

Michael Ondaatje /

PURE MEMORY / CHRIS DEWDNEY

*"Listen, it was so savage and brutal and powerful that even though it happened out of the blue I knew there was nothing arbitrary about it"*

*Christopher Dewdney*

1.

On a B.C. radio show the man asked me, the coffee half way up to his mouth, what are the books you've liked recently? Christopher Dewdney's *A Palaeozoic Geology of London Ontario*. Only I didn't say that, I started stumbling on the word Palaeozoic . . . Paleo . . . Polio . . . and then it happened on Geology too until it seemed a disease. I sounded like an idiot and Chris Dewdney must have sounded like an idiot too. Meanwhile I was watching the man's silent gulps. The professional silent gulping of coffee an inch or two away from the microphone. Unconcerned with my sinking "live" all over the province.

2.

I can't remember where I first met him. Somewhere I became aware of this giggle. Tan hair, tan face, tan shirt and a giggle-snort as his head staggered back. His arms somewhere.

3.

The baby. He shows me the revolving globe in the 4 month old kid's crib. Only it has been unscrewed and the globe turned upside down and rescrewed in that way so Africa and Asia all swivel upside down. This way he says she'll have to come to terms with the shapes all over again when she grows up.

4.

He comes to dinner, steps out of the car and transforms the 10 year old suburban garden into ancient history. Is on his knees pointing out the age and race and character of rocks and earth. He loves the Norfolk Pine. I give him a piece of wood 120 million years old from the tar sands and he smokes a bit of it. Recently he claims the rest of the piece is going white.

5.

When he was a kid and his parents had guests and he was eventually told to get to bed he liked to embarrass them by running under a table and screaming out Don't hit me Don't hit me.

6.

His most embarrassing moment. A poetry reading in Toronto. He was sitting in the front row and he realized that he hated the poetry. He looked around discreetly for the exit but it was a long way away. Then to the right, quite near him he saw another door. As a poem ended he got up and officially walked to the door quickly opened it went out and closed it behind him. He found himself in a dark cupboard about 2 feet by 3 feet. It contained nothing. He waited there a while, then he started to laugh and giggle. He giggled for 5 minutes and he thinks the audience could probably hear him. When he had collected himself he opened the door, came out, walked to his seat and sat down again.

7.

Coach House, December 1974. I haven't seen him for a long time. His face is tough. Something has left his face. It is not that he is thinner but the face has lost something distinct and it seems like flesh. But he is not thinner. He is busy working on his new book *Fovea Centralis* and I watch him as he sits in the empty back room upstairs all alone with a computer typesetting terminal. Has taught himself to use it and

tries to teach me but I don't understand a word and nod and ask how he is. I can't get over his face. It is "tight", as if a stocking were over it and he about to perform a robbery. He plucks at the keys and talks down into the machine. I am relieved when he starts giggling at something. I tell him I'm coming down to London in a week and he says he will show me his butterflies, he has bought two mounted butterflies for a very good price. If I don't tell anyone he will let me know where I could get one. A Chinaman in London Ontario sells them. I start to laugh. He doesn't. This is serious information, important rare information like the history of rocks — these frail wings of almost powder have their genealogies too.

8.

His favourite movie is *Earthquake*. He stands in the middle of his apartment very excited telling me all the details. He shows me his beautiful fossils, the white that is on the 120 million year old wood, a small poster of James Dean hitting his brother in *East of Eden*, and the two very impressive mounted butterflies.

9.

On the bus going back to Toronto I have a drawing of him by Bob Fones. Wrapped in brown paper it lies above me on the luggage rack. When the bus swerves I put my arm out into the dark aisle ready to catch it if it falls. It is a strange drawing of him in his cane chair with a plant to the side of him, reading Frank O'Hara with very oriental eyes. It was done in 1973, before the flesh left his face.

10.

His wife's brain haemorrhage. I could not cope with that. He is 23 years old. He does. Africa Asia Australia upside down. Earthquake.