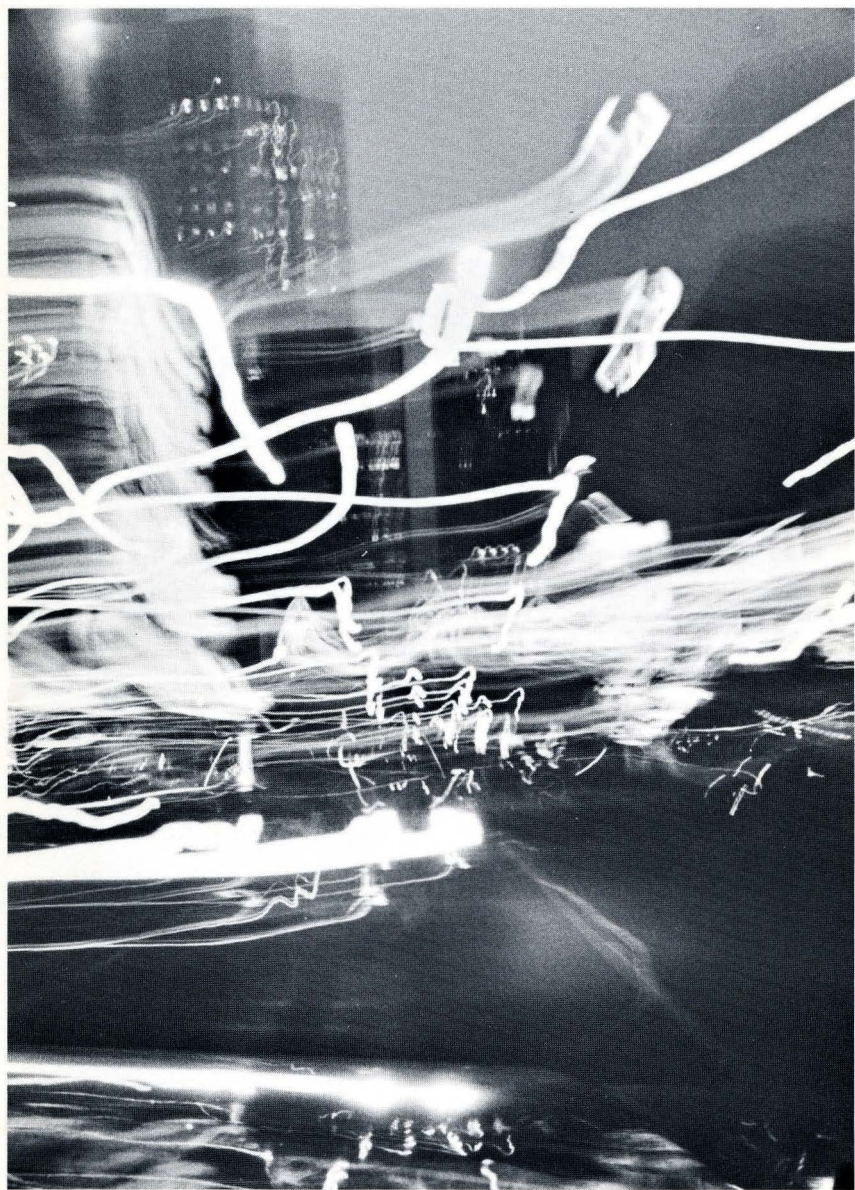


THE CAPITANO REVIEW



That's why, while stopped for through-traffic a block from that eerily glowing cross, you turned to me just before the light went green. "Okay, Mister B. You tell me when to change gears." And I did.

—ROBERT G. SHERRIN, "Certain Things"

EDITOR	DOROTHY JANTZEN
POETRY EDITOR	SHARON THESEN
STUDENT ASSOCIATE	MICHAEL SHEA
FICTION EDITOR	BILL SCHERMBRUCKER
STUDENT ASSOCIATE	SUE LAVER
DRAMA EDITOR	REID GILBERT
VISUAL MEDIA EDITOR	ANN ROSENBERG
STUDENT ASSOCIATE	MICHAEL SMART
SECRETARY (ACTING)	EILLEN STEELE

The Capilano Review is published four times a year from Capilano College, 2055 Purcell Way, North Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada V7J 3H5.

We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of The Canada Council, the Capilano College Humanities Division, the Capilano College Student Society, the Government of British Columbia through the B.C. Cultural Fund and Lottery revenues.

The Capilano Review is a member of the Canadian Periodical Publishers' Association and COSMEP. Microfilm editions and reprints are available from University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

We are always pleased to receive good material, especially from artists we haven't published before, but we cannot take responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. Manuscripts should be submitted to the Editor, and must be accompanied by a self-addressed envelope and Canadian postage to ensure return.

Printed in Victoria, British Columbia, by Morriss Printing Company Ltd.

Second Class Registration Number 4593

ISSN 0315-3754

THE CAPIANO REVIEW

Number 37

Fall 1985

CONTENTS

	4	Robert G. Sherrin Section
	5	<i>Certain Things</i>
	29	Interview
	64	Images
<i>Two Poems</i>	68	Dierdre Hanna
<i>Two Poems</i>	70	Norm Sibum
	80	Contributors
Detail No. 10		COVER
		Robert G. Sherrin



Robert G. Sherrin/A SPECIAL SECTION

CERTAIN THINGS

I

I'm not sure if the doctor told us the Latin name, but I do recall that he leaned back in his swivel chair behind the desk and performed a half-twist, first to Mother and then to you. As he talked, his hands were gently rising and separating as if he were tossing water to a thirsty garden or releasing a small bird. I saw nothing but the full extension of his fingers, and I retracted a little from the sound of his happy voice. This was the man who'd removed my tonsils, promising me ice cream in endless amounts after the surgery but who did not warn me of the hours in the recovery room where I would lie on my side, flexing like an accordion as I vomited blood. This was the man who'd removed the wart on my finger by drawing from a smoking steel cylinder a cotton swab he claimed was so cold I would feel nothing. But I did. The ice, impossibly, had burned me, and my face went slack in shock. A week later in school, the wart fell like the dark node of a tiny toadstool to my desk, and I rolled it over the slanted writing surface, through the shallow trenches of the initials of past students, until the tiny ball disappeared into the well that during penmanship period held my bottle of ink. Now as the doctor folded himself toward you and Mother, I stepped a little closer to the window of his office.

“... or let’s just call it a slipped disc,” I heard him say.

I imagined a plate skittering over the floor, as mine had done when, in a rage because my sister Maralyn would not let me near the stove, I swept our luncheon tableware off the counter, one Melmac plate twirling on its edge like a top, the other sliding loudly across the linoleum to a clattering halt against the wall. Maralyn had simply turned to me and declared in nasal tones, “Wait till Mom and Dad get home.”

Now, in the doctor’s square little office in a building that overlooked a flattened grey ruin of a cold Calgary spring, I heard him begin to explain the problem in detail. I put my face to the window where already on that late Saturday afternoon tiny wings of ice were stretching outward from one corner. In the empty lot, a boy my age stood kicking at a lump of darkened snow, and across the street from him the sun, seemingly too weak to extricate itself except by surrendering to gravity, was momentarily snagged in the bare limbs of a tree. I put both hands to the glass to feel the cold, and I heard behind me the same coolness now in the doctor’s voice. There was no laughter as there had been when he’d pulled that steel cylinder from an even larger one and asked me if I liked icicles. There was no clucking of his tongue as there had been when he’d pressed flat my own with a little wooden paddle to check the condition of my tonsils. And I knew he wouldn’t ask me after this consultation if I wanted a few of those wide depressors to add to my popsicle stick collection. There was just the steady tone of his voice, the boy outside kicking that frozen lump, the growing ice near the palms of my hands, and the word “operation” uttered several times. When the voices were finally stilled I turned. The doctor was writing. Mother was looking at the clock behind him. Her hand was in yours, and you stared at her. I imagined for a moment I was on the edge of a play, the type that older students performed for Friday morning assemblies. How could a person be another person as well, I’d wanted to know as boys and girls of Maralyn’s age went through their ritual actions. Now I watched you watch Mother. You were wearing an old Air Force jacket, and on your feet were the sheepskin-lined flight boots that I would secretly don in our basement before climbing our trunks that were piled against one wall. Sometimes I’d be scaling one of the Rockies we could see from the base on a clear day. Sometimes I’d be piloting one of the old bombers that rumbled low and wobbly over our school before

settling with a loud mechanical sigh to the runway. Now, one of your flight boots tapped nervously against the edge of the chair where the wood leg dug deeply into the dark carpet. Your free hand moved back and forth from knee to chin, rubbing one and scratching the other. Between gestures you patted a jacket pocket where I knew you kept the cigarettes that Mother often rolled on the big Vogue machine. I could smell the open tin, the slice of apple, and I could see the rubber sleeve of the roller like a dog's long tongue holding the strips of paper, the thin rows of tobacco. When she pressed the handle, there'd be a sharp snap, and the tongue spat out finished cigarettes. Now, without looking up, the doctor said, "It's okay, go ahead," and you reached for the pack inside your jacket. You used both hands to light the cigarette, and as you turned to exhale you noticed me. You beckoned me over, and I went to stand beside you.

"Mom's going away," you said quietly.

I nodded.

The doctor looked up and grinned.

Mother glanced at you. "Oh God, don't say it like that."

The clock clicked into momentary place. If this were a school day, I thought, I would already be at home. I sniffed the smoke from your cigarette, and when you reached for the paper the doctor had slid across his desk, I returned to the window. The boy was gone and so was the sun.

The hospital was called Holy Cross. You took me four times, usually on Fridays when school was finished. You'd wait for me at the end of the bus loop in the sky-blue Hillman, its tailpipe putting clouds of exhaust, your window half down, cigarette smoke spilling out, being immediately whipped up and away by the cool wind. The last of the snow squealed under my rubber boots. I sat beside you in the front seat and took a deep breath to better appreciate the smell of leather and smoke. You gave me a wink.

"How goes it, Mister B.?" you said while putting the car in gear, cigarette in your mouth.

"Okay. I won the spelling contest."

"Oh yeah?" You checked the mirrors, revved the engine, and cautiously edged the little car onto McLeod Trail, keeping well behind the big diesel buses while they made their lumbering turns towards the airbase. "Get *all* the words right?"

I was watching the army kids walk home, some of them with hockey sticks already setting up an impromptu game in a driveway. The girls would stay to watch, I knew. I let them disappear from view before I answered. "No. I missed two. Carol missed five, and she was second."

"I guess you'll just have to learn to spell, won't you?"

I looked over. You were concentrating on the road. As usual, your hair was slicked back so you looked always in motion, and I suppose you always were in a hurry to be somewhere else. Your favourite expression was "Let's get a move on!" even if it only meant finishing dinner before retiring to the livingroom and the pleasures of our first TV set. Even then, I used to wonder if you'd had a childhood, or if you'd leaped over it, like a strong puppy prodded from behind by its master who called out as his training cane clipped its heels, "Let's get a move on. You're going to have to learn to jump faster!" Maybe your pace was due to your being a boss. I'd visited your department and knew you had an office of your own with baskets overflowing in paper. You had charts on the wall, and they were littered with numbers and coloured bars. There were maps and blueprints that still smelled of ammonia. On them were marked all the buildings on the airbase, even the house we lived in. When I stared at those maps I felt like a bird sailing high above the prairie, looking down on our little military village: there between #139 and #151 ran the path where I'd race Brightman's borrowed bicycle; there the hill by the swimming pool where we'd toboggan in winter; there our driveway where you'd pull away in the mornings, and I'd mimic you in my wagon, carefully backing out of our sidewalk onto the main one, remembering that the first movement ahead was always a brief movement back towards our house, as if your car and my wagon were nodding a farewell to those inside. Then we'd correct our steering and be off for the day. Now, I was tempted to say to you, as you nervously slowed for an easy turn on the hard, crusty road, "I guess you'll have to learn to drive in the snow, won't you?" But I just watched you slow the car and asked instead, "How do you know when to shift gears?"

"The engine tells me." You butted your cigarette.

That made no sense at all. The engine didn't speak any language I knew. "But how?" I turned in my seat to face you.

You glanced at me then checked your mirrors to make sure there was enough room for this lesson in motor communications. "Watch *and* listen," you said and put your foot on the gas. The little

Hillman darted ahead. I watched the speedo needle climb the inside curve of its dial. I heard the engine grow louder. Then suddenly one hand left the wheel and you moved the gear shift. "There," you said, satisfied.

"There what?"

"The engine gets so high pitched it tells me to change gears."

That still made no sense to me. I plopped back in my seat and crossed my arms and legs to show my dissatisfaction. "That engine does not talk," I declared.

