

George Bowering / A SPECIAL SECTION

WEST WINDOW

grip down and begin to awaken

The tendril that grew last spring across my study window
is now a bare branch.

I dont recall being hugged
by either of my parents; I grew that way, food in my mouth
they gave me, frequent drinks of water,
exercise in the hills behind the house
& in the back yard. They made certain I had work to do there.

I dont remind myself of anyone in my family,
the greedy way I am always hugging my daughter,
smoothing her hair while she sleeps. I would rather watch her
than watch her grow,
but she does. & I put food in her mouth.

Now a bare branch. I have often told myself
to cut it down, it is a creeper like a weed, cut it down
& while you are at it, rake last summer's leaves
now frozen to the lawn. But I dont do it, day after day,

& after doing it just this once more,
dont make any more figures in which you compare
foliage & children.

OLD STANDARDS

*Love, so easy once to speak of,
never got a chance to reply.*

*Maybe she wasn't interested, maybe
she brushed her hair more than necessary*

*while he went on enjoying his skill.
Maybe when he left she rushed to her telephone.*

1.

Every time it rains it rains
on sidewalks he walkt on in the rain

back in West Point Grey again,
snapping-dry Interior forest put away again.

And there she was, whom he put off in Spring.
Jane. The second woman he ever entered
was seventeen. And older save in language
far than he who left his wallet God knows where
till he went back there & there
it was under her bed beneath the living room.

He loved her & it was without simplicity.
He loved her & her father's boat.
He loved her father's gold plates
upon which he ate his first truffles.
He loved her grandmother's box at the opera.
He loved appearing first night at the theatre
wearing a thirty-dollar charcoal suit on the society page.

He loved his mushroom earwig cellar room
where he wrote a book devoted to doom & filled with her.

He loved her perfect tennis body.
He loved his life in the early twenties
sitting in her basket chair reading a poem
& looking at the broad enclosed garden
where his fated Byron life fell relentlessly
like pennies on the green green lawn.

2.

Moonlight becomes you
after it's quietly taken place in the room

it slips off surfaces, walnut table, patterned carpet,
& gathers to reality,
a tall blonde woman
glowing with light he cant believe is borrowed.

He cannot believe he's seeing this in the past,
more months gone by than creases lie
under his collar.

You turned in the space before the window
just beneath the tree hardly further than his hand
could reach,
away away, turning,

whom he saw seldom at night. You were moonlight
& he was alone.

During the daylight he saw you
& was deeply impressed by your tan. He also realized
his life had no room for the way you acquired it.

3.

When an early autumn walks the land
you'll freeze your ass
in the wind off Lake Manitoba.

Walking a sparse avenue there he felt
as if he loved the first woman he ever entered,
& felt too he was at last grown up, an early autumn,
putting on his uniform the next morning,
patting his soiled wedge cap on the middle of his skull

She was as she must be, a year or so older
& a mother, how round, what escape from psychology.

Words
failed him. He took instead pictures, she lookt up at him
years later, a friendly trollop,
& he loved her then, who knew not where she fetcht up.

It was not the little death of winter he felt
but the onset of a long fall,
a series of imaginable tumbles, a door
over an abyss, & if that's not psychology
it's not the truth either.

Or rather it *was* not. No
it *is* not.

4.

Pennies in a stream, falling
thru the time she loved him, paid all accounts
owing to nature, *la belleza*, etc.

He withers, interestingly, as leaves drift
round his half-floating body as if they were
a disappearing bank account.

Those pennies came from heaven
& he always had the sense to come in
out of the rain. She never noticed the weather,
she was the weather.

And he used to act as if
you could get something, even sunshine
for nothing.

She became in the early times
moonlight in Vermeer, a valuable painting.

Pictures eventually
failed him.

He spied her bare bum in the dark of his room
as she, in the mirror,
felt around his feet
to see whether he was in bed.

--

his ears stopt up years before hers,
the news of her passing
coming by folded ways till he learnt,
he had to learn, she was gone

Somewhere there's heaven, he believed
going with her mysterious non-faith
to her church with the twin towers.

His best friend told him
he should have entered her
earlier, now she is gone, he is gone,
the only member of the party remaining
is himself.

58

6.

Down among the sheltering palms
he questioned his heart
yearning to take the boy home with him

away from the grungy bar
in the Graham Greene town
where the fat woman with the parrot on her shoulder
& the Russian in the 1930's ice cream suit
spoke a culture that grew there
with the weeds up thru the restaurant floor.

Yes, he was in dirty rags & beautiful,
grey-black & his faced shaped with an expert knife
like Roberto Clemente.

He loved him without simplicity,
he said to himself he would like to adopt him,
he would never be able to forget him,

he was in the tavern at nine o'clock in the morning
& he was there at midnight.

Having probably several sisters & a father
& his own nationality
& a future
burning by that corner of a sea
few would abandon themselves to.

Oh honey, he thought, no,
dont wait for me.

7.

The sun is shining, oh happy day.
The sun is shining into the middle of his history
where she can see the scars of pleasure.

She lookt to find what she dreads & it was
not there. In a moment it was there, quote:
“She suckt his cock with the noise
of a beagle drinking soup.” Unquote.

No more uncertainty & no skies of grey.
What she found was, quote:
“He has never entered her.” Unquote.

She would not like to allow that *chic*,
poetry speaking of itself, the poems singing
for themselves, & she was right.

It was plain to herself, she loved him,
he should have been here to see this poem
she was making for them,

an end to the list of lovers, a confusion of clarity
& a sunny day.

8.

I'm singing in the rain —
like pennies on a green green lawn,
he said, in his croaking frog voice.

If the truth be told, he was inside a large house
filled with collaborations,
his home like his poetry
composed as he went along.

On the phone
she talks to the outside
world, where it's raining.

How dry I am
sings the appliance in the basement.

He has come
this moment to a domestic poem.

There's a smile on his face.
He cannot believe he's seeing this in the present.
He cant believe how delicious is her *ratatouille*.
He will never carry a machine gun in his life.
The whole human race
is outside. He hopes for sunshine.

So he can get outside & lop the mushrooms off.

It is simplicity at last.
But what a complicated way of getting
happy again.

from *THE DEAD SAILORS*

CHAPTER 38

Menzies kept the carcass of that brown albatross around for weeks, & some of the officers made faces & some of the men were heard to mutter unpleasant words. But he was the scientist, & therefore up to something they didnt understand, so one had to put up with it.

Not that they were superstitious about the albatross. They didnt give two hoots about an albatross. Unless there was a literary person about. If there was a literary person about, they let on about how the great spread albatross over the quarterdeck was the source of supernatural calm, & the dead albatross was a source of supernatural dread. Once when there was a German poet stalking around the vessel while they were tied up at Capetown, a sailor named Delsing told him that he had once as a lad thrown a belaying pin at a perching albatross, killing the bird on the spot. The older sailors, he told the German poet, had seized him & compelled him to wear the albatross around his neck until it dropped off. But the sailors who overheard the telling of this tale doubled over with their sun-browned hands clapped over their mouths, the universal gesture executed by people who are trying not to laugh or throw up.

The truth of the matter was that you could never throw a belaying pin straight enough to hit an albatross, & if you did, you could never throw it hard enough to kill him. If you managed to get him the pin would bounce off him & fall onto the deck, & the albatross would look at it there, then look over at you, & then look away again & stand up on tip-toe, flap his long jointed wings, & jump away into the breeze.

That's why everyone was deeply impressed when the little botanist Menzies brought down the bird with a second shot from his flintlock pistol.

So it was not that they were superstitious. If they had been superstitious, & especially if there had been a literary person on board, they might have looked at the decaying bird & said things such as:

"I dont like it."

"It makes me uneasy."

"It's an unholy thing he is doing."

"No good can come of it."

"We shall be paying for his affront, mark my words."

"I fear him & his glittering eye."

But it wasnt superstition at all that fetched their disapprobation. It was a normal distaste for the ongoing apparition of a large dead & decaying bird on the premises. On board a ninety-nine-foot ship one cannot comfortably imagine the rotting body a great enough distance from the cook's supply of salt beef. The rumour that they were putting saltpetre in the mashed potatoes was bad enough. So what they were actually saying, historically but non-literarily, was more like this:

"Aw, shit. I dont see why we have to put up with this from a civilian."

"Christ, I left Birmingham to get away from odours like this."

"I feel like kicking that piece of shit over the side, & him after it."

"He's a Scot, & a Scot will eat a sheep's old stomach full of horse-food, so it bothers him not at all; but I am a tender boy from West Sussex, & my nature was not formed for an outrage the like of this."

