

THE CAPILANO REVIEW



What is it in us that frightens you so? Maybe that's not the right question. Maybe you are frightened by the fact that we even ask such questions of you, but nevertheless, let us ask you this one: what is it in you that is so frightening?

And this one as well: why are you so determined to control everything but your own desires?

— Robert G. Sherrin
“Still Life”

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COVERS

Siren Carel Moiseiwitsch

PREFACE

Shifts & changes: no issue ever turns out quite as planned, but the issue at hand has changed dramatically from our original conception, most notably in relation to Roy Kiyooka's work, which was to have been the central focus with a large section of photographs and texts. But Kiyooka's plans turned out to be more ambitious than our own, and he proposed creating not just a special section but an original suite of photographs and text as a separate artist's book. The challenge for him and for us was too wonderful to resist: his section in this issue now functions as an introduction to a book of 'photoglyphs' that will constitute *TCR #3*, and which should appear in the early Fall. To date he has completed over 140 photographs especially for this project, and is now at work on the long poem that will run as a continuous ribbon of text through the issue.

But his section still serves as a focus for one of the two major concerns in this issue. In itself it is a poem that explores the process of language and making, of seeing and saying. George Bowering, Gary Geddes, and Brian Fawcett also explore that process, in their disparate ways. Their essays, taken together, reflect committed and perhaps mutually antagonistic points of view on this business of making the world intelligible. The continuing violence in the world, which persists at all social and political levels, is the other major focus of this issue, principally in the fiction of Robert Sherrin and the *Siren* drawings of Carel Moiseiwitsch. In these drawings Moiseiwitsch celebrates the primal and original power of women, against whom much of the violence in this world is still directed. In his story focussed on the massacre of fourteen women engineering students at the Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal, Sherrin explores and interrogates the male pathology that so fears the independent power of women. "Power," Sherrin tells us, "is a matter of perspective," and the power in Moiseiwitsch's work draws on a fundamental perspective that is also reflected in the work of Lucinda Coffman, Evelyn Lau, Betsy Struthers, Gillian Harding-Russell, Susan Zettel and Kate van Dusen.

Neither this issue nor the last three could have appeared without the energetic participation of Leslie Savage. As Managing Editor for the past 18 months she has made a tremendous contribution to the magazine, from which she now takes her leave to pursue her writing and her increased teaching commitment at the College. We wish her every success at both.

And dedicate this issue to an end to prejudice, to an end to violence.

Pierre Coupey

Susan Zettel / WATCH

I sometimes wonder how my father sees me. I have to squint to see myself. Maybe because I am so skinny. Tall — five foot nine at sixteen — and fair too. I feel as if I'm more eyes and ears than anything else. Somedays I look in the mirror to try to connect the pieces of my face to one another, but what I see are eyes looking at eyes looking at eyes. Or I see what I am that's like him, and think: these blue eyes are fine, his are brown, but I'd like to have a more definite chin line. (Here I lift my chin far up on my neck and press the skin under my jaw tight into my throat. I hold it until I think I'll choke, then let go.) And a longer neck, a less sharp nose than mine and his.

What else I have from him is my name, Bertha. It's really from an aunt he loved, he says, who gave him hard maple candy whenever he visited her. She was short and dark. I hate maple candy. The name also came from a saint who'd been rich, had only one child and gave away all of her money to the poor. For God's sake, I like to say to him when he shows me this story in the Book of Saints. My father hates blaspheming. I call myself Bertie. My father doesn't.

What I do have that's mine is this: a full-time summer job at Vogel's store (part-time during school) that pays enough to indulge my passion for buying shoes and presents, like the toaster oven I got my mother for her birthday, with some left over for my savings account marked "Nurse's Training Savings." Blonde hair that feels good, shines in the sun, and is long enough to flick over my shoulder. It even stays there. A best friend, named Karen, who I should be planning to go roller skating with at the Glenbriar right now. She has 38B breasts with smooth, dark brown nipples, a flat stomach, hips like a boy's. She has more boyfriends than she wants, she says, and wears false eyelashes to roller skating just for fun. She even has a pair made from mink fur that are self-adhesive and so thick they don't need mascara. Her eyes are small and the fur lashes make them look frightened and tired. I've never told her this.

I also have a valid driver's licence, and a brand new pair of white cotton duck bermuda length shorts. I bought them for this very holiday that we are on, from Sommer's Ladies Wear. They were full price, but

the saleswoman, Rita, gave them to me at 25% off because I was leaving town for nurse's training.

Rita has dyed red hair teased up at least three inches on the top. It's so stiff with hairspray it shifts as a whole if it moves at all. Sommer's sells traditional women's clothes on the main floor and up-to-date junior's in the basement down a narrow set of wooden stairs that smell like lemon oil and ironing. Rita works in the basement, but always wears upstairs clothes — a straight skirt with a slit up the back, a kitten sweater set with a sweater clip and red lipstick that leaves traces on her teeth. When she sold me the shorts she said, "Nurse's training. Why don't you go to university. Don't go away to learn how to clean up messes after sick people. Be something! Your poor mother's going to miss you."



I'm wearing the shorts now on this hottest day of the year. They're probably wrinkled because my legs are stuck to the hot vinyl seat covering and because my brother, Robert, has been sitting on my lap for the last twenty minutes. His sweaty, fat legs push the material into bunches and their sticky dampness practically strips the skin off my thighs every time he shifts to look out the window, which is constantly. There are twelve people in the car — my parents, myself, four sisters and four brothers all younger than I, and my maternal grandmother who I adore. I begged off work to go on this, my last, family holiday to a cottage called "Happy Hours" at Sauble Beach.

Ours is a full-sized, three-seat station wagon. Even when completely loaded with all our gear and the roof rack full, it rides up high on the suspension. The car was driving just fine, but now begins to lose power. My father, who talks to me about cars because I'm the only one in my family who drives or is even remotely interested, looks for my eyes in the rearview mirror.

"I think it's the gas pump or something in the gas line Bertha. It gets these surges then slows down. I give it all the gas I can, then my foot's on the floor again and nothing happens. We had that trouble one other time remember?"

I do, but it isn't really a question. My father just needs to say something because he's not the swearing type. I know, if the trouble gets worse, he'll become silent. His mouth will set in a firm line pulling

all his anger into tiny wrinkles that appear sewn into his lips like darts into a dress. As I grow older I find myself angry in silence too. I feel, in my skin, that my father's face becomes impressed on my own. I have to open my mouth, say some words to ease the lines so that my face no longer feels the way my father's looks.

My father doesn't say another word about the car.

I turn my eyes away from the mirror, where I can still see his face, to look at my mother who sits in the front seat, the baby on her lap and my sister between them and my father. My mother, too, remains silent on the subject of the car, putting all of her energy into keeping the children quiet and seated. The car moves in a roller coaster motion, first speeding along, then almost slowing to a stop before it surges violently forward again.

"What's that Mommy? Why's the car doing that? I'm thirsty. Daddy when do we get to the cottage?"

"Sh." my mother says. "Bertie would you get your brother's arm in from out of the window?"

My mother's tone is gentle. Tired. As always asking something that she seems to think is impossible.

My grandmother remains quiet, too, having learned to let my mother handle these situations in her own way. My grandmother is proud of the fact that she's come to look after us children every time my mother has gone to the hospital to have a baby. She'd start out doing everything — baking, mending, even ironing the underwear. By the end of the week she'd be exhausted and short tempered.

Once she said to me, "I hope your father has the sense to stay away from her for awhile. This is too much work for any human being."

I remember every word. I hear it in my head. After each baby is born I understand more.

When my grandmother repeated this sentiment to my mother, when she returned home from the hospital, my mother asked her, "Which of these children would you have me get rid of? Which one should I not have had?"

My grandmother took this newest baby from my mother's arms while my mother hung up her coat and talked to each now older child. We all went into my parents' bedroom where my grandmother placed the baby on the chenille bedspread. My mother sat on the edge of the bed and showed the baby: hair like one of us, fingers long like

another's, this the cord where the baby got his food. It would fall off in a week or so. We laughed and said yes, yes. My grandmother's voice was the loudest and happiest, this being the longest, fattest, prettiest one so far. But when she said these things, when I saw her eyes look at my father, they looked dark and hard. Blaming. Just like they do now, every time the car slows.

"We passed a garage a ways back, Daddy. Maybe we should turn around."

I try not to sound whiny in case it makes my father more determined to go on. There's no need. The car motor comes to a complete stop. The wind from the open windows diminishes and heats up. All the children hush at once. As we roll along all we hear is the crunch of each and every piece of gravel the tires touch as my father steers the car off to the side of the road.



My father sits in his seat. Both of his hands are on the steering wheel, one at ten o'clock and one at two, just as he had showed me when he taught me how to drive. I notice his neck is sunburned. Some of the pores on it are enlarged; one has a deep core of black that is raised slightly above the skin level with a distinct, whitened ridge around it. I want to lean forward and squeeze it out, but instead, jiggle my brother's legs up and down to try to cool off our thighs. I can't take my eyes off it though. There are also two lines of curly dark hair growing down both sides of his neck that disappear into the collar of his clean white T-shirt. As I watch, without moving his head, only his shoulders, he reaches down and pulls the hood-release knob. The hood thumps open and in one motion he opens his door, is out and walking around to the front of the car.

Inside the car, heat and noise explode. I get out to see what my father will do. I stand as close to him as I can because he seems not to notice that I'm here. He touches the hoses, the engine lines, hits a hot spot and sucks in his breath, pulls his hand away, shakes it, touches it to his lips. He checks the battery connections. I look at his mouth, watch it tighten. Much as I wish he would say something, I know he won't.

"May as well get out and take the kids over there into the shade, Mom."

I lean my head into my mother's window as I talk to her. I can smell the sour cheesy white spot on the shoulder of her blouse where the baby has spit up. My mother has smelled this way for as long as I have known her.

"He's pretty quiet. I don't think he's got this one figured out and he's sure not looking for help."

I jerk my head in the direction of my father almost wishing that he'd overhear. I'm about to stand up when the baby grabs my hair in his relentless, non-release grip. I start to frown but give him my biggest smile instead. He responds as he always does: an open-mouthed, toothless grin full of drool and laughter. I can't imagine my father ever being a baby but the thought makes me laugh. What I do imagine is his face as it is now on a baby's body. The baby laughs even louder as though he knows what I'm thinking and is having the same thought. That's the way it is with this baby.



I love this baby differently than I love my other brothers and sisters. I can't resist touching him whenever I'm near him; his skin is tight and smooth as an apple. But warm. I like his milky breath and the way his fingernails and his hair grow. And how he'll fall asleep in my arms with his mouth open, head leaning back, after I feed him his bottle. I sometimes think he is mine. That I made him. And that's the crunch. I could have made him.

Before, when my mother got pregnant, she just did and was. At some point we'd notice, place our hands on the stretched elastic over her belly and feel it move. She'd go away for a week and come home with a baby. There was no surprise, except for the time her waters broke when she was taking a roast out of the oven. We all laughed because our mother had had an accident on the kitchen floor. This is what I remember: she went to the bathroom, got a towel and put it over the wet spot. She served us supper, sometimes stopping to hold onto the edge of the stove or the table. While we ate, she cleaned up the mess on the floor, then went to lie down in the bedroom. After my father finished eating, he called my grandmother to come in a taxi, told me to clear up the supper dishes, which I resented, and took my mother to the hospital. She came home a week later with my sister Veronica.

The difference with the last baby was that I knew, from the beginning, how the baby was conceived. And my mother knew I knew. She took me aside before she was even showing and told me, "I'm pregnant. The baby will be born in February, probably the second week. I wanted you to be the first to know. I'll need your help, Bertie." At first I just said sure, and was she going to tell the other kids. She said no, she was going to wait awhile. As I digested the news I began to understand. My parents went all the way. Had been for years, in the bedroom across the hall from mine and my sisters'.

I knew what it was like, almost. I had made out before, kissed until my panties were wet and sticky. I had felt a hard penis rub on my leg, up and down, over and over again, pressing and pressing. My breasts had been touched and the sensations had connected with my groin, making it tight and aching, throbbing with too much blood. I had never gone all the way, but my parents had. Watching my mother's breasts grow heavy and her stomach swell was enough to slow me down. This was not going to happen to me for a long, long time.

When my mother went into labour she told me what was happening. I could see her huge belly tighten and seem to get longer and thinner, but that could have been in my mind. She lifted her top and said to touch it, go ahead, now, while it's contracting. I did. It was harder than any skin I'd ever felt, even harder than the muscle in my father's arm when he flexed it. Harder by far than the boy's penis that I had felt on my leg, that I'd reached down to touch once or twice.

And when my mother brought this baby home, I felt I knew him better than the rest. When my grandmother said this was the best baby yet, I was inclined to agree. I watched closely. I loved him and saw him take as much as my mother and everyone else had to give. Babies are like that.

Several weeks before this holiday that we are supposed to be on, I also watched and helped my mother nurse herself and the rest of us through a bout of stomach flu. I noticed darkness around my mother's eyes and a lined heaviness at the edges of her mouth. We were doing the dishes — my mother, myself, and my sisters. I rubbed the dish towel round and round a plate with a faded rose pattern. I felt each bubble along the edge, let my fingernails pop over each one, making a noise like a dripping faucet.

"I'm never going to have children."

"Oh Bertie." Her voice was thick and low. She didn't look at me.
"Why?"

I stood still. I tried to think why. I knew I had to answer and more than that I wanted to. I wanted her to know I saw everything.

"I never want to be like you."

I was looking straight ahead. Even so, in the distance that separated us at the sink, I felt her body pull away from mine.

"You might change your mind someday."

I didn't answer that.



Now I want to protect my mother.

"I'll get the blankets out of the back of the car. You and Grandma can go to that patch of grass. I'll be over in a minute."

My father is standing by the side of the car. He is not moving, though his image wavers in the heat shimmering up in waves from the car engine in front of him and the pavement behind. I help the children to the grassy places, carry one, take another by the hand and tell them where they can play and where they can't.

"See that line over there where the grass starts to get stoney? Don't go past that line."

I spread the old plaid car blanket over the tall grass. A smell like oil and stale bread rises with it and seems not to settle even when the blanket does. The heat has caught and held it like an invisible cloud above the surface of the cloth. My grandmother and mother sit down on it and the smell of bruised grasses sweetens the air around them. I walk back to the car, each step in the heat is like trying to shift a weight with my legs.

"What are you going to do?"

As I ask this, I place both my hands on the side of the car and leave them there even though the surface is too hot to touch. I won't move them until he speaks. I straighten my shoulders and toss my hair to one side. It flicks up and back in one clean motion.

I try again.

"I could walk back to the garage we passed and get the tow truck to come."

My father stands looking at the engine as though by staring hard enough the reason for its stopping will present itself. So I stare at him,

will him to look at me. I begin to feel that I have drawn his attention. He starts to turn his head just as a car slows and stops. My father looks right past me and watches the car, then the driver as he walks over to us.

The man is small and compact. He takes short steps, each one exactly the same length from the last. His arms hardly move at his sides. His eyes are on the car, but seem to take in the whole situation. He reminds me of a smaller version of my Uncle Raymond, who is a policeman. The man also ignores me. I lift my hands from the hot metal of the car, pat them gently on the cloth of my shorts before I look at them to see if they're burned. No one notices.

The man's body is turned sideways; blocks me from my father's view. I walk over to where my mother is. The little man turns our way, nods towards us, takes over. He notices the number of children to be accommodated, and flags down another car. He directs the rather startled driver to take the older women and most of the children to the garage half-a-mile back. My father and I and my two brothers, Richard and Michael, are to drive with the man in his car.

As I get into the back seat I notice how clean it is and how it smells like pine freshener. There's a line of peaked caps along the shelf by the back window — Caterpillar, Osh Kosh B'Gosh and Carling Black Label Beer are the ones I can read by their backward reflections in the glass. The radio is playing what my grandmother calls swing. The man, who my father is calling Reg and sir — "Yes sir, I thought to check that. No Reg, I don't think it's the carburetor." — has told us to keep the back windows up so the hats won't blow around. Between the heat, which swirls around me in the dead space of the back seat, and the up-and-down flow of the music, which blends with my father's fawning and grateful voice, I feel my stomach begin to rise into my throat. I swallow quickly over and over again and try not to breathe in the heavy scent given off by the pine freshener. When I can't swallow any faster I roll down my window just as the car slows to turn into the station. I avoid looking at either the man, or my father, who turns to look at me. I slam my car door as hard as I can, walk around to my brother's door and slam it, too.

Reg makes all of the arrangements to have the car towed in. Once he starts something, he likes to see it through, he tells my father. After the car arrives and is checked, the mechanic tells Reg that the problem is a

faulty gas pump.

"You knew that, didn't you, Daddy?"

I try to draw my father into the active part of this conversation. They're standing at the side of the open garage door facing each other. I'm just beside and behind my father. Reg doesn't stop talking, hasn't since he picked us up. He is telling my father of a friend of his, a taxi driver in Montreal who loves snowstorms. This friend has a box he had made especially for his taxi, with places for thermoses, food, medical supplies, two ropes, chains, shovels and blankets. He drives around the city in the middle of blizzards looking for people to help. Snowstorms are his favourite days for driving and even if he's just finished a shift, he'll work on his own time helping stranded drivers.

"Now I'll have a story for him." Reg laughs. "You sure do have a big family. Are you Catholics?"

Reg shakes hands with my father, opens the back doors of his car and brushes out each side of the seats with his hand. He rolls up the window. For the first time since he arrived on the scene he looks at me directly over the top of the window, his eyes moving up as the glass does, the contact cut the second the window is closed. He turns away, straightens the caps in the back window, gets into his car and leaves. He gives a blast on his horn and I feel he needs to be a part of the action even as he's leaving it.

"What a horrid little man."

My mother's words come from behind my father and me. We turn together to face her; my father turns away again.

"You just be grateful he came along."

My father doesn't turn to look at her as he says this, but watches Reg's car pull out of sight on the highway. He watches him as though he's trying to place himself in that car, going where it is going. His feet have not moved, but his body is angled away from us, leaning in the direction the car is going. I turn my back on him and smile at my mother.

"Here, let me take the baby for awhile. You've got some spit-up on your shoulder. Maybe you want to wash it off and get a drink of something."

I point out to my mother where the stain is: I run my hand down her arm and squeeze her fingers. I reach to take the baby.



As I sit with the baby and watch the highway I'm sure that everyone is looking at us, seeing all these people together, the car in the bay, wondering and commenting on us as they whizz by. I remember how the garage mechanic stared at us, bobbing his head up and down to count as each one of us emerged from the two cars. My grandmother gives the children money. Get whatever you want, she says, which is one of the reasons why I love her so much. I sit with her now as I let the baby crawl around as much as possible. To let off some steam, I hope. Maybe he'll fall asleep in the car, if it ever gets fixed.

My parents are talking with the mechanic in his office and making phone calls. We can't hear them, only the sound of cars approaching from a distance, swooshing by in a flash of sun-on-glass. The cars leave a trail of dust, raised from the gravel shoulders of the road, which seems to take forever to settle. There's also the steady, high-pitched whir of tree frogs. The noise and the hot air seem to be attached, to belong together. The stillness at the end of each call is more an intrusion than the sound itself.

My father turns toward us. He calls to me.

"Bertha, go get Michael. He's playing too close to the road."

