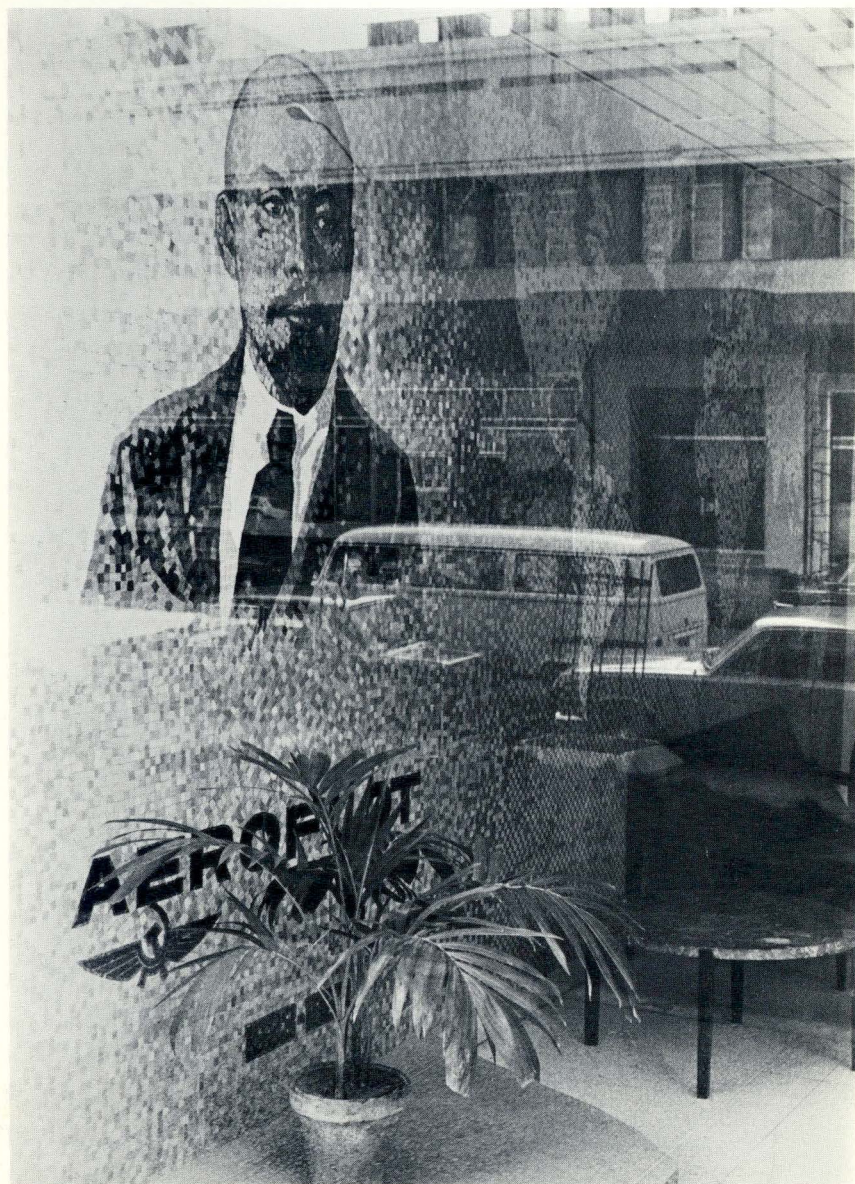


# THE CAPITANO REVIEW



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## Eleanor Wachtel / AN INTERVIEW WITH DAPHNE MARLATT

“The birds don’t sing here”: finding a sense of place in the west coast

Vancouver writer, Daphne Marlatt, spent her early childhood in Penang, a northern Malaysian island in the Indian Ocean. Her family moved here when she was nine years old and she spent her teenage years earnestly trying to assimilate into the strange Canadian life of North Vancouver.

For her, one of the attractions of becoming a writer was that, as an outsider, she could write her way into the world she wanted to be part of. “You write your own script and include yourself.” This notion fit right into a concern with the local that characterized the TISH group of poets she encountered at UBC in the early sixties. And it resulted in books like *Vancouver Poems* and her major work of the seventies, the prose poem, *Steveston*, which started out as an oral history project of the Japanese fishing community, the old cannery camp on the Fraser River.

Daphne Marlatt has always been fascinated by language, the roots of words, the ways in which language shapes and frames reality. It’s not a recent, faddish interest. She grew up in what she’s described as “a colonial multi-cultural situation”; five languages were spoken in her house. The sensation of having her world turned upside down by the move to Canada gave her a sense of the relativity of both language and reality.



Perhaps the biggest upheaval since that early one has been her growing awareness and exploration of the way language informs gender perceptions—a recognition that has been preoccupying feminist writers in Quebec, confronted as they are with the overt masculine and feminine of French, but which has only recently been probed by English-Canadian writers and critics. Since Marlatt was already working and playing with language at the edge, it meant a simple but profound shift in focus.

As someone attuned to both the immigrant experience and the manifestation of its nuances in language, Daphne Marlatt was an obvious interview subject when I was embarking on the dubious project: to find out what was distinctively west coast about the literature that originates here. With the peculiar synchronicity that characterizes the media, both CBC radio and *Books in Canada* expressed an interest in an exploration of this subject. Because of the way in which Marlatt has perceived particular linkages between this place and the way language is used here, her observations deserve more than the capsule treatment they received elsewhere.

*EW* Where were you born?

*DM* Melbourne, Australia. I lived there till i was three, then my parents moved back to Penang, Malaysia, where we lived until i was nine. In 1951, we arrived in Vancouver.

*EW* In terms of the immigrant experience, you've written about growing up with two nostalgias—for England and for Penang. How did you relate to the west coast of North Vancouver?

*DM* In junior high school, i did a "job study" on E. Pauline Johnson whom i thought of then as the epitome of the west coast. Her retelling of the Salish legends of the Capilano band (*Legends of Vancouver*) gave me a sense of the place here, it meshed with my immediate sense of the woods and rocks yet gave me a sense of what it was like before i got here. Sheila Watson once said that you don't really see a landscape until it's been imaged for you in art—you see it through that human version, you hardly ever see it unfiltered. So my first image of the west coast was through Johnson's legends, a suede-bound book of them that my great-uncle gave me in the first month or two of our arrival.

*EW* Did Indian material remain as a source for you or were you wary of it?

DM I've gone through two phases. Only in the last decade have i felt very wary of using it, mainly because i was made conscious that it isn't mine to use. The songs belong to the original singers, and i suppose the stories belong to the tellers. That's why we have to make up our own. But during the sixties and early seventies, i spent a lot of time reading Franz Boas and others. I was fascinated by that vision of spirit and matter, together, inseparable. It's surfaced in much of what i've written. It made the underlying structure in *Our Lives*, was very much a part of *Vancouver Poems*, and, in Mayan form, appeared in *Zocalo*.

EW You once joked that you were going to be Rimbaud and Vancouver was going to be your Paris. . . .

DM *Vancouver Poems* got written out of homesickness. I started writing them in Indiana when i was reading Rimbaud's *Illuminations* and thought what a magical form, i wish i could write like that. And of course, the longer i stayed away from Vancouver, the more magical it became for me. I was conscious of the history of a place, that whatever had happened in a place left an energy stain, a Rorschach imprint. Language is my plumb line in that book: it sounds the feel of a street or beach. Of course it's also sounding itself too.

EW Do you feel a spiritual resonance with the west coast?

DM Yes, this is the place I belong in, that feels like home. When i started writing it came from a need to get at what this place was about, to materialize it in language. I felt that I had a mission—to articulate in as much complexity and detail as i could, the phenomenal breadth of this place and the historical depth of it. Part of that came in reaction to my mother's sense that there was no history here, coming as she did from England. And coming from the tropics, she'd say the birds don't sing here, they just make noise, and i felt offended since i was busy embracing this place. Perhaps my secret audience in writing was my mother—i wanted to convince her.

EW Is this place 'graspable'?

DM I feel a bit like Kawabata or Tanizaki must feel because there is an old Japan that they evoke that is gone or going. I feel there is an old Vancouver that was here when i arrived but is now gone, replaced by a metropolis. The Vancouver i knew had an intimate marriage between houses and nature. In the fifties, it was still a small town. Now there is so much concrete, so much commercial activity that the place itself seems to recede. It will never recede completely, like Toronto where you can't see the lake or know where you are, except by subway map. Toronto is an exclusively human environment while Vancouver is still in places a garden city, though you can see the gardens going rapidly in Kitsilano. Think of what English Bay was like when Ethel Wilson wrote about in it *The Innocent Traveller*—it's not the same place at all now.

EW Are city and landscape in opposition?

DM One dominates the other, unless you have a very small town. In the heart of downtown you don't have a sense of landscape, except for the mountains you occasionally glimpse between the skyscrapers. One of my concerns in writing this novel [*Ana Historic*] is to re-capture that sense of old Vancouver where you had buildings next to woods, skunk cabbage just off the sidewalk.

EW Fred Wah wrote that at UBC you had a feeling for the west coast.

DM I felt very much on the outside of the writers i met at UBC who were legitimately west coast in a way i wasn't. Almost all of the TISH poets were BC born. They were older and better read and more sophisticated, able to discuss poetics. I had no poetic then, just a feel for image. The first things i wrote were steeped in traditional English lit., what we inherited from the Romantics. At home, i was reading Keats and Tennyson and Shelley so it was very hard for the place itself to filter through. That's another reason i was interested in native myth—it was the first human take on something that up until then was not given in words, so i was intrigued with how it was being told.

*EW* Were you influenced by Olson and notions of literalism and locale?

*DM* Very much. Olson's permission or rather prescription to get into your own place and write about where you stood, what was immediately underfoot—that worked beautifully with my original enthusiasm for the place, so it gave me a method.

*EW* How did you get involved in collecting oral history in Steveston and Strathcona?

*DM* Strathcona was interesting to me because i had never realized that there was such a strong immigrant history associated with one particular neighbourhood. I grew up in North Van and for me the city was downtown. I knew there was Chinatown around Pender Street but i was never east of Main in more than an occasional way. When i began to live there, in what is now residential Chinatown, i found vestiges of previous waves of immigrants—Little Italy, Powell Street Japanese, the city's first Jewish community, the first synagogue. It was like doing some kind of dig. With Steveston, my interest was occasioned by taking a Sunday drive there in the spring of '71 or '72 and finding Star camp, the last extant cannery camp, little houses, shacks still standing—it was about to be torn down, the people had moved out. You could sense a whole life there in what they had left behind. Again i wanted to find out more about it, about what that life had been like.

*EW* What happens to a place when you transmute it from documentary to poetry?

*DM* First of all, the place goes on no matter how much you verbalize or image it, it still exists in a certain untapped way. You can only get at a small part of what's there, the part *you* see. Documentary is a very misleading notion because it's based on the false premise that the documenter isn't a filter but only a neutral observer. There's no such thing. Poetry is much more upfront in its subjectivity.

*EW* Do you think of yourself as an urban poet?



*DM* Yes, i'm urban, though landscape outside of the city has a great fascination for me. I suppose it's that sense of crossing boundaries. One of the things i've always felt about this landscape is its softness. It's something Nicole Brossard mentioned in *Journal Intime*. The softness of the air, of the vegetal growth, it feels very female to me, compared to the prairies or the east. It's an easy landscape to live in, there's a voluptuousness about it. The constant rain dissolves edges, boundaries become elusive, permeable. I felt that very strongly in Steveston, that the boat basins—that meeting place between land and water—had a female sensuality to them. It's only natural that boats be named after women when fishing is such a male activity.

*EW* What happens when you visit your pasts, Penang and England?

*DM* If my parents had wanted to perpetuate a sense of the tropics in their children, they couldn't have chosen a better place than Vancouver. This southern corner of the west coast is Canada's tropics, the growth is tropical in its lushness. So it was an accentuation of this to go back to Penang. Both England and Penang are islands crammed with people but Penang still has jungle areas on its hills. England, at least southern England where i was, is more of a domesticated landscape. Even the pubs are like extended livingrooms. People have learned how to live with each other jostling shoulder to shoulder, they've learned to be incredibly polite in order to create a little space for themselves.

*EW* Did it give you a new perspective of the west coast?

*DM* It made me value more the sense of space here, the solitude you find in the bush. In England, the closest i could get to being out in the bush was out on the moor and there weren't trees there, just stone walls and sheep. Here you can go half an hour and get a sense of being in the wilderness. In Penang the jungle was off-limits—poisonous snakes, scorpions, biting ants are more of a constant threat than the occasional bear. West coast people, even if they're very urban, have this sense that they don't have to go very far before the "trackless wilderness" begins and it's a relief, a place to go to get away from the city.

*EW* How does the possibility of vastness affect your writing?

*DM* In two ways. For one thing, it makes for a sense of openness in the writing, avoiding closure, and that's why there has been so much experimentation and innovation in west coast writing. Frank Davey feels that the serial poem is most at home on the west coast. There's a way in which we think that seems to have to do with the ongoing, with a continual linking of bits and pieces that do not close, that are fragmentary, that keep opening out into further pieces. Also because white history is relatively recent here, we have a sense that we're in the process of making history, making it up even, so we can be imaginative. West coast writers flirt with documentary but we're much more fascinated by myth, which is the imaginative equivalent of history. I think somehow too that there is a quality of immersion in west coast writing. We're more immersed in landscape, and many writers are more willing to let themselves get lost in syntax, in language, and find their own route out. In the east, there's a much clearer sense of direction, of mastering the form, that's why it took a while for my generation of writers to have our work accepted back east, because it seemed to them to be amorphous and excessive—"those romantics out on the coast."

*EW* Is there a sense that this is the fringe, the end of the road?

*DM* Yes, definitely, and that's what gives us the freedom to go our own routes, to find our own paths formally. We're faced by the utter wordlessness of wilderness. It doesn't speak. I don't think you'd have a Bill Bissett or a Fred Wah or a Maxine Gadd in Toronto—they seem particularly west coast. Even someone like George Bowering, who is constantly shedding old poetic skins, experimenting with form, that transformational quality seems very west coast to me. I'd claim bp Nichol too as west coast in a similar way—after all he was born here. The transformational, *and* the silence, also appear very strongly in Phyllis Webb's work. And there's the same engagement in various forms.

*EW* Do you feel that landscape is simply inhuman or benign?

- DM It's benign here in terms of its temperature, but not in terms of its density. You quickly get lost in a rain forest. There are all sorts of spirits in the woods the native people were aware of, spirits who would lure you out of your skin.
- EW Do you think that here on the west coast it's the opposite of Atwood's *Survival*, that instead of victims and survivors, we have celebrators of the splendour and generosity of the land?
- DM Yes, i think we've learned from nature here. We've learned the transformational tricks of rain forest growth, we've learned to tell lush and extravagant stories, to write lines that run on as endlessly as rain.
- EW Do you think west coast writing developed as an offshoot of the Romantic movement? pantheism, nostalgia, individualism?
- DM The Romantics made us see nature, and there's a pretty strong inheritance of that sensibility on the coast. If you don't feel that life is a fight for survival, then you can afford to feel awe and exhilaration and freedom, sheer sensual pleasure even, when you're out in nature.
- EW You've remarked that writing about the immigrant experience is a perfect seedbed for the writing sensibilitiy.
- DM Because everything is outside you and you're fascinated by it and you want to be included. You write your own script and include yourself. I was romantic about this place because it seemed exotic and foreign and appealing. When i was a young writer the other young writers around me who had grown up here seemed to have more of a sense of humour about the place. I couldn't afford to have a sense of humour because i was trying to be part of it. Hence, the romance. Once you've begun to make a place for yourself inside it, you see the reality, which is that you will always be on the outside to some degree—in nature because you're human, and in human society because you're a woman. In mainstream Canadian lit. because you're west coast or experimental or feminist. It goes on and on.
- EW Is being a writer in BC affected by being marginalized and overlooked by Toronto-centrism?
- DM Yes, definitely. It makes it all the more essential to materialize this place in the work because to Eastern eyes it

seems like a weird fringe somewhere off on the horizon. That push to make it present, vivid, to give it its place on the literary stage, can be seen in a lot of the writing. And then part of the experimentation has been let's just junk those forms that were sanctified in all the Toronto anthologies, let's do something different.

*EW* BC seems to be a place of polarities and extremes: the highest rates of suicide, divorce, drug use, etc.—political polarities. Does this sense of extremes percolate through to the writing?

