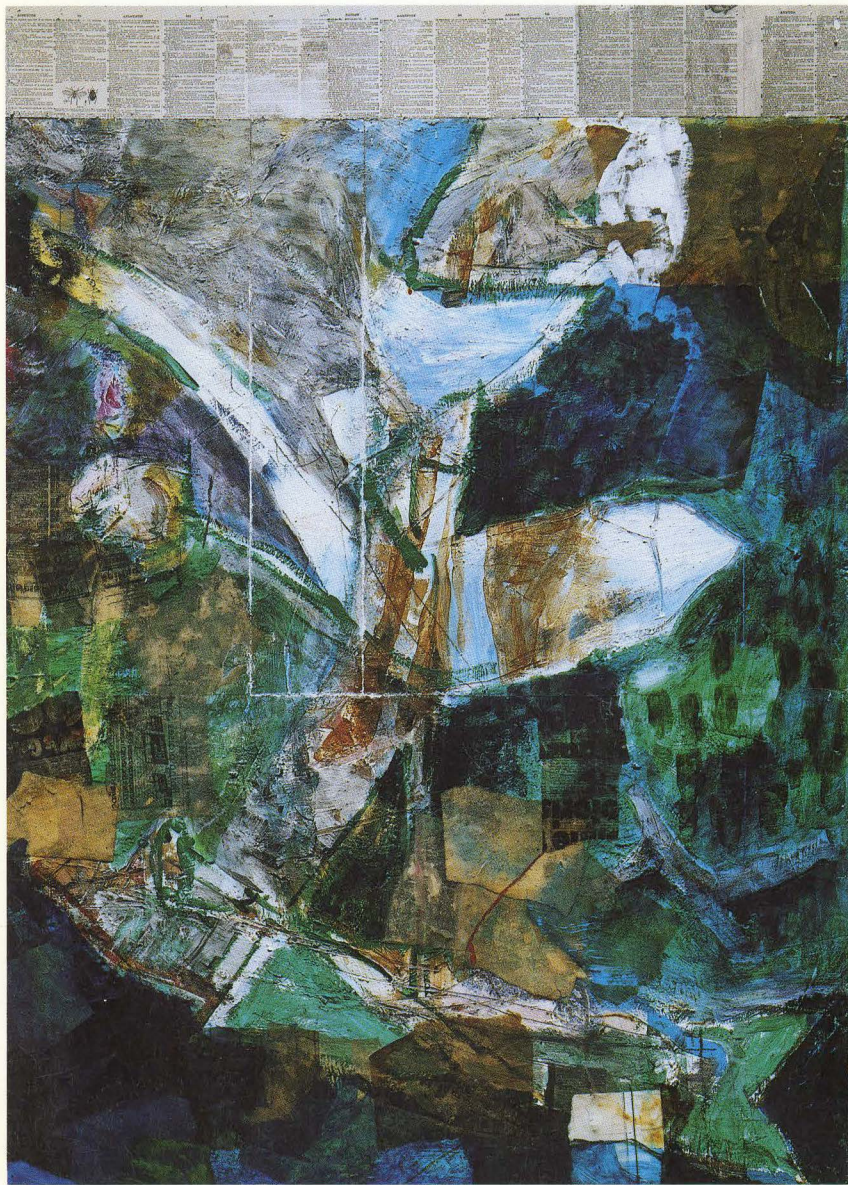


THE CAPITANO REVIEW



Himself giving himself
a chance to explore crystal flakes
sharp-angled interstices
of the universe in galactic formation
at zero time.

—GILLIAN HARDING-RUSSELL, "Claude Jutra's Note"

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BAIT

COVER

Michael Carmichael

Sally Ito / FOUR POEMS

JEWS IN OLD CHINA

I

Their history
is without words
in this ancient land.

Who carries the struggle
but the oak, the voices
in the still branches?

II

The silk road
winds around their middles
like sashes of birds in flight
over the soundless plain.

A ringing bell,
and they are sudden scattered
pearls in a wave
of blue silk.

III

These sages
cut across pages
of black ink
and rice paper.

Searching, searching.

The fine stroke of the brush,
the black flutter of words,
the sudden rush of wind
and their story is revealed.

UPON SEEING A SCULPTURE OF MAITREYA, THE FUTURE BUDDHA

the finger
is the arc of a crescent moon
lighting upon the face
of a starless night.

Such still perfection!
the full tremor of heaven within those lidded eyes,
the smile of seeing on those silent lips.

poised,
it sits, an arrow in its bow.
The sudden pull,
the swift song,
the toppling body.

the lotus,
shedding its last petal
into the clear waters of enlightenment.

KYOTO

I

Book of knowledge said:
a city of cultural splendour
housing the nation's most
historically revered pieces of art.

Voice of Grandmother says:
ah, city of palaces and castles
built up in gold and silver
for emperors and lords clothed
in kimonos of the purest silk.

Kyoto in my head:
a city of light nestled in mtns
mtns to climb
mtns to worship
mtns to crumble, fall away for me
to see
what has been there
for ages.

II

kyoto station,
early spring
you meet me here,
an appointed guide, my relative,
(we look astonishingly alike).
Knowing
too well what i seek, you say at once,
'Kyoto is a city of ephemeral delight.
To hold the most fleeting sight within
the palm of your hand is to catch
the heart of your imagined place.'

*

late night,
downtown kyoto

tonight, i caught glimpse of her
of whom you spoke, flitting into the night;
a sleeve, red as blood, flashing from
a geisha hurrying into a limousine
down a Gion alleyway.

even here and now,
 you say the sight is rare.
 Rare as what?
 Me in my kimono
 or you in yours?

*

hot springs
mtns near kyoto

 naked,
in the spring, i bathe
quietly in the corner—
my body exposed, pale and white
 against the coloured tile.
 you offer to scrub my back.
 i nod.

 Hearing
only the quiet chuffing of your
hands upon my skin, i think
 ‘how loud
the sounds of insects
humming in the night.’

*

last day,
omuro, kyoto

And oh,
the cherry trees are in bloom!
We have gone to Omuro Temple to see
the late blossoms
 worshipped for centuries by courtiers
 and priests,
 and merchants
 and yes, even you
who claims veteran this world of transience—
you, who saved for me, two pink petals,
soft as a child's cheek, to put in my pocket
for me to find at the train station.

‘ah, train fare
for home.’ —Parting gift
too fragile for the
station clerk's punch.

ON MEETING THE PROPHET: FIVE STAGES

Seeking the Prophet's thumb
 like seeds among stones,
are hands, blooming frail
 the flowers of His sowing.

Savouring the Prophet's cries
 like fruit, all bruised
are golden scattered, a flock of sheep,
 a swarm of flies.

Wearing the Prophet's face
 like gems upon water,
are two eyes, clever frogs!
 green stones of silence.

Shedding the Prophet's gown
 like wind undressing,
are restless scents, quaking lilac
 shuddering rose.

Riding the Prophet's tail
 like water rolling off the leaf,
the still sounds of His flight
 are bells, clear as the new moon.

Brenda Riches / THE BREEDING GROUND

He fell asleep with his head resting on the table, his arms spreadeagled over it. Perhaps it was the hardness of the wood that gave him awkward dreams, each one stumbling into the next till he found himself blundering through a scorched forest towards a distant woman who smiled and turned into Ruth when he came close. Her smile contained a promise of damnation.

When he awoke at last, all he could do at first was open his eyes and let the light from the window persuade him that he had left Ruth behind for the time being. He needed a cup of tea.

As he walked to the kitchen, it seemed that he was somewhere high above himself looking down at this dishevelled person going from a table to a kettle and taking endless time to get there. The more he thought about it, the more the distance stretched, reminding him yet again that Ruth was somewhere else in an unreachable place. The cold kettle was a shock that brought him back down into himself. A cup of tea to console him. Was it too much to ask for? But he didn't plug the kettle in. Nothing boiled.

He sat down at the table and pounded his rage into its sticky surface, pounded so hard that crumbs bounced and rolled off down into the carpet.

The carpet was a world of bright blue, long-tailed birds and sturdy trees. Between the trunks magenta rivers meandered. Now that Ruth was gone, he was doomed to travel alone, hour after hour, till the line that divided his nights and days grew thinner the way a sunbeam grows thinner when the crack between curtains narrows as they are being drawn closed, locking a room into darkness.

When his tantrum was over, he went to the store, taking with him the orange plastic bag he had bought for its capacity and strength.

Where in the name of all that was worthy did they hide the teabags in this godforsaken store? He tried to read the signs over the aisles, but the letters fidgeted on the boards and changed places with each other. The more he peered up at them — having to crane his neck, they were so high — the more shoppers jostled him and knocked their wagons against his shins. No one said sorry, and when he tried to tell them to look where they were going, they stared past him and trundled away.

He asked a girl in a white smock where the tea was and she told him aisle six but he couldn't distinguish the numbers and the girl's expression stopped him from asking which one that was.

He snatched up items at random and hurried back to his house.

It took him a while to cross the carpet because a violent storm blew up and he had a tortuous time negotiating the rapids. The water was thrown into high pink waves that hid the rocks and changed the shoreline. Soaked through and exhausted, he went into the kitchen and unpacked the shopping bag. He emptied the fridge of sour milk, mouldering bread, brown-edged lettuce, and meat that had turned blue in places, then put in the fresh replacements. The garbage bag was now full. He took it outside.

Glancing down the street, he noticed there were no other cans at the curb and the garbage truck was disappearing around the corner. Time was such, that a small lapse in a schedule could tilt a universe. The garbage would have to wait a week. Why had Ruth left him to this muddle and mess?

On his way back to the house, he picked up his mail. One letter. An invitation from Ruth to an eight-day celebration of her "new-found freedom." He would accept, of course, because he had no choice.

The cypress on her lawn bowed as he passed, and the climbing rose over her lintel bent to snag him when she opened the front door to let him in. Her livingroom was so airless, he asked her to open the latticed window. She did so, lamenting the brief loss of her leaded barrier to the world.

"Help yourself to a drink," she said. He mixed a martini, glad to have something to fortify himself against her soft profile at the window. The cypress was a charred shape behind her against a sun setting in a clutter of orange cloud.

He was relieved when other guests started to arrive. She greeted each one lasciviously, relatives and friends alike, yet he soon perceived that they felt no more at ease than he did. A lank-haired man who spent much of his time leaning against the bar looked as if he were seeking something he would more likely find under a stone. A plump redhead in a diaphanous blouse, who hovered near the stereo taking charge of the music, might have felt more at home in a glass bowl. She seemed to be swimming inside the confines of a vacuousness. Even though she had an adoring man at her side, she was patently turning a deaf ear to his ardour and chose instead to fix her glassy gaze on the place where Ruth's Van Gogh used to hang. The memory sent him to refill his glass.

By the time he was on his fourth martini, a joint was being passed from mouth to mouth. Leaning against the wall, he observed the chain of lips being clamped to the weed, listened to the sussuration of sucking and exhaling. When his turn came, he inhaled deeply, taking the smoke into his lungs and holding it there. He had heard this was how it was done. The goldfish turned off the music to create a silence that would "help them to hear their deeper selves." A girl with spiky yellow hair felt moved by her deeper self to take off her skirt, revealing slack, pale thighs. Soon others followed suit, and the chairs, bar and couches were draped with garments, obliging him to wonder why people felt the need to reveal in public what was best left to the imagination. Ruth was nowhere to be seen. Her absence tugged at him. He got himself another drink.