You chuckled and pressed the lighter into its socket. I glanced up a sidestreet to see another hockey game in progress. You waited till you'd lighted your cigarette and that first, sweet smell of ignition had gone. "Well, someday certain things will just make sense," you said softly then banged at the horn as a car at the next corner dared edge beyond the stop sign. "Be careful, buddy." You wagged your finger at the other driver. In my annoyance I thought you were warning him. But I should have realized that given our destination and the dilemma of Mother's injury, you were really warning yourself. That's why you slowed down after that intersection. That's why you smoked two more cigarettes before we reached the hospital. That's why, while stopped for through-traffic a block from that eerily glowing cross, you turned to me just before the light went green. "Okay, Mister B. You tell me when to change gears." And I did.

The cross was what unnerved me. It stood alone in front of the hospital. In the thin darkness of evening it produced a cold light that cast a circle that I saw as a definition of private property. It was not a cross of wood like the ones I recalled from the cemetery, unable to support a human body, merely signposts: "X marks the spot," I used to say to myself whenever we went to place flowers on your father's grave. He was a man I'd never known, so his absence was meaningless. The photos I'd seen of him were simply images of an old man who didn't, to my eye, resemble you. He had close-cropped hair and a moustache, while you were always slicked back, clean shaven, lean of face. Even the picture of Mother, Maralyn, and me, as well as the rest of your family, gathered around this plot was simply a document that tested my powers of detection: this was Grandmother in her stout dark clothes, staring dully at the camera; and this was Mother on one knee in a summer dress, her head to one side, whispering to the chubby little boy in formal shorts and

shoes who grinned happily, raising a hand to wave at the photographer; this was Maralyn behind us, both hands clasped over her first purse, a little hat on her head which supported the hand of your sister who was obviously crying. The light, like that of Holy Cross, was harsh, and you, as the photographer, were simply a shadow that intruded on the lower privacy of the image. All that I knew. But this cross in front of the hospital, planted in the earth still frozen and caked in snow, was different. It was large enough to support a body, and it too marked a spot where people might die, where even children might become still shapes that are wrapped in white and carried away in the hours after dark.

We walked towards it without talking. The snow squeaked. When we reached the bare sidewalk, you stamped your feet and left two white imprints on the dark concrete. You tossed your cigarette aside and thrust your hands in your pockets. For a moment we stood alone, and I watched you prepare yourself because, in fact, you were preparing both of us, and I too put my hands in my pockets. The light from the cross lent a prominent curve to your forehead over which a strand of hair had fallen. You twisted your shoulders, not quite a shudder, not quite a shiver, and when you next exhaled it was the pure white of breath that escaped you. Finally, you looked down at me and withdrew a hand to rest it on my head. You squeezed lightly. "Well, Mister B.," you said so softly I could barely hear you over the long hisses of traffic on the roadway far below us, "let's get a move on." I went a step ahead of you, and to the figure who appeared briefly at the lobby doors, it might have seemed that you were directing me, whereas I felt the tug of your hand and I pulled against it.

You were known at the reception station and were called by name. The shift nurse smiled at me. "How are you tonight, young fellow?"

I was not a young fellow, and like you, I was not in the mood for jokes or chit-chat. "Okay," I said.

"Hard day at school?" she wanted to know as she scribbled our names in a book, a light behind her blinking, a soft bell bonging in another corridor, a rack rattling with bottles as it was wheeled past her station. I nodded, but she didn't notice. I thought about school to which someone had brought a garter snake that morning. It had been half frozen, half asleep in its midwinter nightmare, for the boy who'd produced it from a brown shopping bag swung it about like a striped whip causing girls to shriek. Maralyn and her friends had

turned away in disgust while I'd stood rooted, watching the green and yellow line rise and fall over the head of the boy who grimaced as he swung the creature. The snake had whistled through the air, a moving line no one could cross or interrupt. Finally, after it was all over, I walked away to the door at the far end of the school where we younger students were admitted. Now, the nurse tapped her pencil and my eyes focused on her again. "Go ahead," she said to you. "I'll take care of the conversationalist here."

You touched my head, unzipped my jacket. As you squatted to straighten the front of my clothes, I could smell the tobacco and hair oil. Your brow was furrowed. You sighed and then raised your eyes to mine. "I'll be back in a little bit," you said. "And then you can go in, okay? Meantime, you stay here and read." You pointed to the seats in the waiting area and the piles of magazines and comic books strategically scattered on little tables. Then you were gone.

The nurse guided me by the shoulders. "Hard day at school?" she repeated.

I shrugged.

"Lots of work?" She stopped by a large, well-padded chair. A man on crutches hobbled past and mumbled something.

"No," I said. Then I looked at her. "But they killed a snake."

Her mouth opened in feigned surprise. "Oh they did, did they? In your science class?" Her large warm hands brushed my neck as she helped me remove my jacket and scarf.

"No." She pulled a stack of comic books closer to me. "They swung it until it hit the side of the school. It was almost frozen."

She looked down at me, quite puzzled. She leaned closer. "Just what sort of school do you go to?"

"Elementary and junior high combined."

"And who kills snakes there?"

"The guys. The ones in Grade 8."

"I see." But I could tell that she didn't. She squatted beside me and dropped her hands to her knees. They were covered in white stockings so her skin was revealed like a pale chalkboard through a layer of dust. I looked up. Her eyes were wide with concern. I wanted to explain it to her. I tried to gulp a little air, but my chest was already full, so I felt as much as heard my words fall out of me. "And when I came out of school today the snake was there, but it was broken into pieces, and some of them were flat, and some of them were sort of smashed open, and people just kicked them." I blinked at her. I couldn't explain anything.

She cupped my face and gently forced my lips upward. "Don't worry about cruel boys now, you hear? Just think about your mom."

"Why?" I managed to say through my reshaped lips. The nurse dropped her hands. "Is she going to die, too?"

The nurse shook her head. "Not a chance, honey. She's going to have an operation, that's all."

"When?"

She sighed and glanced back at her station where a couple had arrived and were now gently tapping their boots. "Look, I got to go," the nurse whispered. "Now you just read and don't worry about your mom. And don't think any more about snakes." She pushed against her knees and stood looking down on me. "Okay? Just for me?"

I nodded.

"Good." Then off she went, her white shoes chirping on the hard floor.

In the alcove by the stairs was a large statue of the Virgin Mary. She stared into space, and I wondered if she saw anything there. If I were to climb to the level of her eyes, what would I see? Maybe it was the future and that's why she stared so steadily outward—so as not to lose it or have its image crack. I turned in my seat to better judge the Virgin's point of view. She was staring beyond the reception station, out the front doors of the hospital where the white cross glowed in the dark. Some future, I thought, annoyed that she would see only the death of her son. I shivered a little. I thought of Mother and felt my stomach creep under my ribs. I took a big breath and eased back in my chair. I reached for the first comic on the pile. It was *Wonder Woman*. I put it back and closed my eyes.

I had been listening to the sounds of the lobby. I dreamed it as the waiting area of an airport. I created for myself a large room with rows of comfortable chairs. A woman like the nurse, but not dressed in white, would take your ticket and tell you where to sit. I could hear the footsteps of families around me as they moved to their appointed spots. I heard bits of conversation and the names of foreign cities and people unknown to me. I heard talk of Paris and Andre, words of delight about seeing George again. Mothers told sons not to eat all the candy before the plane ride, and sons told sisters that they'd have to wait until the plane took off before they could take a full breath or their chests would crack. I could smell

the luggage, the leather and the scent of face powders and perfumes in overnight cases that women opened and closed as they checked their faces. I could hear fathers rustling their newspapers and blowing their noses. I heard bells bong and announcers call for pilots and stewardesses. Families were paged and told their planes were awaiting them. And in the alcove, I could feel the presence of the airport statue, a woman in a long dress pulled back by a breeze, her hand raised in welcome and farewell, staring forever out the big glass doors of the building to the runways.

Then you touched me on the shoulder and gently wrestled me out of sleep. You gave me a moment to focus, to still my suddenly thumping heart. You chuckled at my look of bewilderment. "It's okay. I'm here," you said. "Mom wants to see you." You pointed to the corridor and told me the number again, though by that time I already knew her room. You would stay in the waiting area and smoke.

She lay on the inclined mattress and rested her head on a pillow. The door was ajar, so I looked at her for a moment before I stepped inside. She didn't seem like the woman in the photograph at the cemetery. Her eyes were closed now. Her glasses were folded on the night table where a tumbler of water stood beside a brown bottle. Her fluffy slippers were pushed half under the bed, and her pale green dressing gown was draped across the foot of it. One hand rested on her chest and around the wrist was a plastic bracelet. I closed the door behind me with a click. She didn't move. After a moment, I began to tip-toe a little closer. Before I could reach the bed, her face was released into a smile and she said, "Come here, you. So I can get a better look."

I jumped to the edge of her bed and put my nose to hers. "Is it me?"

She crossed her eyes. "Yup. No one else I know looks like that." Then her arms magically appeared, warm and nearly weightless around me. Then I sat back and we talked. That night the questions about school, friends, Maralyn were kept to a minimum. Finally, she said, "I have to tell you something."

I nodded and settled myself quietly on her bed.

"Monday morning they're going to operate on me, and when you see me again I won't be able to move very much. I won't be able to give you a big hug, and you won't be able to sit on the bed." She tried to smile. My insides were beginning to squirm. "But we can still talk," she added softly.

I didn't believe her. "Mom," I said, "What are they really going to do to you?" I looked down to see my fingers coiling round one another.

She reached to cover them with her hand. Then she told me.

For the most part, the ride home was quiet. The dashlights barely revealed your face. Only when you pulled on your cigarette could I make out your profile. You drove slowly, methodically. I started tapping my foot against the side of the passenger well. That's how the tension began.

When we turned onto McLeod Trail my boot was banging steadily. You shifted gears and looked at me as we reached the strip of highway that goes past the runway threshold, between the school and the airbase itself.

"Cut that out," you said, lighting another cigarette, blowing the words against the windshield with your smoke.

I banged a little harder.

Your voice bore down: "I said '*Cut that out*'!"

We were moving through a brief parenthesis of prairie night with the lights of the airbase ahead and those of Currie Barracks behind. To our left I could hear a Lancaster bomber coming in, engines wailing, its navigation lamps visible. Suddenly its landing lights burst across our path.

You swore and gripped the wheel. I booted at the passenger well even harder. Your open hand came out of the noise and the bright light to strike me on the back of the head. The car swerved for a moment, the huge plane grumbling wildly over us, and since my head had been turned by your hand to my window, I saw the aircraft's squat tail section come into view, the undercarriage touch down, the cloud of ice and smoke from its tires in the back light of the blue runway lamps. I kept kicking. "No!" I yelled and repeated that word for every boot I gave the inside of your car.

We lurched to a stop. The windshield wipers suddenly came on, and the horn blared as you slid across and grappled with me. I can't recall what you said at that point. Our arms flailed and finally, of course, you pinned me, your foot pressing on mine to stop my kicking. You bounced me against the seat till the wind went out of me and I sagged.

"Dammit! Just what the hell's the matter with you, mister?" You punched the blue leather beside me. "Just who the hell do you think you are?"

I couldn't get my breath.

"Huh?" you yelled. "Tell me, or I'll march you right down to the basement when we get home!" The basement was where you took either Maralyn or myself and removed the broad leather belt from your trousers and applied it to our bare buttocks.

My head was still turned away from you, and I could just pick out the Lancaster making its distant turn to the taxi strip. Cars were going by us, their passing wind rocking our little vehicle. Again, you asked me to explain myself and killed the windshield wipers with an angry flick of your hand.

"She told me," I said.

"Who told you what?"

"Mom." The Lancaster had disappeared now. "She told me they're going to cut her open on Monday."

You groaned and rolled back behind the wheel. "You already knew that," you said.

Now I turned to you. "She said I can't sit on her bed any more, or hug her."

You nodded, resting your forehead against the coolness of the steering wheel. You stared into the dashboard. You pressed the gas pedal, and the Hillman revved but didn't move. I leaned to watch the RPM needle mimic in its quick half sweeps the sound of the engine. Out of that movement came your tired, flat words. "They told me she may not walk again." Up and down the needle went, and with it your voice. "They said she has a disc in her back that has to come out." The engine whined, sighed, whined again. "Then they're going to fuse two other discs together to fill in the space." A car went past on the highway, and I listened to its tires hum against the cold pavement until their sound merged with that of our idling engine. You'd stopped pressing on the gas. The needle had come to hover over the number 1. "They say it's a tricky deal—no guarantees."

I moved a little so I could rest my feet on the transmission hump near the heater outlet. I crossed my arms. "You should have told me."

"Yes." You still stared into the dials. "Yes, I should have told you."

I could hear another Lancaster making its approach. For once, I didn't want to be there when it dropped low and loud and brightly lighted out of the night.

“Can we go home?”

You looked at me and nodded, then slipped the car into gear, and slowly we moved out onto the quiet highway.

