

# THE CAPILANO REVIEW



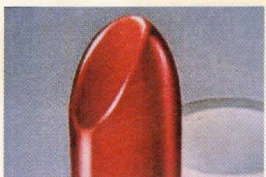
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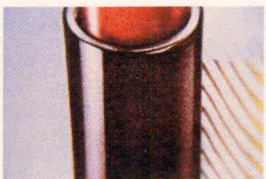
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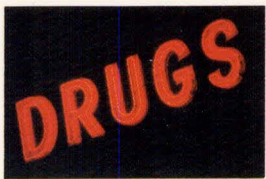
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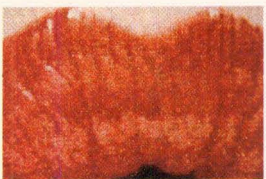
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HOMO EKTA CHROMO



HOMO EKTA CHROMO

We come to these islands as if to dream,  
come to trees where we ascend to their growing.

We come to these islands as if to mystery,  
come to a sea where voice is song.

— RON SMITH

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# THE CAPIANO REVIEW

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1984

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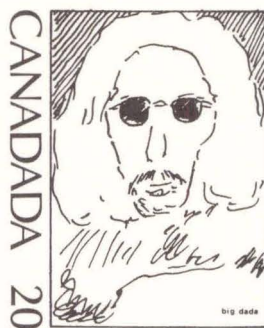
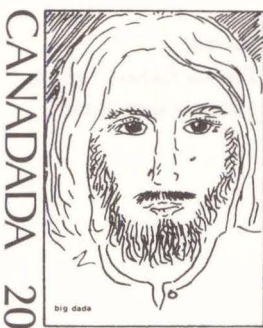
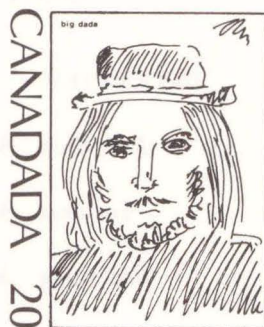
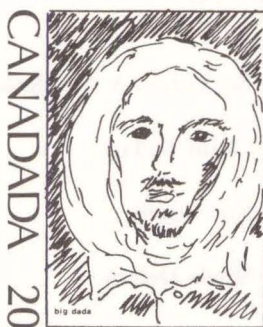
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COVER

*Homo Ekta-Chromo*  
stamp sheet detail





## Ed Varney / INTERVIEW

*The interview recorded here is a compilation of two, really three events. It takes materials from the tapes made at the first interview at Varney's Kerrisdale house-cum-Museo and interpolates them with rephrased questions and new questions and answers that occurred during a second interview held mid-February, 1984. The speakers — Ed Varney and Ann Rosenberg — are identified by initials.*

EV I came here in 1968 from the States and soon after I got here I discovered Intermedia which was . . . an artists' co-op. . . I'd had this idea of something like that before I got here, though I really didn't know what it was, so I was really excited when I discovered Intermedia existed. At a certain point Intermedia decided it needed a press and purchased a complex mimeo machine and that's where I learned the basics about printing.

Intermedia was founded on the premise of an interdisciplinary mix but especially it aimed to create a union between art and technology. There really was collaboration and exchange between people at Intermedia. Almost every artist in town had some relation to it. . . . At a certain point in 1973 when Intermedia was at its apex, . . . when it had an L.I.P. grant that covered twelve salaries is when it started to break up. It's just ridiculous the way these things happen. The very process that got it to that point hastened its demise because people who'd been working there had learned to administer their own trips. So the Western Front broke off and became a separate thing, then Metromedia. Al Razuitis started Visual Alchemy. Granville Grange was a co-operative studio run by Glenn Toppings, Dallas Sellman, D'arcy Henderson. Intermedia Press which had been the publishing arm of Intermedia just kept going partly because I was very committed to Intermedia and didn't want to recognize that it had broken up. It was like a marriage. But I was also doing Correspondence Art in 1973.

AR Yes, and you were also publishing poetry? Being typically self-starting . . .

EV At a certain point in life you realize that you can't just wait around to be discovered, you have to do everything yourself. And in Vancouver, you really have to.

To survive as an artist, you definitely have to be a teacher, a curator or something else. You just can't be one thing, because that doesn't work. So in terms of poetry, . . . I realized that I had to do it myself. I had to edit and publish my own magazines. I had to start my own publishing company and learn the printing trade. Soon I got together with Henry Rappaport, John MacDonald and Brad Wendkos to do a quick-printed magazine called *The Poem Company*. It was on an 8½ x 11 inch sheet of paper which could be folded and cut into an eight page magazine. We printed five hundred copies and mailed them out. In those days postage was three or four cents, ridiculously cheap. We decided not to seek subscribers, but to mail it out to the people we wanted to communicate with.

Before the magazine started, I'd done a similar project called *Junk Mail* where I also communicated directly with the people I'd chosen. So when we started *The Poem Company* which cost us six bucks to produce, we brought it home, stapled it, mailed it out and we got into the rhythm of doing this almost once a week, which is really fast for a poetry magazine. If someone sent us a poem, it might be published next week.

The response was fantastic. Whenever we met someone we took their address, but in a sense we were distributing junk mail to whoever we wished. And at a certain point we were saying, let's send stuff to William Stafford, to Alan Ginsberg; let's communicate with William Burroughs. So we really picked the audience. And in a year we came a long way. The first issue was done at the quick printer, but by the end of the year we had a printing press in the basement and our methods had become very sophisticated and we were publishing almost every conceivable kind of concrete poetry.

AR And you were publishing other people's books and poems?

EV Yes, I guess we were by the end of that first year. . . .

A poet  
 A tongue that mocks the wind  
 A comrade of things  
 An ear that hears what never happens  
 An eye  
 A barbarous heart  
 Death's last ditch



**po'ém**, n. A metrical composition esp. of elevated tone (*prose p.*, description &c. resembling *p.* in tone). **po'etry** n., pp. or the art of making them. **po'et** n., maker of pp., writer of (esp. elevated or imaginative) verse, (*Poet's* corner, part of Westminster Abbey with monuments of poets, part of newspaper assigned to verse); person of imaginative temperament. **po'etaster** n., inferior verse-writer. **po'etess** n., **po'et'ic(al)** aa. (*locally*), of poets or poetry; (usu., -to) having the good qualities of poetry; (usu. *ical*) written in verse; *poetical justice*, ideal equity in fate of the good & bad; *poetic licence*, **poét'ics** n. pl., the science of or a treatise on poetry; highfown talk or principles. **po'etry** n., the poet's art or work, elevated expression of elevated thought or feeling esp. in metrical form; poems; poetical feeling, quality in things that evokes it. [*Grk poiesō make*]



1. Who ripped off the enthusiasm?
2. Where are the farming instructions?
3. What times was the moon?
4. Blinded, did the pilots just drift, laughing?
5. Were there blood sounds?
6. Why the clouds of fish bones, surprised in the fields?
7. Did the tourists survive?





AR And that's how Intermedia Press grew? The press you still run with Henry Rappaport?

EV Yes.

AR Were there ever any other partners?

EV One: John MacDonald who worked on *The Poem Company*, but he couldn't take the poverty. He bought a new Volkswagen, then he had to get a full-time job to pay for it. John was still with us when we got a thousand dollar grant from the Canada Council to cover postage for *The Poem Company*. . . . We were really excited about this money and decided to document the process of us putting the money in our account, and so on. Almost as soon as the next day, the R.C.M.P. showed up, because they thought we'd been casing the bank. It was quite hilarious, really.

Anyway, out of *The Poem Company* project grew a network of correspondents. *The Poem Company* became a medium of exchange. If someone sent us something, we'd send back a magazine. As it happened while we were following our impulses, in other places people were doing similar things, but not the same things. For example, a guy called Dana Atchley in Victoria was working on *The Space Atlas*. What he did was to ask people for a hundred prints and he would collate the materials collected into books. Then each participant would get a book with his and other works in it. And what happened was, there was soon this network that sprang up of people working in a contributory mode. Art sent through the mail and various projects became Mail Art. So between 1970 and 1972, little by little, we'd gathered together the addresses of people who would exchange things through the mail.

AR Here you have this beautiful book of Xeroxed snaps of Broadway intersections. Will you send something back?

EV Yes . . . One of the principles of Mail Art is the premise of trade, not purchase. So when I get a book like that, I trade the sender something I think of equal value. When I think about it, what I've had for years is an audience of four or five hundred people for my work. It's an audience unlike a gallery audience, because you know that in sending something through the mail, it's going to get there; it's going to be seen by someone. Secondly, you're able to judge the quality of the response to what you've sent by the quality of what is sent back. So if you get a bunch of junk, you realize that somehow the thing you sent didn't work. But the main thing is, you do get back something in trade almost every time.

Out of the context of sending things back and forth — sometimes you send an original drawing, sometimes a print — I got the idea of doing an exchange which would involve me sending a piece of paper on which I'd want the correspondent to do an artwork that would be sent back to me. . . .

AR That idea figures in the recent *Global Postale* and *Heaven and Hell* projects, but hadn't yet been worked out by the time of your first major stamp project. . . .

EV No. The material for that one came because in my correspondence I'd mentioned I was making stamps and so some people sent me things that looked like stamps, that could be stamps or just imagery, like this concrete poem. Then I made stamps out of the ones I thought would make the most interesting stamps.

For the *Global Postale* project, I decided to send people a piece of paper on which they could make a stamp-like image, so I wouldn't have to go through the contortions I did when I made that first collection. So I sent the form to about two hundred and fifty people who I thought would send something back. The format was exactly three times as large as the finished stamp and had *Global Postale 1984* set under it in . . .

AR . . . your Esperanto.



EV Yes, and with an invitation in the pigeon language I've developed. And they could do anything they wanted in the format. It turned out that one hundred and twenty-six people sent something back and I had room for one hundred and twenty-five. I edited one out, because I found it tasteless; but I didn't edit the project. That's another thing about Mail Art; it's always been very open. I thought I'd get enough for one sheet of stamps and it turned out to be five — essentially a little magazine of tiny images.

... When I got them back, I was thinking about them as stamps, I wasn't too concerned with them as originals. I realized later that I'd received some fantastic images; a show, in fact. So I've matted them and preserved them in plastic folders. I've even shown them at a little gallery called the Six in One, but I'd like to have a more comprehensive exhibition combining those with the *Heaven and Hell* projects, and some related things that are really fascinating. . . .

AR Did you collect *Global Postale* last year?

EV No. I actually did it in 1981, but used 1984 because there's been an undercurrent about that year for years, and now I'm beginning to see why. . . . Anyway, you can see how *Global Postale 1984* was the genesis for the *Heaven and Hell* project.

AR In this current one you gave everyone a format and a concept, but some people took liberties with it. . . .

EV They sure did. . . .

AR I just cracked up when I saw them in that little room at the October Show. . . .<sup>1</sup>





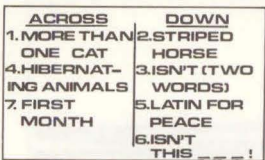
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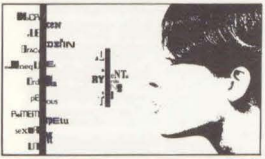
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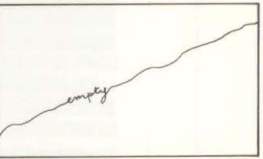
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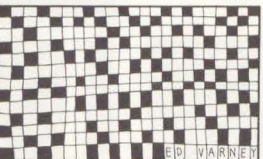
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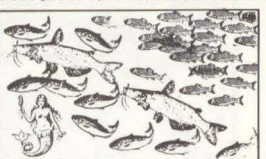
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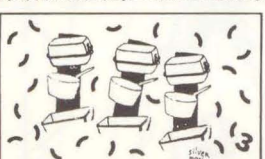
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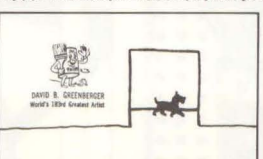
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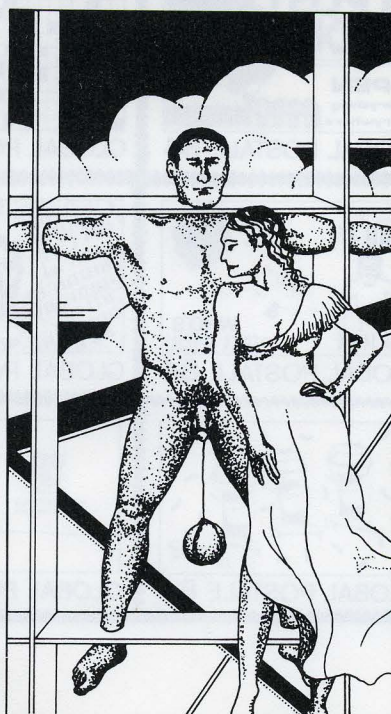


HELL

NO

HEA VEN

YES



*EV* In this one, all they got was a box to put something in and on the back of the paper a space for their names and addresses. Some used the box horizontally; others, vertically. With this project, too, I sent out about three hundred and fifty and got back about one hundred and twenty-five, but not from the same people who contributed to *Global Postale*. . . . The interpretation of the theme was very liberal; a lot of the images have sexual overtones. It's amazing. That didn't occur to me. I probably won't edit this project much either.