*DM* You can see a concern with violence and you get a definitely leftist political stance in the work of writers like George Stanley, Brian Fawcett, Lionel Kearns, Barry McKinnon, Norm Sibum. Also, in a different way, in Robin Blaser and some of George Bowering. You get it in Maxine Gadd, Carole Itter, and to some extent Gladys Hindmarch—though with these writers it's filtered through a feminist consciousness. I was concerned with those extremes when i was writing *Vancouver Poems* because it seemed to characterize a feeling of the city at a certain level. When i was commuting to UBC in the early '60s, those were the days of the suicides off bridges. If you worked your way west and you finally arrived in the city which was your last hope, so to speak, there was nothing but a great immensity in front of you, so what could you do? you could jump off a bridge *into* it. It has something to do with a greater awareness in west coast writing of the unspeakable. It has to do with being at the end—of the road, of your rope, of a sentence.



*EW* Do you think the west, the last frontier, implies a more pagan life force?

*DM* Perhaps it has to do with the multiple nature of islands. Here the land is constantly being broken up by water so we have a sense of spirits abiding in different places, not one overriding one. There was also a strong shamanic bent in the '60s and '70s when people were experimenting with hallucinogenics. The shaman is the one who learns how to escape his own body to find the escaped souls of others. That sense of journeying through realms of consciousness is pretty apparent in west coast writing. The trips tend to be through the self, again immersion, we're in the midst of it and you might as well travel through yourself as through the woods. Or if you travel through the woods, maybe you're travelling through yourself.

*EW* Do you see yourself as an ambassador, explaining the region to the rest of the world, or more like a shaman, interpreting the region to itself?

*DM* I'd rather be a shaman anyway, but i don't feel like either. I find interpretation or how one reads anything much more interesting than explanation. And my region, i mean the region i'm writing out of, is not so much place or landscape these days as life as a woman.

## Daphne Marlatt / FROM *ANA HISTORIC*

"Watch Carter when the 'donk' (his donkey!) has got up steam—its first steam; and when the rigging men (his rigging men!) drag out the wire rope to make a great circle through the woods. And when the circle is complete from one drum, round by where the cut logs are lying, back to the other drum; and when the active rigging slinger (his rigging slinger!) has hooked a log on to a point of the wire cable; and when the signaller (his signaller!) has pulled the wire telegraph and made the donkey toot . . . just think of Carter's feelings as the engineer jams over the levers, opens up the throttle, sets the thudding, whirring donkey winding up the cable, and drags the first log into sight; out from the forest down to the beach; bump, bump! Think what this mastery over huge, heavy logs means to a man who has been used to coax them to tiny movements by patience and a puny jack-screw . . ."\*

history the story, Carter's and all the others', of dominance.  
mastery. the bold line of it.

soon it will be getting dark, soon the kids will be coming in from outdoors, Mickey breathless and exuberant from hockey practise, Ange drifting in the door with studied boredom and the latest "grunge" about school. and what will i have done with my day, this endless day that unites and separates us? it is the kind of waiting you knew.

moving around in a maze of things to be done, the little ones that never get finished because there is always more i should, i could be doing . . . the rotting walls of resolution, good intention, will power.

how you repainted them. Bapco apple green, primrose yellow. painting them over and over. Kematone blue. blue willow covering up the cracks, the tears in the wallpaper. faultlines. faults. so fix your hair, mend your ways. to fix up a home is fixing up yourself. Practice Makes Perfect, over and over. the smell of turps in the rusty red Blue Ribbon can, later the latex and rollers. you loved it, we said, not knowing. "love." the constant reek of it, the glazed feel on your skin, transformation via aching arm, something achieved at last: long hours of the mind alone in its trap turning the wheel.

i remember you with flecks of paint, hair wisps escaping from under your peasant scarf (kerchief, we said, we wore them to school with the others practising femininity). i work like a peasant, you said. your peasant scarf then, that made you look severe except for the soft line of your cheek, paint sprottled on its down. always the frownlines etched deeper between your eyes, etched by trying, arm in the air for hours, to paint a ceiling, paint a face, paint over the cracks in the whole setup.

holes. there were holes in the story you had inherited. holes in the image. Canada: romance of the wilds, to which you brought:

a trunkful of woolly underwear. Mounties in red coats and Rose-Marie. the loons, the lost lakes. a pas-de-deux, glittering white, under the lights of theatre marquees and furs...

not knowing there was first of all:

"a clearing three hundred and fifty yards along the shore, two hundred and fifty yards into the forest, boxed in by tall trees; damp, wet, the actual clearing littered with stumps and forest debris, and a profusion of undergrowth, including luxuriant skunk cabbage."\*

not knowing there was first of all a mill and then:

"three hotels: Deighton's, Sunnyside, and Joe Mannion's; one grocery store, and Chinese wash house, and lock-up"\*\*\*

to elaborate:

beer parlours separated into men's and ladies-and-escorts. movie houses and oyster bars. the everpresent five-and-dime. skid row churches and drunks and countless patrol cars careening, sirens wailing, traffic flickering in the growing night.

and that was 1950, that was what we came into, Ina, stepping off the train into mythic snow one dark November afternoon. and

Harald was there and the bridge was there and all those flickering lights, a necklace looping us into the North Shore of our future.

the trouble with you, Annie, is that you want to tell a story, no matter how much history you keep throwing at me.

and i know what that means, you who used to accuse me of "telling stories" when you thought i'd lied.

you've forgotten how many stories i used to tell you when you were small.

but then you stopped telling them, or told me to stop telling them—"telling stories again?"

it was you who changed. you grew up. you learned the difference between story and history.

i learned that history is the real story, the one men tell, of all the important events in the world. the tale of their exploits hacked out against a silent backdrop of trees, of wooden masses. so many claims to fame. so many ordinary men turned into heroes. (and the ordinary women with them, nameless, blameless of course in the silent space of the page.) city fathers (where are the city mothers?), city fathers bragging about what they've done, "our gang," building a town out of so many shacks that were going to be some place when it grew up: the Western Terminus of the Transcontinental, Gateway to the East. all these capital letters to convince themselves of its, of their, significance.

"A world event had happened in Vancouver . . . On the eve of the Queen's Birthday, 1887, the Canadian Pacific Railway . . . closed the last gap in the 'All-Red Route,' and raised the obscure settlement on the muddy shore of Water Street, sobriquetly termed 'Gastown,' to the status of a world port."\*

all the figures, facts to testify to their being present at it:

"I had 400 men working 140 in a tented camp one-third mile west of the hotel. I built the two and one-half miles of the C.P.R. from Hastings to Hastings Sawmill. . . ." John ("Chinese") McDougall\*

"I hauled logs with oxen down Gore Avenue, also out of the Park at Brockton Point, had a logging camp at Greer's Beach (Kitsilano), and another on Granville Street at False Creek." H. S. Rowlings\*



I/my laying track in the form of facts rescued against the obscurity of bush. and the women moving about their rooms all day in the rain, the women remember:

"The first piano on the south side of Burrard Inlet was one which was part of the cabin furniture of the barque 'Whittier,' Captain and Mrs. Schwappe. Mrs. Schwappe sold it to Mrs. Richards, school teacher, who lived in a little three-room cottage back of the Hastings Mill Schoolhouse. . . ." Alice Patterson\*

what is a "world event"? getting a piano was a world event in that "obscure settlement" because years later somebody still remembered it, even remembered where it came from and who bought it. Mrs. Schwappe. Mrs. Richards. a ship's piano suddenly landed in an out-of-the-way spot, this little three-room cottage.

these are not facts but skeletal bones of a suppressed body the story is. falling apart. there's a story here, Ina, i keep getting to. it begins:

. . . at the other end of a square of light cast on the dark outside, unknown trees, sawdust and stump debris, she was sitting at an oil-cloth-covered table, blue and white check (no, that was the picnic cloth you used to use—did they have oilcloth in 1874?). perhaps she brought a lace one with her when she came over, one of her mother's (we know nothing about her mother). she was sitting in the pool of light, yellow and rather dim to our eyes, the coal oil lantern cast. sitting and writing in that journal of hers that later, years later would be stored in the dustfree atmosphere of city archives. she was writing what would become a record, but then, then her hand hovered, her mind jumped. she could have imagined anything and written it down as real forever—

"Such rain here?—It rains day in and day out, a veritable curtain falling all around my Cabin. The trees weep, paths slip into small bogs, the chickens look as bedraggled as I feel my muddy skirts to be. I am orphaned here at the end of the world—Yet I feel no grief, for I am made new here, Father, solitary as I am—nor am I entirely so; daily a garrulous blue-black bird keeps me company. The small cedar spared by my front door dips to greet me. Neither of these tell me what I must be, nor how I must hold my tongue."

she writes as if she were living alone in the woods, her vision trued to trees and birds. she filters out the hive of human activity in which her "cabin" sits, a tiny cell of light, late, after the others have

been extinguished. in the dark (i imagine her writing at night, on the other side of a day in England she already knew) she can overlook the stumps, the scarred face of the clearing that surrounds her, and see herself ab-original in the new world (it is the old one she is at the end of). but why she had to erase so much is never given. it is part of what is missing, like her first name, like her past that has dropped away. we cannot see her and so she is free to look out at the world with her own eyes, free to create her vision of it. this is not history.

and this is why, perhaps, they think her journal suspect at the archives. "inauthentic," fictional possibly, contrived later by a daughter who imagined (how ahistoric) her way into the unspoken world of her mother's girlhood. girl? even then, teaching at Hastings Mill, she was said to be a widow, though young. but she married again, didn't she? she married Ben Springer and moved across the inlet to Moodyville, Moody's mill, the rival one. and her daughter? we know nothing of her, this possible interpreter of her mother's place in that world. it's hardly a record of that world, is it? no, it's Mrs. Richards' private world, at least that's what they call it. that's why it's not historical—a document, yes, but not history. you mean it's not factual.

what is a fact? (f)act. the f stop of act. a still photo in the ongoing cinerama.

Mrs. Patterson, say, with her crocheted mitts and bonnet, the very picture of a "Dame Hospitaller." there is no image of Mrs. Richards. but if there were, she would be caught with a tiny frown between her eyes, lower lip dented by an apprehensive finger, pen idle before her, thinking:

"My keenest pleasure is to walk the woods, despite their scolding me most roundly as to it its dangers. I do not hold stock in their stories of Bears!—The Siwash do not seem to fear them but wander as they will. If need be, I will lie face down as if dead, as they have told me.

"More I fear their talk about me, their Suppositions. Perhaps because they understand me to be a Widow, the men think me most eager for their company. Capt. Soule yesterday insisted on escorting me, pointing out this and that—D'ye see those two peaks beyond the Inlet? he says, Sheba's Paps they call 'em. I did not know

whether to shew myself insulted, for surely a School Mistress should be above reproach. Yet it was laughable—what did he imagine Sheba to be? I merely remarked that Burrard's Inlet must look very different from the Nile, which gave him the occasion to boast, Indeed ye'd get no timbers the size of ours from that desert. And so it passed. Should I have shown displeasure at a remark a gentleman would not utter in the company of a lady? And he a member of the School Board! Or does he speak freely because he sees me wandering of my own free will? I cannot keep only to drawing rooms and the School! I am not a Proper Lady perhaps."

Proper, she says, Lady capitalized, and it is barely sounded, the relationship between proper and property. the other Ladies at the mill would be wives or daughters-about-to-be-wives: Mrs. Alexander, Mrs. Patterson, Miss Sweney. she alone is without the "protection" as they would say, the validation of a man. subject, then, to sly advances under the guise of moral detection. subject to "agonizing" (your word, Ina), subject to self-doubt in a situation without clearly defined territory (because she is no one's property, she is "free" without being sexually free), she feels her difference from the other women, hopes the Captain recognizes it as freedom of intellect (suspects he doesn't), is at home only with things without language (birds, trees) in a place she struggles to account for in her own words.

words, that shifting territory. never one's own. full of pitfalls and hidden claims to a reality others have made.

lady, for instance. a word that has claimed so much from women trying to maintain it. the well-ironed linen, clean (lace at the cuffs, at the collar), well-tailored dresses and wraps, the antimacassars, lace tablecloths, the christening bonnets. beyond that, a certain way of walking (sedate), of talking (discreet). and always that deference, that pleased attention to the men who gave them value, a "station in life," a reason for existing. lady, *hlā̃fdige*, kneader of bread, mistress of a household, lady of the manor, woman of good family (lady by birth), woman of refinement and gentle manners, a woman whose conduct conforms to a certain standard of propriety ("lady airs"—singing true again).

i imagine the ladies of Hastings Mill spent hours when they got together discussing the merits of various haberdashers in Victoria, New Westminster, centres of culture by comparison with Granville and the mill store with its red flannel. so hard to get anything

"decent," they complained. for a decent lady kept herself well-covered, her sexuality hidden. no flag to taunt "vigorous" men with. for if men couldn't control their desires, women could. women knew the standard of what was socially acceptable in conduct, behaviour, speech. just as you spent hours, Ina, shopping for bargains, shopping department store basements or poring over Sears catalogues, dismissing things that looked "cheap," vainly trying to clothe us with the class you had in the tropics where your clothes were handsewn by Chinese tailors and our intricately smocked dresses came from the School for the Blind. now there was very little money and Harald wore good suits that "lasted" ("slightly out of date, poor dear"), you tried bargain dresses ("dreadful—people here have no idea of fashion"), and struggled with our running around in jeans ("they're so unfeminine")—unladylike you meant. exactly. skirts meant keeping your legs together as you so often told me (i didn't realize *why*), skirts meant girdles and garter belts and stockings...

and i suppose it wasn't *your* crinolines i had to starch?

i remember. crinolines and white bucks.

and i suppose it wasn't you who pestered me for high heels?

but it wasn't that i wanted to be a "lady," i wanted to be like the other girls, sexy but not too much, just enough to be "liked," just enough to be "cute."

and what about "nice"?

yes, "nice girls don't..." i didn't realize the only alternative to "lady" you knew, was "tramp," though that was a line i heard often enough on one of your records. tramps were girls who smoked in the bushes behind the corner store (doo-wop, doo-wop). tramps loved Chuck Berry and "Little Darlin'," wore pencil-line skirts with kick pleats, wobbled their hips, inked initials on their arms. tramps cut school or left it because they "had to." i was fascinated with their flouting all the rules, but i didn't want to be one. "tramp" was a word nice girls used to brand those outside their group—tramp, slut, bitch.



i came home to "Red Roses for a Blue Lady," the last pop song you bought. i came home to the peculiar silence of your growing naps, your obsessive washing the kitchen floor, your chronic exhaustion (sleep, the one great unsatisfied desire). "that damn dog, they deliberately leave it out all night to torture me." "hell's bells, will no one give me any peace?" peace. a lady's respect for tranquility.

Oh, Jemima, look at your Uncle Jim,  
He's in the duck pond, learning how to swim;  
First he does the breast stroke, then he does the side,  
And now he's under the water, swimming against the tide.

Of course Jemima looks on, only looks on, silently, as Uncle Jim demonstrates his prowess. i didn't hear then what kind of stroking was meant. bathing was what you called swimming, as if to sanitize it. what did you do with all that pent-up energy? (besides paint walls). you taught us your fear, you taught us what you knew about where even uncles were not to be trusted.

you grew more afraid as our sexuality came budding to the fore—foreground, fore-body, carrying these forward parts of our bodies. ladies do not draw attention to themselves. (is that you speaking or your mother or all the mothers?) ladies keep to the background. ladies *are* the soothing background their men come home to.

"The man suggests that he would like chicken for dinner. It is not a command, yet such is the harmony between them that his wishes are hers," says one of the how-to-heal/how-to-fix yourself books (caught in a fix, castrated—what is the female word for it? i mean for the psychological condition?) Soul has "positively no wishes of its own, no preferences. It stands forever as the servant of the Spirit" and in this it is "similar to a happy home."\* the standard. Soul: generic feminine. it is the man who is Spirit, has spirit. what does Soul, what does a woman do with her unexpressed preferences, her own desires? (damned up, a torrent to let loose.) and this is what you were trying to live up to. the neuter.

