THE CAPILANO REVIEW

Women and Words/Les femmes et les mots is a country-wide conference to be held in Vancouver, British Columbia in July 1983. It will be a meeting of women working with the written word in both traditional and alternative frameworks including writers, editors, publishers, critics, printers, typesetters, academics, playwrights, librarians, distributors, booksellers, translators, educational and cultural organizers.

The conference will provide a forum for women to celebrate our strengths, discuss our differences and exchange our skills and knowledge. The organizers hope that it will provide an opportunity for cross-cultural exchange among women from Quebec as well as native and ethnic women from each of the provinces and territories.

Women and Words/Les femmes et les mots invites suggestions for papers, panel discussions, workshops and interviews relevant to our themes: feminism (the context); power and alternative structures; doing it! (developing work strategies); traditions and new directions. Write for guidelines to the address below.

WOMEN AND WORDS

As well as organizing the conference, *West Coast Women and Words Society* is compiling an anthology of previously unpublished prose, poetry, critical work and short one-act plays which will be published in the fall of 1983. The deadline is November 15, 1982. Maximum prose length 3000 words, one piece only. Maximum five poems. Send typed manuscripts to *Women and Words/Les femmes et les mots Anthology Committee.*

Become a member of the *West Coast Women and Words Society* and receive updated information about the conference. Individual memberships, $5.00; supporting, $10.00; sustaining and institutional memberships, $25.00.

Women and Words/Les femmes et les mots • Box 65563, Stn. F • Vancouver V5N 4B0

That's a funny way to put it.
Talking's a funny language.

— KEATH FRASER,
Mother and Father
Talk of Going South

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We are always pleased to receive good material, especially from artists we haven't published before, but we cannot take responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. Manuscripts should be submitted to the Editor, and must be accompanied by a self-addressed envelope and Canadian postage to ensure return.

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Larry Trotter

Brenda Riches/
some mornings

she burns the toast some mornings she doesn't some mornings no one wants toast and if she's made some already she gives it to the dog and if she hasn't made any she doesn't some mornings she wakes up and feels death in her stomach and is afraid of the dark if she has woken up before dawn and is afraid of the faint daylight if she has woken up after dawn and gets up when the fear hugs her too tightly and puts a kettle on cleans her teeth wipes her face with a damp washcloth and when the kettle boils makes tea pours it drinks it feels a little safer some mornings she wakes up and accepts death in her stomach and lies looking at the part of the room she happens to be facing maybe it's the open closet where too many clothes hang most of them she hasn't worn for years but won't throw them out maybe the children will use them for costume parties or hallowe'en maybe it's the ceiling where the lamp hangs on its long wire dust on the paper shade she never wipes it off maybe it's the man's back or his face asleep accepting death in her stomach she can get up and put on the kettle clean her teeth wipe her face make tea pour it pour it from pot to cup to stomach and the hot tea warms the death that has settled there when she opens the basement door out walks the kitten purring finds a dust ball to play with leaps around his ball of dust picks it up in his fine teeth spits it out performs his dance for the imagined mouse the one mouse he will never taste because there are no mice in her house only dust balls and the fantasy of a black kitten one by one the children are woken when she tells them the time she tells them it's time for them to wake up but doesn't kiss them because their waking

faces are so frail she doesn't want to risk them with the touch of her mouth they have clocks in their rooms but she is the one who wakes them one by one the children come into the kitchen one with heavy eyes one with a finger in her mouth one singing all of them not hungry not wanting anything to eat but you must she says you can't go to school on an empty stomach but she doesn't eat her stomach isn't empty not with death lying there just as long as death lies there her stomach will never be empty so she fills the children with milk and toast or pieces of apple that they only nibble at soon they are out of the house and on their way to school while she sits at the table looking at the partly eaten toast the half empty glasses of milk the bitten apple pieces the chairs where they had sat and frowned there she sits and waits for the man to wake up

Keath Fraser / MOTHER AND FATHER TALK OF GOING SOUTH

Inflation gradually pushes the whole community towards speculation, since ordinary life begins to require speculator's skills.

— *William Rees-Mogg*
The Reigning Error

1

Sun gives me the rapture, lying in it like. Days like this I worked for all my life. *How come you're not lying in it then?* I came in for some coconut oil. *You want to burn?* Right now I'd settle for a burn. *Sam's gone.* Sam? Sam's a professional. By lunchtime professionals have long gone. *You used to be gone by breakfast.* Yeah, look where it got me. Hammering and sawing my life away and not a buck to show for it. *The cost of living ate you up.* Up! Being a carpenter was no guarantee of amounting to a hill of beans.

2

What do you want for lunch? Coconut oil. *Your skin isn't ready for coconut oil. Use your PABA.* PABA wouldn't tan dog dirt. Look at me. I'm white. I've had it with that stuff. *So am I. I'm white. Coconut oil hasn't helped my skin.* I'm whiter than white. Albino. Besides, you're a woman. *No whiter than me.* I can *see* I'm whiter than you. Bleach I use screens out brown rays and lets in white ones. I'm white. *You're used to delayed gratification, it's in your blood.* If it is the chemo's killed it. *Not like Sammy. He wants something he wants it right away.* That's why Sam's an entrepreneur not a carpenter. Why you got Sam to thank for this penthouse, not me. *He's your son too.* Where's the coconut oil? *Sam never listens to me.* I can't figure it out.

3

I'm looking down on the beach and it's like Bombay. I'm using binoculars like. I can see bodies lying around the sand like candy bars. Same with the Park. I'm looking down on the Park and everybody's chocolate . . . picnickers, roller-skaters, men in earrings, children . . . chocolate brown bodies. They're all using coconut oil. I can smell it on the wind. *Maybe it's me you smell.* You? You weren't such a piker you'd let me put that oil of yours on my legs. All over me. I look anaemic. Look. Don't I look like I've been through chemo-therapy? skin shrinking? brain bulging? eyes popping? *Put your wig on.* I look like I need a tan. Head, chest, legs. . . . *You want lunch outside?* I want my legs rubbed. I can't reach my shins or I'd rub them myself. Therapy did that. Pumping chemo into my whole body. Veins running through me like wires . . . red hot wires. They stiffen you up. Therapy stiffens you up. Here. Use this to kneel on. *That's your hair.* Sam doesn't want oily knees on his broadloom. *How am I going to land on that little patch?*

4

Where do you want it? Feel any hair below my knees? *I wouldn't call it hair exactly.* . . . Christ, I'm turning into an Inuit! Better start with the shins. Rub it in good. *Like sorrow? You're doing a good job rubbing that in yourself.* I don't take a cane.

5

Listen . . . there's that mouth organ again. On the patio. I don't hear anything. *Your ears are worse than your posture.* The chemo ate away the stirrups in my ears. Which affected my balance. Which definitely affected my hearing. *You're standing on one leg.* You haven't oiled my foot. *I thought you were ticklish.* Tell me about it. Nothing tickles with chemo inside you.

6

Who is that kid anyway? Is Sam training him to be a houseboy or what? *It's lunchtime.* Past lunchtime The sun's past zenith. You haven't done my thighs, my back neither. Tits and skull I can do myself. *That's a funny way to put it.* Talking's a funny language.

7

You still have a healthy pair of thighs. They're bald too. Bald head, bald legs, bald balls. I used to have hair. I used to hate the wind. It blew the kind of hair I had around like horsehair. My barber called it horsehair. It wasn't good hair but it was hair. I had a mane at one time resembling a stallion's. Now it feels like a beachball. *You want your wig back?* A tan would give me some spunk. Look like I *had* spunk.

8

Living here next to the water drains you. The swelter. *You make it sound like a toilet.* Oceans *are* toilets. If you read the newspapers. *Not ours.* The Indian Ocean? Effluence is what they dump in that ocean. Dog dirt spelled wog. You could be swimming off Djakarta and see a lump float past you. The fish don't like it. They're clearing out. They're dying out. *Well, here we've got salmon and crab.* Oysters, yeah, ling cod. . . . *And you want to go south?* Who said? *To the tropics. You did.* We can't stay here the winter. *How come? When you retired Sam said come and live here with him.* Here! There's not enough sun to keep a bug alive. Without sun I shrivel up. Already the days are getting shorter. Next thing it's fall. Falling all over you. Fall's no good for tanning. The fog takes half a day to burn off. The sun comes down on you at an angle, not from overhead like now. Right now's still summer. I can't understand how come I'm white. Might as well be lying in the freezer. Soon will be, if I don't go south. *The pension isn't enough to keep us in coconut oil let alone travel.* Retired couples always travel south. *Well, we travelled West. From the East End to the West End.* People freeze to death without sun. *This isn't exactly a stable.*

9

The boy's got a yacht. *Who does?* Sam's got a yacht. Tied up in the tropics. *Turn around, I need the back of your thighs.* I read it in the newspaper. Sam's famous now. A real saviour of free enterprise. *Sam never hears us anymore.* Works too hard, forgets to relax. He's going to have a breakdown. *He's got secretaries.* Secretaries? Sam doesn't dip his pen in the company inkwell. *What?* He's too busy to even go sailing. *How come he's got a yacht then?* Took it in down payment on a hockey team. Can you beat that? Paying a crew just to sit on a yacht. It's probably peeling in the sun right now. I could slap some paint on it for him. If he needed them, I could build him lockers. *No crew wants you barging in with your hammer.* Doesn't matter what the crew wants. They're crew. Just like we're crew here. You cook. I'm the handyman. *I don't take orders.* You anticipate orders. Because you know how to crew . . . instinctively. You enjoy crewing. You get a cranky crew and you get mutinies. *There's that boy's mouth organ again. . . .* I'll broach the matter with Sam. You and me could live aboard the winter taking out charters. We could take charge of his crew. Make sure no one's cheating the absentee landlord. We'd get to lie on the foredeck and suntan. Make our son a return on his investment. *A pipedream if you ask me.* Well, we can't stay here in the winter. *Geese stay. The lagoon is full of geese. The ocean is full of whistlers. They migrate here on account of winter.* Winter would kill me. *Here's your wig.* You haven't oiled my head.

10

The little bugger likes to stare doesn't he? *He's never seen you without your hair.* He doesn't have to gape. *Just wants his reward.* What for — that mouth organ stuff? I gave him some change a week ago. *He's got his expenses.* Him? What's he need coconut oil for? He's got a suntan. It's in his genes. *He's got to eat. Look at him, he looks like a coat hanger.* Look at me. I don't eat. In this heat who needs to? *I like his playing.* Sounds like a funeral parlour. *The trouble with you is death on the brain.* In case you missed it I've got terminal cancer. That kind of music makes it *in*terminal. . . . *I know . . . I'm sorry.* I don't want to talk about it.

11

Where's lunch? *You want lunch?* Get me a glass of tomato juice. *I'll bring you a glass, hold your shirt on.*

12

What good's generosity when he's lonely? Got no friends, doesn't speak the language. The tarbrush has definitely affected his social life. *Poor little beggar. All he wants is his reward.* Secret is to make do with what you've got. *Not when you've got nothing. Not even when you've got everything.* I haven't got anything. *And you want a trip to the tropics.* Are you going to oil my back so I can start tanning? *First I'm going to offer him a glass of tomato juice.* Mud in his eye. . . .

13

He was thirsty. Make sure you wash that glass out good. *You were nicer when you had hair.*

14

You want your handlebars oiled too? What? *You're still heavy around here.* That's where the chemo collects when it's through circulating in the blood. *Feels soft.* Softness incorporated. *I can make my brain move.* Make sure that oil's on even. *Exercising the hemispheres is good for you.* What are you talking about? *Keeping alive my mental fibre.* You're not a ghost or something. *I exercise.*

15

I dream a lot. At night. *That's healthy too.* I'm not bored. *You're up with the sun. How could you be bored — a man who gets up with the sun?* I'm not dead. *A good dream is good for you.* Last night's was a stinker.

16

I'll tell you . . . maybe you won't believe this . . . I had a dream I was fresh dead. That I went up to heaven in the rapture. I went up in the rapture, and when I got there it was so real I could hardly believe it. Then it started to stink. Right under my nose. Boats, junks, sampans, rafts started sailing in off the gulf, landing on the beaches below me. Scrambling out of these junks were families . . . Indian, Chinese, Indonesian . . . black families talking wog. The tanners in the sand, of course, they all stood up to watch. Couldn't believe their eyes. They thought they were dreaming. *I* thought they were dreaming. They got pushed back by the boats landing, people landing . . . dozens, then hundreds, thousands. Thousands of junks, thousands of people, thousands of rags, covering the sand. And fires! Burning all night, all over the beach. When the sun came up I couldn't see the shoreline for smoke, rags, bodies. . . . You couldn't hear the gulls for the babble babble babble. For the screaming and crying. I could smell the garlic. I could see men tearing apart their rafts to build lean-tos in the sand. When it got too crowded for spitting they started walking into the forest. . . . I was watching them from on high, a whole migration. Clogging the trails, tramping down ferns and salal to set up their hovels in the Park. Boys in loincloths grabbed squirrels and wrung their necks. Acted like they'd skinned squirrels all their lives . . . cooked squirrels. Families spilled into the lagoon. Knotted the necks of the geese. Cooked the swans. All of a sudden a thousand acres of wilderness were real wilderness. The Park looked like a jungle. The zoo looked like a slum. These wogs opened up cages to let out monkeys they ate. Same with the parrots and penguins. I'm telling you, instead of peacocks crying and seals barking, nothing but a hullabaloo of sing-songing voices. Which people in the city must have heard. They got in their cars and drove down to see, locked their doors and wouldn't get out, crawled through the Park peering out their windows, the rose gardens littered with defecating humanity. Trees kept falling for firewood. Smoke hung over the forest like a cloud. I could smell it. Spreading out across the city, up the coast. I could see it, day after day. No rain fell and the lagoon nearly dried up. Millions used what was left to wash in. Their laundry covered the rocks and rushes. They squatted, fought, ate grass, crapped. They murdered the policemen's horses, cooked the timber wolves, ate the buffalo. At night their fires burned on the beaches and in the forest.