*AR* As correspondence and mail artist, one of your specialties is stamps. As you write in a preface to your stamp which was included in a lovely compilation of stamps from twenty-five countries in Milwaukee by Patrick Bellman in 1983:

I got interested in stamps as an art medium because

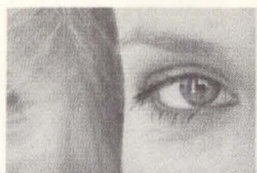
1. They are an intrinsic part of Mail Art.
2. They are efficient, lots of images on one sheet.
3. They require excellent reproduction and
4. Someone gave me an old perforator. I made my first stamps in 1976 and never looked back. My ambition is to design stamps for Canada Post. Stamps are only one part of my endeavours. With the price of postage these days, it will soon be worthwhile to get into counterfeiting.

I like stamps and I have an excellent collection of artists' stamps. I like playing with media that are not generally felt to be art media. The first art stamps I ever saw were William Farley's "X cents" with the reverse of his head. Jim Felter at Simon Fraser University has curated and travelled an excellent show of Artists' Stamps. I could be tempted by \$ to produce a sheet for someone.

Now in this book was included one stamp from a sheet you produced at U.B.C. with a class run by Michael deCourcy. . . .

*EV* Yes. That stamp project was done as a group project on a very primitive printing press and everyone was blown away with the detail that was possible. I was impressed too. It's almost cosmic that each stamp represents a square mile. I like the ones that are the most abstract; some others are almost interchangeable. The Prospect Point one is really great. I've known deCourcy since Intermedia days and we're still excellent friends. . . .





HOMO EKTA CHROMO



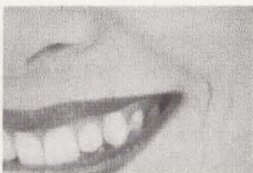
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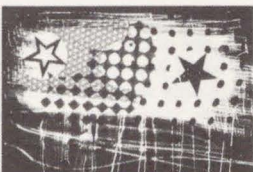
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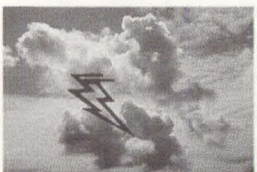
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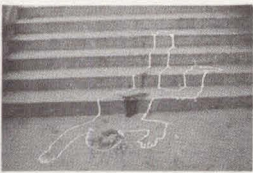
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AR What is the first stamp you made?

EV The first stamp project I was involved with was called the *1st Intermedia Stamp Edition*. I made it at Intermedia and I got little images from the people right there. It had twenty stamps on the first sheet and I did thirteen of them myself because it was just a little experiment.

AR So that came before the others. . . .

EV Yes, that was in 1976. Then I didn't do anything until 1978 when I did the *2nd International Artists' Stamp Edition*, because by then I'd got material from other places. . . . I took the material which was in all different forms — some big, some small, some postcards, but all were graphic — and reduced the ones I thought would look best and printed them in black, red and white. Then I thought I'd like to do some coloured stamps and soon I was working not on one sheet but on four, concurrently. These were the *Homo Ekta-Chromo*, the *International Post*, the *3rd International Artists' Stamp Edition* and the *1984 Commemorative Edition*. I was working on all four at the same time, because the project got a little out of hand . . .

AR . . . as some of your projects seem to do. . . .

EV Yes, that's right. . . .

AR And so the black and red stamps came before these. . . .

EV Yes, they were the *2nd International Artists' Stamp Edition* and they came before *Global Postale* and the colour stamps.

AR In *Homo Ekta-Chromo* and in the *1984 Commemorative Stamps* there's movement on the sheet. Is that something new?

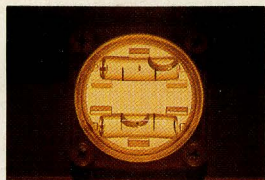
EV No. I see them as a whole sheet, more so than as contributions by individual artists, because I'm always working with them as a block. But in the *1984 Commemorative Stamps*, I worked with people to produce blocks of four stamps, because in philately a block of *four* is an important part of a philatelist's trip. And especially the corner right-hand lowest block. So when I was designing the Commemorative stamp sheet, I asked





Anna Banana to do that corner. People like Anna would come to the press on a Tuesday evening and work on these. Maybe it would take four evenings of discussion and work to come up with the images. It was nice. There were these local people coming in who had an interest in stamps — Ladislav Guderna, Jim Felter, . . . Michael deCourcy, . . . Rick Hambleton, Dave Roberts. . . . In this series some look more like stamps than others. Jim Felter's almost look official; Dave Roberts' are just lovely images, like stickers more than stamps. Each artist played with a stamp-like format in his own way. But in the other series — the *International Post* — I gave them the format and I made it look like a pseudo-stamp, not counterfeit but playing the stamp game. . . . And what interested me a lot in this series was the many visions people had of what a slide could be, for all these stamps were generated from slides. One was a negative; one was made with ink and Letraset right on a piece of acetate; there was one colour-Xeroxed onto a piece of acetate; there was a painted slide, etc. . . .

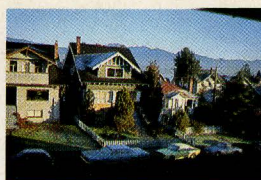
So I started these colour stamps in 1980, but they didn't get printed until 1983.



33<sup>cents</sup> International Post



33<sup>cents</sup> International Post



33<sup>cents</sup> International Post

*AR* But the *Homo Ekta-Chromo* sheet originated from a slide show. . . .

*EV* Yes. . . . It arose from a group of students in Michael de Courcy's class who started up an organization called T.B.A.T.V. They had a weekly show on cablevision. . . . I know Michael, as I mentioned earlier, and I'd visited his class, gotten to know these people, and so one of the projects T.B.A. undertook as a whole that was beyond school and beyond the Fine Arts Department at U.B.C. was to collect a 20th Century media compilation in the form of slides for the Museum of Anthropology: 20th Century Anthropology. So they collected literally thousands and thousands of slides. . . .<sup>2</sup>

*AR* From people that they knew?

*EV* No, the group took them. There were about ten people who made thousands of slides. In the end there was a six-screen computer-driven slide show for the Anthropology Museum, . . . and, in the end, we went through the slides and picked out ones to make stamps of which represented to some extent the concerns of the slide project. So in the stamp sheet there are images drawn from media, from reality, banal images, abstract images like snow on T.V., T.V. images. The stamps came after the show. The museum was pleased with the show itself and I believe it still retains the materials, because the museum essentially commissioned the slide project. . . .

*AR* But the stamp sheet allows it to survive in another form.

*EV* Yes, this just condenses it. And a lot of people who were involved in this group are still really active. . . .

*AR* Yes, I recognize their names . . .

*EV* . . . some were Michael's students then. I think he really did a great job out there at U.B.C. I felt sorry when they changed policy, let go the photography area. . . . While this T.B.A. project was going on, I'd make myself available one night a week at the press and the stamp project was the basic continuity that went through that period of availability. On a given night Rick Hambleton would be there working on some P.M.T.s and I'd be there talking with Ladislav or Michael about stamps. Meanwhile someone else would be using one of the light tables to do something else. It wasn't really a seminar, but I was opening up the facilities of Intermedia Press, that resource. I was making myself available in that context and I really enjoyed it. It went on for almost three years like that, but then over the last year or so, I haven't been doing that as regularly. Then, at a certain point, I'd finished the stamps . . . and the reason evaporated to a certain extent.

*AR* Have you done other stamp projects, sheets for artists?

*EV* Well, come to think of it, I have made sheets for Michael McCall, Andrej Somov as well as for Ladislav and Martin Guderna. But they were simpler than these colour stamps are.

*AR* You have been collecting things by mail for a long time. Is there any pattern to the correspondence you receive?

*EV* Some of the people have been in the network for a long time; there are people I know well. I've got lots of pen pals. I've corresponded with Uncle Don Milliken really extensively, maybe as much as once a month for three or four years. But lately I've been sending him things and he doesn't respond, so that's tapered off. . . . There's this lady, Angelika Schmidt from Germany, who's always sending fantastic things. Tom Ockerse responds with really nice things, but not often. Actually, I have about one hundred consistent, longterm Mail Art correspondents and another two hundred casual.



ENEMY

LINCOLN CLARKES





*AR* Over the years, have any of the Mail Artists established their personalities?

*EV* There's this guy called Richard C. — never knew his last name — who's sent me about fifty postcards. His forté is the pun. He'll send a postcard and on one side it will say, "left," and on the other, "right." They're always simple little tricks. Richard's medium is the strange little postcard. There's another fellow who sends quick-printed collages that are always 8½ by 11 inches and really complex; always built up from ads and stuff. . . . Together they give a picture of our culture, and I've got a folder full of them; about one hundred and thirty, so far. These collages are his medium. Some people always send drawings; some people send something different every time. There's no standard really. What's sent is as varied as the people.

And Mail Art is close to play. It's fun. Many of the artists who participate work in other media — some are writers; some are graphic artists. And over the years I've watched some of these artists mature. Some of them have positions like curator at various museums; others — especially the Europeans — I've no idea what they do. But at a certain point, I began to realize that this wasn't just a random activity I was involved with, it was something else. So I came up with the idea of calling it a museum or a museo, because, once again, in my Dadaist pose I like to have fun with, play with all these ideas.

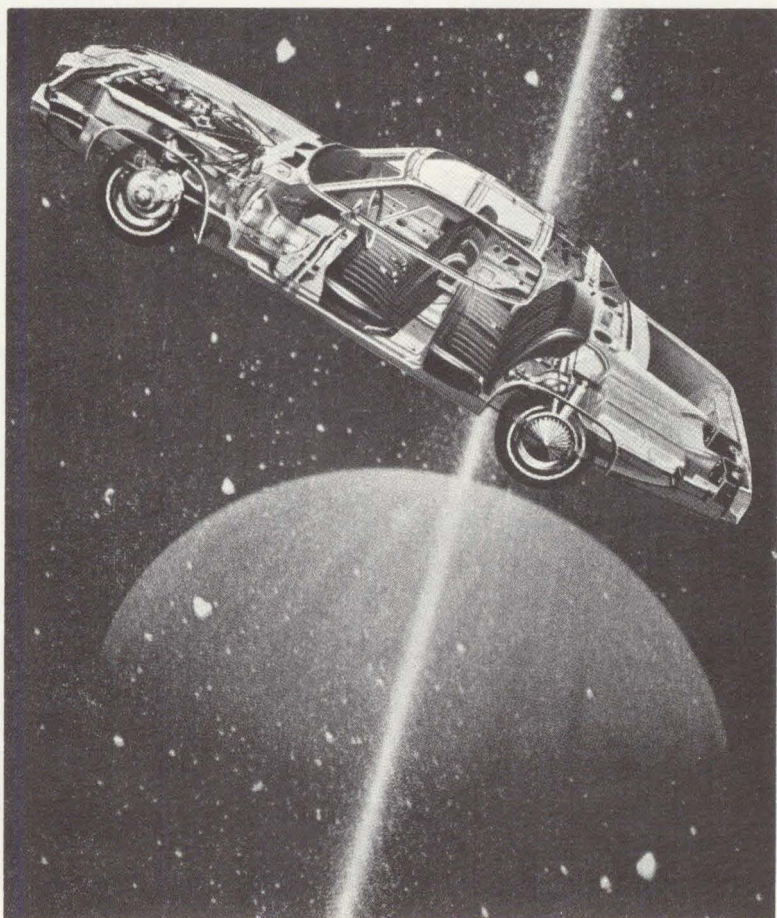
I invented this museum, but I haven't really promoted it. I just use it as a plaything, a front, the Museo Naçional de Neu Art in my own esperanto that combines Italian, German, Spanish, French and English. When I write letters, I try to write this kind of language. I don't know German; I don't know Spanish; I'm not spectacular in French. I try to write in this English-based stuff with a "mit" and a "der" whenever I can throw them in. . . .

*AR* And do people respond in kind?

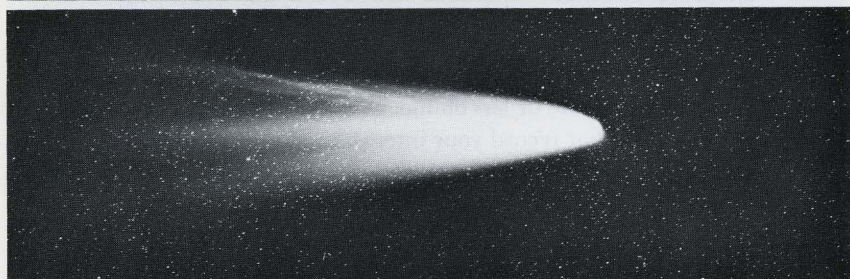
*EV* Yes, they really like that. I always try to make it game-like in some way and people are really responsive. People call it Esperanto, but it really isn't. I was very interested in Esperanto at one time and I discovered that it was a very Baltic, very Slavic-based language. There were few English words and I

found that surprising. The further you got away from Central Europe, the less useful it became. Now I think we're in a period of history where English is clearly the major language so a real Esperanto, I think, should be based on English. I think that, living in Canada, we should be using French in our everyday language, but that's a sub-issue. But I really have fun with my pigeon Esperanto.

*AR* In the office of your museo, you keep different categories of your interests more or less on file. You have drawers to contain photographs that record your interest in Pyramids, Galactic research. You have files for exceptional envelopes . . .