"Ah, you've got goose-shit for brains!"

Thus were the minds of common British sailors unable for long to stay upon the same subject. But one memory was emblazoned now in their minds' eyes. That was the little fellow bringing down a bird near his own size, with a pistol more ornamental than dangerous in its appearance.

It was a device with a single flint & a small pan. Originally one of a pair, its mate was in the *Tøjhusmeet*, in Copenhagen. Menzies had been given this one as a present from Mr Banks, on the occasion of his appointment aboard the *Discovery*.

Its furniture was gilt brass, heavily applied & cast with designs of scroll-work & classical heads in relief. Its brass lock-plate was engraved with scroll-work. The long barrel was chiselled with strap-work & a classical figure, & bore the mark of Daniel Thiermay. Thus it may have been of French make, & if so the only object of French

manufacture aboard Captain Vancouver's ship. In any case the ornamental weapon was fashioned in about 1725, & was nearly seventy years later in excellent condition.

Actually there had been not only another pistol but also a gun, decorated *en suite*, all bearing the mark of Daniel Thiermay. The gun disappeared after its last discharge against the British at Gibraltar, & was probably lying beneath the deep waters of the Bay.

On some of Thiermay's pieces his name is followed by the phrase, *à Paris*. But the Thiermay family is known to have operated in Liège, where brass mounts of the type found on Menzies' flintlock were especially popular. Some authorities there conjecture that Daniel Thiermay worked in Liège but signed his work *à Paris* to render it more saleable. But in that nothing definite is known of his career, it is not untoward to believe that he worked for a while at least in the French capital. So Menzies' beautiful & fated pistol may have known a French birthplace after all. It is a small irony in a large ocean.

In any case, when Archibald Menzies stepped out & aimed his barrel at the hovering albatross, a lot of seamen stopped what they were doing & watched him. Vancouver himself watched with a faint smirk from way up at the forecastle. Menzies just continued what he was doing, as if no one were around to make him self-conscious. He was neither superstitious nor impatient.

There was a flash & a bang & some smoke, & then there was the botanist shaking more powder into his pan & there was the albatross, which hadn't so much as hinged a wing. Then there was a flash & a bang & some smoke, & the albatross hit the deck chin first with a clatter, & though the gathered sailors did not offer a clapping of hands, they did send up a murmuring that is universally recognized as applause.

Though George Vancouver did not offer Mr Menzies a congratulatory word on his marksmanship, he did remember the utter lack of expression on his surgeon's face as the dead creature slammed to his planks.

CHAPTER 39

He had noticed for a long time that while getting down to writing was unpleasant, writing was not so bad; & having written was sometimes so nice that he expressed his pleasure to a friend. In these ways the writing of a book may be compared with the passing of a voyage, but the comparison will not support a close nor an overlong scrutiny.

Two nights ago he'd told a student of literature that he thought that imagination implied a travelling, or a trip. He meant not to use the latter word, or intended its use not at all in the lightsome way teenagers spoke of drugs or new religions or simply recent interests. Such usage is a nuisance — it is a ritualizing of a mutiny.

He said that a passive leaning on a rail & seeing what the coast provides for one's gaze is linear, foppery & fancy. Going there & looking, turning over a rock or a clam — that is what is meant by the imagination. The ship is the vessel of metaphor, a carrying across as they say.

Full of theory & baffled, he felt his brain settle down on the soft end of its stem. The volcanic mountains inland but visible from the main, received their new names without protest. The rhythm of the sentences seemed to call for more.

The Catholics murdered them by the thousands, sacked their cities, defiled their holy places, erased their alphabets, melted down their gold, & brought half-breeds upon their women. But somehow the Catholics made greater inroads into the lives of the Indians than any Protestant, explorer, conqueror, or settler ever did. The Iroquois & the Aztecs became part of the global village that is the Catholic church at its rites, but one would look far & wide before coming upon a Redskin who professed to be a Non-Conformist, much less an Anglican.

At Nootka, the great native chief Maquinna was fond of the Spaniards, & fond of visiting them. For him the dinner table of Don Juan Quadra was the symbol of Mamathni behaviour. He was also proud, & as far as the whites were concerned, pride was a very important quality in the Indian. He was proud of the trust the strong & wise foreigners had in him. There was never any question of armament when he & his entourage visited the Spanish ships, nor when Quadra & his boatload of people disembarked at Maquinna's village. The West Coast, in this regard, was the image of peacefulness.

But Maquinna made the same mistake about the White Men Without Women as the latter often made about the various sorts of brown people — he thought they were all alike. So one day shortly after the British ships had anchored at Friendly Cove he caused himself to be transported to the *Discovery*, where he planned to greet the new visitors to the Coast.

"Hold it right there!" said the sentry on duty.

He didnt exactly aim his musket at the stout native standing among the paddlers in his dugout. But he wasnt exactly presenting arms, either.

"My name is Maquinna, chief of chiefs in these parts, & I come to make pleasantries with your chief," said Maquinna.

Unfortunately, he spoke only Nootka, with a smattering of Halkomelem & Spanish. The sentry was a twenty-one-year-old named Andrew Macready from Glasgow. He had trouble understanding what the English officers said, so it is no wonder that all he perceived was a sort of fat Indian saying something like "Euclatlé muh Maquinna, kims-cutla naw kims-cutla, neah kumkhwalek Nootka skaw kims-cutla koakoax."

In any event he wasnt having any of it.

"Get tha' goon, ye doorty savage!" he replied, perhaps brandishing the musket in the direction of the chief of chiefs.

"He just looked like a regular heathen. How was I supposed to know he was a chief?" the young Macready was later to enquire of the officer in charge of his flogging.

Whatever the truth, one may be sure that Maquinna wasted no time in going to vent his unhappy feelings before his good friend Juan Quadra.

"I am not accustomed to having my dignity mishandled so easily," he told the Spanish Commandant.

"Of course not," said the latter. "But we must both seem at least to be a bit more patient with the English. They are without gods, & therefore ignorant when it comes to conversing with those into whose heads the gods still speak."

"This poor Coastal chief finds it difficult to understand what is meant by a people without gods. Who is it, then, that instructs them during moments of great decision?"

"It is a phenomenon called human consciousness," said Quadra. "Their chief, Mr Vancouver, has a great deal of it."

"Yet they have sailed their wingéd canoes past many lands, you tell me. The world is becoming a different place too rapidly for this peaceful chief."

Quadra, as was his wont, told Maquinna as much as he could about the English, to explain to him why he had been treated as he had; then he told Vancouver what a mistake had been made aboard his ship. He told him further how to patch things up. So Vancouver had eight presents dispatched to the chief, along with a humble & importunate invitation to break fast aboard the *Discovery* upon the next morrow.

Breakfast went along fine for a while. Quadra complimented Vancouver upon the fish. Maquinna was so well-dressed that no one, from Glasgow or elsewhere, could mistake him for less than a great political personage.

But Peter Puget did not like him. He did not like the idea of a Red Savage sitting at the Captain's board & placing the Captain, as he saw it, on the defensive. To give some course to his resentment, he kept refilling Maquinna's glass with claret.

Meanwhile the sun had risen high over the island's mountains, & laid generous light over everything on the sea, the way it does in the morning at Trieste. Some of it came thru an opened shutter & pierced its way into Maquinna's red cut-glass goblet.

"No," he said, & was dutifully translated. "No, you English do not know how to conduct yourselves when you are in the presence of a people's leaders. These Spanish now, they are gentlemen. Their wine is also of superior quality."

"I'll cut off his badges of authority & feed them to the crows," said Puget in an aside. He worked on the assumption that asides were not translated.

Maquinna said that the greatest sadness in his life was about to come down because the Spanish were leaving. He said that he was afraid that the British would probably eventually hand him over, along with his lands & people, to the Yankees. He had hated the Yankees ever since the time when he was standing in front of Meares' skin store & a Yankee sailor had stuck a cigar in his mouth. He was a pipe-smoker for one thing, & the Yankee had laughed at him for another.

Here was an opportunity for Quadra, if he were so inclined, to drop the seeds of trouble between English & Nootka. Instead, he told Maquinna on his honour as a Spaniard that the chief could expect continuing decent treatment by the Europeans. Vancouver looked intently at the chief's face, & saw that he was thoroughly convinced. Then he looked at Quadra's face, & was chilled & excited by what he saw there.

That night the Peruvian was cruel & then he was more kind than he need be.