When a desolate blonde with aimless eyes took a mirror from the wall and laid it on the floor, he feared he was in for a bout of narcissism. But all she did was kneel back while her escort laid out avenues of white powder on the glass with the help of a razor blade, and urged the company to sniff the stuff up through a rolled up dollar bill. When it was handed to him, he bent over the mirror. The sight of his haggard face was repellent. He closed his eyes, and sniffed till his nostrils seemed to catch fire. By the time the blonde had reached that stage of delirium where hands flutter and legs seem moulded from rubber, he decided to go and look for Ruth.

The first room was small with a narrow bed in one corner, visible because of the light from the hallway. The room's switch didn't work and the night was so close, he had the sense of a bat pressing its mouth and wings to the window pane. He looked for a candle but found none. Ruth wasn't there. He heard a gentle wailing as of a widow at her husband's burial. It came from the room next door.

This room was brightly lit. There was nothing on the white walls; no furniture; no curtains. Ruth was lying on her back on the wooden floor, her skirt pulled up to the tops of her thighs. Her face was matted with thick powder; a slash of scarlet bled from the edges of her mouth. Less repugnant and more fascinating were the birds that enclosed her in a precise fence, some standing, some lying down. Did live birds lie down? Yet their eyes were open and wings stirred as if preparing for flight. Looking more closely, he saw that they were in fact stuffed, and the movement of the wings came from a gust of wind entering through the open window. Each bird was different: a blackbird with red streaks on its wings, a canary with a thin beak, a large thrush, a plain sparrow. Some of them had clearly come from a tropical forest, though none of them resembled his carpet birds. The saddest was a white parrot.

In the brightness of the room, Ruth was an altogether different person. Someone not to be desired. She didn't seem to notice he was there.

He went back to the party with new interest. When the blonde came up to him and licked his mouth, he succumbed, mingling his breath with hers and sharing the secrets of his tongue. But the sloppy conjunction soon palled and he withdrew to stir another martini.

The goldfish and the bar fixture were avoiding each other's glances, the dancers were taxing their muscles with inane gyrations that connected nothing with nothing, the spectators were filling their lungs with the smoke they then heartily expelled into the congested room. He joined in with a vague sense of glee till he became absorbed in the sight of a young man with hair that might blind the sun, and his wasted companion. When they reached the tedious point of surrender, he turned his gaze to a picture more pleasing because it seemed to be going somewhere: a horse and buggy driven by a stark-faced woman with severe hair and a straight back. She was encased in a prim bodice and skirt. There was no need for a whip; her eyes were enough. The painting held him in its sepia grip while the debris of the party grew: the flopping, pasty bodies, the wriggling of stale desire where couples came together, parted, found other partners. When the wasted girl rubbed her cheek against his arm, he should have been moved to something. She was, after all, quite appealing. But he had witnessed and taken part in too much that was blatant.

Time rearranged itself in its passage from darkness to light. He slept in daylight; in the space between dusk and dawn he drank and watched. As the night deepened, he foraged in cupboards, managing to eat enough to sustain him. He wandered the rooms of Ruth's house, entering into the disarray that faced him at every turn, losing himself in the powder that saturated his nostrils, the folds of flesh, the tangles of hair, the glasses filled and refilled, the joints rolled and smoked. He broke off his own affair with the gin and satisfied a subsequent craving with large tumblers of apple juice he found in a box under the kitchen table.

On the last morning came a clap of thunder, and Ruth declared the party over. As the guests went their ways from the same door amidst the nauseating expressions of gratitude from those who were still able to speak, he knew finally that Ruth was utterly nothing to him. She might just as well not have happened.

He drove through a lightning storm back to his house.

The garbage bag had a hole in it, doubtless chewed by a scavenging cat. From the hole oozed something dark brown. Flies couldn't keep away; when he lifted the bag, they buzzed. The bottom of the can was squirming with soft white grubs. The stench was sickening.

He went inside, filled the kettle and plugged it in. He took out the teabags and teapot, then watched the garbage can through the window. He felt maggots behind his eyes. The kettle was taking a long time to boil, leaving him space to imagine. He was tempted to unplug it, but knew that only water that had boiled would guarantee death. He touched the kettle. It was stone cold. He flipped a light switch. No light came on. It was lucky he had a gas stove. He filled another kettle. The gas jet came to life with a soft explosion.

He hated to stand and wait for a kettle to boil, so he went to his bedroom to unpack, putting the clean clothes into cupboards and drawers where they belonged, and the dirty ones into a plastic bag, laundry he would deal with after he had dealt with the mess outside. The plastic bag looked like a green shadow.

The kettle was boiling. He poured some of the water into the teapot. When he emptied the rest over the new bodies of possible flies, most of them stopped moving. The rest would too, soon enough. The sun was a dull pink circle behind the trees.

Milk for his tea. But the light in the fridge didn't go on. Was it too much to hope that the milk had survived? He poured some into his tea. The surface curdled.

He filled a glass with cold water and carried it to the bedroom to sip in peace. Sunset was replaced by dusk. Touching the cool glass to his forehead, he saw divisions, lines keeping thing from thing: the fold of a curtain holding a rose apart from its stem, seams in wallpaper breaking the true dimension of stripes. Even the mirror in which he watched his fading self made in the wall a niche that wasn't there. The clock's hands didn't move.

The gentle rim on his lips reminded him that substance is rarely apparent, and in that rareness lies what is. He drank, sensing the wriggle of liquid worm its way down, while the day reached an edge fine as honed pain, a thin brink of blackness.

Gillian Harding-Russell / FIVE POEMS AMNESIA: FOR CLAUDE JUTRA

Having written his way through worlds,
the old man wandered St. Catherine's Street
looking for what he'd missed along the way.

'I cannot enter the word
to its substance, so it is
little good to me now.
The substance, I want
now it is going
so fast,' he once
told a very close friend.

'I see the abstract street—
lines diagonal and perpendicular
moving; so terrifying before
by grainy sight

and

I am lost. It is too exciting
you know. To know
the substance without
the words.'

CLAUDE JUTRA'S NOTE

Claude Jutra gave up the dregs of his mind
for his soul, his soul
protesting, 'this is my body—incredible
but true': "I am Claude Jutra,"

let the world know.

Thoughts disoriented
out of sync, disposed
of, conveniently—*where there's a will, there's a way*
the self
rising out of a carcass of brain.

A friend now speculates, he didn't have it at all—the dreaded Alzheimer's;
when he stopped making films, he fed the squirrels more

(red paisley squiggles on grass)

Increasingly depressed, wanting
a change, the silence
between frames.

The St. Lawrence, mottled in grey ripples brown sparkles
like TV static, the perfect place
to drop everything

amorphous
looking for a new shape.

But
his films were the preview: Mon Oncle Antoine (himself)
dragging himself (the corpse)
across snow (tracks
obliterating tracks); the double signature
'me but not me.' Himself giving himself
a chance to explore crystal flakes
sharp-angled stars interstices
of the universe in galactic formation
at zero time.

YOU HAVE A WART

You have a wart, I notice.
Your grandmother says: Wrap the wart
in a strip of bacon fat overnight
(others say potato peel) bury it
in the ground afterwards. (I remind
you of this, your living grandmother's
wisdom told me before; but you
pretend to ignore me.)

Warts are a virus,
you tell me. Very scientific,
I say. My mother's mother
used to tell my mother in fun
sickness is the evil, coming out
of us. I like that better.
A skeletal horse in Childe Rolande
stands in a landscape of gnarled trees;
he must have been wicked to suffer so.

I have never met my grandmother
but remember an old brown photograph
worn at the edges, unstuck from the album.
She feeds small birds, perhaps sparrows
amongst flowers—foxgloves, sweet williams
and roses behind stiff raspberry canes
in an English country garden.
She died of tuberculosis.

As a child, I wept over the dead birds
lost in the glass—the glare
of window panes struck by sunlight.

In the springtime, we would pick their shattered
bodies off the ground, among bomb-shaped crocuses,
their little necks like corkscrews
bent sadly sideways
rigid leather only
left.

Nowadays

my heart is too cluttered
for small kindnesses.
I watch you thread your wart
through and through with a needle
(you remember doing this to an interesting
wart as a child) absentmindedly
to the fleshy, feelingless heart.

THE JOGGER

Along the gravel road pointed cedars
dark in the early dawn, the girl
forces herself to jog
from habit. We make
our own prisons, she jokes
with herself.

Jagged stones catch her feet
occasionally. I am out of shape
she thinks. I shouldn't
have had that last drink—the one
after the one thrown in my lap.

Birds begin to sing in the grey
before dawn. A crow's wings fingering
shadows of clouds behind the solid
black hands of branches

Approaching from the side
a mere boy, he looks
at first, so slight
in stature, crinkled
face, many lines
eddy around eyes opaque
as broken glass you can't
see through. He asks her the way
to Grouse street. Her jogging rhythm
broken, trying not to be
too irritable, she points over
her right shoulder towards
low mountain foothills when
he pulls a knife

just a shadow of pine or spruce
in her peripheral vision until it catches
a flash in the fading street light,
and she turns sharply.

Why am I so drawn
to see reconstruct
this scene traced around a thin
newsreel? Dream finds the scene
locked in a honeycomb cell
of the brain, shafted
by bitter bees.

How many other
brains do these same bees
inhabit—or do they
hibernate?

THE LIVING HOUSE

Last night we heard a small mouse
grow jaws in the dark,
sharpen his teeth on a steel pipe,
gnaw a hole in the rotting wood,
rock our little house
of bending planks and
collapsible walls.

