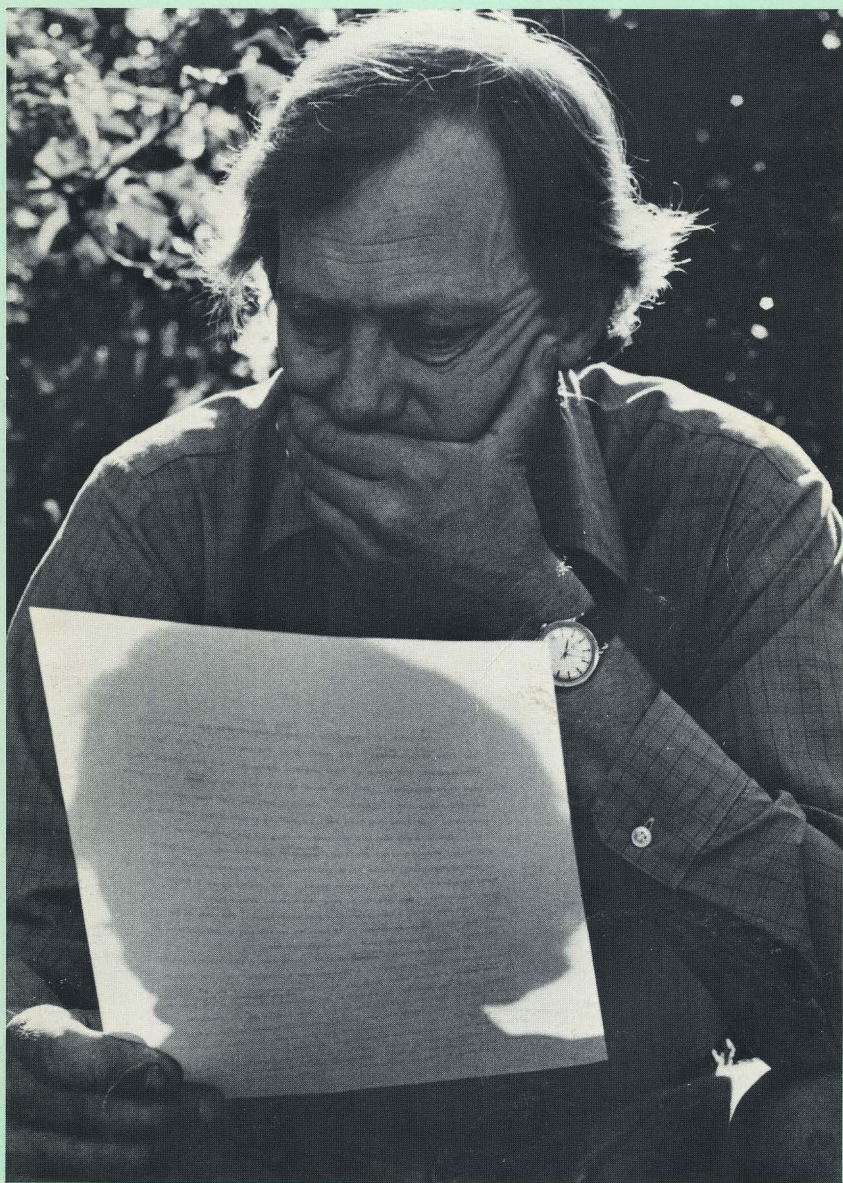


THE CAPIANO REVIEW



This issue is dedicated with affection to Bill Schermbrucker, our former editor-in-chief. His wit, warmth and story-telling gifts are sorely missed at meetings.

—*TCR* EDITORS

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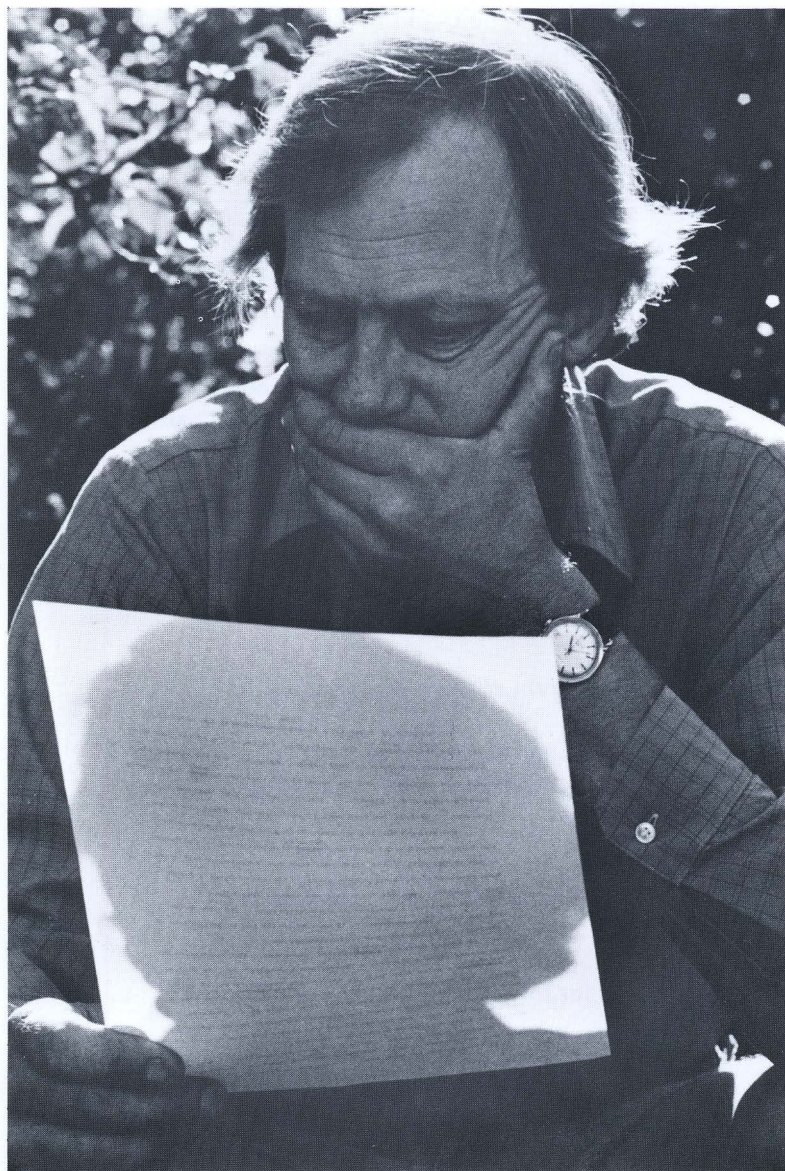
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photography
for this issue: Robert Sherrin

BILL SCHERMBRUCKER



PREFACE / Audrey Thomas

About fifteen years ago the phone rang, and as I was nearest, I answered it. A voice with a strong West African accent asked if this was Mrs. Thomas. I said yes, and the voice introduced itself as belonging to a Mr. Owusu-Banahene (or some similar Ghanaian name), and he went on to say that he was at the Vancouver Airport. Mr. Thomas had said that if by any remote and lucky chance he should happen to find himself in Canada he was to ring up straight away. So here he was and he was ringing up and his wife and children were with him too and he wondered, if, for a few days — just until we get settled, you understand — could they stay with us?

I didn't know what to say. I couldn't remember the man; he hadn't been one of Ian's students, I knew that, but the only hospitable thing to do was invite them to come on over. "How many children do you have?" I asked. "Seven," he said, but not to worry, two were at home. Five of theirs and two of ours and tenants already upstairs and in the basement suite. I said, "Just a minute, please. I'll get my husband." (Since he had issued the invitation he could deal with its consequences.) Just as I was putting down the phone I heard a burst of maniacal laughter; it wasn't Mr. Owusu-Banahene after all. It was Bill Schermbrucker, our new friend from up the street, absolutely delighted that he had fooled me.

It was the first time he fooled me but not the last. Bill has an almost uncanny ear for dialect and he can switch quite easily from playing the District Commissioner giving the toast to the Queen on a sweltering Christmas Day to an East Indian customs official, a garage mechanic — you name it. But if this were all he could do, simply *mimic* people, he would be no more than a clever, very sophisticated form of parrot. However, he also has the ability to see beyond what the words are saying to what they are *really* saying, right to the essence of the speaker behind the words. I think this requires a certain largeness of heart that goes beyond mere cleverness. He is one of the few people I've ever met who really listens, and he listens because he is truly interested. People respond to him because of this (my landlady in Crete who had all the chairs and tables out in the street for a farewell party the night before he left for home; our concierge in Paris who was not very pleased with us because we washed our linen out in the bidet — “*Je vous en prie,*” her note began, “*Je vous en prie.*” — but who blushed like a girl when Bill had the inspiration to buy her a bunch of flowers on La Fête des Mères).

One might say that if someone grows up into a world of privilege — and there is no doubt in my mind that the world Bill describes in his African stories is in many many ways a very privileged world indeed — then it is easy to be easy with the rest of the world. But he is never patronizing, never casual about his treatment of other people, and I have seen white people of equal privilege who were both casual and patronizing and often much much worse.

For years I despaired of Bill ever writing down his African stories. He seemed (as he so readily admits in the introduction to *Chameleon and Other Stories*) to want to turn his back on all that; it was “over.” He seemed to me to be writing about all the wrong things, ignoring the rich ore of his early life in favour of material that had not yet had time to shift and settle. He was like a man who absentmindedly carries a witching wand in his hand and when it dips down over the place where there is water he says, “Ah, this is just an old stick I’m out walking with and besides, even if it were true, all this nonsense about diviners, I’m not sure I’m interested in water any more.”

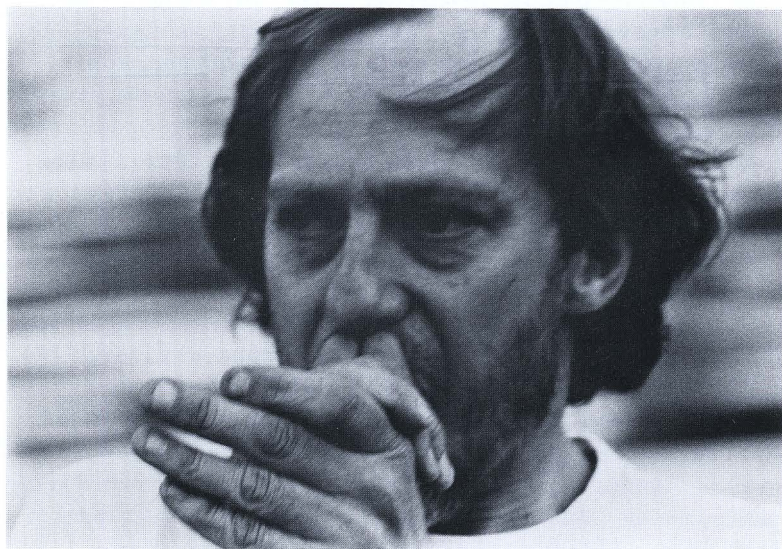
I'm writing all this not knowing which story will appear in this special section of *TCR* but I was interested to discover, reading so many of them together, as I have just done in *Chameleon and Other Stories*, what a male world Bill describes. The women are peripheral. Most of the time they don't even have names. "My mother," "the woman I live with," and so on. Their power is felt (their power both to wound and to cure) but they are not named. And most of the action is male. Boys at school, boys with guns shooting ducks, snakes, oxen, terrorists (boys with guns growing up). The one great exception to this is the woman he calls "Marie Johnson" in the beautiful story "Afterbirth." Now, in the original Acknowledgements, disclaimers, dedications, etc. to this book, Bill made the traditional remarks about "no resemblance to persons living or dead" and so on. He tells me that has now been cut out and, if only for my own sake, I'm glad. For was it a dream then, that I journeyed to that farm with "Calvin" and his wife and children, and met "Marie," the woman who brought my dearest friend into the world, the woman who first touched him (and who can still touch him, it is obvious, after all these years)? "Pete" was there, very tall and tanned, in khaki shorts and white shirt, every inch the "Settler" or the "Settler's son." Old Martin was there and the native servants (although probably none of these from Bill's time). I knew from an historical point of view I was seeing something equivalent to the dinosaurs. I didn't take any notes; maybe I should have. But I watched "Marie's" hands twist together and then her radiant smile as I was introduced. "Billy," she said, "you know Billy?" And then the stories began, went on over lunch, went on and on. They may not understand him but they love him and are proud of him. I was deeply moved.

Bill wrote a poem once, years ago, and I'm probably going to misquote it (he can tell you how often I do that). All I remember is two lines and it was about Africa, about the white man whose family may go back for generations but who's now in "the new philosophy" redundant.

*Now that I have no fathers
Who do I call my fathers?*

Something like that.

INTERVIEW / Bill Schermbrucker, Robert Sherrin, Claire Stannard Guffey



CSG What is your motivating principle in writing?

BS I guess there are two. One is purely that I feel like it, and I do it. I like to sit at the typewriter and write. But I've been very slow to produce publishable text, and so I've come to tell myself that that motivation, while it can be a source of good writing, is often purely therapeutic or just pleasure, and it is not producing a publishable product. I'll remember a story I've lived through or something like that — like I told a story today to Jim Bizzocchi about my friend — and I know I'll want to write this story, but meanwhile I enjoy telling the story, and I enjoy shaping the story and seeing people's reaction to it and so forth. At some point, I guess, then comes the other motivation which is to create a text that is publishable. I don't know if that answers you.

RS What is your motivating principle in *Chameleon and Other Stories*? They all deal with a place during a fairly distinct period of time. You obviously decided in a lot of your stories to focus on what happened in Kenya and to collect those stories together and exclude those that dealt with other things.

BS Well, I guess around 1972 or '73 I began to write short stories about Africa. Prior to that, I had written most of quite a long novel, and I had gotten tired of it, but around '72 or '73, I started to write these short stories about Africa, and I found that as I sent them out to various magazines, people were quite interested in them. So then at some point, maybe seven or eight years later, I looked at these stories and found that I had reached a point that I wasn't getting any rejections. I'd send the story out, and it might not be accepted at the first magazine, but it would be accepted at the second, and in fact there was one year when everything I sent out was accepted. I felt, well, people like these African stories, so I better just mine this vein and finish and get a book.

RS Do you like these African stories?

BS I didn't really enjoy some of them as much as others. "Mile Eighteen" is really not very interesting personally. I didn't discover very much when writing it. In "Mile Eighteen," I took some memories and used them as a basis to create a story — which is very close to the autobiographical reality. One of the things I was doing in "Another Movie" was getting rid of some old, old nightmares that had haunted me, so I don't think I really enjoyed writing that story. I really enjoyed * writing "Versions." I learned a lot partly because I researched so much, and "Chameleon" gave me quite a lot of pleasure because it was such a difficult story. It's really two stories, and I was teaching more than one Creative Writing class through the composition of that story. When I teach Creative Writing classes, I tend to show some of my work to the students, and "Chameleon" was shown to at least one class, maybe two, and I recall the students in Squamish telling me that that story must be taken apart and rewritten because it was two separate stories. Criticism is often very useful because it brings

something to the fore and you study it. I studied that problem for a long time, and I couldn't agree with them. I *know* it is two separate stories, yet I felt that those two stories belonged in one story. So there was a lot of pleasure in dealing with that as an aesthetic problem.

CSG Who do you write for or to?

BS I write for the people I respect as readers, I guess. I write for people who appreciate my language. I can't put names on them; I don't have an ideal reader particularly. I do have some friends who I routinely give my stories to and pay attention to their comments.

RS Are these African stories addressed to anybody in Africa or to characters within them? How much of the composition has to do with directing commentary towards the past, towards people from the past?

