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## Picture and a thousand words

June 11, 2010

This fluorescent corridor of shiny yellow tiles was captured by Toronto photographer Chris Shepherd, who specializes in the deserted nooks and corners of subways. An empty and eerie Osgoode, along with a dozen other dehumanized subway stations, will be on display at Bau-Xi Gallery (across from the AGO) until June 19.

Subway stations funnel and tilt people toward their given destinations, with turnstiles, hallways and stairs serving as the pinball equivalents of ramps, bumpers and gates. So unless we're stuck on the platform, waiting for service to resume shortly, we rarely have reason or opportunity to consider the aesthetic qualities of any given station. Here, without the usual clumps of people clogging the view, one is finally free to imagine what might be behind the enticing red double doors.

While Shepherd's subject matter is quite fashionable, at least in terms of municipal politics, it's not the first time Toronto's subways have been transformed through acts of imagination. Our poets and novelists have also immortalized the caverns of public transit, in the process reinforcing the significance of the subway as both a mover of people and a central symbol of our urban psyche.

According to 17-year-old Samuel, the comic-book-obsessed protagonist of Rabindranath Maharaj's new novel, *The Amazing Absorbing Boy*, subway stations like Osgoode are the domain of mole people. Which makes *The Amazing Absorbing Boy* underground fiction in the literal sense. Samuel has moved from Trinidad to Regent Park to live with his estranged father, and his first trip on our subway provides a fresh perspective on commuter psychographics. After paying "a man inside some sort of glass cage" and noting that everyone seems "vexed," Samuel begins his decent. "The minute I walked down those steps I felt like I had entered a place with a different breed of people. A sort of Bizarro world with all the rules reversed."

It's particularly Bizarro, or at least bizarre, anytime after 8 p.m. on a weekend (with the PATH offering a touch of the bazaar). Regardless of how novelists might describe our subterranean transit system, it's never treated as simple infrastructure. "It is a city that burrows, tunnels, turns underground," writes Maggie Helwig on the opening page of *Girls Fall Down*. For Helwig, the arteries that rumble beneath the sidewalk grates reflect and direct our urban character. We might not be mole people, but we are shaped by the subway in ways that are not immediately visible — which is why Helwig's novel involves a mysterious contagion that circulates through the subway: "The dangers to this city enter the bloodstream, move through interior channels."

There is also the obvious, symbolic aspect to being above or below — light and dark, heaven and hell (especially if you're on the subway in rush hour). As well as a clandestine aspect to the subway. In Russell Smith's new novel, *Girl Crazy*, a straitlaced community college instructor named Justin goes rogue and finds himself on the wrong side of the tracks (in this case, somewhere north of Lansdowne and Dupont) buying a brick of marijuana that he conceals in a yellow plastic No Frills bag. After nearly getting caught by a pair of cops, he ends up at Lansdowne and Bloor, shaken but relieved. "He was almost at the subway station, which he could disappear into like a gopher down a hole."

Lucky for Justin that he didn't wander a few more blocks east. Ibi Kaslik, in a short story called "Lab Rats" (part of the *Toronto Noir* anthology), explains that the Dufferin Bus makes one feel "like a homicidal dumpling" and leads to a subway station "where no one believes in standing in line for anything, let alone a TTC ticket or a bus."

Be they crowded or calm, empty or full, Toronto subways serve as miniature urban stages that encourage passengers give their truest performances. It's no accident that the first scene of Dionne Brand's novel *What We All Long For* (winner of the 2006 City of Toronto Book Award) takes place on a subway rumbling along the Prince Edward Viaduct: "People are packed in tightly, and they all look dazed, as if recovering from a blow."



Osgoode subway Station by Chris Shepherd

Chris Shepherd/Bau-xi-gallery

Meanwhile, three young people giggle and laugh, temporarily disrupting the sombreness of the morning commute. At least until they internalize the “uptightness on the train” and are “finally subdued by the taut silence around them.” Thus, the burrowing of the subway is both physical feature and psychological affliction.

In *Girls Fall Down*, two former lovers meet after many years apart, but their renewed friendship cannot endure the confined space of transit: “They stood up on the subway . . . neither of them able to accept the tight physical proximity of the narrow seats, appropriate only for close friends or complete strangers.”

Of course, not every fictional representation of our subways is meant to suggest that The Better Way is actually The Bitter Way. Philip Quinn, in his poetry collection *The Subway*, writes about a benign and cartoonish toll booth collector who “strips and mimes your tokens of affection.”

And Darren O'Donnell, in his 2004 novel *Your Secrets Sleep With Me*, notes that “If you lay your ear on the tracks you can tune into many of the different conversations that are happening on the various streetcars, the talk reverberating down into the seats, into the wheels, then saved and sent spinning into the tracks which zip them back, forth, up and down the city's streets.” If this is also true of our subways, it might be reason enough to remove our earphones once in awhile and listen carefully to what our fellow citizens are saying.

Certainly our politicians need to listen more often to the reverberating conversations among Toronto artists. Instead of focusing only on TTC budgets and spreadsheets, those seeking transit solutions should also perform some poetry audits and close readings of novelists and photographers. Because whether you love or hate Transit City, we're clearly a city defined by transit, with the buried hopes, fears and dreams of our collective unconscious scattered across the dark recesses of the subway.