II

The Chinook came on the second following Friday. In the morning, I stood on the cold creaking boards of the bus platform, stamping my feet with the other children, keeping one eye on Maralyn who wore a pink toque and had a habit of slipping away from me to join her friends—those young men with thin dark wisps of hair on their upper lips and other young women who were newly rounded under their wool coats and ski trousers. She'd disappear into a hole in the crowd, and before I knew it the blue buses had arrived, and she was waving to me from the first one as it departed while I nervously sought the company of classmates who, if we were late, would at least comfort me in the gymnasium where demerit slips were handed out by the vice principal.

And you? You had become something of a mother who rose well before us and began heating water for porridge, who dashed in your blue winter uniform from kitchen to diningroom calling out your orders for the day: me to clear the table, Maralyn and me to do the dishes, she to lock the door behind us. Then you'd sit at the head of our shrunken gathering, sip a coffee, and smoke a final cigarette before leaving for work. You'd not pick me up after school that day, for I'd seen Mother twice since her operation, and she was coming home on Sunday.

"Don't forget to lock the door," you said from the hallway.

Maralyn looked at me, rolling her eyes and shaking her blonde bangs. I toyed with the mush in my bowl and wished that the brown sugar hadn't been put away.

"Did you *hear* me?" you called, stamping your feet into your boots.

Maralyn set her spoon aside and turned in her seat. "Yes. I heard you."

"Then why don't you answer?"

"I'm not supposed to talk with my mouth full."

"Yeah, right. You be home before five."

Again she rolled her eyes. "Yes," she moaned.

"What was that?" I heard the storm door open.

"Yes. I said 'yes.'"

Then the creak of the screen door. "Okay. Bye you guys." Both doors slammed. In a moment the Hillman was started, and Maralyn left the table to watch you drive away, waving, before she put Pat Boone on the record player and turned up the volume. Then she wagged her finger at me and mimicked you. "Now get a move on there, Mister B. You can't leave the table until you eat that porridge."

"But Dad," I sighed, playing her game. "It's cold, and I'll throw up if I eat it."

"Then you'll eat it again."

"But Dad," I whined.

Maralyn pulled on her finger as if it were a cigarette and exhaled a mighty cloud of imagined smoke—pink, I saw it billow forth. "You're just going to have to learn to eat puke then, aren't you?" she snapped.

We laughed as we scraped our half-empty bowls into the garbage, pulling aside paper towels and a porridge box to conceal our waste from you. We did the dishes. We complained about Mother's absence, and we complained about the cold. Maralyn was drying the silverware, and she said to me, "What did Mom tell you when you saw her after the operation?"

I watched Maralyn's fingers slip the spoons, the forks, the knives into their appointed slots in the bright orange cutlery tray and slam shut the drawer. "She didn't say much. She looked sort of tired."

"That was the anaesthetic."

"The what?"

"The gas they use to make you sleep."

"Ether?"

"Yeah, so what did she say?"

"She was happy to see me. She'd be happy to come home."

"Nothing else?"

"No." I glanced out the window to see Roxanne leaving her house across the street. I knew that in two minutes she'd knock on our back door to walk Maralyn to the bus stop. "What did she say to you?" I asked while watching Roxie say goodbye to her dog.

"Oh, not much," Maralyn sighed, carefully folding the towel and draping it over the chrome bar inside the sink cupboard.

"Like what?"

"Like nothing you should know until she tells you."

Roxie was on her way now. "Like what?" I insisted.

Maralyn smiled down on me then went grim. "She showed me the incision." I imagined a little line of stitches on Mother's back, and that's exactly what Maralyn wanted me to see, for after a moment's pause she pointed to herself and drew her finger in a line from hip bone to ribcage. "That's where they went in," she said as if she were indicating a flap to a tent. "They pushed everything aside and took her disc out. Why do you think she was lying on her back, Mister B.?" I tried to swallow so I could say something, but my mouth wouldn't work. I could hear Roxie's footsteps. "Now get ready to go," Maralyn said, clapping her hands and giving me a push toward the clothes closet in the hall. "Roxie's here. We have to get a move on."

By that afternoon I'd almost forgotten Maralyn's words, though on the bus to school I kept hearing them, while the old commissionaire who supervised us did his missing-finger trick, and I stared out the window at the fields where the tips of brown grass showed above the crusty, grey snow. A Lancaster was taxiing onto the main runway, and just taking off was a Harvard trainer, mustard yellow, climbing at a steep angle like a wingless yellow grasshopper. Beyond the base, beyond the foothills, were the Rockies—clear that day, steep blue and white. I kept hearing Maralyn's words: "That's where they went in." I could see those doctors in white. They had stood over me when I'd had my tonsils removed and stared down as the rubber mask came over my nose and mouth, someone behind me saying, "Count to ten." And I did while looking up into the face of our doctor, white-capped, white-masked, his glasses reflecting my sheet-covered body. And now I could see them going in, climbing over the white pickets of my teeth and angling themselves against

the steep incline of my tongue, finally reaching the site of my problem, one of them probing with a stick then yelling back up my throat, "We're going to need the big one! This kid has a real set of tonsils here!" And likewise, but with greater mystery and fear, I imagined the same white-smocked crew cautiously entering that long opening in Mother, with packs on their backs and little leather bags in their hands. But after that, nothing. I had no idea what was in there, no notion of intestines, pancreas, lung, liver, or appendix, much less what a disc looked like or how big it was. I squirmed in my seat. I felt my spine move. I cringed at the thought of an arm moving past my stomach to grasp my backbone and twist it into correctness, hearing a parental voice call out, "Now straighten up, or you'll be walking like a monkey."

All I remember about school that day was the mid-afternoon when we fourth graders sat quietly hunched over our desks, scratching away with nib and ink in penmanship period. I was pleased with the roundness of my Os and the deft curlicue that initiated my capital Ts. Then the bell rang. It was mid-afternoon recess, and by that time the Chinook had truly arrived.

We ran about in near hysteria. When that warm wind comes, it affects me like a narcotic. Gone was all care and half my clothing. I, like many others, would first simply turn my face to the breeze and inhale the warmth, the scent of water and newly liberated prairie soil. Something stayed in the nostrils: it was the smell of instantaneous spring, the actual leap of a season into one's blood through nose and mouth and every exposed pore. There were those first few minutes of stunned delight and slowly accruing acceptance, then I, and the rest of us, would feel the body begin to tingle, the blood begin to cheer as, oddly, the pulse grew stronger yet smoother. Then off we'd go, running about, some like me with arms spread and eyes slitted against the warm sun reflecting off the melting snow, pretending to be little aircraft of swift birds, swallows swooping after imagined insects. The schoolyard was full of children chasing one another and yelling, pounding their feet in new mud, smelling the lift of turf, others wading in the rivulets that flowed from the shrinking crust of snow. Teachers strolled, coats open, heads back in laughter, tolerant of any activity, madly allowing the first use of soccer balls, chatting with students and colleagues as they patrolled the grounds. They held the assembly bells by their clappers and on that day did not turn them down and begin ringing them until twice the normal recess time had passed. The last

portion of the afternoon was a series of peaks and troughs as classes were slow to calm down then sank almost as awkwardly past the point of efficiency into dreaminess and near sleep. Later that day, when I alighted the bus at the platform, I carried my coat over my shoulder, my toque and mitts stuffed into pockets, my sweater unbuttoned, and boots left to flap on my feet as I splashed through the water rushing along the curbed street past our house. The snow was all gone.

Saturday was washday. Mother would always do the laundry by herself while you played golf, made repairs around the house, cut the grass, or went back to your office to do more work. That Saturday was warm and damp. You were in a good mood but nervous at breakfast. During Mother's absence the house had grown untidy, laundry had waited longer than usual to be washed, and you were not one to rely on neighbours. "No, no, everything's under control," you'd say when Mrs. Henderson appeared with an empty clothes basket. Or "Dorrie, I've already done this week's load," you'd chuckle to Mrs. Andrews if she stood on the porch with a box of soap flakes in one hand and a jug of bleach dangling from the other. Oh no, we were self-sufficient. We would get things done on our own.

"You clean your room and sweep the floors, okay?" you said to me over our bowls of cornflakes, sugar like a white pavement over them, a weekend treat.

I nodded vigorously.

"And you," tipping your cigarette in Maralyn's direction, "clean the kitchen, bathrooms, and livingroom."

She nodded as well.

"I'll do the vacuuming and dusting, and this afternoon I'll do the laundry."

We were in agreement. The morning would be devoted to housework. In the afternoon, I'd be free to play outdoors, and Maralyn would go with Roxie to the movies. Dinner at six, hot dogs as usual.

There was one thing I wanted to know. "What's that box in the den?"

The den was not a den. It was an alcove on the main floor near the stairs. It was where our freezer was kept. The night before I'd noticed a heavy curtain had magically appeared across the alcove entrance, and when I pulled it aside, I noticed a box against the

wall, a square box with a lid. It was a little taller than a night table.

You pushed your bowl to one side and looked at Maralyn. She shook her head. You looked at me. "It's a toilet."

I was puzzled. "But there's a toilet upstairs. And there's a toilet in the basement."

"Mom's coming home tomorrow."

I bounced once in my chair. "I *know* that."

Maralyn piped up. "Mister B., she's not going to live in the basement."

I squirmed again. "I'm not stupid. I know that too."

Your voice came from the opposite side of the table, and I turned. "She's not going to be living upstairs, either."

That I didn't understand.

"Not for a while anyways."

"So where's she going to live?"

"Down here. On the main floor."

I didn't like the sound of that. I watched you closely for an indication of irony or the first wrinkles round your mouth which might suggest the smile that accompanies a joke. But your expression didn't change, and mine must have hardened, for in a moment our eyes had locked, and we began to stare each other down. You took a deep pull on your cigarette and didn't even break your gaze, smoke escaping your nostrils, fingers plucking a bit of tobacco from your lip. I didn't understand what was going on, and I resented not being allowed to know: the glance between you and Maralyn had seemed to register more than five years' age difference between her and me. Now, I heard Maralyn's spoon scour up the last of her cereal and rattle into silence as she dropped it into the empty bowl. I did what both of you wanted of me and lowered my eyes, taking up my own spoon to force the sugar platform beneath the milk, my cornflakes left bobbing like brown lily pads on the surface.

Smoke from your cigarette drifted across the table. Maralyn cleared her throat. "May I please be excused?" she said.

You must have nodded because she quickly rose, took her bowl, and went to the kitchen where immediately water began to run and the radio on the fridge was turned up.

"Hey Mister B.," you finally said, "what's on your mind?"

I stared at my bowl. "Nothing."

"Yeah, okay. So why aren't you eating?"

"Not hungry."

Another cloud of smoke bounced off the table in front of my bowl. I pushed it to one side. I'd only wanted to ask whether Mother could really walk, yet I already knew the answer in part. There was an even more important question I had to put to you, but I didn't want another struggle in order to force a reply. So, knowing you wouldn't dare say a word, I stood and walked away, leaving you to finish the stub of your cigarette, your fingers shaking just a little as you ground it out in the ashtray.

That afternoon I roamed the neighbourhood with Brightman. We loped about pretending we were cowboys, but there was no concentration to our adventures. We were still under the influence of the warm breezes. We didn't even carry our cap guns or bother with hats or regalia. We simply loped, like horses and riders, between houses, up the path to the swimming pool, down to the playground, and back. We paused at his house for a snack where his mother appeared in jeans and a loose sweater saying winter was over and gave us noodle soup and sandwiches stuffed with salami and cheese. By mid-afternoon, I'd fallen on a slippery lawn and soaked my corduroy pants. I presented myself to you at the back porch where you were hanging out some sheets. Your hair was windblown, and you were squinting even though you stood in shade.

"Take them off," you snapped, "and leave them by the washing machine."

I scuttled downstairs and disrobed, retaining my long underwear which was also wet, but I dared not confess it. I went hurriedly to my room, drew another pair of pants from my dresser, donned them, and sneaked out the side door to rejoin Brightman. Twenty minutes later I was back with the same problem. Now you were wrestling with sheets that had become entangled with one another. Roxanne's mother started over. She called to you as she crossed the street that she had a free line and you could use it. You waved her off, angry, and yanked at the sheet until it snapped free and flopped to the muddy lawn. You began to curse. Roxanne's mother stopped at the edge of our driveway.

"Hey Hercules," she said, "why don't you let me give you a hand?"

"No, dammit!" you yelled. "If I can't manage a sheet, how the hell can I do anything?"

"It's not the sheet you have to manage," she said.

"No, of course not. It's the damn wind I have to control."

She smiled. "Well, actually it's a lot closer to home than that."

You turned to her, one end of the sheet in your hand, the other trailing through the mud. "Edie, just what the hell are you driving at?"

She shrugged. "Well, buster, you can run yourself through the mill until she gets home, but it's not going to be easier when she gets here. It's going to be different—a *lot* different."

"I know that."

Edie stepped onto the lawn. She was wearing a dress printed with green flowers, and she had a large apron tied over that. Her hair was red, like Roxanne's but Edie didn't make fun of me. Now she put her hands on her hips and looked up at you. "It's going to be difficult, buster. So you'd better start treating your neighbours like neighbours, not a pack of intruders." With that she wrenched the sheet out of your hand and rolled it quickly into a ball.