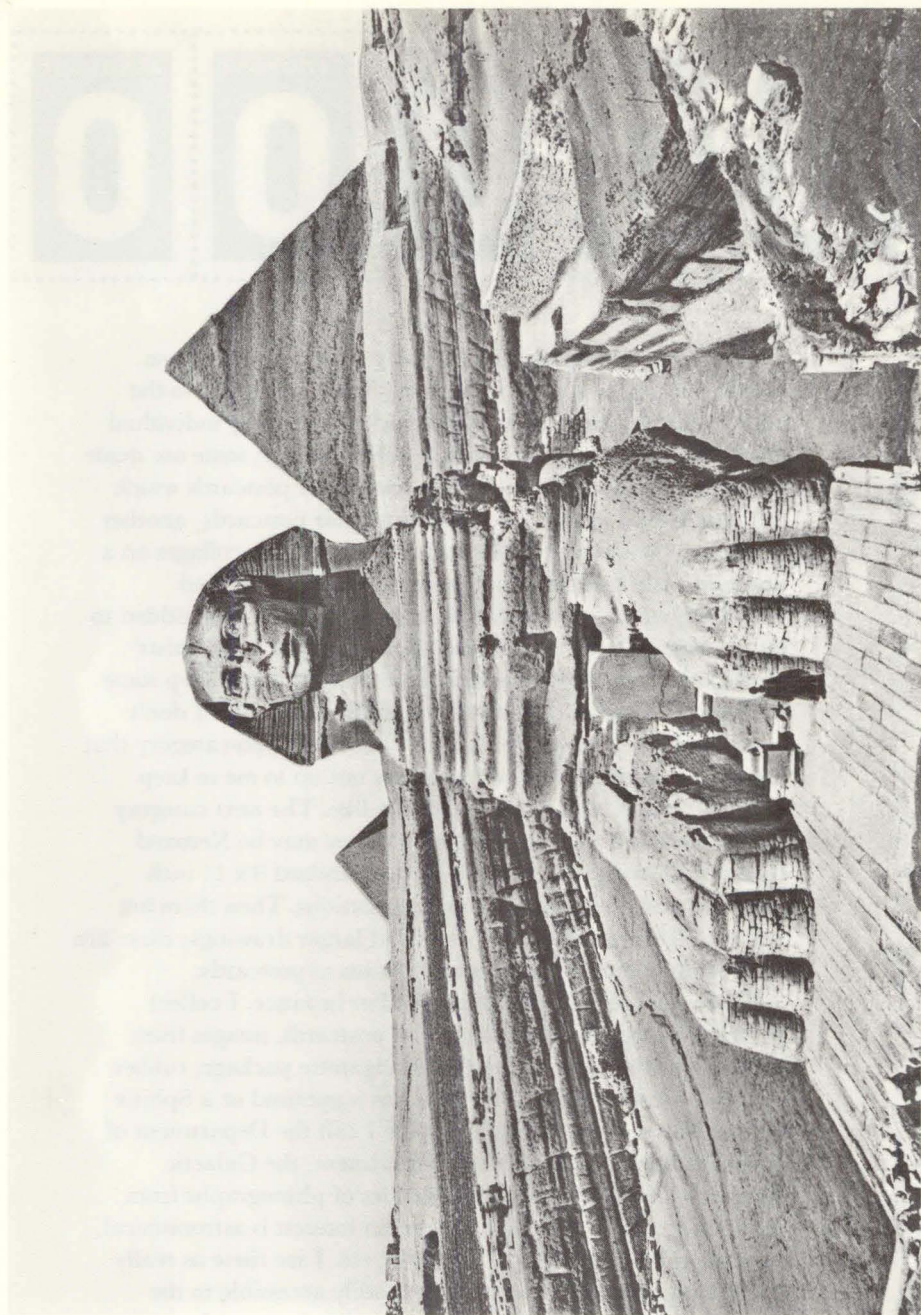






*EV* . . . Yes. I have a big file on stamps by artists, probably one hundred sheets of stamps by artists. These are similar to the ones I've done, but they are mostly whole sheets by individual artists. Some of these are made in colour Xerox; some are made by rubber stamps. I have two drawers full of postcards which fall into several categories — one is regular postcards; another is unique postcards by artists such as drawings or collages on a postcard scale sent through the mail; another is altered postcards, which are regular postcards that have been added to or subtracted from. Then there are also postcards of artists' works and some of these are really interesting art. I keep some invitations to shows that are of postcard format, but I don't keep them all. . . . I figure that invitations is a sub-category that someone else may be collecting, so it's not up to me to keep them all. I only keep the ones I really like. The next category I keep are 8½ by 11 inch sheets. . . . They may be Xeroxed sheets or drawings, but they fit into a standard 9 x 11 inch envelope and are letter-size communications. Then there are posters, etchings, silkscreen prints and larger drawings; there are a lot of photographic images and photos as postcards.

There are specialized collections. For instance, I collect pyramid images that I really like — postcards, images from magazines, the camel of the Camel cigarette package, rubber stamps — just anything I see that has a pyramid or a Sphinx on it. I put all these things into a file I call the Department of Pyramidology. I have another Department, the Galactic Research Council, which contains files of photographs from N.A.S.A. on various planets. My main interest is astronomical, in other galaxies, comets, solar flares, etc. I see these as really interesting images. They are most readily accessible to the specialist, so I thought my job as an artist was to make some of that imagery more available.



I have a huge collection of slides, slides of my own and slides other people have sent me, artists' books and poetry books. I've always collected poetry books.

Again the Museo contains collections of things that no one else could collect, because they're unique. Books, for example, are collected by others. I'm always amazed, for example, at how comprehensive is U.B.C.'s Special Collections. But then books are usually published in several hundred copies, and they really do get around. . . .

In Europe, especially, there's a tradition of people having their own museums. There's one fellow in Belgium who has something called the Art Recycling Terminal (A.R.T.). There's another guy who has a Museum of Museums. In Hungary, . . . there's Art Pool. There are a number of people who have pseudo-institutions; for example, there's one in Ontario called The People's Republic of Poetry; there's one in Poland called Bureau de la Poésie. But to have one's own museum isn't that common in North America where we tend to take our museums very seriously. Here they're seen as public, not private endeavours. There, there are lots of little places, like Albrecht-Dürer-lived-here. . . .

Finally, I've got a large archive of poems. All the things I was sent for *The Poem Company*, I keep in one place.

AR This Museo-cum-archive, like the Correspondence Art, is an on-going activity. You're hoping soon to publish *Heaven and Hell*. What other immediate plans do you have?

EV I had this realization a while ago. I started thinking, "I've done the stamps, I'm doing *Heaven and Hell* — what am I going to do next?"

I realized that I'd be foolish to give up stamps, because I've obviously figured out how to do them . . . so I'm going to work on another couple of stamp sheets. But really what I want to do is to break out of this miniature format, to expand, to make some prints. I have a series of paintings in mind. So I'm . . . moving out of correspondence and the network thing to do my own art.





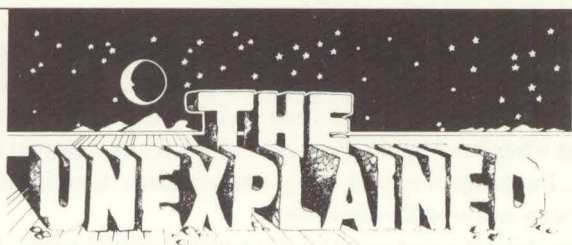
*AR* The last work of yours I remember seeing, I'm ashamed to say, was in the Westcoast Hermetics Show (1973) at U.B.C.'s Fine Arts Gallery. You're still doing art, still exhibiting?

*EV* Yes. I've always been doing art, but lately I've been doing more. I had something in the October Show. I've had things in two shows at the Unit Pitt recently and was in two shows at the gallery near it called the Modele-Kite. . . . So lately I've felt as if I were allied, once again, with the younger artists.

For years, however, my main definition of myself was as a poet. . . . Sometime during my freshman year at college, I decided to become a poet and lately I've realized why. Of all the things I did, I had the least talent for expressing my emotions in words and poetry seemed like the most difficult thing I could possibly attempt, so I really studied hard. I got an M.A. in English with the aim of learning everything I could about poetry. I edited poetry magazines. I learned how to make books, how to be a publisher. I did readings. The printing business I'm in now is a spin-off from those activities. I worked very hard at being a poet and in 1975, I think it was, I gave myself a Ph.D. in Poetry from the University of Vancouver because I thought I'd earned a doctorate in the subject. But in the last year or so, I've changed my direction.

I'd always had a talent for art. In graphic art I could unite the two interests often; for example, I did a lot of concrete poetry. A year or two ago, I began to assess myself as a poet and I decided for various reasons that things had changed for me, that I wasn't as interested in poetry anymore. I'd become

the best poet I could, . . . but the response to my work had been limited and I felt maybe I'd been barking up the wrong tree, maybe I'd taken on a thing that I wasn't really gifted at, that I'd worked very hard at so that I was successful in it on my own terms, but lacked the essential gift for. . . .



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Can we know  
our past lives?

**The Myth of the Twilight Years**



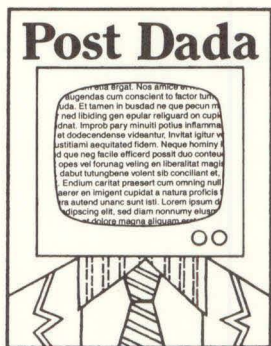
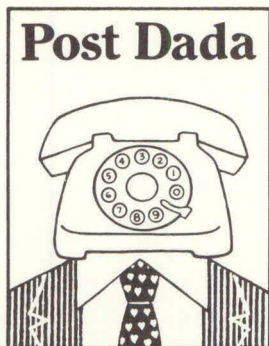
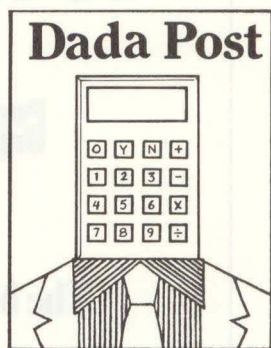
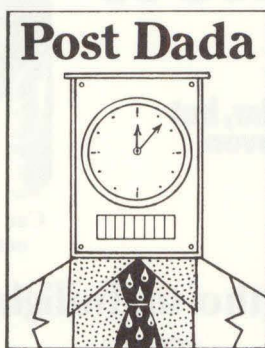
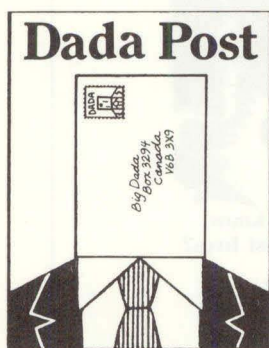
*The Unpublished  
Facts of Life*

**Natural Wonder**

When I was younger, a teen-ager, my mother used to say, "You should be an artist." But the visual arts came easy to me as did printing, so I thought it would have been too facile, too easy to be an artist. I was always very interested in the philosophical end of poetry, . . . and it was difficult to make philosophical art. I think it's hard to convey complex meaning in art, but that may or may not be true.

Anyway, a year or so ago, I dedicated myself to a new direction, to visual art. I'd always maintained an interest; I'd always been a graphic artist, a book designer. But I decided really to get into it and it's been invigorating because it's like being a beginner again. Because I'm a beginner getting serious at it, I'm lumped in with the younger artists, though I think I'm seen as a middle-aged poet.

For the last six or seven years in philosophical terms, I've developed an interest in Dada which grew out of my earlier interest in Existentialism. As I evolved as a poet, I got lighter and lighter, in a way. I developed a persona for myself as Professor Poem. Having given myself a Ph.D., I gave myself a professorship. . . .





**PROFESSOR POEM**  
Poem's The Name And Poetry's The Game



**Box 3294  
Vancouver, B.C.  
Canada V6B 3X9**



*AR* That makes sense. . . .

*EV* So, anyway, I had this poet persona and I was developing some art personas too, the most recent one being Walt Dizzy. . . . But the truth is that there's an attitude that's Dadaist, that recognizes that all this activity is absurd; though meaningful in some ways, it's a game. This attitude seems to work better in the visual arts than in poetry which is usually thought of as a serious business.

At a certain point, I'd become less able to open myself up to experimentation in poetry. It seemed to me that I could lose something everytime I published and opened myself to criticism; whereas now, as a visual artist, I've very little to lose. In fact, I'm moulding my thing on losing it, on giving it away, on not being afraid to make mistakes, on being willing to experiment. And that's really exciting, really fun.

*AR* Do you like the Dadaist idea that everything we do is art?

*EV* Yes and no. In general, I feel that art is really a specific activity. And I'm forced to do things that are definitely not art. My life isn't all that together that I can maintain a high attitude all the time. . . . Recently I've been realizing that my experience in the printing trade has been very handy because I think art is about communication, and through printing I've learned about communicating with large numbers of people. . . . And in my most recent prints, I use techniques that come from the stamps. Those prints derive from collages that I made slides of, then colour separations of the slides. Then I blew up the images so that the dots of colour became very large. The results, I thought, were very interesting, and I'd like to pursue these experiments further.

# TIME

*AR* A thumbnail sketch of your progress as an artist?

*EV* When I was young and first involved in art, I was interested in representational painting and artists like Andy Wyeth. . . . Little by little with that kind of outlook I became involved in photography, took lots of slides. Then because reality itself wasn't interesting enough, I began to make surrealist collages — some of which are published in *The Poem Company* — and concrete poems where sometimes I overlaid a word on slide images. These slides with words I used to project in a random order.

Soon I was collaging things into images of real landscapes which I saw as a way of intruding an image from another reality into an actual landscape, but at a certain point I had images in mind for which I couldn't find collage materials, so this has led me to contemplate moving into the area of surrealist painting. My lifestyle, at the moment, doesn't allow much time for painting, though I'm trying to free up some time.