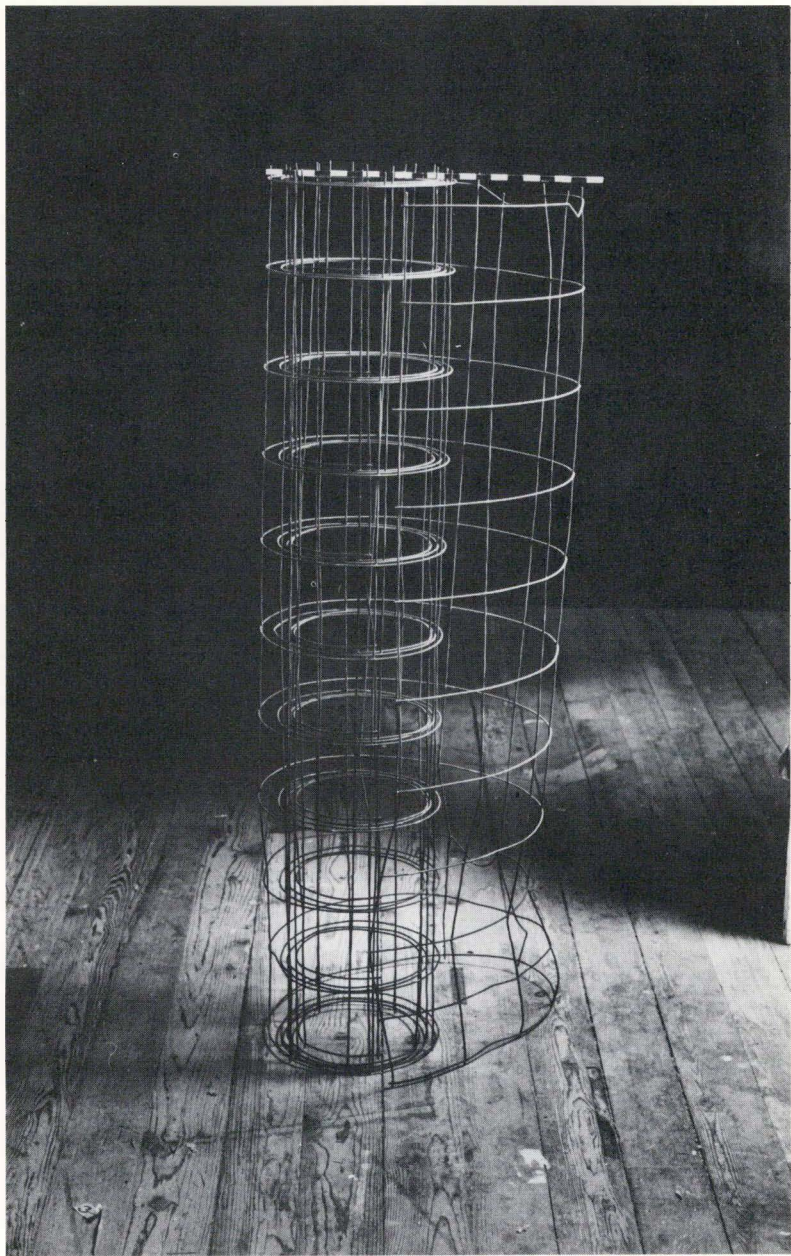
When we moved in
the house was uninhabited, we thought.
Now we are aware of the night life.
The frog clicks his throat
outside the window playing
the ventriloquist's trick.
Was that your stomach
or my intestine?
We lie on the crooked floor
hearing the cock crow, drunkenly
false dawn, inspired
by a passing car.

In the grey morning light
flies crawl out of cracks in the plaster
and corners in the newly heated rooms,
take over our seeing windows
on the raging panes
rolling drops, a fleet
of sea-going planes
battling against us.

You play the hunter
batting them with a fly-swatter
while I am more thorough,
squeezing them against the dustpan,
a thin tissue of kleenex between me
and my fear. I tell you
I have seen these flies
that seem so unimportant to you
rise on rumpled wings, one-legged
monsters nourished on rain and mildew.
I have seen battalions growing
into bulldozers, taking over
our little house.

A fly on the window, again.
I have a sty
in my eye.

Michael Carmichael / RECENT WORK



Passage, 1987, wood, wire, paint, 61" x 22" x 22".



Site, 1986, piling, toolbox, whale bone, plankton net, 70" x 15" x 18".



Readymade: *Captain Cook at Nootka Sound*, 1986, aluminium, steel, whale rib, cedar, 79" x 54" x 42".

The psychic outposts give the Vicar a runny nose. On a ferry in a gale from the northern tip of Scotland to the Orkney Islands we are the only people on deck so we start yelling at each other. Turns out he's an amateur archeologist come to see the Ring of Brodgar. We set off for the site together in the local minister's Toyota.

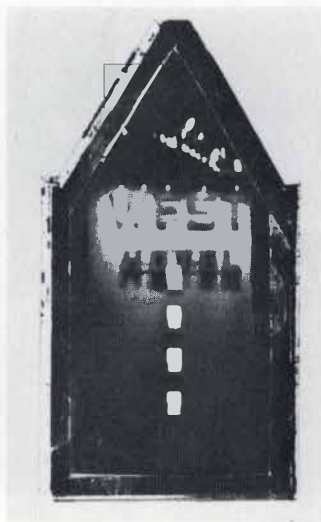
Miles away the Ring appeared. I thought of a passage from a Jack Spicer poem:

In the white endlessness
How pure and big a wound
His imagination left.*

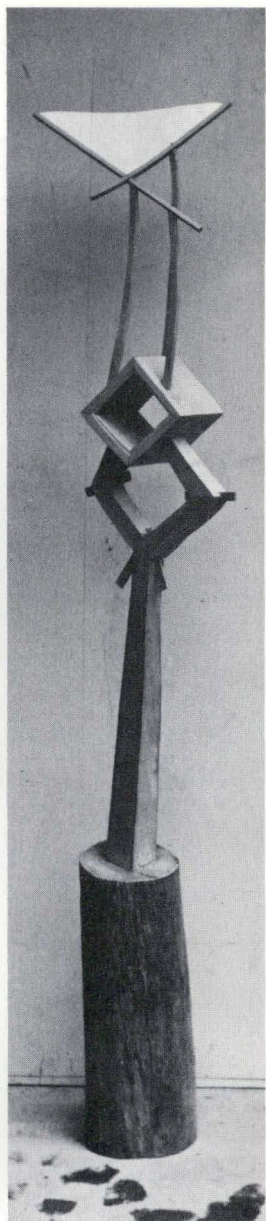
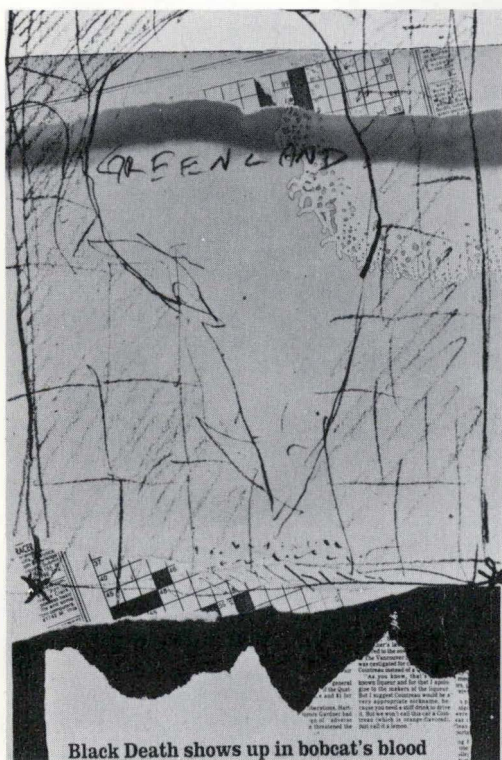
Fifty obelisks, a huge circle on the barren landscape, as old as the Pyramids, as new as a silicon chip, luminous, the wild swans wheeling overhead—and of course the Vicar trumpeting steadfastly into his handkerchief.

That night on my way back to my room from the pub I came across a well. It was boarded over, at the side of the street. The sign on it said "This is the well where Captain Cook last took on fresh water before setting sail for the Pacific Coast of North America."

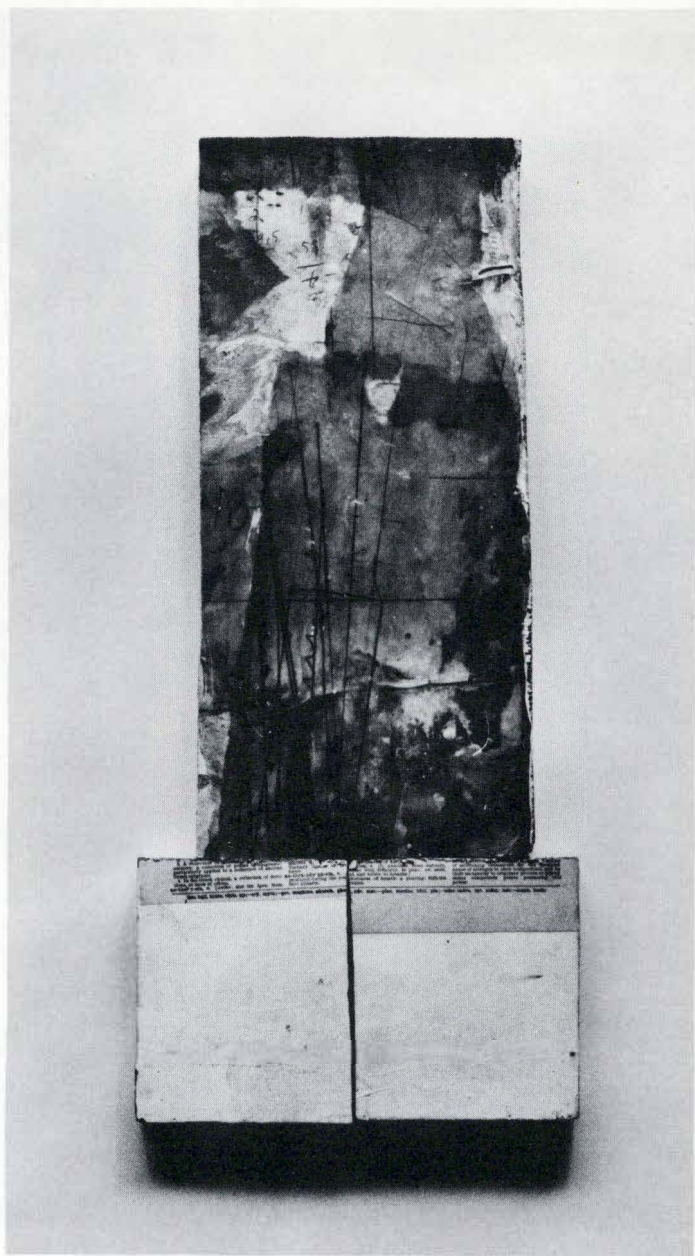
* Jack Spicer, *After Lorca*



study for *Well*, 1987, photograph/mixed media, actual size.



sketch for *Three Colours for Artaud*, 1986-87, photographs/mixed media.
Post, 1985, yellow cedar, paper, 80" x 16" x 10".

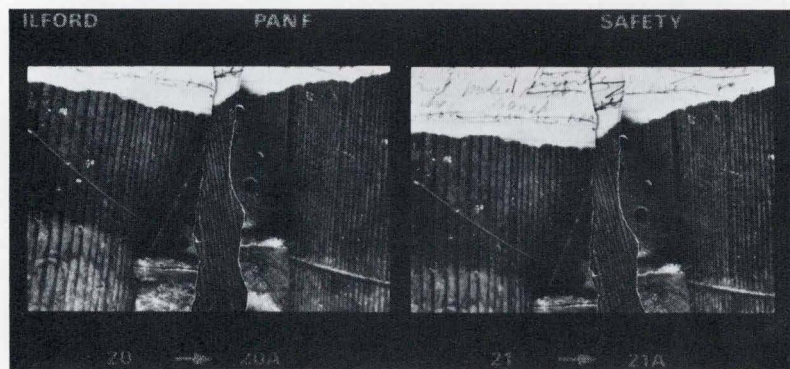


Lighthouse, 1987, mixed media on board, 20" x 9".