"Edie."

"Don't bother," she said. "There's plenty of time for that later. Right now I've another load of laundry to do as well as find Dirk's damn fishing gear. You guys," she said. "Life is so awkward when it isn't 8 to 4."

"Hey, Edie, now wait a second." You took a step towards her, but she was already on her way back across the street.

"Later, buster," she called over her shoulder. "We can talk when you come to get your sheet and a coffee. Say an hour and a half. Now, take care of Mister B. I think he's got a present for you."

You turned then, spotting me behind one of the other flapping sheets. I stepped back.

"What now?" you said.

"I fell."

You looked down at your feet and kicked a small clod of grass onto the driveway then followed it and kicked it back onto the lawn. You pointed to the house. "Leave them by the washing machine. This is the last time. You hear?"

I fell again an hour later. I began to cry, but Brightman pulled me by the scruff of my jacket away from our house and the basement and your leather belt. We sat on a curb beyond a housing block and there, talking about airplanes and horses, making fun of friends, my trousers dried enough for me to go home.

I found you in the basement. The washing machine was silent, but water gurgled in the drain beside it. The room was large, and it was shadowy now with the overhead lights turned off. This was where I climbed the trunks. This was where Maralyn and I played hockey, binding our legs in rags to simulate goal pads. There was the furnace, large and black in the corner, behind which rested the pedal-less bicycle that sometimes I boarded when I was lonely and rode it into the brighter projections of my imagination. You had promised to fix the bike for me when I was old enough to ride it, but we had yet to agree on that age. I was walking silently towards the old canning stove near the furnace when I spotted you. You were sitting on the edge of the rag bin, elbows on knees, cigarette in mouth, head down, staring at the floor. You seemed not to be breathing. Smoke curled upward and disappeared in the light of the window behind you. Your hands hung like a couple of cloths from your sleeves. Then you began shaking your head slowly from side to side. You took the cigarette from your mouth and pressed the balls of your hands to your eyes.

Carefully I backed away until I reached the stairs, and carefully, with tiny steps I went up them till I could take a breath. I waited a few moments then began loudly to descend. This time, when I rounded the corner, you were leaning into the washing machine, swabbing it out. Your voice was a low rumble.

"What?" I called out.

"Fall down again?" Your words boomed.

"No."

You stood up and turned to me. "Good. You getting hungry?"

"Yeah."

"Okay." You bent to retrieve the large round lid to the machine. "You get the weiners out of the freezer, and I'll go over to Roxie's and get Maralyn."

I turned quickly and went upstairs. I heard your slower steps behind me, then the swoosh, creak, slam of the screen door. From the kitchen window I watched you stroll, loose-gaited, hands in jacket pockets, towards Roxie's house. You paused at the end of our drive as two boys went by, guiding paper boats in the gutter water. You watched them move well down the street before carefully stepping over the fast running little stream and crossing the street. When you reached the other side, I turned from the window and

went to the alcove. I opened the freezer, half tossing myself into it, and balancing by my hips on the edge of the appliance I retrieved from amongst the carefully segregated loaves of bread and brown-paper-wrapped chunks of meat a package of weiners. I relished the cold breeze that washed my face as I leaned back, dropped to the floor, lowered the lid, and turned to go. But there was Mother's toilet. Its woodgrain was shiny, and now I noticed there was a chrome handle affixed to the wall beside it. I set the weiners on the freezer then cautiously reached to open this new contraption. Inside, it was lined in porcelain, and at its bottom was a removable bowl. Without thinking, I turned and hoisted myself onto that small perch in the little nook. I thought for a moment about Mother. When last I'd seen her in the hospital, she had, as I'd reported to Maralyn, not said very much. Her face had been more than a paleness, almost a translucence. Her neck pulsed. Her hair was brushed out. Her mouth moved dryly, but when at last she'd opened her eyes and noticed me on the chair beside her bed, she smiled.

"Hello, Mister B." Her voice was a rustle. She tried to reach for the water glass on her night table, but I was quicker and, somehow, bent the straw to the proper angle and put it to her lips.

"Thanks," she said, her voice clearer now. "How are you?"

"Fine." I watched her closely. I wanted to pull the sheets back and see for myself that she was all there. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "I'm doing fine. I want to come home."

"I want you to come home, too."

"Problems?" she asked.

I shook my head.

"How's Dad?"

"Okay."

She turned her head so she could look more directly at me. "Hey Mister B.," she called softly. I was staring at her slippers, still half pushed under the bed. Now I looked up. "He's scared," Mother said, "just like you are."

"But of what, Mom?"

She smiled. "Of me. Of change. That I won't walk."

"But will you?" I had to have an absolute answer, absolute proof—as you did—that not only would she walk but walk exactly as before. Mother looked away from me. Then under the sheets, slowly, her feet moved up and down. Her face was twisted with the effort. After a few moments, her feet came to a rest, and her face went slack. She opened her eyes to stare at the ceiling. Without her glasses she looked like one of the neighbour women or one of the older teen-agers who worked at the base cinema, or ran the cash at the grocery store, or played tricks on me at school. Her voice, when it finally came, was calm. "I'm scared, too."

I don't think another word was said. Eventually she slipped her arm free of the covers and offered her fingers which I touched with mine, much as we do when we teach children about pigs going to market and pigs going home. That warm Saturday, that was what I remembered of her: the fingers against the white sheet of her bed. Then I looked up, and I saw that from that toilet, which Mother would call her throne, I had a clear view down the hallway to the back door. Through that I could see the edge of the flapping sheets and two girls flash past on bicycles. Across the street I noticed movement behind the windows of Roxie's house, and then its door was opened and you and Maralyn emerged, Roxie and Edie waving the two of you towards me. Awkwardly, as if my back could not yet completely bend, as if my legs were still weak and unsteady, I reached for the new handle and slowly pulled myself off the toilet. I lowered its lid, reached for the weiners, and stepping back into our home, I pulled the curtain behind me.

—for Nicholas and Rose Sylvia





i

Robert G. Sherrin / INTERVIEW

Bill Schermbrucker and Ann Rosenberg interviewed Bob Sherrin in Dorothy Jantzen's home in Vancouver on August 27, 1985. That conversation was emended by Sherrin, and then edited for presentation here. Speakers are identified by initials.

AR Let's talk about your recent photographic work first.

RGS The work is done, more or less. Large prints again. But it goes off in a direction a little different than what's been seen before. These are not long exposures. This work in a way is site-specific because I designed it for a black basement-like environment. These will be 38" x 50" prints which are already printed. They will hang about ten feet apart in a very, very black space, and they will be very softly lit so that they will just emerge out of the blackness. And they will be bracketed by photograms placed at either end of the space. These photograms will be about six feet high and on them will be the words of the show. One is "vers" and the other is "us," so "versus." One photogram will have a female figure on it; the other, a male figure. So there'll be eight photographs and two photograms. And for me they will be something along the lines of a poem.

AR Well, I've noticed in the exhibited works I've seen of yours words of introduction, words as titles, words on the image are important.

RGS Yes, and this time I decided to use the words more than I have in the past, and to use them directly in the image. To use as images in a way. Also I wanted to use words that had values within their syllabification, if one can use that word. And I was looking for words that had within them the possibility of other languages affecting them. Those were some of the considerations that went into the choice. I also wanted a background grid of images that were somehow urban.

AR It looks like it's taken from Robson Square.

RGS It's actually Nathan Phillips Square (Toronto), but it's similar.

AR That Bank of Nova Scotia, is it site-specific, local?

RGS No. The photographs are site-specific only inasmuch as the works have been designed for a specific space.

AR In an aesthetic sense, not in a referential sense?

RGS There are some references that are local, like Expo, but there are images that come from New York, from Toronto, from off the T.V. Some are collages I created, and all these different things were rendered photographically in the final prints. So this work really draws together in one way all the stuff I like to do with images.

AR Seems to me these also refer back to that T.B.A. multi-media project (see *TCR* #33) mentioned in the section we published on Ed Varney in 1985, taking things out of the cultural context.

RGS Well, as I said to Dorothy before the interview started, one thing I've been doing consistently for the past two years is to make a calendar a month. Every month I sit down, make a collage which gets turned into a calendar, and this calendar gets posted on the darkroom door because more than one

person uses it—there has to be a place to sign in and sign out, a mechanism for doing that. So I decided to generate a calendar. Some of those have been photographic, some have been photograms, some have been drawings, some have been pasteup collages—all kinds of things and almost all of them have had language in them somewhere.

BS Was that the interest in the grid?

AR Yeah, I can see it right there, all those calendar associations. . . .

RGS I hadn't even thought of it. . . .

AR Even move in move out, clock in clock out. . . maybe you should design three-dimensional calendars and sell them!

RGS I've got to learn how to sell something pretty soon! (*Laughter.*)

AR Photograms are where you put a shadow image of something on photosensitive paper by flashing a light so that it makes an image instantly and to scale on the paper?

RGS Yes, you simply don't use any film at all in the process. You take photographic paper and expose it to light in some fashion, with an object between the light and the paper.

BS We used to do that with leaves in a printing frame. . . .

RGS And I've been told you can even do chlorophyllograms. You can place a negative on a leaf and let it react with the sun, and it will form an image on the leaf because of the whole process of photosynthesis. When Edward Weston took photographs in Mexico and other places and made 8 x 10 negatives, he'd sometimes contact print them in the sun, which is one way to do it without a darkroom.

AR These big prints, the photograms you're planning will be largely black with grey shadows, the reverse of the others which are going to be quite light, white with some dark moments?

RGS Yes.

AR The smaller photographs involve collage techniques. How were they made?



10000



For
a more

f est

RGS I started off with a photographic print made from the negatives that I took in Toronto; then I pasted on these prints words that I wanted. I purposely took all the words from newspapers—just tore them out and pasted them on. Next, I shot each “collaged” print in a process camera on lith film which removes all the greys so you get a stark black, stark white negative. Then I cut windows in those negs, slipped in other negs that I wanted to use, contact printed those on glossy photographic paper, then copied those prints on 4 x 5 negs and then enlarged those negs to 38 x 50 as the final images.

AR The scale will be very impressive.

RGS Well, I’m a little disappointed with the technical quality of the final prints, but I can’t do any better with what I’ve got in my darkroom. I have to print these on the walls and the walls are not perfectly flat... so the prints aren’t quite as sharp as I’d like them, but they’re the best I can do. Now the other thing I was interested in, in this show, was the idea of generations and that’s

AR a real photographic idea.

RGS Yes, it’s photographic, but it’s also human. We all go through generations, and we’ve all changed by the generations we’ve gone through or the generations we’re aware of. So, here I wanted to create with those two photograms a little visual bracket, within which I could look in my own way at male/female values, or interactions, right now, as I sense them. I didn’t try to create a statement; I tried simply to respond, in the way that I make collages, by combining elements as they strike me at the time, thinking about them, and adjusting them slightly. I wasn’t trying to dictate a thesis. I wanted to make references, and try to create, in the selected words, references that the viewer could take and begin to work with the visuals. That’s why I broke all the words into syllables or parts: so that you could take one syllable, or what might be one word, and apply it to various aspects of the imagery and play around.



in

Philad.





ter

AR Do you want to discuss the connection between your writing and your visuals if there is one? Or are they separate activities? For example, in this recent piece there are words and you've described them as poems.

RGS At one time I used to think of writing and visual art as very separate things and I certainly work in a very different way when I make photographs than I do when I write. But now I'm working generally a lot more slowly than I ever have—perhaps that's because I know I'm not going back to my job, so I have the time to think about things. I take more time; I get more pleasure out of it. But I realize that, when I look back at some of the stories I've written, almost all of them, aside from whatever image content might be in them, have to do with photographs—with photographs that spawned them. There's a story called "Man in the Black Magic Box" that actually makes reference to photographs my father made and the story called "Alone Together" comes out of a travel experience, but also I worked from photographs when I wrote that story. There's an image in it of a horse dying in a street in Egypt which I have a photograph of. And that image, during the creation of that story, constantly stuck in my mind. So I think photographs and my writing have, at least in the last few years, been related.

BS I was thinking when you were talking about generations in at least two senses of that word—generations in the photographic process and in human generations—that there was, perhaps, some correlation between this and your use of point of view and person in your writings. You use the second person more often than any other writer I know, and that's a very curious person to use. It sets up a very uncomfortable convention. You are telling the person you are addressing what they did. I put that also together with the theme of the first story of yours that I knew which was "Schadenfroh," that we published in the review (*TCR* #8/9), which is all about looking down on other people. So I see a connection with what I see *here* in the photography and in your photographs on the walls of my own house, a kind of dislocation of normal perspectives, and what happens in some of the stories where you get a very nervous-making second person usage.