I get Michael and go back to sit with my grandmother. Her eyes are always on my parents as they negotiate new plans. Michael goes too close to the road again, but I choose to do nothing about it. I pretend not to see my father glare at me. I look down and concentrate on pulling up pieces of tender grass from their sockets, biting off the sweet, white ends and placing the green stems into a log-cabin-pattern on a flat spot beside me. I sense, by a shift in my grandmother's body, that my father is approaching. I can feel his shadow move onto my legs. Though the shade he makes does not change the temperature on my legs, they begin to goose bump of their own accord.

"The least you can do, young lady, is help your mother unpack the car. I've arranged for rides to get us to Sauble. They'll be here in about fifteen minutes."

I place my hand over the grass structure and look sideways up at my father. I can't see his face, only the silhouetted outline of his head against the sun.

"They?"

"Raymond doesn't have a big enough car so he got Phil to come too."

"Aw Daddy. For God's sake. Two cars again. They'll think we're so . . . Oh, I don't know. Why couldn't you rent a big car or a trailer or something."

"Do you realize how much all this will cost? The car, the cottage. If it weren't for your grandmother helping us out we'd be going home right now."

"So why don't we? I didn't want to come along in the first place."

My eyes have adjusted to the sunlight and I watch his face grow quiet and tight.

"Go help your mother. Now."



When my Uncle Raymond and cousin Phil arrive, Raymond jokes about our misfortune and they help us divide suitcases, food boxes, the baby's playpen and our beach stuff between the two car trunks.

Raymond tells us how, when he and my father were kids, their uncle used to drive the whole family to a resort, drop them off, then come back a week later to pick them up. Their dad never owned a car, refused to learn how to drive one. Every summer was the same. That's what families are for, he says. But back then they all fit into one car. They don't make cars like they used to.

Phil doesn't say a word.

"I'll ride with Uncle Raymond," I say.



It's late afternoon by the time we arrive at the cottage. There is lots of light, but it is late-August light and low in the sky. It does not lessen the heat. The cottage is on a stretch of beach where the buildings are set right on the sand. Some have cedar hedges and patches of sandy grass. Most are square wooden boxes that have porches descending onto packed sand paths that run directly down to the water. Ours is one of these. There's a rich, tinny smell in the air: warmth and water and earth.

The children get out of the cars and run for the water, curious about what it looks like up close, how it feels. My mother calls them back and promises we'll swim in the evening after supper when we're more settled.

The men unload the cars. Phil and Uncle Raymond go for a fast

swim, then have a beer from the cooler. The tall green bottles are wet and without labels. The labels are floating in the water made by melting ice that the children scoop out to eat and play with, the younger ones losing most of theirs to the sand. The men lean against the porch rail under the hand-carved sign: "Happy Hours." I notice that their eyes connect over the heads of the playing children and do not seem to notice what's going on below them. I mention it to my grandmother and she tells me that it takes a great deal of practice for them to do this, and then she and my mother laugh.

When Phil and Uncle Raymond leave, they'll take my father with them back to the city. He's arranged to rent a small car until Monday when he can pick up our station wagon at the garage. The fuel pump wasn't in stock and will be bussed from the city. It won't be installed until late Monday morning. I listen to the men through the screen door where we're preparing sandwiches for them to take along in the cars. I learn that my father will drive me to work Monday morning, as was planned in the first place, drop the rental car off, catch the Greyhound bus to the garage, pick up the station wagon and drive back to Sauble Beach for the rest of his holiday. I'm only glad to hear I will be getting away from this luckless family.



The rest of the weekend is almost unremarkable. The heat turns to a pre-fall coolness. The children refuse to take off their bathing suits and wear old sweaters over them. They spend their time in the water, which feels much warmer than the air, or with their arms crossed over their chests to hug the warmth to their bodies. I spread my beach towel slightly to one side of them all and press my body as close to the warmed sand as I can. I'll get a tan, come hell or high water. I watch my family from under the hollow of my arms which I cross to make a pillow for my head.

My grandmother and mother walk along the water's edge with the baby, picking up shells from the beach and pebbles from the baby's mouth where he tends to put everything he finds. My father sits in a folding, plastic lawn chair. He watches the rest of the children as they swim. His eyes never leave them. Every ten minutes his head bounces up and down several times and his lips move without noise. He is counting: one, nod, two, nod, three, nod, four . . . a pause as he looks

around. I sit up and look, too. Nod, five, nod, six, nod, seven, nod. He doesn't count me or the baby; doesn't look away from the water.

"Why don't you swim anymore, Daddy? Grandma says you were a great swimmer when you were going out with Mommy. She says you even used to dive at Elora Gorge, right from the top cliff."

"Six," he says out loud. "Six. Where's Sandy? Can you see her? Sandy! Get over here with the rest. I can't see you over there. What did you say Bertha?"

In the evening we play Rummoli. My grandmother has a passion for games and can be counted on to play anything we suggest. She even brings her button jar in her suitcase so we have something to bet with. As we play we match up sets of old buttons and try to sort our piles by colour, trading whites for blues, or abalone and mother-of-pearl for reds. We always do this when we use Grandma's buttons. Then we take turns asking her where each kind comes from. She always knows. And no matter how sad it makes her, someone must ask her about the tarnished brass military buttons from the jar. We children have an unspoken pact to take turns using them because we know it is an honour. We take turns with the question, too. It's my turn tonight.

"Where did these buttons come from, Grandma?"

"They were from your Uncle Charlie's uniform. They were in a pouch, in the package of remains they brought to me and your grandfather after Charlie's plane crashed when he was testing it. Whose turn is it?"

It's always the same answer. She never says more, but she never stops us from asking.

My mother spends the evening getting the baby and younger children ready for bed. My father shakes out and folds dry towels and bathing suits from the laundry basket. He sets them into neat piles, which he lines up by the door. Each pile is the same: sneakers on the bottom, the towel folded into a perfect square, the bathing suit on top of that and, finally, a ball or sand sifter or bottle of suntan lotion on the very top. Twelve piles all the same.

"Your pile is closest to the door, Bertha, so you can get it first thing in the morning. We have to leave very early."

"Come play Rummoli, Daddy. There's a space beside me. You're on holiday, too, you know."

"Maybe later."

I can't remember the last time my father joined in our games. He used to say he hated gambling, even with buttons, and he said it as if he knew what he was talking about. Or so I thought. I liked to imagine he had a bad experience when he was younger and learned from it the hard way. Tonight I persist.

"Come on. Just for awhile. You never play with us."

"Bertha, I said maybe later."

Everyone is looking at me. I square my shoulders, sit up straight and tighten my buttocks on the chair. My face feels fat with heat and anger. I continue looking at my father who picks up a newspaper and sits down to read. It's the only thing he ever reads. He reads each page from top to bottom with a concentration I know he will not break to answer me.

"Whose turn is it?" my grandmother asks.



Monday morning my mother wakes me while it's still dark, her voice stretched and distant, but gentle. She's prepared breakfast for us; our coffee is steaming straight up into the bare bulb above the kitchen table. No one speaks; there's only the clatter of cutlery and the contented sound of coffee being drunk. My father rises and puts his mug, silverware and plate into the sink. He places his hands on my mother's shoulders, leans over and kisses her on the cheek. She turns into him to kiss him on the lips. She does this as she continues to wipe a dish. I turn my head away from them. I know I am still irritable when the word necrophilia crosses my mind. I wonder how my mother can possibly feel affectionate when I know she was up twice with the baby, then early this morning to make our breakfast. I think she must be dead on her feet.

"I'll be back by suppertime at the latest. Ready Bertha?"

"Um. 'Bye Mom. Give the kids and Grandma a hug from me. Thanks for breakfast."

My father carries my bag out to the rented car. I watch him in the roof light. The door shuts. The blackness is absolute until my eyes adjust and notice the morning stars in the sky. There's no moon. As we drive, the time seems to move as slowly as the miles move quickly. My father is driving faster than I have ever known him to. It's not reckless, but sure and steady. I'm aware of silence, both in the car and outside

of it. There is no comfort in this quiet. It's work to hold it, but it's too settled and strong to break. My eyes sting with the air from the vents and my own tired awakes. We're going south-east and I stare at a line of light just to our left.

"Look Daddy. Look at the sky."

He turns first to me and smiles, then to the front where I'm pointing. I don't need to point anymore. As we watch, the line of light spreads across the horizon and turns a brilliant magenta. The undersides of the clouds, which are black, outlined in shimmering grey, turn pink, then red, as the light expands and seems to force colour and texture into the sky. A ball of red rises in the centre of this and as the sky in front grows brighter, the blackness behind us becomes impenetrable. Silhouettes emerge: trees, houses, barns, cars and tractors, even a dog running down a lane. The colour behind the silhouettes becomes vibrant, shimmers. Then, the moment is gone. We do not see the shadows of things, but what they really are.

"Will you look at that! Will you just look at that. 'Red sky in morning, sailors take warning'."

My father pulls out his handkerchief and hands it to me. I am crying. He turns on the radio and listens to the news. I look at my father. He looks exactly the same.

When we reach the store where I work I get out of my door, leaning in to grab my bag of clothes from the seat. My father takes a small paper sack that has been sitting on the seat under my bag. He hands it to me.

"I couldn't find the right time this weekend. Hurry up now, you're late."

I back out of the car and stand beside it. My father leans over and pulls the car door shut by the handle. From this position he smiles a sideways smile through the window and waves. As he drives away I unroll the bag and take out a blue velvet case, and open it. The watch, a fine, clear-faced nurse's watch, is gold. It has a second-hand that can time a heartbeat. It's wound and set: 8:06. I look up to see the car turn the corner. I see my father's arm resting along the windowsill of the car door, and I sense that he's looking straight ahead. As I put the watch on I notice an inscription on the back. It's done in the same fancy lettering I remember seeing on my mother's silver engagement bracelet.

To Bertha, it says, Love, Dad. August 1968.

I put the velvet case back into the bag. I roll the top of it down and press the edges into a crease until I can smell the brown paper, sweet and woody and sad. I look at the watch: 8:09. Late now, I still have to change from my shorts into my uniform for work. I decide to call Karen on my break to see if her father will let her spend the night at my house. We'll have frozen T.V. dinners and drink Coke. We have only eight more days together before I leave for nurse's training.

I look at the road again. The car is gone. There is nothing left to see. I turn away and go inside the store to work.

(for Frances Itani & Bryan Moon)

Evelyn Lau / THREE POEMS

CONCLUSION

She likes it cold here —
her hands, scorched by his heat,
dance backwards to safety.
Shot by arrows of exhaustion,
his eyes pulse blue hearts, his temples
swell into tenderness,
but she seeks no refuge in soft spots,
trains instead on the cutting edges.

She remembers now the why:
the years have knit the nerves in her shoulders
high into her neck,
snapped muscles locked and secret.
Voices like warm taffy
trussed her in ropes of platitudes
while armies waited to spring unsheathed,
eyes crossed in disdain.
The hungry ones wait still
for her moment of ripeness —
they will sate their appetites
on her moment of quick weakening.

His fingers spread smooth tendrils across her skin.
Furrows cemented between her eyes,
she stacks the barriers between them
— such a small space to fill —
plucks his hairs from the mattress,
draws bitterness tight around her body.
She stands him outside, and his brave smile
shrivels in the winter frost.

I AM SURE THIS IS

better in the long run
this mixture of white wine and bile in the bathroom sink
like something marinated in a musty fridge
you haven't gotten old enough nor rich enough in the past year
for someone like me to want you
muscles and tight jeans notwithstanding
that familiar hurt look and all the while I'm thinking
of someone else, clean businessman hands
another touch, you could say it was like death
peculiar but awesome
I followed its patchouli scent

drunk now as a forgotten poet in a once-popular bar
eager to sell or sacrifice any part of himself
for that starry career
scotches and slowly sipped tomato beers
those desperate kisses at the bus station
his begging mouth open in front of passersby
I remember simply an evening where it rained
after he left, I wore high heels and it seemed
I had miles to walk alone
downhill

I'm willing to go anywhere but here
someplace sandy, with highways and many cars
I shall wear durable clothing
seems like everybody went places except me
I envy their motion, their initiative
their willingness to give up the struggle and start new
someplace cleansed of old miseries

shamefully remembered bodies
for now my eyes are so heavy
I blame it on the wind that blew up from the beach
blew the shoreline into my eyes
I pump bravely at tears but none arrive
not even four a.m. where no one hears them

you never cried either, at least not in my company
I wanted to see you broken
wanted it to be me who'd worked you over
till everything crashed inside you
like one prolonged orgasm
your adventurous hands do nothing for me
I've experienced the skill of numerous tongues
all the orifices partaken of
I've nothing special here to give you
nothing that can't be bought, and
most men could outbid you any day

certainly you have no success, just a pair of hands and needle marks
in your arms
a grinding crotch and those punk boots
I've made it so far without needing that
lived through the losses of others
the fights and then their moves to different cities
I assure you
there's no bridging ground
maybe we'll meet and have coffee someday
for now, I am sure this is best

FREEBASING

fingers urgent against the window. three a.m.

you fall indoors
a bubble clutched in shivering hands.
wind sweeps you into lamplight; a carpet
floats you towards kitchen chair.

fingers frantic
you seduce mad light into this contraption:
bottle and pipe
starred with white grains like fleas
hopping away from skeletal hands

your eyes gouged, sleepless
the pipe wobbles on your palm
like breast of bird fluttering in hand
milk-pale
cocaine crystals blooming in a glass globe

flame shoots into pipe
smoke swirls inside the bottle
a chemical smell here —
your mouth gasps for this strange bird
sucks and swallows

black figure blazes

the bottle clears
a trace of smoke escapes bleached lips
your grin wraps rubbery
around the splintering room

Hillel Schwarz / THE SWORD FORM, FIRST PART

1. Starting:

If you think we are starting
we are not starting: we are
making believe that we stopped.

2. Three Rings Encircling Moon:

The blade moves in tight orbit
to our weakest parts. The moon
is always in jeopardy.

3. Delivering Sword:

Love is truce, an absolute
apology; even so,
the sword must come to the hand.

4. Big Devil-Star:

You warned me we'd terrify
each other. Of course. Only
evil is predictable.

5. Swallow Skimming Water:

See, I too can tease and hunt
your old lovers. You must have
known I was there in the wings.

6. Fending & Sweeping:

Put off twenty thousand times
by your careful tenderness,
should I learn guilt or patience?

7. Little Devil-Star:

I watch you at the fire
burning old letters. Ashes
never do justice to words.

8. Swallow Entering Nest:

We have built in clay and straw
at corners, but the rest is
flight, years of air. Corners hold.

9. Phoenix Lifting Up Head:

Motion is a long disease.
Please don't look at me that way;
we have come too far for cures.

10. Phoenix Extending Right Wing:

That first time that I came back
you swore; the predicament
was not faith but wanting none.

11. Phoenix Extending Left Wing:

Balance is habitual
surprise; I reach to show that
you were unavoidable.

Kate van Dusen / BUT BLUE

'Blue is the typical heavenly colour: when it sinks almost to black it echoes a grief that is hardly human.'

Vassily Kandinsky

'blue, bluer, bloor'

bp nichol

1

almost black or at least felt as spectrum
(spectre?) from deepest hue steel sharp
edge of sorrow relentless organ march to
the mundane. as in thought (thoughtlessly)
to write a letter. and send it where?
pristine air sliced by chain saw. persistent
hammer of island necessity. far from your
(my) sticky Toronto (spectator sports and
social gaffes) glint and wingy racket of
bluebottles. and other. (you came to the cafe
that day) mundane as in wondering if you
ever stayed at the Seven Dwarves' motel
island highway. giraffe-like curve of arbutus
sneezy unit. your absence. theirs.

soup burnt while they (word count 97) fill
 the page. whores. (universal sense) scraping
 the pot of possibilities /liabilities.
 they're burning renaissance paintings to cook
 their (our) dinner. (Suzuki on C.B.C.)
 frantic gull sounds where sea meets sky. (BLUE
 the most heavenly colour) loon call goat brae
 wave lap. all almost gone? down the drain
 with the rain forest. resistance to beauty
 (sound). to thought of you gone. (who you?
 and me? persistent I yi yi) the cat's me-ow
 as he hears the bleep of laptop. distracted
 by baby talk of crows. attention. span.
 carrots beans onions greens start again.

indigo. and brush of pink (7 a.m.) wings
 filling the page mind. beside the coffee the
 H scratched years ago on the solid table
 (thud of pine cone who says the tree doesn't
 talk?) resist resist the thought of this
 sadness. afterwards Nicky's H-less alphabet
 in the store window. hole (whole) cut out
 of the language (in kwakwala H for hamumu:
 butterfly.) what was it the missing thing
 found in hazy sleep while the cat curled up
 in vortex of braided rug purring and purring?
 no word but does it start with H? opening and
 closing its bright wings disappearing into
 BLUE BLUE sky

Betsy Struthers / PROTECTIVE COLORATION OF THE HEART

1

We take chances coming here
in autumn. Duck hunters
drift their boats into the bay
at dawn. On the still water
gray shapes of men
hunched in ponchos,
thin smoke of cigarettes,
guns cocked, aimed
at the empty sky.

And in the woods, we keep the dog
leashed. Big and brown, she
might be taken for deer
by a boy crazy for blood
and whisky, his uncles' teasing
loud in his ears. Sometimes
we find trunks discarded,
the raw red wound
where the head was.

Men. You also
back away from the pickups
left parked on the fire trails.
Under the covers
we curl, clasp hands
while gunshots crack
the earliest light,
leave the loons
keening.

Paces from window to door, verandah to bedroom, excuses
 herself often to pee, slam of the screen, thunk
 of the outhouse door closing. Comes back, giggling
 about spiders and mice, chewing her nails.

It's not just that she's given up
 smoking, she's quit sex also, the men our age
 either gay or not single or something
 wrong with their look, their eyes
 trained from the neck downwards. You're so lucky
 she says and I flinch. I can see you outside
 in a cloud of flies, guarding the barbecue,
 nursing a beer. As long as she's here,
 you won't touch me. As long as she's here,
 you read murders in bed, one light
 left late in the dark. She won't go
 for hikes or out in the canoe.

She wants to shop, find a bar, tell
 all the old stories. Are there bears?
 she asks us again. What about those signs
 on the highway, the deer in flight, always
 a buck. The point of its horns.
 The long distance.
 The danger at night.

Deer, caught in the headlights.
Another and then another steps from the bush,
stops, all stare at me staring at them.
My hand tight on the dog's muzzle
but she's trembling without sound
just that eager shake. The rush
of silence when I switch the engine off
fills with the rustle of leaves and lake water.
Only my right hand moves so slowly
towards the camera pack. Doe coughs
and they're gone, a whirl of legs
and white tails, the dog hysterical.

If you had been here with me
I would have said, Look.
If I had had the camera ready
I could have said, Look at this,
a photo black on white
of eyes, the taut skin
of their mouths.
I drink scotch neat, the cabin
full of shadows while the dog
twitches her paws in sleep
dreaming, as you will be dreaming now
in our white bed in the city,
of the chase, the ecstasy
of falling. My teeth
for want of any target
fix on my hand.

Gillian Harding-Russell / FULL MOON THIS NIGHT IN JANUARY

With your fingers
against night glass, you fingerprint
the moon a man's skull
an old woman spinning
the fishy spine of a fetus
all visible
to this susceptible eye.