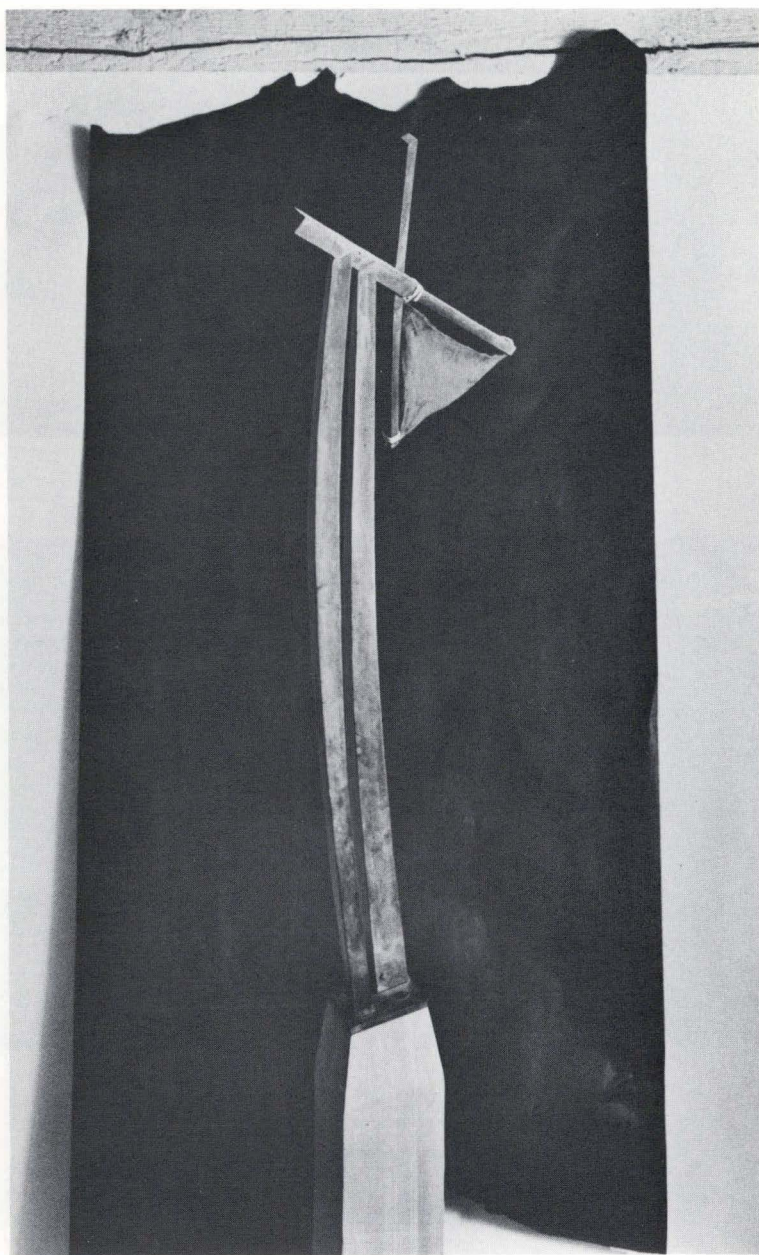


Tide Rip, 1986-87, mixed media on board, 65" x 48".

We are towing a gypo log-salvage operation from Pitt River to the Queen Charlotte Islands: five hundred miles in a converted landing barge that wanders like a drunk down an alley. No radar, compass haywire, and strung out behind—a dozer boat, a jet boat, and a cottage on a scow; flower baskets in full bloom gyrating from the eaves. It's night. Foggy. Lumpy. The charts are fifteen years out of date, the searchlight keeps shorting out, this is Johnstone Strait, it's my turn at the wheel. I stare into the map and then through my reflection into the black where I imagine the lighthouse to be.



studies for *Ground Swell*, 1987, photograph/mixed media.

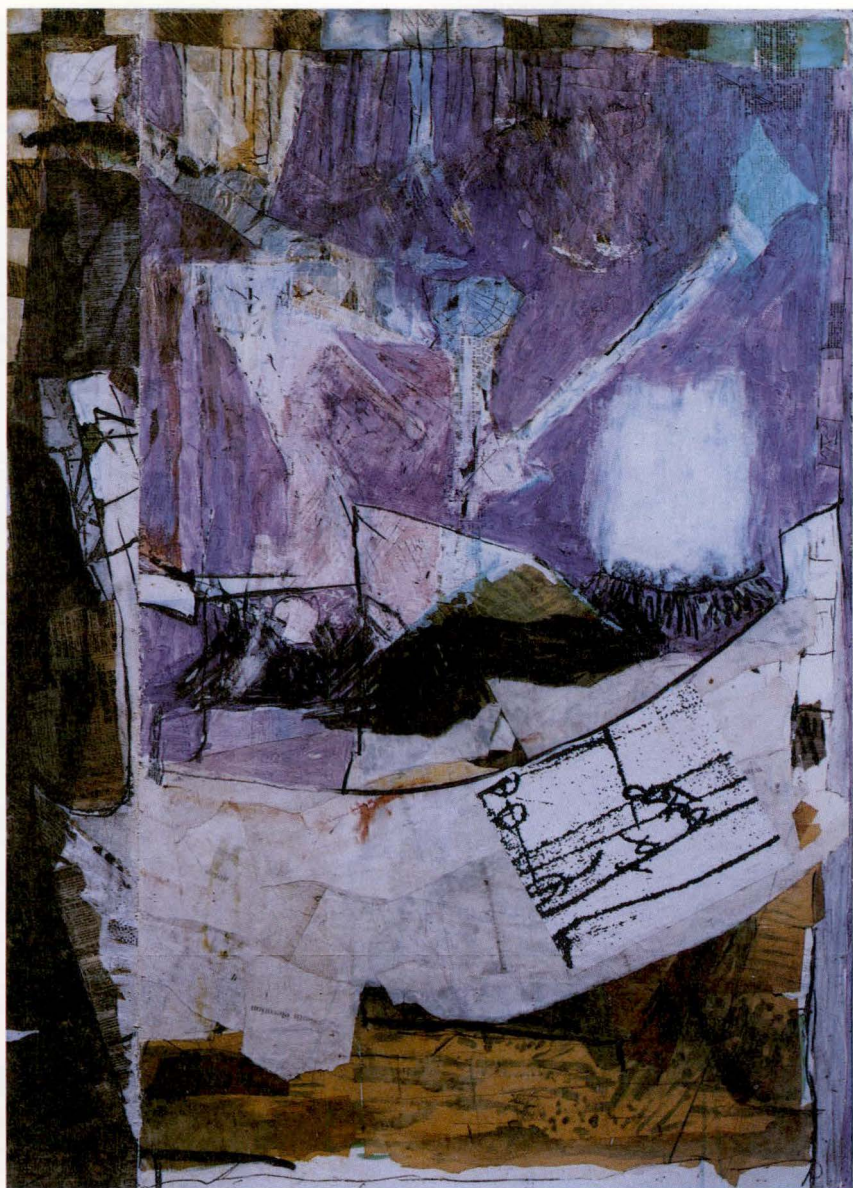


Marker (no. 2), 1985, yellow cedar, paper, 80" x 17" x 11".



Reef, 1986, mixed media on board, 48" x 26½".

Drift, 1985, photograph, 4" x 6".



Another fool builds a boat, 1986-87, mixed media on board, 60" x 43".



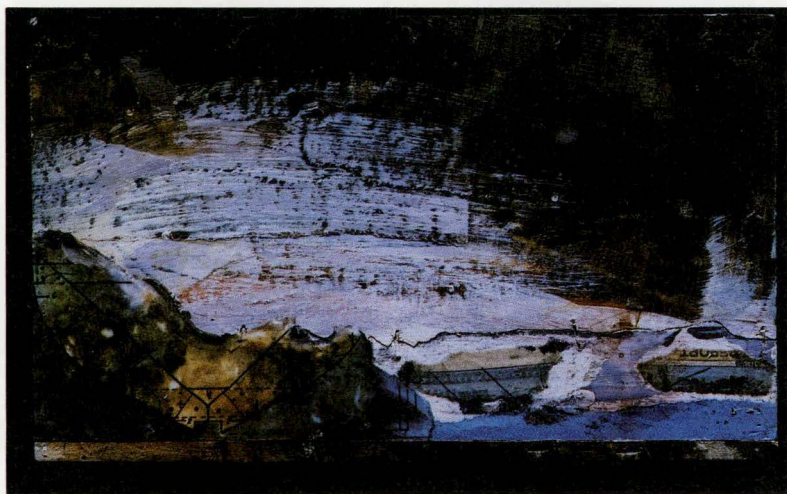
(no. 9) *Wind series*, 1985, etching, 16" x 9".



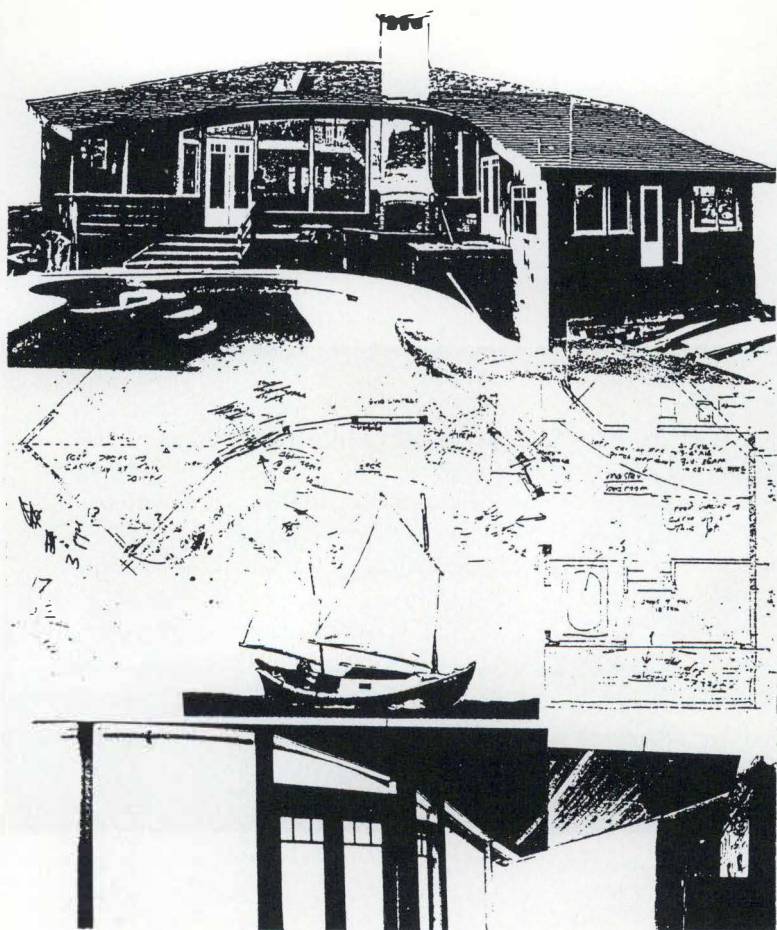
Facing west facing north, 1985, mixed media on paper, 21" x 16".



One bird one fish, 1986, mixed media on board, sawhorse, 49" x 47".



Three Noahs, 1987, mixed media on board, 7" x 12".



Boat, 1976, 27' x 9' x 30'h.

Schooner Cove house, 1981 (in progress), 64' x 50' x 30'h.