BS Well, I don't think I'm addressing myself to those characters or to the real life models from whom they might be drawn. What I am doing is I am telling my story. I guess ever since I was a small child, I felt that not many people viewed things the way I viewed them. In my own society when I grew up, I was kind of a rare species: people looked on me as a weakling; people looked on me as someone who didn't think rightly about things. I got into quite a lot of trouble at school expressing some political thoughts, and in my own family was told often to shut up because my ideas weren't mainstream ideas. I guess I've grown up with a notion that I have my story to tell which is my way of seeing things, and I am very aware that some of my own family and close relatives will not enjoy reading these stories at all.

CSG When you were growing up and people were giving you those messages, did you believe them, or was there a turning point when you started believing in the way you were?

BS I never believed them. I knew that I was different, but I never believed that my story was wrong. I thought they were wrong. But you have to understand that I grew up in a very non-literary culture. When I was about 15, I won a prize at school, and the prize was a book token. We were staying in what's now Zimbabwe — which was then Southern Rhodesia — on my uncle's farm. My older brother and I went into town. I bought a book, and as we were driving back in the truck to the farm, he asked me what the book was. It was the Nonesuch edition of Byron's poems, and he said, "Poetry, hm?" and I said, "Yeah," and he said, "Kipling wrote some good stuff." And I think that is the sum total of my literary conversations with my brother throughout our whole childhood.

CSG When books come up in your stories, they are like little treasures or gifts. In "Mile Eighteen," there are a couple of books. One is from your mother. Should we be saying your mother or Alistair's?

BS [Yeah, his mother. Well, it is true, the facts in "Mile Eighteen" are very close autobiographical facts, although the shaping of the story has been clearly fictionalized. I feel that my brother comes off quite badly in "Mile Eighteen," more so than I really want him to. But getting back to the books, it is true that books were gifts and they were special. In fact, I hadn't realized it until you said it now. Getting a book was a real special thing. And the person who would give me literary books was my mother. She bought me a book called *A Thousand and One Poems*. It was a wonderful book, I just lived in it.

CSG Do you still have it?

BS No, I don't have any of the African stuff. She bought me *Other Men's Flowers*, an anthology of poems by Lord Wavell, and that really pleased me. Also there was the woman who was the prototype of that woman in "Mile Eighteen." She gave us books for Christmas, and she gave me a book called *Big Brownie*. When I was writing that story, I went back and tried

to find that book — not on my shelves because I don't have it — and I couldn't find it, but I did manage to find a book review of it in *Book Review Digest*. It's about a bear. I don't think it's actually in Canada. It's set in Alaska.

CSG Have any of your family ever read your writing?

BS My stepmother read a story of mine, an African story which is not included in this collection because it really doesn't fit: it would pose too many problems — it has the wrong people dying at the wrong time and so forth — but it was one of the first of these African stories to be published. It is called "The Grave by the Fig." My stepmother read that story when she visited me in about 1975, and all she said was that I had "taken some liberties." I think my brother has read "Aga Dawn." I sent it to him, and then I spoke to him on the phone, and he said no, he didn't know what I was talking about, what story. A little later, he wrote to me and said he had looked now, and he thought I had remembered my father's attitude to East Indians wrongly, and he would like to sit down and talk to me and straighten out a few things.

CSG So they took it very literally?

BS Yes.

CSG You hadn't gotten it right.

BS Yes, you must get it right.

RS But how is it possible to get it right? Really, you're dealing with memory, and who knows whether you and your brother even share the same facts in that way. Could you ever get it right?

BS I don't know if that is a question that I could debate usefully with my brother because fiction isn't his bag. He is a veterinary researcher.

CSG [Audrey Thomas uses the term “autobiographical fiction” for her writing. Is that what you would call your stories? How would you define them?

BS [I knew you’d be asking me this question. The stories in *Chameleon and Other Stories* are autobiographical fiction. The distinction between autobiography and fiction has bothered lots of people for a long time, and it bothered me for a long time, but it doesn’t bother me any more because I don’t think asking questions about the distinction will ever really produce satisfactory answers. It was in ’67 that I was put off by the idea of writing anything that would be identifiably autobiographical. And now I’ve lost that because I see quite clearly that everything we do write is autobiographical. I think it’s Audrey who said, “Who does Rudy Wiebe think he’s writing about when he writes about Big Bear?”

RS I don’t know many writers that don’t work autobiographically to some degree. Some, more obviously than others, use a sense of autobiography to create a form for fiction.

BS Robertson Davies writes pseudo-autobiographies of his characters which may well be autobiographical to an extent. But the whole thing really has to do with story telling. If you’re sitting down with some people, and you’re telling them a story, they have to believe somehow in the reality of that story at some level. Now, whether you’re making the story up or whether the story is an attempt to actually transcribe the events that happen doesn’t matter so much as whether the person is interested in the story. I was teaching a class the other day, and I was reading some essays that they had written. They were comparing Michael Ondaatje’s work and Daphne Marlatt’s work from a special of *The Capilano Review* with the work of Hemingway. The students say that Michael Ondaatje and Daphne Marlatt are being faithful to what happened — they aren’t really writing fiction; they are writing historical stuff — whereas Hemingway is just inventing the stuff. Now, that is really quite amusing because the book of Hemingway’s that they are talking about is *The Sun Also Rises*, and we now know from critical studies that are being

done that it is heavily based on actual events. There was a beautifully clear sentence in one student's essay where he said something like, "Audrey Thomas' stories are based on real characters. She went there and she has conversations with these people. Whereas Hemingway never went to a bullfight with these characters. He made it up." This student has that sense perhaps just because Thomas and Marlatt and Ondaatje are Canadian writers and closer to that student's experience, whereas Hemingway in the Twenties in Paris and Spain must just be made up. By the way, this distinction between truth and invention is one that I was very familiar with from the time of being a child because whenever I travelled outside Kenya as a child, people were very interested, as they still are today: "What's Africa all about?" Africa holds this lure for people. So, from the age of nine or ten, when I'd be travelling in some other part of Africa, people would say. "Tell us about Kenya." So you embellish. They wanted a story to be interesting, and you made it interesting for them. You didn't tell them that Kenya is just like it is here; they weren't interested in that. They wanted to hear how it was different. You might move a tree a little bit or increase the height of the rhino that charged you, or make a rhino charge you when it didn't actually happen. It happened to somebody else, or you heard about it.

RS I was wondering about the author/narrator relationship. In your African stories, I see it overlapping almost completely, and that's where I begin to wonder if what I'm reading is not merely autobiography or fiction but actually a form of essay versus a form of fiction. At points the focus of the stories shifts from the fictional life of Alistair to the political and social events of the past. So, there is this interesting tension between the author and narrator, sometimes very close, sometimes very distant.

BS I guess so. If you think of "Versions," he says at the end that if I sit in libraries in Canada and research all these things, that's because I want to know. Who is the "I" that is talking there: is it Bill Schermbrucker or is it Alistair? It hasn't been identified as Alistair there.

CSG "Versions" especially reminds me of new journalism. It doesn't seem like fiction to me.

BS I don't know why these things are so important to us, these distinctions. We seem to find it really important to be able to say that this is clearly fiction, this is clearly history, this is autobiography, *etc.*

CSG I think the distinctions are shifting at this time. They used to be clear, and now people are not caring so much about that and just writing what they want to write. It's changing.

BS "Versions" is all about really cutting through and finding out what was going on. It is a story about somebody doing that. It is not so much a story about the events themselves.

RS I think that at some points the reader feels he's being instructed without recognizing that Alistair is being instructed at the same time. I guess what I sense is Alistair's frustration at being educated by hindsight. I wondered, too, about Alistair's sense of what took place then and what it implies now. I feel a good deal of anger running through the collection.

BS I think it applies to Alistair, and I think it applies to me and to all of us: it should. I don't think people have recognized at all in our society the extent to which we are duped by propaganda. People think that is what happens in Communist countries. When I first came to Canada, I was amazed at the reporting on the Vietnam War because I had come from a country that had somewhat a different political slant. Whereas in Kenya I was reading about American forces in Vietnam, I came to Canada, and there were no American forces in Vietnam in the Canadian papers: they were American military advisers. All through the writing of "Versions" or the end of it, the Falklands War was going on, and we were hearing that very punctilious British news spokesman: "Four Harriers took off from the carrier; two returned." There is that whole making sacred of news so that everybody will utterly trust it. And we don't know at all what is going on; later on

we find out more interesting stuff about the Falklands War which is, e.g., the names of the deceased are often the same family names because a lot of Welsh descendant people were fighting in the Argentine Army, and a lot of Welsh people were in the British forces. Things of that kind are much more interesting than hearing about how many Harriers took off and how many returned.



RS

When you were in Kenya and Mau Mau was happening, did you receive distorted information through the Kenya press as we did through the Canadian press with the FLQ situation?

BS

You've really defined something correctly I think. There is a sense of frustration that to discover what was going on you had to get out of the country or be distant from it, and, although I was a bit sceptical of the traditional attitudes in Kenya, I would not have been nearly as sceptical as I am now. For example, when I left Kenya even after Independence, there were certain books that were not available, and one of them was Montagu Slater's book on the trial of Jomo Kenyatta. I first read the book in the UBC Library. Transcripts of trials are not generally readily available to the public until somebody puts them into a book and publishes it. That's how we find out about Louis Riel or something of that sort. My girlfriend's father at the time [1953] — the very time that I was fooling around with his daughter playing Kick the Can and so on — was saying these things in court which I was just astounded to hear him say. And the magistrate at that trial whose name was a household word in our family because he was part of the legal establishment was trying to twist one of the questions. The magistrate, not the prosecutor, the *magistrate* was trying to twist Dr. Leakey who was the official court translator, trying to twist Dr. Leakey's translation. I was appalled to read that and to read it here when I was no longer in the country and able to scream about the injustice of it. That did, and does, give me a kind of rage. It would never have occurred to me until some years after I left Kenya that Mau Mau did not exist. Such a notion just didn't make any sense. What do you mean it did not exist, people were dying, *etcetera*. The fact is, that as an organized, terrorist army fighting against the establishment with some kind of co-ordinated plan of attack

and with a name such as Mau Mau, it did not exist. What there was was a series of events that drove both legitimate political centres and also criminals who were on the run into hiding, and in those little pockets and in the forests and wherever, gangs got together, and there was a little bit of inter-communication between the gangs. What held those gangs together was perhaps a recognition amongst certain individuals that a time had arrived in history when the political work that had been done in the last twenty years by legitimate politicians like Kenyatta and others might now be able to produce a unified rebellion. But the rebellion was never unified. And the origin of the word "Mau Mau" has been much debated by historians. I am not sure what the latest state of the research is on that, but it appears to have been a term created by the British Army because they had to fight somebody, so they had to name it.



RS In "Afterbirth," Alistair thinks about meeting up again with some of his former students. It's a bit shocking to people who read the entire collection to realize that Alistair, too, was native born Kenyan, and yet there seemed to be no room in that country for him.

X BS I was never kicked out of Kenya. The decision to stay in Canada and not go back to Kenya was a decision that I took, and it was a decision taken with the head not the heart. There was certainly room for me in Kenya and probably still is, but what about my children and what about their children? One thought in those terms. At the very least one would have to say that if education was democratized and there wasn't room for every student in a classroom desk — that only some would have it; there might be universal primary education but not universal secondary education — that what are you faced with in terms of the education of your children when they reach the secondary level? Your standard of education as a person who was formerly privileged as a white is now no longer protected, and so, if you happen to have a C- student in the family, he is not going to get into high school; there won't be a place for him. So these considerations led me not to go back, but my heart has always felt very much in Africa, and it took me 20 years. I'll go back to answer your question again about why I wrote the African stories. I guess they are natural stories for me to write. They are what I know, and you always tell people, "Write what you know." But I didn't write about that stuff for a long time because I couldn't deal with it. It was too painful. I didn't want to have any identity as an African. I wanted to be a Canadian. When people from the African Students' Association or somewhere would call me up and want me to get involved, I wouldn't go. I didn't want to have any of these debates and conversations. I wanted to spend as much time as I possibly could trying to find out what Canada was because I had started about 28 years late being a Canadian, and when my children started talking about Africa,

I shut them up. I didn't want them to talk about Africa. I wanted them to become rooted Canadians, and it was only when I felt really comfortable that I began to realize that this country is made up, to quite a large extent, of people like me who have emigrated from other countries, that I am as Canadian as anybody else, that I became easy about it.

RS The stories that you're writing now, do they deal with Africa?

BS I am not writing any stories at the moment. I've got two or three directions that I am going in. I'm accumulating a book called *Written In Cars*, and some of that has some African material in it. I'm accumulating another book called *Letters To My Father*, and that is much more to do with the relations between fathers and sons than it has to do with any particular setting of that relationship, whether Africa, or Canada, or wherever it might be.

RS The politics that emerge from *Chameleon and Other Stories* are uniquely African, but they also have universal applications. I wonder whether this block of stories and a certain element of your autobiography have been objectified. Do you now think back to Kenya in a different way, or do you not think about it at all? Are you seeking out more information about Mau Mau and what actually went on there, or has that curiosity been satisfied?

BS Well, it has certainly reached a level, a stage. I am not very much interested now in digging up more and more of what went on during the time that I lived in Africa. What was really going on — yes, that interest has been satisfied at the moment. I am a little bit afraid to go back to Africa and confront a different Africa than the one that I've written about, and I suspect that is something that I may find myself drawn into if I go back. I may suddenly want to look at Africa as it now is, to see it as a visitor, and that would be a whole new set of perspectives. But, at the moment, I don't really have the energy, or impetus, to do that, although I see it as something that may happen in the future.

RS Do you think that possibility threatens your memories or threatens the validity of *Chameleon and Other Stories*?

BS Well, actually yes. I don't know if it threatens the memories in any important way, but it threatens the emotions that lie underneath those memories. For example, I recently read Shiva Naipaul's book called *North of South*, and I was horrified with this book. I hated it. I disliked it from start to finish, and I disliked the writer. I was somewhat surprised at the extremity of my reaction to the book, and I went back to it again after a month or two. What I discovered was that I was dismayed by the fact that he had travelled, in part of his journey, over that very same area of land that I wrote "Mile Eighteen" about, and what he describes is a totally different kind of thing than I experienced. The whites, by and large, have gone, and things have tumbled down. The hotels are crumbling, there is no service, bribery all over the place.

CSG What is the time difference?

BS Twenty or twenty-five years later, I suppose. He is coming in as an outsider, too, and I just felt that my emotional birthplace had been trampled on by foreigners.

RS So, in a way you still are Kenyan then. You sound very protective of Kenya. I love the name Eldoret, that it is your birthplace in Africa, but your response strikes me as very protective of that little environment which is really an environment of memory now.

BS Yeah. Maybe that is a little self indulgent to think of my Eldoret and to think of the real Eldoret that exists today. They're completely different places. I guess I was a little bit prepared for this kind of pain and disillusionment because when I read *Out of Africa*, I realized that she was writing about an Africa that had long passed when I got there, so that she probably would have thought of me as some kind of interloper in her real landscape.

CSG I don't know how to form this question because it is just made up of impressions. Throughout "Mile Eighteen" and "Another Movie," Alistair is developing his sexuality in an atmosphere of violence and tension. It almost seemed in "Mile Eighteen" that the boys have to prove themselves by going out and shooting birds and things like that. There's that whole competitiveness with his brother being older and when he shoots his first bird. In a number of the stories, and especially in "Another Movie," I found the images of women really disturbing, the way they recurred: women being tortured, or shot, or dying, or grieving for the dead. The mother is dying and there are mentions of her just crying out in pain. And then you are very blatant in the end of "Another Movie" about the relationship of violence and sex.