#### SOURCES

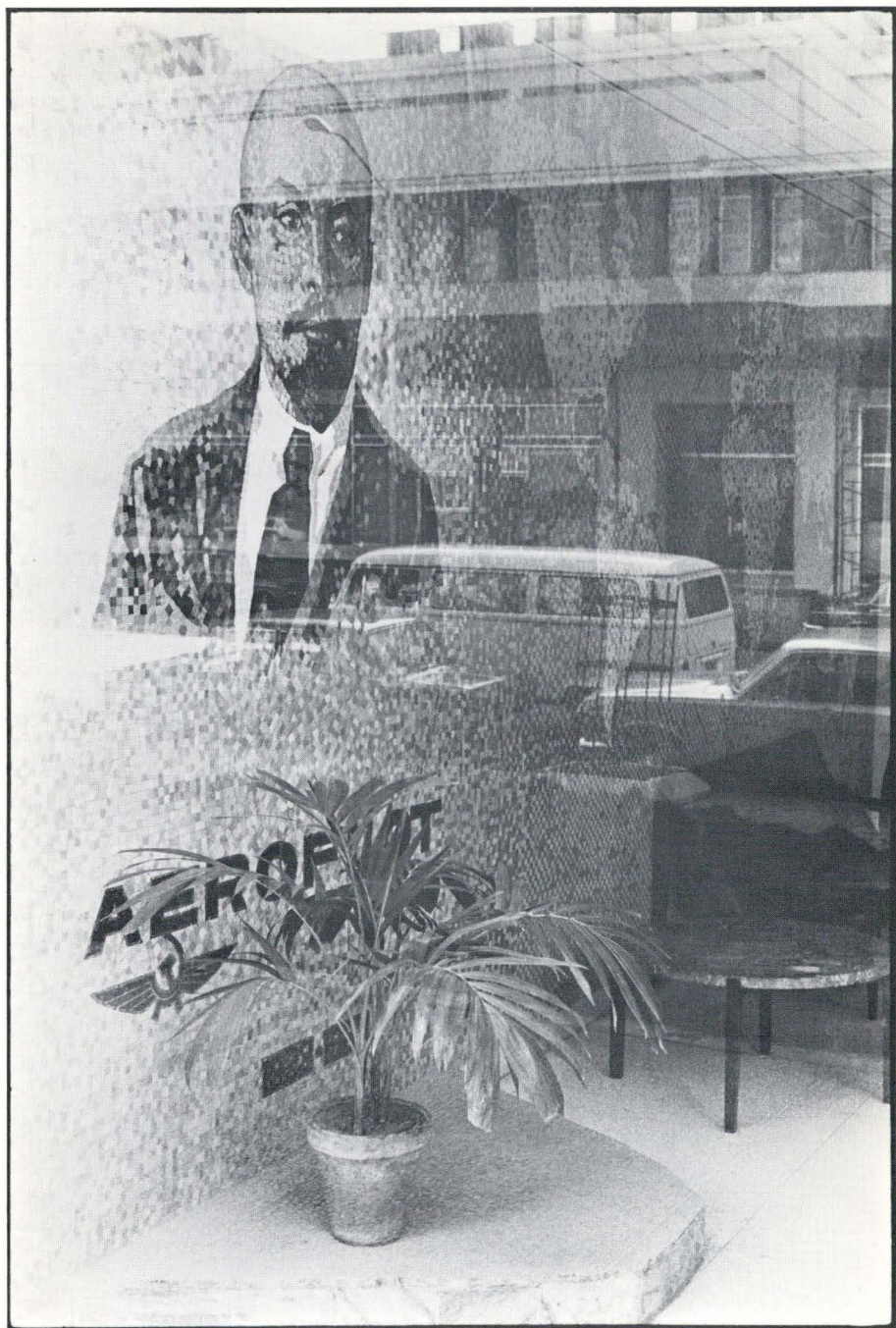
##### PAGE

- 14 Ralph Andrews, *Glory Days of Logging* (New York: Bonanza, 1956).
- 15 Both quotations are from Major J. S. Matthews, *Early Vancouver*, 3 vols. (Vancouver: private publication, 1932) vol. 1.
- 16-17 All quotations are from Matthews, vols. 1 and 3.
- 21 Frederick W. Bailes, *Your Mind Can Heal You* (New York: Dodd, 1956).

## George Webber / NOTES FROM CUBA

In January of 1985 I made a trip to Cuba. I found Havana to be a most extraordinary city. Many of its streets have a wonderful faded beauty. The corrosive salt air and years of neglect have given the buildings a surface reminiscent of a painter's scrubbed canvas. The Cuban people are warm and engaging. They are amicably curious about visitors to their country, always willing to take a moment for a photograph.

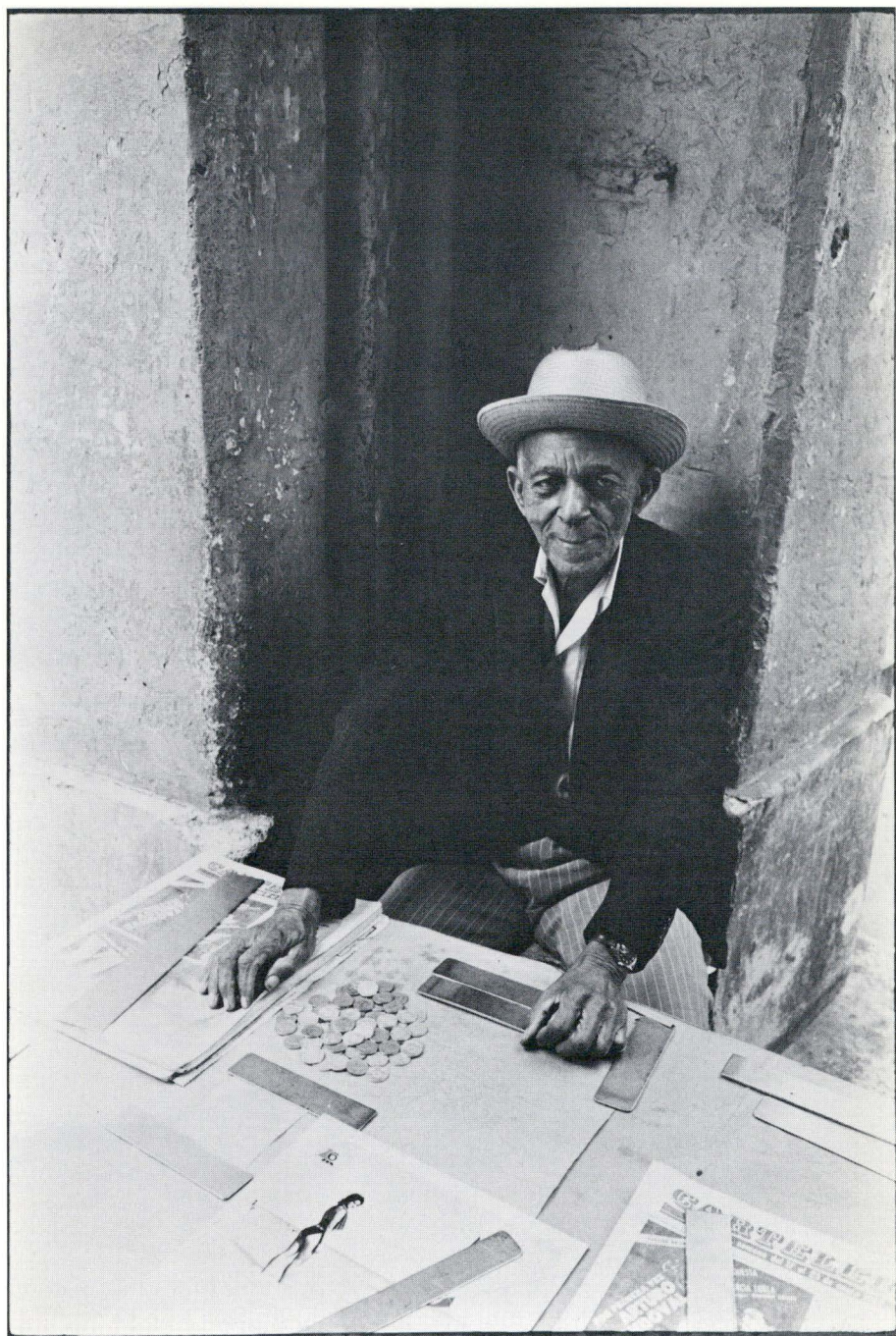
I was 32 when I visited Cuba. It struck me as an amusing coincidence that 26 years before, to the month, the 32-year-old Fidel Castro had assumed power in Cuba.







