400: Coming Home

Dennis Lee

You are still on the highway and the great light of noon comes over the asphalt, the gravelled shoulders. You are on the highway, there is a kind of laughter, the cars pound south. Over your shoulder the scrub-grass, the fences, the fields wait patiently as though someone believed in them. The light has laid it upon them. One crow scrawks. The edges take care of themselves, there is no strain, you can almost hear it, you inhabit it.

Back in the city many things you lived for are coming apart. Transistor rock still fills back yards, in the parks young men do things to hondas; there will be heat lightning, beer on the porches, goings on. That is not it.
And you are still on the highway. There are no houses, no farms. Across the median, past the swish and thud of the northbound cars, beyond the opposite fences, the fields, the climbing escarpment, solitary in the bright eye of the sun the birches dance, and they dance. They have their reasons. You do not know anything.

Cicadas call now, in the darkening swollen air there is dust in your nostrils; a kind of laughter; you are still on the highway.

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Dive in:

1. Roads and highways are often used as a metaphor for life’s journey. If that’s the case, where on the “road of life” do you sense this speaker is? How do they feel about their situation? What do they care about? What clues does the poet leave for you to discover this information?

2. This poem gets a lot of energy from its verbs. List all the verbs, and try to replace them with others to see how the poem might change.

3. You might know Dennis Lee’s writing for children, including Alligator Pie and Jelly Belly. The tone here is very different, but there are also some similarities. The use of a refrain, for instance, or an attention to sound. Put one of your favourite children’s poems by Lee next to this poem (or use this version of “Alligator Pie”), and see what connections you can make.

4. The poem uses the pronoun “you,” instead of “I.” What’s the effect of this? Try re-writing the poem replacing all of the “you”s with “I”s or “she”s. How does it change?

5. Recitation challenge: the phrase “you are on the highway” or “you are still on the highway”
appears four times in the poem. Trace an emotional journey for the speaker that’s punctuated every time this phrase appears. Try reciting the poem as if the speaker is getting more and more frustrated each time. More excited to be home. More tired. More lonely.

6. Writing exercise: the next time you are on a long journey, take detailed notes of the things you see along the way. (Don’t do this if you’re the one driving!) For some of the ride, record the images as if you just got some very good news. For the next section of the drive, imagine you just got some very bad news. How does your description of the landscape change?

Useful Links

1. Traffic cameras from the 400 north of Toronto:
   https://511on.ca/cctv?start=0&length=10&order%5Bi%5D=0&order%5Bdir%5D=asc
3. Does your city or province have a poet laureate? If so, who is it? If not, start a campaign to inaugurate a new program! Dennis Lee was Toronto’s inaugural Poet Laureate, a role which rotates every two years. Here is information about that city program: https://www.toronto.ca/explore-enjoy/history-art-culture/poet-laureate/

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