I kept watching them with my binoculars. They were staring out of the forest, pointing up at the skyscrapers. You couldn't stop them. You didn't want to watch them. They were copulating like rabbits. No sir. I went up in the rapture and got stuck with a stinker.

17

You're done. We ought to put our money in gold bullion. *What money?* Our pension money. *The cost of living ate that alive.* Sam's then. He's got money to burn. It's *going* to burn unless be puts it in bullion. His stocks, his hotels, his shopping centres, his arenas. All his hedges up in smoke. *And your skin.* What? *Your skin is going to burn too.* My skin is goddam asbestos.

18

Listen! He's playing a jig. Must think we're made of money. *I've got a little something in my bag here. . . .* You've always got a little something, haven't you, in that bag. A little something, a little treat, a little nest egg . . . It's usually a big disappointment your littleness. *Five dollars?* What? *All I've got.* Exactly! Give him a quarter. *Look at him, Father. He's hungry.* Give him a Smartie. I can tell you he'd turn down a Smartie, a trained seal like him. He isn't hungry. *Don't shout.* He's trying to skin me!

19

He looks disappointed. He doesn't understand the language. *He can translate spectacles like yours.* Sam, when he started out, wasn't any older than him. I can tell you he didn't start with handouts. Sam will tell you. He worked for what he got. He wasn't a musician. Sam never asked for more money than the value he gave. *You can't put a price on music. Music isn't a commodity like pots.* Pots! Sam never sold a pot in his life. *Music is priceless. The Queen of the Arts.* I know it is. But it isn't worth five bucks. Not that music. For five dollars you could buy the mouth organ. Violins are different. *Listen! . . . Bravo!*

20

He can play all the tunes he knows, I'm not giving him five dollars. That beats the band, that does. *Go on, Father. Give it to him.* Nope. *He played his little heart out.* I appreciate his talent, believe me. I wish I could talk his language to tell him how much. Plus to explain why I can't give him this. *Nonsense. That bill's losing value anyway. Since you've been holding it it's probably lost a nickel. Since I took it out of my purse it's dropped a dime.* It's the principle of the thing. He can stand there till his toes jam. *What principle? Times change. They're changing all the time.* If you don't stand on principle where are you?

21

Suppose there's a special on cellulite where a woman can get rid of all her cellulite for two hundred and fifty dollars. What's cellulite? *Fat. Only it looks like cottage cheese a woman gets on the thighs.* Suppose the woman's thighs look like holy hell. *That's why she'd need a salon . . . to tone them.* For two hundred and fifty bucks? She'd be a lunatic. *It wouldn't be just one treatment, it'd be a number, a whole series. If you look at the way prices are going up, it'd be a bargain.* Bull toot. *It's got to do with time. The price of time keeps going up. The salon's time, this boy's time. People's principles change. They've got to. They lose their value.* Not mine. You go to that salon don't bother coming home. *Me? I'm using it as one example. Five dollars isn't what it was in the great arc of time.* Huh? *We don't need it anymore.* What, time?

22

NO MONEY! NEXT TIME! I GIVE YOU MONEY NEXT TIME! *Oh, brother.* NO CHANGE! SAVVY? NO MONEY! *You're making it worse.* He doesn't talk English so I got to talk pidgin. *You sound like a skinflint.* I know I sound like a skinflint. *You look like some tourist.* I feel like one. In my own country! *He's going to cry.* It won't wheedle anything out of *me* if he bawls. *A principle is a principle.* That's right! . . . At least he isn't diseased. I'm diseased, I can't even tan. I'll talk to Sam. He likes the kid. He'll give me some change. I might ask to borrow his kid for the yacht. In the tropics, he'd feel right at home. Playing for the tourists. We could adopt him. If he keeps practising that mouth organ, who knows what —

23

That — that is bloody disgusting . . . *I think it's the funniest thing I've ever seen!* Shutup, Mother. *Look!* Gimme your bag. My lighter . . . where's my lighter? *He thinks you're looking for money.* This here's one language he'll understand. *Understand what?* This . . .

24

That's using your brain, that is. Sending it up in smoke instead of giving him *the money!* He's got to learn he can't go around insulting people. *It was you insulted him!* Not my fault he can't understand English. *You've burned off your nose to spite your face. What kind of a principle is that? A nice little boy who loves music . . . and you go and insult him twice in a row.* Nice? You call rubbing his bum in our faces nice? His asshole? Even *I* could hear him. I could *smell* him. He was making smells. *He wasn't!* He was insulting us both very deliberately.

25

Mother, go into the kitchen, this isn't for a woman's ears. *It's* you *he's insulting.* Where'd he learn language like that? *Paying you back. You probably turned him into a delinquent.* This is Sam's doings. *You talk about adoption?* Who? Don't make me laugh.

26

It hasn't happened overnight. Things have a way of building up. Little things out on the patio. Like you acknowledging his presence. His music. He threatens you. Why? Just because he has a suntan and you don't? I don't know why. Maybe you think he's lazy. Why doesn't he go off and find himself a job you said. I don't know why he doesn't. Maybe he'd rather play his mouth organ. Maybe he's too young. Maybe he thinks you're *lazy. Maybe he thinks we're both senile. Oiling ourselves up to lie down in the sun. Trying to burn our skins. What he must think of your wig! What he must think of mine. . . . We're kept people, Father. Has beens. Your son, my son . . . he shares his penthouse with us . . . food if we want it . . . views. We can* see *the sea. Making harbors inside harbors. Sea, mountains. Those islands way out. Not a worry in the world up here. No struggle anymore. And we can't even adapt. We didn't need that money. We don't need any money. Our big shot son's got money to burn. And* you *end up burning the little bit we could've given the child! You talk about adoption? I'm ashamed, Father, I am* ashamed. . . .

27

I don't take a cane. *That sounded like the foghorn.* May not have any hair on my head or my balls but I don't take a cane. I can still walk. *What time is it?* There's still heat left in the sun. *Didn't you hear it?* Hear what? *The foghorn.* What are you saying, woman? *That foghorn is saying it. Can't you hear it? Winter is coming.* I know winter is coming. Before it comes I want to get a suntan. *Well, you'd better get a wiggle on.* What for? It's hot enough to cook eggs out there. *By the sound of it there's fog rolling in.* Fog? I just oiled myself. *Have a look.* What? What kind of holy smoke is this with fog rolling in? . . . It's white! . . . *Fog.* We've missed the goddam summer. *Nothing ever changes.* I've got to talk to Sam. *What for, a miracle?* I'm not spending the winter here. Sam's got a yacht. *The sun is still shining.* Pretty soon it won't be shining. If you hadn't taken so long oiling my back. . . .

28

Just think, days like this you worked all your life. I'm going to lay in what's left of it. When Sam comes home I'll ask him about his yacht. *Good Shepherd Sam.*

29

Sam, I'll say . . . I'm cold. My marrow's like ice. You can hear the goddam foghorn, Sam. What we need, your mother and me, is to be standing around in the shade at a hundred and four. Under a flame tree. Having a mango, Sam. Coconut milk's the thing to keep us warm. We'd get a rascal to climb a palm tree. We know one we could take with us. He could help us anchor your yacht, Sam, in deserted coves. Over the winter. Rowing us in, rowing us out. Rowing around the tourists . . . the ones that rent your yacht which we'd be taking care of, Sam. At night he could build fires on the beach out of monkeypod wood. We could lie out under the stars. Tropical nights, your yacht at anchor, the smell of the fire. It's a lot to ask, Sam, I know. After what you've done here, setting us up in the sky, in your own penhouse. This is Paradise, Sam, believe me. But with winter coming I can't breathe. Smell even. My wrinkles freeze when I smile. My liver feels like iced cod. I want to wear my sunglasses for a reason, Sam. If we were wealthy, son, like you I'd climb into my Lear and whip it into the sun. I had a dream your mother was making milk again in the grass.

30

I'm going outside. *So go.* I am going. *What's the matter?* Nothing. Did you oil my neck? *From your neck to your toes. You're ready to be cooked alive.* I'm going then. *So go. My love.*

Louis Phillips / PRECISION MACHINES

SCENE: AN UNFURNISHED APARTMENT IN THE PROCESS OF BEING PAINTED. UP-STAGE CENTER IS A DOUBLE-DOOR WALK-IN CLOSET. THE DOORS ARE WIDE OPEN, REVEALING WOODEN AND WIRE COAT-HANGERS. THERE ARE NO CLOTHES.

TIME: TOMORROW

JOSEPH CRUICKSHANK ENTERS. THE APARTMENT BELONGS TO JOSEPH AND HIS NEWLY-MARRIED WIFE. JOSEPH CARRIES TWO-CARDBOARD BOXES HEAPED HIGH WITH COAT-HANGERS, METAL AND WOODEN ONES ALL TANGLED TOGETHER.

JOSEPH

I found them. I found the coat-hangers you were looking for.

SANDRA'S VOICE (OFF)

What did you say?

JOSEPH

I said I found the coat-hangers you've been looking for.

SANDRA ENTERS. SHE CARRIES WHITE PAINT.

SANDRA

I wish you wouldn't mumble all the time. I have a difficult time understanding you.

JOSEPH (HANGING THE COAT-HANGERS)

I was yelling.

SANDRA

You were mumbling in a yelling fashion.

JOSEPH

You want everybody in the building to know we've got coat hangers?

JOSEPH CLOSES THE CLOSET DOORS.

SANDRA

They talk about masturbation in the hallways. What's so shameful about coat-hangers?

JOSEPH

Just watch. We'll step out for a couple of hours and the kids will come up and steal them from us. I've seen them go in with scrapers and take a whole new paint job away.

SANDRA

Be careful. This is our first fight. It's going to set the tone for all the rest.

JOSEPH

We've only been married three days and you're already planning a life-time of fights?

SANDRA

I'm not planning anything. I'm being realistic. People who live together have to fight. It's only natural.

JOSEPH

You could have married Rocky Marciano.

SANDRA

It's important to accept things the way they are.

JOSEPH

It's the heart of science.

SANDRA

It's the back-bone of marriage.

JOSEPH

You see this jar here? You think it is merely a jar, but it's not. It's our first fight preserved in formaldehyde for generations yet unborn. The little brown speck floating near the top is her spleen. The red blotch is the first blood spilt upon the walls of our cave.

SANDRA

You never take anything seriously.

THERE IS A CRASH IN THE CLOSET.

JOSEPH

What was that?

SANDRA

It sounded like the coat-hangers. I think you upset the coat-hangers.

JOSEPH

How could I upset the coat-hangers?

SANDRA

They didn't like how you were making fun of me.

JOSEPH

Do coat-hangers have feelings?

THE CLOSET DOORS ARE OPENED. THE COAT-HANGERS HAVE FALLEN TO THE FLOOR IN A HEAP.

JOSEPH

Of course coat-hangers have feelings. Hath not a coat-hanger hands, eyes, organs, dimensions? Are they not warmed by the same winter, cooled by the same summer that we are? Or should that be the other way around?

SANDRA

I meant upset physically.

JOSEPH

I know what you meant, but I wasn't anywhere near them. They were safe in their closet and I was all the way out here, and there was a door between us. Maybe one could have fallen down, but there's no way they could have all fallen off the rod.

SANDRA

That may be, but they're all over the floor now.

JOSEPH (ADJUSTS THE POLE)

Maybe the pole's not straight.

SANDRA

How can someone not build a closet correctly?

JOSEPH

How can you tell if a pole is not straight? By the way he shakes your hand.

SANDRA

Is that supposed to be funny?

JOSEPH (REPLACING COAT-HANGERS)

I thought it was.

SANDRA

I think it's offensive on all levels.

JOSEPH PICKS UP ONE COAT-HANGER AND RUBS IT AGAINST HIS CHEEK.

JOSEPH

Not tonight, dear. I have a headache.

SANDRA

Of course, it's not nearly as offensive as someone who can't hang coat-hangers correctly.

THE COAT-HANGERS ARE BACK ON THE POLE.

JOSEPH

Let's close the doors gently. Give them time to adapt to their new surroundings.

THE DOORS ARE CLOSED.

JOSEPH

Perhaps it's too dark for them in there. Do you think they'll need a night-light?

SANDRA

Are you ready to paint, O Great King of the Coat-hangers?

JOSEPH

Quite.

SANDRA

Have I ever told you before how much I hate it when you say *quite*?

JOSEPH

I didn't hear you mention it at the marriage ceremony, if that's what you mean?

SANDRA

It's such an English affectation.

JOSEPH

Well, Cruickshank happens to be a good, old-fashioned English name. What kind of an affectation would you prefer I adopt? Persian? Chinese? Laplandish? Outlandish?

A CRASH IN THE CLOSET.

SANDRA

You've done it again.

JOSEPH

Done what?

SANDRA

Your stomping around has knocked the coat-hangers off again.

JOSEPH

Stomping around? I haven't even moved. Or do I stand still stompishly?

THE CLOSET DOORS ARE OPENED. THE COAT-HANGERS HAVE FALLEN TO THE FLOOR IN A HEAP.