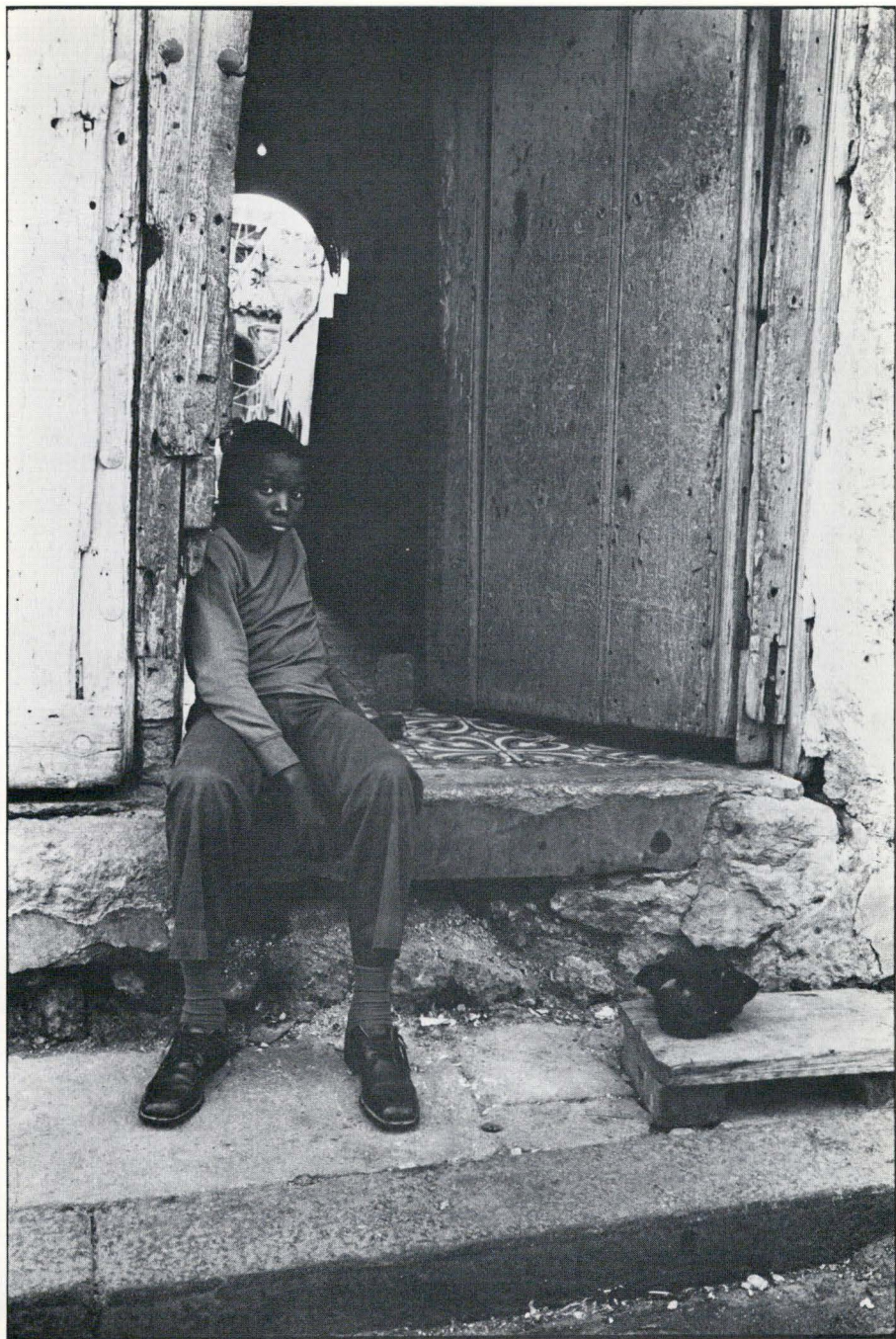








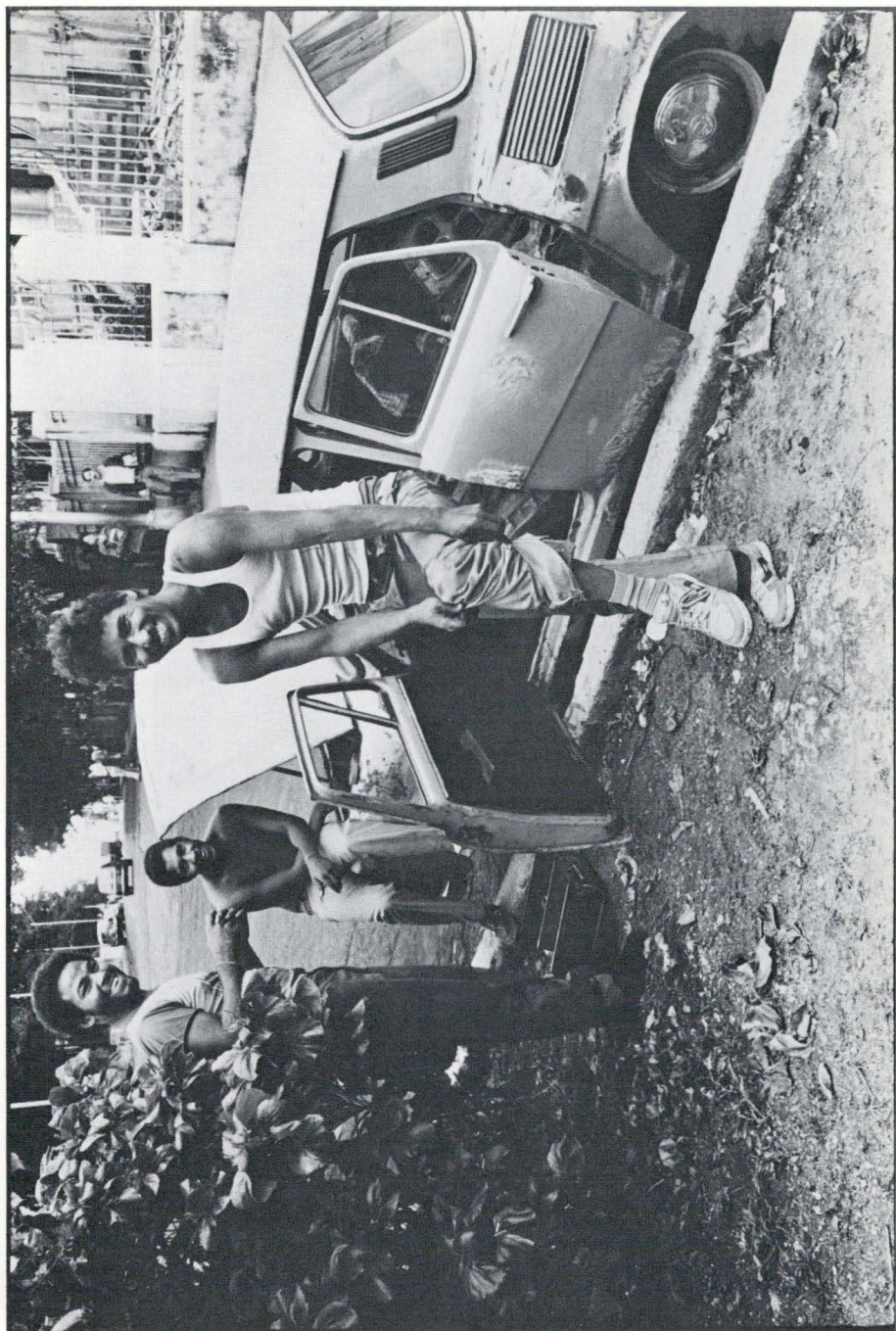




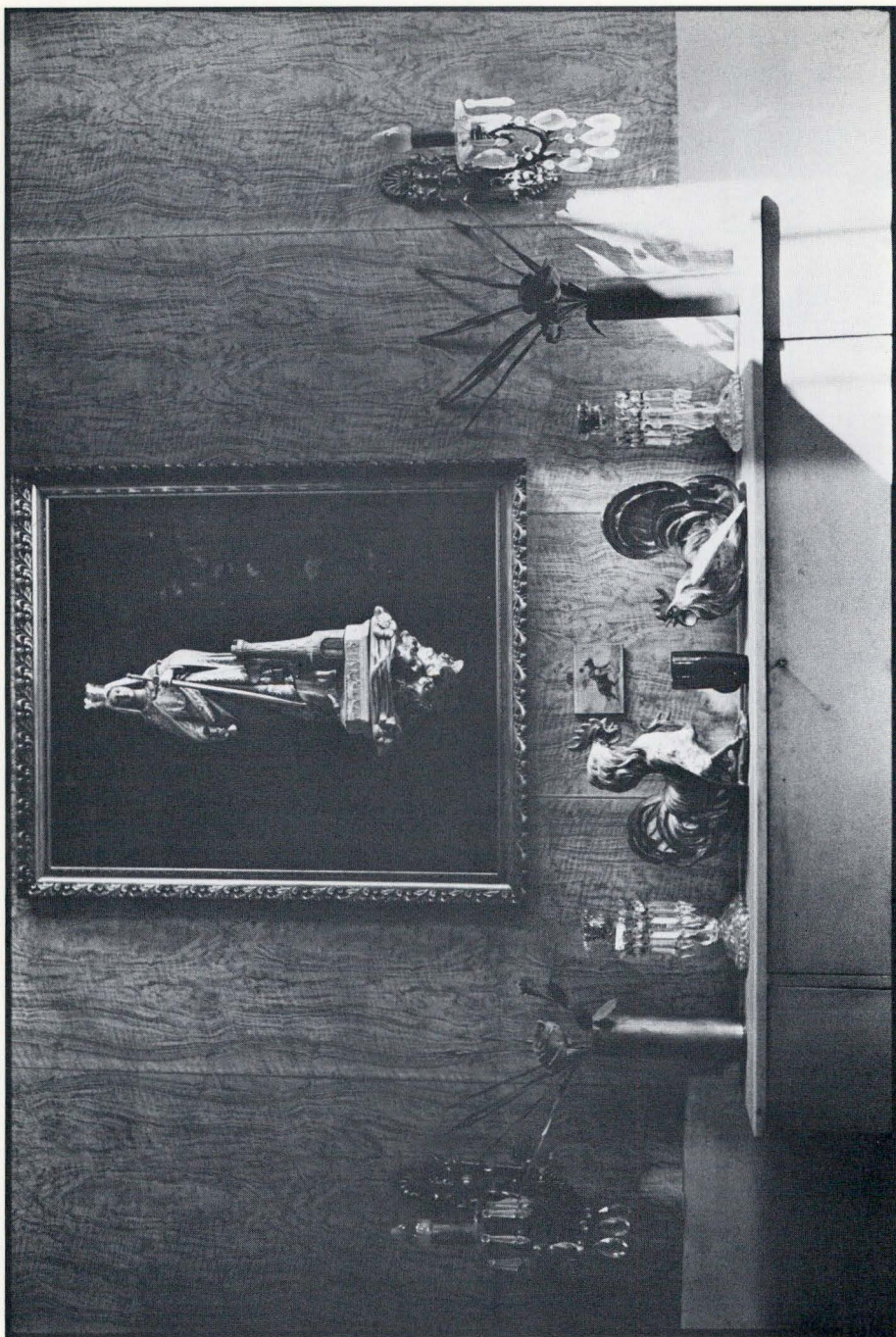




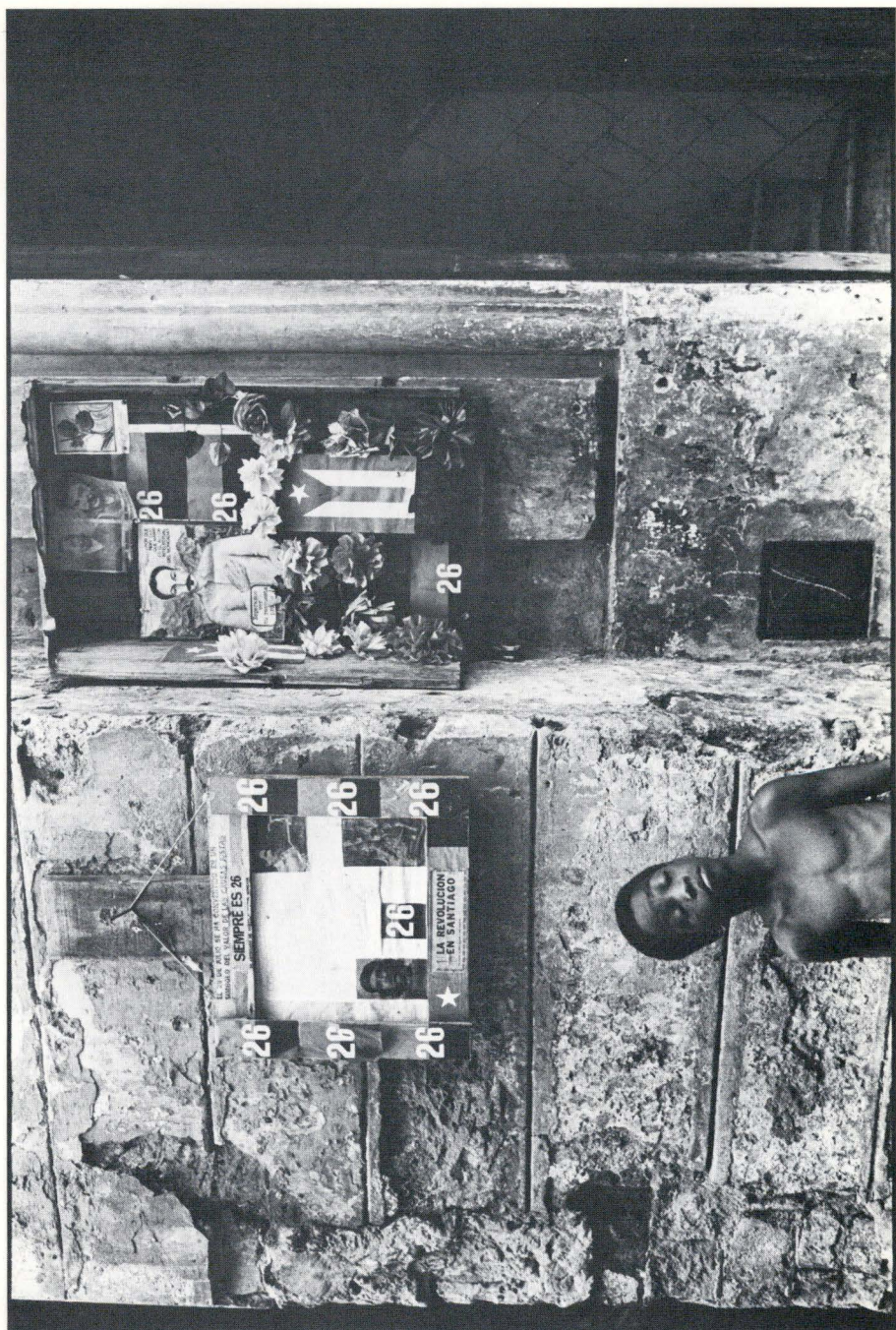




















## IMAGES

All photographs were taken in Havana in 1985.

### PAGE

23 *Aeroflot Window*

24 *Woman*

25 *News Vendor*

26 *Children*

27 *Boy*

28 *Three Children*

29 *Fixing the Car*

30 *Patron Saint*

31 *Boy with July 26 Movement\* Display*

\* named for Castro's failed first attempt at Cuban revolution

32 *Christopher Columbus Cemetery*

33 *Children*

## Eugene Dubnov / TWO STORIES

### CROCUTA CROCUTA

Because of their voices, hyenas are thought of by the Arabs and Persians as semi-human. They can assume the guise of a beautiful maiden and entice a man—and then revert to their animal form and devour him.

The hyenas form a separate family (Hyaenidae) of the order of predatory mammals (Carnivora). They are characterized by a large head, powerful jaws and long forelegs. There are two species, the striped and the spotted hyena. The striped hyena most often feeds on carrion, whereas the spotted hyena is a true predator. The colour of the spotted hyena is a yellowish-grey, and the round spots on its body are dark-brown or black. The jaws of the spotted hyena, in proportion to the size of its body, are the most powerful of any mammal.

In tropical Africa the female hyenas come on heat in the rainy season. The external genitalia of the female are so similar to those of the male that it is easy to confuse the sexes. This is why Aristotle thought hyenas were hermaphrodites. Sexual maturity is reached by the males at the age of two and by the females at the age of three.



Hyenas like open spaces. They often hunt in packs, but also enjoy hunting solitarily. The spotted hyena is not to be despised as a predator: it is a big-game hunter. This fact was long unrecognized because of the hyena's reputation as a carrion-feeder. The spotted hyena is capable of astonishing boldness and often pursues healthy adult animals until they are exhausted.

In most cases where spotted hyenas and lions have been observed feeding on the carcass of a slain animal, it is the hyenas that have made the kill.

In the spotted hyena the senses of sight, hearing and smell are all very keen.

Relations between man and the hyena have varied. In some places it has been protected as a useful scavenger, whereas in others it has been looked upon with superstitious horror. There have been cases of hyenas attacking man with fatal consequences for the latter.

The spotted hyena has a surprisingly large repertoire of vocal sounds. It growls, yelps, howls and emits many other noises. The well-known laugh of the hyena is uttered by the beast when it is being attacked or pursued. The characteristic wailing noise is made spontaneously by lone individuals; this sound, initially low-pitched, gradually becomes louder and higher.

In captivity the spotted hyena can live for quite a long time if it is properly looked after—up to forty years or more in some recorded cases.

SEE EDINBURGH BY BUS. *Edinburgh Zoo*—At Corstophine is justly renowned. With over 75 acres of ground it is ideally situated not only to display the animals at their best but also to provide a point from which extensive views of the countryside are possible. Travel by Services 12, 26, 31 or 86 from the garden side of Princes Street.

I took a No. 12 bus from Princes Street. It carried me up Shandwick Place, then along West Maitland Street, through the Haymarket, by Haymarket Terrace into West Coast, then along Roseburn Terrace, and, finally, down Corstophine Road, past Murrayfield, up to the Zoo itself.

This was in December, and the weather was dreadful: it was cold,

and a bitter wind blew, sometimes bringing with it showers of rain.

After walking round the Zoo for a bit, I came across the hyena's cage. The hyena and I looked at each other and evidently took to each other. As I moved myself in order to get a better view of the cage, I noticed that the hyena was intently watching my every step: it made exactly the same movement as I, and in the same direction. Then I began to test the quickness of its reactions. I made as though to move to the left—and the hyena strained to the leftward with all its body—but then I suddenly moved to the right, and the hyena immediately followed suit. In this way we played games, hunting one another, probably for as much as an hour. I invented increasingly complicated stratagems—like the figures in a dance—for instance stepping back from the cage and making a diagonal movement. The hyena exactly duplicated all my moves.

At length I looked at my watch and realized that it was time to go. The Zoo would be closing in about an hour, and I had hardly seen anything yet.

When I started going away in the rightward direction, the hyena once more imitated my movements and, pacing me, walked to the very end of the cage. There it stopped still and looked at me questioningly, as though awaiting my next move. But I did not stop and continued to walk quickly on. Realizing that I was leaving, the beast broke into a howl and began to beat itself against the bars. The rattling of the cage and the howling of the animal made me, against my will, look back. When I saw the hyena thrusting itself against the bars, trying to get out to me, I couldn't resist coming back. All at once it calmed down, and we continued our game. About another hour went by, and a passing keeper informed me that the Zoo was about to close. I had not even noticed that it was already growing dark.

This time I did not look back. But the creature's wild cries, almost indistinguishable from the sounds of human grief, mingled with the clangour of the bars, still sound in my ears.

THE ROYAL ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF SCOTLAND  
SCOTTISH NATIONAL ZOOLOGICAL PARK  
MURRAYFIELD • EDINBURGH • EH12 6TS

12th March, 1985

Dear Mr Dubnov,

With reference to your letter of the 28th February, I was most interested in the behaviour of the Spotted Hyena as you described it. I talked to the animal's keepers and they have not experienced this before, but it is often the case that a particular animal becomes attracted to a specific member of the public and behavioural changes are observed, often they show behaviour that is only shown to other members of their species. . . .

I hope that this is of use to you,

Yours sincerely,

/E. Leonard/

p.p. Dr. Miranda Stevenson,  
Curator of Animals

HOWLETTS AND PORT LYMPNE ESTATES LIMITED

PORT LYMPNE,  
LYMPNE,  
KENT,  
CT21 4PD

*Directors:*  
John Aspinall  
Lord Londonderry  
M.R. Leathers  
J.F. Osborne

28th March, 1985

Dear Mr Dubnov,

Thank you for your letter which has been passed to my desk for comments.

The interesting behaviour which you have described has in fact been witnessed by myself, and I am sure others, on several occasions, though not specifically in the species you mentioned.

My own opinion is that wild animals under captive conditions frequently become bored, particularly if deprived of company of their own kind, and they will then substitute either a human or another animal species upon which to focus their attention for the purpose of play, aggression, sex or other basic emotional instincts. . . .

We do not have any spotted Hyenas at either of our Zoo parks. Hoping the foregoing is of some help to you.

Yours sincerely,

M. Lockyer,  
Manager.

Author's Note: I am grateful to Dr. Stevenson and Mr. Lockyer for permission to quote their letters in this story.

## A SCHOOL OUTING

We both felt nervous and kept looking at the clock. "What if they take pity on us and stop the train?" asked Ublyudkin. His real name was nothing like Ublyudkin—which means Mongrelson. In fact, it was Konyaenko, meaning Steedman, and I don't remember now why or when I started calling him Mongrelson. He didn't object, but he asked me to take care not to call him that in front of his parents. "Don't be daft," I waved him aside. "Have you ever heard of a train being stopped for the sake of a couple of late-comers?" But I wasn't that sure myself. The hour hand was now pointing exactly at eight, and the minute hand was creeping up to twelve. I peeped out gingerly onto the platform from the covered exit of the stairway. The platform was almost deserted. The last few passengers were hurriedly scrambling into the carriages. That meant we should certainly be noticed.

"How does it look?" asked Mongrelson in an anxious whisper when I drew my nose back under cover.

"Okay," I replied. "Hardly anybody left on the platform."

"Which carriage do you think they're in?"

"No idea. We have to act as if they were in all of them."

"But at the same time we've got to look in the windows," said Mongrelson, as if this were a new idea, although we'd discussed all these details many times before. "We have to look in the windows, and try twice as hard if we see them."

"Of course," I replied. "But when the train moves off and starts picking up speed, it won't be that easy to spot them."

This too had been taken into account at our previous discussions.

I glanced at the clock again. The minute hand was now pointing straight at twelve. I raised my arm. The whistle blew. I gave a theatrical and totally unnecessary signal; "Here we go!"

Mongrelson whispered, and we both rushed out onto the platform.



We acted the part of late arrivals so well that I swear I was afraid they really would stop the train, in defiance of all the regulations. We dashed along the platform, waving our arms ridiculously, casting despairing glances into the carriage windows, mouths gaping, and from time to time even calling out: "Stop!"

At first I could distinguish faces in the windows, looking at us with surprise or sympathy, some of them smiling, but soon they all started to merge, rather like the play of patches on the surface of a river, if you look at one closely and for a long time. Then the last carriage flew by, suddenly revealing the stillness and the silence behind it. We stopped, drew breath, and began swapping impressions.

Our general opinion was that the performance had been a success. Of course, nobody could guarantee that we had been seen, but the chances that we had were not bad at all. After all, it only took one person out of our class of forty to notice us, to ensure that everybody else, including Antonina, would learn of it at once.

"I can just see Antonina raising her eyes to heaven and groaning, 'Every family has its black sheep!'" I said.

"More likely she'll make some crack: 'So Horsey Name couldn't get the Estonian State Coach to the station in time, eh?'" said Mongrelson, and we both burst out laughing.