RGS When I think back on the use of the second person, I realize I'm really attracted to it. Using the second person suggests that you might be speaking to a reader, you might be speaking to another character, but it really also opens the possibility that you are actually speaking to yourself because we often do refer to ourselves in the second person. I think I became aware of this when I read Edna O'Brien's novel, *A Pagan Place*, which is a novel written in the second person. It's ostensibly addressed to her sister, but it is also a lot about what that character speaking from the "I" point of view experienced as a girl of, say, thirteen, in Ireland. So, I am also looking inward at the same time as I'm speaking to that possible other person. There's another sense of dislocation there too: you can't help but look back in a piece of writing, just as you can't help but look back in a piece of photography.

BS I want to ask you about rewards of age. (*Laughter.*) You've chosen difficult media, not popular media. Your first novel was published in 1977 (*The Black Box*) and you didn't get any reviews?

RGS Well, there was supposed to be one. *The Ottawa Citizen* actually wrote the publisher and said that if we supplied a photograph they'd write a review. So I provided a photograph, then I was out of the country for a while and when I came back I happened to be in Ottawa and phoned the *Citizen* and asked them when the review was coming out. The guy said, "We wanted to review it, but there was this theme of incest and we didn't think it was going to be acceptable to our readers," so that's as close as I got.

AR You should republish it this year, it'd be a hot seller!

BS So you've had this novel published by one of the smallest publishing houses in Canada and it got no reviews, you've published stories in magazines and they haven't been collected, you've been working for five years on a second novel and it hasn't seen the light of day, you've collaborated with me on supposedly a money-making commercial fiction and put enormous effort into it and it hasn't seen the light of day; how much farther can you continue with this writing that hasn't gotten serious attention and doesn't generate some money?

RGS Probably for my lifetime. You'd be a fool to think you're going to make money writing!

BS So what is the reward then, from writing, for you?

RGS Sheer pleasure, I suppose. But that's a good question. I guess I'm principally attracted to taking a point of view—which is really nothing more than investigating my thoughts and feelings about something—and the language I discover through that exploration. It's a habit I have, a pleasure I indulge—I can't explain it any more clearly than that right now. I love the making of something—the falling into the activity and the comfortable, quiet, but usually pretty intense place I discover there. I remember writing a short story and even though I took notes and worked on it for several months I got the core story down in five solid hours of writing and I can't recall that five hours of writing. All I know is that I was absorbed in a way that I'm not even when I'm making photographs... it's the satisfaction of just believing something. The other satisfaction I get is that sometimes people read what I've written and respond to them, sometimes people look at my photographs and respond to *them*. The satisfactions I get right now are really from the contact with other people the work has provided for me: the fact that I may be able to collaborate with you again is a satisfaction. Also a photographic collaboration with someone else. The more of those satisfactions I get, the fact that I don't get any money or not much, doesn't matter any more. I live in a society that's totally wrapped up with money, so if I really want money, need money, then I can't see that much problem going out and getting *some* of it.

BS Have you thought of assembling your published stories into a book?

RGS Hmm. There are a number of stories. They go back a lot of years, but I don't think that if you put them together you'd see any kind of connective thread. Some of them are out of a surrealist phase that I was in when I started to write, some of them go through a much more disjointed, kind of filmic mode, and when I look at those now I see many different types of writing, all rather unconnected. Those stories that were published in [*TCR*] issue #18 for example jump around quite

radically. When I look at one now, or have a chance to read one aloud, I always edit them down, because they're over-written.

BS But publication in a volume now would allow you that option, to edit them down.

RGS I'd have to *rewrite* them—it wouldn't be editing! The stories I can see right now as the basis of a collection are "Alone Together," perhaps "The Man in the Black Magic Box."

BS *That* has certainly attracted some attention. Didn't it get into the Oberon *Best Canadian Short Stories* of 85 or 84?

RGS Yes, but that's one story. I remember years ago driving with you South and at that time I said I'd like to write a collection of stories with the title *That Boy in his Narrow Bed*. That idea turned into a short story that was since published in *TCR* [18], but that collection has never gotten any further than that and those three stories might have been the start of a collection.

BS Why didn't you do them?

RGS I just haven't been able to go any further with that material—at least not yet.

BS For someone who's happy with collage in his photographic work it seems to me you have a remarkable desire for uniformity or continuity in your stories.

RGS I hadn't thought about that, but I guess I judge collections of stories partly by what I see in terms of their similarity, in terms of their developing in a single vision, or adopting it.

AR That's apparently how short story anthologies get published, but I don't like that, I mean, the idea that you can predict the mode, or that there has to be a theme. Unless that theme is twisted and turned formally I'm going to get bored. I don't know enough about publishing, but I just hear say that unless you have a collection that meshes it's going to be hard to get in print. So go for the opposite, be a quirk.

BS Yes, exactly. Think of the quality of stories like the one about motorcycles, beautiful, beautiful work. You have several stories of tremendous power. I think you should do a collection.

AR You do it in your other work too. I mean, you've talked to me sometimes about how you want to change your mode, change your attack or something, and that's like changing your style or like changing your projected image, whatever you have in mind for that and I think that is refreshing.

RGS But I also know I have a limited range that I can change within.

AR Yes, but at least you're giving it a good shove in various directions. I mean you could have gone on with those wonderful images that you made for the Coburg show, made those the centre of your art, worked them into a formula, sold a lot, got them into bank foyers, if you'd been into that.

RGS Yeah, I could probably have sold them to provincial governments to use as anti-drunk driving ads. (*Laughter.*)

AR But you wouldn't do that.

RGS Oh, I don't know, if the circumstances were right. . . .

AR Now what I'm saying is that I like it that you didn't stand in the same place. This new series has urban images too, but they are different.

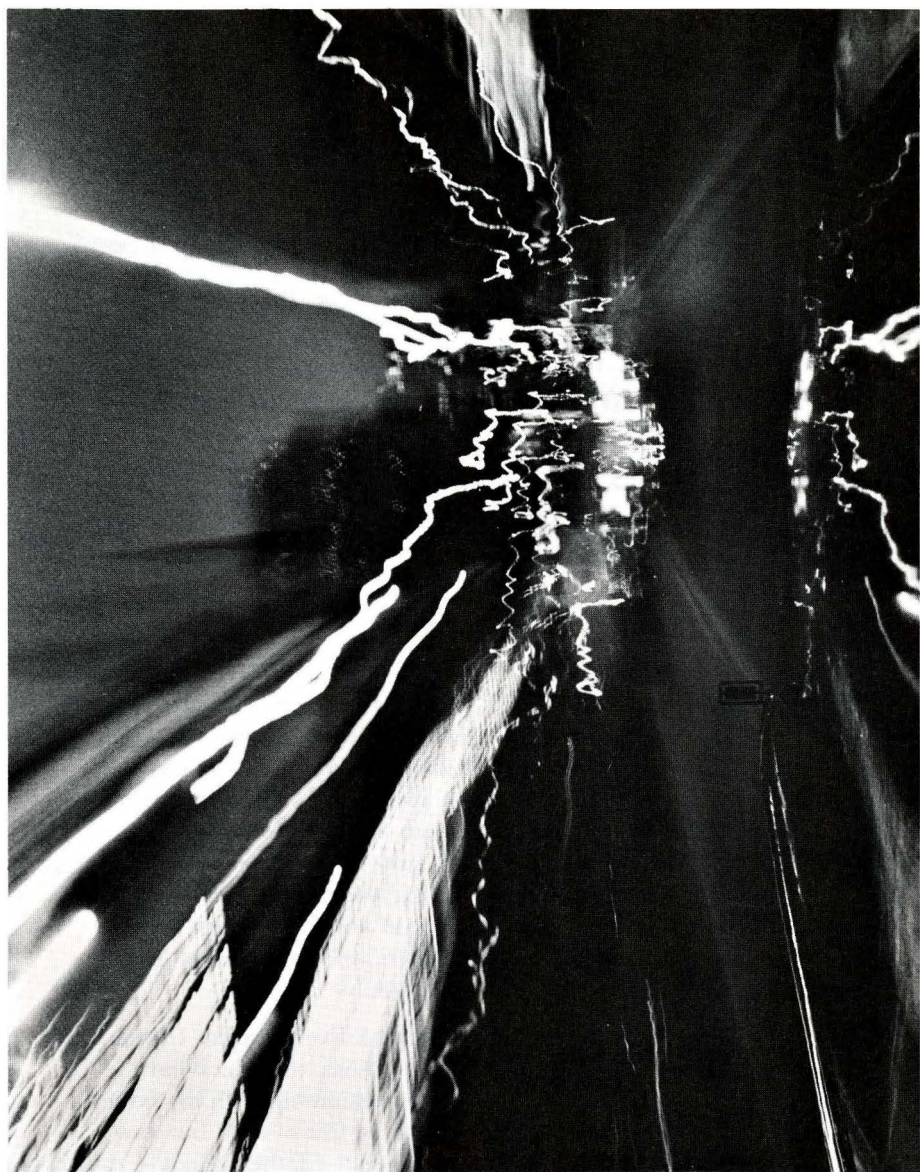
RGS Well, I thought I'd better do something different. I thought I'd better try something different. Technically I'd never done it before, so that was a learning process. Also it affords me a chance to use images in a way I hadn't used them before.

AR I want to go back to connections between your writing and your photography. In the photography, time lapse is important. In the last story you published in *TCR* I had a sense that it was written by putting together a series of written moments; is that any kind of valid comment to make?

RGS The long exposures I've done are just that. I began to put the camera in situations in such a way that it would simply record what was going on, because that's what a camera does: it just records what happens in front of it. What intrigues me is that our eyes don't work like a camera yet we grant photographs a special veracity, a proof of some kind of what actually







happened. Sometimes I think we believe the photograph more than our eyes. I think it's fascinating and abominable that we now have photo I.D.: a photo of me is more real, more accurate, more acceptable than my human presence. So, in those photos that were at the Coburg, I decided to play with time, to open it up and close it down. The same thing happens to me or for me in a piece of writing or when I'm working on a piece of writing—you deal with time, you deal with memory, you deal with the loss and the gain that you find within that. It's amazing how time gets stored up or looked at, speeded up or slowed down in a piece of fiction. That's what makes straight recording within writing boring. Like somebody's journal or diary entry of what they did at eleven o'clock doesn't interest me in the least, and probably doesn't interest anyone else either, because there is no attempt to deal with time except as recording one second after another.

BS Can we go on to something completely different? Is that O.K.?

RGS Sure.

BS It's clear to me that after I met some relatives of yours (*laughter*)—that in the earlier writings of yours that I knew and especially *The Black Box*, you were writing, I wouldn't say therapeutically, or even with a therapeutic motive, but in order to define yourself. You were writing in order to define yourself under the onslaught of quite enormous psychological forces. In other words your writing was a form of rescuing your identity, out of your childhood and growing up and so forth. Now it seems to me that there isn't that kind of impulse or compulsion; do you think that you've changed?