SANDRA

You've upset them again.

JOSEPH

Please don't use the word *upset*. It's morally ambiguous.

SANDRA

If there's one thing I'm not, I'm not morally ambiguous.

JOSEPH

I didn't say *you* were. I said *upset* was. *Upset. Upset. Upset.*

SANDRA

I should listen to you? You don't even put coat-hangers on a bar correctly.

JOSEPH

I didn't realize there was a secret skill to it.

SANDRA (REPLACING HANGERS)

There isn't. You just have to be sure that the hook — that's the rounded part here — goes over the pole — that's the wooden part here.

JOSEPH

May I see that grip again?

SANDRA

Certainly.

JOSEPH (REPLACING HANGERS)

Do you use the over-lapping grip with all four fingers around the neck? (SLAMS ONE OVER THE BAR.) Or do you use a special twist when the neck hits the bar?

SANDRA

There's no need to get angry at me.

JOSEPH

Well I'm not the one who bought these cheap coat-hangers.

SANDRA

They're not cheap. Nothing from Bloomingdale's is cheap.

JOSEPH

Then why don't they work?

SANDRA

They do work. They just don't work for very long.

JOSEPH

Something is shaking the bar. That's all.

THEY CLOSE THE DOOR.

JOSEPH (PICKS UP PAINT-BRUSH)

What grip do you recommend for holding this?

A CRASH.

JOSEPH (PLEASED)

Aha. Now tell me those aren't cheap coat-hangers.

SANDRA

Are you playing some kind of a joke on me?

JOSEPH

I'm not playing a joke on you.

THEY OPEN THE DOOR. THE HANGERS ARE IN A PILE.

SANDRA

Then why are they falling down?

JOSEPH

I imagine they are falling down because of some mysterious force called gravity. They have gravity in closets too, my dear.

SANDRA (REPLACING THE HANGERS)

Is that right?

JOSEPH

Quite. . . . Now, the bar seems straight. The hooks fit tightly around the bar.

SANDRA

What more do you want?

JOSEPH

Unless these coat-hangers are spoiled rotten.

HE THROWS A COAT-HANGER ON THE FLOOR AND STEPS ON IT.

JOSEPH

Take that you rotten coat-hanger. We give you the best years of our lives, and what do you do? You turn on us.

SANDRA

Was that an earthquake?

JOSEPH

I didn't feel an earthquake. Did you feel an earthquake?

SANDRA

Maybe it was just one of those silent ones . . . a small tremor that passed right through the closet, and jiggled everything just long enough to make everything fall down.

JOSEPH

There's only one way to find out.

HE ENTERS THE CLOSET. HIS WIFE JOINS HIM. THEY STAND PERFECTLY STILL, STARING STRAIGHT OUT AT THE AUDIENCE.

JOSEPH

Feel anything yet?

SANDRA

Do you?

JOSEPH

Not me.

SANDRA

Not me either.

JOSEPH

Sounds like a conversation I had in bed once.

SANDRA (STARTS OUT)

You only think of one thing.

JOSEPH

Wait a minute.

SANDRA

You feel a tremor?

JOSEPH

There's a coat-hanger in my shirt.

SANDRA

You're supposed to take the coat-hangers out of your shirt before you put it on.

JOSEPH

I don't know how it got here. . . . Help me, willya?

SANDRA REMOVES A COAT-HANGER FROM BENEATH JOSEPH'S SHIRT.

SANDRA

I got it.

JOSEPH

Am I wounded?

SANDRA

I don't think it bites.

SANDRA TOSSES THE COAT-HANGER BACK INTO THE PILE.

JOSEPH

What are you doing with it?

SANDRA

There's no sense putting them back if all they're going to do is fall down.

JOSEPH

That's true, but it offends my sense of order to hang clothes on the floor.

SANDRA SCREAMS AND JUMPS.

JOSEPH

What's the matter?

SANDRA

It bit me. One of the coat-hangers bit me.

JOSEPH

Which one?

SANDRA

What do you mean which one?

JOSEPH

They didn't all bite you, did they? Was it the one you took out of my back?

SANDRA

I took it out of your shirt, not out of your back.

JOSEPH

We're talking about you, not me.

SANDRA

We're talking about coat-hangers. Not about either of us. . . . But I did feel something bite me, and we're both rational adults, so that we know it can't be a coat-hanger. So what could have bitten me?

JOSEPH

Perhaps your imagination bit you.

SANDRA

My imagination does not bite.

JOSEPH

A true imagination should.

SANDRA

Look at this welt. Is that my imagination?

JOSEPH

It could be a spider.

SANDRA

That's comforting. If you're going to grasp at straws, why not pick a cottonmouth rattlesnake, not just a lowly spider.

JOSEPH

I tell you here and now that it's more comforting to be bit by a snake or a spider than it is to be bitten by a coat-hanger. If you had been bitten by a coat-hanger, it would upset all known laws of the universe, and the universe, my dear, is a precision machine, just like these coat-hangers here are precision instruments. There is no way to improve upon the shape or function of a coat-hanger, just as in thousands of years there have been no ways to improve the shape of a barrel. There should be comfort in that. Better to die amid order than to live amid chaos.

SANDRA

You don't sound very sympathetic.

JOSEPH

I'm sorry, but at least now we can breathe easier.

SANDRA

Why can we breathe easier?

JOSEPH

Because there is something in the closet. It knocked all the hangers to the floor and it bit you. Now that the events of the day have been given a rational explanation, we get on with our painting. The human brain is a precision instrument.

SANDRA

But there's nothing in the closet. Nothing so big that it could have knocked all the clothes-hangers off.

JOSEPH

Tricky little bugger, isn't he?

SANDRA

We were both standing there and saw nothing.

JOSEPH

The bar that holds the clothes-hangers is a precision instrument. Any little thing could have thrown the balance off, especially with the earth moving in eight different directions at the same time.

HE CLOSES THE CLOSET DOOR.

SANDRA

Did you see anything in there that could have bitten me?

JOSEPH

I didn't bite you. That eliminates one.

SANDRA

You think I bit myself then? You think this redness is psychosomatic? . . . Where are you going?

JOSEPH

Whatever is in there is still in there. We've got it trapped in the closet. I'm going to get something to kill it with.

SANDRA

What about the coat-hanger that was in your shirt?

JOSEPH

You think I should kill it with that?

SANDRA

How do you explain the coat-hanger getting inside your shirt.

JOSEPH

I don't. But let's be satisfied with two out of three. The most advanced physicist doesn't know everything there is to know about the atom.

HE EXITS.

SANDRA

Then you admit something's wrong? . . . I can't hear what you're saying. You're mumbling.

SHE CROSSES TO THE REFRIGERATOR.

SANDRA

I need something to drink.

SHE OPENS THE REFRIGERATOR DOOR. 300 COAT-HANGERS TUMBLE OUT.

SANDRA

Joseph!

JOSEPH RETURNS. HE CARRIES A TENNIS RACQUET.

JOSEPH (SURVEYING THE SCENE)

What did you let them out for?

SANDRA

I didn't let them out. I opened the refrigerator and there they were.

JOSEPH

What do you mean *there they were*?

SANDRA

I mean they were there . . . inside the refrigerator.

JOSEPH

Are these the same ones? or are they different ones?

SANDRA

How would I know? They all look alike to me.

JOSEPH

Now THAT really will upset them.

SANDRA

Did you put them in there?

JOSEPH

Did I put what in where?

SANDRA

Did you put our clothes hangers inside the refrigerator?

JOSEPH

What for?

SANDRA

Joseph, you're annoying me.

JOSEPH

A little precision in language wouldn't hurt right now.

SANDRA

When we were moving, did you put things inside the refrigerator to save space?

JOSEPH

You can't save space. Space is always the same. Except when it's expanding.

SANDRA

You know what I mean.

JOSEPH

I know what you mean, but we didn't move the refrigerator. This one came with the apartment. Perhaps the previous tenant put them in there.

SANDRA

Who in God's name would put 300 coat-hangers in a refrigerator? For what reason? Pourquoi?

JOSEPH

Pourquoi?

SANDRA

Why?

JOSEPH

Some things we have to take on faith. If a human being wishes to store his or her clothes-hangers in a refrigerator, who are we to say no? Must we impose our will upon someone we haven't even met?

FROM THE CLOSET THERE IS A CRASH.

SANDRA

There it is again.

JOSEPH

We'll get it this time. Take this while I open the doors.

HE HANDS SANDRA THE TENNIS RACQUET.

SANDRA

What's this for?

JOSEPH

When I open the door, whatever comes out, hit it. Hit it good and hard.

SANDRA

Is this all you could find?

JOSEPH

No. I also found our color television set but I didn't think it would be very practical right now.

SANDRA

Why should there be a crash in the closet? There was nothing in there to fall down.

JOSEPH

Maybe the pole fell down.

HE OPENS THE DOORS. THERE ON THE POLE ARE ALL THE COAT-HANGERS SWAYING GENTLY. THREE OR FOUR HANG DOWN, INTERLOCKED TOGETHER.

JOSEPH

Now that's impossible.

SANDRA

Thank God!

JOSEPH

What are you thanking God for?

SANDRA

Because now we know that the hangers in there are not the same as the hangers out here.

JOSEPH (LOOKING INSIDE THE CLOSET)

Systems of philosophy have been built upon less.

SANDRA

There's nothing in the closet. Right?

JOSEPH

They're linked together. Can't you see that some of these hangers are linked together?

SANDRA

There is nothing in the closet.

JOSEPH

I can't pull them apart.

SANDRA

Not even anything small.

JOSEPH

Solid cannot pass through solid.

SANDRA

But something did bite me.

JOSEPH

It's a precise law of physics.

SANDRA

And coat-hangers don't fall down by themselves.

JOSEPH

The closet's built against a solid brick wall.

SANDRA

Nobody I know keeps clothes hangers in the refrigerator.

JOSEPH

A few moments ago I was perfectly content.

SANDRA

You open a refrigerator and they come spilling out.

JOSEPH

Je suis content.

SANDRA

What can be worse than a cold clothes hanger?

JOSEPH

It is impossible for a happy man to live in a universe where objects fall upward and people fall out.

SANDRA

I should call Mama and tell her not to send the trunks.

JOSEPH

Where shall we hide if coat-hangers revert to laws of the jungle?

SANDRA

Let's have another conversation like this sometime.

JOSEPH

Form follows function.

SANDRA

Call it counterpoint. You take the A line.

JOSEPH

What did people do before they had coat-hangers to comfort them?

SANDRA

I'll take the B line.

JOSEPH

Was there comfort in a world without coat-hangers?

SANDRA

You say one thing and I'll say another thing.

JOSEPH

I went out of the room.

SANDRA

See if we meet.

JOSEPH

Not if I go out of the room, and if you stay here.

SANDRA

What would Harold Pinter say in a situation like this?

JOSEPH

I stepped out. You opened the closet and hung up the hangers.

SANDRA

Precisely.

JOSEPH

And then you welded 3 coat-hangers together, linking them forever so that not the greatest brute force could wrench them apart.

SANDRA

All in less than a minute.

JOSEPH

Oh no. You planned all this out ahead of time. Putting 300 coat hangers inside the refrigerator. Just waiting for an opening, a chance to mock the world of reason.

SANDRA

There is a secret passage-way.

JOSEPH

Where?

SANDRA

I am supposing. Suppose there is a secret passage-way. You leave the room, enter the closet secretly, hang up the hangers while I'm distracted by the pile of hangers spilling out of the refrigerator which you had put there ahead of time. It was you that introduced the inter-locking hangers.

JOSEPH

I am an anthropologist not a practical joker.

SANDRA

An anthropologist in public. In the closet a practical joker.

JOSEPH

I have no motive. You lack a motive.

SANDRA

To drive me insane which you have succeeded doing beyond your wildest expectations.

JOSEPH

I have nothing to gain by driving you insane. For God's sake, I've just married you.

SANDRA

You an educated man! Since when are marriage and insanity mutually contradictory.

JOSEPH

Bosh!

SANDRA

Quite. . . . Not satisfied with my body you must get your fingers on my mind as well.

JOSEPH

It's you who's doing this to me. After all, you stand to collect insurance money.

SANDRA

Your college is so generous. What should I do with all that money?

JOSEPH

Buy yourself some clothes to go with all these hangers of yours!

SANDRA

They're not mine. They're ours. This is community property.

JOSEPH

We're getting upset.

SANDRA

That word isn't precise!

JOSEPH

We should be uniting together.

SANDRA

I don't see how we can unite apart.

JOSEPH

We must face this problem squarely like mature adults.

SANDRA

There is nothing to be afraid of.

JOSEPH

We are together, not attacking each other. Neither of us wants to harm the other.

SANDRA

Violence is the heart of sex.

JOSEPH

Not for us. Stiff upper lip.

SANDRA

I'm not playing a joke on you. Are you playing a joke on me?

JOSEPH

No.

SANDRA

Where does that leave us?

JOSEPH

Damn!

SANDRA

What?

JOSEPH

Another one has crawled under my shirt again.

HE REMOVES A COAT HANGER FROM BENEATH HIS SHIRT.

SANDRA

Is it the same one?

JOSEPH

Can it possibly make any difference at all?

SANDRA

You asked me if they were the same.

JOSEPH

Things are different with you.

SANDRA

Maybe there is one coat-hanger out of all these that has a great need for body warmth.

JOSEPH

Sandy, I'm going back in there.

SANDRA

No, Joseph, don't.

JOSEPH

I have to. Everything I believe about the world is at stake.

SANDRA

Go to darkest Africa instead. Another anthropological mission.

