

## George Bowering/THE CREATURE

When he was a boy, and growing up in a valley town with no traffic lights or curbs, the creature had always been seen in a black cape, legs wide, head down, on the edge of the roof of a tall apartment or office building, rain behind him, though in that little town it hardly ever rained. It rained once just before the orchardists could get the cherries picked without splits in their skin, and once again around the Labour Day weekend. He probably stank, the creature, stank of foul long-dead flesh and strained minerals and the torture of steel. But he had always held his breath hard when it was around. When it stood for a moment, for instance, in his bedroom the night after the day when his only older cousin died. When it looked over the shoulder of the fat soft anaesthetist during that first operation in grade six.

It had no voice at all; it would not speak. It would have been less frightening to a kid if it had spoken, even if it had had a voice that shook out of an echo-chamber, even if it had an accent like something out of giant dark stony mountain crags in some sort of Europe-Asia snowbound night of unrelenting wind. It did not speak at all, nor make any other sound. You did not see it move from place to place. You did not see it arrive or depart. It was there and then it was not. It was not a skullface. It was not a putrid eyeball fleshface. It did not laugh like an animal.

It was not a hyena, and he was not in Africa, and none of his wounds was physical, and he was not in bed. It was very familiar. He had known it long ago, when his memory was intact, when he had not riddled his memory by using it. He had written about it in other shapes, but now that it was here again after all this while, he knew that all that writing was incorrect. Decent, but incorrect.

"You are obsessed on the subject," she had said. "Ever since I first knew you you have been obsessed with it."

"In my writing?"

"In your writing and in your life."

"It is the great subject, I suppose."

"I have never met anyone who spends so much of his time thinking about it," she said.

Very well. He would think about life. Because now that it was here again for sure, he did not like to think about it, really. It had been one thing to grin as he titled a book after it, but now that it was here he did not love it. He did not like it.

Very well, then. He would think about life, the coming of life.

*She felt the urge to push, and that called for rapid panting, as the course taught her, and you could see the baby turn around, opening the cervix. Earlier, pushing on her tail bone during contractions, I could feel the baby's head in my palm.*

In his memories of childhood, layered with the writing he had done about childhood, the kid was afraid of the creature. He knew it did not exist, not like that, not as a creature, but he was afraid of it. Now he was not afraid of it. But he hated it. He was depressed, he would say, if he had to go for a word like that.

Because it was there. He could not see it but it was there. It was not just something in his head, either. It was so damned sad, if something about yourself could be sad.

If he could have been in a different place. No, if his life were not about the damned things it is about, he would not have to know about the nearness of the creature. It was not a creature.

*From the time the baby got turned around the right way, things went much faster and the mother was now in control. We were in the delivery room, and I didn't know that it was anything more than just the place for the local injection.*

Someone looking from the distance of say a few houses down the block might say that he had not really ruined all those lives. So people cried some tears and moved to other cities, and made impossible telephone calls. Maybe some of them will not be living together after all these years. That is regular business in this neighbourhood. Who do you think you are to get that mixed up with death?

*Finally the doctor put his fingers in and let her push a little, and I heard the lip go over with a wet sound. Then she started pushing, her face going red in determination, and I was as busy as could be, putting moisture to her mouth, lifting her with my hands.*

She probably thought, at times anyway, that he liked it. He did not like it. When it was at its worst he thought he would do anything to get out of its whereabouts. Figure that one out.

Death would be, if you really did it, the sure way of getting away from the problem of death. There'll be no more dying then. No more slow glide of silk slip up the outside thigh, either.

No, he didn't like it, ever.

He could never understand, or never quite believe those young people when he was young who said that they did not mind death, it was just the idea of being old they didn't like. He had always said that he wanted to live forever, and then that he would like to live as long as he could.

Now he was not sure it was worth it. He had read about depression. He had read about clinical depression, or at least heard the word. To tell the truth, he had not read much about depression. But he had heard about it. It was something that often came just before death, sometimes theirs, sometimes yours.

*Another young nurse looked at her watch and listened with a stethoscope to the baby's heart. 150. 160. 160. Nurse Olafson said that the highest pulse came when the baby's head was between vertebrae.*

*The doctor came back from his cigarette and sat with his face in the right place. He looked like a painter on his stool, stopping to reflect over the canvas between contractions.*

It did not make a sound but he knew it was there. He did not locate it, not behind him, as in the cartoons, or in any particular direction. He did not know how close it was but it was close. It did not stink. It did not cast a shadow. But he knew it was there. It was present. It was *with him*.