You blow warm frost against the pane
and mark the light smudge of stars
with dots

a ladder to that dark element
framing our brain, thin-layered
in bone and halo-white.

(You can step into that sky
just closing your eyes
and dreaming.)



I tell you the story
about the smudge of life
within my belly, that dark figment
sketched on film, I am told
to believe may be
your brother. Can believe
only when I feel
the trail of new formed limbs
flutter within me.

Why was I surprised to see
the small perfect head, limbs
angled like a doll's

to embrace
(the testes unlike) nature
unfolding oblivious
to clinical eyes
watching, measuring
interpreting (that lump
is bladder, that dissected snail
the house of heart, the kidneys
like love birds twinning).

You will step out
of that brief negative
into the light
at large
to live.

•

Your great grandfather still
living stepped out
of the shell of his body, leaving
it in the nursing home. While his eye
levels with the anesthetic table top
his mind roams the dust motes
of his boyhood
on the prairies.

So strange to step out
of a negative
into the light
back to the negative
when the image is worn.

*I can draw you
on a piece of paper, cut out
the shape that is you*

*and you'll be gone, won't you?
Or where will you be?*

We dream (consciousness
taking cons, the thought
in sea-creatures,
the lumbering lobster and crab,
like the shadow
at the brainstem).



You crawl into bed
and I turn out the light.

*It's funny, I'm there
but not really there, when
I'm asleep — things
can happen and I
don't notice them, you know
what I mean? I missed*

the ferry trip across Georgia Strait,
did not see the dolphins and whales
(or did I?) when
I fell asleep.

Because you have been sick
I creep back at midnight
to watch your face, eyelids
sculptured white in shadow
young lips puffed and pouting
mouthing small words.

January 12, 1990

(for Celia, Lindsay and Katie, aged 2, 7 and 11 years)

Lucinda Harrison Coffman / PERSPECTIVE

For miles the road runs parallel to the Ohio so that I catch up to and pass coal barges going downriver that seem not to be moving at all. The river here is wide, a commercial conduit, a lock, a bridge, concrete and barges. Further on, by Missy and the Captain's, there is no evidence of the Corps of Engineers at work, the river bends in a natural arc and the banks rise in ancient stands of sycamore and cottonwood. As Missy likes to say, it couldn't have looked much different two hundred years ago. It's the first thing my mother-in-law tells visitors. "From this perspective, you just squint your eyes and look across to the far bank and if you're real still you'll see" — she pops open falsely innocent cornflower blue eyes — "Indians."

Missy, like the Corps of Engineers she hates so much, lives in a world where there are answers to problems. This morning on the phone she said, "LaBrae would never have become impudent if you hadn't torn up your bedroom to paint it. Men are creatures of habit, and that includes you know what." Her telephone voice is clotted with charm.

"What are you saying, Missy, that LaBrae's problem is promiscuity or impotency?" Missy's quaint circumlocutions can be irritating. "In either case I don't think sexual preference has been linked to paint. Colors and fabrics might be considered symptomatic, but not causal."

"That isn't amusing, dear. My son has always been perfectly normal. At least until he met you." Normality is. The world can be set straight. Rivers can be dammed and bridged, and sexual currents changed.

From bank to bank the sun marks a wide gold track across the pale blue; there is a light breeze and the water is choppy with pink-crested waves. A speedboat towing water skiers roars close to the bank, cutting a white furrow. The boys in the boat wave. I wave back; when you're as rich as I am it's easy to get lost in other people's illusions.

If Missy were with me, she would make one of her coyly derogatory remarks, "It's the Porsche they're flirting with. And of course they think you've just got a good tan." Wrong, Missy; times have changed, no matter how hard you squint.

I couldn't have been more than five when I discovered that race is not always the genteel equation Missy would like to think it is. My mother and I were driving through a little town in the Bluegrass on the way to a horse show. I say a horse show because I don't remember my mother ever driving us anywhere else. It was one of those towns built around a court house square so that I saw the fight from three sides. A black man with a knife was astride a white man, and as I watched he carved out the white man's eye. There must have been horrible screams, of course, but I don't remember them, just the ragged, red hole staring out where the eye had been. "My god, would you look at that," Mother said. She rolled down her window. What had been the white man's eye lay on the hot concrete and the black man's knife was drawing a line beginning at the white man's left ear. "They're good with knives," she said; she spoke with the same dead level admiration she might have used to describe a gaited horse executing a rack. I had never seen a real fight, only television fake ones; but I knew this wasn't the way fights were supposed to happen. Fighting was like kissing, too intimate a thing for white and black people to be doing together. I tried to tell Mother, but she only laughed. "If you only knew, babydoll. Someday I am going to remind you of what you just said."

But of course my poor mother didn't live long enough for that conversation. It wasn't that she avoided discussing my paternity; it just wasn't the sort of thing that would interest her. In fact, she wasn't really interested in anything that didn't relate to horses. Mother had simplified her life in an enviable, if not always admirable, manner. She was *that* heiress of *that* automotive fortune, a name synonymous with the common man, granddaughter of an almost illiterate, but in the true sense of the word, *inventive* immigrant who made billions, whose only child, my mother's mother, in elevating herself, slid back into a pissmire of snobbery and exclusion more soul-stifling than the hole of ignorance and poverty from which my great-grandfather had clawed his way out fifty years previously. Insulated by money, my mother was raised in a society for which the breeding of horses was the paramount, no, the only consideration in life.

Ambitious mothers of gifted young horsewomen invariably fail to take into their social calculations that their daughters will marry horse trainers, or worse, have affairs with the swipes. It was the fifties, that soon to disintegrate fortress of conservatism and segregation, and my

mother was gifted. There was not a breed of horse that she did not own, race, or show. Then one summer abruptly during the show season she left for an extended European vacation, returning at eighteen with a baby girl, the richness of my café au lait skin and the ebony of my eyes already rampant, rearing against Bluegrass society, which could not quite bring itself to repudiate *his* great-granddaughter; with a frail, pale middle-aged husband called “the Count,” a title that was always spoken with a small hesitation by the servants, who were, as servants always are, the ultimate snobs. I have a memory so dim that I may have only imagined it: as a child I hold his bony hand and walk down to the lake on Grandmother’s estate. He hands me bread crumbs. “Trow dese to de ducks,” he says in an accent that I now associate with New Jersey. I am still unfathered, undefined.

Missy is waiting for me on the lawn. The afternoon wanes, the sun in the river dies from yellow gold to orange and the water greys in the failing light; the putrescent mudsmell of evening has set in. The old house, an austere and simple brick, built by the Captain’s progenitors when the Indians of Missy’s imagination were real and still asserting their rights to this land and river, reflects the orange sun opaquely in its mean twin window eyes.

Missy, with her appropriately quaint collies at her heels, walks over to my car. “You’re late, you know, and I hadn’t really counted on you for dinner,” she says, then covers her rudeness with a sigh of long suffering. “I haven’t defrosted anything. The Captain, poor dear, hasn’t felt up to coming down for a regular meal in days.” She gives me a cool peck on the cheek. The dogs, associating my presence with LaBrae, cower, not knowing whether they will be kicked or patted.

“But I must see the Captain,” I insist. “It would be just too disappointing to come to the River and not see the Captain.” From the first meeting I was intrigued by LaBrae’s parents. My previous marriage had been to a boy whose family was so average, so middle-class American that they might have been cast for a TV sitcom. They never mentioned my skin color, and only shyly, blushing, talked about cars. When I sat at their table and ate their roast beef and mashed potatoes I felt myself as blonde and freckled and average as they. They could not define me, make me into *me*. But with the Captain, Missy, LaBrae, and Sam, the black man who works for them, I sensed a relationship of such perversity and delicacy that the discovery of the

very essence of family life lay at my fingertips. In this miasma of despair and ambition I felt that I might discover what I had missed in my well-padded childhood.

"The Captain has been very bad lately. So many barges on the river." Missy looks at me, twitches her nose like a large white rabbit. "We musn't let on to him about LaBrae's" — she hangs on the word — "condition. I haven't told him about your separation yet." The rabbit look is pure appearance, not personality; since Missy has gone grey she has become colorless, as if her upper layer has been flayed, uncovering a sort of albino blankness beneath. Once a month she goes to a beauty shop in Lexington and has her eyelashes and brows dyed; it is time for a touch-up.

To be fair to LaBrae, all the signs were there when I married him. He looks like a Marine Corps poster, but his interest in the different, the eccentric, is boundless. LaBrae has, in our brief life together, never adhered to any occupation, belief, or sport for longer than three or four months. Before homosexuality he was a hot air balloonist, before that a disciple of a charismatic faith healer, bird watcher, horse trainer, publisher of a magazine for wine and cheese connoisseurs, stock car driver — so many personae has he lived that open his closet door and you will think you are backstage at a bizarre comedy.

As we walk across the lawn I catch a glimpse of an elongated shadow in an upstairs window, the Captain's room, from which, even when things are "going well," he rarely emerges. The Captain is "in drydock," an expression that allows the family to give full play to their sense of their own quaintness. The family had operated a ferry across the Ohio from 1809 until ten years ago when the new bridge was built five miles upriver. He was the last official Captain, but he had retired *de facto* several years before the new bridge, turning over the hourly voyage back and forth, back and forth, to his second-in-command, Sam.

Sam did not leave when the ferry closed. He lives in the farm's old tenant house, a shack on the edge of the deep ravine behind the big house. He gets government checks and does occasional odd jobs around the place, but since the ferry stopped there really isn't much for him to do. When there isn't any mowing or when he decides the job Missy has assigned him is not essential, he escapes to the shed on the dock that once served as the ferry office. He builds a fire on the bank,

his private ritual held over from the days when the ferry still ran, signaling the opposite bank that evening was fast approaching and the ferry was closed for the night, and ring as they might he wouldn't risk the snags and dangers of the darkened river.

Sam drinks and the court has taken away his driver's license. Missy has to buy Sam's booze from the liquor store in town. She says the man at the drive-in window gives her strange looks, but she has decided it's the lesser of two evils to be thought a lush than to be known as a rum runner for a "darkie." When she says this she gives me a sly, evil look, waiting for me to flinch, to acknowledge insult. I don't.

Sam does his drinking by the fire on the river bank. He curses the Corps of Engineers, the federal government, the civil rights movement, and when he gets drunk enough he forgets that the ferry is no longer in operation and curses the Captain for leaving him alone and for giving him the job and not the title. Then he curses the authorities for not demanding that he be licensed, for preferring to ignore the fact that he was running the ferry so that they would not be forced to issue a license to a black man.

Sam makes no secret that he thinks I have "passed" and that LaBrae has married beneath himself. Sam is a bitter man: in the old days he saw himself as exemplary among his race; now he has no job, not even an unofficial status, and he is not prepared for the new order and the possibility of equality. He has built a fire and his hunched figure is silhouetted against the smoke and the greying river.

"Soused again," Missy snorts in the direction of the river as we enter the house. "But you know how *they* are." Is this another dig at my uncertain paternity or a nudge to my white heiress half? It isn't always easy to know if Missy is being indirectly nasty or naturally a little addled. To make ends meet she runs, in the old summer kitchen behind the house, a primary school for retarded children, although some of her pupils are larger than herself. She calls her school a Christian Academy for the Learning Disabled. God, or perhaps modern medicine, has worked to Missy's benefit; her school overflows with children whose kumquat shaped heads and slanting eyes make them both appealing and pathetic. The bricks of the summer kitchen are crumbling and in the winter the windows rattle in their sills, but it is, in a way, reassuring to hear a babbled version of "Jesus Loves Me"

coming from that disintegrating kitchen where once slaves cooked over open fires, where now eighteen blighted souls are being toilet trained, led to Jesus, and given a niche of sorts in an alien normal world.

The school has taken its toll on Missy's logical processes. She rambles on in the sing-song baby talk voice she uses with her idiots, leading me through the dusky dog-trot hall, pronouncing in what may not be a non-sequitur, "It has never been a suitable marriage. Because of your background, who you are."

"Everyone adjusts to money sooner or later." I bring her up short, intentionally ignoring a possible slur, reminding her that in any bargain, because of wealth I automatically have the upper hand.

"What my son needs is a new start. As if none of this had ever happened. He needs to find himself." Overhead we can hear the Captain pacing back and forth on the wide old ash boards, fretting as he does when the barge traffic has been heavy.

Missy has recently redecorated the parlor, throwing out the ugly horsehair settee and the threadbare velvet drapes, replacing them with calicoes and the primitive rat-holed cupboards that for generations had been banished to the tobacco barn and meathouse. The room is as artfully cozy as a woman's magazine layout, but I prefer the parlor the way it was before, with its palpable gloom, as I am sure the Captain does.

She serves me tea from the silver service and offers me a cookie. "Fresh out of the oven. I baked them especially for you, dear." I recognize them from her last idiot school commencement, which I graced as a favor to impress the parents. They are hard and tasteless except for a bitter sprinkle of the Captain's bourbon, a failed attempt at revival. In spite of the stale cookies the point of all this formality has been made: my visit is to be a summit conference; we will decide the conditions of my divorce from LaBrae.

It hasn't dawned on Missy yet that I hold the trump card for she says, "Our name is one of the oldest in the state. It automatically bestows respectability on the bearer. You'll want to keep it, of course."

I weigh my response carefully, seeking the appearance of candor, "Frankly, Missy, LaBrae's name is of no value to me. I will take back my maiden name, or maybe my great-grandfather's, the inventor, you know, the white one. In the world at large, I believe, automobiles have more cachet than a defunct ferry."

It is a blow to her pride that Missy hadn't expected; she sits up so straight in her plain little Shaker rocker that its slatted back is perpendicular to the floor. "Then why in God's name did you marry my son? None of you even pretend love anymore, much less honor." Her voice rises in an anger which she cannot afford to show. "Why, when LaBrae first brought you home like a stray mongrel puppy, the Captain said it just proved —" But she stops herself.

Should I explain to her the true nature of my love, my pursuit of that most abnormal state of normality, the family? I think not; the subject of any study will behave truer if observed from a blind. And anyway, how can I explain what I myself do not clearly understand. I say comfortingly, "LaBrae and I have both benefited from our marriage. We have grown, all-be-it in our separate ways, but we have grown. We have discovered ourselves by reaching a kind of death."

"This is a temporary thing. LaBrae has always been imaginative. He just needs to find something to believe in."

"He may have found himself this time."

"Then LaBrae will have to have therapy," she says hotly. "People can be rehabilitated from that. But it's going to be expensive." Missy is under the very wrong impression that to get money from the very rich you have to prove injury. She doesn't realize that we are like the government or God in that respect: we expect to pay for life for services we require only temporarily.

"But that would suggest to LaBrae that there is something wrong with his newfound sexuality. I was thinking more in terms of a new start. In a place where his new lifestyle will be, well, more acceptable." Missy is, if nothing else, one who adjusts to the curve balls, the slings and arrows, the frequent and execrable exigencies. She rocks in her antique chair, her rabbit face deep in thought: she will trade her son's geographic proximity to her and her hope that he can regain heterosexuality for his living a lifetime of luxury and ease. But what choice does she have; what mother wouldn't? I love it. Missy doesn't realize that the bargaining is not yet over. I go on, "I've been thinking, with all my money I should do something for the less fortunate. Some eleemosynary act. Have you any need for, say, computers for the learning disabled? Or some improvement to the facilities?"

Missy brightens: the cornucopia holds far more than she has expected. I rise, glance at the ceiling. "I'll just pop up and have a word

with the Captain."

Panic flashes in Missy's white-rimmed eyes. "You won't let on to the Captain about LaBrae?"

Here, I am fair, resolute, as certain as any TV pedant of popular psychology. "Acceptance will be the key for both of them. Adjustment is essential. We musn't treat LaBrae's homosexuality as shameful. Besides, it will give the Captain something more concrete than barges and the Russians to worry about." She follows me to the stairs, cowering like one of her collies. I stop her with a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I know you hadn't planned, but I am simply famished. Why don't you rustle us up something to eat while I visit with the Captain."

Upstairs, the hall is cramped and musty with the smell of old wallpaper and disintegrating plaster. The door to the Captain's room is closed. I knock and enter. The Captain is sitting by his window of little wavy panes. The river beyond is dark except for Sam's fire on the bank and the running lights of a tow going upriver. Behind him, over the mantel, is the portrait of an ancestor, the original LaBrae, supposedly painted by Jouett and worth thousands, a stern big-jawed face emerging from a gloomy nebula, a hideous and valuable painting that the Captain, even at his lowest financial ebb, would never bring himself to sell.

The Captain is in his nightshirt (he believes pajamas to be decadent and once threw LaBrae out of the house for wearing shorts). He hasn't turned on a lamp, probably so that he can better watch the river from the dark. When I enter the room he orders, "Smile, so I can see where you are."

"Ha, ha," I say, "Very funny. Have you seen the newspapers today?"

"Missy canceled our subscription," he says gruffly. "She thinks the news won't reach me. But I've got Sam and you. A good darkie will always tell you the truth."

I love it. I wonder if my own father, wherever, whoever he may be, would denigrate my white blood. Would he abuse me as cruelly: I am defined by cruelty. "You know, Captain, the Russians have announced the development of a new ICBM."

There is a look of instant justification on his face. "I knew it. I knew something was going on. More coal barges on the river today than

ever.”

The Captain believes that the military-industrial complex and the Russians are in collusion, upping the ante to keep employment and production high, hardly as original an idea as he believes it to be, and considering our nuclear brinkmanship world, a rather comforting one; at least we’re all pulling together for the economy. The family is embarrassed by his counting the barges and babbling about the Russians. What they don’t realize is that the modern world has no reality for him. His reality is here: the river, the crumbling walls, the gloomy ancestral portrait at his back. The Russians, the barges, the threat of nuclear war are all a game.

No, the real craziness, and they don’t know it, is theirs: he is oppressed by the weighty grandeur of their past. He sits by the window with its old wavy green glass that turns the water to the color of pea soup and watches the empty trackless path his family’s ferry followed for almost two hundred years, thirty-five of which were his own life, every hour on the hour, daylight to dark, until his nerves got the better of him. At the time of his retirement they were down to selling their last hundred acres. Once the family owned five thousand acres along the river and a hundred slaves. Now the Captain’s holdings go no further than the ravine below the garden into which Sam throws his dead soldiers; and Sam and me, his two darkies.

“I have something to tell you. LaBrae has decided that he is gay and we’re getting a divorce.”

The Captain says nothing. Although my wealth has always been an affront to him, a symbol of the military-industrial complex that destroyed his pastoral heritage, he doesn’t despise the money itself. His pride would never let him admit it, but in his imaginings he has surely envisioned LaBrae restoring the old house, buying back the land.

“However, as I have come to feel about you and Missy as I would my own parents I would like to continue being your daughter. We both have much to share.” The Captain considers my proposal stoically. He leans back in his chair, away from the faint light from the window. His face is as dim and stern as the original LaBrae’s over the mantel. “Don’t tell Missy,” he finally says, “but bring the newspapers when you come.”