CARTER FELL

Above the clouds he had eaten baked lasagne out of a rectangular white dish, & fixt in his ears, the plastic knobs offered the Pittsburgh Philharmonic playing Pachelbel's Kanon in D. If he was going to die in another fiery crash, thank goodness for this, serendipity. It was the name of a bookstore in Berkeley, & as it turned out, he did indeed make it there, following an alarming zoom of the new subway beneath, somewhere, the bay.

It was his first stay in San Francisco after thirteen years, a return he had put off by way of a distorted principle. For six years he had stayed out of Babylon altogether, but a year ago he'd gone swimming a few meters across the line, & that broke his private pact. Now, San Francisco, that is, North Beach, was another matter. It was the city where he had learned that art was not something you do, it is something that chooses every fault & virtue, after you volunteer to pass thru its gate. The eye & the words are not tools as some had tried to teach him elsewhere, but a world you enter & mature in. Poetry here had killed its truest son.



But they had gone their ways, diverging. Since his last visit, the city had been broken in two, not by the promised earthquake, but by the loud music & its victims the kids with matted hair from the prairies, & the magazine writers. San Francisco was no longer an artists' town but a journalists' temporary hot spot. Now they made police-car pictures for television here. For his part, he had gone east, to Ontario-Quebec, the country that had sporadically fed him its colonial dreams during his childhood. Now he lived in the western colony again, but this week he was returning north from his winter in Puerto Limón, & returning to the still-standing site of his own civilization.

He dropt his suitcase & gadget bag in the room full of holes at the Swiss-American, killer across the hall grinning at him as he pulled the rickety door shut on its rattling lock, & hiked up to the bar on Greene Street. Fifteen years ago he had been driven to the bar to sit & have a drink with their poet — not an illuminating evening, but solid in his memory. The poet was now dead twelve & a half years, but the bar was still there, & so was he now, Spanish phrases falling off him like dying insects. From the lovely cool swarm of San Francisco midnight air, he walkt into Franco's, & there he was, inside a ramshackle American gay bar, the Christmas decorations left up thru late January attesting to the other defiance. A gay bar, yes, but neither the one nor the other fabrication, not a swishy aluminum piano lounge & not a waterfront leather bar with tattoos flext under every globe of light. Franco's is the best bar in America. Grateful policemen drink there at seven in the morning after a boring night's duty at the precinct.

As soon as he walkt in he saw Carter's large being at the only table, facing him. Carter did not recognize him & so he had the joy of saying hello, Carter. San Francisco can be depended on from the moment you arrive, a hundred rolls of exposed film in your bag, a winter well spent. Pachelbel & Franco's. At moments like this your life seemed worth living.

He put on a casual happy grin & said hi yah, buddy, & Carter couldnt believe it. Then he bought Carter a Picon Punch & there they were, the first time together at Franco's, who both loved this place.

Three months later he remembered this moment, a pen in his hand now, & wisht that all one's nights could be so marvelous, & wisht he could, after all that had happened since, recall it all with more vividness, such as one could recall the things outside oneself & time.



Carter the sculptor had been the master poet's lover some years before he had died, age thirty-nine, attacht to hoses in a California hospital. Ted the poet, who had always seemed so large, was really so small beneath Carter the giant, a hale junkie then, it was all a story, & he knew it of the telling. Here now was Carter, dying so the story went in Vancouver, a precious new citizenship that can protect you against many threats but not against your past. How that counts the revolutions & adds year by year, organ by organ inside your body. Mine too, he thought, from time to time.

What are you doing here, askt Carter, siting noticeably still as he always had.

Having a drink. I just dropt my stuff in Murder Hotel & ran right up, he said happily.

Carter just lookt at him out of the eyes of a large body with no time for impatience. So he continued.

A couple of hours ago I was standing in a line in Lost Angeles. Before that I was getting sunstroke in the bottom left corner of the Caribbean. Surprised to see me, arent you?

Carter broke into his lovely campy chirp.

You bet your life I'm surprised to see you. Arent you surprised to see me?

Yes, but happy, too. I think that if I can expect to find anyone I know in Ted's bar it should be you. It certainly shouldnt be anyone else I know in Vancouver. Did I ever tell you that I first met Ted in this bar? He was sitting right about where that stool is. How come you're in San Francisco?

Chirp chirp chirp chirp chirp chirp chirp.

Wonderful, he thought. What a pleasant way to bring another lonesome trip to an end.

So Pearl didnt even blink. She gave me the charge plate & drove me straight to the airport. She's a wonderful woman.

You dont deserve her, Carter, he said.

We'll all give you anything under the circumstances, he was thinking. Though we will try to be rough about it, so that you wont be called upon to acknowledge our extra care. When it gets complicated like this, talk a little louder & express your minor feelings with heart.

I love this place. It seems as if I havent left, I havent been away for fifteen years, he said, leaning back in his cane chair & looking at the titles on the juke box. Surprised, he put in a quarter & played a couple of Frank Sinatra songs.

Boy, he said, shaking his head, & he & Carter smiled at one another.

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The next morning he moved to the Sam Wong Hotel, & there he wrote away on his article, & then he went out for lunch. The very streets of the city gave him life, the life he had dreamed away under the snow of Canada. He recalled every bar, every hotel, every store, the kumquats in fact that he had pulled off the trees along the boulevard in Berkeley. In the afternoon he walkt to the Haight-

Ashbury. The love-child heavy-metal drug scene, the rock rainbow had come & gone during the time since he's last been there. That was the reason he'd spent so long between visits. Who needs a San Francisco of teen-aged Rabelaises? Now the city had settled back into its former life of unseen gangsters & alcoholic poets.

That evening he went back to Franco's. Carter didn't show up, so he spent the night sitting at the bar, watching the basketball game on TV. As soon as it was over, some gay fingers turned off the set, & it was time to look, just drink the inexpensive old-fashions, & trade quips & information with the bartender, Aldo.

He had last seen Carter at his birthday gathering in the little house overlooking the end of Burrard Inlet. Carter hadn't mentioned that it was his birthday, just invited thru Pearl all the poets & artists & pub characters he knew, all the people who by description would "care for him." He had apparently spent the whole day cooking his marvelous un-Canadian food, aromatic fowls in large pots, salads made of large greens & raw nuts, abalone with white sauce in shells, bread he had baked that morning. He stood in the doorway between the little living room & the larger kitchen, obviously unable to eat or uninterested in eating, a towering figure in a black robe, his face grey & thinning, his hair straight back as always, a large wine glass filled with vodka & grapefruit juice in his huge hand.

The record player in the other room played the sound-track of "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" over & over.

How many times have you turned it over, Carter?

This is the sixth time.

Are we going to hear anything else? How about some Pachelbel, for instance?

There is no other music. The rest is all just this world, just dirt, just ashes. It has all been burned to ashes. The power exhaust of their ships incinerated all of it. We are left with all the music we need.

How many times have you seen that movie, Carter?

Eight times. Once on the giant screen in Seattle.

Boy!

They are here, you know, he said confidentially, a satisfied smile on the largely immobile grey face.

As usual when he heard Carter speak this way, he was shy, he turned away a little with a joke.

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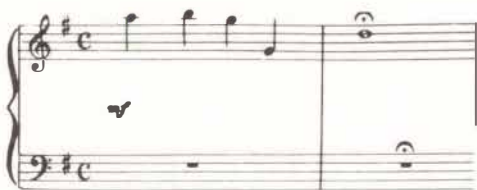
Once Carter was a savvy junky lying with Black horn players in Manhattan. He was a sculptor with a California kind of success. He knew the insider's view of the sex lives of the politicians. So when he said the UFO's were here & they were going to take us all to heaven you thought he was grasping at straws, his brain cells were undergoing chemical change.

Twenty-five people were invited to the gathering. Nine showed up. Carter stood like a statue in the kitchen, a "greyhound" in his hand, his lips pursed. I'm forty-five years old today, he said, in his usual half-whisper.

I didnt know it was your birthday. Congrats.

He smiled, his head so high. He was six foot four. He was up there listening to the saucers. Everyone knew he was dying, so sixteen people stayed away. After all that slow practical work, there was too much food, & it was delicious. There were halves of partridges piled on the warm stove.

People, the little group, began to eat. While they were eating, Carter disappeared. He had gone to lie down. Everyone talkt, plates on their knees, as if they hadnt noticed. Soon they were ready to meet in other places, the beer parlour, the Arts Club bar.



Next night he went looking for Carter, who was staying with Dev, the poet who swept out Franco's. It took a while, the North Beach streets running into triangles, but he found the number. He couldn't find the door, though. After a quarter-hour of foreigner's indecision, he looked up at the windows again, & there was Dev, visible thru the dirty glass. He threw six American pennies, one after another, & at last one cent hit the window. Dev looked out & down at the dewy street, & waved, he would be right down.