Antonina—in full, Antonina Ivanovna—was our class teacher. She taught us language and literature. We were all afraid of her. She was a bit dotty anyway, and, what's more, she had a sadistic streak. She enjoyed humiliating us, giving us insulting nicknames. Mongrelson, for instance (of course, I'd given him a rather unflattering name myself, but in an affectionate, joking way, as a good friend)—him she called Horsey Name. "Horsey Name will now canter up to the blackboard," she would say. But he was one of the luckier ones: others had far worse nicknames. Titchy little Spalagutov, for example, was called Birdie. "Chirp a little louder, Birdie," she would say. "We can't hear what you're chirruping about." Molokov, who had rather slanted eyes and a swarthy face, was Tartar Yoke. "How long do we have to suffer under your rule, Tartar Yoke?!" she would scream when he gave a wrong answer in a lesson. I was dubbed the Estonian State Coach, because she thought me too proud, and because I came from Tallinn. Once the year before when I hadn't gone on one of their outings, she

remarked on my absence in the following dramatic manner: "Lo and behold, the Estonian State Coach has not deigned to honour us with his presence?" (Birdie reported this to me later, adding that he preferred his nickname to mine). But as a rule she only used her nickname for me behind my back, perhaps because she had other, more spectacular ways of humiliating me directly. For example, only a few weeks earlier she had berated me for the composition I'd written on a subject of my own choice, describing the pond in Petrovskiy Park. I had to stand for a whole lesson, while she summoned all as witnesses to my highly suspicious love for ponds. "We Soviet people have no wish to dig in mud, dirt and mire," she said scornfully and demanded of the class: "Who among you here could ever be a friend to a person like that?" (Mongrelson, although he didn't dare say straight out that he was my friend, nevertheless stood up and said my ways could still be rectified.) Then the bell rang for break and saved me, ashamed as I was to look my classmates in the eye.

Attendance at these outings of theirs wasn't strictly compulsory, but today's trip was a bit different. This time those who didn't go were going to have to clean up the school as a punishment, and it was this position between hammer and anvil which had forced us to focus all our mental powers on the search for a way out. That was how our plan was conceived. We couldn't be counted as absent, because we'd been present, if late. We thought, furthermore, that our belated arrival and our desperate behaviour on the platform would cause even the sadist Antonina to feel just a little sorry for us. All this gave ground for hope that we wouldn't be punished for not cleaning up the school, but would be left in peace.

Still laughing at the picture we could so vividly imagine of Mongrelson harnessed to me, we went to buy tickets and then on to the other platform, from which trains left in the direction of the beach, the opposite direction to the one our outing had taken. It was May, the morning sun was growing warmer every minute, and we felt happy, having escaped both the outing and the cleaning-up job.

The train arrived and we got in. During the journey we laughed at each other endlessly as we recalled how idiotic we looked on the platform, with all our wild leaps, grimaces and gestures. We talked and laughed so loudly that the other people in the carriage started smiling as they looked at us.

We got out at Lielupe, the first station on the beach, named after the river that runs past there. The sun was already quite hot, and near the station we drank some cold beer under a toadstool sunshade. The sea was only ten or fifteen minutes' walk away. On the beach we changed into our swimming trunks and walked to the right, towards the mouth of the river. The beach was deserted: hardly anybody ever came to this corner of it. We hadn't come this far before either. Striding quickly along in the warm breeze, beside the waves, we walked and walked, until at last we noticed how the sea appeared to divide on the horizon. A yellow tint showed in the blue waves; it must have been river silt. The water of the river itself, when we reached its bank, was a dun brown colour. It rushed on with such force that not even the sea could have stopped it, if it had wanted to.

After a dip (the bottom was sticky and slimy) we started digging in the sand and mud under the bank. I dug up a few worms, which Mongrelson called leeches, to spite me, and he found two maggots and a slug. Then we clambered up higher, right to the pine-trees, where the sand had a thin covering of grass and pine needles. There we saw a lizard, and even came close to catching him. Returning to the river, we sat down a little further along, on the bank of a small backwater, and dangled our feet in it. When you looked closely, the water was teeming with life: a variety of aquatic insects, spiders, water fleas and ticks were whizzing around, and beneath them, when the sun pierced the amber depths of the water, you could see little fish darting to and fro. "That's what's known as fresh-water fauna," said Mongrelson solemnly. "Remember the way Antonina told me off about it?" I asked, and we both burst into hoots of carefree laughter.

The first drops of rain fell, and it was only then that we noticed how the sky had become covered with clouds. We started running back, then slowed our pace to a walk when we got tired, then started running again. The rain was light and warm.

At the station we were lucky: the train arrived at once, it was a fast one, and in a quarter of an hour we were back in the town. "That was a jolly good outing, wasn't it?" Mongrelson said, as we got out on the platform.

*Translated from Russian by Kevin Windle*

Lary Timewell / EIGHT POEMS  
ONCE/THE



plots fragment  
where subtitles fail

I can't believe my eyes  
fall into old habits of

document      head sense

once appeared bold  
the vertical juxtaposition

the linear like a cross  
obliterates

text giving up  
credit where musics due

these eyes believe  
the the the

stuttering film  
of the text

once appeared red  
a sexual revolution

now who's face  
of last year's media

made      the manipulative  
intention of dramatic musical

scores

not produced so much then  
as let loose from the eyes

have it of deconstruction

written & realized  
after cezanne

I'm glad gertrude  
saw her chance

when she did  
what she did



# OPEN CITY/ & PINK MEGAPHONE





its all about surveillance  
my love says

this one shocks    crows  
like mirrors    all about

getting your attention first  
then moving in for the

fixing of sights on selling  
how her & it get identified

sign profit in  
solid masculine metric

shivering cheerleaders  
on the sidelines instructed

what to how to  
urge on the team

a blast signals open  
season on her

implicit & anonymous  
image as carne-

val queen  
I sense more than see

a green ape looking in  
the pool

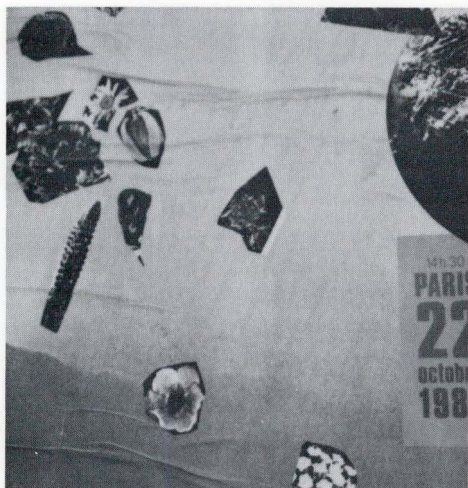
startled by  
my hand in it

# LA MORT/& LE PARTY FOU



a spear taunts the edge  
of our limited nuclear  
vision of ourselves  
holding guns to the head  
the heart has  
barely enough  
time to make  
a little o in death o  
don't go out in the woods today  
its sure to be a surprise  
its bears & eagles & candu geese  
dancing mayday  
from pole to frozen pole a mad  
house on fire  
a superpowered party  
come as you were  
an instant ago

# VOTRE LIBERTÉ/ & SPACE FLOWERS



headlines shred your sleep  
leave you only this

undersurface of waking to  
anxiety resistance

vague memories of film  
noir fade

the gesture across generation  
reduced by replaced by

a logical fiscal  
language

entropic computerese (read  
english read american)

founding father wisdom  
decrees now this

is for your own good could  
hurt me more than its

going to hurt you  
to agree say oui

say ja  
say da da

dechirez les affiches  
your alphabet's cornered

you cubist  
castro lover

star wars is just  
this era's peter pan &

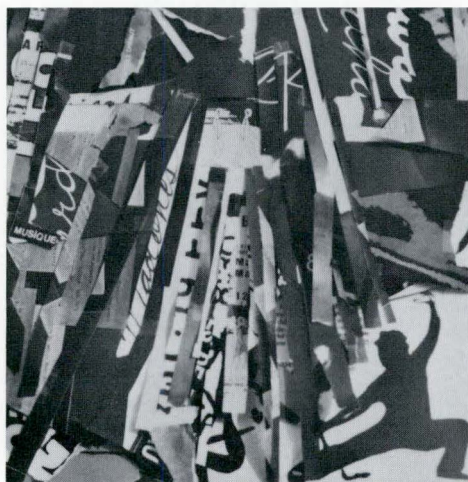
space junk  
flowers

in the O zone  
of your dream of

intelligent  
life out there



CHI



in the stream of all this taking  
tiger mtn by storm

no sense of a banner  
that is not music

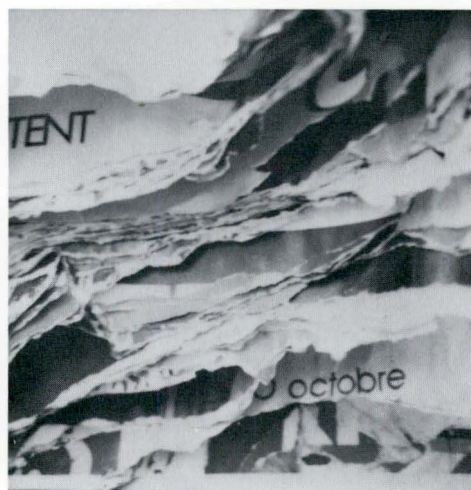
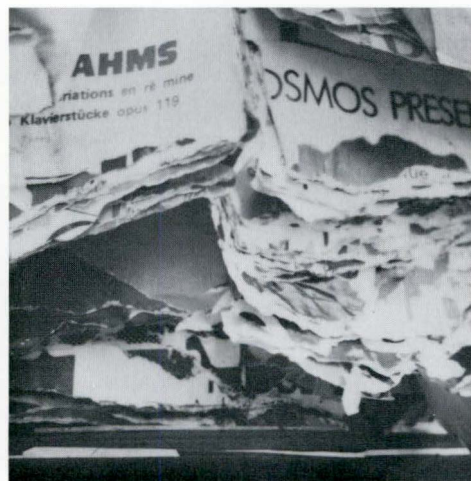
for the spirit  
any of us could be

dancer among this paper  
prayer tied to ancestral trees

in the year of the ox  
in the tugging of the heart

shaped kite of hyperbole  
after all

# COSMOS & OCTOBER TENT





it begins decomposing  
beauty

calls rust out from under  
layers of language unglued

curved watermarks of  
time collecting

alms for the trust  
fund of meaning

as from a forest step  
these syllables

rain on the canvas    versus  
keys of the clavier stuck

c/osmosis    absorbed in  
reading under a blanket of pulp

autumns spring one-liners  
on the audience    our eyes

resilient nation  
fears to be undone

by assembly & gathering  
announcements' timely scrap

s  
thin banners flap

in the wind  
ing wind

## CREATION/THEATRE



Harvest moon in ragtime  
torn from its tough

& pliant sense, sweet blue  
jellyroll of season

slides into the sea  
of old orleans, shrill

accordion of agreement

The notes' noisy  
tinman text builds up

jazz around  
middle C

molecular festival  
burst from barbed wire

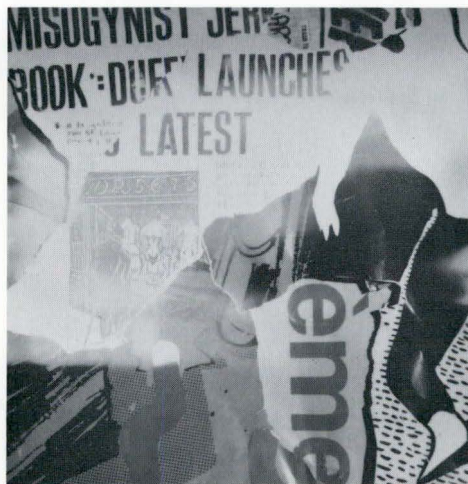
the all or nothing of  
this song's necessity

: the axe fell  
followed

in time  
by the tree



# MISOGYNIST EME/ & VICTOR MAN



fetch says the fire-eater  
in his best master's voice

lay that newsprint  
at my feet

he's the ad  
verse emblazoned  
boldface  
type

guard to this planetary  
household pet    a sidekick  
bares her teeth

he tosses off another  
floral molotov description

like a '40s private dick  
dime novel in the hip  
streetsmart readership

heckler at poetry's side  
show    something always

inflammable on his breath

in the fade of the latest  
thru hoops of fire &  
floodlights of publicity

no accident but how we're taught  
another trick for attention in  
obedience school

a nicely packaged  
letterbomb    a

howling inside out

## Sheila Delany / TELLING HOURS: A CONVENT JOURNAL

### PREFATORY NOTE

The following are excerpts—about one-third the total—of a journal I kept during two weeks at a convent near Vancouver. I went there to start work on a book, *The Spiritual Autobiography of an Atheist*, and to recover from a short but intense romance with a man who had been an evangelical proselytizer before breaking with the church.

As a form of fiction, the journal seems to deny everything we usually associate with fiction: plot, character, polish, coherency of statement. Instead it is heterogeneous, random, raw, subjective—apparently. In actuality, though, a journal is as necessarily selective and worked-up a version of things as any other writing. Subjectivity, we know, is a social artifact, far from random or unique; and even historiography (once considered the most objective of genres) reveals its author's mode of selection.

In its entirety, this particular journal is about two things: the process of healing after loss, and the narrator's interrogation of religion as a way of mediating experience. It has in that sense both plot and character; and, to the extent that the narrator's perceptions are generalizable, a view of life. Who is this narrator? A character, confined to this text and therefore (unlike you or me) without a subsequent history. Or a prior history, or a full range of interests. If, in spite of these limitations, the journal attains credibility and interest, it will have justified its story. Anyway, as my friend Paul Kelley reminds me Mikhail Bakhtin has written: "In which utterance is there ever a face—and not a mask?"

From the night before: Monday, July 9.

My hands remember better than my eyes do: how beautifully, how completely he delivered himself into my hands to be touched. They remember hard thighs, the circumference of cock, a neck surprisingly thick with fine soft hair over it.

In spite of this it is hard for me, still, to think well of Jude. I have to remind myself, for instance, that he is the only one in his family to have broken from Christianity and to be able to call himself an atheist. Thinking well of him is harder in the absence of a photo. Without a photo he dissolves into the words in my other journal—more than fifty pages of handwritten words. I would like to say that I will never forget your precious face, the hollows down your cheeks, but how can I keep from forgetting?

The familiarity of my house irritates: I'll be glad to go to Rosemary Heights tomorrow morning early. I am physically restless, spiritually unsettled. I will go to bed tired of reading though it is early, not 11 yet.

I suppose I am talking about forgiving.

To forgive is to remit or cancel a debt owing. To believe that Jude owes me nothing any more. It is to give up a connection. The refusal to forgive remains a bond, if a negative one, where there is no ongoing relation. I don't really feel it yet. I would like to feel the gentle rain of merciful forgiveness but my heart is still hard—not monolithic, but hardened.

I am reading what people have to say about religion—not medieval theologians or gnostic revisionists, but moderns, intellectuals, some of them ex-Marxists. There is a serious malaise: I do not want to be starting out on a path that could conceivably lead to conversion. To write about it I have to open myself to it, as you do to write about anything—and, insofar as my nature is capable, even experience it. Otherwise I'll be starting this project in vain or in bad faith, it won't be really a spiritual autobiography. I am worried about the material taking over, about becoming passive with respect to it, creating a world that I may be tempted to enter in real life. I can't at the moment say with complete assurance, as I always would have been able to say, "It won't happen. Don't worry." Possibly it is like an actor playing a role and becoming the



character; it is a character unlike his normal one, but it picks up fine threads of temperament that have been buried or ignored. I want to remain, as Simone Weil puts it, "submerged in materialism"—but it has never before been a struggle to remain there. I am tested.

There are, of course, a lot of differences between Weil and me. Primarily, she believed in God, I don't. She prayed daily, I never do. She had migraines, a brother, a thorough French education; I have none of these. She felt that her desire for community would cause part of her to become a Nazi if confronted by a Nazi chorus in full song; not me. Her book strikes me as the work of a middle-class spinster, insufficiently rigorous. I am as unwilling to use her as model, as she was to use the gun given her by Loyalists in Spain. Indeed she was more intransigent: she flatly refused!

But suppose that my present condition—a lurking desire for death, pessimistic vision of the aridity of life without a man to love, the injury of being rejected—suppose all this, working in me, produces a motion toward some unreal love, ideal love, the unconditional love that God has for me? The perfect husband, father and lover. Suppose I become willing to suspend the criterion of intellectual consent—or worse, find a way to intellectually consent? Like skeptical fideism, the doctrine of two truths, the truth of reason and the truth of faith. Faith that exists because it is absurd. And this might be especially attractive because I am for the moment denied the opportunity to make an act of faith with a human being as its object (through of course any Catholic would say that a human being is not an appropriate object for an act of faith but, being variable, can only deceive or disappoint).