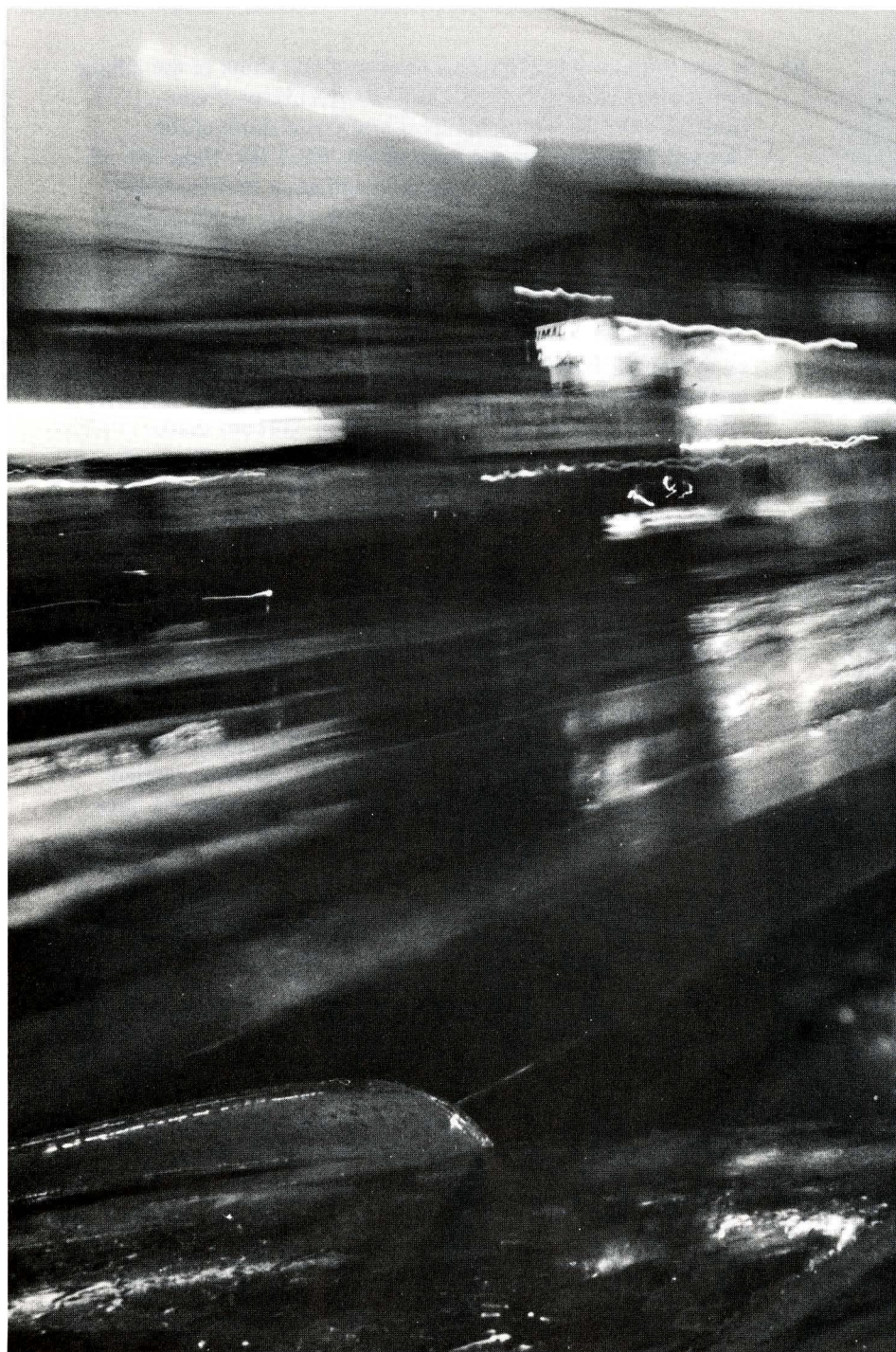
RGS Well, I hope I've changed and I think I've changed. I think I'm still interested in a lot of those things, though. What you're basically referring to is my relationship with my father. At one time, of course, I wanted to be free of that, but now I'm more concerned with learning what a father *is*, not avoiding the notion of it or dwelling only on the painful aspects. And that goes right back to the image of generations. I can't escape that and I don't really care to because I no longer want to define myself *in reaction to* some other people—I'm more interested in how we mesh rather than how we might diverge.

BS If you think of *The Black Box*, or even if you think of the killing the gophers story ("Forced Out," *TCR* #13), or if you think of "Dream Three-hundred" or if you think of the claimed biography on the back of *The Black Box*, those are all stories that involve an enormous imaginative stretch—a lie, perhaps; certainly an invention—but the later writings from my personal experience and from discussions with you have shown almost a reverence for literal accuracy about things. How do these two things go together in your mind as a writer? On the one hand the ability to exaggerate, to metamorphose or to transform and as, for example with these pictures, to create collage, to take a picture that comes off a T.V. screen and shove it in a window on a square in Toronto that's been through four or five generations of photography; and on the other hand to be concerned, as you say in the note you wrote in *TCR* #18, about not simply making things up but getting them accurate.

BS Well, I don't know, but I don't see them as two different directions. The desire to be accurate: I don't know if it's at all wrapped up with trying to be factual. I find a good deal more truth inside fiction than I do in non-fiction, in factual writing. And when I stop to think about it, when I look back at what I've written, when I realize what I'm doing when I'm working, I see that I don't have much of a resource beyond my own experience, so I have to draw upon whatever I have as experience, upon whatever I recollect about that experience. I suppose to make it important enough for me to work with it, I have to make it as clear to myself as possible while at the same time realizing that it has gone through a set of eyes, and mind, and a set of biases that are mine alone. So my views of anything, be it an object or be it a state of mind, are to a degree an assumption for everyone else.

BS There seems to be a preoccupation with violence in your writing, I wonder how you explain that? There's the clubbing of the gophers, the death of those children on the road, there's the blowing up of the whole past at the end of *The Black Box*. I think the last sentence is, "We didn't come from anywhere."

RGS I can't remember the last sentence of *The Black Box*, but I meant it to be ambiguous, the house doesn't really blow up. But yes there is a lot of violence in those earlier works and





even in the recent ones. I can explain part of that, by the fact that the gophers *were* clubbed. That was the environment I lived in at that age, I lived on an airbase.

BS But the sun set and people kissed, also, all those things went on too.

RGS Yeah, but not at the age of nine and ten. . . .

BS Sure they did. But if you select out the clubbing of the gophers. . . .

RGS Well, that *impressed* me. It's what I recollect more profoundly and therefore it's part of that bias, that assumption I referred to. Those clubbed gophers were a horrible form of truth for me. At that point I began to become aware of the kind of world I was living in, which was not necessarily the bigger world, but the world I occupied in 1960 in Alberta on a little airbase, where you went to baseball fields and watched baseball games, and for distraction people would appear with plastic bags with gophers in them because they got 3¢ for a tail. If somebody protested about the agony you were putting the gopher through, you didn't let it go, you beat it to death so you could take the tail off and claim it. I didn't trap gophers, and I didn't beat them to death but I saw people who did it, and that certainly affected me. I lived in an environment that was full of violence or implied violence. Bombers landed every day around the houses I lived in. . . .

BS So is it partly from being an army brat. . . .

RGS Partly, sure it is. I can remember being on an airbase in 1965 in Germany when a Canadian who happened to be passing through there briefly said to me, "You're crazy to be on this base, you're stupid to stay here if you can get out because this is a violent environment," and I thought he was crazy to see it that way, but years later I don't.

BS Your access to the base, to the military was through your father, wasn't it? That was the circumstance that brought you there, but he wasn't a soldier or a gunner or something, his function was more a civilian function.

RGS Well, his function was administrative, but still, at the same time, at the age of fourteen, I lived in a place where at least once a month air raid sirens went off and your fathers would disappear for a day and they'd pull out their sidearms and

play war for a day. And bombers would take off and bombers would come back.

BS What I'm trying to get at is if your father had been platoon leader or something, from that kind of role model you might be voting for Reagan.

RGS Oh, I don't know. . . .

BS What I mean is, did the fact that your father had an administrative role, something like an observer, make you an observer. . . .

RGS Well, he made me an observer as much as we moved around, so I had to go where he went.

BS But you never saw him go in and kill the enemy.

RGS No, I never saw him go in and kill the enemy, but I knew that was what he was there to do, or help bring about if certain powers felt a need for it, because that was what was bragged about. . . .

BS But *he* couldn't brag about it because he didn't do it.

RGS No, and he didn't brag about it, but his reason for being there was not only to make it possible to build houses on airbases; he was there as part of the whole function of what made it possible to drop bombs on people. When he had to go out to play his little tactical evaluation game, he wasn't there to determine how much coal was to be brought in next year. He was there to help get those planes refueled, and rearmed, and back in the air in twenty minutes. So I lived in that environment for fifteen or sixteen years and I can't say that I disliked it, but I can't say I enjoyed it either, because there was a lot of gratuitous violence and there was a lot of talk about the ability to do away with things and people, and I found that very strange and, in a sense, ironic—to live in Germany in the 1960s when we were there as occupiers as much as guests . . . basically administrating someone else's territory, and to conduct a war, if necessary, and at the same time being in a culture that was so obviously to me, from the first day I got on the bus from France into Germany, much more deeply rooted, much more developed than our own in terms of having been *in just one place* for several hundred or a

thousand years and having done things in that environment with your mind and the materials available to you, I mean, driving through a little town in France with a shit pile on the side of the road was a lot more interesting to me than, say, walking through Barrie, Ontario and trying to catch perch at the end of the wharf. And there was this constant juxtaposition for 3 years of fighter planes flying overhead, screaming, and at the same time I'd want to walk through the woods to get to a castle that had been there for five hundred years. There was this constant battering up against one another of two cultures, one, which was basically rather violent, and the other, I suppose, was kind of violent too, but it was also thick and rich and baffling and held out whatever heritage the Germans had to offer.

AR So is that why you went back to The Wall, to make that early set of photos, because you'd lived in Berlin when you were younger?

RGS No, I'd never been to The Wall until 1981. I'd never been to Berlin and we weren't permitted to go to Berlin, at least I couldn't have gone with my parents because my father was a servicemen and you weren't permitted to go to an Eastern bloc country.

AR Your parents were born in an Eastern bloc country? Is that why you've travelled to The Wall and beyond in recent years, to discover your roots?

RGS My communist roots, my pinko background? (*Laughter.*) Yes. But, actually, they were born here. My family comes from the Ukraine and Bessarabia, but the farthest I've gotten so far is Bucharest, and I may well go back there again.

AR Do your parents retain the language or any parts of those cultures?

RGS No, not really, and that's one of the reasons why I'm interested in going back. My father told me that during the war, people came around to his base, his camp or whatever, and asked for people who spoke any Eastern European languages and he didn't admit to the fact that he did. That interested me, not so much his hesitance to try and be useful, but because he'd come from a life where he was denigrated because he was a "bohunk." So he wasn't going to be a "bohunk"; he didn't

have a "bohunk" name; he wasn't going to admit he spoke Romanian, he wasn't going to admit anything. He spoke English partly as a reaction to being harassed and more obviously as a means to become acceptable in Canada. My grandmother, now dead, spoke mainly Russian and I have relatives in Eastern Canada and the United States who speak Eastern European languages still. Mainly, I want to go back to see the people who came from the same part of the world as my father and mother. And that's probably why I'll go back again, simply to find out. But I don't think it's to find out where I come from but rather to see and sense the influences on my parents, to see what's there.

AR Do you find yourself stirred by elements of that culture, the music, etc.?

RGS I do like some of the music. I certainly like Enescu and Dvorak, Bartok. To me they're "eastern"—only Enescu is actually Romanian. When I go to Bucharest what I'm aware of is not a vibrant culture but exactly the opposite, a culture that's dying because it's being kept down by a foreign power, a culture that's dying because the most talented people within it are leaving the country. I don't know if that's analogous to Canada—we're awfully sensitive about our own culture and how exactly it's constituted, but I know to me it's interesting to go back there to see how people cope with the day-to-day fact of their culture's being slowly dismantled, packaged up, part of it deported, then to come back here to a culture that has analogous fear. . . . Yet we're willingly and totally captivated by American culture. We hate it, but we love it. We'll gladly put ourselves up as movie extras to make a few dollars. The same thing, in a more serious way, goes on in Romania where every day you're being more and more pushed into being this amorphous thing called "soviet," which all of them deny is of any value to them but which none of them can deny has an impact on them every day, whether it's standing in line to buy toilet paper or trying to get a job.

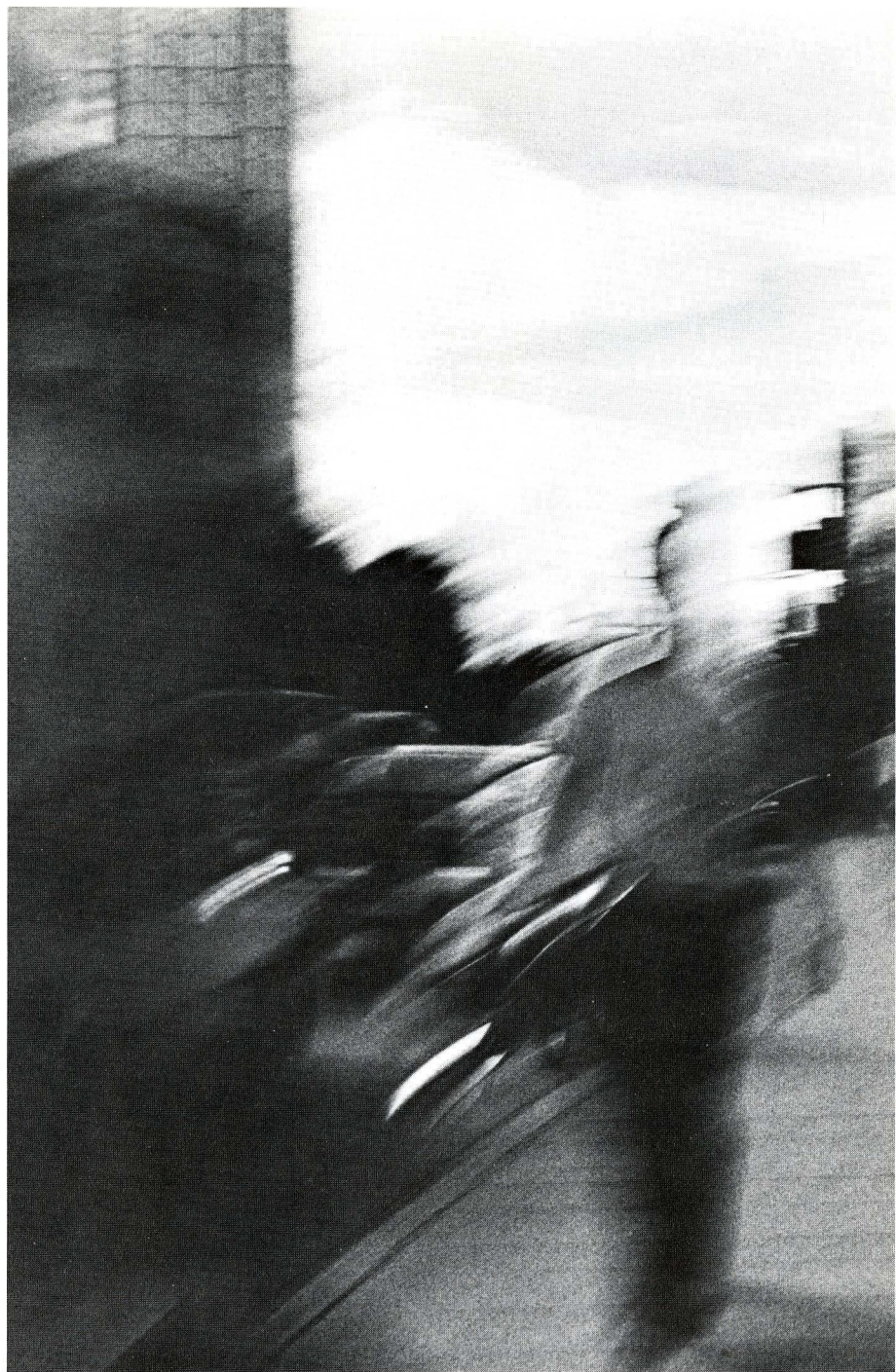
BS Well, recently I read something about Ceausescu who's supposed to be someone who has managed a defence against cultural co-option and with his passing there will just be, *the flood*.