Downstairs Missy has fixed supper. We eat in uneasy silence in the kitchen with its cozy woodburning range, in which Missy has built a

fire as the evening has turned cool. Baskets hang from exposed rafters overhead and the old fireplace with its trammels and iron pots looks as it must have a century ago. When we finish, Missy lights a cigarette; she is not a smoker and she maneuvers her cigarette in unintentional camp. She doesn't like the taste and she's afraid of cancer, but it's her one vice, she maintains, something she can do that the Captain doesn't approve of but can't stop her from doing. And when her idiots are around they watch and ape her every move, so lighting up gives her a sense of unharnessing from one more burden in her life. Missy takes a couple of puffs, rises, then lifts the lid on the stove and destroys the evidence.

"You've probably noticed the summer kitchen needs a new roof," she says, breaking the silence.

"I'll send a contractor over."

"It's up to us to protect them, LaBrae and the Captain. To take care of things," she says nobly. Under the light her white-rooted lashes make her appear to have dusted her face in bath powder. "Men are so much weaker than us."

"Check out the kind of computer you want." In leaving I bend to kiss her head. Her roots are grey beneath the blonde and she smells of old tobacco and the classroom. I remember my own mother smelled of horses. She was an expert horsewoman, but even expertise has its limits. Her gaited gelding tripped in the show ring, fell on her, crushing something internal. Her dying words to me in the ambulance were, "Damn, I think I had the class won, don't you."

I say, "Goodnight, Mother." I have never called Missy that before, although when we were first married she insisted. Now she flinches.

As I start to get in my car, Sam's fire catches my eye. A sharp breeze off the river fans it into a blaze. My approach startles him. He looks up from the flames, and when he realizes that it's me, he nods in a surly, formal way, then thinks better of it. Perhaps he has weighed my racial heritage; the wealthy white half has tipped the scales. He stands, suddenly in instant transformation the house nigger. "How do, Miss. How you this evening?"

To the parents of her students, Missy refers to Sam as "our house boy," even though no amount of money would induce him to put on a white cotton jacket and answer her front door. But he can put on a good show, although even he must sense that the audience who

appreciates this sort of thing is rapidly diminishing. "You got your Derby horse picked, Miss? Cause I got mine. Hee-hee-hee. And I ain't telling. No sir."

An open bottle of whiskey sits at his feet, only a swig down, his second bottle, for he is steady on his feet. Sam has reached the point of alcoholism where consumption has an inverse relationship with steadiness. Sobriety makes him shake violently.

A string of barges slides down the river, making the water slap the bank. "The river seems busy tonight."

"Sure do, Miss, sure do." He laughs with high good nature, not sure if I am taking a pot shot at the Captain's mania or just making conversation. I can play his game, too.

"Some things a government doesn't know everything about," I say, leading him out.

"Sure don't, Miss. They sure don't." He shakes his head and pokes at the fire; no phoenix will arise from his flames. Occasionally I wonder if my father, wherever, whoever he is, got caught in the eddies and backwaters of our time like Sam; I wonder if he, too, is a bitter man.

"For instance, a bridge may get you across the river, but it isn't like a ferry. A ferry takes a man to run it. It takes a human touch."

"You right about that. A ferry don't run itself."

"And you know what else it takes to run a ferry, Sam?"

He sizes me up with a rheumy, serious eye. "Smarts; it take a brain. You got to know the river. You got to know people." There is bitterness in his voice.

"More than that. It takes money."

He takes my bait warily; am I playing him, will I reel him in at will like the Captain, history, the government? Is the tan of my skin to be trusted? "Hee-hee-hee," he bluffs. "It do, it do, and we ain't got none of that around here."

"Sometimes, Sam, when you're sitting here watching the far bank, do you ever see Missy's Indians?"

He takes the joke — if that's what it is; it's a matter of perspective. "Depends. Depends on how good I'm feeling."

"Change is always hard, Sam, but we'll be all right," I say with more confidence than I feel.

Like one of Missy's idiots, he nods complacently and repeats, "We be all right."

CAREL MOISEIWITSCH



Carel Moiseiwitsch / SIREN

1. (Gk Myth) any of several women, or creatures half woman and half bird, living on rocky isle to which they lured unwary seafarers with enchanting singing. 2. sweet singer. 3. dangerously fascinating woman, temptress, a tempting pursuit etc.; (attrib.) irresistably tempting, as of a siren . . . (ME., f.OF sereine, sirene f.LL Sirena fem. f.L f. Gk Seiren)

— Concise Oxford Dictionary

According to psychoanalytic theory, we repress aspects of ourselves and others which we are unable to confront and accept. Ancient primitive cultures who worshipped the female principle of the Great Goddess provide aspects of women that our patriarchal christian culture represses, i.e. marginalizes, outlaws or denies. *Siren* is a search for visual representation of this repressed female energy and power, the shadow of the Virgin Mary.

This installation has a traditional format of guardians — four Demons — and attendants — twelve Sirens — flanking a central throne. Historically the Goddess is often represented by a bird or seat — the Primordial Lap. The Winged Throne depicted here is therefore a site of original female power and the whole piece posits an opportunity to behold and confront a primal force.

Note: The images in this issue present the four Demons and the twelve Sirens; the triptych of the central throne has not yet been photo-documented.









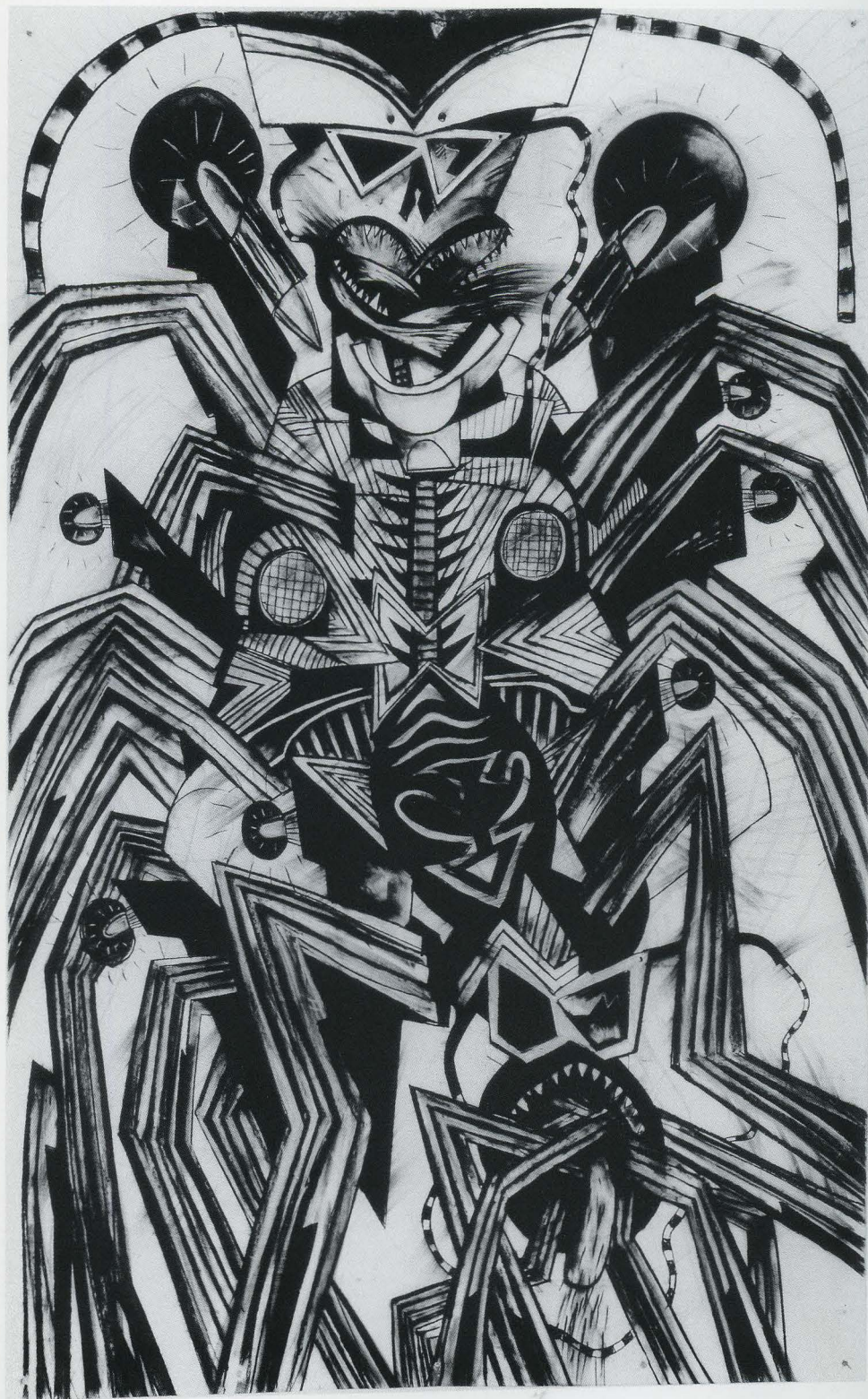
















CAREL MOISEIWITSCH

Selected Exhibitions

Solo

- 1991 Solo show scheduled at Open Space Gallery, Victoria.
- 1989 *Siren*, Vancouver Art Gallery.
Comic Relief, Reko Muse Gallery, Olympia, Washington.
The Mountie Postcard Show, Susan Whitney Gallery, Regina.
- 1988 *B/W Repro*, OR Gallery, Vancouver.
No Hanging Around, University of Regina.
- 1987 *Biko*, Non-Commercial Window, Vancouver.
Fugitive, UBC Fine Arts Gallery, Vancouver.
- 1986 *Heroix*, The Front Gallery, Vancouver.
Comic Relief, Partisan Gallery, Toronto.
- 1985 *Comic Relief*, Pitt Gallery, Vancouver.
Terra Incognita, Joliffe Studios, Swindon, U.K.

Group

- 1987 *Amnesty Show*, UBC SUB Gallery, Vancouver.
The Casual Casual Cultural Exchange, Toronto Artists' Resource Centre and Fetish Gallery, Montreal; Galerie Donguy, Paris.
- 1986 *Les Banalistes*, The Front Gallery, Vancouver.
Le 23e Salon Internationale de la Caricature, Montreal.
Dog Days, Pitt Gallery, Vancouver.
Political Art, Surrey Art Gallery, Surrey, B.C.

Selected Articles/Reviews

Coley, Byron. Review. *Forced Exposure* 15(1989): 121.

Gilbert, Gerry. "Carel Moiseiwitsch." *Vanguard* (November 1987): 31.

Laurence, Robin. "Carel Moiseiwitsch." *Canadian Art* (Winter 1987): 91.

———. "Images of Female Sexual Power." *Georgia Straight* 25 August-1 September 1989: 17.

Lippard, Lucy. "Activist Art News." *Up Front: A Journal of Activist Art* 14/15 (Winter/Spring 1987-1988): 80-81.

Michael-Dault, Gary. "Casual Casual Cultural Exchange." *Vanguard* (Summer 1987): 36.

———. "Savage Pencils." *Canadian Art* (Winter 1988): 71-75.

Orser, Brenda. "Les Banalistes." *Vanguard* (Summer 1987): 45.

Owen, Holly. "Art That Illuminates You." *Kinesis* (September 1989): 15.

Shein, Brian. Interview with Carel Moiseiwitsch. *Casual Casual* 18(1986): np.

Carel Moiseiwitsch

Siren 1989

Pastel on paper with metal grommets

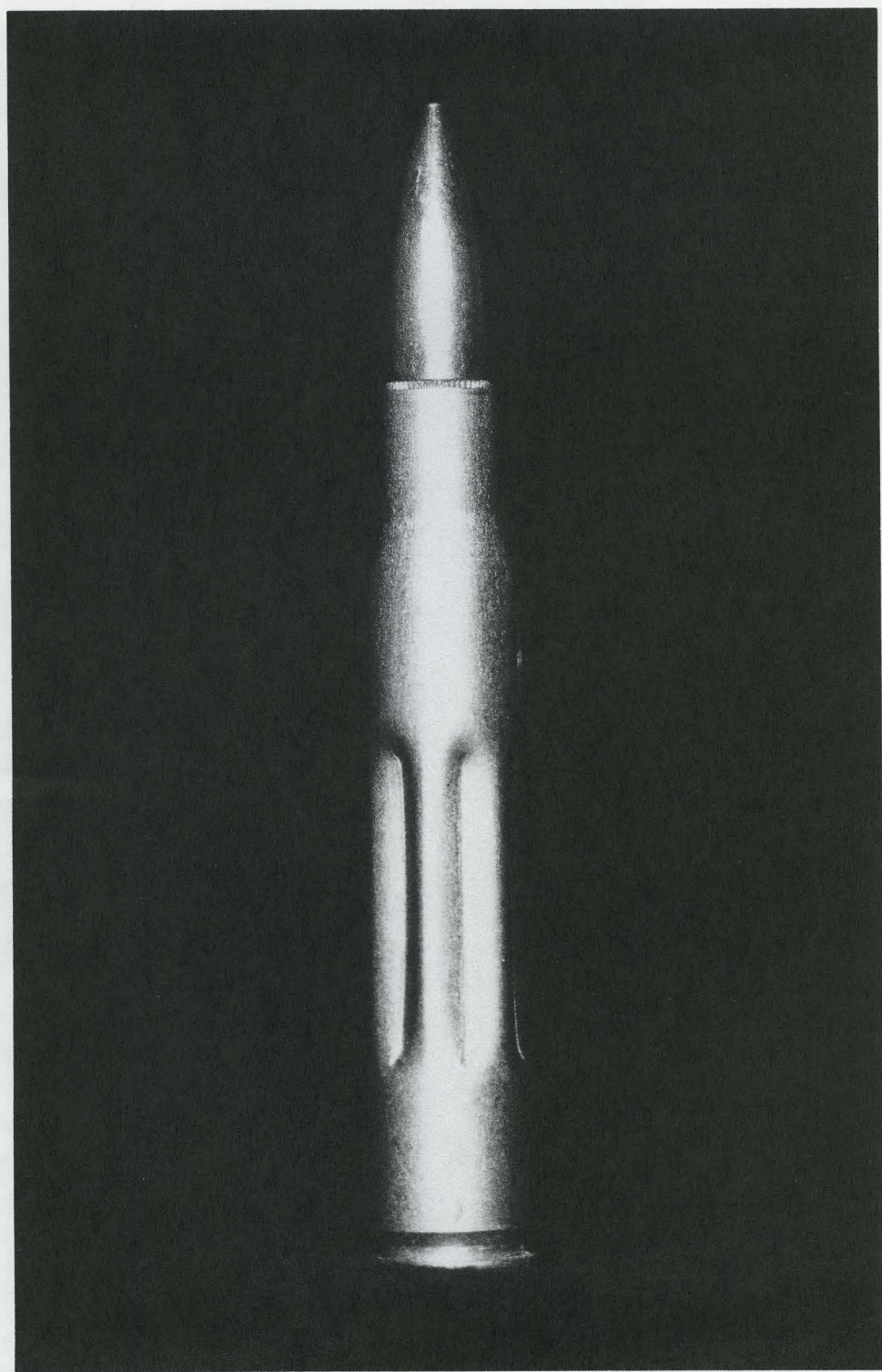
Seventeen elements:

14 panels, 84" x 52" each

Triptych, 120" x 144" overall

Courtesy the artist

Photography: Ted Clarke/Weekes Photo



Robert G. Sherrin / STILL LIFE

Nature morte: a hand, just so. The fingers curl lightly, as though about to receive a touch. The palm is still damp, and its life lines glint with a dark moisture. In the background, a blur of movement, mainly reds and greys and blacks and blues. Noise echoes into silence.

●

He withdrew, so we're told, into his apartment where he watched war movies and read war comics.

He must have practised often: pulled it out of his closet, swung it from a sack, aimed it at the faces on his TV. He must also have contemplated how to travel from his apartment, how to carry his weapon from the building to the car to the Polytechnique, how to remind himself of the exact location of his gun and to feel always assured that others couldn't see it. He must have imagined pretty thoroughly every step he'd have to take to the second floor, where to park legally, how many doors to get through, when to pull the semiautomatic from the garbage bag, how close and intimate the crowds might be. He must have dreamed every night of those tight corridors, lined with lockers the colour of iodine.

●

Why do you have to be so powerful anyway?

●

The head. I know a little about the head: de-capped it resembles an eggcup with breakfast cooling in it. The dura mater coats the brain like albumen. But it can be peeled back, like the membrane of a Christmas orange, to lay bare the corrugations of what I am: imagination, motor skills, the ability to reason myself to the logical extremes of that cavity.

I am quiet most of the time. I look out the window but I stay away from it, behind the curtains, and peer through a slit in the fabric. Things dart past the thin gap. I learn to slow down my gaze, until the traffic and pedestrians move past my sight at a pace that makes it easy to track down a feature, a moving colour, or put sound of protest to the car lurching sideways.

I don't eat much — except things that taste sweet, that counter the greyness of the room.



He had to pick a wardrobe. This is something he knew a little about, having gone with his mother as a young boy to be outfitted for a new term of school. He understood that certain colours went well with others, but he was no longer sure how to make decisions about things like clothes. It was irksome to have to devote time to appearing to be any thing in particular. He understood the symbols as well as you or I — that ties denote a degree of success or a desire for it. *Material desire*, I suspect we are likely to be told when the so-called authorities are allowed, or are willing, to tell us all they know. Certainly by that time, we'll have speculated so greatly about his character that we'll find him a bore and turn our attention to the latest large scale political murder somewhere else in the world.

He believed, I suspect, that the only time we point is when we raise our remote controls: that much we understand.

To be different, so he thought, he chose mottled colours, such as those found on the bark of winter dormant trees: medallions of flesh-colour slipping over patches of withered brown sliding into pools of coagulated rust. Like a wilderness he could wear.



I have learned things lately. For instance, I have learned the difference between television and the world outside my window. Television is an electronic pulse. The world outside possesses a wider spectrum. This is a property quite common in science, an activity that causes me to think a lot about pulses, energy, and spectral displays. I've learned that when I watch TV I don't watch TV. I watch other people take their places in the activity on the screen — fleetingly, like the pedestrians that slip past the widening gap in my curtains. At night I now turn the television off and stand by the window. I let the darkness come around me, from behind, like a gesture I sense is about to land — and does. That's what I like about the darkness — its touch, its thorough embrace. I lean toward the window and wait for the shapes to shift through the streetlight, weak now at this time of year. The cold makes the air so clear that light is absorbed by it, and I have to wait a long time to see, but then the patterns on the snow become

discernible. I can pick out depressions, and I imagine the foot that made them, probably narrow enough to fit in my palm. It is a pale foot, particularly under this blue yule light. But a soft foot. I run my thumb along its instep and the warm skin wrinkles. There is moisture under the curl of the toes. A little lint too. I can smell a mixture of sweat and felt and freshness because the sock's humidity has already dissipated in the cool darkness.

It tastes of salt and soil — right there, at the heel, where it's a little rough.

•

Why are you so afraid of us?

•

The round, he thought, was well named. When set beside the video monitor, its shadows were multiple and mobile in the wobbling electronic light. He found himself watching, humming a tune over and over again. This was also something he'd done as a young boy — sung his chorus repeatedly while his classmates sang their assigned verses over and over.

The round was also well named, he understood, because it was endlessly repeatable, constantly pumped out 24 hours a day at sites all around the world. There was probably one for every living human being, a name for every round.

The round was long and tapered. It had what he came to call *hips*. And narrow, delicate shoulders that carried the head — of copper.