*AR* How does meeting with the Melmoth Vancouver group of surrealist artists and writers assist you?<sup>3</sup>

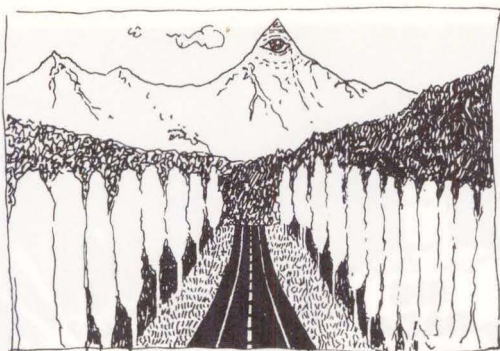
*EV* What I appreciate in meeting with the surrealist group is that they get together to discuss what they are doing. I liked that at Intermedia, that network of support. I like that about Mail Art.

Art is a process of communication, and I like to talk to artists about what they are doing. I'm interested in their concerns. Even at college though I was an English student, I hung around artists.



×WORLD×ART×POST× 84×





A pamphlet printed at Intermedia Press outlines seventeen projects of Varney's concern, most of which have not been touched on in the interview.

1. To create a series of images of the West End of Vancouver seen from different points of view with three large pyramids superimposed in a realistic enough way to convince someone from another city that these actually exist.
2. To produce a large time capsule to be buried under a pyramid-shaped monument in Stanley Park commemorating the City of Vancouver Centennial in 1986 and to be opened in 2086.
3. To produce a set of limited edition serigraph prints of the Lions called *36 Views of the Lions*.
4. To set up and run a summer school for the visual arts on Lasqueti Island.
5. To produce a large number of miniature paintings in series, each series dealing with a single theme, such as the moon, natural textures, clouds, graffiti, flower close-ups, etc.
6. To carve a monument 450' high, representing the mystic image of the eye and the pyramid on a suitably shaped mountain peak.
7. To produce a large-format coffee table book containing a photographic history of Vancouver.
8. To produce a series of large serigraph prints of already existing collages using newly developed colour process and UV inks.
9. To produce a commando street-art project for the summer of 1983.
10. To produce a sheet or sheets of process colour stamps by artists in a limited edition.
11. To produce an ongoing calendar series based on space photographs.
12. To curate a large-scale and comprehensive Mail Art exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1984.
13. To continue to promote the Museo International de Neu Art.
14. To make a book about the history of the Intermedia Society.
15. To produce a book called *Heaven and Hell* comprised of images and writing gathered from artists round the world.
16. To curate a comprehensive exhibition of the work of Dorothy Manning.
17. To produce a 33 rpm record drawn from the Ed Varney tape archives.



Sketch for monumental sculpture at Rogers Pass B.C. on the Trans Canada Highway. Funding by the Canada Council, the Canadian Heritage Foundation and private donation. Total cost of project \$180,000. To be executed in 1984 under the auspices of Canada Parks and Recreation. General contractor: G. Mason & Sons, Calgary. Artist and project co-ordinator: Edwin Varney.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The *October Show* catalogue (Vancouver, 1983) contains a substantial entry on *Heaven & Hell*. This catalogue may be obtained at the Contemporary Art Gallery, 555 Hamilton Street, Vancouver.
- <sup>2</sup> For more information about this project please contact the Museum of Anthropology or any of the individuals listed under the image entry.
- <sup>3</sup> *The Capilano Review*, Issue #29, "Surrealism? B.C."





## IMAGES

*Canadada* — four self portraits. Ed Varney.

Six pages of *The Poem Company*.

*Global Postale*. Left to right: Lon Spiegelman, Martin Guderna, Professor Plum, Julie Oakes.

*Global Postale*. Top to bottom:

- |   |                      |                      |
|---|----------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Davidet Hompson                          | 1. Dave Emblom       | 1. Herb Gilbert      |
| 2. P. Robertson and J. Wolodarsky . . . . . |                      | 2. Marv Newland      |
| 3. Anthony Gnazzo                           | 3. Michele Perfetti  | 3. E. F. Higgins III |
| 4. Ko De Jonge                              | 4. Ed Varney         | 4. Horst Tress       |
| 5. Paul Hill                                | 5. Henryk Bzdok      | 5. Pat Taverner      |
| 6. Marvin Jones                             | 6. David Greenberger | 6. George Brett      |

*Heaven & Hell*. Top: Gilmar Cardoso and Johan Van Geluve;  
bottom: Buster Cleveland and Larry Sunter.

*Homo Ekta-Chromo* was a multi-screen slide project by Bev Atwell, Arden Williams, Cindy Trotsuk, Barry Gordon, Karen Crosby, Linda Gammon, Leigh Harrington, Ken Oye, Darryl Montgomery, Bill Jeffries, Jan Koot, Bob Sherrin, Michael deCourcy, Ed Varney.

*International Post* (below) was contributed to by: Tony Gnazzo, Keith Rodan, Ely Raman, Emil Daley, Mike Crane, Gerry King, Jerry Dreva, Rick Hambleton, Gerry Gilbert.

*1984 Commemorative Stamps* by Anna Banana.

*Enemy* by Lincoln Clarkes (above) ; stamps by Henryk Bzdok (below).

Photocollage, Ed Varney.

Galactic Research Council Comet (Arend Roland, April 26-May 1).

*Zero Post* stamps by Endre Tót.

Department of Pyramidology image.

Pyramid stamps by Ed Varney.

Concrete Poem by Ed Varney.

*Dada Pose, Dada Stamps* by Ed Varney.

Professor Poem business card.

*Time*, a drawing by Ed Varney.

*World Art Post 84*, Ed Varney.

*Pyramid Project*, Ed Varney.

Collage, Ed Varney.

Poetic License Exam.

## Grant Buday / LABYRINTH

Beyond the stream they disappeared into the mist lying thick between the almond trees. I slumped back against the bank, beneath my favourite bridge with its smell of damp timber, alone with my flagon of Manchurian Dragon's Fire. The sun had not yet risen from behind the mountains encircling the valley. The only sounds are the waterfall's faint roar there, high in the rocks, and the water slipping past my feet.

*Why had I not been more suspicious? For now we've entered the old man's palace, eaten, been entertained, taken on debt. You old liar. Take this robe back, your robe and your slippers. Prying them from my heels I kicked them off. And, carefully, poured wine down my chest so pleasant and warm from keeping it so close. I watched it colour and spread. Lolling back on the rocks of the bank is how Georgio will find me this time. "Georgio!" I crowed.*

But no. Clutching my bottle I crawled out, and brushing the dirt from my ass and beard, I scrambled up the bank onto the grass. *I know how I should do it. Dump these clothes on his feet, dirty and wet, and naked, naked! Turn and leave. Let him play his games and make his offers to the next fool to wander past his mud-baked walls.*

I took a drink, it spilled down my neck and throat. Then, swinging the bottle, I danced! *A step we used to do in the spring. In Venice! That rancid clam smell of the canals, the wet stone of buildings in the fog and:*

Pease pudding hot, pease pudding cold,  
Pease pudding in the pot, nine days old.

*Seventeen years.*

*Look at these hands. Ill-chewed nails, fingers that practised flute. Seventeen years of collecting experiences like coins, turning them, holding them to the light. I might be wealthy had I stayed in Venice.*

The tears surged up again. I raised my fists. "And now you want to keep me here? Here!" They dropped down to my sides, the wine sloshing in the bottle. I wiped the groping of imagined fingers from

my shoulders. *And who was it the Khan's servants just buried in the almond grove unaware of me watching? His hair was pale as beach sand. We had not seen him. Or once heard rumour of another foreigner.*

I looked up. They had all disappeared, Orion and all the stars. *Sunrise used to be my favourite. Until I saw through the mask of pale rose hiding your true face. Never a pause to reconsider the beginning of yet another day?*

The final dribble of wine. I spat the muck of sediment and flung the porcelain bottle into the stream where it shattered on a rock. Wandering the hills and stumbling through the paddies outside the Khan's walls, I suffered my own acrid wine-breath. *This is where I end? A penniless drunkard?*

Then I stumbled upon them again. The monks.

Their shaven skulls and that unnatural smell of the odourless about them in their black-robed dance against a phantom opponent. Stooping as one, then rising as one, they held fists high, silent. *Are spirits so slow? So exact, to appear each morning in the guise of the mist beneath those almond trees, and pick up the battle from yesterday without end?*

I watched as they raised slippered feet and kicked, turned slow. Heard the sound of breathing, the twist of feet in the dirt. Pushing the leaden mist back, they advanced upon the spectre, warding off, and then striking downward as though slicing through a cloud.

*And all this we are to believe you learned from watching the battle between a swan and a serpent? To catch the fist as if it were an egg, with the most gentle of hands, and throw it back into your opponent's face, offering your handkerchief?*

Wading in amongst them I blundered: "Let me try! Turn, punch air — 'Snake Creeps Down,' you call this one?" But I staggered, and clutching at the sudden pain in my thigh, collapsed. I couldn't move, only shiver, like one of Amal Mu'haz's pithed toads.

A pair of hands set a cup of steaming tea nearby, and I felt the stoney ground pressing into my cheek. *Our monks, they never did this 'Tai Chi Chuan,' or moved with such grace as if through honey. They only shuffle down alleys, chins inside their cassocks, mumbling.*

\* \* \*



Awake since before dawn, a flutist, a player of the seven stringed ch'in, a man carrying a sonorous stone, and another with a skin drum, filed silently into the bedchamber. The flute and ch'in took their places behind the rice paper screen by the south window. The sonorous stone and the drum, behind the screen of indigo and yellow silk thread woven to the image of a peacock, at the north wall.

They waited.

Sun Sun approached the sleeping figure in the massive bed. With a choked gasping he started backward! Kublai Khan's eyes were wide open, and they had rolled back into his head. His mouth was twisted, his hand a stiffened claw upon the bedcovers. A tiny shriek and Sun Sun was at his side, but — the Khan was rolling over, turning his back to the old servant and murmuring in his sleep. After a few moments of wringing his hands and peering about, he slipped from the bedside and motioned to the musicians, who at once touched their instruments, beginning the Khan's awakening music.

Curled on his side beneath the vast indigo quilt with its gold embroidered dragon, Kublai Khan, awake long before they even entered his chamber, stared out the window, thinking: *Rumour that I am sickly will spread. Good.*

Black tea with ginseng arrived, served upon a lacquered rosewood tray. Kublai sat up in bed. His eyes were clear, and his forehead amazingly unwrinkled for a man of eighty years. The musicians continued to perform subtle trills, entering the day into the room. Feminine hands slipped lids from boxes, releasing red and black butterflies. One settled upon the hill which was the Khan's toe. He sipped loudly, and watched the butterfly fan its wings in the cool breeze coming in the window bearing the scent of arbutus and rose.

Sun Sun stood attentive. He hesitated, wishing to ask: *Did the Khan have a nightmare? Or was the ghastly pose a seizure? Should he call for the physician?*

The Khan let him wait, musing: *Sun Sun, your sole deceit is to steal a plum from my tray when I am not looking.* He shifted his toe. The butterfly moved off. Then he considered the old servant; toothless, cowering beneath his scrutiny. *Certainly it is not disloyalty on your part, Sun Sun. Not that. Someone sets a half cup of wine before you and you tell all. And not a thought to your own gain!* Kublai recalled the morning that Sun Sun stubbed his toe on the porcelain wine bottle, one of the dozens carefully laid. *It was you, Sun Sun, you who plucked the last bottle from my carp pond and guided me to my bed. And that same day it was all over the city that I was in drunken mourning over the death, the day before, of my third wife. Poor girl. So awkward moving about on bound feet. And to fall from my very own window? And there I was. Waiting with drawn blade for any who would think me vulnerable in my grief. But after all my planning, none were so easily lured.*

*What will I do tomorrow? Another seizure? Or a trace of pork blood dribbling artfully from the corner of my mouth? And the next? Slip away for the entire night, and then be discovered at dawn, bathing with the fallen leaves in the garden pond?* He felt suddenly enthusiastic. "Sun Sun! Get this tray off me!" Then he opened his arms wide. "A fine day!"

Sun Sun nodded, "The Khan well pleased?"

But he did not answer. Instead a look of concentration came over his features, followed by a low sound. He averted his face and wafted the covers. Then, reaching out, he beckoned Sun Sun to come closer, and slipping his fingers around his neck, drew him near. Kublai gazed off, out the window, which stretched from the marble floor to the ceiling. "Has he made a decision? Will he stay?"

"No . . . again he drinks . . . All night!"

From where he sat, the Khan saw across the garden and treetops, all the way to the wall. Narrowing his eyes, he followed the moving figures of the sentries on duty there. Knowing none of them personally, he could nonetheless recognize the manner of each, how they held their heads, turned, paced.

"Does he take women?"

"No."

"Men, or boys?"

"No."

The Khan considered this. His attention settled deeper through the multiple facades and personas in a repertoire developed through years of deceit and survival. The musicians finished, but his fingers remained locked around Sun Sun's neck, who stared down at the eye of the dragon on the bedcover.

"Across the earth. No army. No money. How many years he has travelled?"

"Seventeen."

The Khan removed his hand from the servant's neck. Sun Sun remained in the same pose, blinking his eyes. But the Khan had forgotten him. His gaze was directed out the window into the distance. Then it occurred to him, though not the least flicker or shift of his eyes would have betrayed him:

*The Venetian is an outcast.*

He motioned Sun Sun out of the room. He waved his arms, shooing the musicians away. Flinging back the covers, his feet touched the



floor and he began doing knee bends, listening to the satisfying crackle of his joints. He paced the room without the aid of his cane, his reflection appearing for a moment in the carp pond each time he neared the window. Then he poked his head out and smelled the over-ripe winter apples and rotting pomegranates. *A balcony would be so nice.* But his was a life spent whirling round to catch his own shadow advancing upon him, and experiencing the clutch in his chest at the unexpected rustle of paper. He turned away from the window, the carp surfaced with a soft *plash* and settled back.