Surprise! Jude phones from work. It's nearly midnight, end of his shift in the emergency room at Vancouver General Hospital. It always used to seem so comically appropriate to pick him up at midnight under the huge red neon letters that spell EMERGENCY, like a slogan for our meetings. Even slogan for the whole affair, all beginning and end, no middle, a protracted emergency. He offers to deliver, right now, two letters in response to mine. He says that mine are beautiful, moving, full of charity, "transcending hurt and anger." (He hasn't seen the one I mailed today.) He wants to bring his letters over before I go to the

convent. "Drop them in the mail": I explain I want to concentrate on my own stuff while I'm away, will read his letters in two weeks time, and don't guarantee a reply. The last perhaps an unnecessary bit of nastiness, but I am not so far beyond hurt and anger as he thinks: in fact I'm only just getting there. Midnight comes, he makes no effort to end the conversation, so I do it. His voice tells me (as his words do not) that he's not expected this. Rather than put himself on the line, risk saying he wants to see me, he pretends his offer was only for my sake, only out of consideration for my preference as to method of delivery. "Put it in the mail," I repeat. I'm rubbing his nose in it: this is what it means to break off.

Afterward I weep for the first time these two weeks since. Not sobbing but a slow welling of tears, redemptive. A letting go, as of a balloon that drifts away slowly, trailing the string. I realize I will continue to love him for some time, it is not as completely over as I'd thought, it will be more difficult. O these remnants, dregs, tatters and shards of love! Then, also for the first time these two weeks, I feel horny and take care of that, a chaste once.

From Day 1: Tuesday, July 10.

South down 99 to White Rock, a pleasant little seaside town semi-decayed but with thick veneer of new shopping malls and little boutiques, condos a few blocks from the beach, fancier houses further up the shoreline.

The convent is about ten minutes' drive from the beach, straight north on Johnston Avenue in flat, rural Surrey. Curved driveways, spacious grounds well-landscaped and well-kept: lawns, flowerbeds, hedged orchards, the whole surrounded by mixed deciduous and evergreen woods with trails woven through. It is a series of long, low rose-brick buildings connected by a portico. At lunch I am told that the place was formerly a school for girls, a training school for emotionally disturbed girls, with full staff of social workers and psychiatrists. That is what the foundress, Saint Euphrasia, intended the order to do: to care for girls and women in distress. Government funding was cut off in 1978, and since then the facility has operated as a retreat centre for groups and individuals.

Lunch is the main meal of the day, the hot meal: good solid food and three desserts, everything set out buffet style. We gather in a circle around the buffet while everyone crosses herself and says grace, worldly enough not to comment that I don't speak the prayer.

Four nuns are at lunch; they are all about fifty-five or sixty, all grey or white-haired. Last week, in anticipation of the Pope's September visit, the *Vancouver Sun* ran a series of articles about Catholicism in Canada. It said that 47 per cent of the Canadian population are Catholic, but that of all the brothers and sisters in Catholic orders in Canada only 10 per cent are younger than 45. Here the sisters wear a dress-length white habit, long-sleeved but not uniform. Dark-blue coif. They are not cloistered; that is, they can leave the grounds. It used to be, one of them relates, that the doctor came in, the dentist came in; but no more. Sister Joan, brusque and without a coif, appears to run the place more or less; she is assertive and the others defer to her. Sister Martina is girlish and somewhat timid, with sharp features and a tittery laugh. Though her hair is entirely white, her hands are very smooth and her face unwrinkled, so it is hard to tell her age closely. Sister Jeanne is from Quebec originally and still has a strong Québécois accent. She is small and pudgy, with a head too large for her little body. She bustles and talks and explains things. Sister Rosamund, stolid and shy, keeps more or less to herself, her blue eyes like large moist fruit behind the thick lenses of her spectacles.

There are, evidently, more staff than nuns, though only some of them are at table. There is Nora, a dark, plain, pale young woman who sews and does other domestic tasks. There is a pixie-like, plump old lady with oddly vivacious gestures, Frances, who is introduced as "our lightning rod; she is often with the Lord" (i.e., in the chapel)—to which another sister adds, in a murmur, "We need prayer." Maeve, the cook, is middle-aged and Irish, sharp-featured. There are two other guests, Veronica and Grete.

Grete, about the size and shape and age of Frances, is introduced to the latter as "your double." Grete raises an eyebrow in a skeptical European way but is tactfully silent on the question; plainly she considers that her tinted hair and attractive print dress adequately distinguish her from the unworldly other.

Veronica certainly stands out here: a statuesque blonde wearing tight jeans and black cotton sweater with cut-out shoulders. She is almost albino with her whitish-blond hair and blue eyes, no visible eyebrows to speak of. She sits across from me at lunch and her voice is so whispery-hushed that it isn't until later, when we talk, that I can even detect the strong Scottish accent. She smiles at everything one says, terribly interested and concerned. Nonetheless I suggest a walk after lunch and she agrees, pleased. Waiting for her in the lobby I am aware of someone reciting Hail Marys in the little modern chapel. I love the sound of it, that low, soporific murmur: it always seems to fall in the same cadences and minor tones, no matter the language or the church; and though this is no high-vaulted Gothic cathedral, the voice seems distanced and echoing nonetheless.

We walk out to the road and then down a path to the river, the Nicomekl River silty and rust-colored. Mucky edge, probably sewage muck. There won't be, as I'd hoped there might, a clean sandy spit where I can lie in the sun and read. As we descend the hill from the road two men fishing across the river whistle at us, then yell about their fishing. There isn't even enough of an edge to walk along the river. We feel, at least I do, like accomplices. It isn't hard here to feel like children in a community of adults, ever so slightly resistant to the aged authorities and the system. Veronica: a good Catholic name, though she is not Catholic: *vera ikonika*, true imprint of the Lord's face on a handkerchief. She is breaking up a marriage of nine years to a harsh, moody man who, she says, threw her love back in her face. She realizes now he will never change, even the psychiatrist says so.

At supper the other guest comes into focus: Grete, a woman of seventy, just over cancer surgery. She has come through it well, and recounts in her Austrian accent the endless tale of the operation and recuperation. She was about to embark for Vienna when the news came that she was ill; the tickets had already been bought. I am glad to have talked with Veronica earlier, but I see that this could be more sociable than I want it to be: if I am to work I will have to be generally unavailable except at meals.

In a corner of the dining room there is a large painted wood statue of John Eudes, first founder of the order before St. Euphrasia reorganized it in the nineteenth century. In black hat and roped cassock, he extends the flaming heart of Jesus. Everywhere, of course, there are pictures or statues of Jesus, Mary or saints. In the



lobby a small but splendidly painted statue of Mary, star of the sea, arising from the waves: bare feet, aquamarine robe over white gown, both garments elaborately edged with gold tracery. Finery. Physicality. Clean feet: an achievement in sandal-clad Jerusalem. There is a crucifix in every room. In my room the crucifix is over the desk, and on another wall hangs an undistinguished and sentimentally rendered Mary, haloed, blonde and pretty in a rather 1920s style. There are also, in the conference rooms and hallways, many nature-paintings or reproductions of them: peaceful woods or meadows, surf breaking against rocks with light coming through one translucent swell—the kind of painting that is supposed to show the glory of God in created nature. In the lobby there is a counter full of trinkets and charms and wall-hangings, some with distinctly new-age mottos about the importance of love and friendship. There are also rosaries, tiny crucifixes, sorrowful bleeding heads of Jesus crowned with thorns. The impact of these comes through despite the surrounding schlock. There is a larger crucifix in the dining room, and if I say that contemplating it would take away the appetite, this is not because of physical revulsion merely, but because of the mood of intense sorrow and affliction it creates. It is not, however, hung so as to be easily visible from the tables.

The crucifix that hangs over my desk I remove, take it to the window to study it closely. At the top is the scroll reading INRI—*Iesus Nazareth Rex Iudorum*, Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews. I grasp it by the bottom, as if on crusade, or warding off a vampire. An ikon. The feet are not nailed but rest on a small ledge or pedestal; the arms very attenuated, rib cage and hip bones very detailed. To tell the truth I do not have any blasphemous thoughts about it. On the contrary, I hang it on another wall, not wanting it as tutelary spirit to my work, though not minding it for the room itself. Why not for the work? Too overwhelming an image, demanding attention and the subordination of one's own thoughts. Next to that affliction, and the history that flows from it, everything else subsides. I am reminded of a friend in New York who complained that she couldn't work at her desk. When I visited her, I saw that her desk was surrounded with photos of the man who had recently left her and for whom she still grieved. I told her she would not be able to work until she put those pictures away, but she couldn't bear to take them down and asked me to do it for her, in her absence. I never keep photos in a room where I work, nor, in general, representative art at all.

At supper the front buzzer sounds. Sister Martina hurries away to answer, and returns to announce girlishly that there is "a young man" to see me. There is the slightest soft burst of titillation at the table, and a certain slight coyness in her announcement too, that remind me of college, my dormitory at an all-female country campus. The visitor turns out to be not Jude but Gord F., a student of mine ten years ago—in a Bible course, as it happens—who became a good friend and who now practises medicine in White Rock. He's biked over: shorts, muscle shirt, cap. We return to the dining room, and again it is like college: a kind of prestige in being visited, and especially by a vigorously handsome and semi-naked young man—well, not all that young, but early thirties. "Is that your son?" blurts out Sister Jeanne, and I tell Gord he should be flattered to be taken for eighteen. Gord fits in well, gregarious as always. He refuses supper, but accepts strawberries, the dessert: "That's tempting."

"Didn't take much," comments Sister Joan—the only dry or even slightly ironical remark I've heard so far from any of the sisters.

"It never does," I reply equally drily, and there's a quick glance of appreciation from this sharp-minded and sharp-tongued woman. Even though the exact dimensions of my rejoinder are ambiguous, at least it has dimensions, and most of the nuns' conversation is void of dimensions.

After supper I sit with Gord on a lawn. We haven't talked for a long time, years, while he's been away at medical school. Something seems different, his face more vulnerable, his body less so. His body has always seemed like a defense system to me: too developed in shoulders, arms and chest. Now it is even more so, and the thighs correspondingly overdeveloped. He has, in the last few years, become a power weight-lifter, with records in Alberta and able to aspire to international competition. But the effort has given him high blood pressure and burst blood vessels about the eyes and nose, so he has taken up cycling instead and may compete in a Vancouver-Mount Whistler race. It has been a hard year for him with profession, wife, friends and family. In March he tried to kill himself with a huge muscular injection of morphine (to which he

was also at the time addicted). Both parts of this are astonishing. I don't associate addiction or suicide with people of high energy and good common sense. He creates a lot of his own stress, he says, and the eternal busyness is a way of not feeling. Oh Gord, we have a lot of each other's history, haven't we? Continuity is important to you now because you're ten years older than when you were the smartest one in my Bible class at SFU, and because you almost died—important enough so that you can say things you couldn't before. You escort me back into your life, another rite of passage we've performed. I'm invited to your barbecue next week, where I will meet your wife and other friends.

Tonight I am reading about seventeenth-century spiritual autobiography, and though the reading is for my book, it helps me to understand Jude better—as a Calvinist. Where Catholicism locates the devil externally, Calvinism brings it into the human mind, in full possession of it. The conviction of depravity. Unworthiness. It also arrogates punishment to man. No forgiveness: predestination makes it irrelevant. (Is this why Jude is a predestinarian in love, deciding so early and irrevocably that a relationship can't possibly work? Perfection or nothing.) No real way of knowing whether one is saved, neither confession nor absolution. A minimal and elitist sacramentalism: sacraments for the already virtuous, the object conveying only a diminished symbolic presence, not a real presence. Calvin calls the proposition "This is my body" a metonymy: the name of a higher thing given to a lower. He is rigorous here: a sacrament is a sign ("the visible sign of a sacred thing": or "the visible form of an invisible grace"—both Augustine) and a promise. On this basis he takes out five of the seven Catholic sacraments, including marriage, which makes no promise, no more than any other God-instituted activity does, such as agriculture or barbering. Nor does the allegorical reference to God's marriage with the Church make marriage any more a sacrament than a Biblical parable. I agree with Calvin's rationalism here. Yet for a person who wants to be religious, I would think that any religion with strong and available sacraments is healthier than one without, because sacraments affirm sensual reality just as good works affirm social reality. The poor Calvinist has only his poor self as the way to God: truly he is impoverished.

From Day 2: Wednesday, July 11.

Grete, Veronica and I linger for an hour at the table after supper. The nuns congregate promptly at 5:30, eat rapidly and disperse. Their speed could have an ideological cause: to avoid indulging in pleasures of the flesh longer than absolutely necessary. Or an institutional cause: mealtimes always assume inflated importance in an institutional setting, especially a boring one with standard routine: they are eager. One of the nuns goes after every crumb of her cake, mashing it into her fork. It makes me think of Chaucer's Prioress: how unusual she must have been with her super-genteel good manners, wiping her lips daintily before every sip so as to avoid getting grease in the cup. I realize it isn't poor manners that the nuns are quick, just a businesslike attitude, no frills.

The food tends toward starch and vegetable—not easy to keep up my usual high-protein balance. There is a salad or raw vegetable platter at every meal, a substantial cooked meat at noontime dinner (steak, fish, liver, or chicken) and cold-cuts at supper (ham, beef, salami) varied with a home-made soup or vegetable. Tonight it's both: Scotch broth and sweet-sour red cabbage. There are scones and whole-wheat rolls, fresh raspberries, rhubarb-apple pie, custard. Good food.



The nuns' conversation so far ranges from bland to painfully trivial: food, weather, etc. The guests tend to fall into this monotony when the nuns are present: nobody wants to distinguish herself with a determined conversational assault—not even me. Veronica especially listens to the nuns with a series, a repertoire, of exaggerated facial expressions: intense concern, rapt concentration, surprise, distress—she uses these expressions even when it is the tedious history of a woman who converted, and became a nun, and is now eighty, and used to live in such and such a house, and so on.

Question: Do I need Jude in the background to maintain the momentum of my present work? In cutting him off entirely, will there be a complete reversion to rationalism that ends my openness to others' religious life, or makes it easy to dismiss the whole thing once again, even ridicule it in myself? With him about, even in a marginal way, there is a little area of rawness—like the patch of skin abraded with sandpaper where the electrodes go for an electrocardiogram. It is necessary to be rubbed raw a little—for the skin's thickness, the hide's protective surface and the accretions of daily life to be abraded—in order that the heart's motions may be accurately recorded.

A quiet little flurry of excitement in the evening: a deer has appeared in the back and is roaming cautiously about the orchard. (We saw Sister Joan's photos of the deer last night at supper.) Veronica is in raptures; she has very much wanted to see a deer before she left, almost as token epiphany of the meaning of her stay here. There is also a rabbit poised on the walk, and it is like a Walt Disney movie as we cluster at the windows to see.

From Day 3: Thursday, July 12.

After lunch I show Grete and Veronica my room—an excuse to visit together, really, and since they are both leaving later today there is a strong sense of fellowship. It is less than three days that we've known each other, but we know each other intimately, having started out with the reasons for being here. Veronica and Grete have spent a lot more time together than I have with either of them—long walks, watching TV in the lounge, for all I know praying together in the chapel—but there's no sense of exclusion. Veronica is reluctant to re-enter the outside world, which she is intermittently reminded of by traffic buzz from the highway nearby. She shows us a copy of her personal Bible, bound in white leather and gold-embossed, a gift from her husband the exigent and

incurrable Alexander. She is quite religious as it turns out: raised as a churchgoer, "strayed" in her teenage years but returned to the church. She had serious questions, in fact a crisis of faith, when her mother—a good and gentle soul—died of cancer six years ago at the age of fifty-two: at that point Veronica even said she hated God. But now she does a lot of church work, needs God, needs to believe that her mother is at rest and that she will see her mother again. She needs to believe that this life isn't for nothing. A year ago it got so bad with Alexander that she thought of taking her own life, and of taking their son's as well so as not to leave the boy to Alexander's malign influence. A murderess in her heart, repented. It is incredible she can tell us this. Confession, I suppose, and she seeks forgiveness in the human community. Now her face is stressed, on the verge of tears; she does not want to let herself weep, and she doesn't.