A redhead, he thought. And gave it a name.

•

I learn new things every day. Today I learned that if I stand for long periods at the window, I seem to disappear. No one takes notice of me in the same way that I take notice of them. I pull the curtains wider, so my gap frames more and more things: that one's leg slipping past the doorframe of a store; this one waving in anger at the passing cab; another one, just over there, bending by a tree, reaching down for something. Her hand is outstretched, and I can see the splayed fingers so I know she is not about to grasp anything. It's as if she were testing the temperature of the snow-covered earth. Her fingers curl, but very slowly, I notice, so the yellowy sunlight glints, but just barely, off her

burnished fingernails.

They are not so hard, you know. They can mark the flesh if drawn over it in various ways — a brief furrow, the fast whiteness of a scratch, the burgundy welt. But nails can be cut themselves or bitten off.

I look down at my fingers. I feel the coolness that arrives — as though from the lined glove she draws her hand, slipping it through mine, finger between finger laced tight. If I were to have the chance to be with a woman again, it's that coolness I would want, something distant but momentarily touching, foreign and somehow dangerous. Quickly absorbed and excreted.

The woman is gone now, and I am relieved. The glass is icy as new bedsheets against my forehead. I lean hard into the damp cold cutting edge.

When will I break out
or up
or down
or in?
Any day now. Any day.

•

What is it in us that frightens you so? Maybe that's not the right question. Maybe you are frightened by the fact that we even ask such questions of you, but nevertheless, let us ask you this one: what is it in you that is so frightening?

And this one as well: why are you so determined to control everything but your own desires?

•

He began at an early age to look at his body in mirrors, in any reflective surface in fact. When his father and mother and sister were out, he would take the looking glass from its brackets on his closet door. He would lie on his bed and hoist the mirror so he could scan his naked body: across his thighs the snake-like bruises from the belt, the dark lift under the eye where the fist had struck, the scratches on the chest where the nails had dug in to spin him around for another fatherly tap on his face. It was odd, but he understood that the pain had leaked into him from outside and sunk deeply, settling perhaps to the bowl of the abdomen, for it's there his hand would begin to smooth things over as he stared upward into himself and witnessed the

transformation.

He realized that size is a matter of perspective. He realized that in his culture power is also a matter of perspective. Sometimes he lay on the mirror, pressing himself into it, feeling his cool hard reflective surface. He loved that pressure — and the ritual of his father's hand, his mother's useless threats, his sister's quick yet futile invisibility when the beatings began and the old man made his rounds. No one protested. The neighbours turned up the sound to the Plouffe Family and that was that. He would pound himself into his own reflection and wait for the weakness to overwhelm him.

Years later, he would still sigh in his looking glass cell: oh yes, oh yes. Fuel, he would think as he rolled off and stared into the winter of his cracked ceiling. Energy. Size. Power. These are the things he would build with, he decided. With these things he would engineer his world: tall buildings, mirrored sheetwalls 54 stories high on Rue Dorchester and long jets of arced steel over the St. Lawrence. He recalled that carbonated sensation just at the moment of release. That soft explosion.

The shot, he said to himself, finally finding the name for the thing and the action both. The shot.

•

Do you think we're taking your world away from you? Why do you believe our future denies you a place? Don't you know that a fetus is, at one point, both female and male? Do you really think the one disappears when the other declares itself?

•

The classroom he chose carefully. He had thought about it while watching the videos he'd bought. He would squint at the monitor and soon the howling shapes would recede into the schematic he devised for himself: up the long escalators on the slope from Cote Ste Catherine, past the tall tower, up the ramp, and there just to the left, the entrance way. He knew the dimness of the escalator shafts, the nearness of concrete, dull bulbs glowing. He could already sense the students sliding smoothly up and down, their smatters of conversation deadened by the materials of the building. The classroom would be large: this he knew all along. There would be a little wooden desk on the podium, and women and men in the seats in front of it. The men he had no use

for, but the women would remain with him. Then his work could begin.

Certainly he knew already they would look at him with slackening faces and then they would grow animated. They might want to argue with him, even handle him roughly, but our world had already trained him in the language of denunciation. Oh, he'd have no trouble keeping their voices and hands at a distance. That's what he would design in that large room: space. He would engineer emptiness.

The weight of his weapon was that of a phantom limb. Even when he wasn't hoisting and aiming it, he could feel it nestle into his shoulder, the embrace of its length in his arms, its perfume of light oil and tempered metal. He would sometimes lie on his back with the weapon on his chest and loins, feeling it rise and fall as he breathed. He slept that way towards the end. His dreams became more and more hollow until their images dimmed to quick ragged movements, and the voices he heard were those of women calling out.

Their names, that's what they were giving him. This he finally understood, and in his sleep he began writing them letters of outrage and suicide.



Fear we understand: we learn it from childhood. We are warned about strangers. But now we must ask you more questions. Since you also are afraid, why must you make a joke of it? Why is your humour so black, so vicious? What is there inside you that makes you piss your pants when we insist we will live our own lives? Who put it there?

Why is it that when we say, No Means No, you reply with glee:

No Means More Beer

No Means Tie Me Up

No Means Kick Her In The Teeth?



I know a little about this head. It is full of things from books and television. I recall Lortie blasting his way into the National Assembly, the still electronic frame as he points his machine gun at the camera. Camouflage gear, boots, and clips of ammunition. I know also that in this head is a recipe, a complex one centuries in the making, subtle but volatile at certain moments. My head, should you peel it open and settle into the rift between my hemispheres, is like an open air cinema

where you will see our history played out: the fist, the foot, the crushed face, the geysers of blood bursting from bulldozed trenches in Silesia, the assassin in the window, the man in the shadows, the wolf outside the hut, the .223 raised yet again to frame the world in crosshairs, the sirens like a wind cutting through Boulevard Edouard Montpetit.

In this cinema, there is an endless loop: male power — we are, I say, all pricks. And some of us are all prick.



We have now for you instead of a question, only a few facts, too well known, too much already romanticized:

In his three page letter, he wrote, “I will die Dec 6.”

In his chosen classroom, he yelled, “You’re all a bunch of feminists.”

He wore a baseball cap with the words *Montreal Tracteur*.

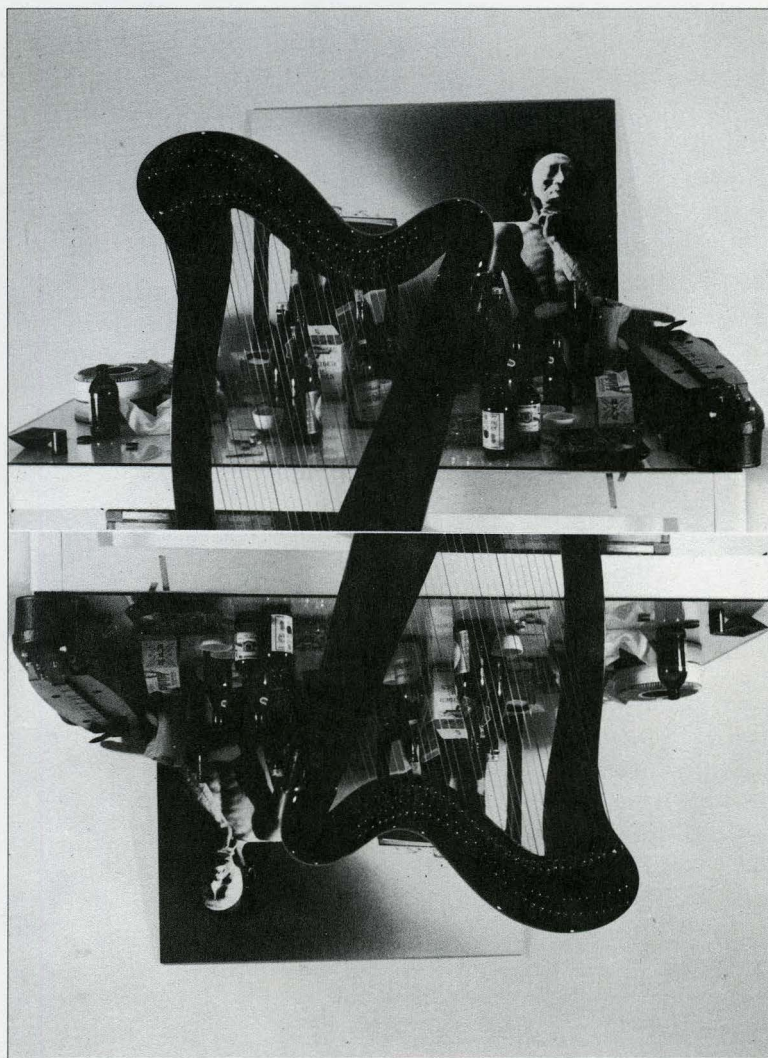
His weapon cost \$600.00

The men who run the store where he bought it said, “He seemed like a happy guy. I guess he felt good here . . . It isn’t a place where you see a lot of women. It’s like a boys’ club — toys for boys.”

We know his name will live forever. We fear these ones will not: Genevieve, Annie, Helene, Nathalie, Barbara, Anne-Marie, Michelle, Maryse, Maud, Sonia, Annie, Barbara Maria, Anne-Marie, et Maryse.



ROY KIYOOKA



Roy Kiyooka / NOTES TOWARD A BOOK OF PHOTOGLYPHS

To see is to forget the name of the thing one sees.

— Paul Valéry

The sacred consists of all those forces whose dominance over man increases or seems to increase in proportion to man's efforts to master them. Tempests, forest fires and plagues . . . may be classified as sacred. Far outranking these . . . stands human violence . . . violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred. How did man succeed in positing his own violence as an independent being? and then call it politics?

— René Girard

dear Pierre, Leslie and Barry —

ever since you came by to talk about TCR #3
and my participation in it, i've been turning over in
my mind's eye, the shape of its yet-to-be reified
contents. along the way i've got into the fundamentals of
computer-literacy: ha! this is the 3rd letter i've
started; the other 2 decomposed, due no doubt to my high-
tech illiteracy. digital derelictions. bear with me:
this letter will surely compose itself within the bounds
of our solstice-timbrels as we all veer towards the
distaff end of the modern age's rabid technologies.

given the unforeseeable ascendancy of
literacy via Gutenberg's Printing Press and
the unquantifiable Babel of Text/s that
issue exponentially from the world's presses.
given the implicit ideological premises
of the whole world's (satellite) MEDIA and all

of the varied (corporate sponsored) Art/s
i've often wondered what i'm doing, treadmilling,
inside this Image-Colossoi this ubiquitous
print Vortex? nonetheless, in my ruminations i
keep returning to the notion of a petite
book of my own photoglyph/s with its own vexatious
text/s: it's surely a quest of 'how' to
lay 'em up, to, at least, startle myself, let alone
ingratiate a delinquent TCR, spring-reader...

a hitherto, un-bidden Interleaving
of Photos and Texts unfolding, page-by-page
(fan-wise) like a pleated Renga Scroll

such are my immediate thoughts; have a listen
tell me your parameters for TCR #3
bark, loudly, if you want me to do a summersault

i would daub this grey november pallor
all over these clandestine filmic faces if the
weather didn't already posit their rune

each hapless noun soaked clear through
the mind has its own corrosive agencies
coagency itself but an syntactical whiff



to be both parochial and worldly at one
and the same time seems to me to be our allotment
heading into the maelstrom of the 90s;
though i have wondered if this could be promoted in
the heart of Patagonia. agog; i'll trace
The Lineaments of My Own Polis and if grace be given,
re-affirm, my place in the intricate web-of-
divers-thing/s. ideally, the author should disappear
into the plenary convection-currents . . . this
drear november day and all the dwindling days to come
propose a heartfelt in-dwelling: the utterly-
engaged 'photoglyphic-narrative' ought to summon up
its own alembic. fair or foul: let's abide the
consummate weather: let winter utterly wither us so

that TCR #3's Spring Intrancement/s can fly up-
ended into the Hullabaloo of the 90's

Concordences in Solstice Time: the Imago-quest
hold my hand i'm a habitual two-finger logos bandit
hallow all the unaggrieved foreboding/s of our
dumbfound noun/s and their coagulate agglutination/s
begin with this runcible Letter . . . this Pacifica . . .

yours truly
indelible trace/s

•

"the unravelling universe has no linguistic limits"
(who said that and why does he sound just like me)

•

it's the essential act of getting back
into the darkroom with all its noxious fumes that
i keep putting off. am i irresponsible
sitting here empty-handed, swaddled in solstice gloom
daydreaming, unsurpassing, Pagan Skies.
anyday soon, saint nick will tumble down my chimney covered
in soot to stuff my image sock. each morning
i wake i ask myself will i begin printing today? or, have i
in fact begun with this attenuated letter?

a table of contents:
an entablature of contentlessness
breath's tracing/s

(. . . if it weren't for our counting:
counting the daily 'minutes' and bygone 'hours'
if it weren't for our calibration/s
and hence, cost-accounting and by recompense our
interminable mortgages and purloined
deficit/s: if it wasn't for all our chrono/logical-
indoctrination would we go on dreaming
up a pagan world with or without our credit card
incredulities.

counting on you, too . . .

over many decades i've had my hand in a number of
collaborations and if i'm lucky i'll have a hand foot eye
mouth in this yet-to-be-apparelled occasion i tell
myself as the 80's dwindle down and TCR begins its occular
ascent. like language/systems grounded in post-
Gutenberg print technologies and endlessly replicated 'our'
once-published/ no longer 'personal' images have to
all intents and purposes been flawlessly pre-empted by the
printed pages ideo-logical plenum. paging marshall
mcLuhan and andy warhol the prince and pundit of visual pop.

but that i tell myself shouldn't prevent us from
attending to our own mundane visual minds. after all we all
know that even a simple-minded 'image' let alone —
the hiss of a mere syllable has more alchemical layers than
you can shake a wand at. like i've said, it means re-
formatting each print with a 4 x 5 camera and all things
considered, it begins to look like, my perdurable, december
gig . . .



odd to have come to that time in one's life
when all the things one puts their hands and mind to
goes on and on within the parameters of one's
daily dalliances and in that ambient attention turns
indelibly into grist. the mundane, grounds us.

ain't november
typically grey / deliriously
sodden? ain't
the smashing of the berlin wall
and our own foetid
memories part & parcel of TCR's

S p r i n g / T r a n c e

will the 90s be among other things an insouciant
decade or will it be a continuation of all the ideological
fall-out we've had in recent times til it's finally
sunk so completely into the sedimentary layers of our bodies
it'll turn into mind, tissue, whorls of stars, blood,

and excrement . o my unpaginated pagan lattices...

this thirstless rain permeates my own midden .



this fog lifting its sodden drindlskirt
between hastings and prior surely has a priority on
this morning claritas that keeps us on
our toes indoors while outdoors it adds an un-sound Ping!
to all our parenthetical airs. the body's
nonetheless small consternations, a glossolallia of all
the voracious entitlement/s

a
sustaining vision of
the intricate palimpsest-of-relationships
supporting every living/dying
thing ought to inform an enlightened polis:
to imagine oneself interacting
with everything (imaginable) at a strategic
moment: pen, brush, spear to hand
is simply what it's always been about

lascaux painter/hunters haunt the precincts
of these commotions

through the open doors
of the newly refurbished Japanese Deli:
miso, sushi, and sashimi
fill many bellies. this november-gutter
swirls with our flagrant
thirst/s



the day after pablo picasso's painted bather
came to alexandria street to have her true complexion
replicated: richard turner was using a handspan
to gauge the distance between her blue breast and her
green one. the day after pablo's picquant
bather arrived at his studio in a yellow cab the new york
stock market dropped precipitously but her aplomb

never waived. when she settled in and he had taken note
of her measurements, he asked her if it didn't feel
a bit strange hanging out so far away from her st. tropez
haunts; but all she would say was "pablo knows best."

after all got said and done the question was truly
irrelevant. they both knew that the only consensus
that mattered had a lot to do with this, their once-in-
a-lifetime complicity plus their daily conviviality.
even the flush on her painted cheeks had to be scrupulously
replicated. a copyist's work is never dumbfound.

recognizing we'd spent a big chunk of our lives
inside a millennial dialogue about Art and all the modes
of its Valorization, we knew there were more ways to
embody the 'unutterable' than our own paltry syntax could
match wits with, let alone, conjugate. appalled, we
recognized there was no bottom-line to homo faber's appetite
for artifact/s. ideally, each one unique, certified
one-of-a-kind: yet, no more or no less than the ten million
replications of vincent van gogh's simple sunflowers.
and we had to admit that Picasso had inscribed his ledgerde-
main on our ransacked wits and that even a copyist's
handiwork bore testimonial brush marks to his vision.



ovarian stones tumble down-stream:
blunt shoulders smoothed by millennial abrasions.
scoured; this solstice prose, this
day's dismaying News from Eastern Europe: all
the toppled ideologies will surely line
the coffins and pews of tomorrow's ideological
stratagems

 this dilapidated prose
bears its own perdurable solstice endorsements...



. . . what i painted, yesterday, will
beget, tomorrow's undefiled colour-spectrum.
an unquiet gender-bed creaks beneath

us and picasso's bather. this dwindle-down
december sun, this questing nightbody . . .

'to paint is to love again' (henry miller)
proposes an end-of-a-millennium anti-historical trope;
a blush of unreason to flush out the old de-
crepitudes. in capricorn's season; all the capricious
children who speak cantonese ease my ears of
tomorrow's ideological squalor. i tell 'the round of
seasons' by their play ground ebulliences.

'gold mountain' our everyday background.

ghost-writers paid to pump platitudes into politics
can count on henry kissinger to applaud their
adenoidal ventriloquism. simple-minded syllables bite
the unbequeathed bullet lying parallel to their
intoxicated silences. i keep looking for impeccable
photo-glyphic moments, those gestural/nuances to
launch me into the mundane domain of the willing "i".

some whim in me says i want nothing more than a
counterpoint-of-sumishades to measure my outreach.



he for his part searched through old painting manuals:
spent hours mixing and matching colours til his own batch
matched the bather's earthen epidermis, and were, to all
intents and purposes, indistinguishable. "comparisons!
comparisons! will surely foreshadow whatever mirth i have
left in me," the parsimonious copyist muttered, comparing
different weaves of linen canvas imported from belgium and
france; comparing seasoned hardwoods for the stretchers
which have to be hand-mitred to the original specifications.
the sum of all these transactions compacted into an adroit
copyist's felicitous hand and eye. other-wise, it sure helps
to pay the rent.

talking, talking about the gild-edge currency
tuckt in/ among the 3rd world's inmemorial droughts and all
the lawful deficits, we came to the conclusion that
the New York Art World talks out of the side of its value-

laden, monetary mouth; and that all the multiforms
of replication/s, ad nauseam, added more than a pittance
to the lop-sided Monetary/Image Concatenation/s.

one afternoon i fell by he had four pristine
canvases propped up on either side of pablo's painted
bather. the trick consisted in intuiting where
pablo began and using a brush of the same width coupled
to the right sort of wrist-movement, complete the
copy, in a series of sustained gestures: the challenge
as he saw it was to come up with a copy so like the
original it would deceive even the collector's wife who
had come to esteem 'it' as her own self-portrait.



though: she had lost none of her decorum
she had begun to look as homely as alexandria street
itself. all sorts of his friends who fell by
remarked upon her sullied mediterranean grace. others
commended her for her adaptive 'savor-faire.'

but, what's a well-meaning copyist to do with
the old mod master's sticks & stones heiroglyphics?
or, the blunt wonder is how he kept flogging the
old cunnilingnam-factor for nine decades as if nothing
but his own furious libido empowered her presence.

one afternoon after a final tea and biscuits
pablo's painted bather and her freshly-minted replica
returned via yellow cab to their north vancouver
haunts. need i say we were riven by our rite-of-passage
into the importune realm of artifacts and their
discretionary, facsimiles. 'humble pie,' we thought, almost
simultaneously, thinking of, our own small place
inside Babel's hexagonal image-Hive . . .



young japanese couple and their two kids
dead, in the west end. the sum total of their immigrant-
lives, briefer, than mine. to have been born
and raised in modern Nippon with all its ideo-logical/

kul-tural/techno-cratic, 'homogeneity' makes it
ever so subtly difficult to re-adapt to other linguistic/
societal/ values. it's at bottom, a heart-rending,
filial, alienation; and, an unappeasable, home-sickness:
once you leave the heart's domain, it'll change
willy-nilly into a 'remote' garden in your mind
one you know you will never stroll through, let alone, name.
"never," is the name of a heart-break bed.

