

## Carole Itter / THE OUTING

*(Work in Progress)*

Crossing Hastings Street at rush hour, I am standing beside two women, one in a black jacket and red pants, her friend the reverse, red jacket and black pants, shining short hair-do's, feet sore in newly bought shoes, *the fear in their faces*, she turns to me, our faces just ten inches apart, *the fear on her face*. I smile and her smile explains the fear, of the big city, of not knowing how to stop the four lanes of traffic, of being away from home, home town, small town, the village, the hopelessness of that place traded for the alternate, another hopelessness, the consequences, the big city, the skid row.

They'd just arrived, looking for the teen-aged daughter, they were sisters. What was it I could do for them, what was the least I could do? I could move precisely, step out into the traffic — more precisely, stick the child and stroller into traffic. I could hold up my arm, english-style, so sensible. Had I seen the daughter, maybe in a pub around here, what did she look like, young, dark, short; I'm pushing a stroller and *they ask me* what *bars* I go in! "I don't get into bars much, ya know. I got a kid to take care of," enviously, grass being greener, the babyland blue grass blues. The black-jacketed sister looks directly at me and says, "Well, *my daughter's* got a kid too, but she dumped it." *Who am I in these eyes?* There is the deep silence in their faces, generations of watching fire by night, for warmth, for food, for fantasy. My eyes that don't know fire, those that do, my daughter's seven fire signs, a straight flush dealt out by the stars.

The red-haired woman, trim today in a new leather coat and riding hat, the dopey hollow eyes, the hustler being hustled but instead going in for the coffee and on the stool next to her, planted there, her

conscience — the plain-clothed street man from whatever social agency, telling her again and again to go home. She was laughing minutes earlier as we walked through the doorway, now weeping uncontrollably, "I can't go home, I can't go home."

Behind me on the street, the familiar conversation, "Well, then *go home* and *do it*," the command. I know the bastard, without turning around, the college kid, mid-thirties, pudgily showing the comfort of his salaried job. A needy area it is, so bring in the educators on their salaries to comfort the lot of us. Curiosity does turn my head, and it's exactly as I'd thought, leaning against his car. She sleeps in the stroller, head lolling back at a weird angle, golden hair, pale pale botticellian face. I unlock the door to the studio, swing the stroller around to back it onto the landing, a face is peering at hers. "That child is certainly sleeping." Our eyes meet, the plain-clothed do-gooder's face looking at mine, he has followed *me* now. My impulse is to say "No, you mother-fucker, she's dead!" He's looking for it, the trouble, the chaos of other people's lives, he has a cure for the pain on the streets, himself, philosophy, a better way, his.

I can walk the area because I fit it. I fight it but I fit it. I am stopped, threatened for money, I open my wallet, the five-dollar bill, the spare change. I say sure. I say, "Sure. Look, I'm on welfare, bringing up this kid, it's the end of the month, the end of the money. If you want it, take it." We start talking, the basis being how rotten the world really is, we laugh, I let him take the lead. "What's more rotten than the world?" he asks. I answer laughing and point down the street, "That do-gooder, whatshisname." More guffaws, my shoulder is patted. I am thinking that I'm more rotten than the world, because I kept my head all for the sake of my five-dollar bill, I got myself out of this one, I've got the wits, I'm the rotten world he is talking about. I can see this desperation, pick it up, put it down, I've got the wits to keep out of it, get into it, at will. I am fighting it and I am fitting it, I fit into no other part of town as easily. Part of me died here, my mother, the flop hotel, the overdose.

At Hastings, I see red and black walking again with black and red, I turn but they won't recognize me, a hard look, they have light kerchiefs around their heads, shopping basket filled, the bottle wrapped in brown paper, a white man following them at four paces. The look is hard, to stay away, to fuck off, to forget the encounter two

hours earlier, to have forgotten it themselves, to get on with whatever it is we have to do. I peek in, I am snooping, leave it alone, get away from any hell-hole but your own, lady, you're not one of us and it shows, (blue jeans, bandana, boots, cowichan sweater, stroller) you're not here, you come from the upper-class districts and you smell of it, you stink, you're good for a quarter if I look derelict enough, otherwise you won't get involved, you're slummin', you're lookin' in, you're a god-damned peeping tom, and it's worse when you smile, you're fakin' it, *you don't have to be here, you can be anywhere you want*, you're a snob of the worst sort, your mother was a drunk and you're taking *the right road, the path of righteousness*.

YEAH.

I'm gonna bring up my kid properly and not let her know pain or fear and the shock she's gonna get in the future is the same one my mother got when *she* got to the big city, to the right neighbourhood, into the right bracket, and will my daughter do anything different from what my mother did, will she give me the anguish that my mother gave me, and do I just set myself up for it, the pain, and who cares?

when the bough breaks the cradle will fall

I care. I keep it gay, keep it somewhat cynical, ironical, humorous, keep it short, the short burst and a firecracker explodes behind us, will the child ask what it is? I ask, "Did it make you scared?" She laughs and says, "That noise *does* make me scarey." It is solved, silenced, it's Hallowe'en and I'm scared of spooks, of witches, real, imaginary. It's a good time for masks, where are mine? How many do I have on now? How many have I taken off? What extras on for this occasion, the outing? Rouge on the cheeks, one layer, the happiness mask. The occasional black eyelid, penciled on. "Mommy, you makin' a clown on your face!" The bandana, the bandage, holding the hair on, hair-raising, hallowe'en.

this is the maiden all forlorn  
this is the man all tattered and torn

"Pretend it's New York City," he said, "and learn to live with it."  
"Should I keep a weapon by my bed, a hammer? Like it's done in

New York?" I am teasing, I am serious. I am fear itself, I am a walking fear-hole, step in and get scared. "HE HE HE hehe hehehe" says television's kindergarten witch and she ran out of the room, was holding on to my leg. I know the scale of my fears because I see them manifested in my daughter, the monsters she finds anywhere. "The monster is coming, I can hear."

I push the swing, her buttocks, harder, higher. I've learned how to push, she's learned how to swing. The pump, the push. Each time she swings towards me I push her harder away; each time she moves away, she pumps harder to get away. The rhythm is satisfying.

"I be mommy, I high!"

"o.k. I'll be Lara, I'm high."

"I higher too!"

"I'm higher too!"

The child is mother of the daughter. Now she can speak, scream, now she can say when the screaming has ended, the reason for it — her eyes red, sullen, filled with anger, the words not to me but to Noni, the imaginary friend, the neutral person in the ring. She says it flatly, without feeling, "I cry because I like to cry. I can't go to sleep because I don't feel very well."

hush, little baby, don't say a word,  
mama's going to buy you a mocking bird

The scream goes on, the beat, the beating of my head against my wall,  
hers against hers.

the wife takes a child  
the wife takes a child.