BS Well, I certainly realize that you are talking about something that is in me and in my background. I don't think I've got a critical perspective on it so that I can say anything intelligent about it. I can tell you, though, that we're perhaps moving a little bit behind the text into psychoanalysis here, and I don't know if it is useful. But one of the most powerful things in my imagination as a child growing up was the scenes of desecration, of sexual desecration of any kind: rapes, especially cross-racial rapes, things of that kind. I think this is true of the South too. It is still such a powerful force within me that I can't repress it. I don't quite understand it. I was travelling in Europe in 1960 or '61 and the Congo crisis occurred, and you had the reports in the news magazines of the nuns being caught and having their breasts slashed or breasts burned by cigarettes, or the wives of the white Belgian soldiers being raped in front of the bars of the cells of the white soldiers, being raped there in front of their husbands by the black soldiers. These kinds of things just inflamed me, absolutely enraged and infuriated me. I must have grown up in some way thinking of sex as a weapon or vulnerability or something like that.

In my culture, sex was something that was not really discussed at all amongst men except in perhaps a joking way. Even with your more sensitive friends, you never really got down to talking about any of the details. I grew up with a very warped notion of sex. I felt apologetic about it towards women. I remember at one time, I must have been about 13 at the time, I was in boarding school and I was writing to this girl who was my girlfriend at another boarding school and this is a little bit daring because the teachers intercept the mail and if anything very overt was going on, you get clamped down on, so on and so forth. I remember a friend of mine asking me, "Why do you write to her?" and I said, "Well, it is the only way I can keep my thoughts about sex decent." He didn't quite understand what I meant by that. I somehow could not bring together the woman on the pedestal, or the woman over there in the girl's school, with my sexual feelings in my own body. I remember trying to imagine how it would be to have sex with a woman. Of course, it never occurred to me that the woman might enjoy it or have any sexual feelings of her own. I thought, well, I guess you just sort of enter the woman and try to get it over with as quickly as possible and not give her too much pain or inconvenience. I remember thinking — I guess when I was a thirteen-year-old and I started masturbating — well, there is a good technique: I could masturbate myself till I almost come, then I could just quickly insert it, then that wouldn't disturb her too much.

RS In "Another Movie," you make a reference to the fact that now Alistair is back in the library on the floor with all these books scattered around trying to figure something out. I copied your words down: "Some strange motive in me wants to relive the atrocities."

CSG There's this fascination with violence.

RS I found that really interesting too. There is that link with the sexual growth of Alistair. In "Another Movie," Marcus accidentally shoots himself with the gun, and that is the night that Alistair has his first wet dream. There is a link between blood, violence, manhood, and sexual power. All those things

get wrapped up in characters like Marcus and Roger, who in the end seem to be terribly disturbed and manipulated individuals. They were white in a black country, supposedly the same in many people's eyes as the British who came in to take charge of the military situation, yet white Kenyans were used by the British to bring about their own demise as a people. I found it absolutely disturbing.

BS Well, I can't explain any of that stuff, of course, but one of the things that you referred to was that strange motive to relive the violence, the atrocities. I think I can understand that at one level, and that is when I lived through those atrocities the first time, it was as an observer and as a member of the colonial power. Now, as I look back on that whole chapter of history, I see it quite differently, so that if I remember the fear of that gun barrel poking in through the burglar bars to find my bed, and I remember the fear that makes me move my bed around, and makes my dad come to check where my bed is and make sure that I'm out of the line of fire if somebody comes to the window, then as far as possible, I now want to relive that story from the point of view of the guy who is behind that gun, who I now no longer see as just some absolutely inexplicable, wild terrorist but rather as somebody who is participating in the war of independence of his own country.

RS The images of Mau Mau and the independence movement in "Another Movie" and in "Roger Ash" are strong, and they're not terribly positive for either side. It's quite clear that the blacks tortured other blacks, and the F.I.O.'s did the same thing. Violence becomes, I suppose, a tool of mediation, a brutal form of it. What you describe in the hamstringing of cattle are horrible ways of delivering messages that are incommunicable before.

BS Oh yeah. I remember Drummond's book that I talk about in one of those stories. One of the things that upsets them more than anything else was that when this food gang came down from the mountains to get food and they slaughtered some cows, it was pedigreed herd they slaughtered. In other words, it was the perception that they weren't just getting food but that they were really delivering that message, as you say.

RS There's another question I would like to ask about women in the stories. One thing that I did notice was the lack of women.

BS In general, women were not very present in my life as I grew up. In regard to the later stories, like "Muriuki's Mother," your perception is interesting because the publisher has the same perception I think, and he's asked me to write an additional story based somehow on my relationship with my first wife.

CSG There are all the wives who keep passing in and out of the stories without ever speaking. Julia speaks in one story, but just barely. There are different phases of coming together with someone and then a marriage ending, and then a second marriage ending, and there's a line in "Another Movie" about spending his fantasy life in the body of the woman he lives with. I found that a really disembodied image. I didn't see a live woman there.

BS I think you have pointed out the absence of the women. I guess it's a way of thinking where you're brought up and you simply take women for granted. Although surely Mrs. Johnson, old Marie Johnson, is quite a strong presence in "Afterbirth."

CSG But Nora and Marie Johnson seem interchangeable to me. They both seem like strong influences but not very warm influences. There is a love there, but there is a distance too. When I read about Alistair's father, I sense a seeking or reaching there, but the parts with the mother seem to be explained away as quickly as possible. I feel there is a presence of pain that is not being spoken about. When she is mentioned, it is as a brief aside, but with the father there is a real reaching to try to capture his essence.

BS It may be an accident of the selection of the stories because there are other pieces that I've written in which I autobiographically go back and try to deal with my mother or my aunt. "The Grave by the Fig" has a bit of it. And also, there is another story in which I totally shifted out of this

African setting and set it in West Vancouver. It's called "Dear Betty and Father." It's never been published, and it's all about my father's second wife. She is the only woman I really had a relationship with as I grew up because my father would go off to bed about 7 o'clock at night after supper. She was about 30, and I was about 15, and we'd sit up and talk all night in the sitting room. She was where I got a first new access on life.

CSG Did you talk about sex?

BS Not really, although we certainly went beyond the normal boundaries. For example, when I was at university, I was only 16, and she knew I was writing to somebody. So she would ask me questions about this girl, and I would tell her a little bit about her.

CSG You were an actor at one time of your life; did you study drama?

BS Yes.

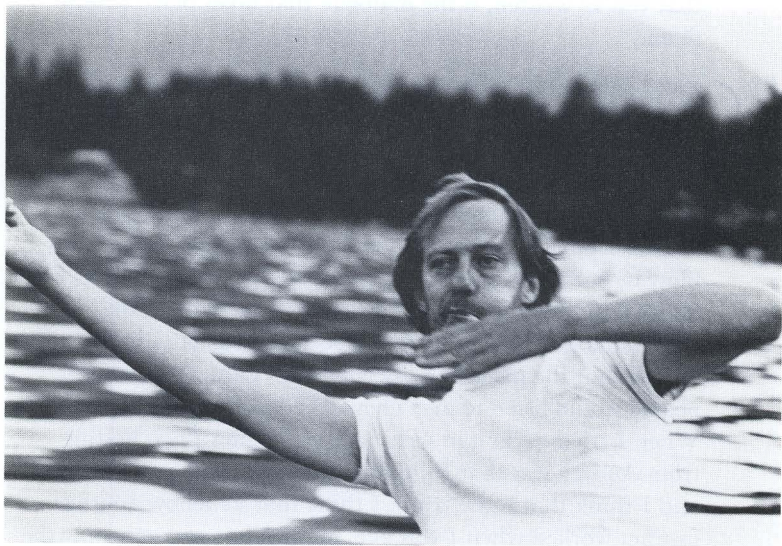
RS One thing I've always liked about these stories, and most things that you've written, is the dialogue that takes place within them.

BS (Years ago, Audrey Thomas said that I didn't write good dialogue, and I just couldn't understand her saying this because it seemed like good dialogue to me. Then she said that I didn't listen to what people said, and that I found even more difficult to understand because I am a good mimic, and I've always been able to hold an audience at a party. Sometimes I blow it, but it has been a personality feature of mine that I've always enjoyed and used. I was puzzled by the fact that I could almost at will move into a scene and start telling a story and act out the parts and say what the characters said and people would listen to me. They would stop their conversations. When I tried to do it in writing, the reaction I was getting from Audrey was that I didn't listen to the way people talked, and I think that is the truth. I think that somehow another instinct worked when I was live, mimicking; yes, somehow the

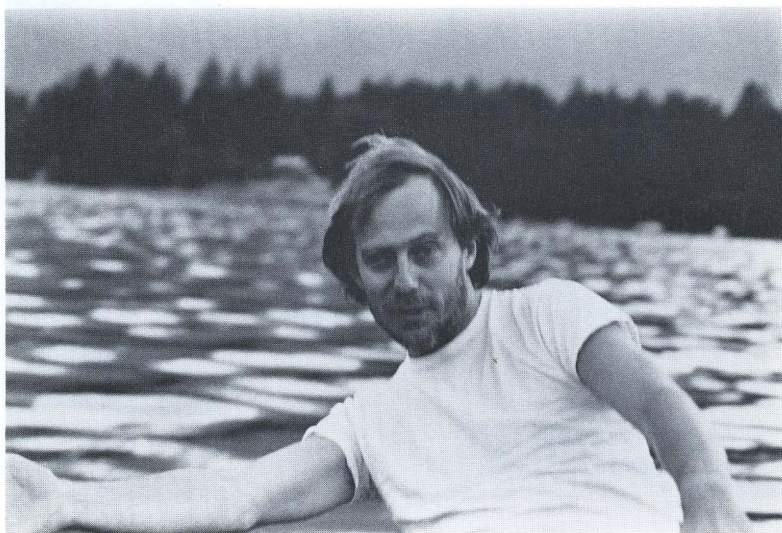
magic was flowing. Somehow when I sat down with a pen to write, a different set of motives came in and got right in the way.

CSG Do you find there is quite a difference between your oral story telling — which seems quite natural to you — and your writing?

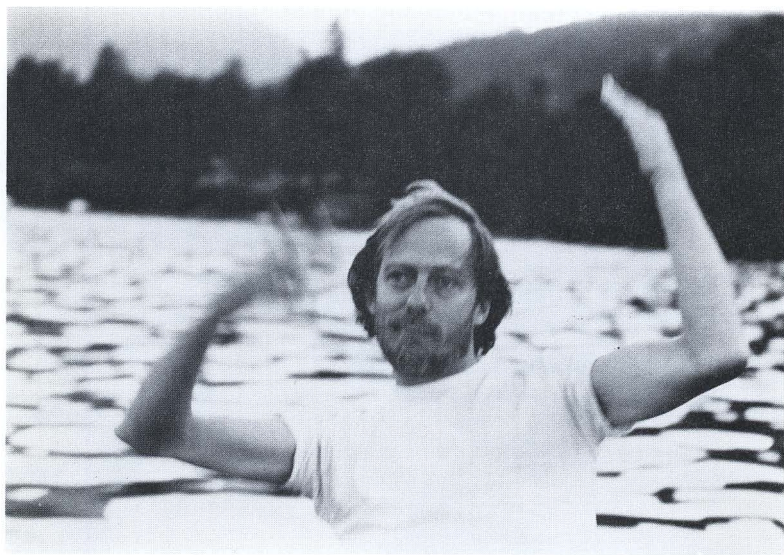
BS ~~✱~~ Yes, and it has something to do about my psychology. Go back to your first question which is “Why do I write?” One of the reasons I think I write is that it was so hard for me. Some instinct in me often drives me to try to do the thing I can’t do. The thing that I can do I become uninterested in. The thing that I cannot do or cannot do very well — this intrigues me. I discovered very soon as I started writing that my skill was really quite primitive compared to my skill at talking or dramatizing or whatever, and this so fascinated me that I just kept pushing at it until, eventually, I got publishable stories. And there was a great sense of reward out of that.



- RS* Do you find yourself writing all the time, in the sense of composing?
- BS* Absolutely, especially in the morning. I have been writing this book this morning in my head. It's a non-fiction book, in a way, but it is still a story.
- CSG* How do you write? What is the process of writing for you? Are there any things that help you to write?
- BS* I had a really bad habit which I don't do any more: I used to try and sit down with the typewriter and write a story. I can't do that. My writing stint is about 4 hours, and after 4 hours, I'm wiped out and have to go and do something else for quite a while. I can't do something else for half an hour and come back. I have to do something for at least another 3 or 4 hours and then come back. So what I do then is try to get prepared for that first 4-hour stint. What I'll do is I'll think about the story. For example, I can give you an example of the story



that is in progress right now. I want to do a story about my friend Nathaniel who lives in Vermont. I have already taken some sheets of paper and tried to type out little incidents, and I've thrown them into the file so there is a building up of various things that he did. There's the incident of how he decided to learn to play the piano and he had moved into a very small house to stop people from coming to stay with him. He was in the American Peace Corps teaching in East Africa, and all the other American Peace Corps teachers would come and stay with him because he lived near the campus. So, in order to get rid of them, he actually transferred into this tiny little house. He got into the tiny little house, then he went to take piano lessons. He asked the teacher should he have a piano. She said it would be indispensable, and he said which would she recommend. She recommended a grand piano. Well, how would you get a grand piano into this little house? What's interesting in that little anecdote is that this is the guy that taught me that you have to have a certain amount of space:



"A person has to have a certain amount of space." I was brought up to think you shouldn't. You should be quiet and shut up, you should listen to your father. Write it down, go away, think about it some other time, you know. Don't make statements. So, there is the piano. I won't go into the background of all this. But there is the time I called him up last summer in the middle of the night. I was drunk, it was 3:30 in the morning in Vermont, and he wasn't at home. Finally I got him, and he is staying in some little room in Vermont, and I say, "What the hell are you doing there, why aren't you with your wife, *etcetera*."

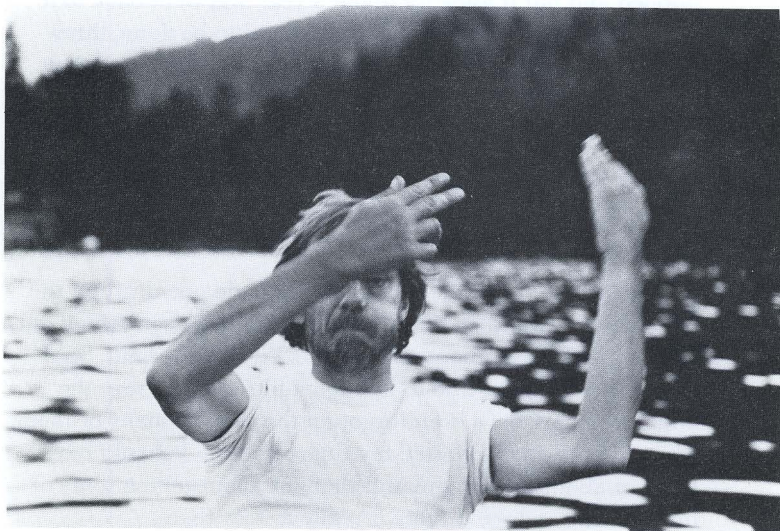
"Oh, it's all broken up again."

"Oh God, how awful."

And he says, "Listen, I really want to talk. Put the phone down, I'm going to call you back. I'm going to pay for this. I'm going to talk."

I said, "Talk on."

He says, "No, I mean I'm going to talk half an hour, an hour."



I said, "Fine, you talk on."

Well, the story culminates in him explaining to me why the second marriage has broken up for the third time. He says, "You know, the problem is that we didn't sleep together, and you know," he shouts, "I like to fuck!" He says, "I like to fuck somebody who likes to fuck!" And then he screams, "I like to fuck somebody who likes to fuck me!" And I'm sitting on the other end of the phone, thinking of him in this little house in Vermont at 3:30 in the morning where he rents this little room, screaming loudly. I imagine this retired couple, in their bedroom down the hall, rigid, eyes staring. Okay. The point is, since I told that story today, and enjoyed the whole image, and now as I come to write that story — whenever it is going to be, the next week, or month, or year — I will make some notes on that, and I will accumulate enough notes. Then I sit down and do a draft of the story.

CSG How many drafts do you do? Is there ever a single draft of a story?