Grete, a Catholic, tells a story about how, on the acreage she had in Langley, there was a stump with an anthill in it, thousands of ants. The bulldozer came and took out the stump, and the house was built. Well, the house was there, and if one ant survived, she (and I love Grete for this "she") would not know how it came there. We are able to see the connection, but the ant is not. And so with us, our knowledge is not enough to understand the reasons and connections. It is a perfect Catholic fable about the workings of Providence and the limits of human consciousness and the need for faith. Chaucer tells a similar one in the little digression about nymphs and fauns in the *Knight's Tale*; and Grete is pleased to learn that she is in a tradition, though the story is her own. Yet it is a story that a Catholic would think of—whereas Veronica, with her Calvinist epistemology, does not have the cosmic view, does not see the natural world as instructive, redemptive or sacramental. Veronica can only wait uneasily for God to reveal what he wants her to do, and hope she is doing the right thing.

Later, exchanging benedictions and farewells I know that despite the intensity we haven't got what it takes to be friends on the outside. It's very specialized in here. We don't exchange addresses or phone numbers, or wishes to see one another again.

So far this retreat has not been any escape from humanity, intensity, horror and loss. Sister Jeanne says that after Kate goes, tomorrow, no other guests are scheduled to arrive, so I will be really alone. And it is only 7 p.m. More could yet happen.

Day 6: Sunday, July 15. At home.

I am edgy here, back home, wish I were at the convent again. Everything is intrusive here. The neighbours' dog sets to barking at 3 a.m., and whining at 9. Then Nick, my older boy, comes up from the basement where his room is: his firm tread from room to room on the first floor. Then he calls me, and comes upstairs to discuss his college applications. Ten o'clock. As I start out to get my *Times* and thence back to White Rock, a phone call. Seth and Jean Cohen, making their way up the coast to Powell River, are now in Portland, will arrive later this evening and stay here. Should I stay the extra day for them? I won't see them again soon, their hospitality when we were in LA, the years-long acquaintance and rarity of the meeting: I'll stay. Of course. Go into town, purchase *Times* and *Voice*, come home, read them. Jamil calls. Later I lie down to sleep, but radio music from next door prevents a nap. In order to write it seems I will need to be away for an extended time. Even as I write this Nick interrupts to ask me to help him find the misplaced first draft of his application essay, comes upstairs to help me look.

Dinner alone at the Himalaya restaurant after swimming, before Seth and Jean are due. This part written on the restaurant's fortunately blank newsprint place-mats. I should always carry paper. In the shower at Kitsilano pool this afternoon an absurd dialogue occurred to me, obsessed as I continue with Jude. Possessed, even, and in need of exorcism. "I'll pray." "To whom?" "To God." "God who?" "The God that answers prayers." I'll pretend I am about four years old (might as well; feel it anyway) and in the same condition of suspended disbelief as the little girl the anthropologist Frobenius tells about, whose matchstick "turned into" a witch. Kids pray to get a bicycle at Christmas, I'll pray for what I want of Jude. He calls it a "mating relationship," and says that in spite of a kind of love, he doesn't want one with me. Even though I believe, intellectually, it would be destructive. Why am I still ambivalent, when the issues are posed so clearly? How can you continue to love someone who is not good for you? I thought I was incapable of that.

Either you do not fully believe he is not good for you, and have hope of some good from him. There were hints of this good: promises, "the visible form of an invisible grace." That he was able to read Jim Cannon's book on American Trotskyism and respond to it so beautifully, understanding it as my tradition. That he felt "like

a tree rooted in earth" when we made love. His relief when I came back after walking out on an argument. His tears when we decided to stay together. That he was able, even with qualifications, to say he loved me.

Or there is in you something that wishes to be abased, to abase and veil itself, bow and worship before a shrine (a dim old stone sanctuary, perhaps in India). Something that wants to operate on the level of instinct or passivity entirely, to give up in a way, quit fighting. But actually I have to keep fighting to stay in any touch with Jude at all: the easiest thing would be to let go and cut him off completely. It would only take a sentence or two, by phone or mail, and I'd be quit of that oppressive weight for the rest of my life. "Oppressed": the image is of him lying on me: the pleasure of oppression—such are the paradoxes for those who know a little Latin.

Or there is a conviction that I am unsinkable.

Why do I want so much to please this person, this goofy-looking, narrow-minded youth? Because of the beautiful, polyvalent man in him. Maybe for some other more sinister reason. In New York there was a big, good-looking, white-haired and treacherous dude with rumored links to the CIA, who linked on the student revolts we all took part in. My old friend Henry described this man as "the handsome fascist pig every nice Jewish girl would like to fuck." Jude could go either way—like Céline, in Trotsky's review: toward real authoritarianism and rigidity (backsliding of a secular kind) or forward toward polyvalence. Is it the future polyvalence that attracts, or the hidden rigidity?

Am I or am I not going to pray? I am already praying all the time: does it matter whom I address? I am like a nun whose vow is to repeat the same prayer every minute of her waking existence, a mantra. There is that first moment of waking—only a few seconds before my conscious mind clicks it into place. The mantra is ritualized, formulaic, boring. It deadens the mind, but rubs it raw at the same time, like the moment Paul Bowles wrote about that everyone undergoes who confronts the Sahara alone: "*la baptême de la solitude*." It forces me to realize how extremely much wanting there still is. I'm left not with a person but a condition: Jude-ness. A principle. It isn't that love entered my heart, but that you did. My interiority is you. A flame glows in me: you—though it's a candle lit to honor the dead.

It is bizarre to think that people have written this way about Jesus, an incorporeal presence. I think you can't really pray for



what you want personally. There are no prayers for that. You can pray in order to attain an attitude or a condition, like forgiveness. I, at any rate, can't pray to something I don't believe in.

Part of me wants to be part of something or someone else, an appendage, cog in the wheel. It is an instinctual social striving—"species consciousness"; or is it that infantile level Jude tapped into that wants to be in the womb again with somebody else making the decisions, doing the work? As in the cloister.

From Day 9: Wednesday, July 18.

John Henry Cardinal Newman: "All had passed in a dream, and he was a stranger where he had hoped to have a home."

At lunch, Maeve, the cook, joins us. She is three years out of Ireland, northern Ireland, and her daughter, at college there, has just won a prize in history. We discuss allergies, and everyone produces an allergy story. Maeve's is that she suffered for months from sinus, then decided to make a novena to St. Martin in order to discover the cause. And as soon as she started the novena, it occurred to her: the new houseplants. So she threw them out and was cured, and remembers St. Martin with periodic offerings: "He's good for diseases and things about the house." "*And mice,*" adds Sister Rosamund.

Tomorrow is my last full day and night here for the week, though it may be possible for me to return for another few days next week again. Interesting. This opens the possibility of Jude visiting me out here to deliver his letters. If he offers to do so. If I agree. If I would like that, though—for him to come to lunch, meet the sisters, see the place. Interesting because it extends our future into another week, unexpectedly. Of course he could simply drop off the letters at my house unannounced, though this would be uncharacteristically risky and spontaneous. Will I ever be able to say, "Like all firm Persuasions it is come to pass?" Yet I doubt even Blake can help me here (and my persuasion is not so firm any longer)—here where I am like Hansel and Gretel walking in the woods, where Blake, and everything I've read, is no more helpful than breadcrumbs cast behind to show the way back. I remember once Henry said that his relationship with L. was sometimes like a fairy tale. I wonder which fairy tale he meant. I always assumed it meant something rich and strange and wonderful, a Russian/Oriental fairy tale. But this is a German one, severe and terrifying (and Jude is of German stock). Yet even a German fairy tale may turn out well for the protagonists.

They may weep bitterly—they *do* weep bitterly, they are treated badly, but they plow on with ingenuity and openness and sometimes a little brutality of their own. What would my strategy be? How would I outwit my enemies? (His past is my enemy.) Win them over, or else use their weakness against them. But one has to be up close and in danger to know what the weakness is; in fact one is usually already entrapped before discerning the weakness. Perseverance and decisiveness. I really am spinning out a fairy tale here. O well: as well live a fairy tale—even a German one—as some tedious contemporary novel.

From Day 10: Thursday, July 19.

It is so easy here to be purely a writer, and let it all happen between me and the page in a kind of continuous orgiastic release. You forget your other roles and live purely in a state of desire. That is, after all, what a convent is for—to devote yourself to desire (theirs for God), to cultivate it. This is why I get along with the nuns so well: because I am doing the same thing here that they are. I think they see in me a purity of intention and an intensity of devotion, an interiority which makes it not difficult for me to feel at ease with them, even like one of them, on a different track but methodologically similar.

Last night I got a steam burn, making a cup of herb tea in the hall lounge at midnight. I kept ice on it for about four hours, and Vitamin E from my capsules, and finally a tea bag, until it stopped hurting. It's surprising how slowly the histological effects of a trauma emerge. First, naked pain with no visible mark: intense burning sensation whenever the ice melted away. After four hours or so, there emerges the slightly raised, pinkish welt that defines the burn area. Another day before discolouration sets in. Now, three days later, the discolouration is fading: no scab, no blister—smooth, with a kind of epicentre a little darker. The discolouration is more like a bruise than a burn, light purple-brown on the inside of my arm where it passed over the steam-kettle spout.

With my feelings too, the worst symptoms were averted by immediate intensive care: lots of talking to friends, lots of writing about it; but gradually the welt and the discolouration set in anyway, there's no avoiding them; and so, though I'm perfectly functional and even frequently happy, there's an underlying melancholy to me right now, that sometimes even deepens into anxiety, a band of it from stomach to throat.

Day 11: Monday, July 23.

Down. I'm back down after the weekend at home. To the point where I barely want to write even this.

At dinner Sister Jeanne regales us with her account of the wedding Saturday at the Ocean View old people's home. She lists the names of the other aged guests: "'Oo helse was there?" From another table, listening to but not quite hearing the recital in all its details, a visiting Father inquires: "Did they get married in a rest room? I mean rest home?" The bride was 90, the groom 84. (This indeed is going with older women!) She has twelve children and is Catholic. The wedding was to have taken place in a local church but couldn't because the groom had been in hospital having his leg amputated, and wasn't well enough. The bride is determined not to use her cane to walk down the aisle: "No way I'm gonna use a cane to walk down that aisle!" is Sister Jeanne's version of it. The bride is given away by her son, and keeps everyone waiting until the organist plays the proper music—the wedding march—so that she can emerge from the wings. Now they will share a room in the rest home.

From Day 12: Tuesday, July 24.

Lunch: discussion of Jews and Judaism with Sisters Rosamund and Jeanne. How did it come up? Don't remember, but in response to some assertion about Jews and family loyalty I relate an anecdote. Halfway through, Sister Rosamund breaks in as the light dawns: "Are you Jewish?" And, to my affirmation, "No wonder you're so smart!" Then she joyfully calls Sister Jeanne over from the buffet: "Did you know Sheila is Jewish?" I find her overtness very touching, and her naive pleasure. Sister Rosamund's experience of Jews has been very good, she says (thank goodness!); she knew quite a lot as foster families for underprivileged girls in Toronto, where the order has a home. Sister Jeanne sits down and begins an encomium on the Jews for their sharp business sense. This stereotype I feel I do have to counter, so we go through the whole thing. But she is stubborn, or else it is such a habit of mind that she can't see it as stereotype at all. It's a fact of life, which one may praise or blame: that Jews have money, are good at business. To blame or resent it would be anti-semitic, so she will praise it; but she can't

actually dispense with it. Oh well. I suppose I offer her an opportunity to implement the program of Vatican II by showing charity to a member of the chosen people, the ancestors of Jesus and Paul, the forerunner of her own faith. Fine. Good enough. Better than a kick in the pants, as my ex-husband would have said. Sister Jeanne goes on to tell me about Edith Stein, a Jewish philosopher who became a Christian, and Sister Rosamund lends me a biography of Simone Weil.

I've lost the rawness, the compulsion to notice and write everything. The wound's scarring over. The convent is by now perhaps a little too familiar and cloying, sticky with the memories and anxieties experienced here. It will be good to go to England for the Chaucer conference. I've lost what I think Simone Weil would call a certain "attention"—and a tension. Am going on the momentum of inertia rather than real speed. Am I slowing down for the curve? For my trip abroad, the shift of gears into academic conference life followed by a new semester? Everything seems less writable now. There's a desire to sleep and to rest.

My burn is still there visually, and probably will be for another week or two, but it doesn't hurt, even when stroked or pressed. I cherish it, I like having it as correlative of the inner condition. It's important to be able to see something heal and go away. I don't know whether I did it to myself on purpose in order to externalize pain—I rarely have accidents of any kind. It was a careless gesture, taking a chance, given the position of the kettle. I knew I could get burned but thought I wouldn't, took a gamble and got burned.

Sister Jeanne brought me a quarter chicken at dinner. Where does she get this food-hoard from? I wonder whether she is being extra-nice to me because of finding out I'm Jewish. I'd better not be hypersensitive: she's been nice all along.



Day 14: Thursday, July 26.

A date in the Cuban revolution. One month plus a day since breaking off with Jude.

Cool today, prepared by last night's thunder, quick rain, lightning display.

I believe I can say, would have to say, I no longer love Jude ("and yet, when all have given him o'er / From death to life thou mightst him yet recover"). I don't even think the Drayton is any longer true, though one hates to close the door so definitively. Soon I will be forgetting him, I will have forgotten. That there was intensity I remember, but to feel it is more difficult every day. Only the writing will be left of his image, and eventually it will be only writing.

Just now I went into the convent chapel for the first time—my last day. Quite a wonderland. Yes, I did dip my finger in the little holy-water font to my right upon entry—actually, I pressed my finger to the soaked sponge in the font. And yes I did, though not immediately, sign myself: wet finger to forehead, left and right shoulder, abdomen. Have always wanted to perform this little rite that I've seen done so often. I didn't dip or kneel.

In place of stained-glass windows (the chapel is windowless) there is a series of small enamels up one wall and down the other, depicting the stations of the cross and events in Christ's life. A beautiful lace-trimmed altarcloth on the altar table. A liturgical book open on a reading stand. Candles burning in large blue or red glass lanterns with wrought pewter covers. Fresh snapdragon and gladiolus on and near the altar—now I see why these tall flowers are cultivated in little plots here and there on the grounds. Odor of scented candle-wax.

And there are relics—*ex ossibus* St. Euphrasia and John Eudes, the founders. Probably each house in the order has a relic. The Euphrasia relic—a tiny roundish chip of bone—is mounted on a plaque beneath a small portrait of the woman; this is framed and mounted on a most elaborate reliquary that stands some two feet tall, an incredible piece of rococo art in wrought metal, cruciform, curved and curlicued, inlaid with enameled tiles, red and green semi-precious stones, the whole topped with an elaborate cross. The relic of John Eudes is in a smaller and much less elaborate hand-held reliquary, like a highly decorated picture-frame.

In a way they were right, the church fathers who chastised classics-loving Christians with the question "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" Or Alcuin's later version: "What has Ingeld to do with Christ?" to his monks who spent their time reading Norse saga. I suspect it was not only the distraction they saw as a threat, but the alternative methodology. Once you begin to admit another criterion for truth than the literal, a way of interpreting the truth of poetry as relative, symbolic, figurative, etc.—you open the way to treat religion the same way: to the Calvinist symbolic presence, for instance, rather than transsubstantiation.

As a habit of mind this makes religion less literal, more literary. It offers a way of accepting religious propositions as exemplary, symbolic, representative, redemptive, possible, etc.—anything but literally true. "Structurally meaningful," "relevant." Is it possible to take Jesus for your saviour that way? Probably. The new Anglican Bishop of Durham proposed just this view of it, to cries of "scandal" and "shame" at his consecration in York Minster. Is Jesus my saviour? No, but I suppose he could be if I wanted him to be. Someone could be so why not him symbolically? People do sacrifice themselves for one another, do save one another. Still, what about one person sacrificing himself for everyone else? A convincing story and a powerful symbol.

Why would one bother to believe it, what would be the need or advantage? An aesthetic thrill? Yes. Feeling of communion with a large number of people? Yes, though a lot of them you wouldn't want to spend time with. A channel for reverence and other similar emotions that you don't have the chance to feel often, in the normal course of things. Still, those criteria can be met in human love: aesthetics, communion, reverence. I think religion would be hollow substitute for human love. It is, however, a lot more readily available, and much more stable. Yet it remains settling for less.