A gloomy calm took him. He contemplated the fish, and fingered the jade cicada hanging at his neck. He wondered: *Is this melancholy a weakness of age? The inevitable arrival of philosophy?* But there was a jewel in his lidded eye. The frail shoulders possessed something greater than bodily strength, and he smiled again, deep in his secret self, laughing, thrilled even by his own decay and the ceaseless advance and turn of events. Kaidu, his half brother thirty years his junior, awaited in Djang-ti, drumming his fingers, plotting his opportunity. While on the other side, laughing with toothless mouths, opening their arms to receive him, an endless line of dead ancestors.

\* \* \*

Concealed by the wall, the Khan peered out the window. He sniffed the approach of rain. Winter was being driven south by the winds of Mongolia. He shoved his hands into his armpits, and hugged himself against the chill. *The concubines? Wade into the heaps of belly and thigh to be warmed?* But the thought of being touched was loathsome. *Where is my pipe?*

He looked around.

"Sun Sun!" *He is late.* On his knees, Kublai searched around; looking beneath the bed, pulling out drawers, checking the nooks and holes carved into the walls during the long hours of his private paranoia. There was a tentative tap at the door.

He received the day's calendar, cast by his astrologers. Sun Sun trailed him into the room as he turned away, absorbed in the chart:

Autumnal equinox, two days hence.

Neptune and Venus approach Saturn.

Water looming close by a Bull with Fire and Positive Fire.

He was silent. Slate grey clouds dulled the garden view. Sun Sun cocked his ear to the low echo of thunder murmuring up through the soles of his feet. The Khan thrust the chart back into Sun Sun's chest, and clasping his hands behind his back, paced the room. His cloth slippers scuffed the marble floor. After some moments he looked up to see the servant still there. He levelled his eyes at him, then, as if suddenly remembering, took an exaggeratedly deep breath, threw his arms wide apart, and winked. "My two favourites, they're here?"

Sun Sun swung open the huge door and stepped back to allow two women to enter. One was old, the other no more than a girl. The Khan stepped forward rubbing his hands in delight. He ushered them toward the bed, and turning on Sun Sun: "Get out."

When the door closed, he put his ear to it, and satisfied, turned to the women. The older one had already let the silk robe fall, and pulled wig from head. A man. From beneath his elaborate wrappings he produced a leather sack, opened it, and busied himself with the contents. The Khan lay down on the bed. The young woman began massaging the soles of his feet, kneading them and pressing in with expert thumbs, noting changes from the day before. The man, the Khan's personal physician, scrupulously shaven and perfumed, leaned over him. He listened to his breathing, and charted the shape of his eyes, comparing it with the diagrams of the past days. They took his pulse from various points. Turning him onto his stomach, they shaped tiny mounds of mugwort, and placed them at strategic meridian intersections on his back, then lit them so they should smoulder and produce heat, to enervate the *chi*. Kublai submitted. The mounds became too hot, he gestured with his boney arm. "Get them off!" Then, "Well?"

Stiffly, the physician set his wig back in place. The nurse arranged his robe for him, and then, kneeling beside the carp pond, she decorated her own forehead with beads of water, dampening her hair and tossing it to just the right degree of disarray.

"Well?" he demanded, lying there.

He exhaled and met the Khan's eyes. "You must relax." He picked up the spotted old hand. "Already they grow cold again."

Kublai pulled it back, brooding with his chin on his fists. "What can be done?"

"Exercise the *chi*."

But he had heard all this before, and grew impatient. He sat up. "Join the humble at dawn in their reptilian dance fighting imaginary enemies?"

The physician was a man of immense dignity, and guardian of hidden lore. "Surely a man who can weave desire, or loyalty where there is none, can create an enemy, a battle, or even —"

"Get out."

\* \* \*

In his bedchamber, the Khan held the curtain aside and watched the pale winter sunset. He recalled a rhyme:

Ten cups to practice the sling,  
Ten cups to knock from the wall,  
Ten cups to drink and sing  
To long dead ancestors in the Nirvana Hall.

\* \* \*

The next morning, before the musicians, before the sunrise, the Khan sat in the torchlit glow of his library. On the shelves the works of Confucius, the Tao Te Ching, the Book of Odes, Li Po's poetry. All dust-laden, unread. Kublai bent over the stained, torn pages, executed in alternately swift, and then awkward hands. Written from Khanbalu to Byzantium, in snow, in dust, the thoughts and observations of Ghengis Khan. Through his own eyes, those of his aides, as told to scribes after thirty days in a saddle when delirium had set in and horizons were magnified by heat waves, having survived on the blood, taken hot each morning, from the shoulders of their own horses.

Allowing the manuscript to slip from his fingers, he swallowed dryly, remembering his grandfather.

\* \* \*

The room was vast.

Circling, the wind gained momentum, pushed hair into eyes, chilled fingertips, and bent favourite roses to the floor. Seated upon the chair, all morning, all of the afternoon, Kublai Khan buried in his Dragon robe, sat half facing the small table. Birdclaw hands protruded from his sleeves and gripped the arms of the chair. On the other side of the table sat one of his wives. Her face was white and



dry, like paper. At long intervals he looked over and his eyes darkened, trying to remember, *Who is she?* Wrapped tightly in flowered silk, caricatured feet propped on the delicate stool, patient as a porcelain figurine.

The tea had long grown cold.

The white cups with their blue trim were chipped. He looked down and watched the faint rise and fall of the gold threading in the five-clawed dragon on the shoulder roundels of his robe as he breathed. But his vision blurred through his eyelashes, and he suddenly discovered himself tipping forward, slowly forward feeling the weight of his head hanging on his neck. There was the burble of digestion, and the aimless meander of his mind.

Later, when the light had made imperceptible changes, something scratched across the floor. A leaf. It sat there, caught like a spider. Then the wind took it again, lifted it high into the air, dropped and skated it across to their right. Their heads turned in unison until it disappeared, circling around behind them and they looked back to their left to see.

Remembering his hands, the Khan reached for the hammer hung by the bronze gong, and struck once. He squinted his face into a pained grimace and, dropping the hammer, put his hands to his ears to blot out the skull-piercing reverberation.

His wife looked at him. Her breath whistled in her nostrils like cavern wind, dry, painful. "More tea," she whispered, and then forgot.

Sun Sun appeared.

One foot sliding forward, the Khan pointed with his chin and finger. Sun Sun followed with his eyes, emitting a nervous giggle. But as he stooped for the leaf, the wind snapped it up and away, leading him around the room, cloth slippers slapping on the floor, breath growing hoarse as he reached out.

But the trickster wind took it off the tips of his fingers, and finally dropped it at the woman's feet.

They all stared.

Hesitant, Sun Sun approached, delicately picked the leaf from her toes as the Khan leaned forward, watching.

The servant threw it out, off the balcony. But the wind rushed up and laughed it back inside. Sun Sun turned to watch. The wind grew louder, and more leaves were blown in like a flock of confused birds swirling up and settling near the walls. One landed on the table, sat, tentative as a butterfly, and before the Khan could touch, was off. Sun Sun stood in the midst, hugging himself against the chill. The curtains stretched out nearly horizontal, like fragments of spider web in the breeze.

More leaves piled in. In drifts rounding out the corners and heaping at their feet. Holding onto the chair with one stiff arm and his shoulder thrown back, the Khan stared around at this intrusion, this. . . .

His wife held one, touched it with her fingertips, tracing over its brittle surface. Sun Sun turned his head to hear the strains of a song. Raising himself up, listening, the Khan heard the sound of the wind, rippling over the steppe. The leaves deepened. After her fingertips, she touched it to her lips, pressed it between them feeling the delicate crispness, pushed it further, tongue on dry, and chewed, allowed at last inside the glass ball, and soon they would be lifted and turned upside down and the leaves would settle like snow and blanket them in a layer of white.

The leaves deadened sound.

Struggling inside his throat to protest, knuckles whitening with the effort, Kublai Khan pushed himself up from his chair. He waded toward the window sweeping aside the leaves now risen past his stomach. Ignoring Sun Sun who stared dumbly, he slid the window shut, pinching out the wind. It rushed in repeated surges against his back as he leaned upon it, breath difficult, gasping. *Cold water, he realized, to stay awake.*

He looked at his wife, buried to her shoulders in leaves, asleep.

## Ron Smith / SEASONAL

NICOLE: JANUARY 6

This epiphany, minus Media and Persia,  
minus the Magi, ancient names and myths gone old.  
We live out our lives behind these shadows,  
come to know each other so briefly  
crossing beneath the dead light of this winter's moon.  
Only this sound, mystery of flight,  
night birds landing on the waters of Nanoose Bay,  
the surf scoters and buffleheads.

"I go round and round," you say, "become dizzy  
when I think of the world turning."  
Your stopped voice hangs in the cold air.  
Somewhere near, moonlight washes up to stone,  
marks this path along the shore;  
our hands, frozen voices, held in communion.



NICOLE: FEBRUARY 24

Snowbells, the first flower's unfolding, mimed  
in your own small hands. You exclaim: "But they  
didn't pop their showing yet," and you glance at me,  
quizzical, your hands opening to the February sky.  
Last night, you talked out in your sleep  
while I, in the next room, had pale dreams  
of graveyards and tombstones, beyond  
which no language can invent, wrote my own  
epitaph, a consuming indulgence. And you, you  
too, closing into your own darkness, asked  
the hall light be left on, confident to see yourself to sleep.  
Today, though I fear I might not see  
your words form images, shaped by the hand in gesture,  
we are astonished by snowbells impelled toward sunlight.

NICOLE: MARCH 20

Spring equinox, the day's own turning, declines  
into a dance of dust, into stone. From tidal pools  
small pincers claw toward you, your own face  
half lighted by the sun's descent, a small moon  
caught in the spring's first light. In the telescope  
you sight the moons of Jupiter, and I  
push to explain gravity, tides, that planets are spheres  
suspended in this dusk, in orbit around the sun,  
that where we stand, on the edge of this sea,  
half circled by the bay, is also a planet.  
Puzzled, you reply, "I know all I know; each night  
the moon comes down to my room to play with me."  
Stones, I rush upon you as shore crabs scurry  
before the turn of tides, and the heart's bleeding.

NICOLE : APRIL 3

"It is storming. There is lightning.  
Clouds are crashing down on to the roofs.  
The people are running out."

Do your people, like mine, run about in circles,  
their hearts snared by nightmare fire,  
white of the lily consumed in flame?

I wish you more than scarred dreams, bloodied hands  
holding the compass of masked apologies,  
eyes of vacant stone violating our silence:

*Peace is no guarantee against war.*  
Hell's music outrages the dead;  
no prayer but this requiem rising from ash.

Magnolia and cherry blossoms bloom,  
the terrestrial storms outside our home.

NICOLE: MAY 11

Was it the day of the whale, a large grey  
drawn to unfamiliar shores?

Was it the night you spoke in tongues, mutable  
archaeology of the moon's betrayal?

"They were scared behind my eyes.  
They came out of my dreams."

Do not lament the loss of giant bones;  
we cannot know the shape of time.

Nor can I offer you another's history,  
only my longing to share in this, these words.

We come to these islands as if to dream,  
come to trees where we ascend to their growing.

We come to these islands as if to mystery,  
come to a sea where voice is song.



NICOLE: JUNE 21

Since last we measured your height against the doorjamb  
you have grown precisely three and a half inches.

You are more than pleased with summer's whirling play.

"Was it crows who swallowed the moon?"

"Why do stars light up at night?" Such questions  
tempt me to turn somersaults; stand me on my head.

Doors to our fears open with equations  
more complex than the random geometry  
of celestial configurations. Now we wheel  
around the world at arm's length, your laughter  
muted as your feet swing round, circle above the lawn.

Wearied of this flight, I spin you gently down.

At once you leap lightly into my arms and laugh:

"Look, I tricked gravity! That's what pulls you down!"

NICOLE: JULY 28

Madrona, arbutus, demonic tree  
sheds leaves and bark through summer;

the scent of October ripens the air.

Childhood you cannot abandon so easily.

You navigate the seasons, as if dancing  
at the helm of things were heaven's will.

The way of stone encircles our hearts.

We open our eyes to the music of memory,  
legends sung by wind; songs composed in our throats.

You took your first steps as if they recorded  
your name in the radiant moments of morning.

Now you rush toward me, your delicate mouth  
filled with apple; as we embrace

you laugh and sing: "There, that's an apple kiss."

NICOLE: AUGUST 20

In summer the sun ascends from the sea,  
a silent verb of morning, and the song of birds  
sits on your tongue: "Why is tomorrow, tomorrow?"  
Or, "When I grow up, do you grow down?"  
Such a knot of questions would have defeated  
even Alexander. Five years ago, to the day,  
what a blessing was born under that fragile moon.

Daughter, in love we betray what we know  
by default — bloom of the rose is holy.  
Now balloons, streamers, cake and candles  
decorate the playroom. "Roses," you say  
"I love them, I can smell them with my heart."  
If I were an old man would I answer  
only a fool comes to age with ease?

NICOLE: SEPTEMBER 3

Tonight, driving home, headlamps prying the darkness  
you question me about the birth of your brother.  
Above, beyond the skeletal twists of arbutus,  
a bright star follows us through the motions,  
turns in the highway, my responses now  
as oblique as the moonlit forms  
plunging at us from the forest's verge.  
You cannot know what I have known, at best, imperfectly.  
Nearing home, I seek an easy solution and tell you  
when you are old enough, you'll understand — these  
noble illusions of fleshless bone. "No," you cry. "Why  
can't I stay five? I don't want to die!" And your fingers  
close, like calipers around mine, measure this moment  
against his birth: close us in a matrix of shadow, of flesh.