It was worse than any words about it. Therefore he should keep trying to describe it. When he was a kid he would lie awake at night in his room, afraid of what was there. It was not death. It was not a creature. But everything seemed too close and at the same time too far away. There was a relentless buzzing, or something like buzzing, grinding, drilling, but not a sound, a drilling presence of something. He would finally have to shout, hoping that shouting would break it. His mother came and asked him what was the matter, and he tried to tell her.

"It is nothing. There is nothing here," she said.

There was something wrong with his brain. Not his mind. That would be all right because he could deny that. But there

was something wrong with his brain. Then he knew that his mother used to be able to do things but now she could no longer do something, and he was there by himself. Not a grown-up. A kid with a brain you could not fix or trade. You keep the one you are born with. Well, it could scare you to death, or you could make it romantic.

*During the next pushes I can see not only the slit of a grey hairy head, but now the whole pelvic floor bulging with the shape of the little head, and everyone is cheering. On the next contraction the doctor is holding the forceps with one hand, elbows up, cotton swabs in there with the newly arrived.*

He tended to look back on his childhood as a childhood unlike the ones claimed by his friends. That is, it was spent in a small town surrounded by orchards and hills, where with topical variations people lived in families much like those presented in schoolbooks and advertising and later on in television. It was not a disturbing childhood then. That was the right word for that absence—disturbing.

Once, though, when he was around ten years old he was out later than usual on a Saturday night. He had probably just been to the movie and now he was down by the river a block below the movie house. He was never allowed to swim in the river. He could swim at the village pool or out at the lake, but never in the river. Some people did swim in the river, but they were the same tough kids who smoked in the school lavatories.

He was doing his usual lone sensitive kid act at the edge of the river, now, not hiding, particularly, not spying for certain. Not spying as he always meant to do on the strange people from somewhere else who lived for short periods of time during the summer in the little row of whitewashed shacks down by the river. In that town your standing was represented by the distance you lived from the river. If you lived near the river nobody knew your name, or if they did it was a name that had been around town for a long time, and so exceptions could be made for history.

Now this Saturday night two people he did not know appeared between the shacks and the river. The river was green and opaque, and it ran swiftly with little folds in the water. Really it was a brown kind of green.

They must have been people, the kind of people, who lived in those shacks. The man was wearing an old purplish-blue

suit, and she was wearing a dress and white high-heel shoes. They were holding hands, with their arms touching shoulder to wrist, and walking toward the river. When they got to the river they continued to walk, and he, the kid by the water, unseen or ignored by them, watched. He was always watching things, but he was not often this lucky. Now he did not think it was lucky.

Because they were still walking into the river, and the sides went down quickly, and the water tugged at you quickly, so that your parents did not want you to go into that river. But now here were these two in their clothes in the water. The river was pushing on her dress, lifting its skirt to the turning surface of the water. They continued to walk and now there were just their shoulders and heads and then their heads, and he, the kid, may have turned to look elsewhere for a moment, but if he did, when he turned back again those two people were entirely gone. There was a little chance that they had come back out of the water. But no, there was no chance of that. If he had looked away he had not looked away that long. If they had walked back out it would have to be on this side of the river, but it would probably be a long way downstream. So maybe they did come back out.

Anyway, he was not sure of what he had seen. No one in his family did peculiar things, so he was not aware of what a lot of things might be. Was it religion? Was it death? Drink? Madness? It was something that was scary and beyond him. But it was something he would grow to know. If he grew up and left this valley he would know what it was. That was even more scary.

*The nurse on the right poked in the pit and I looked back to see that tiny wet head coming out between the two big spoons, which are then dropped. I saw the bones rippling apart in the head, and before we knew it, out came the body, comely shape hanging light purple now from the doctor's hand, thick twisty soft cord dangling — this call's for you — "It's a girl!" all the female voices say, as they often do, I suppose.*

*"Oh Baby!" said its mother.*

*Love was blazing out of all my senses, to both figures now on the gurney. Then I was laughing. Then I remembered that in all that hurry of images there were two that one had better remember. Immediately on coming out the little creature being turned, though she did not know it, upside down, made a*

*tiny cry. And before that, the most beautiful thing, its little head, amazingly little head, turned by itself, toward its mother's left thigh. Its mother just pushed her out!*

He had learned a lot of things since getting out of the Valley. Some of them were about mortality and some were not. But then eventually all of them were about mortality. Every morning when he woke he said either aloud or in his head, "Another seven hours closer to the grave."