BS No, it gets close to that. "Roger Ash" was one draft, and I stopped and put it aside for about a year and went back to it and picked it up again, realized what had to be done, threw some stuff away, wrote the second half of the story, and then maybe I went over it just one more time, and that is basically it.

RS So, you compose quite consciously, inasmuch as you store moments on paper regardless of whether you know them to be part of the ultimate story or not.

BS You see, in the past, when I was trying to do one draft on the typewriter, I would go and I would try to draft something out, and I would get to about page 8, and I'd be wiped out. So, I would then assign a title to it, open a file, and put it in the filing cabinet. I have even forgotten the titles of many of them. Some didn't work, I wasted my time on those. I should have thought about them more and thought about telling some of them a little and see if there is really a story there.

CSG So the impetus of the story doesn't get diluted by talking about it, telling it.

BS No, the impetus never gets diluted by talking about the story. But I tell you what happens: if I read a draft of a story to friends, sometimes it just gets diluted.

RS Okay, so we're talking on a number of levels here: about language, activity, insight, also — at least in the African stories — about political revelation.

BS Well, if we take the Roger Ash story. I knew that I had a story there as soon as I wrote that sheep off the wing scene because I thought, there is something quite funny; it can be embellished from then on. But the Roger Ash story, at another level, is a portrait of my generation of people, and it is actually consciously drawn. There never was a person called Roger Ash. There were three people, parts of whom have gone into the making up of that character, and that was, in a sense, a piece of history, a piece of historical fiction. I was deliberately creating the vanished white Kenyans of my generation who now live in Perth, or Vancouver, or Montreal.

RS And Marcus Chillingford is an amalgam as well?

BS Marcus Chillingford is much more based on a single character. "Another Movie" is a much more personal story than the other. The models of the Roger Ash character I didn't know very well. There was a guy who gave me a book and said that thing about the oddness of sex, there was such a guy. I didn't know him very well, he was older than I, and he was at school. He was more a friend of my brother than he was of mine.

CSG Did you know when you were writing the stories that they would be a collection, that they were inter-related?

BS No, I didn't at all. No, in fact as I began to see the possibility of a book, I asked myself whether I should stop, take the whole stuff apart and rewrite it all as a novel just because I felt that, financially speaking, a novel, probably in the long run, would be a better bet than stories. But I decided not to do that

because I was satisfied with some of the stories the way they were, and I didn't want to disassemble them. I also made enough money from the publication of some of these stories that I began to think that I could probably make more money from the stories than if I ever published them as a novel. But that was largely because of one big dollop of money which was the CBC prize.

CSG What writers have influenced you? Who do you find most affects you?

BS Well, there have been good and bad influences. Bad influences in the past were literary influences developed in university. And they were the people that I studied most, Patrick White, D. H. Lawrence, and William Faulkner. These were really devastating influences on my early writing I think. Very bad.

CSG Would you have been better off not to have read them?

BS Perhaps not, but the writing that was produced under their influence was pale imitations-type writing and just really garbage. The writer that I've learned a fair bit from is Audrey. As much from her talk as from her own writings, but I really like her entrances into stories, and I like her reliance on detail. But I think now I'm much more aware of influence in terms of a single phrase or, in other words, theft, rather than general influence. I hear somebody say something, or somebody uses an image, and I think, "Ha, I'm going to use that."

In fact, I wrote a story which was published in *Grain* called "Esther: A Spring Sketch," and I used an image in that story which I took straight from a Creative Writing student. I asked her, "I want to use that image, may I use that image?" and she said that I could, and I used it, and I read her the story after it was published, and she didn't recognize the image. But I'm much more aware of that kind of — I don't know if that is influence or what it is — that grabbing of material. But there is a colleague in the department, and I'm very aware of his speech patterns, and I've borrowed from him. For example, in "Another Movie," when he says, "Marcus, isn't it?" I took that actual usage directly from a letter I had

from a guy in Toronto who said, "Please get in touch at the next CPPA meeting. September, isn't it?" I just liked the sound of that, so I used it. Those are not large influences perhaps.

CSG They're like environmental influences, atmosphere.

BS I suppose a recent influence to some extent, unconsciously, has been Ondaatje because Ondaatje is a trickster as a writer. He is theatrical and I, to some extent, in some stories, am theatrical. I manipulate experiences for the reader to have.

CSG Do you find you are influenced by your students, being a Creative Writing teacher?

BS Well, I don't make a distinction between students and other people, but a lot of the students who take Creative Writing I find are so elementary that many of them I doubt carry on writing for very long. I have begun to find lately that that is a bit debilitating to me, so I am stopping teaching Creative Writing, and I don't know if I'll go back to it later or not.

CSG When you were a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?

BS When I was a very small child, I wanted to be a mountaineer. People would ask me this question when I was about 4 or 5, and I would say, "I'm going to be a mountaineer and I'm going to write poetry in my spare time." My mother fostered the poetry side, and my father had been a mountaineer, and he had these mountaineering pictures, so I thought that was a neat, masculine job, and the feminine job would be for the spare time, the second status because it was Mother's suggestion. Then in my teens, I decided to be a lawyer. My father was a lawyer, and my mother was a nurse, and my brother had decided that he was going into medicine, too. So that seemed to me to have a certain balance to it. He would follow her career, and I would follow the other parent's career.



RS Do you think you'll ever go back to Kenya?

BS God knows! I just got a letter from my brother. It's quite interesting. It's a postcard on the beach at Malindi which is a northern spot: there is Mombasa, there is Malindi, and there is Diani where I still own some property. Malindi was a place we used to go. Suddenly, after my mother's death when my father had time on his hands and it was a more difficult trip, we would rent this house on the beach there, and it was just lovely. Anyway, my brother is there right now, or he was when he sent this card: two guys walking, big, husky black fellows carrying an oar, just something around the waist. Hanging from this oar are all these fish. There must be two or three hundred pounds of fish, all red and blue and various colours, great whiskers and things. He has crammed on the back of this postcard every piece of writing he could do, and he says, "Do you remember when we went fishing here in the 'ngalawa for sharks?" This was a thing with us, to use the Swahili word, that meant something to us. When I wrote some of these stories, I would write *panga* and the editor of the magazine would say, "What is *panga*, do you mean knife or something?" I'd change it to *machete* because people understand it. Machete, hell, machete wasn't what we had in Kenya, that's what the Belgians had in the Congo! WE HAD PANGAS!

The interview took place May 5, 1983. It has been edited and re-arranged for inclusion here. "Like a Hinge on a Gate" that follows is a new story that grows out of Bill's friendship with Nathaniel; "Versions" is included in Chameleon & Other Stories published by Talon Books in Vancouver, 1983.

“LIKE A HINGE ON A GATE”

“He’s not new to Africa,” the Old Man said. “He’s just done his teaching diploma at Makerere. But he’s new to Kenya, and he’s new to teaching. Would you be so good as to take him under your wing when he arrives?”

“Yes sir,” I said, “I’ll be glad to. Where is he from?”

The Old Man’s eagle brows contracted, which always made him look like the Cambridge Don he would have been, if he hadn’t opted for the Church Missionary Society, and Africa, thirty years before.

“He’s . . . an American,” he said reluctantly. “But I’ve had a talk with him, and he’s . . . a *good* American, there are some, you know.”

“What do you suppose the Old Man means by that?” I asked Julia when I told her.

“Perhaps he’s respectful,” she said.

“Perhaps he talks quietly,” I suggested.

I was dead wrong. Julia was wrong too, in a way.

* * *

Jedediah Framingham was a tall New-Englander, twenty-three, with a wave of sandy hair and a ruddy face. When you told him things, he listened, nodding, with a steady frown. He took matters seriously. I used to think it had something to do with the five divorces his parents had racked up between them. (I remember, years later, when he was running for political office in Vermont, listening to him answer a question on a radio interview:

"Mr. Framingham, would you be in favour of impeachment proceedings against President Nixon?"

"I uh —" he began, and sitting out in the lobby of the radio station, I could visualize Jed's frowning face bobbing around in a figure eight as he swung his body in the chair to address the grave issue.

"I believe in the principle of innocent until proven guilty."

"So —"

"So I would have to look at the full evidence before I could answer you."

"Then —"

"BUT . . . based on some of the things I have heard, IF they turn out to be true . . ."

"You —"

"I would impeach."

"You —"

"I would impeach."

Needless to say, the voters of Vermont didn't pick Jed Framingham. In all his moral seriousness, he sounded a bit too much like Nixon himself.)

No sooner had Jed arrived at the school, than he got into conflict with the Vice-principal. It was at the first Staff meeting. The Principal, the Old Man himself, swung his gaze round the room at the end of the meeting, and asked if there was any other business.

"Uh. . ."

"Yes, Jed?"

"Sir, the urinals . . . the School's urinals. . ."

"What about them, Jed?"

"They're absolutely disgraceful, sir. They smell very bad."

Vice-principal Arthur Jamieson cleared his throat deliberately. He'd been there over thirty years, from the time when the school consisted of two wooden shacks, and the only toilet facility was a two-by-four bar set over a trench in the wattle forest. Now this Yank, with two weeks under his belt. . .

"I would not have thought this an *appropriate* discussion." Jamieson rolled his R's.

The Old Man considered for a moment, then nodded. "Let's close in prayer," he said.

That night, Jed marched back and forth in our living room, his voice growing louder and more rhetorical, till the dog started barking at his heels, and woke the baby.

The following Staff Meeting, under "any other business," Jed raised his hand and got the nod.

"I'd like the School's permission to spend 350/- shillings on maintenance."

It was a fair sum of money, about half a month's pay for a junior teacher.

"On what, Jed?" the Old Man asked. Jamieson's face was grey as a church stone.

"Paint, sir."

"Paint?"

"I have arranged with Shivji Brothers to seal the walls of the urinals with waterproof paint. Here's the contract, I just need your permission." He waved a piece of paper in the air.

"It's an in-*or*-dinate sum," Jamieson declared. "There are higher priorities."

"I am prepared to pay it myself," Jed said. "I just need permission."

The Old Man blinked slowly, twice, and his face cracked half a smile.

"Let's close in prayer," he said.

Afterwards, he took the paper from Jed, and the school paid. The smell ended. But the war was on.

Next Staff Meeting:

"I underr-stand, there is a plan af-oot, for *mixed singing*!"

Jamieson said the words slowly, as though "mixed singing" was the name of a rare disease.

In the silence that followed, people began slowly to focus on one person.

"Jed?" said the Old Man.

Jed's red face went even redder. His brows knit, and his face bobbed, as he shifted in his chair.

"I uh . . . I have been in consultation with Miss Merival in the Girls' School, and with Dr. Taylor at the Conservatory. We are all

agreed that a choir drawn from the two schools would be of great value. With a choir of mixed voices we could greatly expand the repertoire we can perform. At present we are limited by the artificial division. On an experimental basis, we propose rehearsing one evening a week."

"Evenings!" cried Jamieson. But Jed got his way.

The next incident concerned furniture, which brings us to Bwana Mdogo.

* * *

It would not have surprised me if Jed had refused to have a servant. The British expatriate teachers all had servants as a matter of course — why deprive yourself of the convenience, given how cheap they were, and anyway it created employment. But as an American Jed saw emerging Africa differently. Julia and I had resisted having an inside servant, and we were thought quite "modern" for this. I would have expected Jed's Yankee egalitarianism to have revolted against the idea of personal service. But he surprised us all.

"This is Solomon," he said, introducing me to a small, very black man who was seated in an armchair in the living room. "This is my friend Alistair."

"How do you do," I said, and reached out a hand. I spoke in English, taking Solomon to be a teaching colleague, or one of Jed's fellow-students from Makerere who'd dropped in for tea.

"I'll get you a cup," said Jed, and made for the kitchen.

Solomon let go my grasp and said quickly, "No, no, Bwana Mkubwa, I get it." He moved swiftly and beat Jed to the doorway.

"You've stopped by at the right time," Jed said. "We were just about to discuss wages. Perhaps you could give me your advice."

"Yes," I said, "perhaps I could."

Solomon returned with my cup, and poured it. "Soogar?"

"*Sucari mbili, asante.*"

"Oh!" Solomon beamed. "*Bwana najua kiswahili msuri sana!*"

"Thank you," I said in Swahili, "and your English is good, too. You're not from around here, are you? What's your tribe, Muluhia?"

"Yes!" His coal-black face positively shone. I had taken a risk guessing on this sensitive subject.

"Listen, Solomon," I said, still in Swahili, "we don't say 'Bwana' around here very much any more."

"Oh yes Bwana, I understand."

"What is all this 'bwana' business?" Jed said. "What do you call me, 'Bwana' what?"

"You are Bwana Mkubwa, Bwana. It mean you big man." He held his hand above his head to indicate Jed's height, and smiled innocently.

I laughed. No fool, this Solomon. He laughed with me.

"And you," Jed said, looking down seriously on Solomon's head, "you are very short. How do you say that in Swahili?"

"*Kidogo*," said Solomon.

"If you put it with 'Bwana' it becomes *Mdogo*." I said.

Jed held out his hand. "*Jambo, Bwana Mdogo!*"

"*Jambo, Bwana Mkubwa!*" said Solomon.

I watched them shake hands, grinning, and I realized that neither of them knew what sort of pact they had sealed with one another — nor, for that matter, did I. Later, I tried to explain to Jed the subtlety of Solomon's humour. In 1961 no black man still called any white man "Bwana Mkubwa," except perhaps tongue in cheek. Solomon, having done it, and then embarrassed by my presence, now pretended it referred to height.

"It would be like some man in India addressing you as 'Mighty Sahib'."

"I don't know, man," Jed knit his brows. "I think it's quite literal. The tall man, and the short man."

"Oh sure," I said. "Abbott and Costello."

They settled the details: wages, rations, days off. The house had three bedrooms, and Jed suggested Solomon use one of them.

"Oh no, Bwana Mkubwa, not here. This one out here." He pointed to the small servant's house at the back of the lot. "This good for me."

"It's very small," said Jed. There was one room, and a shower stall with a flush hole, and a kitchen recess. "It's too small."

"I am too small," said Solomon. "It's good for me."

"Alright." Jed frowned. "Now, what about furniture. Bed, table, chairs."

Solomon shrugged.

"Why don't you take the furniture out of my spare bedroom?" Jed said.

"Thank you, Bwana."

But when Solomon went next door to borrow a wrench to undo the bolts on the bed, the information fed into the grapevine, and quickly reached the ears of the Vice-principal. Jamieson drove over to Jed's at once, and delivered a stern harangue on "setting bad precedents," and pointed out that the furniture belonged to the school, and the school could "in no wise countenance" its being loaned to a servant.

An hour later, Jed was tramping back and forth on our living room floor, re-enacting the harangue, with an accurate imitation of Jamieson's thistly accent. He ended, on the moral zenith of his lungs: "So Solomon, man, is OUT there, SLEEPING ON A COLD CEMENT FLOOR! TO AVOID SETTING BAD PRECEDENTS!"

The dog barked, and fainted at Jed's knees. The baby woke. Julia sighed.

Poor Jed.

"Always there is this grey and unimaginative presence, telling me that I cannot do the things I want to do. The same at Harvard, man! The same at Makerere!"

Later, I learned that at Harvard he had been forbidden to use the props of the dramatic society for a play he was producing, so he sent his actors and stagehands to steal scenery, from various amateur companies, or wherever they could. This brought the Cambridge police to the opening performance, but the play did go on. And at Makerere University, in Kampala, Uganda, he had wanted to put on *Macbeth* in Maasai tribal dress, and had been refused by some University authority who said the show would not attract a large enough audience. Jed wired friends and relatives in the States, and raised \$500, and rented the National Theatre in Kampala. They put the show on, in tribal dress, and repaid the \$500. "And *made a profit*, man! We *made a profit*! Two-hundred and eighty shillings."