NICOLE: OCTOBER 31

Bats and hobgoblins fly about the house.  
You search for the seeds from our last fall  
harvest of pumpkins and plant them in a jar  
to watch them sprout. You ask your mother  
"What happens after death?" Next morning  
you announce: "I believe those who say  
we are reborn. They are right! I'll never  
pull the legs from crabs again. They might be me!"  
What we know, we live by.  
This mutilation of night, eve of All Saints' Day  
smiling behind toothless grins of candlelight,  
terrifies me. You grow so quickly  
toward us. There is nothing difficult  
in simple questions. The seed grows its own.

NICOLE: NOVEMBER 11

Things not past remembrance: daughter, first born,  
how your brother clings to his mother,  
his sightless eyes open, suspicious.

His small body lurches about against her belly  
risking the perils of uncharted voyage,  
desperate to recall those inner waters;

as if barnacles latched onto rock  
distrusting the rush of tides,  
small lives parented by the sea.

Daughter, love inspires your desire to birth,  
eclipse his life. Without malice, the tide  
takes measure of its own motions.

Abandoned on shore, fathers listen,  
hear the insistent weeping of mothers.



## Shiela Delany: BEGINNING

### NICOLE: DECEMBER 24

How to tell you your brother's birth  
brings more than mere recurrence. More than  
a sky host of shore birds, heron and gulls,  
returning to this bay, drawn to the known  
currents of habit, the easy feed  
of herring and shellfish. "My dreams hide  
behind my eyes, only come out when I speak them."

To name what we know, to hear the space  
between words is to welcome strangers  
into our house and hearts. How readily  
we discard this old magic, these animals  
spun from the trees, that leap from fires;  
those shadow beings etched into wind  
where gull wings lift our voices into air.

## Shiela Delany / BEGINNING

i.

He is sixteen and big, spiky-haired and delicate-browed. He is the singer in a rock band that practises in my basement because my sons are in it. Wears a black T-shirt and very torn jeans. First time we talked he said that he is not the kind of person who could ever learn to drive a car. He also said that frequently he makes a nasty remark immediately on meeting a person for the first time — can't help it. I told him that anyone can learn to drive, and he'd get over the second. This must have been reassuring because he gave me his school ring, silver with a black M on it, to take care of during the gig so that it wouldn't fly off while he was singing. Suggested I put it in my jewellery box, but I sealed it in an envelope with his name on it and put it in the kitchen drawer.

The act is at the Smilin' Buddha downtown. The neon sign shows a fat, bright-yellow buddha, and the bands split the door. This rarely comes to more than bus fare, since admission is only two dollars, and the owner, whose profits come mainly from the bar, lets people in for free. Nonetheless it's rarely crowded. Outside are drunks of all ages who don't come in any more since the place went punk. In the back alley where bands unload equipment are huge garbage bins and the scent of Chinese cooking. It's a place to start. You can only go uphill from there.

Yesterday while Bob and I made love in my room the band was practising in the basement, then eating and goofing in the kitchen. It was fairly obvious what we were doing behind the closed door. Later we heard Mike yell over the mike to the rest of the band, "Fuck off, eggheads, I'm makin love."

I thought that this would be, and I think that it will be, an innocent story more or less, but other versions are possible: a disastrous love-story, a humiliating encounter, a pornographic tale. At least it will not be cynical.

ii.

Mike isn't yet a tremendously good singer. He has a raw, crude energy that could as well be chopping wood or, more likely, working the green chain. Or making love.

In the somewhat self-deprecating conversation recorded in the last section, I had thought about telling Mike that he should trust himself, see himself as attractive. Except that in my mind I stumbled over the noun: attractive boy? Patronizing, and he's too old. Man? Flattering, and he's too young. Young man? Maternalistic. So: person. But by that point the conversation had gone elsewhere — too late for such advice, and, as between us, perhaps too early.

Mike goes to Burnaby South High. His hair and brows are black. Wears a ring with "M" on it in silver and black, and a black leather jacket that his mother and sister gave him for Christmas. He thinks he's a weirdo and troublemaker, a born bouncer and natural Frankenstein: "All I do is come down the *hall* and people run the other way." He agonizes about whether to be serious about the band, or to keep it just goofing. The big secret: "I am a serious person really — but not like the *stupid* serious people." There must be something harsh in his background, critical: heard him three times during practice speak harshly to one of the others, the youngest, about fucking up: a very impatient tone.

As for me, I think he must see or sense that I like him and is possibly puzzled by it. Do all things come to pass? I caught him trying to impress me (with liking Beethoven). And he apologized for possibly having said something offensive the first time we met. He cares what I think about him. His looking at me is speculative, and mine at him no doubt. During practice when they were downstairs I tried on the black jacket that was flung across the kitchen table: weighty, zippered at front and wrists, warm and supple as a second skin. How wondrously garbed, the young! He caught me trying to find out whether he has a girlfriend: "Karen — is that your sister?" It was, but of course that doesn't really settle it either.



This being a story about Mike, I don't plan to unravel the other stories touched on: my lover and friends and ex-husband, my sons (both a bit younger than Mike) who play drums and guitar in the band, the others, in the band with Catholic moms or ex-alcoholic dads, Benny the other guitarist who is in the throes of deciding whether to leave school, and so on. My older boy, almost fifteen, is pretty much the same on stage as elsewhere: self-possessed. But for the others, seriousness is still in the closet, beginning to peer cautiously out for reconnaissance. Maybe that's where I come in: to validate it.

iii.

O lord: trapped right in the middle of a swamp of clichés. Blind love. Lost your heart. Can't sleep at night. Think about you all the time. A string of lines from old songs that keep on being written. Feel like sixteen. But do you remember what it was *like* to be sixteen? Not just a lot of coltish energy, but how to be and what to say, calculating the minutest effect of a sweatshirt or haircut, whether to say hello or not, to be casual or polite. Every detail signifies — the odd remarks, the motto on a T-shirt, a look, a tone — because they don't grasp the big picture, the surrounding order in which contingency occurs. So they aren't sure what's accident and what's intention, what counts and what doesn't, what to throw away and what to keep. Hoping to get laid, almost no matter by whom perhaps some mother's friend or friend's mother. (Mother's friend in my case, whose kids I used to babysit, always hoping he would come home early, miraculously alone, and know exactly what to do. . . .) Beginning to feel your attractive power, and I do mean power. Wishing social forms and norms and taboos would dry up and blow away. Confronting the inaccessibility of the real inner life of adults. Learning attitudes toward women: "She's easy to talk to but she doesn't seem to *do* much." "She wants you cause you're in the band." "My mom's idea of cooking is sending out for Chinese food." "She's pretty tough and gutsy." "She's ugly anyway." The ruthless, constant slashing down of sentimentality and inauthenticity — even the traces that we rely on to ease us into and out of conversation, those comfortable codes in which the heavy stuff can gradually come about.

Inexpressibility. Would they be expressive in passion, in bed? Do they know how to have an orgasm, to let you know they're coming? I remember the stifling of expression, knowing nothing of words or gestures — taking it quietly, not knowing how to increase pleasure or conjure it with the spell of word or groan.

Their language is coded in one-liners and wisecracks, signs and symbols, double meanings. It's a discourse of lines from commercials and rock songs, words to songs they've written and left on scraps of paper in various rooms, crayon or pencil drawings ditto, smiling faces or greetings inscribed by finger on dusty car-windows, candy-wrappers, soda-bottles, pretzel-bags — mementos of their voracious presence — loud ostentatious announcements and opinions shouted from room to room.

There is the difficulty of naming and defining, placing by way of name: whether to use my first name or my social title, "Mrs. . . ." Alternating between the distant and the more familiar, using gags: "Hi, Fred." This one is resolved by me saying I'd rather be called by my first name, and him taking the plunge and doing it, noticeably loud and businesslike, but dignified as usual, on the telephone next time he called about practice.

So some sort of intransitive beginning has begun: the concentration that can never have enough of itself, the fantasies that are modalities taking shape. Will it be in the living room or in my room? with dope? how slowly paced? what it would/will be like to kiss. (KISS is written by anonymous finger in the steam on my kitchen window, to reappear every cold night: it's the name of another band, an imperative, telos, urgent desire, message in the thick of domesticity, for I have to be washing dishes, or at least standing at the sink, in order to see it.)

A transitive beginning is also made of this writing. But this writing is the plan for another act — by which, as a good critic says, one seeks to augment or change the world. “Change the world, it needs it!” Es braucht: there is missing. . . .

This piece could take a *long* time to write: years. For the sake of a story one would like to hurry it up. But for reality’s sake one waits for reciprocity or at least readiness, for the shape of the thing to come through, convinced that whatever it turns out to be will be more powerful than anything that could be invented. It’s hard, therefore, to write a strictly true story, but that’s what this is going to stay, an experiment and a test. Experiment in writing, test of myself: whether my desires have coherency and form. If the unconscious is structured like language, then desire should be writeable, have linguistic or even literary structure. “And what can I speak more or better than what I write? Speech always lags behind writing” — this we know already, pragmatically, for nothing has been addressed directly to the object or recipient of this desire: except of course the existence of desire itself which can always be seen. It is like the old game of wonderball. To the tune of a formulaic nursery-rhyme chant (the normal more or less superficial verbal exchanges and jokes) the big ball passes back and forth from hand to hand. Whoever holds the wonderball last, when the chant ends, on its very last syllable, that person — loses? wins? it hardly matters: that person is designated. When the “normal” exchanges stop, we will have given desire a form of its own, we will hold it there, we (as “we”) will be acknowledged, designated. So far, nothing has been said at all. No one knows about this writing or its subject. I keep it separate from my regular journal, a diary within a diary, a secret journal. It is still in handwriting.

There have been several films recently about mother-son incest. I think one’s own son can scarcely be as attractive as someone else: with someone else you needn’t think: “someone else’s son,” not think “son” at all. The taboo is powerful, and my impulses have usually been ex-centric, centrifugal, exogamous. Yet this insistence on “he is not my son” carries with it its opposite. (It is difficult to write this.) Which one is the substitute? If they both amount to the same thing, then neither.



How would it really begin? A plan: somehow we are alone in the house. I sit cross-legged on my orange bedspread, reading. He hesitates at the bedroom door and enters. I indicate the carven-backed desk chair. There's no trouble talking, and he eventually comes to sit opposite me on the bed. Removes the black army boots. Decides to wash his feet. On returning, a laugh and (relieved), "I sort of thought you'd have your clothes off when I came back." And my relief too: "That would be a bit too fast for me."

That would certainly be a beginning. The terror of writing that, the thing one's afraid to write. Alternating intervals of faint hunger and faint nausea. My heart beats in my ears. The act of writing terrifies me more than imagining any other act, possibly more than performing any other act.

It is surely a long time since I have desired a man of sixteen.

Here's another one. We colour. Mike likes to use crayons, carries a ratty package of them about with him at all times in a pocket of the leather jacket. We use crayons and coloured pencils and sketchpad. On the pad there's some drawings of myself in the bath, the view I see looking down along my body. Eventually we draw each other, taking hold that way.

There are a million beginnings. Any one of them, I suppose, could be the opening of a novel about a middle-aged (though — I hurry to assure the as-yet-hypothetical reader — youthful looking) woman and an adolescent who vacillates between fortyish and five, who is father-like and son-like and brother-like, who displays courage and gallantry while retaining the distance of ambivalence. It could be spun out indefinitely, fantasy upon fantasy. It could drive you nuts to live the lives of characters while trying to live your own. "Madame Bovary, c'est moi." *Do* you live your own? Is there time? Is there any desire to, when you can get everything you want in fiction? But then you must have to surface periodically for more material. The effort of survival in writing a historical novel or epic must be tremendous: not to drown in the inwardness of imagination. A critic said of a writer that she wrote a real-life story twice, "the second time as fiction." Embedded it in writing? Extracted its meaning? What precisely is the component that accomplishes the transfiguration? In any case, this isn't fiction, not yet; not as far as I know, anyway.

iv.

Rats. If I stopped writing about this I'd probably stop thinking about it too. A tempting prospect, as the thinking about it grows obsessive. Too many fantasies, of beginnings, middles, ends. Reality conspires to keep me thinking about it.

Item: a long talk, or listen, rather, with Mike's mother. She was very chatty and possibly a little bit drunk. She talked about her trip to Europe with Mike and Karen last year, the gold wine glasses from Venice at forty dollars each, her recently-begun affair with John, the man next door, the father walking out and going to the interior to work, what a crud he was, how she lost thirty pounds when they split up. She works at the Safeway head office operating keypunch. They evidently live in a condominium since she mentioned a mortgage. She phoned to find out whether Mike would be home for dinner with her and John, but he decided to stay here for dinner, being "such a great human being" and clearly having a nice understanding with his mother. It is odd to have a secret from a stranger. It is odd to have a secret from a stranger which links you intimately to that stranger.

Items: I cover Mike with a blanket when he falls asleep on the couch. He hits me on the rear with a drumstick while I am preparing dinner. I make him hot honey-lemon tea for a sore throat. We compare heights, fence with umbrellas. Nonetheless there's an opacity to him between these moments and even during them, the opacity of a child playing alone in a circle he's drawn about him, or of a cat grooming itself that catches your gaze and returns it, then goes back to its task, unminding. Part of the playing is "I dare you to cross over" — not exactly an invitation but a dare. It's like the game of "Hey, guess what?" "What?" "That's what!"

So there are gestures but no words, the relationship still unacknowledged anywhere but here as anything other than my son's friend/my friend's mother. From script to speech. Speaking of shifting media, I wonder what it would be like to type this. It would require revision as/and seeing again, editing and embarrassment. I will do it anyway: woman is a creature of habit.

v.

