collarbone.

The air carries the smell of burnt sugar from the Redpath Sugar refinery on the lakeshore only a few short blocks away, the scent drifting through the crisp late afternoon atmosphere reminding me of the brown sugar burnt in the pan when mom starts her stewed chicken–my grandmother's recipe. Mom rises from her crouching position, resting her hand gently on one side of my upper back between my shoulders and my neck. Wilton Street, a short block in the middle of Esplanade, is laid out in front of me interrupted in the west by George Street and in the East by Frederick Street. This is one of my first memories, not only of my Neighbourhood, but also in my life. It is the weekend before my fifth birthday.

GORE STREET
Nadia Ragbar

She would have to murder him. Stella watched her neighbour from the front porch, watering his piece of the sidewalk. He saw her, and with a grunt, raised his hand. Stella glared down at the crochet spiralling furiously in her lap. He deserved everything coming to him. She'd make up a dish of blood choriço and send it over with Debbie. She imagined him unable to sleep at night, going down to the kitchen in his underclothes, eating forkfuls of it over the sink; a sickly fluorescent bulb lighting up the whole place, exposing every grotesque detail of his paunchy body and his dirty home. Her wild magic still potent, he'd be dead by the end of the week. She'd be sure to get her dish back before then.

"Mãe, it's time to come inside. I'm going to the mall—you can't sit in the sun all day. Have you seen my white sweater, Mãe? Where the hell did I put it?"

Debbie held the screen door open with one socked foot as she wheeled Stella back inside.

"Do you wanna eat lunch now, or wait till I get back? Sammy! Get your shoes on, we're leaving soon! Ok, why don't you eat now, Mãe? I already made a sandwich."

Stella didn't know why Debbie pretended she had a choice about anything. She was sitting with her chair wheeled up as close to the table as possible, one hand, a hawkish claw, shielding the side of her face. Debbie handed her mother a plastic cup of water with her pills. Stella had to take three gulps to carry the huge things down. Water dribbled down the corner of her mouth.

Sammy came running into the kitchen with one shoe on and his arms outstretched, hugging Debbie around the knees, "Mamma! Can we go to park after?"

Debbie was looking down at him, laughing: he had on Stella's enormous prescription sunglasses.

He tore back out of the kitchen, bumping into the wheelchair: "Sorry Vovó!"

Stella wanted to give him a proper lashing to teach him some respect. She took a bite of her egg salad and pushed the plate away. She needed more water.

Debbie went down into the basement with a handful of towels. Mail dropped in through the slot.

"Sammy. Bring the mail to me."

Stella had been waiting to hear from her sister in Portugal. She was sure the mailman had lost or damaged the letter. For weeks she had been telling Debbie they needed to get a Doberman. She and the dog could sit on the porch and wait for the mail. That mailman would have to look her dead in the eyes as he handed all of it over, her eyes steady on him, one hand gripping the dog's collar, keeping the growling beast temporarily at bay.

Sammy ran back into the kitchen relieving his fists of matchbox cars and stickers, "Vovó! I brought you some toys so you won't be bored while me and Mamma go to the mall."

"Mail."

Sammy ran to the door and back, tossing a handful of flyers at the table, before dashing away.

Jealousy seared through Stella because she couldn't just flail and scream and run and run. She pushed the junk mail and toys onto the floor and banged her glass on the table again and again conjuring an old memory of brutal, howling winds that could uproot trees and whip the seas into delicious bloody frenzy. She didn't listen to what Debbie was yelling up from the basement above the roar and the banging and Sammy's childish laughter.

THICK AS THIEVES
Chuqiao Yang

a trio of women dry out their hangovers
at the yoga studio, lululemon instructor
with tinker bell's lost voice in the air, she
is the healthiest human they've ever seen,
contorting muscle into ball, while anne
presses her face against the rented, rancid
smelling mat in child's pose, smother me
she mumbles as vera swallows a burp

why did we eat so much garbage last night
because you inhaled six martinis and lost a boyfriend
does the instructor even have bones
this is carnage, I need coffee
yes yes yes

they namaste and dip, the world outside raining
as vera removes a fake eyelash from her hair
as laura shakes her flax and chia magic juice
as anne says get that bougie stuff away from me
as they slew and halt at a coffee shop, see hot
men reading highbrow lit, intelligent
jawlines against fendi, tweed, etc.,

it smells like expresso
it smells like marriage
it smells like still drunk

a handsome dad brings in a screaming kid, one word
says anne: condoms. why is everyone here beautiful
and thin? they order their coffees, no space anywhere