* * *

Jed's relationship with Solomon settled into a routine, but it took a while, and it took some learning on Jed's part. The fact is, he needed a servant, more even than some of the bachelor teachers who at least cooked for themselves. Jed's mind was usually on a project, the choir, the Drama Festival, even the blessed urinals, and he forgot about the humdrum details of life. Cutlery, for instance, cooking utensils, an iron. Once the bed problem was solved — I had taken him down to the native market, and he bought Solomon a hand-hewn thong bed for 10/- shillings — Jed left the rest to Solomon. And Solomon took care of things, borrowing an iron from us, pots and pans from Mary Greene; sheets, pillow cases, towels, etc., Solomon found them all. I learned that he had bought plates in the *boma* with 10/- shillings of his own.

It was the coffee pot that clarified the relationship. Jed had met a young teacher at the Girls' School, and after much fretting, had invited her to dinner, followed by a movie in Nairobi. He brought her home at midnight, for coffee, but was unable to find the coffee pot. It had been there at dinner, and now was gone. He pondered all the possibilities, and eliminated them, and then stood confidently on the back step and yelled into the darkness:

"Bwana Mdogo! Bwana Mdogo!"

At length came the sleepy answer, "Ye-ees Bwana."

"You have my coffee pot?"

"Ye-ees Bwana."

"Well, bring it back, right now."

"I sleeping, Bwana."

"Yes, and I want to make coffee."

A few minutes later, the pot was pushed through the back door.

"Your coffee pot."

"Damn right! And I would appreciate it if you would not borrow my things in future without asking."

The next evening, Jed found Solomon packing all the plates into a cardboard box, in the kitchen.

"What are you doing?"

Solomon shook his finger. He was angry.

"You no lend me your coffee pot, I no lend you my plates. *Where* you get iron? *Where* you get fry pan?"

For the moment, the "bwana" language was forgotten.

Jed was embarrassed. He looked into Solomon's face, and saw only resentment. "This is a serious matter," he said. "Let us sit down and discuss it."

They sat down across the kitchen table from one another.

Then the actor in him took over. I would not have attempted what he did, and risk compounding the injury. Somehow, Jed created a transformation. One minute, the two men, master and servant, offender and the injured party are sitting across the table from one another, deadly serious. The next minute, the two of them are dancing about the kitchen with knives, a long bread knife and a carving knife, whooping and slashing at the air beside one another's heads.

"You bad man! You bad man! I *kill* you! *Aieee!*"

"Don't take the plates! Kill me if you must, but *don't take the plates! Aaooorr!*"

Suddenly, there is a face at the window. Jed catches sight of it in the middle of a turn, with his knife arm raised high. A hand cupped over the eyebrow, the face peering in through the glass, and then the tap-tap of a car key. Vice-principal Jamieson.

Jed puts down his knife and straightens his clothing. He walks through the living room and opens the front door. Solomon begins quietly unpacking the plates and putting them back on the shelves.

"Jed, er," says Arthur Jamieson, "the Principal has authorized me to speak to you on the matter of . . . visitors." He coughs loudly. "This school does not encourage overnight visitors of the opposite sex."

Jed stares in amazement.

"Last night," Jamieson's voice is stern and slow, "you were seen driving a young lady in . . . but not out."

"Last night," Jed shouts, with a stupendous frown, "last night, Arthur, I brought Jane Merival in for a cup of coffee after going to the cinema, and then I walked her home to the Girls' School. If you're going to spy on me, you might as well do the job thoroughly!"

Jamieson retreats, mumbling. Jed returns to the kitchen, half angry, half giggling. "God Damn it, Mdogo!" He seizes his knife and lunges. Solomon leaps into the air with a loud scream, and the dance continues. In the driveway, Jamieson shakes his head and mutters, then starts his car.

"You clown!" I said. "Perfect hams, both of you. You found the right man there."

"Solomon?" Jed says. "He is one smart guy, man. You know what he said to Maurice Bowles?" Jed shrinks down to Bwana Mdogo's size. "He said: 'Meester Bowles, how many shildren you got?'"

"Bowles says, 'I g- I g- I got two, Mdogo.'" (Jed imitates Maurice Bowles' Lancashire stutter.) "'W- w- why?'"

"'How many bicycles, Meester Bowles?'"

"'Th- th- three, Mdogo, w- why?'"

"'I got *four shildren*, Meester Bowles! And no bicycles. *Not even one bicycle!*'"

"Now Solomon's got a bicycle, man. You've seen him riding around on it? Says he's going to send it to his children. At Christmas." Jed broke into a loud, American belly laugh.

"Oh Jed, you might as well stay to dinner," Julia said. She loved his stories. The later it got, the louder and more exaggerated they became. And then, of course, the dog.

* * *

Jed's experience in theatre was a problem for me. I had just inherited the school's dramatic society from a teacher who'd gone back to England, and I was damned if I was going to give it up. The school had developed a tradition of putting on a Shakespeare every year, using the entire dramatic society in the cast. It was a public event, and got write-ups in the Nairobi papers. The dramatic society consisted of 120 or 150 boys who had signed up for the short play readings at the start of each year. Putting on a Shakespeare with a cast that size was a challenge that appealed to me. We had multitudes and battle scenes alright! At one performance of *Henry IV Part 1*, when the armies clash, a woman in the audience got up and ran out of the theatre, shrieking.

Jed helped me with the production, of course, but it wasn't the same thing as running the show.

"'And *under him*,' Jed bellowed, on our living room carpet, shaking his finger at me, "'and under him / My Genius is rebuk'd, as it is said / Mark Antony's was by Caesar.'"

I recognized the quote: Macbeth rationalizing the need to murder Banquo.

"This territory ain't big enough for the two of us, pardner!" I made to blow off his head with my Smith and Wesson. We all laughed, but as usual the horseplay expressed a truth.

I thought of suggesting he take over the short plays, but that was no good. The readings at the beginning of the year were adjudicated, and three or four winners announced, and the winning plays were then produced. But the whole point was for the students to do these productions on their own, and so develop their initiative. The only help we gave them was with costumes. To have Jed take over production would defeat the main intent.

The problem was solved unexpectedly, by the announcement of a new event, the Kenya Schools Drama Festival. Jed leaped at the opportunity. And the first year, they won every award, Best Producer, Best Actor and so on. The second year, I forget what happened. The third year was typical Framingham:

It was 1964, the quartercentenary of Shakespeare's birth. Jed came to me looking serious. "I want to invite you to participate in a project, man; I'm seeking your collaboration."

He wanted to enter a dramatic collage called "Shakespeare 400." There would be three scenes, representing the three types of play.

For the Histories, he had chosen *Henry V*'s Saint Crispin's Day speech, and for the Tragedies, a selection from *Julius Caesar*. For the Comedies, he wanted me to produce Falstaff's narration of the robbery, in the Boar's Head tavern. And all of this, within the strict time limits of the Festival's regulations: one rehearsal and one lighting rehearsal at the National Theatre, an hour each; ten minutes to set the stage, and five minutes to strike it; maximum performance time of forty minutes.

"Christ, Jed!" I said. "Aren't you missing something? Why not throw in a few of the Sonnets as well, plus maybe a scene from the Dark Comedies? Forty minutes, fellow!"

"I think it can be done, man." (Long, serious pause.) "I want you on board."

"'On board' hell! Up all night painting scenery is what you mean!"

Jed laughed at the dig. The first time he entered the Festival, he had chosen to stage a Roman comedy in West African dress, set in a village of square mud houses. I had spent the night painting scenery, and even then I didn't finish, and had to continue after class the next day. The Principal drove down in his Volkswagen at one minute to four, to bid the cast a ceremonial farewell, and had to wait a few minutes while I finished off a wall, which we then hoisted and tied on the roof of the school lorry.

"Best of luck!" the Old Man intoned. "Everyone pull his weight! Never mind if you win or lose! Everything done properly!"

Off went the lorry in a cloud of dust, Jed and cast waving, the Old Man standing with arm upraised, like an ancient Norse king sending warriors to battle. Then he turned to where I stood, paint-spattered and with bags under my eyes, and he began doing what the students called "stepping." It was his way of expressing rage, and had something to do with blood pressure. He'd lift one foot, then put it down and lift the other, where he stood, stamping slowly, his whole body stiff and quivering.

"When you announce at Parade . . ." (step; step) ". . . that the lorry will leave at four o'clock, . . ." (step; step) ". . . then it *leaves* at four o'clock! If you mean five past four . . . SAY SO!" He ended with a shout. I stood there numb, as his Volkswagen whined angrily back up the hill.

"FRAMINGHAM!" I shouted into the thinning dust. "NEXT TIME MAKE YOUR OWN FUCKING SCENERY!"

But then they came back with all the trophies, so what could I say?

Everybody thought "Shakespeare 400" was a wonderful idea. Julia and Mary Greene immediately offered to do the costumes, and my actors were delighted at the chance to revive the Boar's Head scene from last year's production. Four or five nights in a row, Jed had his casts for *Julius Caesar* and *Henry V* rehearsing past midnight, and not a peep out of Jamieson. When I mentioned scenery, Jed said all I'd need for the tavern was the huge "Boar's Head" sign, and it was true. With a couple of chairs and a table, it created the tavern, easily portable. But there was no mention of the rest of the scenery.

"I need to envisage it," Jed said.

Our combined casts for the three segments totalled forty boys, plus stage hands, and we knew we could only ask for one trip in the lorry. And you couldn't leave scenery at the National Theatre. It was going to be some trip! I wished Jed would hurry up with envisaging, so I could start planning how to pack everything into the lorry.

At the lighting rehearsal we still had no scenery, so that trip was easy. We were last to rehearse, and the technician asked me to throw the main switch and lock the doors when we left. It was against the rules to take extra time in the theatre, but I didn't care. Jed was not going to stall any longer, I'd damn well see to that. I went looking for him. I was striding across the lit stage, when suddenly his voice boomed from the dark auditorium, telling me to stand where I was.

"Move to your left, to your left, TO YOUR LEFT, MAN! Right there! Mark it. How high's the fly there?"

"Oh, fourteen feet."

"Write it down, now come forward, FORWARD, TO YOUR RIGHT, there! Mark it. How high?"

Three times this happened, and finally I said, "What the hell are you doing, Jed?"

"For *Henry V* all we need is a big rock, man, there's one out in the parking lot. It's bleak, it's bare, it's like the battle. He puts his foot up on it."

"What am I marking here?"

"PILLARS MAN! For *Julius Caesar*. A Roman temple, huh? Great, big, white, marble, *pillars*, man! Fourteen, eighteen, and what did you say, twenty-three feet? It's perfect, it's *strong*! Fluted white marble. Add a couple of feet to those dimensions, because we mustn't be short of the fly. Three tremendous *pillars*, man, rising out of sight!"

I shielded my eyes against the blinding lights, and tried to see his face. "Envisaging" was one thing; this was madness.

I shouted towards his dark outline at the back of the auditorium: "Jed, this is Friday night. We go *on*, on Monday afternoon. And you're talking about fluted white marble pillars that are longer than the lorry itself. You're off your cotton-picking rocker, you crazy Yank. You've got to *make* them, and you've got to *carry* them. How are you going to do it?"

"Come down here and look, man. It's *strong*! I think it can be done."

I decided to steer clear of the whole project. I was not about to waste a frantic weekend manipulating bits of bamboo, and¹ chicken wire, and *papier maché*, only to have Jed arrive and start guffawing and making smart remarks ("That is not marble, that is *macaroni*!")

Perhaps I was in a huff, I don't know. I just rehearsed my actors and kept out of Jed's way, and he didn't come looking for me.

Monday morning, there they were: leaning against the front of the school theatre building, as I crossed the² playing field to morning parade. Three gigantic white pillars, straight and strong, and gleaming white in the morning sun.

"Who made the pillars for you, Jed?"

"Peter Jones."

"*Peter Jones!* He's the guy that asks me to come over and show him how to jack up his car!"

"He builds model airplanes, man. It's the same principle as an airplane fuselage, struts and skin."

They truly were beautiful pillars. They tapered slightly, to enhance the perspective, and later, when they were in place on the stage of the National Theatre, they created exactly the right atmosphere: a sense of public spectacle, of noble men, and traitors. I was very impressed, and all the more because the construction was so simple and light. A single stagehand could lift one, and put it in place. Peter had used segments of corrugated cardboard, evenly curved, and jointed to look like segments of marble, along frameworks of plywood and lath. He had got them perfectly straight, so they looked heavy and solid.

Standing ten feet from one, you'd swear it would stop an ox. The actual danger was that an actor might nudge one, accidentally, and knock it over. We couldn't lash the tops to lighting rails, because of our quick scene changes, so the actors were warned to be extra careful. This slowed the pace of their movements, and in their sweeping togas, their actions became most graceful, and suited the play.

I got the lorry loaded without any problem. The longest pillar overhung the roof, front and back, by several feet, but it was firm. Jed and I packed students into our Morris Minors, and followed the lorry. I had talked to Mwangi, the lorry driver, and said we had lots of time, and he should go slowly and carefully. We had allowed an extra fifteen minutes to get to town.

It was as though I had not spoken, or had irritated Mwangi and provoked rebellion. He swung the lorry out of the school driveway, not left, down the smoother, longer road to town, but right, down the short-cut route. He went bucking through switchbacks, and slid into winding, corrugated corners, and over potholes and ruts. As I followed, smothered in dust, Mwangi stepped on it. We hurtled round a corner into Dagoretti Village, and the next thing I knew bodies were flying in the air. One landed with a sickening thud, on the hood of my car.

They were sheep. Mwangi had driven into a herd of them spread across the road, and had been unable to brake in time. It's a detail that has no apparent connection with Jed Framingham, but whenever I recall the sight of that clotted grey corpse, spinning up in the dust from the two left rear wheels of the overloaded lorry, and landing *thud!* on my car, I think of Jed. It wasn't so much that he was a comic in himself, but genuinely ludicrous and exaggerated events always seemed to happen around him.

We didn't win everything at the Festival, but we won some. Best Actor, Best Producer, Best Set Design.

* * *

I didn't learn from Jed immediately. Perhaps I am a slow learner, or perhaps my British colonial upbringing had drilled too much moderation into me, and I stood in awe of this American who frowned up projects and then set about accomplishing them. My father taught me how to be polite, and to know my place. From Jed I learned another view of life entirely: envisage things, and do them; but recognize that always there will be "these grey and unimaginative presences, telling me that I cannot do the things I want to do." In that war of repression which the grey presences wage unceasingly on the creative, a camaraderie grows. So Jed Framingham became a reference point, a major figure in my imagination for the past twenty years and more. He taught me that you have to occupy your own life, stake it out, damn it, and tell the nay-sayers and the trespassers to go to hell.

I began to realize what I was learning, when I saw Jed deal with his own problem of unwanted visitors. Because he had been posted to our school, just outside Nairobi, other Americans from the Teachers for East Africa programme would write and claim friendship. Their postings were out in the boondocks, and they needed to get to town once in a while. Why not pay a visit to Jed Framingham, in his three-bedroom house? Tootle around Nairobi all day, and come back in time for dinner, courtesy of Bwana Mdogo. One of these freeloaders sent a letter announcing his arrival from Uganda with girl friend, for a three-week stay commencing two days after the letter arrived. "You may not remember me," the letter began, "but we spoke once in the rain, outside the library, at Makerere. . . ." Jed was pissed off.

"What am I going to do, man? Even if I hid out at your place and pretended to be away, they'd just occupy my house for three weeks. Good God! Listen to it: 'My girl friend and I will be arriving some time on Friday 22nd. to visit with you for three weeks. . . .'"

"What nerve!" I said. "Send the bugger a telegram."

Jed drove over to the Post Office and sent it: "NO ROOM IN THE INN STOP FRAMINGHAM."

It worked that time, but he had to find a more permanent solution.

