

MARGARET ATWOOD / George Bowering and *The Gangs of Kosmos*

I first met George Bowering and his wife Angela at a writers' party in Montreal in 1967. I was teaching at Sir George Williams (now part of Concordia), and so was he. She was wearing a mini-dress and white knee-high go-go boots, one of the fashions then; he was wearing a Donald Duck tie and doing a silly duck walk, and quacking—he was in the habit of acting up to disguise shyness, I suppose—eliciting from Angela the cry of, “Oh George!” that was familiar to all acquainted with their curious doubles act, in which George would step outside the lines in a deliberately embarrassing manner and Angela would catch him doing it and rebuke him for it. In those early days, she would also giggle delightedly. How could he be so naughty?

The English Canadian writing community was quite small then. Maybe it wasn't a community as such, but a flotsam-jetsam agglomeration of people interested in writing, and a small enough agglomeration so that those individuals tended to clump together for warmth. It was mostly the poets who knew one another, they having drifted hither and thither on buses and other modes of cheap transport and also having read together in various dives and at various universities. (The novelists were mostly holed up in private, bashing out their novels on their typewriters, though I did meet Clark Blaise in Montreal then as we were both teaching at Sir George; and Mordecai Richler wafted through town, and John Glassco was there, and Hugh Hood.) There were not yet any writers' festivals, and Jack McClelland had just started his ambitious and successful cross-country book tours, so you met other writers by happenstance, and through mutual friends. Poets in or around Montreal, or coming through for readings, included F.R. Scott, Gwendolyn MacEwen, and Doug Jones, Al Purdy, Irving Layton, and Leonard Cohen. And George Bowering.

I already knew George's work through *Points on the Grid* (Contact Press 1964) and *The Man in Yellow Boots* (El Corno Emplumado 1965), and I knew about the TISH group, as I had been in Vancouver in 1964/5. We poets read one another's work in those days; there wasn't so much that you couldn't keep up. At that time I was also working with Anansi in its early days—days in which it published mostly poetry, including my book *The Circle Game* (Contact 1966), which had won the

Governor General's Award but was out of print by that time, having printed the large number of 420 copies. So Anansi did a reprint, over 2,000 copies. (I thought they were mad. But the book has not been out of print since...)

So I knew George and Angela, and I also knew Anansi, and I ended up putting together a collection of George's poems, *The Gangs of Kosmos*, which came out from Anansi in 1969. The magazine citations for the poems are a trip down memory lane, a trip that sometimes draws blanks: *The Ant's Forefoot*: what was *that*? *Camel's Coming?* *The Resuscitator*? But there's *Quarry*, and *Poetry* (Chicago), and *The London Magazine*. Not so shabby.

On the cover—back and front—there's a 1968 print by our mutual friend, Charles Pachter, back in the days when he had hair. That's me on the front, wearing mysterious sunglasses; that's Angela on the back, looking either at me or at the forest behind me, from which humanoid faces either do or do not peer out. Charles said that he was in among those trees. Maybe George is in there too. Anyway, he chose the cover.

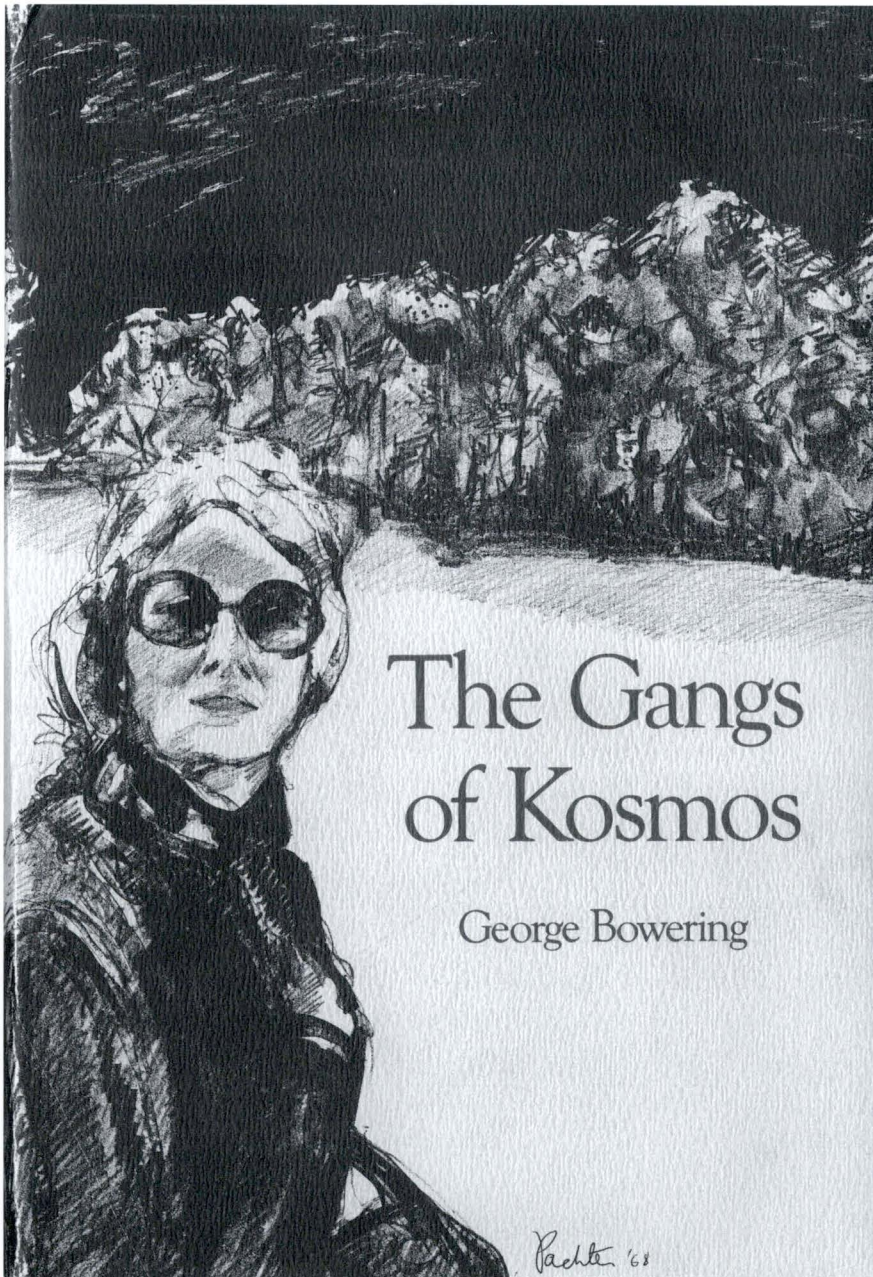
I think it's a pretty good collection. All the strengths. George was already worried about growing old, on page 62 (Haha, we laugh now: we thought *that* was old?) and is already as elegiac as he later became. No silly duck walks in the poems; those were done by his bodyguard, at parties, and for faking his own biography from time to time. All writers keep a double in store so they can save the reality for the art, and George's double was just more obvious than most.

The last poem, "You too," ends with an *envoi* to the reader:

*How can I die alone.
Where will I be then, who am now alone,
What groans so pathetically
In this room when I am alone?*

I do not know, I know
you begin where my eye
leaves off, you too, turning
my pages are alone.

So there you are, George: I just read the poem. Again. Alone.
It all came true.



The Gangs of Kosmos (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1969)

Title taken from Whitman's "Democratic Vistas." Dedication: Love and gratitude to the three people | on the cover. Epigraph: *not God merely in bread | but God in the other-half of the tree* | H.D. [Tribute to the Angels]