They walked to the bar together, talking about Carter.

What is he doing down here, he asked, thinking that Dev would know he meant to say is he saying goodbye to his old mean streets.

Dev was not in a hurry to get to the bar, but he was steady in his path toward it. Besides being a poet he was a painter, not a California success, but a good painter, when he had the time & eyes to be one.

He came to see Michael Cause off. Michael is shipping for Japan & Formosa.

He walked a dozen steps.

Carter loves Michael, he continued.

So does Pearl. Michael spent six months at their place, I said. He couldn't keep his narrator in the third person any more, not thru all this emotion.

Everyone loves everyone, said Dev, & he knocked a long thin American cigarette into his mouth.

When I was last here everyone was very busy hating everyone. The poets & painters & boy longshoremen were all fucking each others' lovers & saying terrible things about each other at dinner parties.

Yes, that's true. Don't you understand us? asked Dev. Once in a while, last Fall in Vancouver, & now here, he made me realize I was about five years younger, & a Canadian.

I could never get them into group photographs, I said, lightening up.

The only group pictures you see from those days are of the New York poets in town for a literary uprising, said Dev, holding his cigarette like a suicide pill, & we were at the bar.

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A few months later Pearl told me that in New York he was always getting lost, & usually finding himself in a bar. Usually at a table near

the jukebox. Once they were all going to the beach, Pearl & Carter & the boys, deflated beach balls, plastic sand buckets, towels, all crammed into the hot subway, ready for a Sunday afternoon at Coney Island. She knew better long before they got there, but she gave up, & the family got out at 125th Street. Carter went for one at an African saloon, & the three blond-headed mortals went across the tracks for the long ride south. Carter came home next day, with sand in his shoes. A sort of cheeky magic.

*

That night I walkt Carter home from the bar. I was pleased for some reason that he was wearing his old San Francisco outfit, jeans & denim jacket, black shirt, work boots. Like Ted, but bigger. Carter was one of the few men I knew who was taller than I was, & heavier. And gay. He was, surprisingly, street drunk when we got outside, & I kept within a foot or two of him, prepared to steady him on the steep sidewalks.

When is he supposed to die? I was thinking. I had been told before going to Central America, but so much had happened to dismiss the winter.

Now it had been over a decade, but I thought I could find our way around these Italo streets to Dev's place all right. There was no one else on the sidewalks in front of the restaurants & whatever else was there at two in the morning. The St. Francis or somebody church stood in a California night across Washington Square.

I'm staying just across the square & up a block, said Carter, as we stood on the corner. A taxi prowled by, an advertising board on its rear. No you arent, I said. I was there several hours ago or at least last night, & it isn't across the square, it is in here a block & up a half a block, I think. I shouldn't have said I think. But I got him turned around. Now I'm straightened away, he said, it's up the top of this hill. I don't think so, I said, but I walked up with him anyway. It wasn't there. We stopped for a while as his body fought for breath. His throat was wheezing & I felt a sudden responsibility here a thousand miles from his house in North Vancouver.

Then his great work boots slid across the night sidewalk & he fell to the concrete.

He was a heavy man. His devil had wasted away much of his flesh, but it was all I could do to lift his heavy skeleton to his feet. I had my arms around him & he had one arm around me, & I felt all of the human doom of his art then, art & its themes born out of the eternity we were so close to, I had a hold on love & death. In that silly collapse he had wet himself. I loved him, & felt more security than alarm. I felt as if I could now aim him for rest, & walk straight to Dev's place. I did, & I waited fifteen minutes while Carter climbed the stairs inside. I saw him in the unlit window & then I walked straight back to my hotel.

*

I had agreed to fly back to Vancouver the next day with Carter. At eight-thirty I was out of the Sam Wong Hotel with my suitcase & gadget bag. The coast air was cold & the streets were shiny wet. A transvestite in silver high-heels snubbed me when I said good-morning. San Francisco is a comfy place in the early morning.

At Franco's there were several cops in nylon jackets & suntans, drinking brandy or whiskey to wind down from their shifts. I didn't risk saying good-morning, except to Carter & Dev. Dev was a mess — he had been there all night, washing the floor & catching an hour's sleep on the cot in the basement. Carter was wearing his lively red plaid woolen jacket, good for the earlier morning, & ready for the north. He was drinking a lot of Picon Punches for his last day in San Francisco. I bought a long cigar & read the paper. Franco's is a nice bar in the morning. Fielding Dawson would not feel out of place but he wouldn't altogether like it.

Going home today, Carter? said Angelo, who was wiping the bar. He *is* home, I thought he would say, or I thought I would have him say that.

Yes, said Carter. Going home.

Will you be seeing that faggot poet?

I'll be seeing about twenty faggot poets, said Carter, in the high amused voice he used for banter & gossip. I loved him when he did his catty queen voice, which was one step along the way.

I mean the extraordinary one who publisht Ted's late great po-ems in his typical North Beach dear-me magazine.

You mean John the Arranger?

Yes, that's the one. Will you give him a message from me?

Sure.

Tell him to go fuck himself, said Angelo.

Now, I cant do that. We arent good friends any more.

I lookt up from the exciting basketball story in the *Examiner*. Vancouver is just the way San Francisco used to be, I said.

That's not true, not entirely true, said Dev. A lot of the people are dead. And the new blood that replaces them drink beer in loud barns filled with little round tables.

That made me nervous. I went back to my newspaper, & then I had a look at Carter. He was just ordering another.

We better go pretty soon, I said. I didnt want to have an uncontrollable event on the airplane.

*

Dont you understand us?

*

At the airport I paid the taxi driver, & then I did everything. Carter would have led us off to Zambian Airlines. The little bar was packt, & so once the bags were cleared away we went to the snack

stand & I made Carter eat a cruller & drink some tea. His fingers on the dough did not shake, & they were not wasted. A sculptor's hands are twice as strong as any of his interior organs. Michelangelo's hands are still firm around a rosary in his tomb.

On the jet I ordered a bloody Mary & Carter had a lemonade with little ice cubes in a plastic vessel. I didnt say anything but I supposed that he was straightening up, assuming an order pertinent to him & Pearl & the physician. But at the last moment before we started our descent into grey-green Vancouver, he had a double vodka while I drank a cup of coffee.

God, it is a job I would not like, being him, I thought. I thought of taking out my camera & fixing him then, & now, but I only thought about it.

Helen pickt us up, & then we drove him to the university, where Pearl would be off work in an hour.

He was standing in the gateway of the Japanese garden as we turned to drive home. He was wearing a red plaid jacket & holding a small blue bag. It was the last time I saw him.



Two weeks later I was in Toronto, talking with some Toronto people who knew how to look at photographs & words & turn them into a book. They too were from the west but now they were in Toronto, & every word they said & every movement their bodies made said this is the way we do things in Toronto. They led one to believe

for a while that in Toronto they really did know how to do things we on the west coast are too innocent & too nice to have learned. So that a sculptor in Toronto, for instance, would not share his energy equally between shaping mud & speaking love to a poet in ill health. Everyone like me needs a little Toronto & quite a lot of time forgetting Toronto. If Carter had ever taken a plane to Toronto he would have vanished like a drop of water on a hot pan.

In the evening in Toronto I ate part of a pot roast in the dining room of an old friend from the coast, & then I phoned Vancouver to find out how Helen was doing. She told me that Carter had died the day before. He had gone to bed in the middle of the afternoon & an hour later he had just died because he could not breathe.

Sometime last winter he was working on a series of small heads of his friends. I have seen the sketches he made for mine. It was as if he wanted to be sure we would all remain. I don't know why some things are important in a story.

*

Relationships very often go in this order: strangers, friends, distance, sickness, death, & funeral. Distance is very important. In a story readers look for distance.

I flew back in time for Carter's service, a week later. It was held on a cold afternoon in Pearl's back yard. We all sat on stools or blankets on the deep grass, poets & artists, homosexual friends, babies, some college professors, sons & daughters. Some were people I knew. Some were from New York or San Francisco, while others were the semi-permanent semi-strangers we often saw at Carter's parties. There were four times as many people here as there had been at Carter's birthday party. His scratchy-haired dog went from group to group, sitting at someone's feet for a while, then moving on.

I was cold, & that kept me from gathering all my feelings for the importance of the occasion. People were talking without the nervous conviviality of indoor funerals. Pearl & her sons handed around the blue mimeograph program. It was entitled "A Mass to Celebrate the Death & Resurrection of Carter McCammon."