JOSEPH

But why?

SANDRA

Because in Africa they have trained guides. There's no guide for this closet.

JOSEPH

There's nothing to worry about.

SANDRA

How can you say that?

JOSEPH

I'll take this flashlight. I'll take the tennis racquet. If you hear me knock on the door open it immediately. That's all there is to it.

SANDRA

I don't want to be a widow on my honeymoon.

JOSEPH

You're over-reacting.

SANDRA

I'm not over-reacting. I'm under-reacting.

JOSEPH ENTERS THE CLOSET AND SHUTS THE DOOR.

SANDRA

Is anything happening?

JOSEPH

I just got inside.

SANDRA

It's not a good idea. The air's not good.

JOSEPH

I have plenty of air.

A PAUSE. THEN JOSEPH KNOCKS ON THE DOOR. SANDRA PULLS THE DOOR OPEN.

SANDRA

Joseph! You all right?

JOSEPH EMERGES WITH A COAT-HANGER AROUND HIS NECK.

SANDRA

What happened?

JOSEPH

Nothing happened. There are just no batteries in this flashlight.

SANDRA

You should have checked it before you went inside. You're losing all semblance of professional training.

JOSEPH

It's your flashlight!

SANDRA

When did I become the supply-sergeant all of a sudden?

JOSEPH

I'll use my lighter.

SANDRA

You'll start a fire.

JOSEPH

There's nothing to set fire to. There's nothing in the closet but metal coat-hangers.

SANDRA

What happened to them all?

JOSEPH

What do you mean what happened to them all?

SANDRA

They're all gone. . . . Most of them are gone.

JOSEPH

Perhaps they sensed a hostile atmosphere.

SANDRA

Why don't you say something about the coat-hanger around your neck?

JOSEPH

Why don't you say something about it? You're the one who's good at instigating conversations.

SANDRA

Quite.

JOSEPH

Every inanimate object in the world is making fun of me. Must you too?

SANDRA

Coat hangers are not every inanimate object.

JOSEPH

When I count to ten I want all those coat hangers back where they belong. And then we'll consider the whole subject closed.

SANDRA

Don't threaten me. I have nothing to do with it.

JOSEPH

No?

SANDRA

No.

JOSEPH

Whose idea was it to hang up our clothes in the first place? I'd just as soon keep my clothes dangling over chairs. A chair you can trust. A chair doesn't crawl up under your shirt.

SANDRA

Get it through your pedantic skull. I have nothing to do with anything that is happening, any time, any place.

JOSEPH

Things don't just happen by themselves.

SANDRA

Then let's admit it to each other. This place is haunted. There's such a thing as a haunted house.

JOSEPH

You call that a rational explanation?

SANDRA

Why not? Ghosts are precision machines like anything else.

JOSEPH

Oiled only by primitive superstition. We have risen far above the apes, the animals, the savage.

SANDRA

There isn't an ape in the Bronx Zoo plagued by a coat-hanger problem.

JOSEPH (COUNTING)

One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five.

SANDRA

There. Are you happy now?

A SOLITARY COAT-HANGER SLIDES SLOWLY ALONG THE ROD AND STOPS ON AND IN THE CENTER OF THE ROD.

JOSEPH

I am happy in a world where five comes after four, not after three, not after two, but after four.

SANDRA

It slid back all by itself.

A SECOND COAT HANGER SLIDES ALONG THE POLE AND JOINS THE FIRST ONE.

SANDRA

We didn't offer it any food or anything.

JOSEPH

I'm going right back in there. We'll try it again.

SANDRA

No, Joseph. Please! We must let well enough alone.

JOSEPH

When you hear me hit my fist against the door, open it immediately. If there's a ghost in that closet, I'm going to find out about it by God.

SANDRA

Then you agree with me that ghosts are causing this to happen.

JOSEPH

No. I don't agree with you. The Greeks never had ghosts in their civilization! that's what made them so much more human.

HE ENTERS THE CLOSET AND SHUTS THE DOOR. THERE IS A LONG PAUSE.

SANDRA

Joseph? Are you all right?

A COAT-HANGER SLIDES OUT FROM BENEATH THE CLOSET DOOR. THEN A SECOND ONE.

SANDRA

Joseph. Are you sliding coat hangers from beneath the door?

JOSEPH

What are you talking about?

A THIRD COAT-HANGER SLIDES OUT FROM BENEATH THE DOOR.

SANDRA

There's another one. . . . You're just doing that to scare me.

JOSEPH

I'm not doing anything to scare anybody.

SANDRA

They're all getting out.

JOSEPH (STILL IN CLOSET)

They can't. I have the exit blocked.

SANDRA (PUSHES THEM BACK)

I'm sending them back.

JOSEPH

I don't want them.

SANDRA

Can you see anything?

JOSEPH

I've got my lighter on. I can see everything.

THE DOORBELL RINGS.

SANDRA

What do you see?

THE DOORBELL RINGS.

JOSEPH

Nothing.

SANDRA (CALLING TO DOOR)

I'm busy now.

SHE PUSHES COAT-HANGERS BACK. MORE SLIDE OUT. THE DOORBELL CONTINUES RINGING.

SANDRA

All right. All right.

JOSEPH

Who are you talking to?

SANDRA

I'll be right back. Don't go away.

SANDRA EXITS. THE COAT-HANGERS STILL SLIDE OUT FROM BENEATH THE CLOSET DOOR.

JOSEPH

Sandra!

JOSEPH POUNDS ON THE CLOSET DOOR. EACH POUNDING IS SLIGHTLY MORE DESPERATE THAN THE ONE BEFORE IT. THERE IS A PAUSE. SANDRA RETURNS WITH A CARDBOARD BOX. SHE OPENS IT, INSIDE ARE THE COAT-HANGERS SHE HAD ORDERED FROM BLOOMINGDALE'S.

SANDRA

Joseph!

NO RESPONSE.

SANDRA

Joseph, are you all right in there?

NO RESPONSE.

SANDRA

Are you still in there? . . . Joseph, answer me!

SANDRA OPENS THE CLOSET DOOR. THERE INSIDE IS JOSEPH HANGING IN A NOOSE FASHIONED OF COAT-HANGERS. HIS TONGUE PROTRUDES. HIS EYES BULGE. HE IS CLEARLY DEAD. SANDRA SCREAMS.

SANDRA

Oh, my darling . . . Joseph . . . Joseph . . . Speak to me. . . .

SHE ENTERS THE CLOSET IN AN ATTEMPT TO RELEASE HER HUSBAND FROM THE GRIP OF THE COAT-HANGERS. SHE STRIKES OUT WILDLY AGAINST THE COAT-HANGERS THAT HAVE RETURNED TO THEIR PLACES ON THE ROD.

SANDRA

Killers! . . . Murderers! . . . That's all you are . . . You're precision killers. . . .

HER ARMS AND LEGS ARE ENTANGLED IN THE PILES OF HANGERS THAT HAVE FALLEN (LEAPT?) TO THE FLOOR. THE CLOSET DOOR SLOWLY SHUTS UPON HER. WE HEAR THE CRASH OF COAT-HANGERS.

SANDRA'S VOICE

Stop it! Let go of me! . . . Get your filthy hooks off me. . . .

SILENCE.

THE DOORBELL RINGS.

A SOLITARY COAT-HANGER SLIDES OUT BENEATH THE DOOR.

VOICE FROM OFF-STAGE

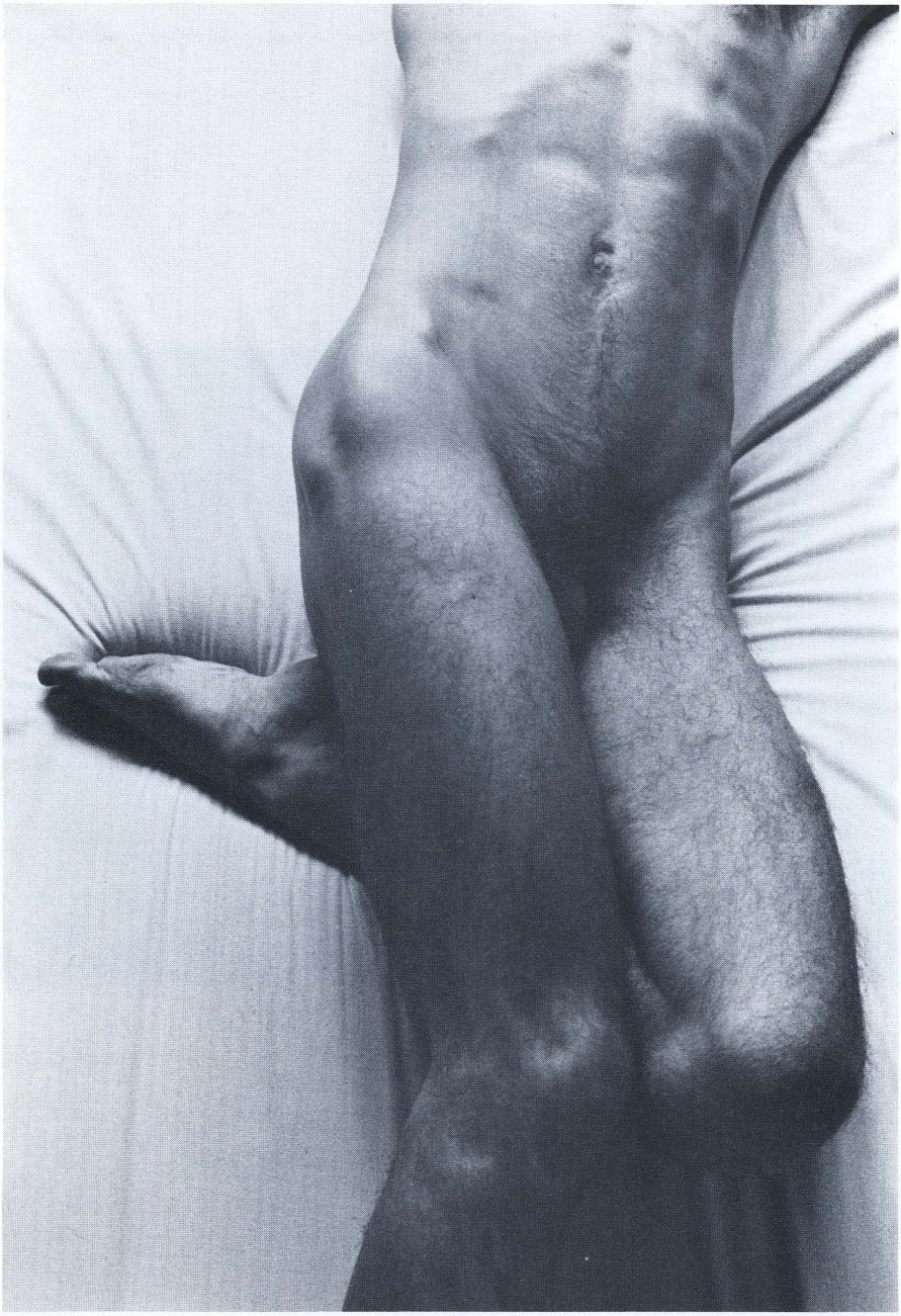
Hello in there! . . . I'm your neighbor from across the hall. Did you people by any chance leave some coat-hangers in the hallway?

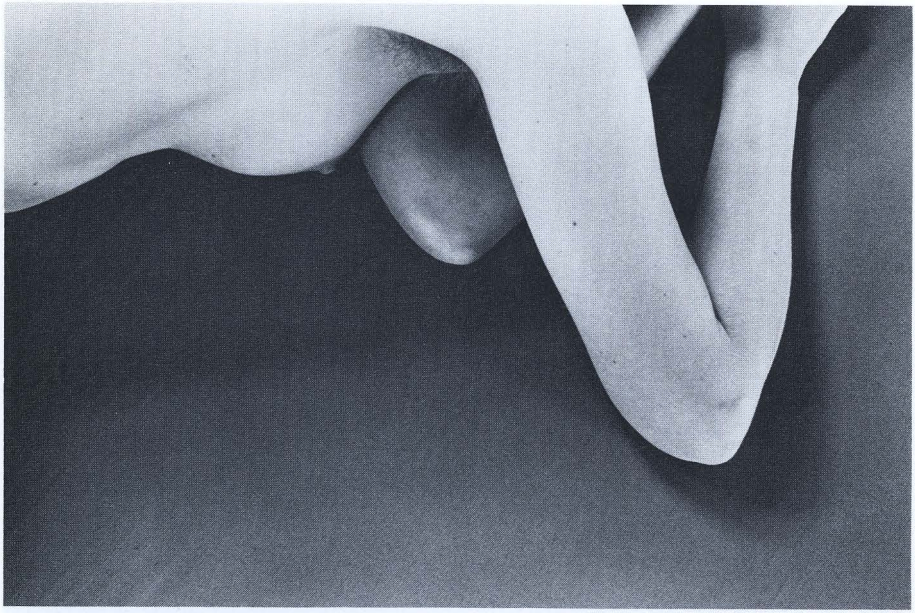
AS IF BY WAY OF AN ANSWER THE COAT-HANGER BEGINS ITS JOURNEY TOWARD THE FRONT DOOR.