"The answer," he said, "is to move. Some place that's literally too small to accomodate people." Fine, but where was such a house? Jed went looking, and found it. Stuck away behind a hedge was a cottage that nobody noticed. A bedroom, a living room, a small dining room, and a bathroom. The kitchen was a small back porch. And nobody had noticed the place, because for years it had been lent to the Red

Cross, to house a field worker. Right now, it happened to be empty. Best of all, it had a servant's house out back which was larger than the quarters Bwana Mdogo now occupied. They moved in.

"I don't quite see how it's going to work, Jed. Surely your American tourists will insist on sleeping on the dining room floor?"

He looked at me, puzzled. "Oh, you haven't been over since we moved? Come and take a look."

It was marvellous. Jed had been taking piano lessons in Nairobi, and getting quite serious about it, so he'd bought a piano. It was a grand. It occupied the new dining room, roughly wall to wall. To enter the room, you had to crawl between the piano's legs.

"How the hell did you ever get it in here?"

"We had to make some adjustments," he said, and did not elaborate.

And that was the end of Jed's unwanted visitors. His real friends, when they came, slept anywhere a body could fit. And mice made nests in his underwear and socks, but what can you expect in an old house hidden behind a cypress hedge? Jed was happy there, and might have stayed forever. He was a good American alright, and brought his music, drama, basketball and a dozen other contributions to the school. I notice in the school's official history, Arthur Jamieson has shrunk my own time there in half, and attributed all my main achievements to Jed. Touché. "Under him / My Genius is rebuk'd." To be honest, I don't care. It's quite appropriate that Jed should have my measly honours tacked on to his own. His was always the larger, more inventive imagination. Even the Old Man knew that. The Old Man might have relied on me to fix a visiting team's lorry, or rid the library roof of bats, but for Jed he had a special kind of fondness and respect.

I'll never forget an incident one morning at Parade. The Old Man had been to visit Jed's class, to evaluate his teaching, and had nothing bad to say; but he did point out, in a friendly way, an error that he had spotted. Jed, to explain the meaning of the word "mutual," had told the class that the Old Man was "their friend" and also "his friend," and therefore their "mutual friend." The Old Man said it was an incorrect usage: two parties can have a third party as their "common" friend, but "mutual" means reciprocal between two parties. Jed argued, and cited Dickens. The Old Man slipped Fowler into Jed's mailbox to prove the point — the page was marked. Now, at Parade, with the Old Man looking formal and donnish despite his khaki shorts and bush jacket, Jed handed back Fowler with a note: "Dear Sir," it said, "You were right, and I was wrong. You are no longer our mutual friend. You are common." The Old Man cracked up and had to hold his forehead to still the laughs, before three hundred serious students, and a dozen stern-faced staff.

* * *

After I left Kenya, Jed stayed on at the school for a couple of years. From time to time we corresponded, ten years of letters, with theatrical gesturing and crude cartoons. Once, when he had moved back to North Carolina and I thought I might be passing by, he sent a Xeroxed drawing entitled "Shower." Underneath, in Jed's unmistakable scrawl: "I think we can offer you superb accommodations here." The picture shows a naked man scrubbing his back with

a long-handled brush, and pissing a fat stream down onto a fan that is raining it back on him.

After ten years, we met again, and then comes another ten years of letters, and drawings, and cartoons. Once I sent him a story I had written, and he wrote back referring to my "literary posturings." Once he wrote a poem, and sent it in to *Atlantic Monthly*, and when he didn't hear from them in a few days, he travelled down to Boston, and knocked on the door at 8 Arlington Street, to find out what the editors thought of his poem. I wrote telling him he was extremely naive.

Then, we both go through divorces and marriages and other relationships, problems over children, and contemplations over the state of civilization, and our letters reflect it all. We meet again, then once again, and sit around the fire telling stories among our latest companions. The story of the pillars, of how Bwana Mdogo got his bicycle. . . . The laughter doesn't change, and after the first few hours of reacquaintanceship, it's all talked out. The relationship will go on like this forever, I suppose.

Our women friends are puzzled, a bit jealous perhaps. "Why don't you and Jed just get it on together?" one said to me. And, another time, "You won't do things for *me* when I ask, but you'd bend over backwards for Jed. What *is* it about you two?"

This riled me, and I went to the file of his letters, which I never throw away. I found one letter in which he refers to me marking student papers in the staff room, in Kenya. "You were able to sit there, and get the goddamned papers marked while the rest of the faculty was exchanging ridiculous gossip. I envied you your concentration, that you could isolate yourself in a public space and achieve your objectives." It's himself he's talking about, not me. I've always been distracted by any fly on the window.

In another letter, he writes this: "The happiest and best relationships, am I wrong, seem to be those in which the roles are not constantly being renegotiated but which have been defined, not perhaps fairly, but defined, and the thing works, like a hinge on a gate, it functions."

* * *

I called Jed up last year. I hadn't seen him in two years, and because he can never be bothered to relate the details that are mundane to him but informative to anyone else (job? companion? births and deaths?) I couldn't imagine his life; and I wanted to know right then. It was midnight, and I was drinking wine. I dialled, thinking "3 a.m. in Vermont — so what," and got the "not-in-service" tape.

"Oh shit, he's not dead is he?" The last I knew he was happily reconciled with his second wife and had bought a house, and was working his butt off for an environmental agency that even paid him a little.

Information had another number, so I called it, and he answered on the third ring. He sounded muffled, drugged.

"Are you alright," I said.

"No man, I'm not alright."

"What's the matter?"

"Anh," he said. "Anh, man, why don't you put your phone down and let me call you back. I'd like to talk with you."

"Go ahead and talk," I said.

"I mean a long talk. Maybe an hour."

I said, "Talk."

He said he was exhausted, terribly tired. That's why he had sounded drugged. Everything had gone wrong, and he was losing the war on every front. The grey presences were winning.

"I'm forty-two years old, man! I don't have a marriage, I don't have a house, I don't have a job, and I don't have any money."

"Where are you?"

"You know where I am. I'm in Vermont. *You* phoned *me*, man."

"Jed, where are you *living*?"

He brushed the question off, and started telling me again about his father's death. I asked again, and he brushed me off and told me all his friends had "crapped out" on him. He said I was the only person left in the world with whom he could claim friendship.

"That's only because I'm three thousand miles away," I said. "If I was there, you'd probably say I'd crapped out too."

Jed laughed, for the first time.

"Where are you *living*?"

"Man, anh, I'm living in a room. A decent couple. They paint their fence. I rent a room in their house, and they're sleeping in their bedroom down the hallway. They have a garden, with rose bushes, you know?"

I asked him to think, and tell me one thing in his life he would like to change right now.

First he said he'd like a job. Then he said that wasn't the problem; he'd like to have a sense of direction, for the future.

"Well, Jed, you quit teaching school in Vermont because the Vice-principal took the door off the girls' can, so he could look under and see they weren't spending too long standing in the cubicles."

"Do you *believe* that, man! I'm not going back into teaching. It's all about repression, and they're probably still doing it, goddamn flag in every classroom."

I felt I had him on the assertive.

"Alright, Jed, so where is your project? Theatre, environment, politics, what's it to be?"

"Listen, man, I'll tell you something. I always find a project, that's not the problem." He spoke rapidly, and his voice rose. "It's not my father's death, or a job, *you know what it is*?" It was as though we were back years ago in Africa, Jed pacing back and forth on the living room carpet, and the dog going at his ankles. But it wasn't. At the other end of the phone, in Vermont, it was 3:30 in the morning, with a decent couple lying in bed down the hallway, Jed yelling into the phone:

"The problem is, I like to FUCK!"

"I know, Jed, but — "

"I mean, I LIKE TO FUCK SOMEONE WHO LIKES TO
FUCK!"

"Yes, but — "

"SOMEONE WHO LIKES TO FUCK *ME*!"

I imagined the decent couple's eyes, bulging wide as soup spoons
into the darkness of their bedroom.

"Jed," I said, "Listen, is there a dog there?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is it barking?"

He laughed his big American belly laugh.

"Listen," he said. "I've got a story to tell you."

VERSIONS

When an ignorant person becomes enlightened, where will the clever one then go? He will be in trouble! — traditional Kiswahili saying (from a speech of Jomo Kenyatta)

Their names have not entered mainstream history: Kahuthu, son of Kamau; Mwema, son of Kinuthia; Ngungu (also given as Ndungu), son of Kibaki (also Kidaki) . . . and the other eight. They died at a place called Hola, at a Detention Camp for hardcore Mau Mau detainees. “Hardcore” meant a total refusal to co-operate with the white officials and their black warders. They had taken their oath, and they stuck to it, despite the fact that the fighting was all over, Kenyatta languished in a remote jail, and detainees were being repatriated to their now tranquil villages. It was 1959. Still these hardcore, these *hika-hika* resisted their captors, refused to work as instructed. One day, ten of them died. Later, an eleventh.

What caused the deaths? Contaminated drinking water? Scurvy? They “willed themselves to death”? Which is the version we can trust? (The uncertainty about the name of Mr. Ndungu/Ngungu could possibly be related to the pathologist’s report: “. . . cerebral contusion and laceration of the Pons and Medulla.” Perhaps he tried to give his name and his speech was slurred. Perhaps not. There are many stories, and for each story, different versions.)

* * *

On 11th April 1960, one year after Hola and some three and a half years before the Colony and Protectorate of Kenya became independent, the British Governor and Commander-in-Chief, Sir Patrick Renison, KCMG, wrote a foreword for an official report entitled *Historical Survey of the Origins and Growth of Mau Mau*, by F. D. Corfield. With the weight of his plumed office, Sir Patrick commends Mr. Corfield for "zeal and industry," and "such an attractive style [that the Report] makes absorbing reading." Corfield's own brief preface outlines his "formidable" task: "... I have found it necessary to examine almost every aspect of the social, economic and Governmental problems which arise when a new civilizing influence impinges with suddenness on a primitive people who had stagnated for centuries." Heavy words, after a heavy task.

Eight years before, Corfield, then 50, had retired from a long official career, including Governorships in the Sudan; he was living in the Nairobi suburb of Karen, and had already been put to work on another report for the Kenya Game Policy Committee. He was well educated (Cranleigh School; Exeter College, Oxford, Honours in Natural Science), and the Governor says frankly the Kenya Government "was lucky to be able to obtain his services." The Corfield Report, Sir Patrick declares, "supplies an answer to the oft repeated question 'why did it all happen?'"

* * *

Law-abiding by nature, I've always secretly admired those ill-disciplined persons who must scrawl their heartfelt comments in the margins of library books. As I turned the pages of Vancouver Public Library's reference copy of The Corfield Report (their other copy has mysteriously disappeared), I found, to my surprise, no graffiti. Twenty years ago, when the Report was published in Kenya, my black students tore the school library copy to pieces — literally, I found pages ripped and scattered under tables and chairs on the cement floor. On the other hand, certain white friends set the book on the mantelpiece like the Bible.

("Any of those English Labour Party MP's come nosing around now," I can hear my father saying, "tell 'em to read The Corfield Report.")

But then, as I was walking to the Reference desk to trade back Corfield for my ID card, I glanced again at the Table of Contents. Above a crude arrow which points down through all the Chapter headings, some hand has pressed in blue ballpoint, nearly tearing the paper: "ALL JUNK!"

So much for the official version.

* * *

The year that Corfield was published, I began to notice in marking my weekly Form Four English compositions (free choice of topic) the emergence of an unfamiliar stereotype — unfamiliar to me, anyway.

"Europeans consider dogs more important than people. . . ."

"Do not to go near a whiteman's dog or he will kill you. . . ."

("How?" I wrote in red, in the margin of the latter exercise book, and got the answer the following week: "With a gun.")

"Where do you get this idea about white people's dogs?" I asked one class.

"It is well known, suh."

My own small Sealyham wagged his stubby tail throughout the school grounds, much petted and played with, and lay, at that moment, curled asleep on the rubber foot scraper by the classroom door. I wondered how the stereotype had arisen.

"Must be the Poole case," Simon Kithenge suggested, in the Staff Room. I realized at once that he was right, though the details had gone fuzzy, since that was the year I was meandering round Europe and the papers were full of Kennedy vs. Nixon. Poole lived . . . where? A Nairobi suburb? Or a country plot?

Imagine that the feet of women walking to dig their gardens in the early morning have worn a path across the corner of his lawn. Imagine that Poole puts up signs, plants a Kei-apple hedge, pushes wattle stakes crosswise into the ground — all to no avail. So he leaves his Alsatian or Doberman loose. The women arm themselves with sticks. At six one morning, somebody beats off the dog. Standing in the doorway of his house, in slippers and dressing gown, the white man shoots the woman dead. It could happen as clearly as that: a faceoff of cultural logics:

"We walk to the gardens singing, at dawn, along the natural contours of the land."

"You angle round my property line, by God, or you pay the consequences!"

the gardens, the land vs. *my property*

"And is it true," I asked my students, "of all white people?"

"It is true of all those who have dogs."

"How about me? I have a dog."

"Oh suh! That is not a *dog*!" ("White people . . . such jokers!")

* * *

Poole went to jail for life — or, no, I think they hanged him. That's something I'd better research in the library. I'm sure there's an official version of the event, and its wording and composition may nicely (precisely) fit the times. After all, white men have killed black women before in Africa, many a time, and not hanged for it; not even gone to jail.

("At that point, the deceased lost control, and, giving every appearance of succumbing to the witchcraft she believed to have been practiced on her, she advanced towards Mr. Wilson, wildly swinging a sharpened panga, and ululating in the tribal manner. Despite two warning shots fired over her head, the woman showed no sign of abeyance but closed ever more frenziedly on her victim. Mr. Wilson stood his ground, and called on her repeatedly in Kikuyu to stop where she was, but in vain. All other measures having proved useless, there was no alternative save the shot fired in self-defence, aimed low, at the woman's knees. Mr. Wilson escaped, badly shaken, but unharmed, and the woman unfortunately succumbed to wounds, and died that night in the Fort Hall Hospital." District of Fort Hall, Inquest Case No. 9 of 1923.) Well . . . that was in 1923, long before the Official Version of things could come under hostile, nit-picking scrutiny from people like the British Labour Party MP's. Wilson was a gentleman, and had behaved like one in the face of savagery. To his credit — commented the Coroner — Wilson, "Bwana Tumbo," as he was affectionately known among his labour and the neighbouring farmers, went to visit the woman's father after the incident, to express his profound sympathy, and his readiness to assist the family in any way possible. It is not disclosed why the woman was upset in the first place. "Witchcraft."

Poole . . . 1959/60, with Uhuru on the horizon . . . it's a different kettle of fish. Circumstances change; official versions keep pace with the times.

* * *

The Official Version — and those who wrote it. Who were *they*?

Imagine, if you will, a neat Preparatory School classroom in England in the dead of winter 19— (or, for that matter, 18—, or even 17— . . .). Methodically, the split-nibbed pens dip into small ceramic wells and scratch away. Latin translation, “versions” (O.E.D.), under the watchful eye of “Ruggles” or “The Beak,” M.A. (Oxon.).

“Corbett Minor.”

“Sir?”

“Read your version.”

“Yes sir. ‘Meanwhile Labienus, having been badly wounded by the arrows of the barbarians in a former battle — ’ ”

“ ‘Former battle?’ ”

“Previous battle, sir.”

“Did I invite you to speak, Satterthwaite?”

“No sir, I’m sorry sir.”

“Then wait until you’re asked. But yes, you’re right. A ‘former battle,’ Corbett Minor, would be a battle that *was once* a battle, but that is *no longer* a battle. Now it’s become something *else*, a tea party perhaps, or a bowl of goldfish. Yes, ‘previous’ is the best word. Quiet everyone, and continue please Corbett — no, *you* go on, Satterthwaite.”

“Yes sir, ‘previous battle, now commenced a fresh assault on the rabble.’ ”

Oh Caesar, Tacitus, Livy! Who could have imagined the training for which your complex syntax and diction would be used, centuries later? The playing fields of Eton may have been vital to some functions of Empire; those snot-nosed scribes in the Latin class had their part to play too.