they stand in the rain outside drinking coffee,
they tally up the number of times they were
strong independent women, the number of times
they ruined themselves this past year,

can we get a seat yet?
I see a space, but it's so small
we can squeeze in
go go go

they are a trio of football players, tossing
dolled up girls in the air, stunning
the handsome hipster husbands, but success:
butts planted in a tight row on a concrete slab
drinking coffees next to the garbage can
their victory is short-lived, joykill anne says:

eighty percent of this room
are people on first dates
everyone is so polite and nervous
man that kid has a bad attitude, even
crappier teeth, let's get some food,

so still husbandless they leave, a trio of hungover,
slick cats laughing, living, taco hunting
post-afternoon stretch, wind airing out martini
coated mouths, arms linked like paper clips,
no folly, no stranger, no linebacker able-bodied
enough to cut through this trio, these rain pruned
friends in their city of wicked deeds, rock steady,
these foul-mouthed, lippy fiends, raw-boned
hearts full of new year's resolutions,
three little gods post saturday bender,
three little queens thicker than thieves.

TWENTY YEARS LATER
Chuqiao Yang

All fathers are their daughters' dragons and dragon-slayers.

The mines in Japan are even more cautious now,
nuclear energy is ebb and flow and hazard,
we are going to Port Hope tomorrow and I
have been sweating like a pig, rent costs
a fortune these days all those years ago
we'd rationed a bottle of Coke for a week,
God we were so poor then, I'll spend my whole
life making it up to you, do you want me to
buy you a house? Had we stayed in Beijing,
maybe we'd be millionaires by now, let me
buy your friends dinner, when you were a baby
I took you down Yonge Street, you wanted to be
Peter Mansbridge but I don't think I'd live to see
you get that old, we didn't get the VISA, we
had to go to Buffalo, that customs officer
was such a cow, you were telling us you
like the song on the radio, when are you
going to find a job, I love you so much
that if I could, I would keep you safe
in my mouth for the rest of my life,
in case the world melted you,
do you think I embarrassed you in front
of your friends? I wanted to save face,
make you proud, I told them about
Hiroshima, about nuclear energy
about Port Hope, I told them about
the bottle of Coke, do you think I
said too much? I always want to

make you proud, I know that
sometimes you are embarrassed,
I know that sometimes you are
ashamed, I promise I'll spend
the rest of my life making
this all up to you.

CANARIES
Rudrapriya Rathore

A morning in winter, 2002. I am ten years old and getting ready for school. The phone rings, and from the static I know that it is a far-away call, a back-home call, an important call. *Where's mummy?* She is in the shower. I am told to find her, to have her call back. While she dials, while she waits, while she claps her hand over her mouth, I stand on the doormat with my coat on, backpack zipped and ready. We are supposed to walk down College Street to Dewson Public School.

We don't go. Instead, a few days later, we get on a plane to Udaipur.

*

Grief is a heatstroke stumble through a coalmine. Find me with my parents, thirty years deep. History has gone slower here. The cheese comes in a tin. The bougainvilleas burn like fires. The glass of milk I am given grows a skin of fat.

Everyone calls my mother *Baby*. Later, I will watch *Dirty Dancing* and never not think of these things together. My mother's mother sits on a straw mat in the middle of her home, which is crawling with relatives. A circle of women rock and pray and talk around her. Their heads are covered, eyes downturned, but the children have memorized the patterns on their saris, which is how they clamber into the correct lap. My grandmother, newly widowed, wears pure white. When she hugs me, I don't recognize her earlobes. Stripped of jewelry, they're fleshy and naked.

*

The next time it happens, we are canaries in a blackout, eating ice cream on the porch. Toronto has no power. The July sun dims to unveil a canvas of stars. Mom is on her way home from work.

The phone rings, its battery almost dead. My father says nothing during the call but he leaves me on the porch when it ends.

I find him upstairs, sobbing on the bed. I am no longer the child. The sheets glow blue. That week, I dream of a mouse in a cardboard coffin. I have to bend its whiskers to fit them in.

Again, we walk silently through airports. Smiling feels like blasphemy. In the city of Indore, the professional mourners call me *chhori*. They have black hair to their knees and they sing like they themselves are dying, whipping their heads. Or: they sing like a flock of pigeons taking flight. Like the rasp of paper tearing.

When I first met you, my father's mother says, *it hadn't rained for weeks and weeks*. I look at a second set of naked earlobes, and at her starched white sari. What a fire, I hear her think. What a fire we have been through.