*

Once, a year ago, Carter led me downstairs, into his basement. Past the usual pickle jars & washtubs, he led me to his damp place of solitude. He parted the curtain made of wooden beads, & I saw a wide bed on the invisible concrete floor; it was covered with a spread of cheap Indian design, & strewn with Oriental cushions. Around it were some red & brown drapes. Against the wall stood a rude wooden table covered with photographs & papers, strange objects, hollowed heron's eggs, carved African animals, something tubular that lookt as if it could have been old human skin, a lot of things I cant remember, a plastic bag of marijuana, sheet music, & so on. On the wall above the table was a large Canadian flag, not the Pearson maple leaf, but the Red Ensign from my childhood. I never did understand how I felt about that.

From the table Carter casually pickt a small green-covered child's notebook. He opened it to the middle pages & handed it to me.

Do you recognize this, he askt.

It was one of the finest of Ted's poems, inscribed by the awkward hand I had seen only once before, fifteen years ago, & in fountain pen ink. It was a poem we all loved. We knew that Ted was a great poet then, though his cult was only now making its effect known in the eastern parts of the continent. We loved him, & I do not know whether to say it is partly because he has been dead for thirteen years or because we simply do not think of him as dead.

Ted had died in San Francisco a week after I had left the city for Latin America.

He wrote that one afternoon while I lay on the couch across the room, listening to some strange music, said Carter.

I didnt know what to say. It was inconceivable, though I knew better, that the homely words written on this vulnerable little note-

book's paper, & read by this man in this dark chamber just last night are left by a person clear out of this world. Ted used to say that his poems were recited by voices from another star.

Carter was nicely preparing everyone, & it embarrass me.

*

Polymorphous as our group was, it was a real mass we celebrated. Among Carter's people was a poet whose brother is a young priest, & now they were both on the high back porch, both in black-rimmed eyeglasses & straight-legged blue jeans, Michael singing the Latin in a high beautiful voice, Matthew handing him things. The Protestants & pagans on the lawn sat with coats around their shoulders & sang along in response as Michael had instructed them. I gave up trying to feel a solemnity, & lookt at my friends up there, & now I knew what I was feeling was love, a human living with a great deal of confidence fallen away. Michael did for us all, & Carter, & Pearl especially, the grace that his bluejeans suggested, of carrying on an authentic west coast Catholic ceremony without condescension & without hipster sophistication. I had seldom felt more love for people in a group. Pearl sat up front with friends, no tears on her face. Helen beside me, who had no great patience for these people in the general course of things, was moved to a serene quietude, & I knew that she, who wore sweaters in May, felt more cold than I did.

In a rectangular pewter box, carved on all four sides & the top with Oriental equine figures, was Carter's residue.

The sky, framed by the bare apple trees & mountain ash of the sloping yard, descended from blue to a darker blue.

Four months later I am remembering that moment, a pen in my hand, & accustomed to the fact that not all evenings can be that marvellous, but wishing I could, accepting all that had happened since, redraw it all with vividness, such as one can a place, a house. I did not then have my cameras with me, & though it was suggested to me that I might photograph the afternoon & later the night in the crowded little house, I did not want to.

*

I'd wondered whether I should tell Pearl about Carter's falling down on the street corner in Little Italy. I decided not to, but how many times did he fall noisily in that little house? We never heard

about it. For the first time now I am seeing a picture of their tall sons grasping him under each arm & lifting him again to his feet. For a second then I also imagined him looking down at me writing this. At my father's funeral I held my sister's hand in one of mine & my mother's hand in the other, & wept. Then sitting there in the second pew behind the empty first pew, I heard my father's voice.

It's all right, he said.

Now I wonder whether Carter knows that those people from elsewhere came to contact us. Either he knows or he doesn't. For sure I don't know. Between the two of us he has at best one chance in four of knowing. Though from his point of view, if any, he might see it as a much greater chance than that. When he was talking about those people coming here, when he was using his high-pitched gleeful voice about that, was he just preparing us some more? I was so embarrassed by his sincerity I just made a little joke about it & changed the subject; it was too close to what I was thinking.



It was getting colder, but on the blue paper everyone could see that the service would soon be over & the wake inside would warm people up. Michael came down from the high wooden porch & passed among us, offering communion, & everyone there took it. The bread had been made by Pearl, from Carter's recipe, & the wine they had made together that winter. We have to use it all, said Matthew, & so we did, & I saw Pearl give some bread to Carter's frisky little dog.

After that, Carter's older son Brice played his Spanish guitar, & sang a song he had written during the previous year. The words were all about the spirit & the spirit's longing for illumination, very spacy. Brice pickt high notes from the strings for a long time between choruses. I did not like the words, so I lay back on the grass to ease my sore back, & listened all alone. It was not as cold as I'd expected, & I lay still so that Helen would not think I was being dramatic. I was looking up thru the bare branches of an apple tree, & as I listened to the clear music my eyes settled down too, & I lookt as I always wisht I would look, at no other possible angles. Some of the limbs were closer & some were higher. I let my eyes fall on the bottom branches, & then rise one by one to the certain smallest twig at the highest reach.

I knew it had a corniness to it. But that too was stript away, & I felt no embarrassment at all, for the first time in Carter's friendship & death. The sky beyond the tree was not yet black. It was a deep blue people mistake for black.

Once I lowered my eyes & lookt at Brice on the porch. He was holding his guitar high, on a perfect forty-five degree angle. There was only an inch or two of room, a few centimetres of room on either side of him, & then a candle burning near each arm. Also on the rail in front of him I remember seeing a pedestaled tray containing the host, & two flagons of deep red wine, & so I know I have told of the order of events wrongly. Draped against the wall below the rail was the large Red Ensign.

Then, sometime then, it was Pearl's turn, for the program listed "The Death Poems of Carter MacCammon." The poems were, then, made by the two of them over a period of a week & a half. Pearl wrote them, & Carter lived them thru, till the last. I have been planning to get draughts from Pearl & copy parts of them here, but now I dont want to. They will, in any case, be publisht on earth within the next year. They are very hard to endure & we were fortunate to be prepared that evening. She spoke them clearly, & loud enough to be heard by everyone in that cold yard. They bared her completely, her anger, her disgust, her patience, & her god-awful love.

When she came to the words, I carry your few ounces home on my

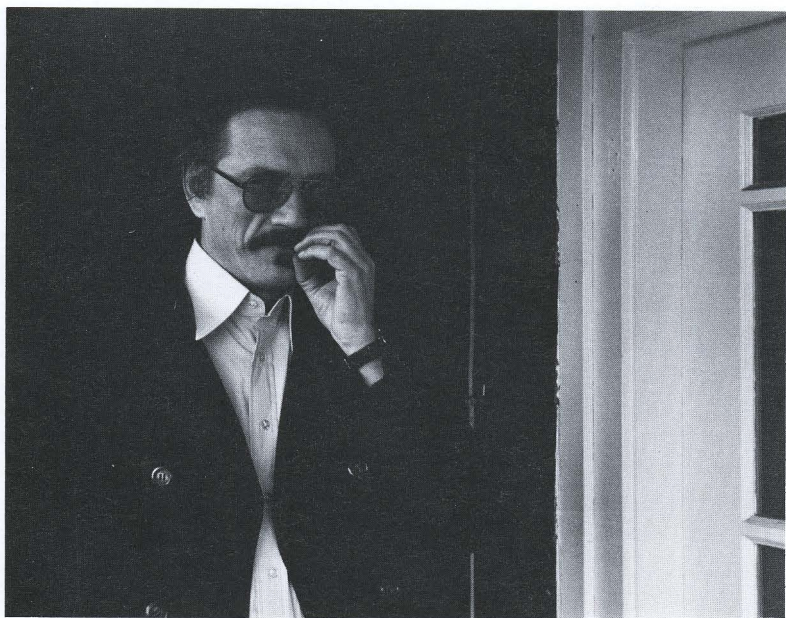
lap, & the lightness of your arm making stone of your life the last time, I lookt for no reason to my left & saw that all at once between two telephone lines a planet appeared, large white disc in a sky it made finally black.

The morning star.

Then we were praying all together. Michael & his brother spoke the final Latin, & we pickt up stools & folded blankets, & we all went up the stairs of the porch.

As usual in Carter's house there was plenty to drink, the food was excellent, & there was a lot of it.





14 PLUMS

George Bowering was interviewed on February 18, 1979 by Bill Schermbrucker, Sharon Thesen, David McFadden, and Paul de Barros, in Vancouver. These extracts were edited by Sharon Thesen.

"Kerouac said . . . that he sailed on the Pequod for fifteen years and never saw one single whale, just a lot of flounders. And I really respect a guy that will do that and then write about them."