Some people when they look at clouds see Armageddon, others see horses and ducks—the old doctor saw *Eudistylia Vancouveri* coming out of its tube. He and his wife worked together for sixty-five years. They were scientists specializing in Polychaete taxonomy: the classification by structure of a group of marine invertebrates some of which have heads like bouquets of feathers. I'd take him sea-life I couldn't identify from books. He gave me an antique binocular microscope; an instrument he'd used to write his first papers—papers filled with careful drawings of the particulars of form; a glimpse of the path between one creature and another.



Equivalents, 1987, photograph/mixed media, 27" x 40".

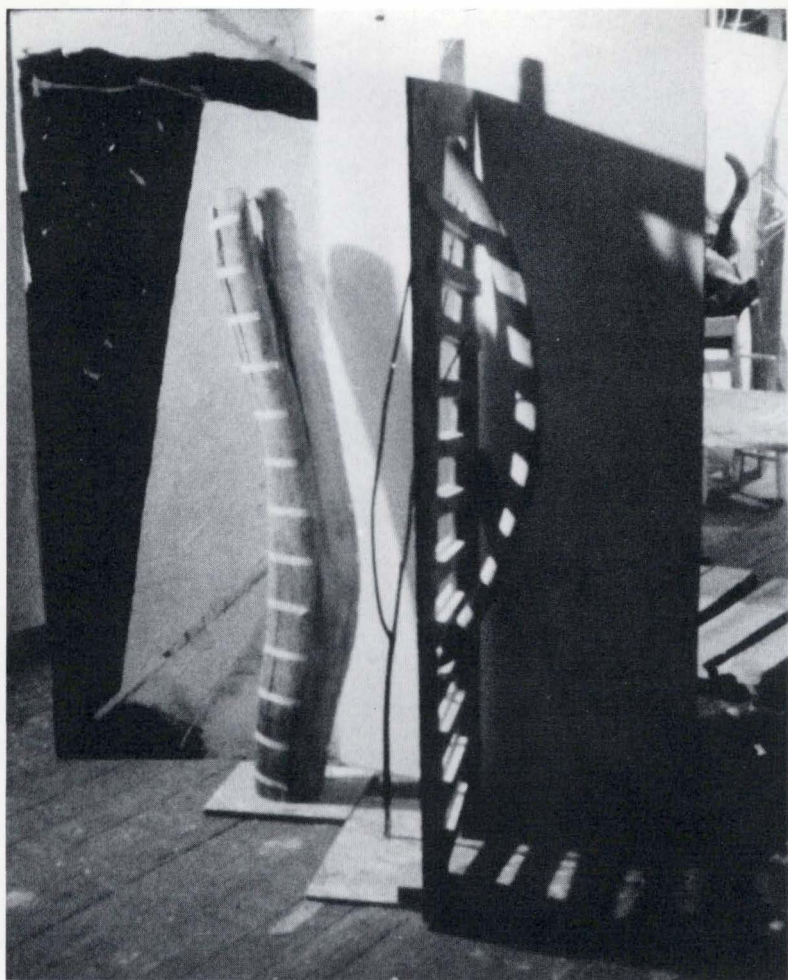


Noah Dreams (no. 2), 1987, mixed media on board, 20½" x 16".

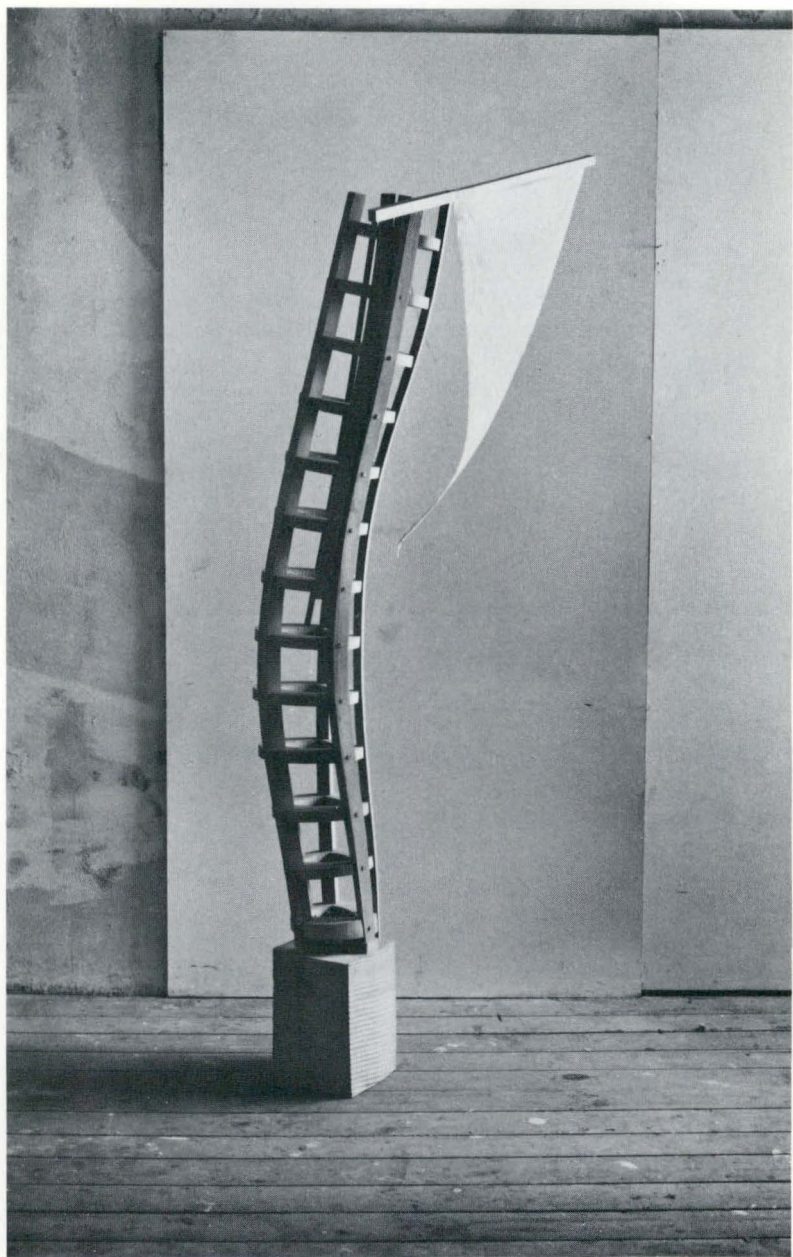


standing figure, 1986, mixed media on board, 81" x 16".

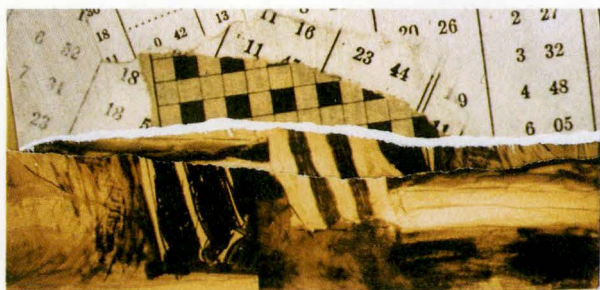
Reef (no. 2), 1986, mixed media on board, 87" x 28".



study for *Noah Dreams*, 1986, wood construction, 7 ft. high.



Noah Dreams, 1986, arbutus, cotton, 83" x 26" x 18".



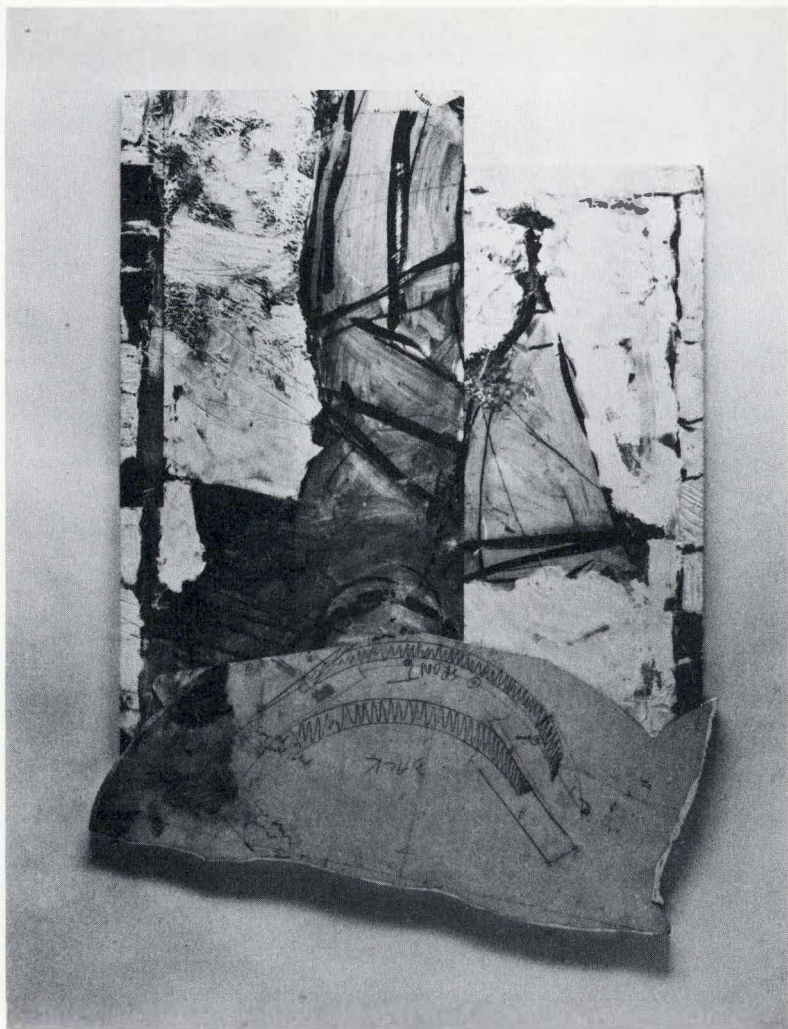
pearls at her ankles, 1986, photograph/mixed media, 4 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 7".
sketch for Tide Rip, 1986, photograph/mixed media, 4" x 6".

It was an all Indian crew. They took it upon themselves to introduce me to the wildlife of the New World, "Oh Look Custer . . . a BIRD." On weekends if there was no work I'd leave camp and take the ferry to Alert Bay. The road forked at the head of the dock. The sign pointing to the Indian Reserve said *Nimkish Land*. Someone had spray-painted under the sign pointing into town *Stolen Nimkish Land*.