"against the grain" was not to be their way
in an alien land. (all the electronics, notwithstanding.)
the exiled heart, punishing itself, doesn't know,
what, drove it, to that, that, unutterable, estrangement,
with its concomittant, death-wish . . . pray that
the Tao will lend them its filial ear for the rest of their
unlived lives. all the names extinguished in our
obituary columns confound their unintended, nounless-ness.

"enochi wa namida no nagarei mon"



"the posture of her absence"

"i miss her, you know. i've had lots of women pass
through whom i go on missing and others i no longer have
time to miss, but i have to admit that pablo's dame
with her wacky hairdo got through to me and who knows what
we might have accomplished if she had hung around. ha!
but it's all tucked away in the mind's flagrant image –
repertoire, isn't it?" "and doesn't the body's inclinations
not to mention, its logomania, remain dumbfound...?"

i didn't fall by the day after she left or the day after
that i didn't want to face up to her absence, either.
full bodied; intentionally inscribed with sticks and stones;
or, simply going through all the old erotic commotions
for the sake of a well-wrought facsimile: we thought of
her vanquishment into the market place as yet another act of
un-framing the old oedipal muse: 'memories' motherlode.

sometime later; we heard that the original
had fetched an enormous sum at sotheby's whereas
her scrupulously painted facsimile had taken
its honorific place upon the floral wallpaper and
to the proprietary wife's delight, none among
their immediate friends let alone unnumbered guests
recognized the change: they all said she could
still pass for twenty-four if she had to.

deep inside the minotaur's labyrinth
picasso stood four-square, his burning eyes turning
into crystal-spheres whenever the sickle-
light silhouetted a flawless pair of fatty arbutle
knees, pendulum breasts & dimpled elbows.
even alexander street has its history of bricoleurs.

tally each and every artifact
incite, your own plenum



down on the end of ballantyne pier
the day after pablo's piebald bather left
alexandria street with her pristine aura and her shiney
replica intact: a sodden fog swallowed up one
luxury liner, several trawlers, a fishing fleet plus the
whole panchromatic slope of north vancouver:
meanwhile, the peerless gulls perched on the end of the pier
let the fog roll off their waterproof backs and
shrug their peregrine shoulders

stooped shoulders/ certified boulders
also have their backs, thoroughly scoured
this unexpected, salt clamour . . .
this, matchless, fog...



haven't inscribed a cheque with '1990' on it,
yet. neglected to make a 'new year' wish and slip it
under my midnight pillow. portentous all these
sullen winter days particularly in Eastern Europe: how

each of them and each of us hugs each perfervid
lunatic-moment, displaces the sortilege of all sorts of
ideologies. unsurmized, 'tomorrow' lies like a
sullen tiger on the far side of any capricorn's glaucous
sleep. a lot of my dream-life these winternights
comprise the soi-disant acts-and-sayings of person/s and
thing/s i've been looking intently at via prints
negs and even video-tapes: it's as if i had (inevitably)
been drawn into all their momentary fulminations
and hauntings. with rare exceptions i hardly ever remember
what 'he' or 'she' said in the talkies, but, in
galleys of the dream-world their un-repeatable gestures
quicken retinal longing . . . these thoughts comprise
one of the essential acts in the working out of the cadences
of a photo/glyphic/auto/biography.

counting; counting, the cadence/s
measuring out the number/s of face-to-face emplacements:
the succession of images, their obliquely
apprehended, (nonetheless) quotidian pagination/s. what
wants to be 'sighted' as well as 'sounded' —
is an intricacy-of-gestures that lies but a breath away
from the interlocutor's sullen eyelid.

. . . it's time to peer at more prints, negs and footage
to 'see' and 'hear' a unhidden narrative. all the
specs of darkroom alchemy and computer technology thus
engendered attending to the least visual/aural
inflection. needless to say it goes on being a vexatious
quest.

two months plus into TCR #3, i say the inquest
will have to wait. . .



brightness of this january morning
arouses the darkroom-spiritus. is it for a
light-suffused-day like this we suffer
weeks of abysmal rain? my whole basement reeks
of photoglyphic chemistry. i'm intent on
getting TCR off the ground and i know that this

luminous winter day will inflect the whole
ruminative process. pristine particles
of silver bromide monitors my response. TCR has
no name, yet; like not quite birthed.
its prosaic narrative, likewise, unbequeathed.
ease into it after a second coffee and
another dunhill: begin by reexamining the next file
filled with contact sheets and negatives:
ask yourself, do these images aid the furtherance
of a yet-to-be titled photo book. . .?



picture this thing: picture it in this exacting
light. the narrative i am questing, indeed
veering, towards, will only reveal itself after
many dumbfound hours in the darkroom. each
time i return from a long walk in the snow bound
winter light and re-enter the darkroom i re-
learn the alchemy of clandestine images. . .

each time i sit down to my IBM
i'm nonetheless at Language's behest
listen! can you hear the snow —
pelting, these slant/ january/ cadences. . .



“ ‘redress’ not withstanding”
scanning the brimfilled
cauldrons of ideological scald
in the year of the horse
the harkening proletarian-
upsurge in the baltic republics “i”
cross my fingers, touch wood
count to ten, slowly, myself
a number among this century's finger-printed
‘enemy aliens’ . . . to this day
i am nothing but my disparate
nomenclature

•

marxist/leninist
revolutionary protocol would seem to have
lost its ideological-balls during
the despicable “iron curtain” years with all its
rumpledstiltskin fears & loathing

what’s left of ‘the sacral’ after
a millenium of fratricidal wars but this plangent,
moral upsurge, this long abated fervour
to wipe ideologies face of each, their own lintel
and hearth. in lieu of all our previous
scarifications it’s surely a disquieting thought
that all ideologies, the most democratic,
notwithstanding, turn into, replenishible, millennial,
midden heaps

scare the shit out of me make my hair turn white

FEAR: as a gross instrumentality
of ideologies stomps intransigently through
the decorum of our kabalistic media

scare the shit out of me see the white of my eyes

or else —
they all smile that once
upon a time
legendary, lunatic-smile
the whole earth
needs a big dose of laughter’s cosmic
grandeloquence

•

guardian of
this swatch-of-whiteness my tall
maple/ looms/ stars
high above
my winter entrancement/s
under this
stealth of white
my life

a patch-work quilt stained
with a thatch of
colour/s
pillow my head
in the kingdom of sleep snow reigns
over etymology

•

an emerging sense of
an actual order for a long sequence of
Photo-glyph/s: 80 or more
black & white, Inflection/s: a discontinuous
narrative, comprising

ONES, TWOS, THREES
A PEAR TREE,
and a ROUND OF FOURS,
FIVES & SIXES

:

each discrete series
inflecting/
impinging/ on all the

Other
glyph/s

cliff-hangers
fragile fingernails
mincemeat
convection current
lapidarian
ladybug entrail
mug-shots

click!

i'd hazard the guess that photography is
nothing if not the phenomenologist's dream-of-
the irrefutable thing-ness of thing/s: all
comprising the retinal-world. what the eye can

plainly clasp in all its rotundness posits
photography's occulate terrain. each thing visible
a permeable 'text' by which we measure our own
sentience, conceit and recognition/s. . .

a homely silver-bromide Palimpsest,
: independent-yet-complicit
with each series of doubloomed-images

— bearing their own
foreboding chiaroscuro

memorie's breath:
beset by unimpeachable gesture/s. . .

the habitual/daily
darkroom/ ritual/s
all/ the prosaic/claptrap
the clatter of
cantankerous/
ideologie/s



nelson mandela released to millions of
enthralled blacks on television but what's Barbara
Frum doing fronting the Jubilant blacks
in faraway Soweto for all the plain folks back home?
me sitting on keefer street wondering — if
this snow is falling on Tienanmen Square tonight

my dear mao: everybody i know
has forgotten their favorite quotations from
the red book but not the poems you
composed in your heart during the long march.
cascading snow muffles my blue mule's
elongated ears. some say 'death' shouldn't be
photogenic, other savants say that its
proletarian attribute is an impeccable whiteness . . .

this snow, this long snow covets
your crypt and calligraphic thrift. this snow
silencing the pulpits and parapets
this snow, you know



title/s are difficult: they
want to be a haiku of the whole book's content/s
they want to prognosticate, but,
we both know, the best ones, simply, ring, true

i n f l e c t i o n s
— f e l i c i t o u s —
r e f l e c t i o n s

the Title/s of
each discrete series of
photo-glyph/s:
an idiosyncratic ribbon
of gnomic Text:
not to be inscribed til
the photo/s un-
cover their glossolalia
alignments

last things first



the haunted-images of the physiogomy of thing/s
one had paused long enough to look intently at,
and perhaps, photograph: haunted by their pre-
sciences, the insistence of their apparitional-
features, he paused in his scrutiny long enough
to light up a dunhill. everytime he went to benny's
to pick up a pack benny without crackin' up says,
dung-hill, sir. he could do without sleep and sex
as long as he puffed the hours away but as soon
as he butted out his last puff and turned on his side
with his thin legs drawn up he fell into uncraven

sleep. in dream-time he couldn't remember the name of
a single friend dangling a cigarette, let alone
exhale perfectly-lofted smoke rings. he had wondered
if his dreams exempted nicotine's taint 'cause it
fouled the sonnambulist's nest . . .

haunted by the notion of
'memorable moments'

he peered intently at a minute series
of granular-epiphanies . . .

numinous/gesture/s: un/concealing
neighbourhood/narrative
strategies



every moment, on television
millions-of-things have their image taken from them
without recompense. let each man's image/s
of his body be housed in its own environment. let each
man's face, be, for a moment remembered for
its unspeakable/unrepeatable grace. let each detail of
the least thing be a pre-figurement of its own
narrative in time. the next generation of photo-graphers
will be elected from among the blind.

the day onto day plummeting into
the image-vortex, barely translates into, mundane
nomenclature. the eyes are most becoming
when they're raptly dumbfound. after the big snow the
buoyant february days lengthen, any day now
my petite crocuses will tessellate my front gate



holed-up in the cellar of the house with a
hostage of acetate images: some wit on radio named imago
hibernaculum says, anybody in their present-
tense mind causes image-fractures, a teeming chiaroscuro
that extinguishes all nomenclature.

gimlet-eyed he didn't know if he had indeed
chosen and printed a particular photo, or, the photo chose
him to be its unmasked executioner. holed up
in the darkroom all the images began hallucinating spring's
felicitous ramparts . . .



"we" are the twin faces of the bromide beast
stalking a ruined garden for the utterly unbecloaked
face, the very one, that hasn't yet found its
own dumbfound frown. every face i print throws a pall
across my own apparencies; it's always solstice
night in the darkroom: "i" see my own grimace in both
highlights and surrounding shade: a faint trace
of my own fugitive smile creases their lips. every face
i print looks clear through me through its own
death mask. every silver print a bromide memento-mori . . .

these photoglyphs and this
alembic text are dedicated to my family,
and my unpreemptive friends, and
all the eastend personages plus a host of
multi-form things that graciously,
it unintendedly, lent their presences to
this salutary occasion. for the
sake of the book: even my own face is but
one of many borrowed artifacts



'silver imprimaturas
netted
pacific entitlements'

the weathering-of-things is its
essential information.

each page
its mirrored-image a
whole thing

star/stave
the least thing entire
layer on layer

laminated to
present-tense ocular
interventions



persons/places/things
in their condition
momentarily unconcealed

beginning with stonedgloves in 69
bc almanac 70 / 13 cameras 79
my japan 85 and other photo/text/works
this book furthers a capricorn's
photo/glyphic epic

parchment / epiphanies

yuki
and koto raga
each
crystal
flake
each
scintillant
note
loops
of pellucid
white
verbs
mantling
gorgon
throat

Fred Wah / PEARAGRAPHS

On Roy Kiyooka's *Pear Tree Pomes*

A collection of pomace. Left over. Residue. Pome poem. Fruit, of looming back yard pear tree. Windowed lost love, seasoned symmetry of gaze. Words to hang onto, picked, plucked, pared, preserved. Or rain/frost-rotted brown on top of the camper.

Nest. Branch and sky for hair. Dream space where the eye-shaktra's rooted up prime before the mind's eye in growth rings fluttered flowered house of interlimb, mesh of mindingness, net work, nest work.

Some bright beam lights up behind the eyes, or through the greenery, truths of all sorts writing pang and time. Tall is as old is. That's a fact. Things to put a bite on, the bark. Getting to the char-core heart with word-worm tunneling. Put an ear to.

Low roar of shakuhachi waves. Enki drumming on the cedar. Hammered words said beep bent forgotten all but the ever-resonating thud even the paper-clean dry seed-head split and distant sound of frost released from brittle memory pod.

Old dogs of war words let loose as forkt birds slipping the private magic state into talking tree. Listen. Love words. Language paired and othured over the geographical heap, dangled from a canopy called earth-as-sky. Caw. Co.

Facing the old yin-yang turbine round the night sky weaving its stars into the tree tops shade upon shadow questioning distance upon distant sites sign voice weather noting exed ever only spins plus minus minus minima plus.

After the throttle cutting of white inked into body along with the sigh of staining the world with the same body. What a river such tangible surfaces usher singing; its banks cut too with smells and other signs of shape or touch tuned with Meloids.

Word as seed preserve brings up the notion of rotten language composting for the progeneration of itself and the ripe vocable as soft and juicy palpable but for the bite of belief and the Bering Isthmus migration so far from the Cantonese pollen.

Chinatown walking through the food smelling and then sitting down in a booth to taste the birds nest soup or any noodle late night neon ragtime all alone in the dawn music Virgil's vigil down the street and home again home again.

Stirred-up word leaves equal to birds' startled whoosh and the morphophonic fruiting of the great vowel shift(s) syllable canting the old prayer wheel so familiar as the resonating fat of the adjective, you know, like "Summertime".

The tropicism of allowing the range of stimulation (in this case, sky) and avoiding such an indicator as clarity of outline (that is, fingering it) puts the poet's nose to the wind so that bite has surface (in fall, that could mean frost).

Yes, there are a few of those brushes with sudden silence. The "great" hush. A slight stunning of the uttering tongue diverts to rainforest and you know OM is AM somewhere on the hermes dial. Even the trees wait, rooted.

Here the wickerwork of wonder prevails, especially seasonally, especially winter. Night turns too. That's when the griddle glows with answers, that's when the porch of stars or clouds twigs to the forecast, that's when the eyes get used to the dark.

This stoniness that comes to life, unfetters itself from heap by song and the crazy clicking of the compass needle from side to side, something ringing ahead, something diamond, vertebraic, maybe something bonelike in the name.

Sometimes it's just word as a reflective buoy nunning and canning entrance to the (h)arbour. At others, smell's left to gauge place, especially in the morning. The ode as a jar for dead fingernails. Pears, breathing through their skin.

Here's the tree traveller with news from the roots. For the poet that's the "heavenly" one, the one growing down from above. Not just dream. The tune is reflective: the image of the tree shows a tree. Such is home and the authority of love.

The tree-talk hears preaction (ie, just thinking about it) as a plot to rejuvenate the locomotor birth-breath effect (you know, when the sap rises) because there always seems to be an un- or de- chat to simulate houseness.

Layered into west-coast leafery is another homing device between the legs for birds, rivers, salmon, spawning gravel, and smouldering midden heaps. All old time warm, damp copulas charting ocean's peaks to get some home again.

Mother tongue tongue-tied lost ungendered gendering potent cone-seed to burst birth in any chance fire only words green branching into childhood pink Eve's apple stuck in man's throat all forest foreign but for the pear tree.

Behind this tree-braille on the slivered moon-pear of a page is his "screech" and behind that some solitary hollering of the pome poem as proper, as in *proprio*, vessel for any world-preserved jar of memory keeps listening for.

Tell-tale leaf-light filtered photosynthetic compost haunted by the house syntax. Paper page so under the thinking thumb, but then the word baggage tsunamis forth and tosses, say, the persona of language's song which then just dangles and spins.

Ancientness moving in on the dream of falling. Air drama, into the earth. Leaf-word-paper-skin-mold, moist churnowing of a tongue once flowered container of the "well" sprung within body sapling dappled skylight seeded.