1.

GB I've changed a lot of my ideas since *A Short Sad Book* came out in 1977, or, you know, fiddled with them a bit. And I've gone completely around on some.

Paul de Barros What have you turned around on?

GB I've refined some ideas from that book and I've become, in the last few years, a lot less nationalistic than I was four or five years ago, going back more to the position I was in ten years ago. Compared to the way I was feeling about poetry, say, ten or fifteen years ago, I'm much more oriented to the idea of writing as artifice, as visible page artifice, but not in the sense of concrete poetry. I think I've got it straightened around now that prose is a spatial experience. As I was saying the other day, poetry is basically a temporal art and despite the fact that I feel the same way about a lot of things, I feel there is a basic difference between the two of them, that poetry involves memory, for instance (when you're reading a poem) a lot more than prose does — with prose you're more engaged on the space that you're looking at and using it at your own speed and at your own entry. Whereas with poetry, you're in a more passive role; you're sitting there listening to it go by you, second by second, the way you do with a movie or a piece of music. You can't stop and say, wait, let's slow down here, let's go back to where we were and come back again, or let's change where I'm sitting.

2.

Bill Schermbrucker You seem to get a lot of energy out of vacillations or pendulum movements from one thing to another: from prose to poetry, from Vancouver to Toronto, from Canada to the States, from man to woman. Like, in the language of *A Short Sad Book* and in something else that I've read recently, every time a word comes up that fits in *this* context there's a comment on how it doesn't fit in *that* context.

GB In *A Short Sad Book* I was trying to clear the boards and make clear a lot of my opinions that had been working up over the years on various things and say them out. bp Nichol says at the end of *Journal*, I think, that what you're doing when you're writing a novel or writing a book is, you just look into the person's eyes and tell them how you feel. And he says that's the whole function of writing a novel — what it's all about. I just wanted everybody to know how I feel about everything. So there is a lot of measuring of those relationships. . . . I was trying to get the sense of spreading the whole thing out on one big flat surface and then you might see something in the top right-hand corner that connects with something down at the bottom left-hand corner ironically or simply in order to rhyme with it or whatever. I guess it's like a Leonardo da Vinci painting: every part of it is related to all the other parts in terms of the motion of the hand that you saw doing it. He hardly ever finished a painting, and there's supposed to be a sense of that in the book, too. That book just ends because one ran out of space or ran out of pages to do or whatever.

PdeB I can see a connection to Gertrude Stein, where you're spreading it all out and it's almost like each page, each composition . . .

GB It's a way of denying the subconscious, too. The subconscious suggests that we are enacting something on the time continuum. Either you connect it with your own childhood or you connect it with the childhood of the race or whatever.

PdeB Well, most poetry does, too. The whole modern novel is dealing with nothing but that.

GB That dumb path that Henry James put us down, and you'll notice that the whole problem for the modern novelist or fiction writer from James up to, say, 1950, the main problems have been time. The characters' psychological problems have been time, and you get all that, and then the technical problems have all been time, too, so you get all those great inventions like the flashback and the internal monologue and the cutting back and forth between the times of two different people and all that.

PdeB Are you suggesting that it is a betrayal of what prose can really do?

GB Not a betrayal. It's funny — just a 75-year experiment and something new for the novel to do, and a lot of people recognize that it was getting into the business that poetry had claimed before that. I mean, I don't think anybody makes that claim for the relationship between poetry and prose before that. We can see carry-overs between the modes of thought between an 18th-century prose piece, but the whole act of narrative in a Pope poem is quite different than an act of narrative in a Fielding novel. A Fielding novel doesn't gather up everything. If James had been writing *Tom Jones*, something that happened to Tom Jones in Chapter Two would reassert itself in Chapter 35 as causal, but for Fielding, the past is just another place he's been and you could probably put most of those chapters in different places. I mean, Tom does learn a little bit, but he's just as naive when the next chapter comes along; and I aspire to that kind of space for a novel.

3.

GB James says in *The Art of the Novel*, I think, that the novel is to history as painting (he's talking about realist painting) is to nature — an imitation. His assumption was that the rules we have of history are the rules that we're going to have when we get into fiction. We've come around and changed the rules of fiction and at the same time changed the rules of history. Maybe we changed the rules of history first. We look at history in a much different way now. We looked upon it then, in 1840, as a kind of a given: we were not the administrators of it, we were sort of the functionaries of history and it acted upon us. So, fiction was to do the same thing. There was to be an inevitability about fiction, and the author was to pretend he wasn't there, in other words, to disappear. And it's funny because I was just re-reading William H. Gass's *The Figures of Fiction* and he says that most people nowadays want fiction to act like history without having to take care of all those details, like, easy history without customs rates and stuff like that; they just want to sit back and let it happen to them, he says. Like sociology without statistics. And that's a preamble, in his terms, to getting rid of it. The way he's describing it is one of two things: either nurse novels or the most honoured Canadian fiction of the last ten or fifteen years.

4.

GB In poetry I like some kind of arbitrary structure that will then free you in your response to it, whereas in prose I like total control on the part of the author. I like the author to assert his independence of causality as much as possible in the prose, in the causality of the novel. I really used to feel very romantic about the image that novelists always made; they said, I created these characters and then after a little while they took off, right?

PdeB Yeah! They don't behave themselves — uncontrolled.
(laughter)

GB I don't want to be the victim of my characters; I don't believe any more . . . I just said, that's all a game, you know, it's not true! it's a lie! They're lying when they say that. It's the same lie the realists use when they say that nobody in this novel resembles anybody in their life — you know that's a lie. And then they turn around and say, why do you keep treating this as autobiography instead of fiction? And they got characters in there that you can recognize — that you're *supposed* to recognize.

PdeB Well, is what you're talking about that you're disbanding fiction?

GB Yeah.

PdeB But you're not even disbanding it. It seems to me even back in those early books you never bought the idea of fiction.

GB Well, I did, but then I could not resist the desire to show off my power, but I did feel — like, I really was a sucker for the Ernest Hemingway thing, you know. That's what I wanted to do. The novelists I liked were all the big standard American realist novelists: Steinbeck and Hemingway and John Dos Passos and William Faulkner and, you know, all of them, I adored them all. I remember I'd look at old notebooks and see my responses to those novels and say, god, they saw right into my heart, you know? Even though they were about somewhere that I've never been in my life, the story is still about me. Now I say, why the christ should I go to a goddamn book to find a story about me? I mean, I've got a story. Why have a story *about* me instead of me?

5.

GB You notice how the realists — these Freudian modernist fiction guys — are all dead serious? And it's the comic writer and the comic movie makers who are dealing in other terms than realism. For instance, in the early 1950's you had all these super-serious James Dean stories about adolescents growing up and being wounded by the world and the obvious cataclysmic effects of those. And then you have *The Road to Morocco* with Bob Hope and Bing Crosby, who keep letting you know that the camera's there, and they keep letting you know they were characters in another movie. As soon as you recognize a camera's there, you're out of realism — it's disappeared. Because realism depends on your setting the people up on three sides of the table in a movie, although there might be 17 people, they're taking up only three sides of the table because the other side has the camera on it, and they pretend the camera isn't there.*

PedeB It seems really important all the way through the poetry and the prose — that idea of verifying everything: verifying where you are, verifying what you're seeing, having some evidence. It seems that a lot of the poems are nothing but that, like, searching for an evidence.

GB Yeah, I see what you mean but I don't know quite how to connect it.

*"The Three-sided Room"

PdeB Well, my connection is that you're saying, if I can't believe in this system to apply to daily life or dream or experience, then how am I going to verify what's going on? How am I going to have any way of talking about it?

GB Well, for poetry, in the TISH days, the days when we were all learning to write poetry, that involved making use of the lessons of imagism because when you're an 18-year-old kid you're an automatic Georgian, right? And you start talking about things that must be very important. Teenage poets — untutored — always write about suicides and bodies cut open and blood and death and pain and loneliness — I mean that's what the Georgians were, a bunch of arrested adolescents, right? They would be out in a lake and the lake would just be a backdrop for their own loneliness. That's not what you find in our early poetry. You find an incredible number of proper nouns because proper nouns are the most concrete nouns there are because they verify the existence of something outside your own colorations of the landscape.

6.

David McFadden Do you ever get depressed with what you're writing?

GB No, not very often.

DMcF Do you ever find it scary or dangerous?

GB No.

BS Do you believe him, David?

D.McF Yeah, I think so. It's amazing but I do.

GB There have been times when I've gone back and read something and was surprised by it or felt that it was — it had more to it than I thought it had at the time, or felt as if I didn't remember having written that, and I've been moved by it emotionally, but I've never been scared by it.