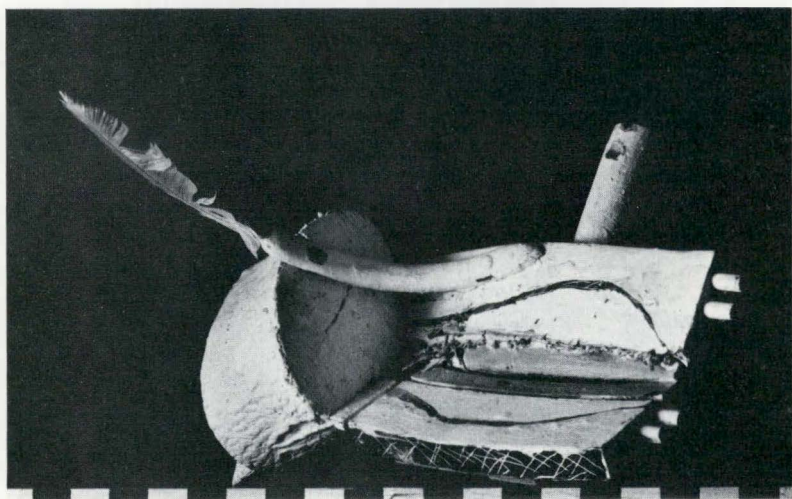
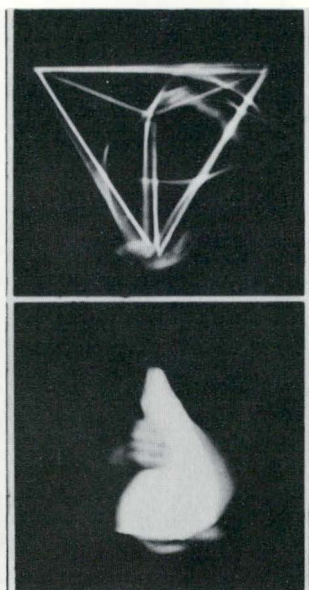
In the Bayside Bar a girl told me of her friend from a Reserve up the coast who had come to the hospital in Alert to give birth. The woman's other labours had been difficult and she was expecting a long stay but the baby popped right out, all was fine, she caught the seaplane home. Below her as she crossed the inlet, her husband, brother and father, on their way to surprise her at the hospital, capsized.

"... and if a man dies it is because death has first possessed his imagination."* The bodies were never found, which is often the case; caught in the thermocline. I thought of them in their checkered shirts, fixed between the layers of freshwater and salt. It was as if the pattern of markings that surround and make sense of a coastal chart had fallen into the centre of the page.

* William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*

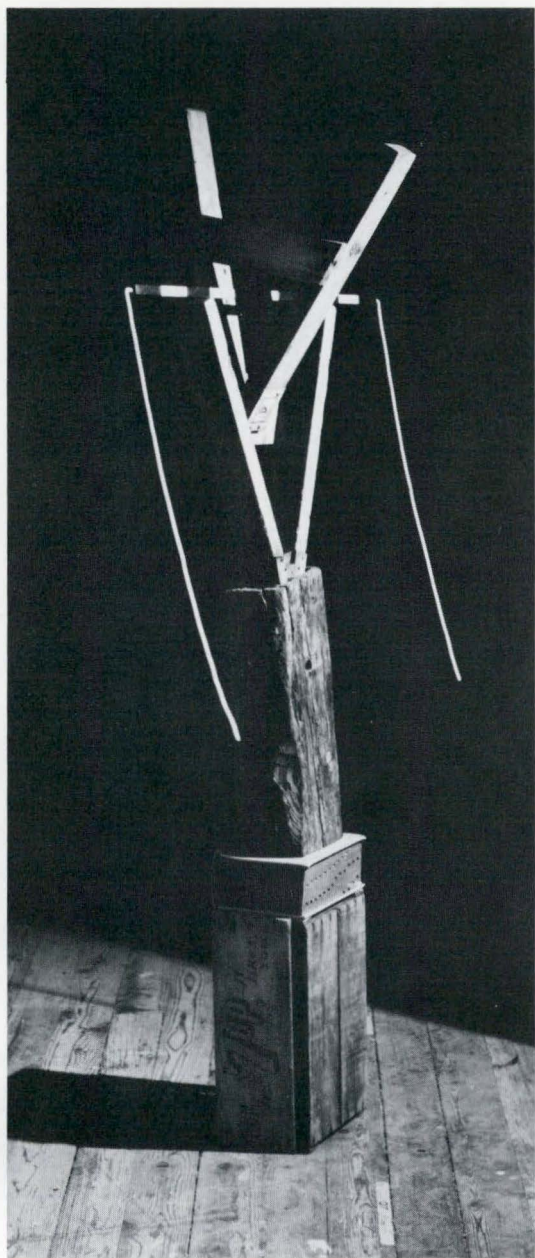


Lighthouse with fish, 1986-87, mixed media on board, 57" x 42".

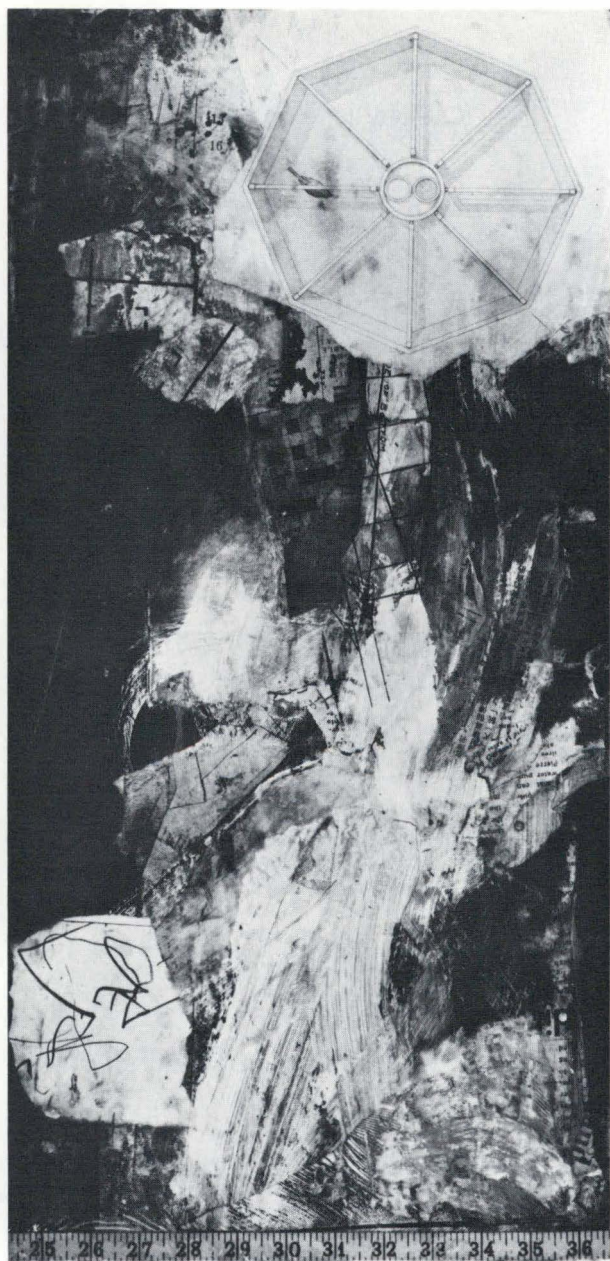


study for *Octave*, 1985, photograph, 8" x 4".

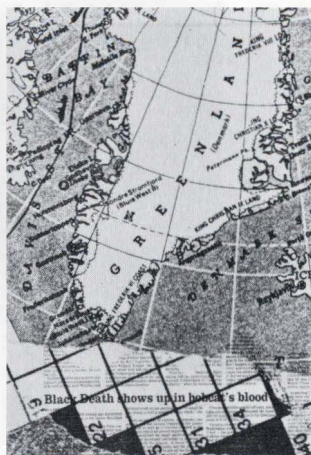
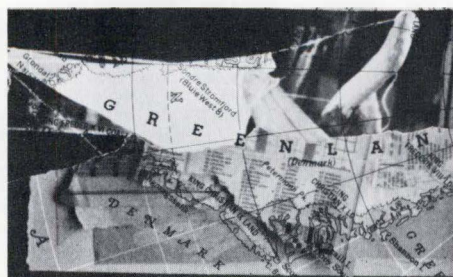
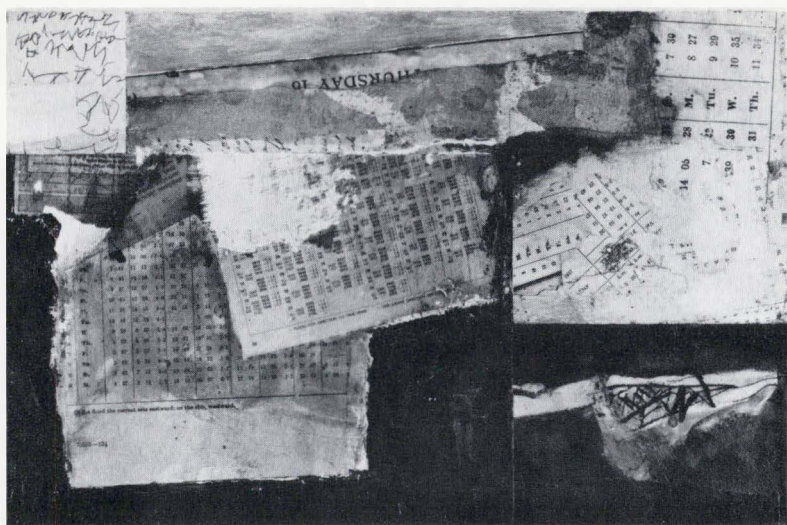
sketch for *My next boat*, 1985-86, chair, log, paint, feather, 13" x 16" x 18".



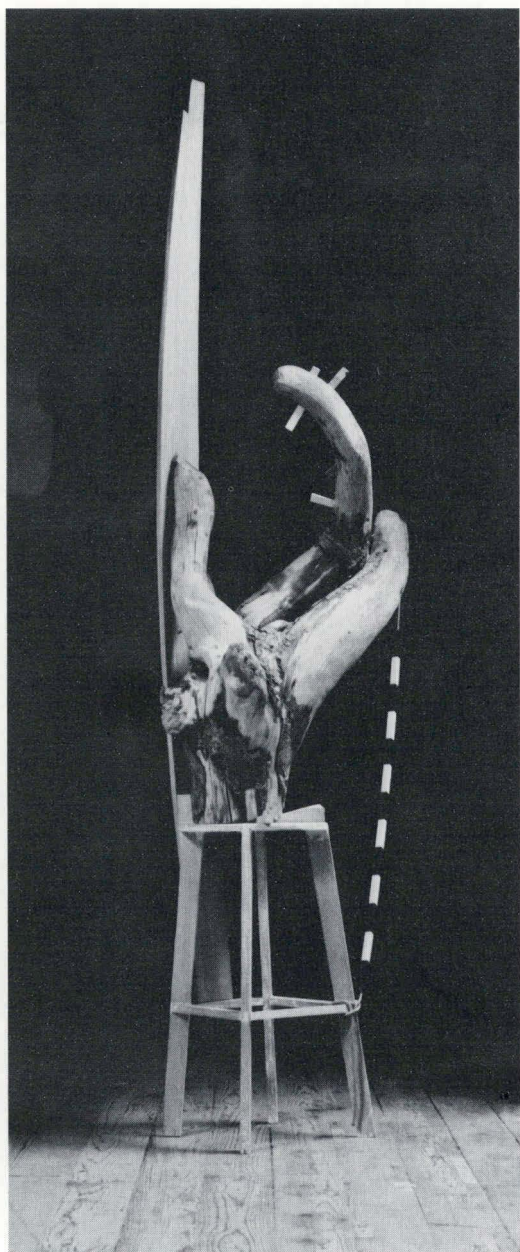
Sam Patch, 1987, sawhorse, nylon, dictionary, crate, paint, etc., 85" x 38" x 20".