After a practice one evening, four of the band and I wind up in the living room. It's February, crocuses are up and the assertive forsythia. My winter jacket is about to become a spring jacket. Hotdogs and marshmallows are brought out to the fireplace. Pretending we're in the woods, Mike cuts sticks off the bare frontyard apple tree with a pocket knife. He has carried the knife since December when he was beat up on the Kingsway bus going home late at night; he took several stitches in the head. The knife was a gift from his sister's boyfriend: it has a brass handle engraved with a scene showing Indians in a canoe. Curiously, on the bow of the canoe is a six-pointed star. Weeks later, when I go out to mow the lawn, I am to discover that on this occasion he carved his initials deep into the crab-apple tree.



Later Eric and Mike discover my photo albums on a low shelf near where the boys are sitting on the floor. Gleefully they look for baby pictures of my two: at fifteen months chomping on a daisy, with hippy-long hair at eight, sporting recently-disappeared plumpness. The other two make fun, give histories of their own vanished cuteness, display their bus-pass photos. What do they find other than what they see? That I cherish my boys' childhood and think them beautiful. There are photos of me too: bathing-suit pictures at the beach, men I've lived with, me married, me pregnant, me younger. So they learn what I've looked like over the years, who I've loved, what I look like more or less undressed. The curiosity of this is that you usually control the knowledge others have of you. You know pretty much what you've given others to know. But here in the house, where they spend hours every week, they have access to a lot of me that I haven't volunteered: what I read, what I've written, my drawings, my make-up in the bathroom, my food, my housework or absence of it. Also, with my kids as channel, they know more of my emotional make-up than they've learned first-hand: what I might get angry about or yell at them about. And the bathing-suit pictures: I was embarrassed, realized I didn't want them looking or thinking about it as if some version of Playboy. O well.

I am using a double standard here, as it is not hard — it is easy — to fantasy to orgasm (look, ma, no hands). For instance, we are kid-wrestling. I win, astraddle. Mike has a hard-on which he modestly acknowledges. I say, I bet you'd like to find a place to put that. He says, Got any suggestions? I say, Are you taking suggestions?

Or another: we are sitting on the woollen rug in my room, fully clothed. He asks, with diffidence, what it is like for a woman to come. — If it's vaginal intercourse, a more or less gentle series of comes, riverlike. If it's clitoral, more violent or climactic. What's it like for you? — Pretty good. But I haven't done it with a woman yet. And soon: — I would like to make love. With you. To you. He nods agreement and very slowly we are undressed. I'm wearing an old olive-coloured boyscout shirt, very soft; the cuffs are rolled back and my arms are tanned. White jeans. My stomach is brown also and fairly flat, though there are stretch-marks that an experienced lover can feel in the dark. — How do you do that second kind of come? — Two ways. With your fingers or your tongue. — Which do you like better? — Both. — But which better? And so, seizing the bull by the horns he licks me very firmly with the tip of his tongue and a real shudder comes over me. I push my hips forward to meet his tongue and am coming, mildly but there.

Sometimes a fantasy is better than a hand-come. I have more patience for the slowness, conversations, building, hesitations. It's too tempting when masturbating to go for broke right away and forget the frills. But the fantasy has made me patient, so I do a long slow one on my bed, mostly light surface fingertip strokes, some rapid some slow, and wind up with a most amazing seems like several stages come. And then two more short quick ones.

When I turn out my light, a full moon irradiates the room and the sky. The moon is surrounded by a rainbow halo of pink and gold against blue-black. In a moment the rainbow dissipates and "the moon doth with delight / Look round her when the heavens are bare." Clouds gather again and gradually shift: there is a light-show of slow splendour as she moves from white hard-edge isolation back into the hazy colour-zone.

I am happy, as if this beginning can only have a good ending. Am I approaching the middle of the beginning? The stages of love: first, looking; then the heart's fantasies of making love. What next? True to form I don't sleep or eat much lately, speeding: "so priketh hem nature in hir corages." I want to be consumed down to bare essence, speed off whatever extraneous blunts the edge of desire. Moonlight. Happiness. Desire. Love. Forbidden words: who will ever believe them?

vi.

Too complicated too fast. I am scared as anyone. Think I've ever screwed anyone sixteen? Even when I was sixteen I never screwed anyone sixteen.

The quality of looking has changed — no longer speculative but a dwelling on, absorbed, appropriative. The intentional look. It comes from the brow being inclined somewhat toward you, aiming the look from under cover, like an arrow, at *you*, baby. The look that says "I want." A sultry look. The one that makes you want to go right up to someone and put your arms around his neck, press up against his belly and give him a hard-on.

To go for it would be like diving off a platform in the dark: maybe you come up with something nice, maybe it's a bellyflop into a bucket of water. It could hurt the band. It could be humiliating. Either of us could get bored real fast. Is there a lot to talk about? It could be a slimy mess, with hurt feelings staring at me several days a week, to be stumbled over in every room. I want to be sure of being wanted, not accommodated. But he's strong in himself and for himself, having already laid hands on his life: ran away from his father in Vernon a few years ago to live with his mother and sister here in Vancouver. He takes creative writing in school — claims that two of the girls in his class who saw the band are in love with my sons. His hair's no longer all black but dappled with ginger — a bleach job done by one Sandra who, he claims, is a bad influence. The colour variations are done by washing the bleach out before the time is up. He bends the artwork to my closer inspection: the roots are white, and the bristly hair surprisingly soft.



vii.

So it didn't work. I stopped writing this for about six weeks but it hasn't dried up. With dismay I admit this, because it isn't in my control, I haven't been able to shut it off. Panicky I ask how long it will go on. Am I going to listen forever to rock stations on the radio, live on tea and eggs and crackers at irregular hours, stay up till four every morning? I understand why the ideal courtly love affair took two years from first glance to consummation: those masters of fragmentation counted every slow step along the way.

Reciprocation of touch. Coming home from work and still recovering from an April flu I am met in the kitchen by Mike and Screech. They ask how I am. I say, Awful. Screech says goodnaturedly that I am just looking for sympathy. — So give me sympathy. They do a big AWWWWW . . . as to a kid, and Mike zooms over with a big embrace from behind, long-lasting. They were right and I feel better.

Provocation to touch, flaunting. I am somewhat flaunting too. Bob and I come in from jogging, a couple of the band goofing in the living room. I am wearing red T-shirt, white satin shorts, showing a lot of leg and arm. Mike recovers well when I notice his looking — he comments on the early tan. I make fun of the pale flabbiness of musicians, confined all day to dark cellars and to sleazy clubs all night. Couldn't have made up a more provocative dialogue than what followed. He — *I've* got a muscle! — No! Where? He holds up his forearm, fist clenched to swell it: — What do you call that? No way I can say anything but the inarticulate truth, hoping it will pass for irony with the others present: — Beautiful, just beautiful. — Here's another one. (As if the first one wasn't more than enough!) This one's a flexed bicep and it is really a man's muscle, big and hard, with that incredibly soft velvety inner-arm skin, blue-green veins showing faintly through, skin rivalled in delicacy only by the cock's shaft. I pretend to be scared, like a kid shown the strap: — Okay, I'll be good, I promise.

Mike begins to sound a lot better, to control his voice, hold a tune, sing for speed as well as power. He has a big, round middle-range voice with excellent projection; it carries extremely well when he is yelling for someone to come to the phone or get downstairs and practise. The voice resonates in my ear when I drive them and equipment downtown and they play Popeye, their favourite car game: whoever spots a missing headlight yells "popeye" as loud as possible and gets to hit the others. The voice always surprises me on the phone, as he says hello and my name very forcefully, so that I immediately think it is someone at least 27 whom I haven't spoken with on the phone before. He uses the voice a lot, almost continually: jokes, stories, questions, interjections, always a response even if I'm talking to someone else. (Sample: "Is anyone in the bathroom?") Mike, from living room, "No." Someone else, from bathroom, "Yes.") It's impossible not to know that he's in the house, whether by omnipresence of voice (the expense of spirit) or pure electricity. He's on like a light-bulb, putting out all the time. Does he wake up that way, switched on, and stay on for sixteen hours straight?

Making love to my adult friend and lover (who is often, for reasons of work, out of town), Mike's image intrudes: I feel faithless. Am I doing something like the governess in *Turn of the Screw* — playing with a boy's emotions, projecting onto him my fantasies, the product of insufficient gratification? More than this: am I a reliable narrator? Is there another version of this story — his version — nothing like this one, or rather, like this one in particulars but totally different in meaning? Is this a true story after all? And then there are the other versions as well: the prudential/moralistic one, for instance, that would see this as something just short of insanity. There is a surrealist version that would call it made love, the resurrection of the marvellous, and say I should have had him in bed weeks ago.

The relationship I want is the impossible one: to be his girlfriend, to be his age with him. I can hear someone say (perhaps it is my infinitely kind and approximately 75-year-old Uncle Ernie), "So who wouldn't want to be sixteen again?" I protest, "That's not it! It isn't just to be young again, not just to return to Eden, it's for a *reason*, a particular person!" Maybe it's always for a reason. I wasn't ready for this to happen — to wish to be younger. I've not felt it before, never once. I've always wanted to be older (and finally got my wish! well, it can stop right here!) — but like Tithonus, forgot to specify a *terminus ad quem*. And so my hands look a little worn, and I can see that two lines will eventually develop alongside my nose, and, as Erica Jong notes, the flesh does not love the jawbone as it used to do. This all sounds worse than it is, and for vanity's sake I want to get it down on paper that I am "attractive" (as men always say, projecting their own feeling onto the object) and that people do often and explicitly admire my appearance. He does too, though not so explicitly: the covert glance to breasts if I'm wearing a T-shirt, the evaluation of tight jeans. Does the category "beautiful" occur to him as a way to think about women — about me? How much does it matter to him what somebody looks like? What about this Jill, whose name and phone number appear on a scrap of paper left in the kitchen? In another room there is a crumpled sheet covered with kid-like drawings of people; the one labelled Jill is biggest, with a cheery smile, jeans, boots. Someone in the band loudly informs the house that Mike's been invited to Jill's for dinner. Still later, around ten-thirty, Mike's mother phones because he isn't home yet and has school the next day. Is an ending in sight?



viii.

He is sitting on stage during another band's act at the Buddha. He is holding down the bass drum so it doesn't creep forward (there's a spike missing). He sits almost curled up in its hollow circle, fetus-like. The amplification is so high that the noise might as well be absolute silence, and what occurs on stage unwinds as in a silent movie, in detailed slow motion, without a sound track. The guitarist of the other band, big and flabby, stands nearby. He kicks at Mike, trying to get him off stage; later it turns out he didn't know the drum had to be held down. Mike grabs the guitarist's leg to deflect a kick. Another kick lands at his mouth. He rolls away from the drum, gets up and walks slowly off stage, disbelieving the blood on his fingers and dropping onto his shirt.

He is throttling an obnoxious skinny creep in leather and glasses who has been pushing around all evening looking for a fight. At first it looks like heavy, awkward male dancing and jostling, but his hands are doing business around the creep's throat.

He is being pursued up and down the club by a woman. She looks about mid-twenties, curly reddish hair, slumped shoulders, not dressed up but wearing street clothes, drunk and stumbling. Her posture and general hopelessness recall every dreary kitchen in Burnaby, or North America for that matter, where a woman, up to the elbows in dishwater, waits for a man to come home, wonders whether she'll get laid or hit. They talk or argue near our table. Later, while Bob and I are dancing, she, dancing alone near us, stumbles and falls down. At the end of the evening Mike leaves right away, not staying to help the others pack instruments.

He is a stage-addict, wants to be *there*, focal. Vocal/focal/fuck-all/fickle. It is no sky-blue pink atmosphere. The waitress herself is like a smiling buddha, though native Indian: rolls of chin, breasts and gut encased in white sweater and black slacks. The band has played nearly every night during spring break, opening for older and better-known bands. It's a small place without any pretense to decor. People drink beer or rum-and-coke or scotch-and-water — no chi-chis here or fancy whipped cream coffees, no side-burned businessmen ogling the dancers, no prostitutes trying to talk Japanese tourists into \$150 a fuck. Just down-home, low-rent, up-front sleaze.

ix.

Somehow the information filters through the house: Mike's making love with Jill. He spends time at her house, took the day off school to be with her because she's going back East for a couple of weeks. Typing this makes me feel like I have arthritis, or some nervous disease in my fingertips making them too touchy for the pressure of typing. Endings are hard to write. I feel like sitting in a pub with a woman friend and crying in my beer. I want somebody to put her arms around me and say "Awww. . . ."

Besides this, the band has moved out, to an old house downtown that they share with other musicians. My neighbours complained about the frequency and duration of practices, the vibration in their living room walls that no television could drown out.

Only a few days without them and the pressure eases, the speedometer comes down slowly, and I'm scared a little of relaxing into entropy, the gears winding down all the way, decomposition. Whatever animated me fades into the light of common day. I listen to sad jazz for a change, Dexter Gordon, "I'll Remember April." For sure. This isn't a lament for virginity but for possibility. His screwing women makes him possible — but later, impossible now. Available but unavailable. So it ends. Heals over. The things I usually do come slowly back into place, like eating, like sleeping, like not spending a lot of time with adolescents, like doing my own work, the things that reconstitute an adult. This writing isn't necessarily secret any longer, nor a plan: only a piece of writing. To be revised. Anyone can read it. I might change the names. It might as well be fiction because it's over. Doubtless someone, smartass academic, will say it was fiction all along, like any other, a perfectly ordinary fiction of the kind people invent daily while reading the newspaper, riding the elevator or the bus. The fictions they survive by.