Sharon Thesen I wonder if maybe David asked that question out of a similar sense that I have to some of the recent work, that there's an attempt to reclaim some innocence, either from the 18th century, in the romantic conversion of your own language in poems like "Which Poesy" and "Old Standards." It's quite different than, say, the "Touch" poems. But I found that in "In the Flesh" there began a shift, a kind of falling away from, or falling apart of a sense of love that is so much there in the earlier poems. And in the introduction to that book you yourself say something about having entered your thirties and becoming aware of your life as part of a larger drama. And it's around that time, too, that you write *Curious* and *Autobiology*, and of course that takes me back to a couple of things I wanted to talk about in terms of what you've been saying about memory and so on. But the last line of "In the Flesh" is "Reaching out to hold you, off."

GB To hold you — comma — off. I wanted both to be there because earlier in the poem it says to pay attention to my endings.

ST Yeah, but you never seem to have any trouble with that, you seem confident in that ability of language to hold the world.

GB Well, that's what love is — you write lyrics with love for the world, you want to name it and say: there, there, there. And what you're talking about in these other poems, the commonality that runs through these later poems, is that the language tends to be more about itself, and that has left what I take to be the lyric impulse — has left it behind, and it is not the dramatic but it is the parallel in writing to the feeling of drama in your own life, so that you're attesting more to the poem having an existence, whereas a lyric poem tends to — it allows — it gives itself to the occasional all the time and verifies that that out there is the real and therefore the beautiful, because, I mean, what you should love is the real, I think.

ST But there's definitely a "you should" loving in it, there's more of a presence of you.

GB Yeah, the more you say, look at that, look at that, look at that — the only motive to do that is to say it's beautiful or it's ugly and could be beautiful — one of the two. I guess when you get to be in your thirties you've done that so often that you begin to see that, and that's when you can make a choice, you can either get psychological, which I felt . . .

ST Well, no, but there is a recovering of the past that you're also doing in your thirties, which is not . . . well, I want to get back at some point to that denial of the subconscious in your work but there certainly is a particularized recovery of — I hate to say your past because it's not really personal history in that sense.

GB Yeah, I know the hesitation you're feeling if we're talking about *Autobiology*. That's why the form of *Autobiology* is so intent on making the present happen in the language. It's prose but it's not prose that's saying "this happened": it's a prose that's saying "I'm happening." I don't know if that's what you said but I think you're absolutely right in the sense that at that moment when it is one's past rather than one's present, it is involved in terms outside the poem. But maybe it's to get over what the realists or the confessional poets, who are sort of the poet version of realists, would do with that material. You throw all the attention on the page so that the reader is not then going to say, oh god, here goes another dreary story about how awful the mother [father, ed.] treated that kid.

PdeB Well, you're resisting that all the way.

ST Yeah, he is. It's that discomfort with the idea of causality that he talked about before, that he preferred to write a kind of Fielding novel. There's George the Picaro, exactly the same at the end of that road as he was at the beginning of it.

7.

DMcF This goes back to a very mundane level. What's happening to your sense of audience?

GB I don't know. I've never been clear about what it was except in some instances — there've been lots of times I've had that experience in Vancouver. I've had all kinds of people talk about this, the scariness or the meanness of it, where it was always traditional in Vancouver that if you read a poem that your co-poets in town didn't like, they wouldn't have a nice liberal attitude about it. They wouldn't say, we're just talking about the poem, George, we're not talking about you, you know. They wouldn't do that; they wanted you to go kill yourself! (laughter)

PdeB If you feel that way about it . . .

GB Yeah! And so that was one version of the story, but I still think that that's part of that business of Toronto and Vancouver. When I go to Toronto I say, that happens out in Vancouver and you wouldn't be able to get away with this shit there. And I've always thought there was more good to that than there was bad. I mean, I had my feelings hurt lots of times and I probably hurt other people's feelings lots of times, but I think that was more good than bad. When I think about audience that's the first thing I think about, and that audience is made up of other people in that circle of poets and so forth. It's like a bunch of Knights Templar on the West Coast.

8.

GB All my books start off with “why am I writing this book?” except in “The Dead Sailors” it’s “he” — the guy who’s writing it is called “he”, and about every second chapter it gives you a page of the circumstances of the guy writing the Captain Vancouver book.

ST The circumstances while he’s writing, or . . . ?

GB Yeah. It’s like, it starts off I went to Trieste, right? So it starts off with a parody of the beginning of a realist novel, which goes something like, “he was residing in a hotel in blah-blah-blah” and the same thing with that book: I had to declare the circumstances of writing the book just to lay the cards on the table and say, I’m the author and you’re the reader and this is the book. And that goes right back to what bp says at the end of *Journal*: he says you put the book down, look your reader in the eye, and say such-and-such. But “put your book down” — you know bp, he never says anything that doesn’t have three meanings. You put your book down like this, you know, and you put (write) it all down. And through that action look at the guy in the eye. But it also means that you’ve been sitting there reading and he says, get out of reading and get into real life. So you put your book down and you look him in the eye, right? So, “He lifted his foot and kicked the kid” — it’s the same function and that’s to get rid of . . . I don’t know. There are two things that happen: one is, some people got all snarled up in the end of the realist tradition and started trying to fight their way out of it, like Mailer, and tried to shoulder their way around it and call the novel a piece of non-fiction and vice-versa, and so then Barth came along and had the author going psychologically crazy because he has to handle this funny old material. Then you get the next batch of people that have to parody it, or — I like Hawkes’ term “travesty” — make a travesty of the whole situation. That has to be done. Then you don’t know what’s going to happen after that. I think we’re still in that space. There are all kinds of interesting things happening, but they’re almost all of them done in terms of travesty: Ishmael Reed is just making a hash of history and by extension James’ notion that novels are history in fiction.

9.

GB I wrote a Beckett paragraph today. It was like a long Beckett paragraph.

PdeB But that's art as problem-solving. Art as problem solving is the main modern idea.

GB Yeah. It is in painting, and it has not been acknowledged enough in poetry, as it has been in prose.

PdeB So that accounts for the move and interest in prose.

GB I think so, yeah. I think that it's more that in poetry I will always look into my heart and write but with prose not so much. And that gets you into the spatial thing: this is really a lot more important to me than time right now.

10.

DMcF There's a tradition in Canadian poetry for most dedicated poets to be — let me boil it down — to be dedicated to their own egos and reputations and things like that, and, what are you dedicated to?

GB The first thing I think of is that I wouldn't want to shame the language. That sounds very pretentious but it's true. Literally I don't want to bring shame down on the language and I feel the same way about other people's poetry. That involves abrogating its space, using language as a tool, and I suppose that that's why I automatically detest confessional poetry. It's why I just cannot read Sylvia Plath. She's one of the most beautiful stanza-makers in recent American poetry or English, whatever she is. She's a lovely stanza-maker but she, what she says is, if the world is shitty for me, the world is shitty, and she then finds various ways of saying that. But as a friend once said, why didn't someone just tell her to go stick her head in an oven.

11.

PdeB Would you mind answering here Brian Fawcett's attack on *A Short Sad Book* — his political attack on it?