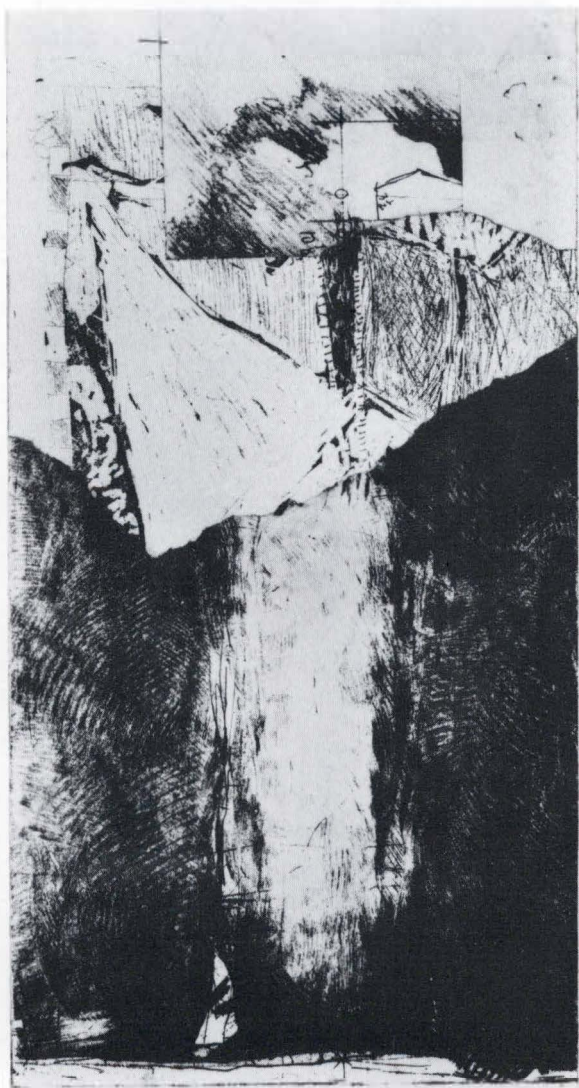
Madonna and child, May 1987, mixed media on board, 26" x 12½".



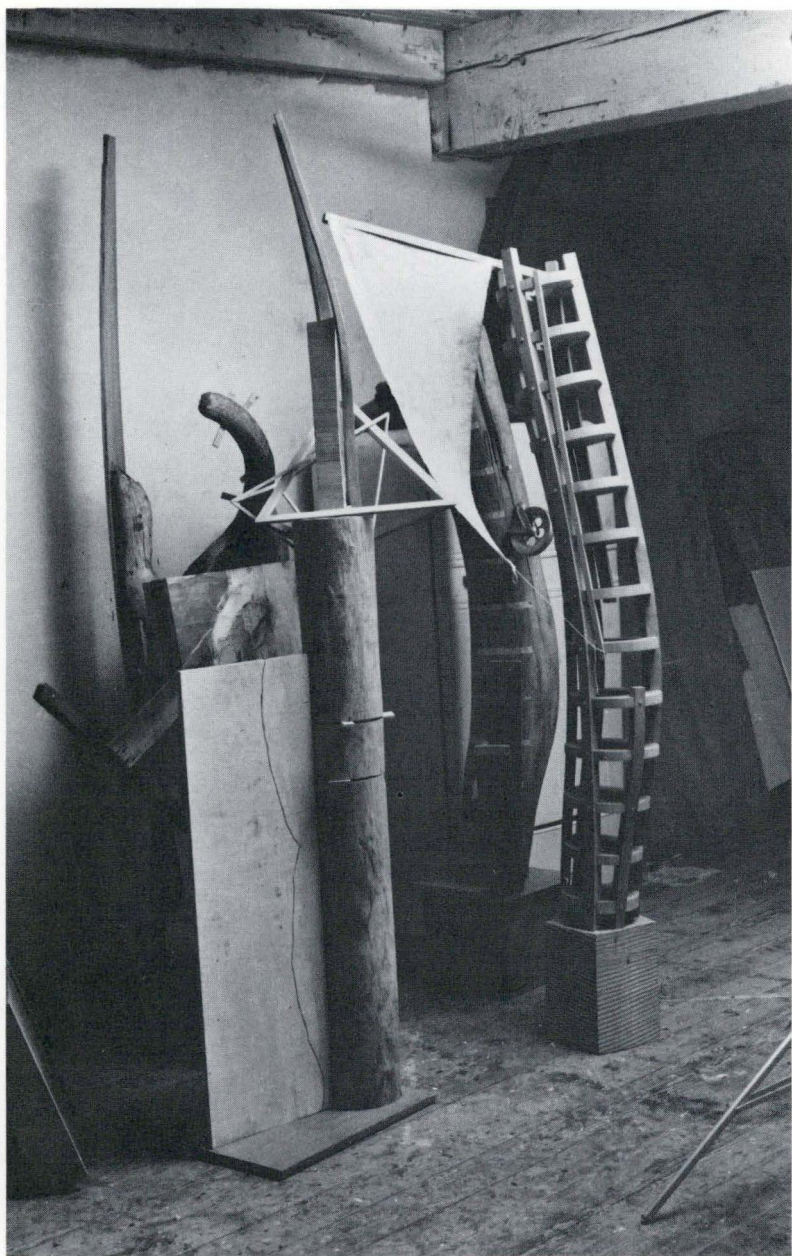
Turning to flood (no. 2), 1986, mixed media on board, 62" x 60".
sketches for Three Colours for Artaud, 1986-87, photographs/mixed media.



Cork, 1986-87, wood, nylon, paint, galvanized steel, 95" x 36" x 20".



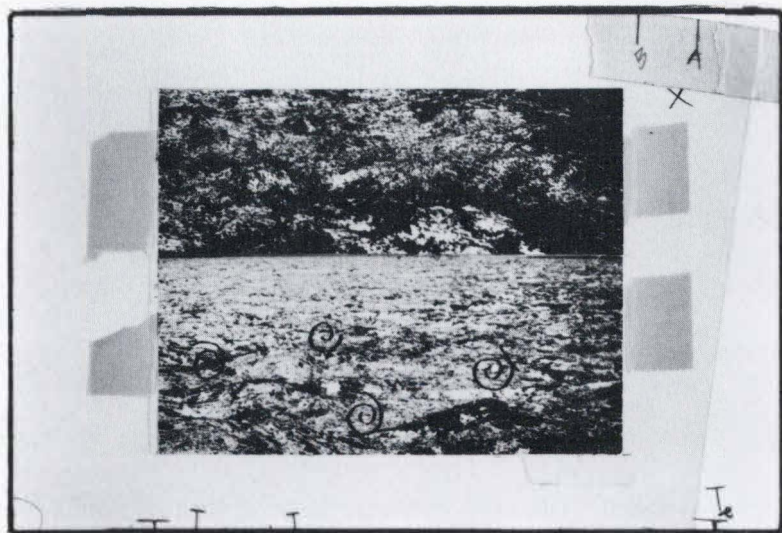
Approach, 1986, mixed media on paper, 15" x 8".



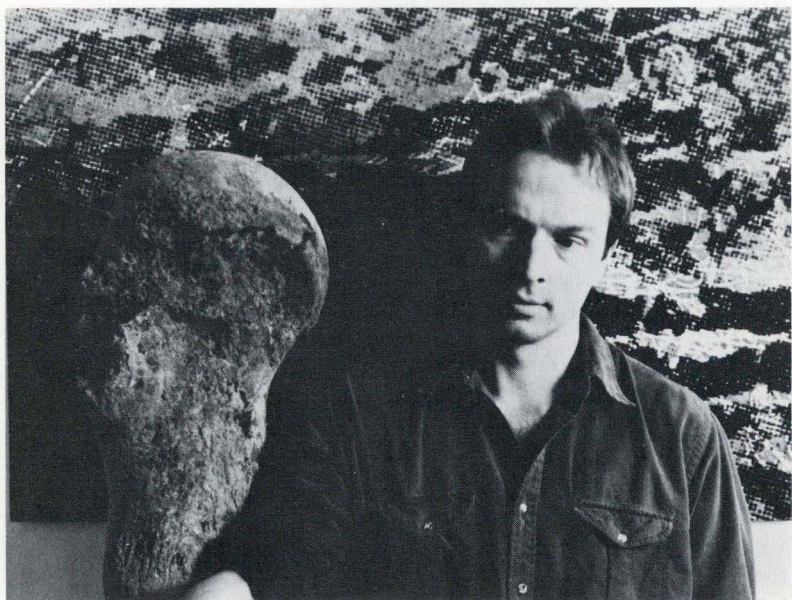
Studio, 1987, photograph.

There was a stained glass factory on a bank of the river that flowed between our village and France. A workman gave me scraps of glass and a shoebox to put them in—red is the colour I remember. We lived across the alley from the slaughterhouse, across a street from a church. One day, I guess I was six years old, I sat on the steps with the shoebox on my knees and said, “If there really is a God make this glass into a truck.”

And then I opened the box.



studies for *Hazards to Navigation*, 1987, photograph/mixed media.



The prose alongside the images is a collection of events remembered while choosing the pieces to include in this article. The prose, both in selection and in sequence, served as a guide.

—MIKE CARMICHAEL, JULY 1987

COVER *Bait*, 1986-87, mixed media on board, 53" x 37".

colour photography: Trevor Mills

black-and-white photography: Michael Carmichael

Michael Mirolla / TWO STORIES

POINT I

Let's start on a point along the path of infinite digression. And label it Point I. At this particular time, Stork is rowing a nondescript boat down an oil-slicked river. The boat is equipped with three oars and a kerosene lamp. And a box of waterproof matches. Above him, the sky reeks yellow. To his sides, tubes like giant recta overflow into the river. Along the bank, a young woman is standing on top of a rusted car. She waits with her thumb stuck out and her dress hoisted to the waist. Stork looks at her in awe; her shiny legs curve beckoningly with the point of a ragged building visible between them; her breasts hang out as she unbuttons her blouse. He hasn't had sex (with a woman) in three years. His genitals begin to ache; he releases his penis and quickly steers the boat towards the shore, looking ahead at the quick, easy fuck, at the ...

A:

But then he stops. And pulls back on his oars so that the boat jerks around to face in the other direction. Women make him nervous. The last one had laughed at the inadequacy of his equipment. He had had to run to his mamma who told him not to worry about what other women might say. They were naughty and the only things good enough for them were eels. With the belching city as the background and the monstrous machines carving it up for dinner, the woman has slowly removed all her clothes. She smiles and pouts her lips; she sways her body back and forth in unison with the rocking of the boat; she holds up her breasts and shakes them at him. Paralyzed, his left leg jerking beyond control, Stork pulls in the oars and the boat continues to float down the river. The woman leaps from the car and chases after him, screaming obscenities. Her feet are cut and bleeding from the broken glass (of which she will die). Her hair whips in the wind. It is falling out in clumps. She runs for a long time,

cursing, throwing car mirrors and hub caps into the water, pleading, spitting out her teeth. But she finally gives up when her shredded feet can carry her no further and she sits down to watch the hunched-up man as he's taken away by a black current. There'll be other men in other boats, you wait and see. One will turn her way. So it's no use getting dressed again and she curls up, waiting for her feet to heal.