RGS I think that's a lie, to a degree. Romania's seen by the West as being one of the more Western of the Eastern bloc countries, yet it has an internal situation that's even worse than that in Poland because there's no core around which the people can solidify to try and create something for themselves. There is no strong religious centre, there's no union movement. What I think Ceausescu has done is to strike a deal with Moscow, saying, you keep your troops off our soil and we'll keep our people in line for you. So Romania did quite nicely deny Russia access to Czechoslovakia in 1968, but it's still shipping people to its own gulag which is called the canal zone. And, I hear, it is requiring writers to register their I.B.M. balls, so the authorities can check to see if people are writing propaganda. You must hold an internal passport and if you get caught travelling in the wrong part of the town, you'll be questioned. They have fabricated a wonderful history for themselves. Ceausescu is a Romanian Socialist hero, who was in prison at the beginning of the war for having dared to be a socialist, but I'd heard he was in prison for murdering his master when he was a cobbler's apprentice. So it's interesting that there is a museum you can go into in Bucharest, a museum of the Socialist history of Romania, and there the history of the country since the beginning of W.W. II has been reconstructed for the edification of budding young Romanians.

BS So your original country is something the same as my native country except that in mine they pay deference to the West and in yours, to Moscow. . . .

AR I think that some of these experiences, and some of these points of view that come from a person with Eastern European roots have something to say in your current writing. Are you working on a novel now?

RGS The novel I'm starting is going to deal, in part, with my experiences as a sixteen year old in Germany, that airbase, the town we lived in. I've made note of certain instances that I'm interested in looking at again, and I will be trying to say through the characters something about things German now and Canadian now. I am interested in where cultural border-lines cross, the interzone, which is an interesting German expression. At some later date I may deal specifically with the











space between the two walls, because there are two walls in Berlin. There's a two block gap between the wall you saw a photograph of and another actual wall further into East Berlin. You can look across the gap at them watching you while you're watching them. But right now I'm more interested in where cultural lines cross and . . . I'll be trying to create a character that is German that will allow me to carry on discussions . . . so, it will be a combination partly of fact and partly of fiction.

AR Did the novel you wrote with Bill have a political dimension? Are there characters or ideas that connect with this future novel of yours?

BS Well there must be, Ann. I was looking at Bob's first novel and there was a character in there called Hilary and she speaks just like a character Bob created in our collaboration detective novel ten years later. So there will be some connections.

AR Sure, there have to be, but I'm asking are there any conscious connections.

BS Bob would like to build the Berlin wall along the 49th parallel here (*laughter*) and stand there watching them watching us. It's interesting that some of the material we wrote in our collaborative novel about B.C. has actually come true and we've begun to collaborate on another one: so far, two days of brain storming.

AR I guess you'll have to get back to it next year.

RGS When we started that first joint novel it was over a number of beers, with the idea of doing something collaborative and commercial. It started off with pages that were left in a desk drawer, then responded to.

BS At that time Bob and I were sharing an office and so I would go to the office with some anticipation to see what was in the drawer. When you'd written some more you would add the page numbers on the outside of the envelope and initial it. And so the story grew, it was fascinating. All we'd agreed

upon was that we'd write a book but after a few weeks, I began to wonder if we'd agreed in any way what kind of book it was to be. I didn't know if it was to be a thriller or serious literature or what it was supposed to be. A year and a half later we realized we'd produced a monster, so as we began a second one, we went about it more methodically.

AR The way you describe the first joint novel venture is like a Surrealist so let's get back to your first writing style. You went to U.B.C.'s creative writing department where there's a surrealist bent. As a student were you encouraged to writing that went with the flow?

RGS Free association?

AR Yeah, that kind of stuff.

RGS Well, I happened to be there when that kind of writing was pretty popular, at least among the students. . . .

AR And that too was the height of hippie times, right?

RGS Yeah, right, it was 1969. I suppose my greatest influence there was J. Michael Yates. He was also a very interesting man. So yes, there was a tendency to write along certain lines. As anywhere else, you're influenced by the people who teach you. . . . I can't say that much of what I wrote then or what I write now has much to do with instruction at U.B.C. It has more to do with my trying to keep writing, which is difficult enough.

BS In your last year there weren't you in Audrey Thomas's fiction seminar and did that have any influence?

RGS I was in a class that Bob Harlow was teaching and Audrey was there as a presence—she wasn't a student, she wasn't an instructor. She was very helpful because she would comment quite freely about our work, but Harlow was the instructor and he had a certain "diplomatic" role to play. In that situation Audrey criticized your work and did not compromise you. She asked questions and dropped hints and hence she was helpful. But she has remained an influence since then partly through her writing but, in some respects, more because she's continued to write. Being around someone for ten years who

has chosen to write and who encourages me to do that myself, or if it's not writing, it's the pursuit of other goals, is very helpful. I mean being around people who, aside from anything else they might have to do to pay their bills, create their work is a great boon. And being around you, Bill—you teach, but, at the same time you write—that's an instruction you can't get any other way except being around people who're doing it. I don't think Audrey has given me much criticism or vice versa ... it is more the thing of just watching her proceed as a writer and that, I think, is more helpful than having someone come to you to change this adjective for that. Being around people who are committed to whatever it is they think is important has helped me.

BS Bob, I want to ask you about how you perceive yourself as a writer and a photographer and an image-maker in terms of the question of privacy and the public. Do you have a public role as an artist?

RGS Well, in one way right now I don't, because I'm not known publicly, so, as much as the work is me, I'm not known publicly so I don't have a public role. As an artist, as a writer, as an image maker, I feel more and more inclined as time goes by to try to find a way to be more public with what I do, not only by getting work noticed but also by taking a public position on things to do with the arts, which probably comes from my work in the Writers' Union, and wanting more to speak out, or somehow be active in how arts are perceived in the country, in how arts are supported in this country, how arts are understood to be part of what we do or are excluded from what we are as a nation. But as far as being someone who sits down to write or someone who goes into the darkroom to make photographs, I don't think of that very often as a public act and I don't think if I did I would be able very long to continue doing what I do. Whenever I sit down to write, whenever I go into the darkroom to make images, I don't think of the public at all. At that point I don't even know what the public is.

BS Are you conscious of any change that has occurred either in your literary or in your photographic work that coincides with the change from yourself as a very private person to yourself as both a former B.C. rep of the Writers' Union and as a teacher, including taking on the job of department co-ordinator which is a responsible and public job? Are you aware of any change reflecting that change in you?

RGS I don't know if it's effected a change; maybe it's part, maybe they're all part of a change that reflects what I've sensed about myself in the last couple of years: that I'm more willing to take what I might call risks. Yet, I don't think it's anything more than a willingness to be more open about what I do and probably to be less apologetic about what I do, less inclined to rationalize what I do. Now I'm more inclined to go ahead and do what I do and appreciate for myself the pleasure I get from doing it. I think in being B.C. Rep. and from being co-ordinator, and from being a teacher, I've had in all those cases to perform in public. What I've learned—I think mainly from teaching and perhaps a bit through co-ordination—is that what it takes to be a performer in public is making public what is private, making public what is yourself, making public your private beliefs. And I suppose that's what was a bit of a surprise and a pleasurable one to me: to realize that in teaching I could say what I actually believed about literature, and about language, and not only have it accepted but realize after a period of time that it was probably useful and to a degree accurate and to a degree truthful. It was a surprise to realize that in being a co-ordinator, I could actually represent, think, the desires of a whole group of people while at the same time express my own beliefs. I found, curiously enough, that what I believed and felt was important was similar to what other people felt was important, and that was not only a very positive feeling, but simply an encouragement for me, because then I felt I could just go ahead and do what I had to do.

BS In other words you found, you felt, a sense of community.

RGS Yeah. And maybe that's more important than discovering you have some talent. In a community you find support as well as give support to other people.

IMAGES

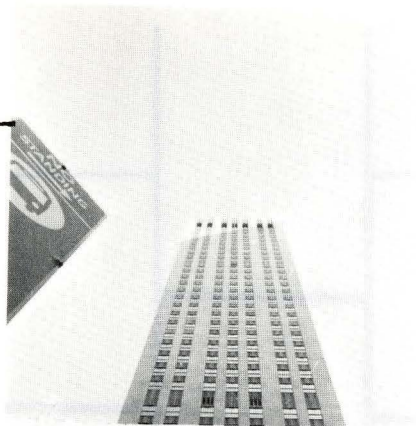
Except for the portrait of Bob, which was taken by Arden Williams, all illustrations in this issue are reproduced from untitled black and white prints by Robert G. Sherrin.

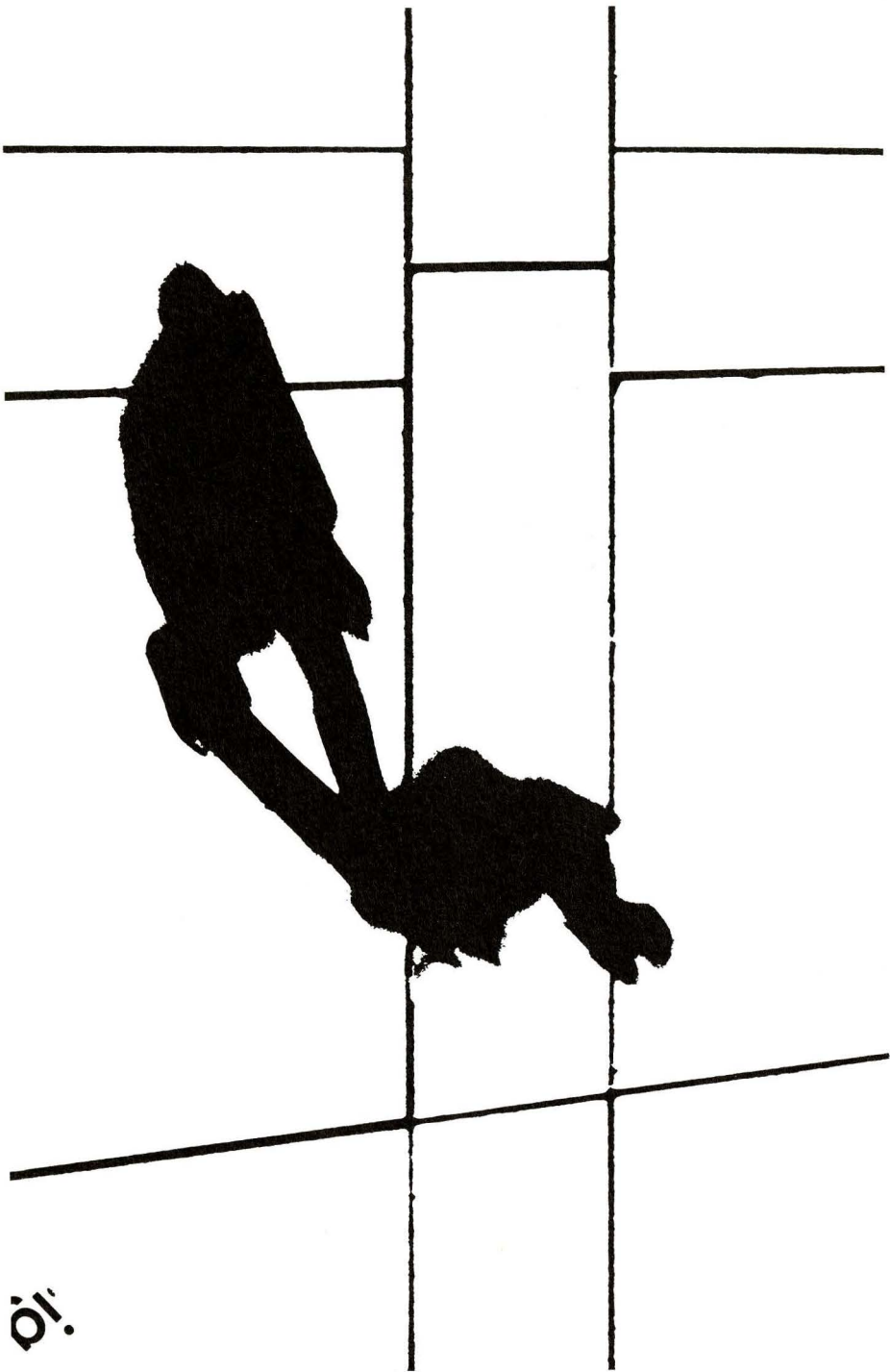
Works from a series which Sherrin began in preparation for his Coburg Gallery Show, *uSAGE*, in 1984 are identified here by number. That series is still in progress. Images which will appear in a future exhibition, entitled *VERS US*, are identified here by letter in the order of their appearance in this issue.