"Time is qualitative," a woman said to him once.

"Everything you have ever done?"

"Yes?"

"Doesn't matter what quality it was. It *was*. It's gone. Irretrievable."

"You are not the kind of man I want to spend my quality time with," she said. And she didn't.

The thoughts he had every day had made him this sort of person: if he saw an ant on the sidewalk he went out of his path to avoid stepping on it. Still, he ate slippery bubbling hamburgers, the brown fat running off his wrists.

When he was a very young man he always said, even to himself, that he would die before he was thirty. Then he said he would die when he was thirty. That was romance. He skulked around in a soiled raincoat and ankle-high black running shoes. He did this while other people were wearing things with buckles on them. Three-voice folk singing groups were popular.

*The last things to remain purple were her feet. She lay there with her eyes wide open. I saw her whole chin trembling. It must have been a shock. They were squirting her and wiping her and putting drops into her eyes, and listening over and over to her heart.*

*I was original and sophisticated in my oral response to the event.*

*"Oh, wow!" I said.*

So you see, I can write about life.

He never for a moment thought that the creature would depart, would despair of making any headway here.

He got up from the scarred and lopsided chair at his desk and went into the kitchen to get a cup of coffee, he hoped, from the newest in a long line of imported coffee machines. His daughter was sitting at the kitchen table, fingers in the hair at the sides of her cranium, elbows on the tabletop at either side



of the fat book she was bent over.

"That's what we like to see," he said, looking through the sink for a decent coffee cup. "Honest study."

She was nineteen years old. In reply to his habitual remark she read from the fat book.

"How gladly would I meet / Mortality, my sentence, and be earth / Insensible! how glad would lay me down / As in my mother's lap!"

"You haven't got that close to your mother in a half a dozen years," he said.

"I was reading from literature," she said, lifting her face now. It was beautiful and at the same time deeply familiar. Her upper lip curled back a little, and moist teeth showed. "*Paradise Lost*," she said.

"Of course."

"Book Ten."

"Who is saying that?"

"We all are."

She had been hinting suicidal feelings at him since she was fifteen. Now she was a university student. That made it more difficult, if not harder. In literature there is lots of suicide, and university students are very fond of it. They don't know about the creature, but they know about suicide in literature and around the table.

"Do you ever feel," he said, "as if there is someone nearby but you can't tell where he is, and he makes you very discouraged?"

"Yeah, you, Dad."

"Thanks. No, I mean it. A creature."

"You're wierd, Dad. Whacko. Creatures, eh?"

"The last things to remain purple were the feet," he said.

"Get out of my face, Dad. I have some fatal thinking to do."

Indoors or outdoors, it didn't matter. The creature was not affected by weather or environment or time of day or night.

What did it feel like exactly? Other people were always asking what things are "like," and that makes some sense, because we have to gauge new experiences against old ones. People also wanted you to put out some abstract words, as if feelings are more expressable in abstract terms than objects are.

What did it feel like, approximately?

Disappointment. I mean you thought you were going to escape, and as in the dream it caught you before your last step to freedom. Heaviness. Sad. I have said that before. Sad. As if for yourself from somewhere outside. Something like the paralysis of shock. You can move, make the usual moves, but how can you, how do you?

There is the bunny. When the hawk has been chasing him, and he has figured out that he is not in the end going to get away, he stops and resigns himself, hunches still, and perhaps, people in the country say, dies before the hawk can use his talons and beak. The hawk has always been there, but just now decided to move in. He is the bunny's creature.

But look at bunnies. How fast they make more of them.

*My daughter, my daughter. When I said that phrase I felt new at it, as if I had won the right to use it now. There was a kind of easy resignation in joining all the people called Dad. Okay, I will not fight and holler against that business, and I will say my daughter.*

*She was on the deteriorating sundeck of the house I or we had bought, yes, but I am not thinking of that weakness, that instance right now. I should be, because I have given him a place to stand and look in through the window. She was in her green walker, a kind of chair set in the middle of a table with rollers at the bottoms of its legs. She zoomed back and forth on the sundeck in the sun, saying "Da da da da," which was her word for every emotion.*

*I was mowing the square lawn in the little backyard. When I bumped the rusty mower against the trunk of the apple tree a thousand blossoms fell down on me. For a second the place smelled sweet.*