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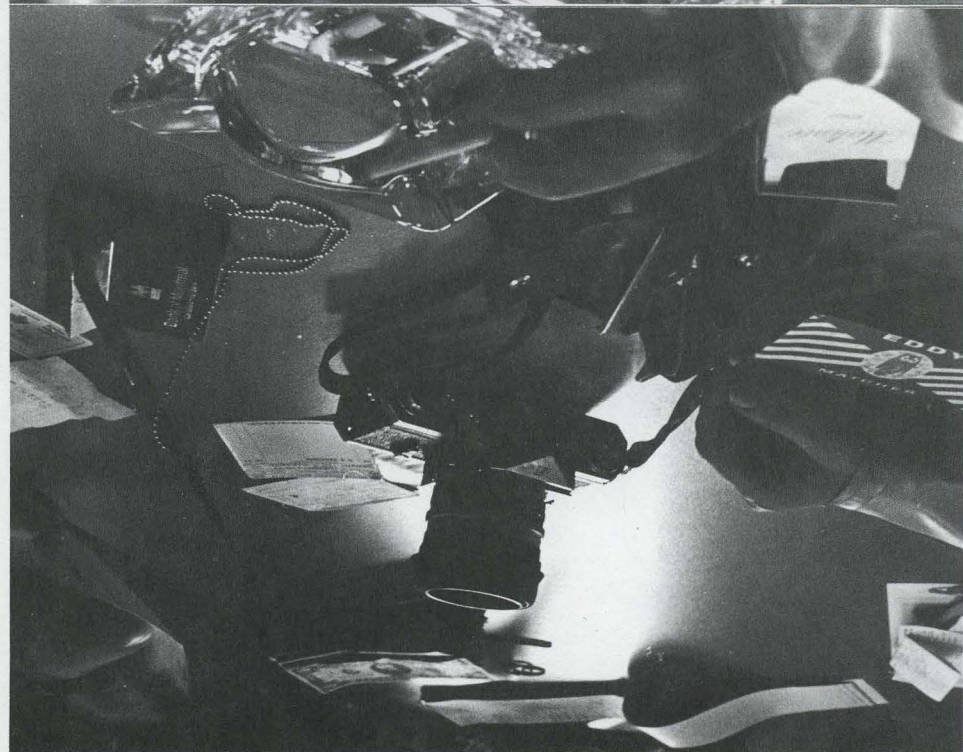
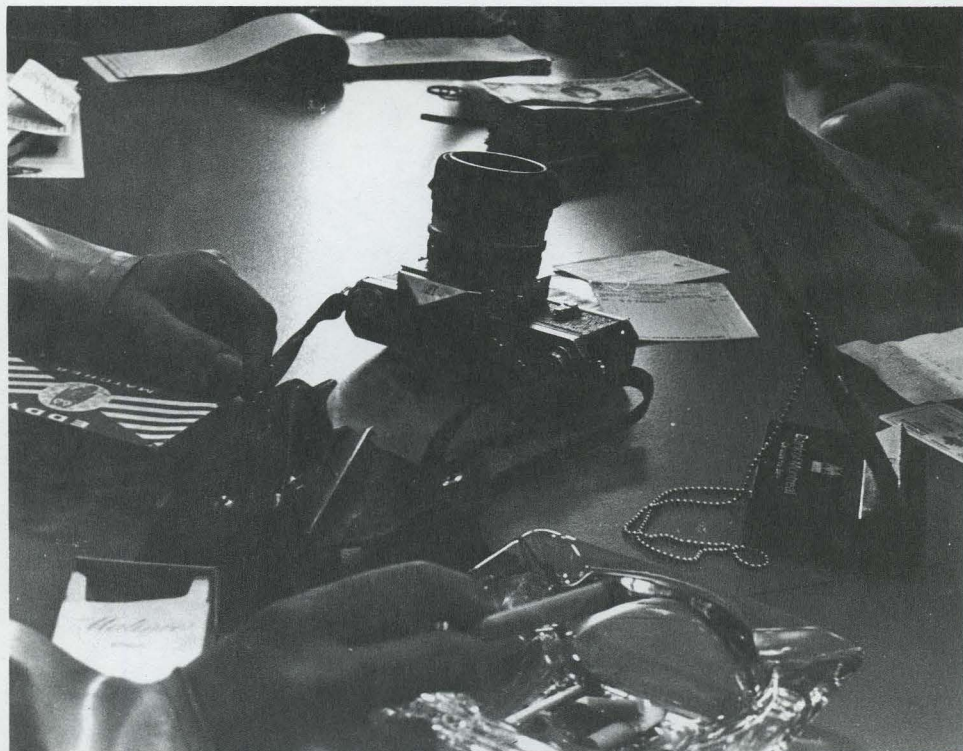
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Chapbooks

The following chapbooks have been printed in editions of 26 + 10 under the logos of the *Blue Mule*:

All Amazed in the Runnels of His 60 Winters
An April Fool Divertimento: 'i am dancing a jig on an upturned bowl'
A February Postscript to OCTOBER'S piebald SKIES & other Lacunae/s
G O T E N Y A M A: A Sequel to Kyoto Airs
A June Sky Lark for Kai's Birthday Air
MARCH: PROSE: WORK/S: A Concatenation of Pacific Rim Vernacular/s
OCTOBER'S piebald SKIES & other Lacunae/s
Struck from the Heat of a Winter Sun
Three Nippon Weathervanes: KOHAMA SKIES
TOTSUKATOPIARIES
KUMO / CLOUD/S
WHEELS: A Father & Son Trip Through Honshu's Backcountry, w/ Photographs



George Bowering / THE POWER IS THERE

I am told that Fred Wah somewhere said that the poet is a “technician of the potent.” We know, from hanging around bookshelves and conferences that he is speaking in the context of Jerome Rothenberg’s phrase, “technicians of the sacred.”

As Wah would say, I like the shift. It is an Olsonian shift if you look at it closely enough. By the sacred we mean things that we have envalued in spiritual terms. No matter how sincere we are, we still place our spiritual needs first. We are likely to remain humanists. We are likely to be at best Wordsworthian priests of nature, with all the egotistical sublime that entails. Olson called it “sprawl.”

A technician of the potent, I take it, is possessed, if such a word be possible in this context, of Keats’s negative capability. One can find remnants of Keats’s prose ideas in Olson’s prose and earlier in that of William Carlos Williams. We are talking about Fred Wah’s inheritance here. Mine, too.

Here is the difference, if you have not yet figured me out. Whereas the idea of the sacred is left to human choice, the potent resides in the material and energy particles that might give themselves up to the poem. Not to the poet, but to the poem. The poet, too, should be giving himself up to the poem. That is the mystical application of Olson’s “objectism.” The potent might be apprehended to be in things you can image. I prefer to imagine its place to be in the language itself, in the phonemes we poets must become experts in.

When Wah says technician, he means to say that you poets have to study and practice so that you know our language structure the way an electronics wizard knows the inside of a transponder. Look at Wah’s imputed phrase: it involves conscious learning (*technos*) and power. I hear one of my favourite theoretical words here: potential.

What is potent? Or where is the potency (the potential)? It is in the possible combinations and recombinations of the basic materials of our language. We can perpetrate fusion at room temperature. God made us happen with a few words. We are the enactment of those words. We too can speak. As poets we should be careful of what we think we create.

That is to say, the technician should never get the idea that he is the source of the power. He is vouchsafed the privilege of channeling it,

from wherever it was proceeding when it came to him, to wherever he can direct it with care. He may be a poet transcreating an urn that is the transcreation of an Attic ditty. He may be learning to see through rather than with his eye.

If the poet is this technician, what techniques can he learn to avoid the sprawl of the ego? Some are obvious and basic: refusing the simile, for instance. The simile might once in a while be a given, but generally we can assume that the poet was trying to author an effective metaphor. That is, to authorize a reading of nature.

Along these lines the poet might learn to refuse the temptation of description. If he thinks he is in the business of representing the world, he can try methods of re-enacting experience rather than describing it. The act of description is a kind of constant low-energy simile-making. It entails appropriating the world, qualifying it, and emitting a somewhat abstracted amalgam of its materials. The sincere poet might begin by refusing any obviously abstract qualifier. Nothing "Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay."

The sincere poet might also refuse the temptation to appear poetical at the expense of the language and its normal beautiful shape. No attestation that "August is laughing across the sky."

What is re-enactment? Well, it is really not possible, as old Heraclitus told us all two and a half millenia ago. But if a poem by Mr. Williams says:

All along the road the reddish
purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
stuff of bushes and small trees
with dead, brown leaves under them
leafless vines —

our eyes travel as the poet's did, and we are privy to the discriminations. The poem is about small things breaking through the soil in spring, Williams's sempiternal image of potency. The seedling can split the pavement and the poet can only watch and say so. No metaphor will ever be as powerful as that.

No metaphor will ever be as powerful as the English alphabet. There is a potential energy within it equal to the power of the universe itself. Do you remember Blakes's picture of Jehovah kneeling to free lightning bolts from his fingers? The poet is not Jehovah, no matter what the atheist Romantic poets say. The poet is the person waiting under the tree, waiting for lightning to strike. Waiting with pen in hand.

Gary Geddes / FOOTNOTE FROM CAHUITA

The jungle walk from Cahuita, which more or less follows the shoreline, holds few, if any, perils for the visitor, but that does not stop Jim from turning it into a journey to the source of the Amazon. The first blue crab that crosses our path, moving high on its four claws like one of those lumber carriers found in warehouses back home, is enough to send Jim careening off the path to the relative security of the beach. It's a splendid creature that seems to have adapted so it can't be easily spotted in the reflected sky-blue tropical waters of eastern Costa Rica; however, in the green shadows of the jungle, where it lives in holes above the tide-line, the crab's glossy ceramic shell comes as a complete surprise. So, too, do the butterflies, with their bars of black and gold.

We've spent several delightful days in San José, a city which, after Managua, seems opulent and full of history, despite the familiar fast-food chains and billboards enticing foreign businesses to invest and visiting pensioners to become residents. We've splurged for a meal at an Italian restaurant and lunched daily in the elegant, tiled snackbar at the National Theatre, taking time out to visit the gold museum in an underground maze nearby. It was there, among the host of exquisite Mayan and Aztec gold miniatures of frogs, turtles, jaguars, birds, lizards, and insects that Jim located his totem animal for the trip, the *zopilote*, or common buzzard. I've seen their relatives circling over the charnel houses in Bombay, waiting to pick clean the bones of the recently dead. Never mind the morbid associations; to Jim, the Spanish name calls up the English word 'co-pilot.' With "Zopie" on our side, he argues, we're sure to make it home safely on the plane.

There's no shortage of jungle in Nicaragua; in fact, much of it is infested still with remnants of the contra, plying their grisly trade on the civilian population. However, my own commitment to give a lecture and poetry reading at the University of Costa Rica precluded a visit to the coastal jungles of Bluefields or Puerto Cabezas. So we've settled for a quick run to the coast in a rented car. In San José, I was able to meet many academics and writers, including Julieta Pinto, Carmen Naranjo, Emilia Macaya, and Joaquín Gutiérrez, with whom I had corresponded. These were the kind of satisfying contacts I'd hoped to make in Nicaragua, but which were impossible because of the

extent of the celebrations and the crush of internationals on the scene.

Joaquín Gutiérrez and his wife Elena live in a small suburb of San José, not far from the University of Costa Rica, where he taught for fifteen years after the military coup in Chile forced him to return to the land of his childhood. I made my way there to meet him and also to deliver copies of the first English edition of his children's novel, *Cocori*, just published in Canada by Cormorant Books. Jim, who served as a tireless guide and host in Nicaragua, has come along as my guest. We left Managua last Wednesday on the red-eye flight at 6:00, which meant a lot of late-night packing and little sleep. Katrina, Paul, and Stephanie were on the same flight, but headed off immediately to travel to the coast on the scenic eight-hour train ride through the mountains and jungle. As it turned out, mudslides had closed down the railway indefinitely and they were forced to take the bus.

It also transpires that Joaquín was in Managua the same time as we were, to receive the Rubén Darío Medal for his contributions to Nicaragua and to literature. He shows us, with some reluctance, the medal and a picture of himself in *Barricada* with the famous Ecuadorian painter Osvaldo Guayasasua we saw at the Borge sod-turning. Not surprisingly, considering the low profile of Nicaragua and of the arts here in Costa Rica, not a word of the award has appeared in the local papers.

He's an imposing man, tall with a shock of grey-white hair, an aquiline nose, moustache, and bushy athletic eyebrows that respond to every emotion that registers in his face. And there are many of those. In the course of fifteen minutes, we have witnessed his delight at the production of *Cocori* ("*Que linda, que linda*"), jokes about the literary life, affectionate asides to Elena, and deep concern over the politics of the region and his preferred home, Chile. There's a boyishness about him and his enthusiasms are catching: we're given an animated tour of the house, with its wall-hangings, paintings, photographs of Tolstoy, Gorki, Charlie Chaplin, Zapata, Sandino, two shots of himself with Ho Chi Minh and Mao Tse-tung, and a collection of animal remains — snake-skin, shark's jaw and teeth, swordfish blade, and turtlehead — each recalling his childhood in the jungle and on the beaches of Puerto Limón.

His father was a land-owner and later Ambassador to the U.S., which led to Joaquín's short career as a student of economics. Higher education, he explains, lasted a month, followed by his making the

rounds of all the chess clubs in New York. He worked much of his life as a journalist and translator, travelling to China to translate the works of Mao Tse-tung into Spanish. I ask if he speaks Chinese.

“Ha! No, I never learned Chinese. I had too good an interpreter and I was lazy. I translated Mao from English to Spanish.”

Talk moves easily from art to publishing — he headed the Chilean national publishing company Qimentu, under Allende — to scenes of childhood. He remembers how, when the sea rose, it would push all the crabs up the sewers onto the streets of Puerto Limón, so you could hardly find a place to put your foot down. He speaks warmly of the numerous black inhabitants, who were determined to succeed and refused to do peasant work, setting up plots of land between the railways and the fincas. Apparently even now, few, if any of them, work for the United Fruit Company. The local dialect, which is a blend of English, Spanish, and Creole, produced some memorable moments in his childhood, as when one of his black companions rushed into the kitchen to announce, “*Hay un snaké in the caca-hole,*” meaning, roughly, there’s a snake in the shit-house.

Elena is Chilean and worked as an editor for many years in her father’s publishing company, Nascimento, which published the work of Pablo Neruda even while he was out of favour. The clandestine publication of *Canto General* was managed by maintaining a network of complete secrecy; no one talked of his or her work on the book, not even the illustrator and proof-readers. Two thousand copies appeared just before Neruda went into exile. Naturally, there were some wonderful anecdotes to relate about Neruda, who was their close friend much of his life. I’m particularly fascinated by the stories of his acquisitiveness, having seen his three dwellings in Chile and heard of a fourth in France, purchased with winnings from the Nobel Prize. Joaquín recounts an incident in front of an antique shop in Venice, or Florence, when Neruda saw something he had to have.

“Joaquín, go in and buy that horse for me. I want it so much, I’ll have to pay twice its value.”

Another story recalls Neruda’s efforts to extract from Elena the sculpture of a whaler, which was on loan from her father. Neruda managed to persuade her publisher father to part with it. Once, after her return from China, Elena was looking at an interesting ashtray in a shop in Santiago. Neruda, who was looking on, convinced her that it was not a good buy. Later, she saw the ashtray prominently displayed

in his living-room.

"He was a child, a child spoiled by his indulgent friends," she says fondly. A sad, shy young man, Neruda later became very social and loved to have happy people around him at all times. Apparently, he hated any mention of death and once turned sour on a young guest who had remarked that the profusion of objects in the house reminded him of a museum.

Time has come to leave our generous hosts. Joaquín has offered to read the Spanish translations of my poems at the lecture and poetry reading at the University and to dine with us in the evening at a restaurant run by Chilean refugees. Nothing could please me more, except for his comment on seeing me enter the lecture-room the next day: "Hey, Big Boy!" I take a last look around this haven of taste and goodwill, which served as a safe-house for Sandinistas during the revolution. Gioconda Belli stayed here, and *Comandante* Henry Ruiz-Modesto. As a final coffee and brandy are finished and I stand up to leave, Joaquín returns to a subject we have mooted earlier.

"The great writers and painters are those who teach us to recognize their people, the essence. Goya was not a good painter technically. He made a lot of mistakes — eyes out of line, and so on — but he knew the essence of the Spanish people. Did you ever see his *perro* looking at the mountain ranges stretching ahead of him, and the look of despair on his face?"

Right on cue, there's a bark from the dining-room, where the Gutiérrez's cat has leapt through the open window with a small black garden snake. The dog circles the writhing snake, which the cat is batting about playfully. Joaquín rewards the cat with a few pats on the head.

"Look how proud she is of her conquest."

We've come to the end of our jungle safari without seeing much in the way of wild life. I can't say I'm terribly disappointed. The spiders, butterflies, and blue crabs are about my speed — or slower. I'll leave the predators to more adventurous travellers. As Jim stalks the treeline with a cigarette and listens to his Stan Rogers tape, I take a last swim in the shallows, one eye on my clothes, passport, and camera, the other on the surface of the ocean between myself and the reef. I've just remembered the gleaming white teeth and jaw hanging on Joaquín's wall. Several *zopilotes* circle overhead, biding their time before descending on the remains of my shark-ripped, water-logged carcass.

One of them dips to the branches of a blighted tree nearby, then takes a low swoop over the picnic table.

"Jim, chase that buzzard away from my clothes. He's probably been trained by the contras to steal passports."

"*Manos Blancos*, more likely. Just what we need to shake up the granting agencies back home."

At that moment a low roar can be heard above the dull rumble of the surf. It's the sound we've been waiting for, and which has sent many tourists scurrying from the jungle for their lives. High above his head, Jim has located about seven howler monkeys, who are making the noise that resembles the roar of the jaguar, doubtless something that has evolved for protection, as birds and animals take on the colours of the vegetation they frequent. Jim is so excited he's holding the recorder up, taping over the voice of his beloved Stan Rogers.

"Arnie will freak out when he hears this."

The diminutive howlers peer down from the upper branches, then stop suddenly. A wave of comparative quiet overwhelms us. Jim bangs a stick against the base of a tree and imitates their noise, but nothing happens. Only vigorous hand-clapping seems to rouse them once more to action. As long as we continue to applaud, these old-stagers keep up their inordinate performance.

"I've heard members of the League of Canadian Poets make less interesting sounds." Jim smiles at his own dig, having chosen membership in the broader-based Writers' Union.

"The poets will do it even without an audience."

"Only the postmodernists."

The howlers have put the finishing touches not only on my trip, but also on these meditations. Stephanie, Paul, and Katrina, who we have met again by chance in Cahuita, arrive with our rented car and the voyage homeward begins in earnest. It's a long road that has led me to Central America, beginning with high school Spanish in Vancouver, the chance discovery of an image which would lead me to write my long poem on the Spanish conquest, "Letter of the Master of Horse;" the poems of Neruda and those of my fellow-poets in Canada who first made the physical or spiritual pilgrimage to South and Central America — in particular, Pat Lane, Tom Wayman, Pat Lowther, and Earle Birney — bringing the various landscapes and their harsh social realities so palpably home to me; the invitation from Lake Sagaris to translate my work and to arrange for me to visit Chile; the subsequent

publication of work by such Chilean-Canadian writers as Nain Nomez, Leandro Urbina, and Gonzalo Millán; and my discovery of the amazing Central American photojournalism of Larry Towell, whose brilliant photographs in *Gifts of War* and *Nicaragua Under Siege: From Their Lips* achieve so well what Kracauer calls “the redemption of reality.”

Earle Birney’s poetic life-work finds its finest expression in his poems of solidarity and self-analysis, written as a result of his travels in the Americas. The poem most widely read and appreciated is “Cartagena de Indias,” which explores not only the conditions of poverty in Colombia, but also the poet’s guilt over his own privileged position as a tourist with time and money at his disposal. The poem takes the form of a romantic ode, in which the poet articulates the causes of his dis-ease and is then rescued from the doldrums by an unexpected source of inspiration. For Keats and Shelley, a west wind or urn did the trick; for Birney, what is needed is the statue of an old pair of shoes, a tribute to poet Luis Lopez, who is reported to have said he loved his countrymen, despite all their failings, as a man loves his old pair of shoes. After the taxi-driver explains to him the meaning of the statue, the voice of the poet is heard speaking to the people of Cartagena, a message which is mainly for himself and other Canadians:

— and him I envy,
I who am seldom read by my townsmen

Descendants of pirates grandees
galleyslaves and cannibals
I love the whole starved cheating
poetry-reading lot of you most of all
for throwing me the shoes of deadman Luis
to walk me back into your brotherhood

As we leave behind the jungles of Cahuita and then Puerto Limón, I’m more than a little conscious of the brotherhood encountered here and in Nicaragua, especially among the writers I have met. This has not been the competitive, self-promoting ‘wolf-pack’ of Hemingway’s imagining, but Wyndham Lewis’s ‘community of writers,’ an ‘inner public’ which guides and sustains us as both writers and readers. Margaret Laurence, drawing from her clan heritage in Scotland, called

it 'the tribe' and was fiercely loyal to those she believed were serious enough to give writing their life. I remember vividly a moment at her home at Elm Cottage in England when, after an evening of wine and talk, she looked at me with piercing eyes and said: "If you're not prepared to be there to take up the mantle when it's cast, don't waste my time." I suspect she said this to a number of young writers in whom she perceived faint glimmerings of promise; but, for me, full of hope and self-doubt, it was a glorious, chastening experience.