At supper the meal consists of everything I am allergic to. Sister Jeanne, noticing my sparse plate, goes into the kitchen and assembles a special plate for me that I can safely eat: roast chicken, wonderful homemade cookies, fresh blueberries. She thought of me, she says, during the reading in chapel this morning, and from her fractured quotation I recognize the lines: "Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion; put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem the holy city; shake yourself from the dust, arise, O captive Jerusalem." She would very much like to go to Israel to visit Jerusalem and especially a kibbutz. She is going a little overboard, I

think—though on the other hand one of the major planks of the Vatican II reform is about the necessity to respect the Jews. It must be difficult for someone bred in a more virulent Catholicism, but she is trying to live up to the new line. Nonetheless, “You’re just saying so because you know I’m Jewish,” I josh her. “Oh, she can’t,” Sister Rosamund protests, flushing, “she can’t be two-faced.” She is well aware, then, of what I’ve been thinking, and distressed that I should distrust.

Everyone knows I’m leaving after supper. There is a genuine pang saying these farewells. Frances, pixyish and stout, is last in the dining room, clearing off the buffet. She calls after me, “Wait!” as I go out. “I wish you luck,” she cries happily with opened arms, and as I approach, “I wish you luck in a Jewish way!” What is this? Not, I hope, some patronizing pretense of acceptance. But the story, her story, is that though Frances is German, she grew up among Russian Jews in Odessa, lived in a household of Russian Jews. Why she was there does not come out; in her excitement to tell me her experience of Jews she omits this information and there’s no space to ask. She describes, with her vivacious gestures so familiar to me from my aunts—and now I know why—the strict kosher home, the two sets of plates for milk and meat, the young boy hired to light the stove on Saturday because all work was forbidden on the Sabbath. It occurs to me that perhaps Frances herself was born Jewish, and converted to Catholicism at some point, but she has treated this whole thing as a secret and I don’t wish to ferret out more than she wants to reveal. What the whole story is I don’t know and she is satisfied to repeat, with upraised finger, her benediction, conspiratorial: “I wish you luck in a Jewish way!”

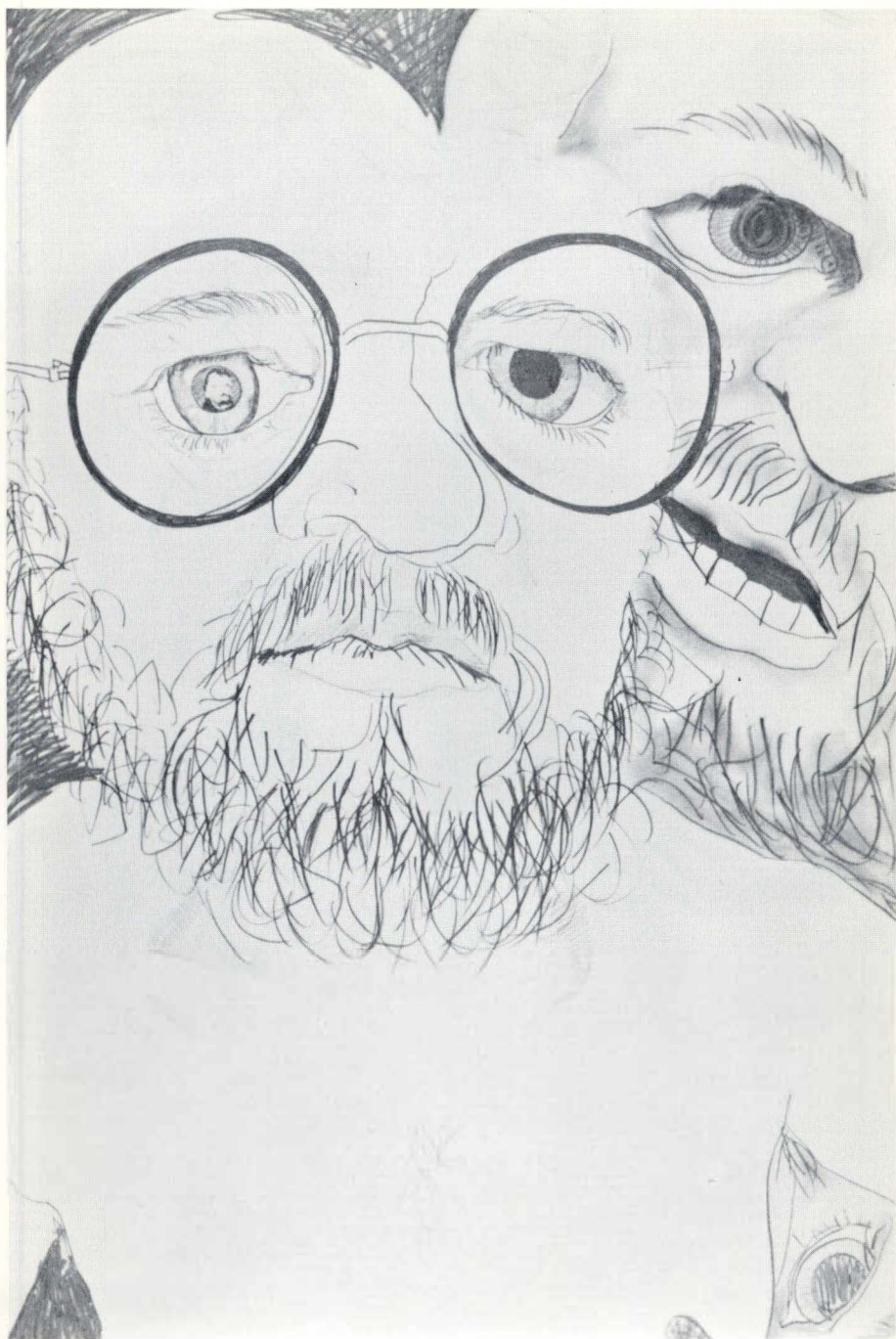
Sister Martina sees me off in the lobby, a little formal. Sister Jeanne hugs me (she comes about up to my chin). Finally Sister Rosamund lumbers out and shyly receives my embrace. She reddens with emotion—a real blush!—her eyes shiny behind the enlarging lenses, and it seems she is moved, as I am, at the mutual acknowledgement of affection. Her reticence, I realize, is the measure of her capacity: it is protective. She is the one I feel closest to, the one who has tried to find out something about me and who

seemed even to take a certain pride in me, almost as a mother would do, in my work and my knowledge. I would like to continue to know her, and say so. This parting is difficult for Sister Rosamund too, I realize. It is wrenching to leave: I am fond of these women. It isn't that we've been close in any real sense, or could be. We're foreigners, and in reality don't want to know one another. Or, more accurately: I know about them now all that I ever would. They are nuns, the white habit says it all: what you see is what you get. The rest of their lives isn't accessible to me—their past (other than institutional) or the range of their emotions or opinions. Their confessor will know this, but not me nor anyone else. I suspect, too, that they wouldn't care to know much more about me than they do right now. Still, they have been the people in this place, the fixed co-ordinates of the venture, and I love them as one loves one's past.

At home the house is quiet and tolerably neat; the boys have cleaned up more or less. There's a list of phone calls and a pile of mail, including a packet of letters from Jude, his responses to mine. Of course I open them at once and read. One of them is apologetic, nearly grovelling. Full of crocodile tears and grandiose rhetoric. Another is sincere and conversational, though distanced. A third (this one in response to my bombshell) is angry. A real war-document from start to finish, full of talk about strategy and traps, assault and defense. Not actually to finish, though: it eases off toward the end and winds up with the intention to resume later. I go upstairs and sit down at my desk for three hours to answer. I will be in England when he gets it, forced into exteriority again. When I come back it will be time to start preparing classes for the new semester. I wonder if this is the last I'll write to him, the last I'll want to. I've thought so before and been wrong.

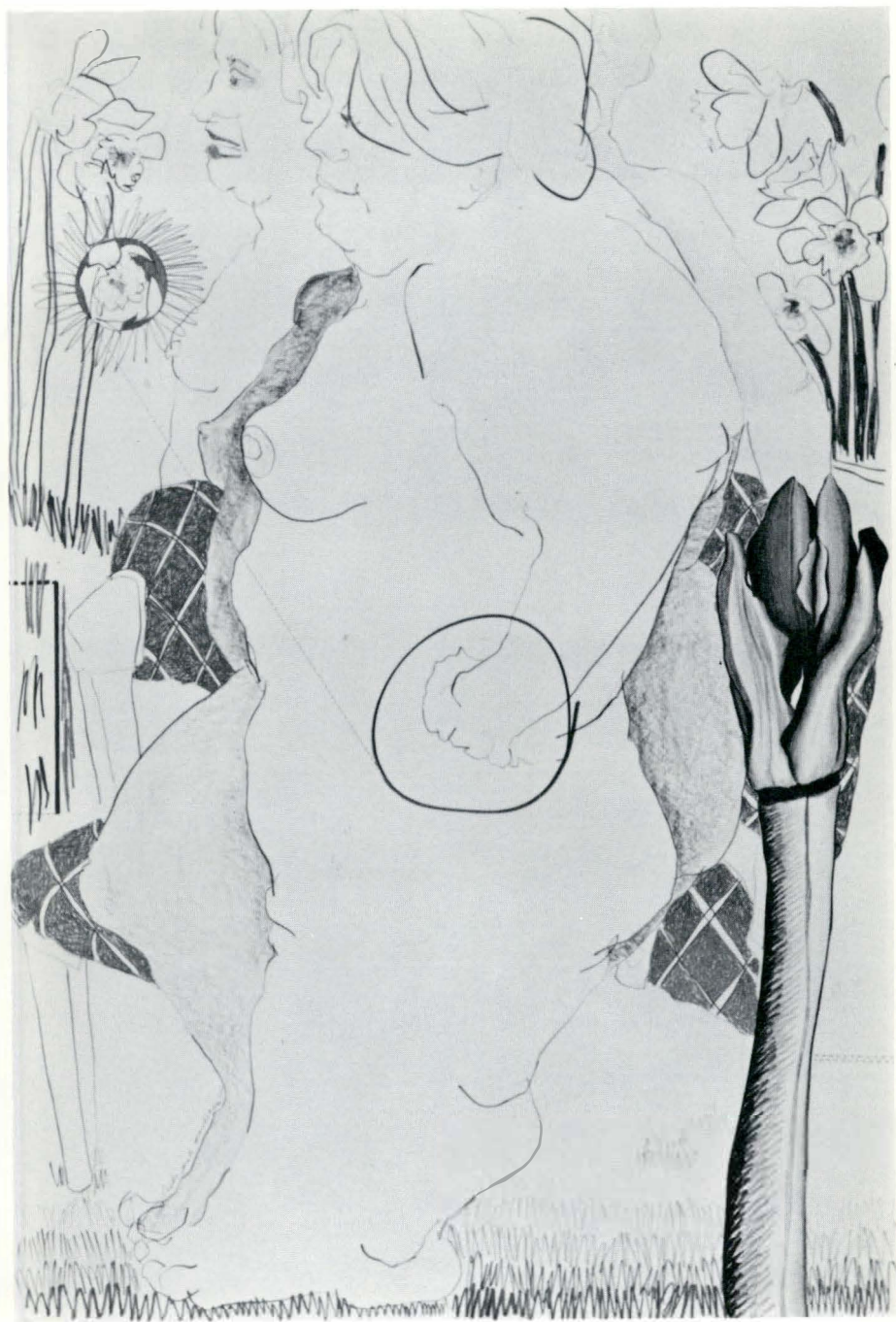


## Leslie Poole / RECENT DRAWINGS















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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

ELEANOR WACHTEL is a Vancouver writer and broadcaster with enthusiasms for west coast writing. She is one of the editors of the feminist literary quarterly, *Room of One's Own*. In a non-literary lapse, she co-edited *The Expo Story*.

DAPHNE MARLATT is the author of a dozen books and has co-edited a number of literary magazines, including a period as Poetry Editor of *TCR* in its early days. She has recently completed a reading tour of Australia, Singapore and Oslo. Forthcoming is a novel called *Ana Historic*.

GEORGE WEBBER works as staff photographer for SAIT, Calgary. He travels extensively with a Leica Rangefinder 35 mm., and is presently preparing to print the photographic work from a trip to France and Morocco. Prints from his *Badlands* series were exhibited this year in Paris and Canberra.

EUGENE DUBNOV was born in the USSR in 1949, and emigrated in 1971. He is currently Writer in Residence in Carmel College, Oxfordshire. He has published two volumes of poetry in Russian; poems and short stories, translated into and written in English, have appeared in magazines in Britain, USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

LARY TIMEWELL (BREMNER) edits Tsunami Editions, a recent series of chapbooks featuring Vancouver writers, and is currently working on a translation of "Mentalite, detail" by Quebec writer Michel Gay. The poems and polaroids in this issue are from a group entitled *Pas d'Affiches*.



SHEILA DELANY teaches literature at SFU, has published fiction in numerous Canadian and American magazines, and has just finished a novel.

LESLIE POOLE recently showed selected prints, paintings and drawings at the Crown Gallery in Vancouver (see *TCR* #34). In the spring of 1987, he will exhibit his landscape series at the Richmond Art Gallery.

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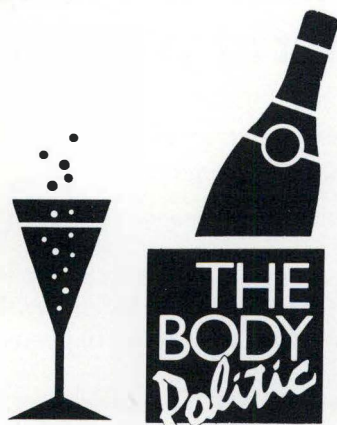
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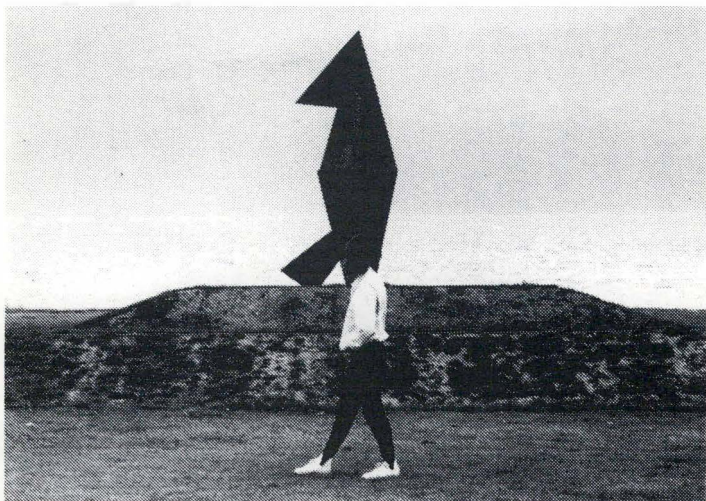
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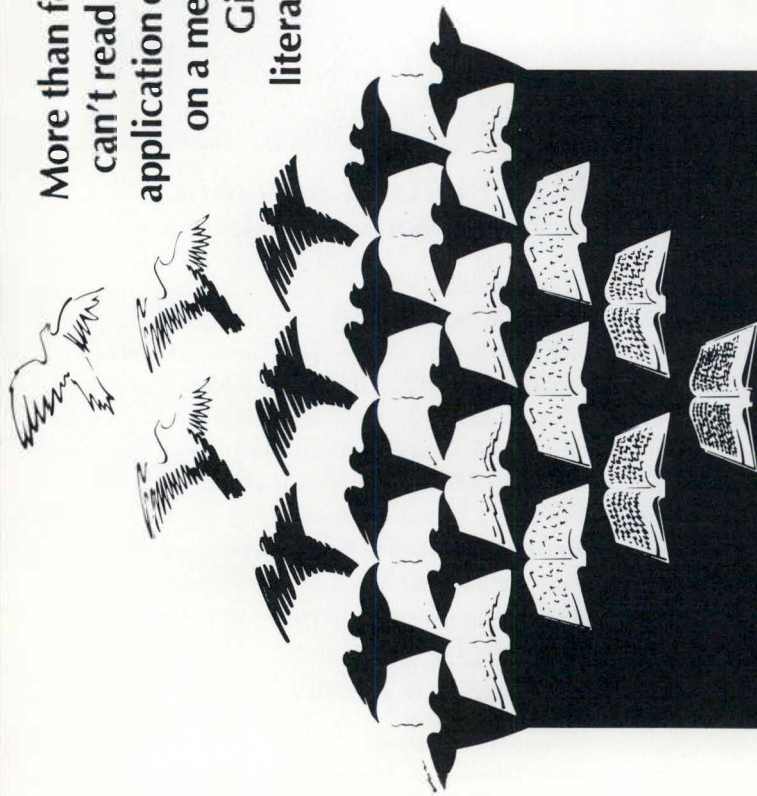
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