* * *

Actually, it was a common term among us as I grew up. I remember sentences spoken under arched eyebrows (in which there was the intimation of other, more privileged knowledge) : "The *Official* version is . . ."

And when Michael Battersby was pulled from his desk on his sixteenth birthday, for training in the Kenya Regiment, followed by Special Assignment, it came to us down the grapevine that he was on the detachment assigned to guard Jomo Kenyatta and co-accused at Kapenguria during the trial. When he came to visit the school, on leave, we asked: "What is it like Mick? Do you put leg-irons on them at night?"

"Well, that may be the official version. Actually we leave the bloody cells wide open."

"Why?"

"Ah man, British justice is such slow bullshit. 'Shot whilst trying to escape' would be one hell of a lot quicker and more to the point!"

(*There's* an official version that might have changed the course of history.)

* * *

It used to puzzle me, growing up, that we did not speak about the times with one another. I could go months at school or at home, and have no intelligent conversation with my brother, parents, or friends about current history. We talked of arrangements for a trip to Lake Naivasha, or how Geoff Bompas saved a friend from a leopard and a buffalo in Longonot crater, or whether Halex combs were really unbreakable as claimed, or whether it was better to kill a dog that you had run over, or try to save its life. Which rugby team was going to win the Enterprise Cup, Nondies or Eldoret? Was the East African Safari Rally muddier this year than last, and did you know Gordon Gobie would've won last year if some fool hadn't tipped a can of water into his gas tank by mistake?

But you did not ask questions like: "What is going on in this country?" "Who exactly are the Mau Mau, and why are they killing people?" If you tried to discuss such a subject, emotions flew out of control, and, as often as not, you'd end up with a cut lip (or, as happened with my Great-Aunt, a stinging slap across the face that I can still feel several decades later). So we remained silent. Collectively, we were like Conrad's Winnie Verloc, the anarchist's wife, who took the attitude that "things do not bear much looking into." Leave it to the adults, to discuss in private. Even the adults' motto was: Wait till the official version comes out.

So, one element of Kenyan society gasped with relief at the appearance of Mr. Corfield's report, with its assurance from the Governor that it supplied an answer. And another element ripped it to pieces. "ALL JUNK!"

(I wonder who wrote that, in the Vancouver Public Library.)

* * *

The content of The Corfield Report is predictable. The Agikuyu's pre-revolutionary war, or War of Independence, is put down as a savage and ill-conceived rebellion, in which oath-crazed peasants are manipulated by sinister political extremists who got out of hand. The words "rife," "insidious," "fanatical" are sprinkled through the pages like pepper. What did take me by surprise, reading it now, is the specific focus that the report adopts. Not so much "what happened" or "why," but "how did it happen without the Government stopping it?"

Corfield's Terms of Reference were:

"To examine and report to H. E. the Governor on —

- (a) the origin and growth of *Mau Mau*, including the circumstances which permitted the movement to develop so rapidly without the full knowledge of the Government;
- (b) any deficiencies which made themselves apparent in the Government machine."

In other words, "How did they do this to us and get away with it?" and perhaps implying: "Can we prevent it next time?" No wonder he found the task formidable! The Government of Kenya, with the Colonial Office keenly peering over their shoulder, had put to Corfield the key question about the British empire: "Looking at this rebellion, can you say whether or not we can stop the rot? Must Empire end, or can we learn to tune the machinery more finely, and so keep the remaining colonies?"

What is the official answer? Poor Corfield never does answer. For three hundred pages in the (shortened) published version, he documents and records oathings and meetings and letters from X to Y, and every now and then breaks out in loathing ("The hard core of fanatical Kikuyu nationalists . . ." etc.). We get a version of "origin and growth" alright, but how it all happened "without the full knowledge of the Government," and the "deficiencies" in the "machine" are questions beyond Corfield's reach. (Perhaps he had wrestled with their prototype, years and years before, at Cranleigh School, or Exeter College, Oxford: "*In a well-reasoned composition of five to ten pages, argue ONE side (but not both) of the proposition: The British Empire is finished.*" I can see the poor boy squirming, longing to ask: "Sir, could we possibly have a *choice* of questions?" but not daring.) Maybe he would have been happier back on the Kenya Game Policy Committee. Or maybe not. After a full life of Colonial Administration, perhaps it was satisfying for him to sit down and blast "the natives." ("*Mau Mau* . . . was developed by Kenyatta as an atavistic tribal rising aimed against western civilization and technology, and in particular against Government and the Europeans as symbols of progress.") Perhaps he believed that his report would seal the fate of "the movement" as he calls it repeatedly, and keep the country still, at least until he lived out his days in Karen.

If still alive, Corfield would be 81 this year. I wonder what memories he might have of his "formidable task." The compilers of Kenyatta's official speeches graciously praise his work as an administrator; but as for the report: "It is doubtful whether any more pretentious document — or anything more blatantly fraudulent in design and conclusion — could be found in all the archives of Government sponsored appreciations. . . . Corfield made a fool of scholarship, and of himself."

As for Sir Patrick Renison who contributed the supportive preface, the British kept him on as Governor for a while. Then they began moving Kenyatta through graduated stages of release. From his isolated incarceration at Lokitaung in the Northern Frontier District, he was shifted to Lodwar, and then Maralal, where he was permitted family and political visitors. Renison couldn't stand it. He went on the radio and we all heard him denounce Kenyatta: "This leader to darkness and death. . . ." But soon, Jomo was out and speaking to mass rallies. He marched right into the wasp's nest of white opinion, at Nakuru, where he addressed a crowd of settlers and got a standing ovation. The suave and modern Sir Malcolm Macdonald took over as Governor, and adapted so well that Kenyatta personally asked him to stay on as British High Commissioner after Independence. Kenyatta was elected Prime Minister, then President. "Let us not dwell on the bitterness of the past," he said. "I would rather look to the future." With 13,547 lying dead and 3,595 officially wounded, it was a reasonable sentiment at the time.

At the Uhuru Day ceremonies, the moment of transition came when the Duke of Edinburgh handed to Kenyatta a thick, symbolic, buff-coloured book entitled *The Instruments of Government*, which the President then raised aloft to the cheering multitude, before beginning his speech ("This is the greatest day in Kenya's history, and the happiest day of my life . . ."). But as we all stood cheering in the stadium, I saw the blond Duke lean down and whisper in Kenyatta's ear. There is no official version of what he said. But according to the unofficial version it was one of the most deliberately silly remarks ever credited to him. The Duke is said to have said: "Are you sure you don't want to change your mind?"

* * *

Don't believe everything you read in the newspapers, we say, believing still. (Why else read them?) Here's a story from March 1959: *Vancouver Sun*, *Toronto Globe and Mail*, *New York Times*, *The Times* of London . . . I've checked about a dozen microfilms, and they all carried it.

REUTERS Nairobi. An inquest is to be held into the deaths of ten Mau Mau detainees which occurred yesterday (March 3) at the Hola Irrigation Scheme camp on the Tana River in the Coast Province of Kenya.

The men were in a group of about 100 who were working on the digging of furrows in the Hola Irrigation Scheme. The deaths occurred after they had drunk water from a water cart which was used by all members of the working party and their guards.

Two of the men collapsed and died at the site of work, and the European officer in charge immediately stopped all work on the site and returned the other detainees to camp, all who were suspected of being ill being taken in a lorry. Eight more detainees died either in the lorry on the way to Hola hospital or very shortly after arrival there. The matter was immediately reported to the European Medical Officer, who is regularly stationed at Hola, to the Police, and to the local Magistrate.

For those who remember the story, let me ask, How was your understanding altered by any subsequent story, or by reflection? (25 words or less) For those who don't remember it, What in your opinion happened?

While you're writing, I'll put another log in the pot-belly stove and read through some Xeroxes from the Vancouver Public Library of the transcript of the enquiry into the Hola incident. For once, the British Labour MP's won. They made such a hullabaloo that an enquiry *was* held, and eventually a new official version replaced the first ones. I didn't have enough cash on me at the library to Xerox the whole report, and it interests me to see which of the 217 pages I picked to copy and study. They all seem to have the words "subcutaneous haematoma" on them. "Fractured patella" runs a close second.

Well, what is your answer?

* * *

They didn't know what to do with the "hardcore" detainees at Hola. Stuck out in the arid semi-desert north of Lamu, will against will, the white officers with non-Gikuyu warders, and over two hundred *hika-hika*, about a third of whom were defined as "recalcitrant." More than 77,000 detainees country-wide had been repatriated, and camps were closing rapidly. Still, these hardcore at Hola were adamantly non-co-operative. Nobody could get it through to them that the war was over. A stalemate, and the mercury in the hundreds, day after day, and no rain.

Chap arrived from Nairobi to look the situation over, and decided it was a bad show. Local Prison Superintendent acquiescing in what amounted to a sitdown strike! Chap from Nairobi'd run across this sort of obduracy before, and he had a technique to recommend, break the impasse.

"Problem here," he told the Superintendent, "these bozos are bound by their oath, 'not to assist any European' *etcetera*, and 'if I break it, this oath will kill me.' They truly believe this rubbish they've sworn themselves to, grant them that. Don't look on it as a problem of breaking them down; instead, help them break the power of the oath."

"How do you propose we do that, sir?"

"Split them into groups of five, ten warders to a group, two to a man. Run 'em down the road a spell, order them to dig, or weed or something, but hands only, no tools. Naturally, they refuse. Then — and here's the beauty of it — one warder on the left, one on the right, you have your men put their hands over *their* hands onto the weeds, Pull 'em up! Doesn't take long, five, six weeds in my experience, they *realize* they've broken the oath. End of their morale old chap! Broken the oath, they're going to die. They give up. Weeding, digging by hand, what you will.

"Big thing Gerry, is: get 'em to do what they've sworn they won't. Co-operate with Europeans. Whole spirit and power of the thing gone. This is '59, old man! Psychological approach."

In preparation for that day, the Superintendent warned the warders there would be resistance, and later, the court of inquiry paid scrupulous attention to finding the exact words that he had spoken in his orders. The court made him say it in English, and then in Swahili: "*Piga yeye, lakini hapana piga kabisa*," pigeon for "hit them, but don't hit them completely."

In later evidence it comes like this (in capitals, still pigeon) :
“*KESHO ASUBUHI SAA MOJA TUTAPELEKA MABUSI
KAZI NA NGUVU NA KAMA NA KATAA TUTA PIGA
MIGUU NA AMBIA ASKARI YAKO KAMA WATU NA
KATAA KAZI PIGA MIGUU AU MIKONO LAKINI SI SANA.*”

“TOMORROW MORNING AT SEVEN, WE WILL TAKE
THE PRISONERS TO HARD LABOUR, AND IF THEY
REFUSE WE WILL HIT THEIR LEGS, AND TELL YOUR
WARDERS IF THE PEOPLE REFUSE TO WORK, HIT THEM
ON THE HANDS OR THE LEGS BUT NOT TOO MUCH.”

Well, I haven't finished my story yet, let alone applied to Sir
Patrick, Knight Commander Saint Michael and Saint George to help
me out with a Foreword. But the drift is there.

It interests me how the medical people tried in a deadpan way to
protest — or is that my imagination? A *post-mortem* pathologist,
examining someone who's supposed to have died a few days before
from poisoned water puts in a list like:

“Dissection:

Head: Subcutaneous extravasation of blood 6 inches by 3 inches over
forehead above eyes.

Chest: Anterior bruising over sternum 2 inches in diameter near the
supra-sternal notch.

Posterior: Extensive subcutaneous and intramuscular bruising with
haematoma from shoulders to buttocks.”

Isn't he or she trying to signal a message?

You go back to the Press Release and read the bland phrases: “all
who were suspected of being ill,” “the matter was immediately
reported,” “the men were in a group of about 100,” and the very
reasonableness of the language smells worse than the stink of the
truth.

* * *

The Hola incident occurred on 3rd March and the press release, attributing the deaths to drinking water, appeared the next day. The *post mortem* reports are dated 9th March (the bodies had been flown to Nairobi and frozen). One after another, these grisly, scientific descriptions of bruised and battered corpses accumulate into a scene of terrible violence: shattered kneecaps, fractured ulna, frothy fluid in the trachea, broken teeth," "death due to shock and haemorrhage." Many of the warders were from tribes traditionally hostile to the Agikuyu detainees.

On 12th March, the Department of Information issued another press release — the official version begins to slip a little: "The medical reports indicate that there were injuries on the bodies which may have been due to violence." "*May have been due to violence!*" Jesus Christ, how else do kneecaps shatter, and windpipes fill with blood, and teeth break? A slip while weeding? (One witness suggested that the knees might have been "grazed" while the bodies were being taken in the back of a lorry over a bumpy road to the mortuary.)

At one point, they found a couple of live prisoners with bleeding gums, and when the Medical Officer named the condition as "minor scurvy" the camp officials leaped at the chance. "Scurvy, scurvy, not drinking water!" That didn't work. Ten or eleven people don't suddenly die together of bleeding gums. They had to find an official version that would stand scrutiny, and it eluded them. It reminds me of an old High School Principal standing on the touchline calling out "Finish well, School!"

Perhaps the most revealing paragraph of all is in the Prison Superintendent's first report, commenced at 1:30 p.m. on the day of the incident, and signed before a CID officer at 9:15 p.m. that night: "At approximately 1230 hours, Mr. COUTTS arrived in the District Officer's office whilst I was present talking to Mr. Marsden, and reported that some of the detainees appeared to be 'willing themselves to death,' by literally falling on the ground and apparently dying in his presence after drinking water." And "other than this," he says, "I have no idea of the nature of the illness which caused the deaths."

Stubborn bastards! "Willing themselves to death." And to compound the insult, right "in his presence." Volitional suicide, without the decency of waiting till he'd gone to have his lunch.

Ten Gikuyu men and one Turkhana died. Nobody was ever charged with their deaths. When the final report of the court of inquiry came out, the Camp Superintendent was given early retirement, with benefits.

A year later, Mr. Corfield issued his report on Mau Mau ("... when a new and civilizing influence impinges with suddenness on a primitive people..."). By the time it was published, he had returned to England, where he retired once again.

Sir Patrick Renison ultimately achieved Cabinet rank in the British Parliament. The Conservative government appointed him Minister of Sport.

* * *

Postscript: I wonder where I dreamed up that story about the women trekking off to work across Peter Poole's "property." A figment? Or did it come from a student's composition? After hours in the microfilm section of the library, I make the following correction: it wasn't a woman Poole shot, but his "houseboy."

Poole was a Briton who had gone to Kenya in 1953 to fight Mau Mau. On October 12th, 1959, his wife came and told him that the houseboy was throwing stones at the dog ("dogs" persistently in *Newsweek*), and Poole (28) went out and, in due course, shot the man. At the trial before an all-white jury (a *second* jury, because the first had to be dismissed when a juror stood up before the evidence began and declared a conscientious objection to any guilty verdict, and the trial had to begin again), Poole pleaded self-defence. He was convicted and sentenced to hang. Appeals, all the way to the Privy Council, got nowhere, despite one ingenious lawyer's argument that since the proceedings had been stayed once, because of the objecting juror, it was improper to have continued without going right back to repeat the preliminary examination.

Poole languished in the Nairobi jail, awaiting execution, while his family returned to England. His wife flew out to visit him, and he is reported to have spent time writing letters to his young children and friends. A petition circulated, begging Governor Renison for clemency, signed by black, white and brown races. Even Tom Mboya, while declining to sign himself, declared that he would not urge fellow blacks to refrain from adding their names to the petition. The London *Daily Sketch* used an entire front page to cry out: "**STOP THIS HANGING!**" But they hanged him anyway, at 8 o'clock one night in August, 1960. By one report, his body was "heavily shackled" when it fell through the trap door. Round the world, the headline announced that for the first time in Kenya's history, a white man had been executed for killing a black. One anomalous reporter observed that the crowd which gathered outside the prison gates on execution day consisted mainly of Asians, "many accompanied by small children."