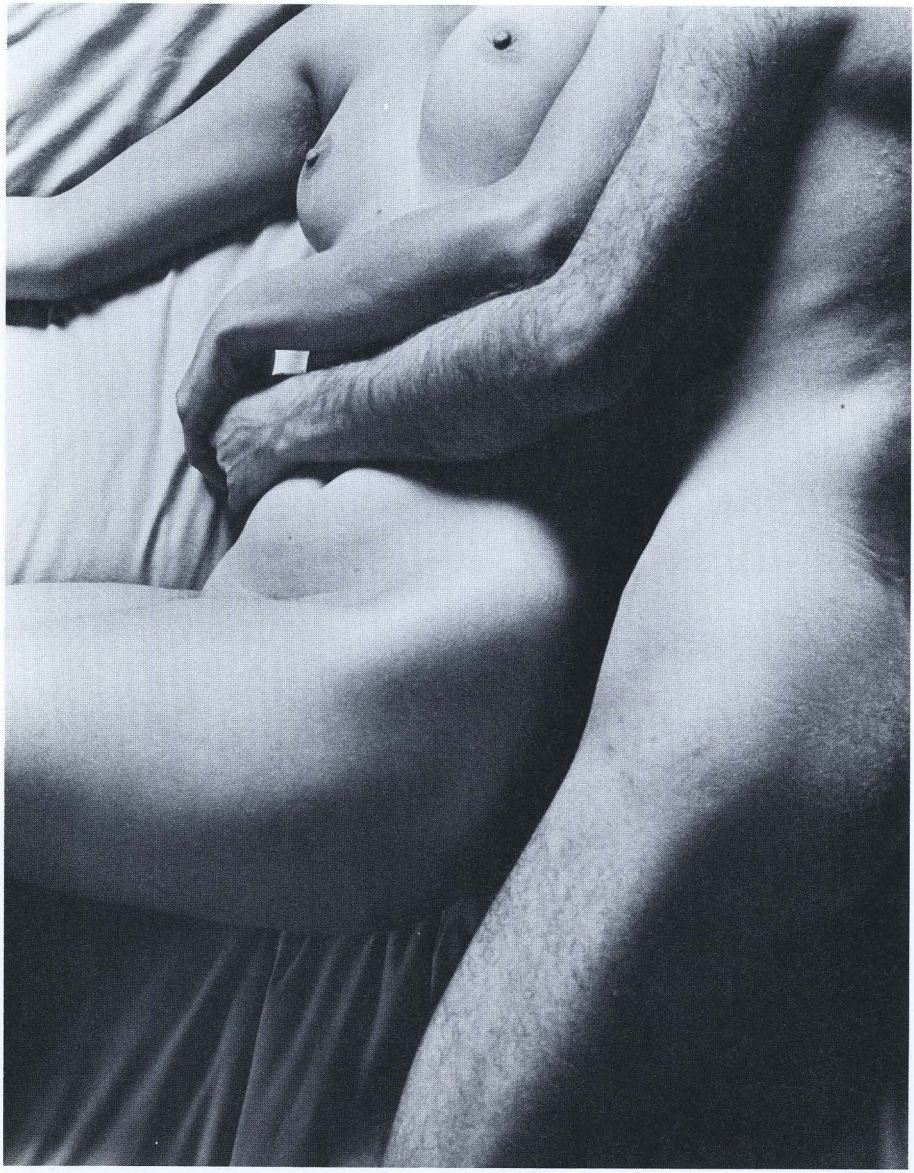
LIGHTS OUT.

CURTAIN.

Larry Trotter (Tristan) / IMAGES







"... and then it was gone, leaving only the impression of something overcharged with life..."

— Mervyn Peake, *Gormenghast*

Richard M. Lush / REJECTIONS

In thirty-nine we owned a gray Olds with a rumble seat. We lived in a rented house beside a service station. My father, in sunlight from the kitchen window, shone in a pearl-gray suit while his finger made patterns in flour on the table. He was driving north early Saturday morning for his father's funeral. My mother never went to funerals. Not even his when the time came. She baked and spoke maliciously about her friends to her mother. She criticized him because his fingers trembled, scattering white on her clean floor. He smiled at my mother's mother, apologized and closed the back door quietly as he went out to the car.

Shortly after the war, on a Sunday afternoon in August when the sky was clear and the air silent, my friend and I threw knives at a peg in the lawn next to the sand lot behind the school. My father, wearing shorts and carrying a golf club, walked alone into the center of the lot and began blasting sand, chipping balls. Only children wore shorts in those days. Not fathers. I walked away. I wouldn't acknowledge that man standing alone in the middle of the yard.

In nineteen fifty-five, when I was jilted by a girl I loved, I cut my wrists and bled on the Indian rug. My father made bandages from sheets, wrapped my wounds, kissed me on the forehead and carried me to the car. At the hospital, I walked four steps ahead of him and spoke for myself. He never asked why I did it and I never told him. When I came home we had a new rug. I've forgotten what my mother said. I remember a small man carrying a smaller man.

My father, sitting up in bed, is smiling. He has dark circles under his eyes. He makes a joke about getting sleeping pills and shows me how he hides them under his tongue. Tells me the man in the next bed died last night. I don't know what to say. I can't remember if I kissed him or held his hand. He died that night and was buried in a pearl-gray suit. Before the funeral, my mother criticized me for having trembling hands.

Kathleen D. Miller / A CERTAIN AGE

They had told her about the tree, but not about this. She swung back and forth, the creak of the swing-ropes saying, "Last time, last time."

Looking straight up at the square beam from which her swing hung, she saw again how the hewn wood had been nailed right onto the tree's living trunk. She remembered her father hammering in the nails — how she had winced with every blow. What would it feel like? Like having a sliver in your finger and never, never, never being able to pull it out? She saw how the square beam had rubbed and scraped its way into the living branch. Some of the bark was creeping up around the beam, as if trying to make it into a real branch — or to swallow it up — anything, she imagined, to ease the pain. For it must really hurt, like a new shoe rubbing your heel. And just imagine never, never being able to take that shoe off and put on a band-aid.

She stopped swinging abruptly. Hadn't she made that pain worse — her weight, more and more each year from the time she was five, when the swing was put up, to this summer, when she was ten? Heavier every year, swinging and swinging back and forth, rubbing in, rubbing in. She jumped off the swing. On this last day of its life, she would cause the tree no more pain.

She bent and examined the worn wooden seat of the swing. Good. Nothing had come through. Her jeans were dark and stained enough that even if it did come through on them, nobody would notice. Her underwear was another matter. The first morning, there had been just a spot of red, about the size of a quarter. The second morning, it had been bigger and darker. Now she slept with her underwear on under her pyjamas, and her thighs pressed tightly together. In the morning, she had terrible cramps in her legs, but nothing had gotten onto the sheets. Yet.

She didn't let herself think about tomorrow, or next week. About what she would do if it never, never stopped — just got to be more and more, for the rest of her life. Until she died.

All she could think about clearly was her underwear. She was running out, because she couldn't just toss it into the clothes hamper the way she always had. So far, three pairs of panties were rolled into tight balls and tucked into the dark space behind her books and puzzles.

She heard a swishing sound behind her, and spun around. It was her father. He was holding an axe. She had heard him coming through the curtain of branches. The willow was so old that its branches hung down all around like a green curtain, creating a round room in which everything was faintly tinted green, like in the Emerald City.

Her father had the same happy-sad look he had had the day he had explained to her why the tree had to come down. Now he said,

"One last swing, eh?"

She knew without having to be told that now she must keep out of the way. Her father had always carefully explained things like that — slowly, logically, in a quiet, unfrightening voice. You did not play with tools because tools had sharp edges and were heavy. You did not enter the workshop in the basement in your bare feet, because there might be tacks or nails on the floor. And now, you kept well back, away from the wide swing of the axe and the flying chips that could get in your eye.

As she watched him put his big hands on the trunk, sizing it up, gauging it, she wished she could tell him what was happening to her. But as strong as the wish was the sudden, horrified "No!" that blocked it from her mind. If only it were just a cut on her arm that wouldn't stop bleeding. . . .

Her father hefted the axe and took a few practice slow-motion swings. She stepped backwards through the curtain of leaves.

Her mother? Her mother had been harried and short-tempered last winter, when her baby cousin Heather had stayed with them for a week. She had rushed around, sweating and looking red and hot, even though it was cold outside. Changes of any kind did that to her. And her face had always wrinkled up when she loosened the baby's diaper. Catching her daughter's eye, she had said ruefully,

"You know, this is one thing you NEVER get used to!"

Then she had always scrubbed her hands thoroughly afterwards.

Her father swung the axe for real this time, and the blade bit the trunk. She clamped her thighs tight together. Through the translucent green curtain of the tree's branches, which quivered with every blow, she could see the yellow-brown patches of burnt grass. The willow's sap had started to drip down and ruin the lawn. That was why the tree had to be destroyed.

"Things get to be a certain age,"

her father had said, in that same quiet, sensible voice with which he explained everything,

"and either they outlive their usefulness, or they become a bit of a nuisance. Now, you're getting a bit big for a swing, aren't you? And we want our yard to be nice. So."

The rhythmic Whut! Whut! of the axe was more than a sound now. It was a feeling, rippling up her legs and throbbing in her belly. She tried to imagine the tree's pain — worse now than that of the nails, worse than all the years of rubbing as she swung back and forth. But what she was feeling was not painful at all, and for a moment she forgot to keep her thighs tight together, her buttocks compressed.

"Get right out of the way! It's going to fall!"

She ran across the back yard and up the verandah steps. On the verandah she turned, pressed her back to the warm, rough brick of the house, and watched.

She saw how much a willow tree is like a long-haired woman, with her arms upraised. The tree lay full-length across the yard, connected to the stump by a single shard of yellow-white wood.

Her father laid the axe down on the ground and pulled his shirt off. He mopped his forehead with it before flinging it down beside the axe. The hair on his chest and under his arms was very black, and his perspiring back looked as if it had been oiled. Suddenly she wanted him to look up at her, but he just bent down and picked up the axe.

The whole tree shivered and jerked with every blow as her father hacked each branch away from the trunk. The shard of wood connecting the trunk to the stump finally snapped. Sap was running down from the stump's every crevice — thin and clear at the top, getting dark and sluggish as it ran, and piling up in sticky black gobs near the roots.

She began to stare fixedly at her father's back, willing him to look at her. His arms and torso were slippery-shiny with sweat now, and his thick black hair had flopped forward onto his forehead. He was breathing heavily, with his mouth a little open and his teeth showing brilliant white against his tanned face.

Every time the axe bit down, she felt the blow travel up through her feet, up her legs into the pit of her stomach. The tree was just a torso now, that her father chopped up into chunks he could carry to the back of the pickup. Soon all the pieces of tree were in there, ready to be driven to the dump.

Finally her father attacked the stump itself, slicing it away, bit by bit, until it was just a circle of wood, level with the ground. He went and pulled a bag of dirt out from under the verandah, dragged it across the yard, upended it over what was left of the stump, then smoothed the dirt out and tamped it down flat.

And still he didn't look at her. He must look at her soon. She had willed it. He must turn around and see her. Part of her wanted to run away and hide — to guess the exact moment, just before he turned around, and fast, fast, run and hide before he had a chance to spot her, like in "Where am I, Mr. Wolf?" But the other half of her wanted to stand perfectly still and let him see.

He picked up his axe, turned around and looked at her. First he smiled, then he stopped smiling. He was looking at her legs. She looked down. The blood was running thick and fast down her thighs, congealing in black gobs at the tops of her white socks.

She looked back up at his face. It was strange — part of her wanted to smile — to grin at him horribly like a Jack-o'-lantern. But the other part of her felt sorry for him. There was a look of pain on his face, and his mouth was working as if he wanted to speak, but had forgotten how.

Still holding the axe, he took a tiny, hesitant step toward her.

"Baby?"

His voice sounded dry and painful. He took another step toward her, still holding the axe. He put his other hand out. She pressed back against the brick of the house.

"Baby, come here . . . okay?"

She was going to let him get her. She was. She could feel the same tickly hysteria rising in her that she always felt in hide 'n' seek, when "It" had just passed by without finding her, and she was safe, but she knew, she just knew, that she was going to give herself away with a rustle or a sneeze.

But he didn't get her. He turned abruptly away and walked around to the side of the house. She heard the side door open and slam. She stood perfectly still, staring at the smear of brown earth that marked where the tree had been.

Then her mother came running out, and fell all over her, crying, gasping out how sorry she was, how she had MEANT to tell her, she really had, how she had been thinking about it just the other day, but she was so YOUNG, and who would DREAM. . . .

Her mother bustled her into the bathroom and tried to explain it all. But she got it all backwards and upside down, kept repeating herself and groping for words. Her father never did that. He always spoke as if he had thought out beforehand exactly what he was going to say.

While her mother was showing her how to fasten on the pad, she heard her father slam the door of his pickup, start the engine and drive away. She listened to the sound of the engine fading as her mother scrubbed her hands thoroughly at the sink, and told her to do the same.

Her father was back in time for supper. But supper was strange. There was an uncomfortable "new" feeling, like new shoes or a new teacher or new house. Her parents talked louder than usual and were very polite, the way they were when there was a guest for dinner. Her father made a point of speaking to her lightly and often, but he never met her eyes. When he got up to leave the table, her mother put a hand over hers and whispered, "Tell me where you put your underwear, honey." She jerked her hand away.

Several times that night, thunder woke her up. And every time she woke up, she felt the strangeness of the belt and pad, and remembered.

The next morning, when she went out, it took her a minute to realize what was so terribly different about the back yard. And even then, she had to keep blinking, trying to focus her eyes.