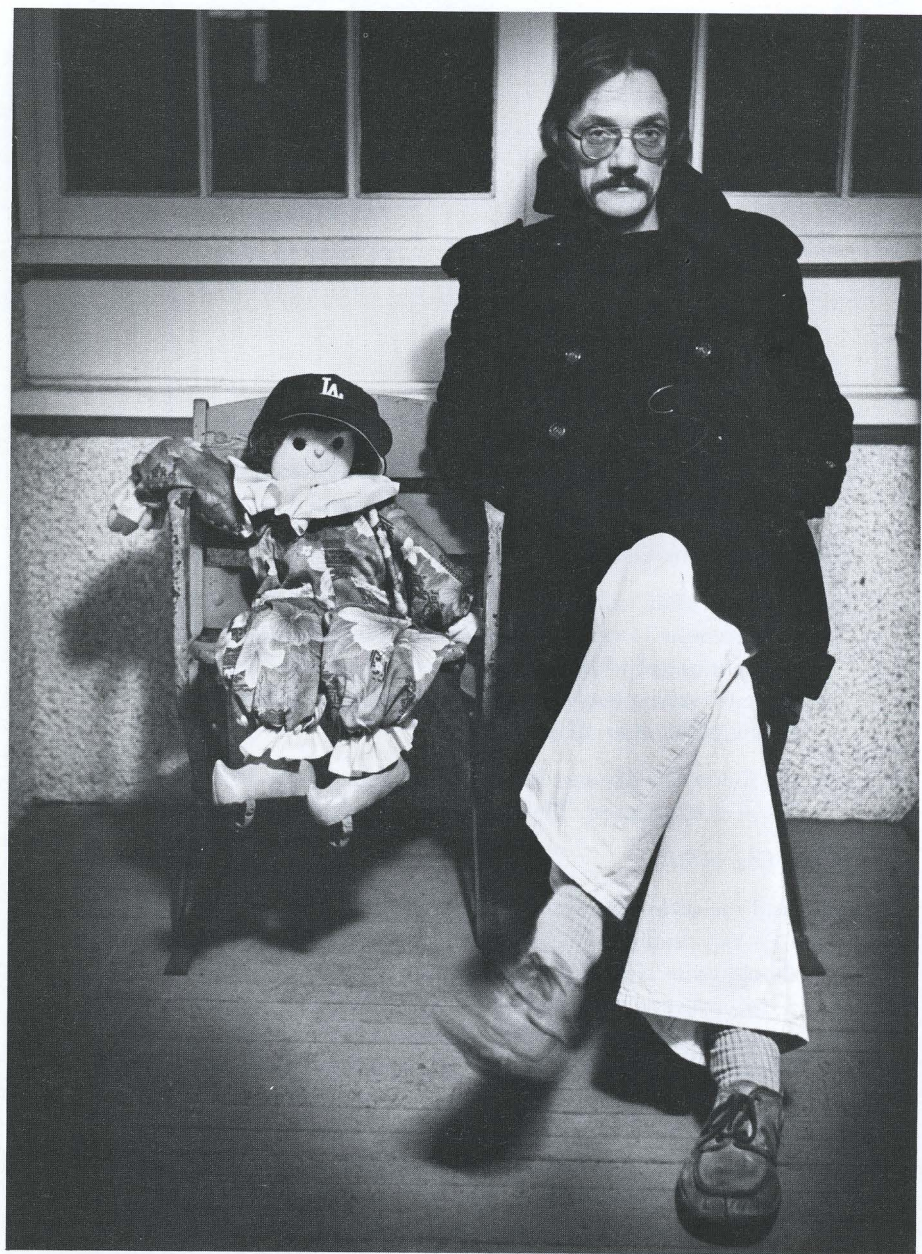
GB I thought he liked it.

PdeB Oh, he didn't dislike it, but he was attacking you for not taking into account (I can't remember his exact language) the social implications of who that speaker is in the book, like, how you come to write a book and what is a writer — that you don't take on the political at all as content.

GB It's funny, it's the one thing that only one person in reviewing it has ever mentioned. The literary politics are pretty clear.

PdeB Oh, yeah!

GB And the statement about literary nationalism and socialization — sociology-ization — of literature is pretty clear. The sexual one I thought was clear but is perhaps not quite — only one person in a review ever mentioned that *A Short Sad Book* is a title that takes from *A Long Gay Book* in which Gertrude Stein — and she didn't publish it, right? — was writing a book that involved her sexuality. But what that would suggest immediately was that whereas "gay" means homosexual, then "sad" must mean heterosexual. And I sort of half believe that and half don't. . . . In *A Short Sad Book* there are female characters and male characters, and male characters and male characters, and most of the relationships between men and women in it are political relationships. The main boy-girl relationship is between the Father of Confederation and the lady for whom there was no space in this country, and who gets shunted off to Louisiana.



And he puts his arms around her when they get up to the top of the mountain and points out over Vancouver and says, "Some day this will all be yours," and she doesn't say it out loud, but she says something to him about how he can go fuck himself. What you've got there is a male-female relationship that involves power, so you have Scotch-English-Canadian versus French Canadian, man versus woman, powerful versus not so powerful, guy who's putting the train tracks here and bam! this is Canada and the lady gets stuck on the boat and sent off, either to drown or to get to Louisiana and so forth: so I thought that all the way through that was a pretty strong political statement.

ST Well, it's a political statement implicitly in that male-female relations are relations of power to some extent. It's one thing to have both male and female characters interacting and say aha! I've written a politically conscious book, but to consciously state the politics of that relationship is something else again. And I bet you joke about it too!

GB Oh sure!

PdeB That means your answer to Brian is that there *is* politics in the book.

GB Sure. It says, "In the mountains with the Acadian girl, John A. Macdonald felt all at once very romantic. He pickt some alpine flowers & offered them to her in his trembling fist. The flowers are nice, she said. But I would rather have the earth they grew in. But this land is promist to Macmillan-Bloedel, he said. Everything over a thousand feet to MacMillan-Bloedel, everything under a thousand feet to the CPR." — and if that's not political — "Who is Bloedel, she enquired. I wish you hadn't askt me that, he said, I don't know, but I can assure you that he is a part of the national policy. It sounds to me like a classic rip-off, was her reply. I'm afraid you will eventually end up in Louisiana, my dear. Come, let us go down now. I just have time to catch my train. You couldnt catch a cold, she thought to herself. Theirs was a love-hate relationship." I think that's the authentic real relationship between sexual politics, racial politics, and big business versus nature politics. Really, I thought I tied them all in brilliantly! If it's not clear where I'm coming from in terms of that, then, you know . . .

BS I'm interested to hear you talk about what you've displayed over the years as a great antagonism to American cultural colonization.

GB In "The Dead Sailors" I occasionally called them Americans and going through I've revised it and every time they're mentioned they're called Yankees. . . . In this new book the only time the Yankees ever appear is when they keep going up to the Indians and saying, pssst, wanna buy some rum? Got any waterfront property you wanna sell?

12.

DMcF How important has Greg Curnoe been to you?

GB He's vastly important to me. He and I are the same age, think a lot alike — we used to sit up till four or five in the morning drinking Italian coffee every night when I lived in London and he taught me a lot about painting and a lot about contemporary jazz, because I had let it go for about ten years. He made me more nationalistic than I was in certain areas, but we also have had and have a lot of arguments about the nationalist position.

DMcF What sort of differences do you feel you have?

GB He's from Ontario and I'm from B.C. and there is that basic difference that we had when I first moved to Ontario. He was interested in a term that was used there — regionalism. I was interested in a term we used here, *locus*. We used the noun, to borrow it from Pound or Olson. And regionalism is a curiously centralist attitude. It's a slavish centralist attitude because that's what Toronto says the rest of the country is. And so he says, okay, I will assume that and call it regionalism without questioning the idea. And I said that I couldn't believe that he would assume, without a sense of irony, without saying, okay, we are the niggers of the world, or something like that. I mean he wasn't — he was championing it without that kind of irony. So I guess that was the beginning of a basic difference. His regionalism is kind of — I admire it and love it and I also got that year with James Reaney and what he was doing with the regional. I found it reactive, and I never felt that the localism that we were practicing here was reactive. It later became reactive in certain statements in which we would belligerently say things to people back East. . . .

13.

GB I think that poetry has shot its bolt and is just going to lie down for awhile and then come back in one way or another. Who needs it, we got lots. The drama has been really happening a lot in Canada. I'm really discouraged by the fact that Canadians somehow or other think that you can make a national consciousness by going back into history, finding some character or some event, and writing a goddamn play about it and giving it a one-word title. That's *not* what James Reaney is doing, by the way.

DMcF Is that what's motivated the series of changes that's gone on in your writing — the notion of filling a void?

GB Maybe it's just that I'm coinciding with various other things. Or maybe it's because I pay attention to that more in other people because that's what I'm interested in myself. . . . When Kroetsch was at that conference of writers in the Canadian West and they asked him what was the relationship between history and the historical novels he's writing now, he said Fuck the past.

14.

GB Yeats said, toward the end of his life, speak to me of originality and I will turn on you in rage. And I believe that, too. Originality suggests mastery over the materials, the individual purchase on the stuff that rightfully belongs to everybody. That's where the responsibility towards wide audience comes from, that the language *does* belong to everybody.

BS Like the moon.

ST So does the subconscious —

GB There can't be a subconscious —

DMcF If there's no subconscious, who created us?

GB I did! I did out of . . . (laughter)

ST You atheist! But I know what you mean — the creation of the world taking place every moment, every day.

GB As long as you sit down and do the writing.

DMcF You don't get that as much in Ontario.

GB I used to hate the term creation — that's one of the big changes I've come to. I've now allowed it back in as long as you're talking about writing anti-realist writing, because the realists pretend that they're mimeticizing that which has been created and as soon as you pretend that, you suggest that creation is over with and you can now make a portrait of it, right?

ST Nevertheless, I think your disallowing of any such thing as the subconscious is bullshit.