The search for Nicaragua is, in large part, a search for form. Political form is not too different from poetic form; both need, constantly, to be renewed. I share Milosz's view that "poetry is essential as bread" and Robert Haas's conviction that "a poetry that makes fresh and resilient forms extends the possibilities of being alive." Milosz has also reminded us that "Form in poetry has many uses; one of them, like refrigeration, is to preserve bad meat." Somoza was committed to an outmoded, feudal ideology, based exclusively on power and self-aggrandizement; this is nowhere more evident than in his purchasing from the Italians an old headless statue of Mussolini on horseback, on which he had a sculpture of his own head mounted. Political structures must undergo constant revision. Revolution or reform is more a state of mind than a finite political goal. Ernesto Cardenal struggles now in public life, as he did in his poetry, to "organize hopes/Possibilities that cannot be dreamed by computers." And Jabra I. Jabra's description of the author of the *Seven Voyages of Sinbad* as a "craftsman of adversity" might well be applied to the practical poet and the inspired politician, since there is no harbour in which he or she can find a perfect and permanent rest.

I'm reminded, in this context, of Conrad's comment about political realities in his essay "Autocracy and War": "The true peace of the world will be much less like a beleaguered fortress and more, let us hope, in the nature of an Inviolable Temple. It will be built on less perishable foundations than those of material interests. But it must be confessed that the architectural aspect of the universal city remains as yet inconceivable — that the very ground for its erection has not been cleared of the jungle." Perceptions have changed in the seventy years since Conrad wrote those lines; it's no longer acceptable, given our environmental consciousness, to use the jungle as a metaphor for the undeveloped or the uncivilized. Still, considering the holocaust in

Europe, the killing fields in Cambodia, tribal genocide in Africa, Stalinist atrocities, and the endless harassment and slaughter of both reformers and innocents in Asia, Mexico and the Americas, with the aid of the U.S. government, not to mention American and Canadian vested interests, Conrad's assessment of our state of moral progress remains as acute as ever.

The first night in San José, I dreamed I was in a small coastal village in Nicaragua. I couldn't shake off a sense of impending danger and kept mentioning my unease to Ortega and several of the *Comandantes* I'd seen in Managua. Nobody paid much attention, though I suspect they must have wondered what a gringo like me was doing here in the first place. Then the planes came, a night raid, with fires and pandemonium in the streets. I took refuge in a boat-house with several others, while light from the gunfire and burning buildings reflected off the water. Ortega put his arm around my shoulder and smiled.

"I should have stayed in academia, *verdad?*"

"You need *cojones* for that," I said, and we both laughed as the bombs fell.

Murray Reece and the Vancouver contingent from Tools for Peace, who shared the flight down from Toronto, have shown up again, their solidarity meetings finished and their cargo of aid distributed in Managua. The tired flesh has not yet begun to pale under their tans. A huge U.S. military transport squats on the pavement near the terminal in San José, its low-slung wings, dark shading and ominous aspect recalling something from another, prehistoric time. I nudge Jim and direct his gaze out the window. What I don't say, since we are about to take off, is that it reminds me of *zopilote*, his ever-vigilant co-pilot.

Brian Fawcett / PROVOCATIONS

Something is wrong with Alice Munro

You can relax. Canada's most exquisite living writer is doing fine. She's living in a small, exquisite Ontario town, writing small, exquisite stories. As far as I know she's in good spirits and her health is sound. Phones Audrey Thomas, Robert Weaver and John Metcalf on successive nights to chat, I hear.

Maybe I should qualify what I just said. I'm one of her readers, not a personal friend. I've never actually met her, but from what I'm told I'm confident that I'd like and admire her, just like I do her stories.

But while I'm cheerfully prepared to go on liking her stories, the fact that she's become an almost unassailable cultural icon has begun to trouble me. In these years leading up to the millennium, as fewer and fewer people regard literature as a necessary part of their daily cultural apparatus, I'm developing the nagging instinct that perhaps I shouldn't like her stories so much.

Let me develop that instinct a little. Alice Munro's stories are too *small* to be thought of — as they are almost unanimously by those with a grasp of Canadian writing that extends beyond Farley Mowat — as the best and most important literary artifacts Canada produces. For sure, her stories are almost perfectly structured and crafted. They're filled with miracles of subtlety so exquisite that they drive educated folks over the age of 40 nearly out of their comas. Canlit industrialists across the nation shudder with delight when a new volume of her work hits the bookstores, knowing that if a free desk copy doesn't come their way unasked, in two or three years they will find it important enough that they'll saunter down to a bookstore and actually buy a copy.

You may have already noted, reader, that my complaint is not really about Alice Munro the person or writer, but about the conditions of literary culture that can make a talented but somewhat antiquarian miniaturist our most revered living writer. She is an exquisite writer in an era no one could describe as exquisite.

I know what I'm suggesting isn't polite, but don't dismiss me as a crude barbarian just yet. As a master of the modernist short story, Munro's skills and formal preoccupations are those of a 19th Century writer. At best, she has mastered a literary form that stopped bending

people's minds a half century ago. Have a hard look at the conditions of political, technological and cultural life under which we now labour. Then have a look at what the modernist short story sets out to accomplish.

A formally correct short story develops a small texture of reality — usually centering on one or two characters — and turns it in subtle moral and material lighting conditions so that we see how wonderfully complex and fragile human beings are, and how textured psychological reality is. Somewhat shyly and indirectly, such stories are a defense of what is humane and good. They are also, provided that one is trained to such things, aesthetically gratifying and even interesting. But the modernist short story is still a very small bite at the enormously enlarged complexity of the human condition. Notwithstanding Freud and Jung, and with a cold stare at 75 years of essentially unproductive psychoanalytic attempts to tamper with the human psyche without tampering with the violent world it operates in, the short story (and contemplative psychology) is diminishing in its relevance and centrality to the human condition.

So that there's no mistaking what I'm saying, I'll put this as crassly as I can. What good is the modernist short story in a world where Walt Disney's heirs and shareholders are running our national and global culture, where mainstream North American consciousness has been overrun with consumerism and cartoons? What real defense of what is humane and good does a short story offer against the grinning professional sentimentalists of the *Cosby* Universe?

If I were prepared to be utterly bloody-minded, I'd point out that most of the characters Alice Munro offers us in her stories are wounded people slipping inexorably into incapacity. Most of the subtleties she renders are diminishment, retreats into privileged silence, anguish or sentimentality. Again and again, her protagonists can imagine no other material world than the one they're in. But because I respect Munro's skills, and enjoy subtleties, I won't point out any of those things.

Instead, let me make this proposition: every era has its central subject matter, one that provides essential focus to artistic and political life. These subject matters constitute something like what Mayakovsky optimistically called the "social command." What I'm talking about is half way between that and what was earlier called a "moral imperative." In the 1950s and 1960s, when the ascendant literary figures of our era were in their formative stages, particularly in North

America, that subject matter was centred around liberation. The “subject matter,” of course, took various forms: sexual liberation, the economic liberation of the working class, women’s liberation from the cultural domination of males are three we’ll recognize instantly. In its most simple formulation, the “subject matter” was the individual, and how individuals got what they wanted and needed. If the era were to be reduced to a single question it would be this: *Why can’t (or how do) I get what I want out of life.* It was a question without a single answer. Instead, it bred preferred formal, technological and expressive paths across the culture.

One of those paths pretty much describes the artistic milieu of Alice Munro in Canada, and writers like John Updike or Raymond Carver in the United States. Each became a master of the modernist short story, the perfect vehicle for dramatizing the subtle permutations of an era preoccupied with private liberations. (This same milieu also created Norman Mailer and the Harlequin universe, but that’s an issue I’ll defer for later scrutiny.)

It seems to me that in the 1980s and the 1990s, the central questions and focusing subject matter have changed dramatically. Today we’re less citizens than we are consumers, and in our willy-nilly rush to get what we want, we’ve largely overlooked the fact that private liberation doesn’t create a liberated world. In burning up the planet’s resources, we’ve driven ourselves to the point of intellectual, economic, and ecological collapse. This era’s “subject matter,” therefore inevitably focuses on issues of government and governance — of resources, information, and ourselves. And today’s question — not yet entirely clear — might be this one: *Why (or how) in an era of total information, is everyone and everything deceiving us?*

I don’t think the modernist short story contains the necessary range to approach that issue, and its insights give us very little relevant equipment to work with. We got liberated in the last thirty years, and the Leviathan swallowed us anyway. We’re in a different game now, and the rules and tools are going to be different — perhaps radically different.

Incidentally, I am thoroughly aware that the demand for moral competence for literary form puts me on unfashionable and even dangerous ground — on intellectual quicksand, actually. But if I take the moderately unorthodox step of recognizing that culturally significant narrative is not eternally boundaried by the regulations

concerning 19th Century “fictional” narrative, the quicksand turns out to be merely a shallow pothole. If I take yet another step, this time to examine the degree to which modern media, particularly television, have corrupted and co-opted fictional narrative, the perspective changes again, and the pothole disappears. Suddenly, the relativism of contemporary literary practice starts to look like either another shuck for maintaining an unexamined status quo, or an unforgiveable kind of naivety.

Just so the record is straight, I’d dearly love to live in a world in which the perceptual universe of someone like Alice Munro had real cultural and, better still, political currency. Like most writers, I’m most comfortable working with the problems of private consciousness. After all, that’s what I was trained to do. I’m also a former Ezra Pound scholar, and I have the deepest possible respect for the literary traditions of Western civilization. I’d love to believe, as Pound did, that if we all read the Great Books and honoured the Great Writers, local and global, all the evils in the world would disappear. Brian Mulroney would not be Prime Minister, Dan Quayle would be delivering letters for the post office in some midwest American town, Iran would not be trying to cut Iraq’s asshole out (and vice versa), Pol Pot would be dead, and so forth. But I’m not so blinded by mortgages and personal fitness classes and croissants that I miss seeing that we live in a world that is emphatically *not* respectful of Alice Munro’s perceptual universe. Instead, what I see is a world that is daily becoming even less respectful of it, one that it is declining into a new kind of ignorance and barbarity.

In every Western country, sales of literary fiction have been diminishing for almost a decade. In Canada, the average sales of a literary fiction title is now below 2000 copies, and that’s factoring in Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood, Professor Davies and W.P. Kinsella — not very good compared to the 20,000 to 30,000 of a run-of-the-mill Harlequin Romance title does, and positively anaemic compared to the millions who watch *Cosby* each week on television.

The problem doesn’t lie entirely with the audience, or with the power of consumerist-oriented media, although it’s easy to lay the blame on them. Increasingly, I’m convinced that the reluctance of writers to examine the formal properties and boundaries of literature has left writers, and literature, less able to capture today’s realities than other artistic (and commercial) media.

So, instead of whining about it or threatening a cultural apocalypse, let me propose a few changes that might begin to rectify the situation. The changes I'd propose follow pretty much what has gone on in nearly every other artistic discipline. But their application to literature, because the medium of literature is language, and because literature has a historical kinship with discourse, might have considerably more dramatic results than it has had in other disciplines. By making a radical adoption of the assemblage techniques used in other art forms and by making a hard-nosed evaluation of where and why print-based literacy is relevant and indispensable, literature could make a belated but profound re-entry into mainstream 20th century culture and thought.

Explaining what that might involve requires an examination of today's key question noted above. The question asks us, first of all, to reverse most of the perceptual priorities that have served literature during our lifetime. If we try to answer it, the structure and content of what is coming at us, and why, becomes more important than what kinds of needs and abilities we give expression to. The integrity of our receiving apparatus and the sincerity of our interpretation will become far less meaningful. What will count are the number and complexity of field receptors that can be brought into play, and the sophistication of data interpretation.

At the very least, the situation calls for writers to have a long, cold look at the sanctity of literary genres, and their separation from discourse, particularly in fiction and poetry. Historiography, reportage, philosophical analysis and a massive influx of data also need to be brought into the legitimate — and even obligatory — working apparatuses of literary writers, along with a dose of murderous scepticism concerning the word "fiction."

A first step for writers to make would be to examine the field to determine which literary forms are obsolete, and why. An obvious method of doing that would be to see which have been superceded by other narrative mediums like television and film. Here, it quickly becomes apparent that if the sole criterion to determine "effectiveness" was audience appeal, we'd have to abandon conventional fiction altogether to those media, except for the narrow market aimed at those who use fiction to render them semi-conscious during periods of voluntary or involuntary inactivity — hospital stays, train or plane trips, bad marriages, etc. That isn't good enough, just as determining

the value of a literary work in terms of its internal aesthetic consistencies isn't good enough (even though exactly what criteria writers should be using is far from apparent).

Probably the best way to proceed is to determine the contexts in which printed literature remains more effective and efficient than any other medium. For instance, what film and television do not do well at all is to transfer the complexity and verticality of reality — the parataxis of private, political and universal instrumentation that penetrates events. With rare exceptions, both mediums tend to sacrifice parataxis to sleekness and tonal manipulation. Likewise, neither medium naturally supports feedback, contingency, or leisurely review. A literature of assemblage would turn itself to those gaps and confidently develop them. Yet in practice, the formal timidity of literature has done almost the opposite. During the 20th century the re-academization of knowledge has effectively given over the universal to science and philosophy, the political to journalism and the social sciences, leaving literature to dither politely over those rapidly shrinking precincts we *hope* are private.

Literature originally meant written thought, and it's "written thought" that needs to be renovated if literature is to continue to have even the slightest cultural value in the future. Writers need to invade every other intellectual discipline, not as dedicated specialists but as intellectual generalists — as conceptual assemblers seeking to secure the full vertical density of human reality.

Right now, the field is relatively empty and open. In recent years, John Berger, Primo Levi, Eduardo Galeano and a few others have all made profound forays into it. Because women writers have had less reason to support the status quo, they've more generally been trying to make inroads from several directions and under ideologically difficult and variable dispensations. And of course, Marshall McLuhan overflowed the field 25 years ago, but he was flying so high he mistook it for the Global Village and thought it would belong to television. It doesn't, and it can't.

But Alice Munro, and the majority of fiction writers today, have lost sight of the field or don't know it exists. And that is what is wrong.

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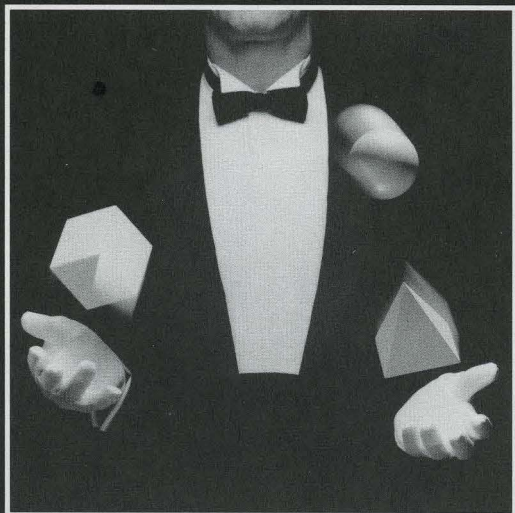
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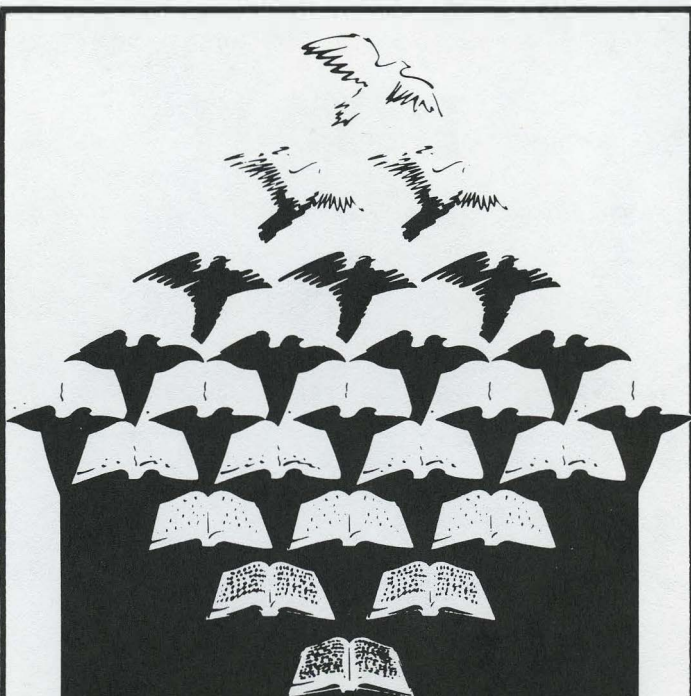
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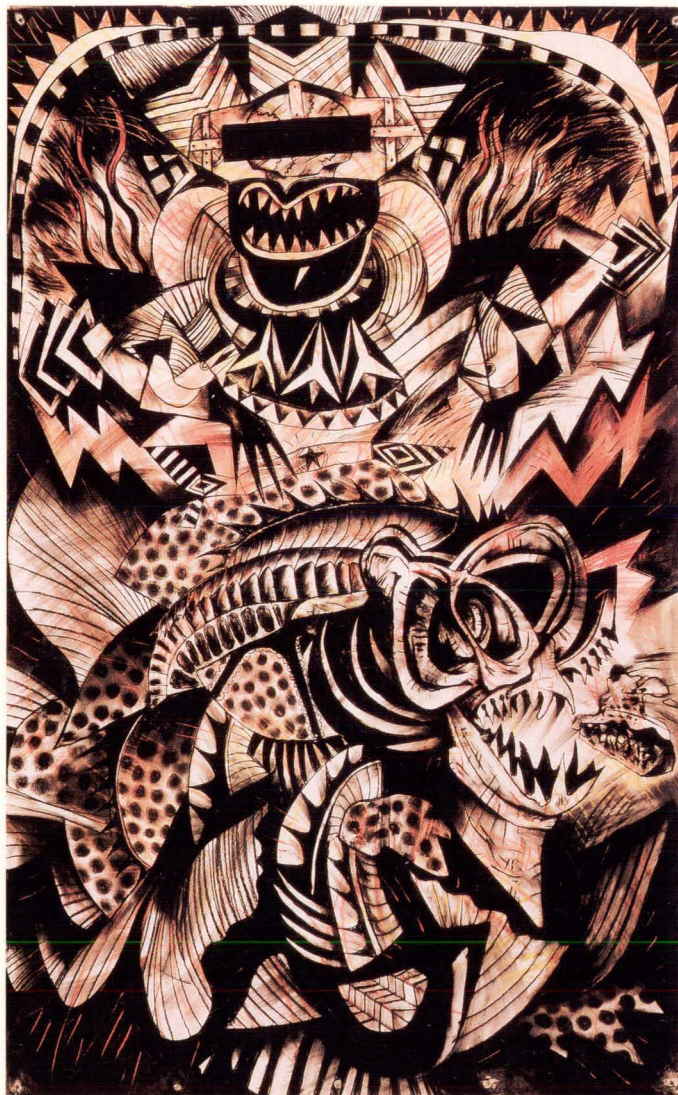
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