Days elapse. When you hold a certain kind of plastic cellophane to the fire, it burns and melts at once, falling in rapid fiery drops to the hearth. That's how the days are consumed. I cling to the idea of what I felt, now cool and quietly encased as in a cocoon, wrapped in fine layers of silk thread — an oval-shaped whitish cocoon rounded off at both ends neatly, the kind I would find on dried-out stalks of grass when I explored the fields near my house, on the other side of the continent, twenty-five years ago. I'd be in love if I thought there were a hope. I know I've been in love. The continued absence of it is it. A cocoon bursts, in season. Has this one got another life? Yes, and its living it now, away from you, costumed in bright colours. End of the black period. Technicolor, with stereo. Quadra. Sensovision. What's sealed off for me lives elsewhere.



## AT THE POOL

These people probably think that I have just broken up with my boyfriend in some typical lower east side saga. They notice without seeming to notice while I hurry along Houston Street where not many white women walk, one hand shielding my tears from passersby. But it is on account of someone I don't know that I weep: a boy of fourteen or fifteen, New Yorqueno — slim and beautiful with smooth skin and a burst of curly hair emanating from his head. He was in the middle of the sidewalk as I approached, and he didn't move — it was Allen Street, coming up to Houston; I was on my way home from my first trip to the pool. The boy stood more or less in one spot, swaying and oblivious. He curled like a weed in the July heat, he straightened up and gradually wilted again though never quite fell. He was nodding out: fifteen years old, and in the middle of the sidewalk.

The Pitt Street pool is where I swim in New York this summer: a fifty-metre square pool surrounded by trees and benches in a dusty park, and by a red-brick wall that stops no one who is determined to climb over. The pool is a bus-ride away from where I live; it is at the other end, the east end, of Houston Street, and admission is only fifty cents. Acquaintances, even friends, are shocked that I prefer this pool to the smaller, more expensive indoor pools at the YMCA or health spa. Am I the only white person there? they ask; am I not worried about getting an infection from the water, being mugged in the dressing room, having my clothes stolen? I hate their questions. And the fact is, I am afraid. I get off the bus the first time, nervous and breathing fast. I pick my way across pools of slimy water on the crumbling sidewalk, determinedly looking straight ahead as I walk toward the old brick building, avoiding any encounter, even visual, with men who stand in front of the tiny stores, stores that look as though they went out of business years ago. In the big empty dressing room I prepare myself for the worst: if challenged, should I give up my money or resist? If surrounded, fight or run? There is not a mirror anywhere in the dressing room, not a sink or shower: all is dark, military olive-drab paint and doorless metal cubicles. I secure my things in a locker, using a lock bought specially for the purpose, and fold the key carefully in my towel. I wear my shoes to the pool hoping they are shabby enough not to tempt anyone while I swim.

Three or four times a week I make the trip to the pool, and as it becomes part of my routine I begin to notice that somehow, miraculously, ordinary lives are led here, recognizable lives. I hunt and cherish signs of ordinariness like someone looking for a good cigarette butt in the gutter: a parent with child happily in tow, a young couple absorbed in one another, men joking together in the hot afternoon or buying a coconut ice from the vendor's cart on the corner. When the bus passes Bowery I force myself not to look, and eventually like the other passengers, forget to look, at the scabbed and crippled men who sleep on the street and who, if fortunate, wheel a few raggedy belongings in a shopping cart. One afternoon there are two women who determinedly sweep away with brooms at the patch of grey sidewalk in front of the bombed-out, boarded-up tenement where they live: all the dust and litter, the broken glass and crumpled paper, the rotted fruit-skins they sweep decisively over to a trash-pile so high it covers the bus-stop.

The pool, to my surprise, is used mainly by kids. They range in colour from pale olive to deepest black, and in age from four to twenty so that I am not only one of the lightest who use the pool but also one of the oldest. I am, besides, the only person who swims lengths; though kids dive and clown and splash, they don't know strokes. There is a group of five small boys, Spanish, who imitate dolphins that they've seen on TV; one of them, short and squat, holds his nose each time he plunges into the three-foot shallows. After a couple of weeks, when I become a regular there, they approach and ask for instruction: "Miss, how do you do that?" "Watch this, Miss." "Miss, am I doing it right?" A group of girls, about ten or eleven years old, sits in the sun telling secrets and swearing not to tell, playing clapping games. Each of them has a unique and painstakingly ingenious hairdo of tiny black braids arranged side to side or back to front across her head. A very dark girl of thirteen or so, with amazing long limbs and black bathing suit, dances in little steps alongside the pool. Everyone dances, it seems, black or Spanish, boys and girls, the portable tape decks going loud with a mechanical disco beat. I swim my lengths, then lie in the sun to dry; yet it isn't the swimming alone that restores me but the staggering beauty of the people here, and the piece of wholesomeness it is for all of us. It is redemptive, this oasis of pleasure and innocence set in the horrendous lower east side. Or so I persist in seeing it, though the scent of marijuana sometimes drifts over the pool as I swim, and cocaine deals are made in the park outside, and some of the younger boys, only eleven or twelve years old, wear, strapped around their waists, a small black leather case in which there is a knife.



It is the lifeguards who tell me about the cocaine and the knives. The lifeguards are New Yorqueno and in their early twenties. This is the neighbourhood they grew up in, over in the big projects at the foot of FDR Drive a few blocks away. One day as I am sidestroking near the edge of the pool, a man's voice observes: "Miss, there's a space between your legs." I brace myself, fearing to look up out of the water: surely this is it, the obscene harassment I was warned about. But it is the head lifeguard who stands at the pool edge looking down at me. He is a short, well-tanned young man with round, innocent face; indeed his face is so very knowingly innocent, brown eyes widened, that I suspect he is aware of the first impression his words must make. "You've got a space between your legs," he repeats. "Snap your legs together at the end of every kick. You'll swim better." He offers me a set of plastic training paddles to work out with. "Lazy left arm! Snap those legs together!"

Later we talk. He is Paul Arroyo, swimmer and karate expert, also disc jockey at a well-known disco on 21st Street. I met Javier as well, who is a tall, green-eyed pre-law student at a college upstate. Both of them have the over-developed shoulders and pectorals of the competitive swimmer. Paul and Javier are the official keepers of order at the pool. As such they possess a glamour which, with their good looks and friendliness, coalesce a coterie of admiring younger boys, flirtatious girls, concerned mothers, seductive older women. To sit with the lifeguards is prestige in this microcosm. I am admitted to the inner circle right away — partly, I think, because my serious swimming is respected, and in fact we do spend a certain amount of time in shop talk, discussing the fine points of strokes, and comparing the merits of this and other pools. They are pleased that I like their pool, especially because I am visiting from Canada and am a writer: two exoticisms, inexhaustible subjects for conversation. A good-looking kid named Freddy informs me that Miss Canada has won the Miss Universe contest. They are all shocked to learn that there are hardly any blacks in Canada. Paul, it turns out, plans to write an autobiographical novel, though he is only twenty-four and finds writing very difficult. The story will be about the old Vietnamese karate master who trained him as a child, and then about his own life so far. Javier is in despair about writing because he can't break the "C" barrier at school: he feels caught between Spanish and English, perfect in neither.

Occasionally Paul's girlfriend Elena comes to the pool on her day off: a quiet, plump and pretty girl, Hungarian, of twenty-six. She doesn't swim. She looks unhappy, and Javier blames Paul for cruelty: "Nobody could be as hard on women as this guy." "I'm not hard, just realistic. I'm a softie," Paul defends himself. They have been together for four years, but Paul refuses to marry without a contract. Elena thinks this insistence on a marriage contract shows a lack of love and trust. "But you have to realize marriage ain't romance," Paul lectures us, "it's an economic institution. I been around, I've seen it." "I'm getting older," Elena complains, "there are other guys I could get." Paul shrugs. Elena assumes the contract would be Paul's doing exclusively. She should get a lawyer, I tell her; she should negotiate her own terms, her own wishes: housework, babysitting, education, how much for clothes and food — everything. It is a fascinating new idea: she likes it. Next day Paul thanks me for talking to Elena. "I don't want to take advantage of her," he says. "Of course she should write the contract too, it isn't just for me. But she doesn't think that way. Maybe it will do her good."

About mid-August the weather breaks and there is light blue sky, light blue river. Regretfully I recognize the first autumn days; they are still warm enough to swim but lack the heavy, solid, reassuring heat of previous weeks. It is only fifteen days before I am to return to Canada and already I am sorry to leave. Each day's date I reckon by counting backward from the day I will leave. I am fond of everything, suddenly; even the roaches in my kitchen I don't bother to kill. I am used to my neighbourhood now: my Indian restaurant, my kiosk where I buy the *Times* and the *Voice*, my bus driver, my neighbour across the hall, my street, always full of people going their ways.

Paul has been flirting with me lately, circling closer and closer, orchestrating his approach day by day. He makes jokes about going out together dancing; he is, he says, a great dancer. Laying his arm alongside mine he compliments my tan, now as deep as his own. He praises my cheekbones (which resemble those of his aunt, evidently), my "muscle tone," my "good shape." He boasts of his athletic talents, referring to himself in the third person: "You got to know Paulie. He's something special." He kisses my hand when I leave poolside to dress. But it is never straight out, it can always be interpreted as innocent friendliness, there is always the escape of ambiguity.

Ganepas have come into season now, and on my last day at the pool someone brings a paper bag of the little oval fruits. It is a delicacy cultivated in Puerto Rico, a small pale-green-rinded fruit with tangy translucent orange flesh. The taste and texture are somewhere between kiwi and persimmon. Gallantly Paul demonstrates how to eat ganepas: strip the husk, suck the flesh to a tasteless pulp. When we are done, he asks, "Are you ready for me?" It strikes me as a much better question than any other he might have used, better than the ones most men use. Readiness is easier to judge than wanting, much clearer; readiness can exist before wanting. It is a far easier question to answer "yes," and I answer "yes." "Is here okay? I have an office in the building." He gestures back toward the main red-brick building, where the changing rooms are located. "It's private, don't worry." We walk alongside the pool back to the building, Paul a few discreet paces ahead as if this were sheer coincidence, as if everyone didn't know what was happening. Three black boys, about eight years old, come out of the building as we enter. "Well, look who's here," one of them remarks, and I have never figured out whether he meant Paul or me.

The "office" is a dim little concrete bunker with a metal door and a wide, low bench of the kind found in gymnasiums. This must be routine for him, I am sure of it; and for me, is it readiness, or desperation? Am I another faceless one in the series of faceless women who have visited the "office" with Paul? What if I change my mind or am too nervous? Are they laughing at us outside, or is everything as usual out there in the sun? It keeps running through my mind: I don't know him.

Without our bathing suits it is still warm enough, and the low bench is less uncomfortable than I thought it would be. Paul steers us through the awkwardness, never a hesitation, talking all the while, practised at this. Rapidly he fits on a condom: he doesn't know me either. "I never do it without one," he explains, but soon, when we have both proclaimed ourselves clean and safe, I remove the condom and am surprised at his gasp of pleasure. "We haven't kissed," I say, but he reminds me that he has kissed my hand and I am happy that he counts it as the first: already we have a history. Special Paul certainly was, and I imagine, or hope, that had we been in a real room, had we world enough and time, we could eventually have become special to one another.



Later, when we walked out again into the sunshine there was no sentimental farewell. Paul was immediately surrounded by a group of kids wanting to learn a karate throw, and I went over to the curved concrete bleachers to lie down in the last heat of city sun. I closed my eyes so that there was nothing but enveloping warmth and a spectrum of sound. Half-asleep, I forgot where I was, what time of day, what language people were speaking around me. There were close sounds and distant ones on a long, long continuum. In the foreground, distinct little nuggets of sound stood out clearly. A child just the other side of the wall wailing for ice-cream. The ice-cream wagon bell. Kids playing in the pool, people speaking in normal tones. These close, surface sounds rested on another, less distinct layer from a radius of several blocks, maybe: a muted police siren, traffic along Houston Street, a bus gearing up: audible but not articulated sound. And so it went, receding further and further away, all the way northward up the island, uptown past the Empire State Building and Rockefeller Center, past Columbia and the Bronx, gathering up the sound of every voice and subway and taxi, every slammed door and breaking bottle; and all the way down to the southernmost tip of the island sound rose up even from tugs labouring past the Statue of Liberty with garbage scows in tow; and across the East River from Brooklyn came noise of trains and people and traffic there, and of airplanes from the airports in Queens. The furthest end of what I heard was a cloud of sound, a vast pool into which every separate piece of sound was assimilated, dissolved and broken down into the minutest particles and diffused, as sand from granite pebbles: broken down into a ceaseless undertone, a low hum-roar like air rushing into a giant pipe, an infinite recession, the sound of city that is always heard whatever else may be silenced.

# NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

ED VARNEY runs Intermedia Press along with his partner Henry Rappaport. As indicated in the interview, Ed has enough projects to last a lifetime.

GRANT BUDAY studied writing at Capilano College. *Labyrinth* is an excerpt from his first novel which concerns the imagined life of Marco Polo in the court of Kublai Khan. Buday is now working on a second novel.

RON SMITH is a well-known publisher, writer and teacher who lives in Lantzville. He runs Oolichan Books and instructs English at Malaspina College. The manuscript from which the Nicole poems were selected will be published by Sono Nis Press.

A teacher at Simon Fraser since 1970, SHIELA DELANY has published articles, reviews and essays in many North American journals. Her short stories will soon appear in *Fiddlehead*, *West Coast Review* and *Queen's Quarterly*.

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