The cover image is a detail of *No. 10* [untitled].

PAGE

4	Detail of <i>No. 9</i> [untitled]
27	Robert G. Sherrin. <i>photography</i> : Arden Williams
28	Detail of [A] from the <i>VERS US</i> series
32 & 33	[A] from the <i>VERS US</i> series
35	Detail of [B] from the <i>VERS US</i> series
36 & 37	[C] from the <i>VERS US</i> series
43	<i>No. 10</i> [untitled]
44	<i>No. 9</i> [untitled]
45	<i>No. 8</i> [untitled]
48 & 49	<i>No. 6</i> [untitled]
55	Detail of <i>No. 12</i> [untitled]
56 & 57	<i>No. 12</i> [untitled]
58 & 59	<i>No. 13</i> [untitled]
65	Detail of [D] from the <i>VERS US</i> series
66	Detail of [D] from the <i>VERS US</i> series





01.

METHOD OF PRODUCTION OF ONE "VERS US" PRINT

- 1 Print on 11x14 inch paper a negative of people walking on grids (shot from city hall ramp, Nathan Phillips Square, Toronto).
- 2 Apply to that print a word, taken from a newspaper, and broken, sometimes into syllables.
- 3 Select another image, or images, that will be "inserted," an image or images that refute, reflect, or comment on the "base" print, or the word applied to it, or both.
- 4 Cut a piece of black paper into a mask that exactly fits the dimensions of the "inserted" image(s). Apply that to the original print.
- 5 Original print, now a form of collage, is placed in a process camera and a line negative is made.
- 6 "Inserted" image neg(s) is placed in the window created by the black mask through the line shot process.
- 7 This completed collage neg is then contact printed on 11x14 inch paper.
- 8 This contact print is copied on high resolution 4 x 5 inch continuous tone film.
- 9 This large neg is enlarged into final exhibition print, approximately 40 x 50 inches. (exact final print size yet to be determined).

NOTE: the size of the "inserted" image may be changed to 4 x 5 inches after further tests have been done following step 7.

Deirdre Hanna/TWO POEMS

Voices.

Darkness.

Believe me (oh

darling, you

swallow, you

dove—

RESID(U)E

I am often alone
vo cabulary in
adequate. You
want me
to draw you
a diagram?

This is my lust.
Sometimes we bite
sometimes we
swallow pride,
some we
love.

Norm Sibus/TWO POEMS

BREAKFAST AT GUENTHER'S

Here, at Guenther's, he looks out of place.
My friend has this problem everywhere.
He smiles at the old drifter, and so, comforts him.
He calms us all down, letting us know, that, like Villon—
keeping the weight of his ass in line,
sweating off the pounds by rhapsodizing—
he counters the effects of the hangman's noose.
A young woman recites from a notebook—
Her lover, bending his ear, is hungover.
'Why this place,' my friend asks.
Ex-cabbie, he says that pushing a hack
was like driving a Womb-For-Hire—
So there's no longer any reason
to drag the extra history along.

He still reads the high-brow stuff—
I still comment on his sweaters—
Familiar with my tactics, he says,
'Why shouldn't I look good—?'
I picture him in a spaceship,
a man dazzled by the controls—
As some ungodly wrenching
begins to cleave him from the streets,
his mind grows dull from the effort
of getting away, escaping death at the hands
of hungry, out-of-work thieves.
Then, gliding pleasantly in space,
he lets out his pent-up breath,
silent and in awe of his destination.

And now he shrugs, 'I've qualified.
What else can I get my teeth into?
Your poems are as messy as this event
of grease and scrambled eggs—'
Up in the mother-ship he's thinking
that a poet who eats in Guenther's
couldn't handle the vast expanses out there—
'What about lunch and dinner,' I answer,
'The ingredients of which we ransacked
all of civilization for—?'
'Ridiculous,' says my friend,
'I see no gods and sorrows hanging around—
just endless exploitation.
Care to buy a slightly used mobile home—?'

'What's it like to drive,' I ask.
'I don't know—It doesn't have a meter.
I flick a switch and pretend
I'm drawing a pail of water.
I fool around in the abyss—
Then I beat it back to the ship.
Mechanisms don't need our dances—
just our intent to move from A to B
in the story of the world.
What's your response—?' I answer:
'I spend my life among strangers.
And history rejuvenates all of them.
Eventually, you'll send out your novel
from a pretty cottage in the south of France—'

Not everyone will care to join him—
His silence up there is bigger, quieter,
less cluttered than my word: Desire.
But call out to an old drifter
taking a crap in the alley—
his thin grey butt resembling rags—
he'll wave the opportunity of a space-ride away.
His privacy as intact as anyone else's,
he'll scorn what is not of this earth.
The poetess might buy the lemon.
She's tired of roses and shit:
The alpha and the omega of her experience—
her notebook becalmed by the light of a rainy day.
Her boyfriend dangles from every word.

'Look,' my friend will insist,
once he realizes I can't make him
look good anywhere, 'I'll write
the hard-core stuff. You stick to beauty,
duty, and local politics.
And we'll split the difference.
As I leave the solar-system
I'll make Cleopatra laugh
long before any old wound says "ouch"
with the salt you rub into it—'
He talks logic to save my poor ass—
his cupped hand a seminar in the art of bitterness,
his lips sprinkled with breadcrumbs,
his face pale with abandoned devotion.

Soon I will submit a damage report,
and my friend will scrimp where he can
to drive a better make of word one day.
The earth begins to believe a poet's lies—
taking stock of herself, pushing for Spring.
A social worker wouldn't know to recall—
like my friend would in a pinch—
Rilke's roses and Mengele's experiments
and the traffic in images between them,
but she'll primp her hair, gird up her courage—
She'll check out a nearby room to see
if some old bugger is still alive in it—
The poetess re-applies her lipstick, and no one
escapes the springtime struggle for order.

AN EVENING IN THE PARK

Superstitious, I can't help but see
potential disaster in every new leaf,
in every blossom's season-opener.
I like the way you've done your hair,
but we have no business cruising around
like privileged jailbirds, forgetting
the dishes, the cats, and the rent,
driving ourselves proudly to the park.
It's too easy for us to imagine
that roughly half of the world approves
of all the pathetic little details
the great liquid night claims as life.
We leave the car, and something in the air
tastes like blood, our share of splendor.

Barely able to breathe, I blame all history
on mankind's weakness for magic.
Feeling shy and strangely light-hearted,
I find these yellow tulips magical.
It's too late now to turn around,
and a hill, gently sloping, calls us to itself.
Housing roots, stones, industrious creatures,
it's probably some bequest, that,
put out to pasture, has life easy
overlooking no field in Genesis.
But I can't tell what old materials
tagged with the names of rich women
are available for a new life elsewhere—
to flourish again on meaning's substitutes.

And remember that when I kiss you
and you think the moment too pat or brief,
affection still serves us as melodrama—
When our mouths do finally meet,
and you have a name and I have one,
and it's not so tedious to say them
along with the rest of the empire's imperatives—
then we pucker our lips and form
a few opinions on how far we have come.
Disfiguring myself, I portray an old man—
I won't be mistaken for anyone's friend,
for another pretty face who tells the fortunes
of those who flaunt their privileges
by gliding here and there a foot above the ground.

One petty rebellion deserves another—If we
walk alone through splendor like this,
so what? At large, we satisfy the state
and ease the burdens that we place
on a few difficult or obliging friends.
The rain broke open the honeysuckle—
The darkness appears to be waking up—
And as we pass beneath these cedars
and you sink deeper into the best times of your
life, your lipstick glows like the new
petunias. My shoes are as faded as old dust.
As man and woman, you and I,
trying harder, flop everywhere, falling back
on our primordial fear of rejection.

A recent dream still bothers you,
and you ask for some interpretation,
unsure as to who or what, on trial these days,
complicates the city's nasty social climate.
I look among the coquettish flowers
for drunk and unruly soldiers—for lazy fires
that lick at your laughing emperors and their
thrones. The peacocks drag around paradise—
Their heads bob on their shiny necks.
They stride toward invisible jealous presences,
wailing like Christ on his cross. No empire
dies just once, and you wear this nightmare
as though it were a party dress.

An oriental girl and a young white male
stand beside a pool and speak—
Seals, raising their luminous heads,
clamber down from the rocks
and obediently fall into the water—
their dark eyes seeming to shine with gratitude.
Everyone will insist on a meaning other
than one that shimmers with the ages—
But this exquisite couple now approach us.
You feel the weight of your unwieldy flesh,
and transfixed by the girl, I look away,
only to follow the grin of her lover
along its warm and careless trajectory
as it rises with its native talent for fun—

So, if the girl weighs as much as a feather,
then, as stone, it suits me to pound
constant contradictions into the grief—
Two weeks too early for the roses?
You dear, a painter, could sketch them in—
you, who would bring a pillow and a beer
and sleep in the shadows of cathedrals
where flesh still has substance.
And now the couple pass beyond us.
Like well-dressed spectres late for dinner,
they swept through our thoughts.
You dig your nails into my arms—
more as a way of pushing your luck
than out of any impolite jealousy—

Nearby, the geese explode into a cloud,
beating their suddenly enormous wings,
and everywhere we walk arm-in-arm
the birds, the flowers, and the trees
break off their conversations on the fly.
Poets, sure of this earth at last,
will purge themselves of this lovely commotion,
agreeing that decent people belong here,
declaring that no command of theirs is good again
for a feather, an alphabet, a fall—
I plunge into something that has been human too long—
the hysteria that spreads in your eyes like pools—
and I sink negligently like a stone,
a parody of what purpose once more becomes.

Certain men would kneel on their sturdy knees
and begin to pray at once,
gathering in their bewildered voices
the cries of these birds in flight.
Sarah would embrace the grieving Abraham
before shutting down her cave,
before her bones grow dark and cold again
and gods, men, and animals grow distant
in the perpetually frozen light.
But you lead me back to the car,
taking hold of my arm as though it creaks
as part of a forgotten door. Hard to tell—
in our moment of impending florescence—
which of us needs comforting the most.

Leighton Artist Colony offers



creative workspace for
Writers/Composers/Visual Artists
Specially-designed studios in
a secluded, wooded site

For further information, contact:



The Banff Centre

Office of the Registrar
Leighton Artist Colony
P.O. Box 1020
Banff, Alberta T0L 0C0
(403) 762-6180

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

After graduating with an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from U.B.C. in 1975, ROBERT G. SHERRIN has been continually involved in creative work in fiction, photography and video. He published a book of short stories, *The Black Box*, in 1976 (November House, Vancouver). His first one-person show, *usAGE*, was held at the Coburg Gallery in 1984.

DEIRDRE HANNA is a recent Art History graduate of Queen's University and a regular contributor to *Vanguard* magazine. This is her first publication in a national literary magazine.

NORM SIBUM is a Vancouver poet whose latest book, *Beggars*, was published by Pulp Press. William Hoffer will be publishing a special limited edition of Sibun's poetry without the assistance of the Canada Council.

\$3.00

ISSN 0315-3754

Coming Next

Fiction by LLOYD ABBEY

a One-Act Play by RICHARD E. BROWN

Installations by JOEY MORGAN

If you wish to subscribe to this magazine, please forward your name, address and postal code number to *The Capilano Review*, 2055 Purcell Way, North Vancouver, B.C. V7J 3H5. Tell us the issue number with which you would like to begin.

Rates for individuals are: \$9.00 for 4 issues (1 year); \$17.50 for 8 issues.

Libraries: \$10.00 for 4 issues.

THE CAPILANO REVIEW