Poole — and Hola. You wonder about the connection between the cases. A year before Poole hanged, the Hola inquiry closed, with no charges pressed. The London *Times* reported the British explanation, off the floor of Parliament: "SIR REGINALD MANNINGHAM-BULLER, Attorney General (South Northants, Conservative) said that murder was a foul and terrible crime and the colour of a murdered person's skin did not reduce its gravity. [*Why bother to mention that, you wonder.*] It was a terrible thing that as a result of March 3, 11 detainees met their death. It would seem almost certain that some if not all of them did so as a result of illegal blows, but as some of the violence used by the warders at the site was justified, it was not possible to establish that any particular injury was the result of any particular blow. (Opposition cries of "Oh.")

"It was not possible to establish that any particular injury was the result of an illegal blow, that any particular death was due to the use of illegal force, or that any particular person struck an illegal blow."

"Murder by death" then. Sir Reginald probably read *Julius Caesar* at boarding school, and knew the effectiveness of collectivizing a murder. No such "particular" loopholes existed for Poole. In another time and another place, he could have pleaded demon-possession, or simply, "The woman told me to do it."

An interesting comment appears in *Africa Digest*: "Probably one of the strongest reasons why the Governor, Sir Patrick Renison, was unable to accept the petition for clemency signed by 25,000 people was the fact that seven Africans were recently hanged for the death of a European farmer, Mr. John Hutson. There were at least as strong grounds for commuting their sentences since Mr. Hutson did not die until many months after their panga attack on him." No petition for them. No *Daily Sketch* front page.

As for me, I have the privileges of a Canadian immigrant and citizen now. And if I spend my time in the libraries of Vancouver, poring through old official reports and microfilms, that is because, after all these years, I want to be able to know and say finally what in the hell was going on, not that constant lie from the officials, but a version I can trust.



Paul Kelley / THEORY OF THE NOVEL

CHAPTER 2

I imagined it this way: there were a man and a woman — a young man and a young woman. They were seated at a small table in the dining room of a European hotel, a grand hotel, in Paris or Geneva, perhaps. The candlelight danced and flickered in the cut crystal glasses and in the silverware on their table. The young man and the young woman were in love. They were newlyweds on their honeymoon in Europe, holding hands on the table and staring into each other's eyes where they saw the flicker of the candle's flame as though it were held there, not merely reflected. It was a conceit I allowed them.

The postures of this young couple, their intent gazes, the shadows the candle's light cast on their faces, what it made of those faces, bathing them in its small, warm light: everything about them said they were in love. Thus, they were recognizable, and the several diners remaining in the dining room could not help but notice them, could not help but be drawn to their gaze like moths to a flame — a gaze which excluded everything and everyone but themselves. Each person in the dining room beheld the lovers as though they were on the other side of a window, separated from, yet visible by, all. And each realized how different life was on his side, or her side, of the glass.

The hour grew late, and the waiters in their white uniforms were restive and tired after their day's work. They wanted to close the dining room, sum up their tips with a glass of wine, or perhaps a brandy, and go home, to their wives, and perhaps their children, or their girlfriends, or just to a cafe, to relax a while before returning to the empty room in which their day began. Behind the swinging doors, in the white-tiled kitchen, they swore and cursed. After pushing the dirty plates and cups and glasses to the dishwasher, they leaned against each other, wiggling their sore toes in their shoes, and made crude jokes about the recognizable lovers. In the jokes the lovers were upstairs in the bed in their room, a room no waiter could afford,

fucking like minks, like rabbits, like horses, like pigs, like all manner of beast. The waiters laughed at the two lovers they imagined thus, remembering, perhaps, scenes they saw in their childhoods, in the countries of their youth. But their laughter did not ease the pains in their legs and feet, and the couple talking quietly at the small table in the dining room still had dessert and coffee, and perhaps a brandy or two for monsieur, remaining.

"A man on his honeymoon has no need for dessert, eh?" one of the waiters asked lightheartedly. Several of the waiters laughed in response. But one waiter, the waiter who had served the couple all evening, was angry. "Who in the name of Christ do they think they are?" he asked. "I have a life, too. I don't live in that dining room, you know."

Still the couple lingered over their meal, as they had lingered over each other. They would draw out this pleasure of eating because they wished to, and could afford to, and because they had offered each other the chance to draw out all pleasures. For them time had slowed so much as to become unnoticeable.

They did not notice the waiter's haste in removing their plates, nor the peevish and tired tone in his voice when he asked what dessert they desired, nor the quick jaunt of his walk away from their table. They did not even notice that they were the only customers remaining in the room. While everything had changed around them, they remained as before: speaking in low tones, caressing each other's face and hands, laughing quietly, and staring into each other's eyes. They lingered.

When, finally, they rose from the table to return to their room, their waiter, relieved at their departure, walked behind them to the cut glass doors of the dining room. When they had passed through the doorway, he closed the doors quickly, yet quietly, and remained standing behind them for a moment, his eyes following the couple as they crossed the lobby before the indifferent eyes of the clerk, towards the stairs. As they began their slow ascent, he pulled the curtains on the glass doors, turned, and walked quickly to their table where he removed the cups and saucers, glasses, china, and silver. His small hands moving quickly, he wrapped their napkins in the tablecloth and placed their chairs upside down on the table. The dishwasher, a thin, bald man, was sweeping the floor of the dining room with a broom, singing softly to himself.

In the kitchen, the waiter threw the linen in a heap to the floor for one of the maids to pick up. He placed the dishes at the sink for the dishwasher to clean when he had finished his sweeping and walked across the room to a rack near the service door where he took down his coat. Throwing it over his shoulders, he called, "Au revoir." There was no response, and he opened the door quickly and went out.

In their room again, the couple undressed each other and fell to the bed, laughing and trembling, to draw pleasure out of each other once more. They were all anticipation as the young woman undid her hair and it fell loose and long and thick against the pillow. His fingers admired it and worshipped it. Her white body was pure and irrational as he saw it: she was human and animal at once. And yet, she was also neither of these: the home of something ancient and pure and untouchable. He was overwhelmed by the recognition that in moments such as these he felt like a little boy again. His eyes admired her small, tight cunnus, and his hands caressed it as he spoke to it the way some people speak to their small pet dogs. She admired his sex, stroking it, fondling it, calling it loving names, as they lay beside each other on the bed. And when he moved between her legs, her belly accepted him eagerly, her fingers holding lightly the curve of his buttocks. She was shocked, if only momentarily, at her appetite for pleasure and his flesh.

They bruised each other's lips with kisses.

Later, they bathed. And while he was towelling off, she brushed her thick blond hair. When she had finished, she pulled a robe about her and moved to the bed. Standing before it, imagining them in their love-making, she admired the stained and rumpled sheets. Tomorrow morning, while they were out, a maid in a little white cap would remove them and remake the bed with clean, crisp ones.

Near the bed stood a desk. On it was a small rack for stationery in which there were several picture postcards of the hotel. She decided she would send one to a friend since childhood, a friend who had been a maid of honour at her wedding. Seating herself in the chair, she took a card from the rack, turned it over, and wrote:

Dearest Eleanor,

This is where we are staying. It is a grand hotel. *Everything* is lovely here. It's all such a marvellous dream. Stephen is *beautiful*. Married life is *wonderful*! I knew it would be like this, and I know it always will be. I'll tell you *all* about it when we return.

Love,
Catherine
XOXO

P.S. The Xs mark our suite.

She turned the card over to look at its picture once again, as though to remind herself of where she was and who she was, of the moment her life had become. Above two third storey windows on the far left side of the building she placed two small Xs.

Hands were caressing her shoulders, and, smiling, she placed the card on the corner of the desk so that she might see it there and be reminded to post it in the morning. Her small white hand reached to turn out the light.

* * *

A thin middle-aged brown-haired man was seated at a table in a room of an imaginary hotel. He was writing. Next to the paper on which he was writing, his eyes saw a postcard. It did not exist. He picked it up, examined it front and back, and replaced it on the table in front of him. He resumed his writing. After a few moments, he put down his pen, smiling to himself. Still smiling, he rose, took a coat from off the back of his chair, and walked across the carpeted floor to the door, which he opened silently. He went out. Behind him, the door closed with a small, but audible, click.

My eyes moved quickly to the paper on which the man had been writing. I wanted to know what it contained. I felt a suspenseful anticipation as I walked across the carpet to the table. I picked up the paper and began to read.

The postcard is before me now, on the table. I do not recognize the hotel. The post mark on the card bears the name of a city and a date I can't quite discern. The two small Xs are above the two windows at the left edge of the third floor. And thus I am urged, as Eleanor was urged before me, and as I now urge you, to press my nose against the imaginary dark rectangles that are meant to be those windows.

CHAPTER 4

This is what you are thinking: you imagine you are lying beneath a tree. It is spring where you are. Under you, the grass is moist and fragrant, the earth cool and dark, and it smells good. Above you, the young leaves of the tree are moving, quivering ever so slightly, in the spring breeze that has just wafted to your attention. Beyond the leaves, the sky seems not just blue, but a celebration of blue, as the leaves seem to be a celebration of green and their own youth. You try to count the leaves at the same time as you know you cannot. You admire the way the trunk of the tree bends, the way the branches seem to emerge from it and carry it further, extending it, and you spread your arms and legs and fingers in the grass. Then you begin to count the spaces between the leaves, appreciating how the blue of the sky seems to mingle with the various greens, how it seems to be held there, as though cradled in the net of the leaves. You think now about distance, and how the eye is deceived and enchanted by it.

As you lie there, smelling the earth and the grass and feeling the same breeze that moves the grass and the leaves move over you, you begin to think of boys climbing in the tree, shouting, their legs wrapped around its branches in growing fear and excitement. Many boys are gathered in its branches, yourself among them, as a boy in a different tree in a very different place. Beneath the boys mingling with the leaves and branches come walking an older boy and an older girl. The girl is wearing a blue dress, a dress as blue as the sky, and you think you might have known her somewhere. The boy and the girl pause and lean against the trunk of the tree, and then they kiss each other, softly, on the lips. You close your eyes and the words of a little rhyme come to you:

Joe and Mary up in a tree,
K-i-s-s-i-n-g. . .

When you open your eyes again, there are many people sitting and lying on the grass. Little children are running and shouting; a father is teaching his baby to make its first steps; a mother is reading to her daughter. Beyond them, in the shade of another tree, a young couple are lying together, talking quietly. Nearer to you, a group of old men are passing a bottle of wine among themselves and laughing conspiratorially. Music from transistor radios fills the air and rides the breeze. A woman is calling to her children who have wandered out of sight. A man is snoozing under a tree, the brim of his hat pulled down over his eyes.

You awake to see the leaves of the tree again. You dreamed you have been sleeping there, high up in the branches. The sky is still blue and wide, and you stretch your body out in the grass, beneath the tree, beneath the sky. There are broken beer bottles against the base of the tree, and the grass around you is littered with paper and rotting, half-eaten fruit. You are alone.

(The man who planted this tree was from an old country. He came to this country in a ship, and later he crossed it in a train. You can see him clearly, but his appearance hardly matters. As a young man he was quiet, perhaps even sulky, and he lived his life unnoticed. He came to this city forty years ago, working at odd jobs for a while — masonry, carpentry, roofing — before he got a job with the City. He worked for the City for thirty-five years, and this tree in this park is only one of thousands he planted and tended in that time. He retired last year.

The City Council sells fifteen acres of the park to a real estate developer who has a plan to build tract homes on the land. About five miles away, in an office on the sixth floor of City Hall, a man who has worked for the City for about ten years has just signed an order to cut down this tree under which you are lying and all the other trees that fall within the fifteen acre deal. He is not exactly happy to do it, but at least the whole turmoil he has been experiencing lately will be over now. This is the end of it — the end of the re-zoning hearings, the end of the long and boring meetings with the Residents' Association, the appeals, the protests, the publicity. This is the last detail. A small sigh escapes him as he places the completed order in a tray labelled O U T on his desk.

The crew is made up largely of university students who are on vacation from their studies. They have obtained their jobs because their fathers, or their uncles, or someone who knows their fathers or their uncles, works for, or knows someone who works for, the Parks Board. They arrive in two pick-up trucks with their shovels, picks, axes, pry-bars, and chain saws. Standing around in their cork-soled boots and hard hats made of yellow plastic, they finish drinking coffee from styrofoam cups before starting to work on the trees. The sun is hot, and several of the crew have removed their shirts to get a tan. Some old men in the neighbourhood, drawn by the buzz of the chain saws, have gathered in a group to witness the event.

One of the crew approaches you. He is an older man with a cheerful red face and a beer belly pushing against his belt buckle. His yellow plastic hard hat says "Smitty." Beneath it, his hair is grey and his blue eyes are lively. He is polite, but informal, when he tells you that these men have work to do here and that, for safety's sake, it would be best for everyone if you moved out of their way.

Lola Lemire Tosterin / TO THE HEART'S DISCONTENT

1

instinct is a small minstrel
flows in and out of summer
burrows her way obliquely
imagine a song imagine a form
of life thick undercurrent
of thin sheath drums beating
the air arid

riding the element
to a standstill

insect of a thousand wings waving
the silence

the languor
langue d'or

golden dialect
one note logic that drills the ear
takes to heart what can't be
said can't be reached
in the right sense

2

and strident too which strips
all meaning from to make more
sense (ssssssssssssssssssssss
break the spell /ingrown
cut it

closer to the bone

air waves
make the head throb blank
and double blank between
the facts you want while mine
circumstantial skirt the issue
for something more
than meets the eye

a mouth that lies in wait
for the heart's content
one shred
of hearsay evidence

3

the sinking feeling
when common ground gives
breath held like baby's
in a vase

in brittle clouds
small corollas

one ground held pragmatic
so grammatically complete
while the other hovers

hors-texte

at best marginal
apostrophe in mid-air
hangs by the skin
of its teeth hairline
hair's breadth just
on the verge of saying

4

cri de coeur

cri cri cri

fly-by-night unlike the dog-day
cicada hissing her missing story
wings folded for a roof
asleep in the ear

cri cri cri

dumb cricket
with its body gossip
feelers at the belly
ears at the knees
her small dislocated voice
that echoes loiters within her
secret recess

cri cri cri

wing span
sharp pang as it contracts
to open once again
to question

5

katydid will she still?
katydid will she still?
carries its own reply
sometimes gives way to a lie
to clear the throat

thinks it can say one thing
mean another

katydid will she still
whiles away the time
while she always will
as time will tell weighs heavy

upon the small chest's cage
of bones (to pick) splayed
in the shape of a wish

6

coeur en tourelle
tourne la page
à coups d'ailes
à coups d'ailes

(excuse my french)
often lose the thread
would lose heart as well
if it didn't leap into my mouth

if the racing heart didn't run
its course

its murmur
to surface by word of
mouth

leg

wing

thin

sheath drum
oh heart
your soft parts spread
me

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

BILL SCHERMBRUCKER's short stories have been published in many literary journals and are familiar to CBC listeners. He served as editor-in-chief to *TCR* (Issues #10-23) and his leadership was creative and democratic. We would produce the very best magazine possible, even if that meant taking financial risks. "If we like it and want to do it, then we'll find the money to pay for it." Thanks, Bill, for your excellent work.

AUDREY THOMAS is a Vancouver writer with an international following. A recent long fiction is *Laetikia* (Talon Books) and *Real Mothers*, a collection of short stories.

PAUL KELLEY, who also lives in Vancouver, works in both long and short fiction. This past summer he co-wrote and co-directed a stage adaptation of Manuel Puig's novel, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*.

LOLA LEMIRE TOSTERIN is a Toronto poet whose first book, *Color of Her Speech* was published by Coach House Press. The six poems published here are part of a longer series, in which Tosterin explores issues of post-structuralist feminine writings.

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