The patch of earth was different. Slowly she walked over to it, the grass damp and cold beneath her bare feet. Mushrooms. Hundreds of them, standing singly and in clusters. They were mother-of-pearl coloured, smooth and fleshy. She had taken mushrooms apart before — knew how they felt, how they smelled. But these — there were too many of them. They were all over, making the patch of earth and the grass around it look like a miniature graveyard. How could so many of them have grown so quickly?

Once again, she felt that frightening division within herself. Half of her wanted to pluck one of them and take it apart and rub the soft, fleshy crown against her cheek. The other part wanted to stamp all of them into a disgusting pulp.

But she just stood staring at them until she heard someone clear his throat behind her. Her father was lighting a cigarette with shaking hands. He smiled a little too broadly, then said,

"Looks like we've got quite a crop there!"

Then he choked and coughed on cigarette smoke.

She remembered, as if it were a long time ago, wanting to give him that horrible Jack-o'-lantern smile, and it made her smile gently at herself and at him. He smiled back, meeting her eyes, then looking away. He walked briskly over to where the mushrooms were, squatted down and lifted the cap of one of them with his finger.

"You see, these always come up whenever wood starts to rot. . . . "

He had to clear his throat again. His voice was still dry and tight, but it relaxed and began to sound more the way it usually did, as he talked on and on about spores and zygotes and buttons. Soon she was squatting beside him, reaching out a finger to touch the nearest mushroom.

Gerald Lynch / SEAMUS AND THE CROW

Christopher sat squirming in the middle of the hedgerow out behind the big stone house, fighting to draw his knees nearer to his chest, to remove his protruding feet from daylight. Cramped in the undergrowth, itching and sweating and unable to scratch, his elbows dug into his ribs as his heels pushed into the groove deepening beneath them, foiling his efforts by causing him to slip even farther into the betraying light. He cursed his feet as he had heard Jem curse him, knowing that his retreat would prove futile. It was too late. Jem would find him whenever he bothered to look. Jem had probably already descended from his loft and was now on his way out back, eyes darting. Christopher knew it was hopeless to hide . . . as hopeless as a stupid Minchelin. His panic rushed back and he again began the losing battle with his own size. He cried as quietly as he could, the salty sweat in his eyes, his genitals aching from the squeeze.

It was enough that he was bothered by his feigned disinterest when he and Jem had killed the snake the evening before, enough that he was worried by his inability to resist Jem's threats, and more than enough that he was frightened by his growing awareness of Jem's difference from the other men on the farm. The incident with the snake proved all: Christopher's bothered discomfort, his worried defencelessness, Jem's difference.

The evening before, they had gone down to the cowpond to drive the herd home. Jem had talked nonstop, rambling on in his usual manner, spouting about the cost of maintaining a family in Korea, a leap from that to the origins of leprosy in the United States (how African elephants were to blame), leapfrogging from that to cosmology: "The sun, cod, is a match that was struck by the devil, and all the stars and moons are wee bits that flew off when the match was struck, and so're we in a way . . . Jesus, I wish I'd worn a cardigan, it's getting colder already, and this only September . . . anyway, as soon as the match burns out — and it must, you know — everything will get cold again and we'll all go to sleep forever. . . . Do you understand me?"

A frightening challenge, but Christopher had by this time learned discretion, what he felt was respect for his elders, even for Jem whom, he knew, was more like a child. "But what about God?"

"God?" Jem laughed, his face cringing. "Is it a theological debate you're wantin'?"

"Uh — I don't know. . . . It's just that God rules the devil, even when this world ends or we die, 'cause — "

"Will you just look at that old snake lying up there on the bank," Jem interrupted, stumbling, spittle flying from the corners of his mouth. He ran to the mucky bank of the drying pond, picked up a small snake and flung it into the centre of the pond. When it returned to the bank he flung it again, high in the air, end over end. This time the snake wove a slower return to the opposite side.

"You stand where I was, cod," Jem shouted, frenzied as he ran to the other side. "And watch your side. When it comes out, throw it back into the middle. And don't stand idle or I'll throw you after it." He held the snake aloft by its tail: "Here's to your God and all his blessed saints in heaven." He whirled his arm like a windmill and let fly the snake; it rose until it was but a speck against the darkening sky, then fell, into the dead centre of the stagnant pond.

Christopher took up his position in the thick sole-sucking muck of the bank and did as he had been told. The cold evening descended quickly as he slopped back and forth on the rim of the pond, reluctantly sending the snake airborne, praying that Jem would soon tire of this sick game and leave the snake alone. Insects buzzed his ears, droning: home . . . home . . . home. But it was Christopher who sent the snake on its last flight, and Christopher who watched achingly as it came weaving back in a barely discernible convoy of ripples to the spot where he and Jem had converged. It struggled into the healing muck, lay still, a bubble of blood at the corner of its parted jaws.

"D'ye see what I mean? D'ye see? . . . "

Jem calmed after a short vigil and they went about their work, herding the few cows up to the barn. Work, it was work to Jem, but Christopher enjoyed the herding. He liked being near the familiar animals, had named his favourite cow and pig. He had even invented an animal the three-legged Minchelin. To the delight of the farmhands he would often hold a stick in front of himself and gallop

about the yard braying, "Minchelin-Minchelin," stumbling each time the stick stabbed the ground. A clumsy animal, the Minchelin inevitably stumbled and fell. But Christopher believed that it rose stronger, having sucked strength from the earth through its lone probing foreleg. Winking at each other, enjoying the game more because known, the farmhands would ask Christopher what the Minchelin was always doing in the dirt. And Christopher would give the ritualized reply: Looking for his lost leg.

"I suppose we took care of that ould crawler," Jem said as he locked the big barn door. "You know, cod, I'd be willing to bet that that ould snake felt about the same way as I did when I left that lunatic bin they call a hospital. . . . Ah well, well-well, how many wells would make a river?"

"I don't know."

"Now that's the mystery. . . . So, up with the birds and tomorrow we'll show you the other ways to skin a cat. Would you like that?"

Christopher said nothing. Jem disappeared through the inset door and left him to his own feelings and unformed thoughts, stirrings that had confused him since his last picture of the battered snake lying in the oozing muck with blood, red as his own, exhaled from its parted jaws.

He walked down the incline to the house, entered quietly and went to bed, where all night he soaked his sheet with a cooling sweat. *How could he save the many cats?* They were everywhere. He lay all night on the ragged edge of his nightmares, raving between sleep and wakefulness, dreaming fitfully of a massive herd of Minchelins being driven off the edge of the world by a dark figure standing on the seat of a massive silver tractor. The Minchelins, which he had always imagined covered with a soft auburn fur, and big as kangaroos, were naked as plucked chickens, millions of mice-sized Minchelins stampeding into cold dark space. In the morning he woke to a colder stiffness in the damp sheets, drank a quick cup of tea and went immediately out back and into the hedgerow.

As the morning wore on he continued his struggle in the hedge, still hoping somehow to telescope his shins into his thighs, to collapse

his legs like the accordion gate that coralled his younger brother on the porch. He heard someone moving in the garden, then Jem's voice approaching the hedgeside. He froze, a perfect stillness that sawed still like a hive of bees in his head.

"Where are ya, cod?" came the question. "Hiding in the hedge? Come on out or you'll be a sorry little sinner for it. Come on out and face your punishment. Come on, you're coming out one way or another."

He maintained his perfect stillness in the damp darkness, hearing only the thumping of his heart and the padding of Jem's feet along the hedgerow. Just as he realized the approaching sound had stopped, his feet were gripped and he was torn from his hiding. Hanging upside down, he looked up into Jem's triumphant face.

"Oh cod, you'll be paying for this," Jem said. He swung Christopher over the ditch and proceeded into the adjoining cowpasture. "Perhaps a little dip in some dung will be teaching you to mind your elders when they call. That's the thing, a wee bit of cowpie for the soul to teach you some manners. Would that suit that pretty empty head of yours?"

Jem moved briskly across the field, chuckling and glancing worriedly over his shoulder, his catch quivering like a strained inverted wishbone before him, an ankle held in each hand. He jerked anxiously toward the freckled corner of the pasture with the boy held in a taut Y-shape, a man with a human divining rod moving in the assurance of paydirt.

Draining blood reddened Christopher's face as the half-cropped stubble of the pasture raked his head. But he neither spoke nor whimpered, though he had been scraped when pulled from his hiding in the hedge. Even now, out in the open air, he felt as suffocated in the rush of the artificial breeze as he had in the hedgerow, as he always felt in Jem's presence. And yet, with all about him threatening, he still experienced a certain exhilaration in the man's company. It was not simply the release of facing an inevitable confrontation; it was a quickening, the sure surge of spirits that had bound him to Jem from their first meeting, despite the continual gnawings of guilt, shame and fear since. It was an excitement, and more than excitement: the man's mystery, secrecy, the confession, confidences, and conspiracies shared with *him*, a boy; the undeniable thrill of this swing through Jem's topsy-turvy world as he bobbed ahead of the man like an extra limb.

Jem, whose real name was Seamus Daly, had been working at the Kisbey's farm in Brigden for three weeks. He had come from somewhere in Southwestern Ontario (working his way as a farmhand, he claimed) and endeared himself to Christopher's mother with exaggerated Irish piety, then paying for his meal with some light yard labor, an eruption of gratitude and, most impressively, a boisterous string of prayers. Taken in by the appearance of simplicity, Mrs. Kisbey saw to it that Seamus was hired on for the harvest and allotted a makeshift room in the barn loft. Although Seamus never did harvest with the other men, it soon became obvious to the farmhands that Seamus was crazy, maybe dangerously so, at best a halfwit, though definitely not an idiot or simpleton. Still, within a week he was known to everyone as Simple Jemmy and blamed for every mishap that occurred within hearing distance of the space he occupied. It was soon rumored that his odd ways were a result of the war — some shrapnel that he had caught in the head while fighting as a Canadian volunteer for the Americans in Korea — and that he had been recently released from a long stay at the psychiatric hospital in St. Thomas. Some versions had it that Seamus had escaped.

These rumors alarmed Mrs. Kisbey, though she knew that their source was Simple Jemmy himself, "talking himself up." She cautioned her children to stay clear of the new man, insisting nevertheless that he was "one of the Lord's poor unfortunate creatures," one who was assured of a spot in heaven with those babies who died baptized.

Mrs. Kisbey relaxed her censorship after Seamus had passed a couple of uneventful weeks at the farm, rediscovering in the man an innocence unassailable by the sticks and stones of gossip. After three weeks Seamus had lodged himself as her personal yard hand, taking up permanent residence in the loft. Mrs. Kisbey no longer snapped her head up in maternal concern when Seamus' voice broke

her silence, finding instead a restfulness that disarmed in the man's chanted outbursts of prayer. Being too busy with breakfast one morning, she asked Christopher to run up to the barn and call Simple Jemmy in to eat (she too used the nickname, but made it clear to her children that it was a title rather than a slur).

Although only peripherally acquainted with the strange new man about the place, Christopher had been fascinated by Seamus' peculiarities, the musical gibberish, the energy. He had often hid near where Seamus was working and eavesdropped for hours. The drone of the man's continuous chant could lull him behind a bush or wall as the cool water of the millrace across his feet could launch him into hours of lost daydreaming. Christopher had been eager for an excuse to approach the source of this hum and was grateful for the opportunity to go and call Simple Jemmy to breakfast.

He ran up the incline to the barn but approached the door with the caution of a prowler. He quietly opened the inset door and froze at the sound from the loft. He had heard the nonstop murmur many times before, the familiar, but he had never been in the man's presence. The smell of the barn, the dusty air, hot even now and sliced by swords of sunlight through the wall boards, all of it had an arresting effect. Kicking off his heavy shoes, he stole to the foot of the ladder and began a slow silent ascent. Holding his breath, he reached for the top rung and cautiously raised his head above the floor of the loft, ready for anything, the madman conversing with the devil. Instead he saw Simple Jemmy bent over his cot in the rigid fervor of his prayers, ejaculating Our Fathers in spasms. Awestruck, Christopher concentrated on the knobs of vertebrae on the man's sweat-soaked back until the rungs of the ladder began to hurt his bare feet, drawing him back to his errand. He leaned away from the loft, fearing the consequences of disturbing the enraptured madman.

"Simple Jemmy," he called, forgetting that the name was never used directly. "Mom says to come and eat now."

Seamus twisted from the waist, the shock of sound and sense on his face, eyes reddened by the knuckles of his fists. His eyes met, locked onto and held Christopher's. The man's forehead was a furrowed white, from the centre of which his hawk's nose seemed to hook into his thin-lipped mouth. Christopher was a blank, as unyielding of information as is an empty blackboard.

"What did you call me?" Seamus whispered, beginning a grin that drew his nose even farther into his mouth. "Speak, cod!"

He stood up, stepped over to the ladder, grabbed and swung Christopher into the loft, where the boy's toes curled and uncurled about the scattered straw. Seamus returned to his knees in front of Christopher, gripped his shoulders and stared directly into his eyes, not questioning or entreating but prying, probing like a shaft sliding in to sample.

For the first time Christopher experienced the overpowering effect of Seamus' eyes. They had the size, shape and lustre of his big clear marbles. Christopher could feel those eyes move in and through him, tingling in the back of his throat like ice, holding his tongue and reaching on down for his heart. He stared blankly at his own face reflected in those eyes, afraid he was about to wet himself.

"So, that's what they're calling me now, is it?" Seamus reflected. He rose to his feet and began pacing, but soon knelt down again in front of Christopher. "And do you think I'm a . . . a Simple Jemmy, codface?"

"M-M-Mom says — "

"To the devil with mommy!" he roared, shaking Christopher so that his lower lip snapped tight again. "I'm asking you, you sniveling little killer."

Christopher couldn't answer. Seamus began muttering and ranting, kicking the straw and stubbing his big toe. He punched himself hard a few times in the stomach, then calmed as suddenly and relaxed onto his cot. He told Christopher that he was going to explain to him why they called him Simple Jemmy, because he could see that Christopher was an ignorant cod and didn't know what he was saying. He told how he had been a corporal fighting for the Americans in Korea, how one day an unexploded shell had landed in the swampy bunker where he and his men were holed-up, how he had found his way back to the command post to report the danger, and how his superiors had threatened him with courtmartial for leaving the line of duty while under fire.

"That's how they treat their volunteers," he whined. Then proudly: "Me, a major in the provisionals back home till it died down there. A Canadian then, and volunteerin' to fight for the bloody Yanks in their God-forsaken war. Ah, but they put me in charge of a troop of sorry niggers who, if the truth be known, knew more about that kind of jungle scrappin' than all their generals. But they wouldn't listen to them, or me, they never — "

"Who were you fighting?" Christopher whispered, finding his tongue as Seamus' attention grew reflective, turning from the boy and winding in upon himself.

"Who indeed?" Seamus sighed to his lapped hands. "Who was I fighting!" he shouted, snapping at the boy like a released spring. "What the hell difference does that make! Why, the Koreans of course."

Seamus rocked to his feet and began pacing again, striding nearer to the unrailed edge of the loft with each trip, stopping each time to peer down into the hulk of rusted machinery below. Balanced dangerously on the edge, he reached up into a cobwebbed corner of shit-covered rafter beams and pulled down an impressive gangling spider. He returned and sat on the floor in front of Christopher with his legs spread. Holding the spider by a few of its legs, he pulled off a free one and dropped it on the floor. It twitched and danced like a ball of spit on hot metal. He moved it about with his finger, giggling.

He raised his finger and pointed it directly between Christopher's eyes: "Now cod, stop with your interrupting. Just keep your eyes on that daddy-longlegs' lost part and you'll learn a few things that Bobby Bruce missed entirely."

Christopher stood mute and paralyzed, bracketed by Seamus' bristled shins which stretched a good distance past his own bare feet. Between the man and the boy the hair-like leg continued its nervousness as others fell to join it. The severed dance of the legs held Christopher's attention as the man resumed his low drone.

"Yes sir, I went back to my men like I was told all right. But just as I got within seeing distance the shell rolled into that stinking soaked hole and exploded." Seamus held the deserted body of the spider between thumb and forefinger, crushed and dropped it among the small pile of debris that twitched in its own spattering of blood.

His chin resting on his breastbone, Seamus whimpered: "Do you know, cod, there was no more left of my men to tell one from the other than what you see right there. . . . And it was me they made sort out the tags."

They remained silent, their vigil concentrated on the remains of the spider. For the first time since Seamus had sat down with the spider, Christopher looked at his face. His eyes had dulled, their sparkle gone, seemingly sore for tears; but his mouth was twisted in two different directions, one corner up and the other pulled down, gums bared in a leer.

"And do you know what I did, cod?" he continued, rising to his feet, rubbing his hands and chuckling. "I made a joke of it, a good story. I made out that I was crazy so as they wouldn't put me away. I had to make up something. You know, they tried to put the blame on me — it's the Mick, the crazy Canadian, volunteer, must be mad, can't be us! . . . They tried to say that I . . . so I kept on pretending to be a — uh — a Simple Jemmy, because I knew they'd be hearing about it back home, and everywhere, and be wantin' to blame me too. They always have to have somebody else to blame."

Seamus heaved to his feet and, reckless, walked to the edge of the loft where, punching, rubbing and pulling at his left shoulder, he stared intently down.

"I wouldn't blame you, Sim — Jem," Christopher called, finding a voice. It was the first time that he used the new name for Seamus. "I'd blame the ones who shot the bomb, the . . . uh — the Kores."

"You'd what?" shouted Jem, swinging around with a peal of mad laughter. "The who? The bomb? You'd blame who? The corpse? The corps? The rotten core of the corps' corpse?"

With a few long strong strides Jem stood in front of Christopher. He picked him up and tossed him high into the air. "Jem, is it? Yes? Oh but you're the gem, cod. But aren't we going to be the greatest of friends. Didn't I know the moment I laid eyes on that empty head of yours poking up like a worm that you'd do me some good. And sure as there's a devil in hell you have. . . . Now, let's go in to eat before your mommy forgets we're alive."

Jem performed his menial chores that day accompanied by Christopher, who could only grow more fascinated as the man reintroduced him to a world which he had thought he knew as well as his bare feet knew the path from his back door to the millrace. Jem, the pace of his speech machine-gun, explained unthought of mysteries, redefined, and continually posed questions without pausing for replies. The soil, the ground, the entire earth upon which they walked was a dungball drifting rudderless in a universal pig-sty, ever ready to sink and allow Christopher to be swallowed into an eternity of suffocating hell. The cleared fields into which his father disappeared every morning now proved to be an insignificant scratch in a wilderness waiting menacingly just the other side of the tree line. All animals, even the chickens and cows, were beasts biding their time, their vengeance, eager to peck out Christopher's eyes or stomp his brains into the dust should he let down his guard for an instant. Jem cautioned him to fear what lies behind the tree line, warned that the woods were wild with flesh-eating monsters, beasts that were half-woman half-wolf waiting to devour snooping young boys. And when Christopher looked out to the line of trees that backed the fields, he agreed with Jem, who brooked no disagreement. When he gazed long enough at those woods that he had hoped to explore some day, he believed, thought he saw a flash of orange fur, a horn.

That first day with Jem, begun so companionably, conspiratorially, had ended with the torturing and killing of the snake. To Christopher, that first day felt confusingly related to this morning and his present predicament, swinging through the cowpasture, helpless, on the way to having his head dunked in a cowpie. His fear, strange taste of something bad, evil, his excited fascination, these were connection to the previous evening. But total helplessness, that was the sudden change, his inability to escape what he had welcomed. Although separated only by nightmares and the snatches of sleep he had managed in his damp bed, he felt the two days to be as different as black from white, distinct in terms of his willing participation; and yet, connected still by his curiosity to see what would happen next, what would be done to him, and what he would be led or forced to do.

"Oh, we're going to baptize you with cowdung. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Minchelin. And then I'll take a salt block and shove it down your throat. Yes-yes, and while your head's in the dung you can take a look around for that other leg you've lost. Then maybe you can stand up when I call and not go running off like a coward . . .

"Minchelin-Minchelin-Minchelin," Seamus brayed in imitation of Christopher. "I'll Minchelin you, turncoat, traitor!"

They arrived at the corner of the field. The cows turned to face the man staggering towards their droppings. The herd was gathered loosely beneath the roof of an open-ended metal shed, ruminating indifferently as the couple approached in their awkward symbiosis. The shed, which served as the animals' lone shield against the sun, was about twelve feet high; it was roofed with corrugated metal that distorted the space above with waves of heat reflected from the noon sun. The roof ran flat along the top, then sloped a few feet to the back eaves where a huge black crow perched, hunched and enfolded above the prone cows. The ground about the shed was bare, parched, and littered with the rusted remains of outmoded tools.

"Are you ready for this, cod?" Jem asked, holding Christopher by the ankles over a dropping baked black by the sun, smooth and blank as an unetched mandala. "You know, they say that this is the stuff that makes things grow. Well, I'm full of it, they all say that. Let's see what it does for you."

Christopher lost consciousness as his head met the hardened crust of dung. The vapors from below came fuming into his mind with the tepid sensation of cows licking the sweat from the back of his neck. All around him there was a pulsating murmur, directed at him, swelling from below, above and on all sides. He was engulfed by an urgent but hushed message, an indistinct and incoherent murmur, a soft but persistent warning. Silent blackness. Then the voices again, dark in confusion, staggered, so that only single words came clear. He was standing by the cowpond at night, black still pond, staring at its dead centre, the voices buzzing his ears with warning: -home . . . alone . . . no-home . . . alone. Words he had to put sense to, to pick out from the droning. The effort made him sick and he vomited into the pond. Choking, he was hanging upside down inside the hedgerow. But the hedgerow was now a wide ditch filled with cud-chewing cows grouped along a rail. Jem was moving along inside the rail, his prize hanging by the heels. Christopher felt the wet slap of each cow respectfully lapping the nape of his neck as he passed . . . and stopped choking. He was trying to shout up to Jem that this was a mortal sin, that his legs were coming out of their sockets, that he wanted to go back, home, that. . . . He began humming back to light, to the blended sounds of scattering hooves and Jem's distant screaming. He came to and found himself, soiled by vomit, chilled and light-headed, lying beside the slightly cracked dung.

"Get over here quick, cod!" Seamus roared, in a condition of frenzy that Christopher had seen only twice before — the confession, the killing of the snake. "We've got this black bugger! He can't move, look!"

Seamus was pelting the crow with every stone and chunk of dirt he could lay his hands on. But the missiles had little effect on the crow. It sat unbothered, eyes closed, wings tucked tight. The cows lumbered away, haunches moving like sluggish pistons.

"Quick cod!" Seamus bellowed, nostrils flaring, "you'll have to get up on the roof and drop something on this dying devil, if he's not dead already."

Spittle flying from the corners of his mouth, Seamus gripped Christopher above the elbow in the bony vice of his hand and pulled him around to the front of the shed. Using his hands and shoulders he lifted Christopher to the top of the shed door that had long been packed open by seasons of accumulated dirt. From there Christopher pulled himself onto the roof and stood, curling and uncurling his toes,

unaware of his feet burning on the hot metal. Hot air filled his lungs and he could neither breathe easily nor see clearly.

"Wait on the edge, Jesus-mother-blackbird. I'll get something to hand up to you. Don't move from your station till I say or I'll come up there and throw you down on the ugly bugger."

Christopher lay flat, hanging his head and arms over the roof's edge, listening as Seamus disappeared in a fit of prayers, oaths and curses, actually hearing the sweat fizz out on his own back. He couldn't tell how long Seamus was away; the day appeared to darken, brighten, the sun seeming to wink in and out of clouds; day or night he couldn't tell.

Seamus returned carrying a short-handled sledge hammer with a blunt, oversized head. Reddish-brown scrapings of rust from the head of the sledge fell into Seamus' upturned and eager face as he handed up the weapon, making him blink and spit furiously as he gave the order: "Now drag this tool across the roof, codface, and slide it down on the ugly black bugger. And don't be a woman. You know you've seen your daddy kill animals when they're no good anymore."

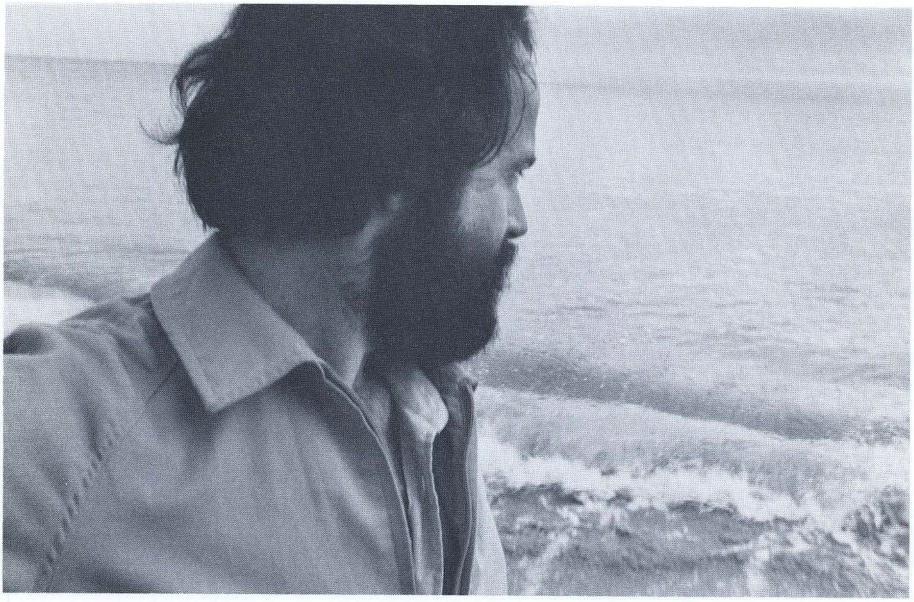
Christopher listened to Seamus but heard only the hissing sweat on his own back. For the first time he hesitated in carrying out a direct order from Seamus, but he reached involuntarily for the hammer when he saw that Seamus' eyes seemed about to explode from their sockets. He gripped the hammer with both hands, pulled and dragged it onto the roof.

"Jesus Christ!" Seamus shrieked as he disappeared around the corner of the shed, his arms thrown above his head. "Run home to your mommy's petticoats if you're going to think about it . . . woman. You baby woman, you Dalila hooer! I'll tear your limbs off when you get down, I will. The black bugger can't move. Hammer it!" There was silence, then the shrill voice from the back of the shed: "Well? Hammer it! All you gotta do is just slide it down on top of him. I'll get it on the ground. Do it! Do as you're ordered or I'll come up there and bust your head then feed it to the woman-wolf."

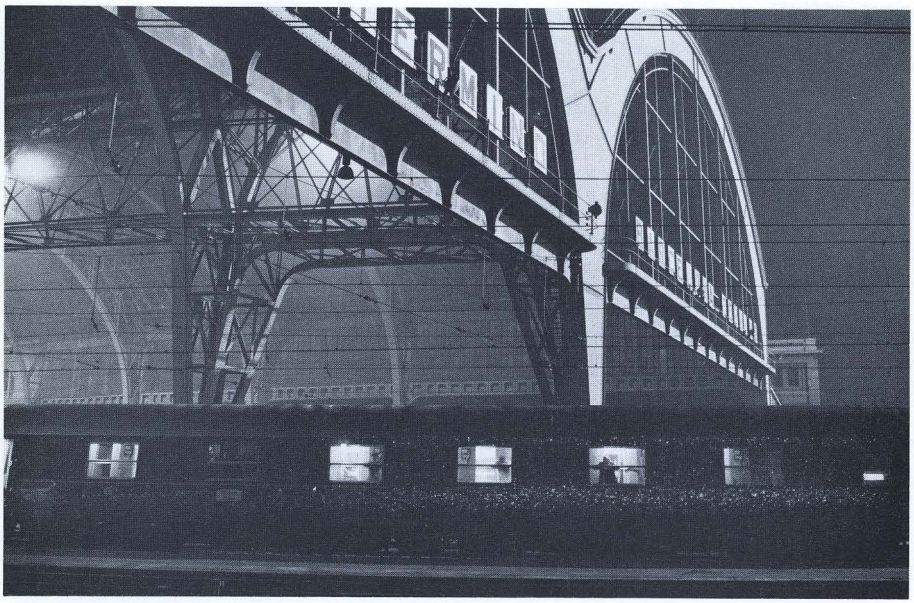
Christopher stood and dragged the hammer towards the back ledge, leaving small drops of blood in his path where the heads of the roof screws tore the soles of his feet. When he turned he was standing directly above the crow, which sat sideways on the lower edge, its eyes now open. Staring into the one wide black eye that fixed him, he hoisted the hammer a few inches between his spread legs. On the third seemingly effortless swing he let the weapon fly. It cleared the crow's head by a foot. He was down in a curled position on the roof when the unmistakable sound of crushing skull penetrated his raving darkness.

The crow stretched its neck and turned its head from side to side. It broke the silence with a flutter of its blue-black wings, extending itself, then settling back, as though in trial of forgotten or awakened prowess. It cawed harshly, piercingly. Christopher opened wide his eyes in time to see it swoop like a piece of black cloth in the direction of the farmhouse.

Ken Straiton/

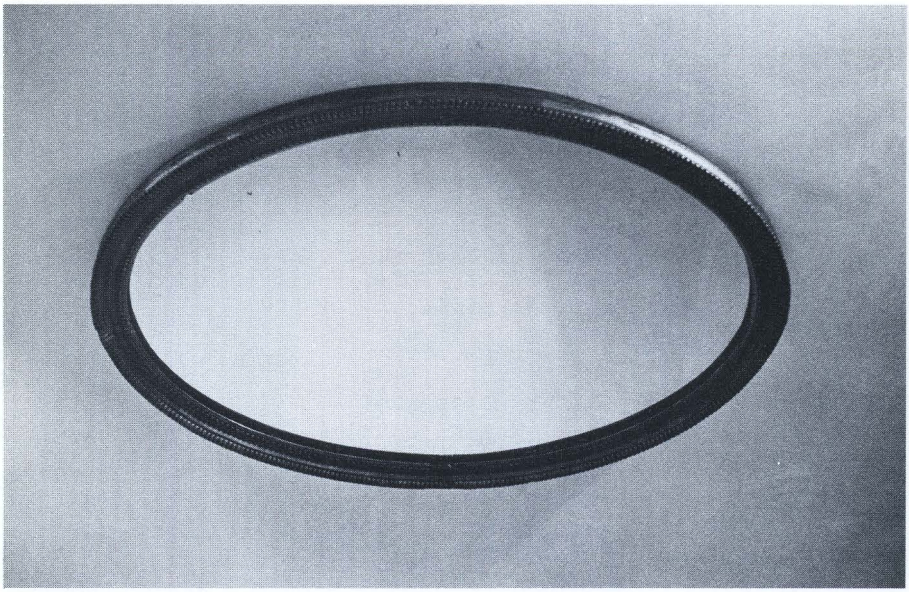


I went to find myself . . . and I did.

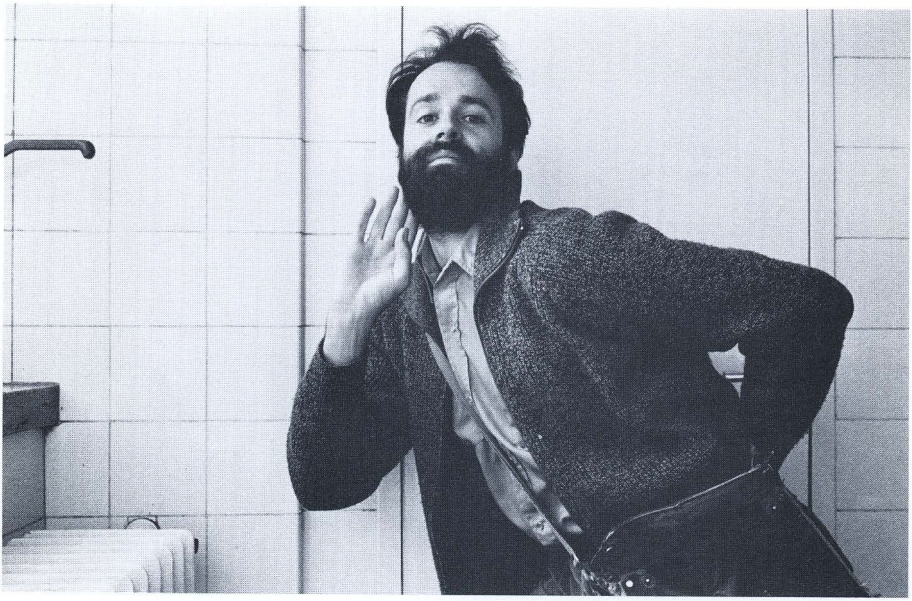


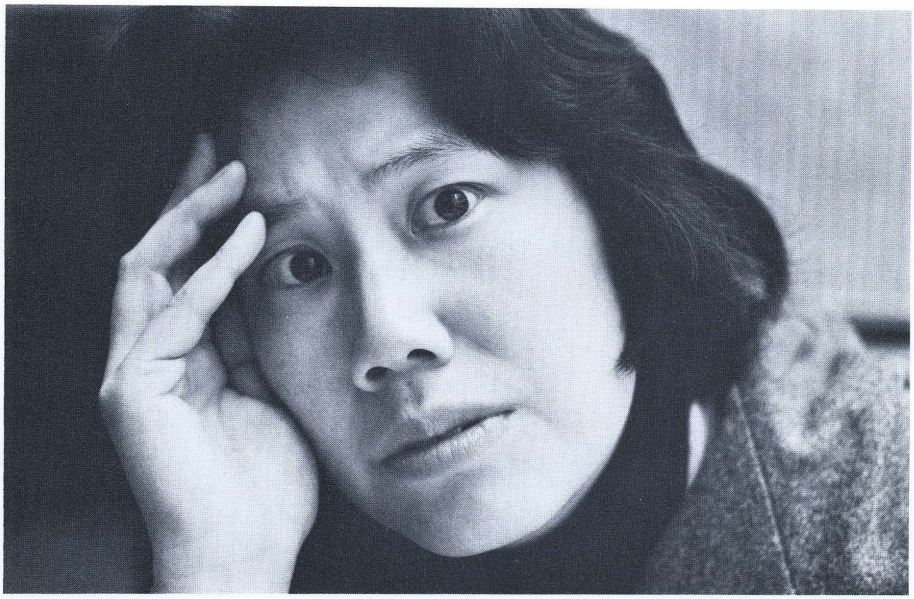
Or maybe it was to escape

but the further I went, the more my
perceptions were a reflection of myself

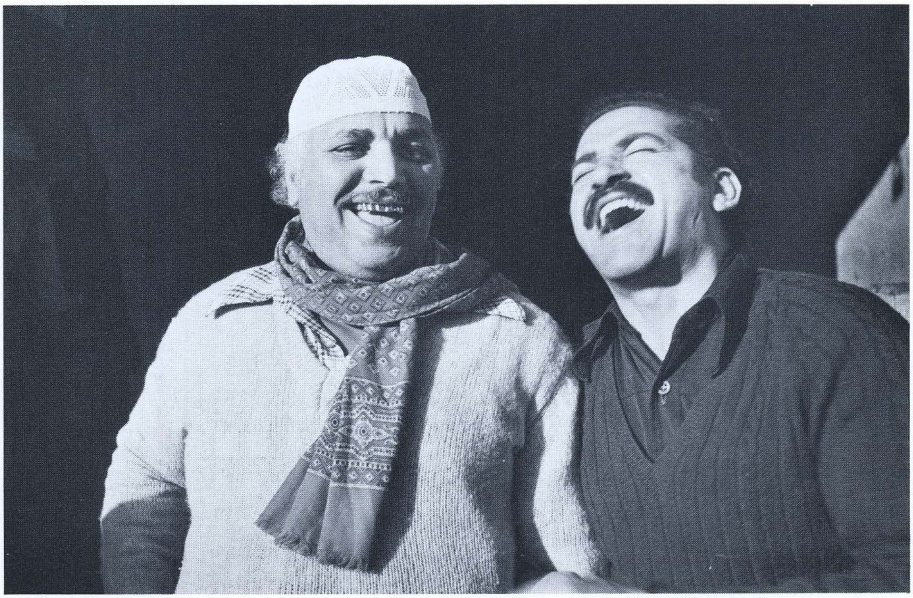


(So why was I there?)

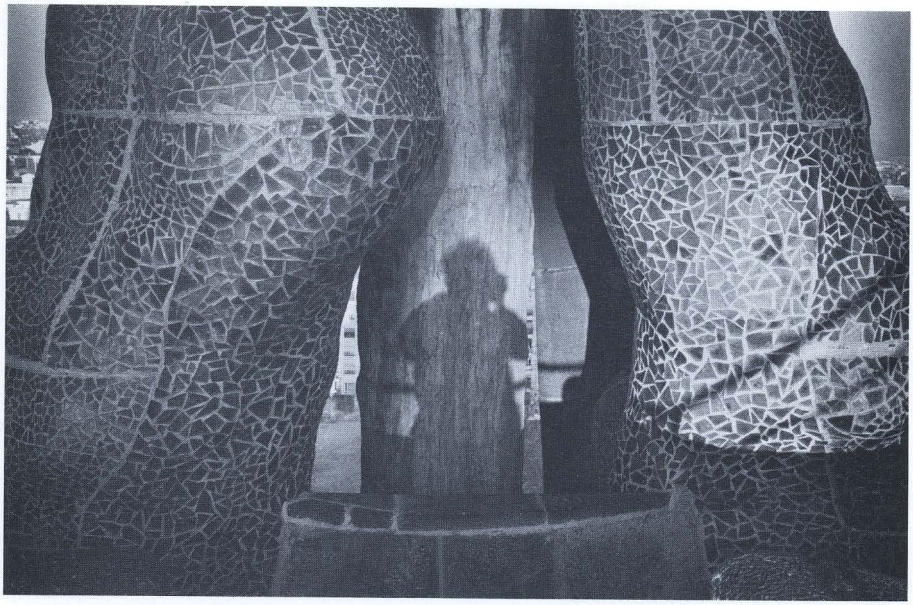




Every time I met someone I was more conscious of myself than of them.



Famous paintings were reduced to mere
commas in my visual experience



. . . while historic monuments became my props . . .

Experience was a reflection of my perceptions . . .
. . . in the end I found myself everywhere

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

BRENDA RICHES is a frequent contributor to *The Capilano Review* and was the subject of an interview in Issue #14. She is also Fiction Editor of *Grain* and is the author of *Dry Media*, published by Turnstone Press.

KEATH FRASER lives and writes in Vancouver. His work has appeared in *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, *The Malahat Review* and *82: Best Canadian Stories* (Oberon). A collection of his fiction, *Taking Cover*, will be published by Oberon this Fall.

LOUIS PHILLIPS' short story "Everything I Know About Lulu" is in the current issue of *Wascana Review*. His plays include: *The Last of The Marx Brothers' Writers* (in *West Coast Plays #2*), *The Ballroom in St. Patrick's Cathedral* (produced at The Colonnades Theatre Lab, NYC), and *Warbeck* (in *George Spelvin's Theatre Book*, Vol. III, No. 2). Mr. Phillips' latest book for children is *How Do You Get a Horse Out Of The Bath Tub?*, due out from Viking Press in Fall 1982.

LARRY TROTTER, also known to his friends as Tristan, came to Vancouver from Edmonton to work as a reporter/editor with the Canadian Press. He left CP to study photography at the Emily Carr College of Art and now does a variety of freelance work. The figure and cloud images combined for this issue were made between 1978 and 1981.

If anyone knows who or where RICHARD LUSH is, tell him there's a small royalty cheque waiting for him at *The Capilano Review*.

KATHLEEN D. MILLER is a native of Hamilton, Ontario and a graduate of the Theatre Department at the University of Guelph, with a Master's degree in Directing from UBC. Her fiction has appeared in *Flare* and her non-fiction in *The Globe and Mail*.

GERALD LYNCH was born in Monoghan, Ireland and his work has previously appeared in many publications including *Fiddlehead*, *Matrix*, and *Canadian Poetry*. He now lives in London, Ontario and is completing his Doctorate at the University of Western Ontario.

KEN STRAITON's photographs were published in TCR #15. Since then he has travelled extensively in Europe and returned with several hundred new images. Currently he is in Tokyo working on a film about Japanese life as perceived by North Americans.

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