Stork is masturbating frantically, thinking of the wife he seldom knew. He is unable to hold the oars, too busy ejaculating overboard. Was that her on the shore? Certain characteristics, such as how she shook her breasts, remind him of her. But it's impossible. He left his wife behind in one of the innumerable canals that led to the river. His mother had warned him she'd only be a burden on the last leg of the journey.

When he finally regains control of the oars, it is dark. He no longer knows where he is. Lights flicker along the shore, but the city is in total darkness, except for a dull glow in the distance like the spread of radioactive miasma. His stomach rumbles and his shoulder blades are stiffening like warped wood. He steers the boat towards one of the banks, past a gushing stream of potassium and sodium cyanide solutions. As the boat scrapes to a stop, a voice cries out: "Beat it, buster. We only got enough for two."

Stork steps out cautiously, his feet making slight sucking noises as they're swallowed by the mud. He searches blindly on the ground, picks up a large stick and hefts it to find the point where it balances best. Two men—one massive, lumbering; the other small, weasel-like—jump out of the brambles and make for him. He caves in the face of the massive one, deflecting him to one side and then hitting him again for good measure as he goes down. The other screeches and moves away. Stork sits down near the fire the two had built, complete with a spit made out of a broom handle. On it, a slightly-leaking kettle sways precariously. He lifts the top and the odour of decaying meat sends him reeling. He'll eat it, however, as it's a choice between this unknown and the certainty of raw rat flesh, the remains of creatures stuck in the sewer gratings. While waiting for it to cook, he thinks back to but doesn't quite reflect on the violence he has committed. It's surely the first man he has ever killed. He feels nothing. His mother had told him scant days before as he leaned with his hand on her emaciated lap that there were many mean and dangerous men along the way waiting to beat him, strip him, force him to do things

he didn't want to do. Not to mention the women who had knives hidden between their legs and wanted to suck him dry.

Half in and half out of the circle of light, his face in the mud, the dead man stirs. He lifts his head like a snake and looks around. He can't see. Perhaps it's only the blood from his mouth and nose; perhaps he's blind, never to see again. He can hear, however, out of one torn ear, the crackling of the fire.

"Alphonse, is that you? Alphonse, I can't see." He emits static as he speaks.

Stork jumps to his feet and holds the stick in a menacing position. In his hurry, he has picked up the bloodied end first. He cleans his hands against a clot of grass.

"Alphonse, get me some water." He spits out his last remaining teeth. And licks the blood that's thickening about his lips.

Stork's mother has warned him never to show any mercy. If a man's down, kick him between the legs and finish him. But Stork is by nature a merciful man. He lifts the dead man and drags him towards the fire.

"Did you kill him, Alphonse? Eh? The bastard! Wanting our food!"

Stork gently cleans the dead man's face which is utterly disfigured, more like pulp than flesh. Then, he wraps it in bandages made from the sleeves of his shirt. Through the hole that was once the dead man's mouth, he spoon-feeds him. One for the dead man; one for Stork. One for the dead man; one for Stork. On a little hill of cars, not far away, Alphonse dances in an absolute rage. He stops suddenly to watch, squinting and wondering about what kinds of torture Stork is inflicting on his poor friend. Sticking needles in his legs; hot coals down his throat; glass pipettes into his urethra? He'd like to help—how he'd like to help—but rationalizes there is little he can do. So he pops a handful of sticky pills into his mouth, curls up inside an overturned car and falls asleep. Almost instantly.

"Where are all these motherfuckers coming from, Alphonse? It wasn't like this before. It was peaceful then. Now, all along the river, these motherfuckin' bastards come strokin' their little pricks. And their sons-of-a-whore friends pour liquid shit on us from back there somewhere (he points in the wrong direction—towards the open sea). Cocksuckers! I'd like to line them all up and cut off their balls. Bastard! He didn't hafta hit me, did he? What did I ever do to him?"

He continues in this general manner as Stork feeds him. Then he falls asleep, snoring and gurgling, in rhythm with the pulse of his blood. Stork is thirsty. He takes a rusted tomato juice tin, goes down to the river and scoops out a bucket of water. When he sees it in the light of the fire, he no longer feels the urge to drink—not even if he boils it. What looks like an aborted minnow—or a human fetus—floats leisurely in it, covered with mucus, thick oil and another substance that seems to be eating away at the oil. He tosses the tin in the direction of the cars.

Stork realizes the importance of staying awake. After all, Alphonse must be out there somewhere, perhaps just waiting for the chance to get even. But this doesn't help and he falls asleep almost at once. The fire is a lullaby flicking about his brain, licking him gently. His head drops between his shoulders.

He wakes in the morning in exactly the same position, the fire out, the cold like a stiff penetrating piece of metal. He remembers a violent dream in which he lost himself in a thick greasy jungle of thin black trees that curled back onto themselves, whose limbs caused boils to erupt where they touched the earth. What had startled him awake was falling into a slick mouth-like pit that reeked of dead animals. There was a time (prior to the canals) when his dreams were truly dreams, when his dreams at least provided an escape from the landscape. Now all he has is a song. And that, too, is fast eluding him, becoming misplaced snatches and bursts of fallible memory.

It isn't yet dawn. A vapid yellow sky yawns above the emerging city. In the distance, electric pulses fire at mysterious intervals. He turns to the river. For the first time, he hears the water lapping against the bank, filling in the scattered suction of mud, clinging like phosphorescent beads to the hollow, reed-like grass. He thinks it's poetic. He had wanted to be a poet once (prior to the canals) but his mother told him they were naughty and often frequented brothels. So he's here instead. He wonders where the poet is.

The dead, bandaged man is still sleeping, his mouth swollen open like some grotesque fish head. Stork contemplates finishing the man off, putting him out of his obvious misery, but decides instead to leave him sleep. He rises and steals quietly away, lifting one leg after the other in an exaggerated pantomime manner so that they don't stay in contact with the mud more than necessary. The boat's still there. He steps into the scum and pulls himself in;

then pushes the boat away from the shore. As he sits there, an impression of his buttocks forming on the beads of acid rain, he ponders the future. It seems to him, suddenly and out of nowhere, that his life has been wasted till now. He slouches down as low as possible in the seat so that the wind chills only the top of his head. Why, if it weren't for circumstances beyond his control, circumstances of birth, of character, of coincidence and luck, he could be, at this very moment, within the walls of that city, within the airy vaults, safely locked away, counting his money and his women, perhaps even owning several of those outflow pipes, for he has heard that they are the new status symbols. In fact, that would be the first thing he'd do: bypass all else and simply buy several of these pipes. Never mind about the factories and manufacturing plants. Or the big-mawed machines that ate all in their paths. He could always get directly to the waste chemicals themselves without losing time.

Back on the shore, the man called Alphonse arises, rubbing his eyes. He looks through the car window and sees the boat floating away as if by itself. He immediately rushes to the aid of his friend, hoping the coals have cooled down and the needles emptied of their poison. He shakes him, jabbing him with an open-toed boot.

"Wake up! Wake up!"

The bandaged man stirs. A clot of half-dried blood spurts from his mouth.

"What's the matter? Alphonse? What's wrong?"

He feels the bandages. They're now various shades of red and brown, crusting to his skin.

"That bastard!" Alphonse exclaims. "Did he hurt you?"

"What the fuck do you think? I'm wearing these bandages for blind man's bluff or something?"

"But did he hurt you after?"

"After? After what? What's the matter with you?" He looks in the direction he believes Alphonse to be. "Lost your memory or something? You were right here last night, weren't you? Weren't you?"

A: 1.

Alphonse looks away. He is disgusted by the sight of the bandages on his friend's face, the thought of what lies beneath. He knows the air is acid, can eat holes through stainless steel, let alone rotting flesh.

"Well?"

"Last night? I was right here. Where do you think I was?"

"Obviously." He starts to unwrap the bandages. "Who else put these motherlovin' rags on? Did you give it to him good?"

"Huh? Yeah. Oh yeah. I caved his eggshell head in."

"Good, good." His mouth and chin are visible, dripping with flesh. "That's for my teeth."

"And I let him have it in the balls."

"That's for my nose."

"And I dragged his rotten corpse over and dumped the stinking carcass into the water. Where the fish gnawed him to bits."

"That's for my eyes."

He has removed most of the bandage and is trying to open those very same eyes. A piece of cloth flutters from the back of his head where it is encrusted and stuck. Alphonse looks around proudly. By now, he can see Stork's body being chewed away by eels or by an army of minute fish razing it to the bone with their sharp glinting needle-like teeth.

"Help me change the bandage, will you? And get some water to wash my eyes."

Alphonse snaps out of his reverie. He turns and looks for the first time at his friend's exposed face. Holding back a scream, he pukes black bile and edges slowly away.

Stork is singing a song his mother taught him:

Buss me, buss me, Bauble mine!
Be my Love and I'll be Thine.
All the Court has come a-Maying.
All the Court at Love is playing;
Men are sighing, Maids are singing,
Through the woods their laughter ringing,
Gathering Flowers, Giving Kisses—
We poor fools have no such Blisses.
Be my Love and I'll be Thine.
Buss me, buss me, Bauble Mine.

He thinks it's lovely because it makes no sense, because there's nothing he can relate to. So he sings it again, continuously, in cycles, feeling his voice scraping over the water. All the lovely things his mother has taught him. He wonders if she understood them. He thinks not. Or else she wouldn't be wasting away from some unimaginable disease. No, that was too, too cruel of her. Because of it, he's on his own, tormented by naked women and assaulted by ungrateful half-humans. And he's hungry and the river fumes are stinking. And a new breed of seagull, tough, beady-eyed, patch-feathered, suicidal, splatters him with its droppings. The gull never regains altitude but swooping low and folding its wings, thuds against the riverbank. Reflecting on this, Stork doesn't notice the slow widening of the river. Nor does he see the rock that sleeps a foot below the waterline, ready to lift its head at the slightest irrhythmic ripple.

A: 1. a)

The boat crumples like a soiled newspaper against it. A splinter jams into Stork's left thigh; he lets out a scream and tumbles into the water. Before he's able to reach the rock, he swallows a few mouthfuls. Castor oil. A river of castor oil. From the rock itself he can see nothing but water. Are those clouds, the banks of the river, or grey waves frozen at their peaks? He feels sick. His feet seem to be rotting away, eroding into the rock. All he can do is sit and wait for another boat to pass by. He waits all day. Parts of him are dying away, shredding off and being left behind. That night, when his shivering has become instinctual and his legs feel like wet cords of wood, he looks out and catches a glimpse of a million fire-flies floating in the water ahead of him. That's where he'd be now if he hadn't been so stupid. He curls down in the foot of water and calls out for his mother, slowly, softly, full of sincerity, a toneless plea.

A: 1. b)

As the boat is about to crash, one of the oars catches between it and the rock. It bends, snaps in two. Stork feels its pressure as it brushes against his side and then gives way so that he almost topples over. Falling into the bottom of the boat, he fumbles about for the spare oar and manoeuvres the boat till he's circumvented the rock's jaws and is safely beyond it. Then he looks back at the mass of darker grey, at a vision of a red splintering boat and a blue drowning man, all made real by the two pieces of oar trailing behind him. His crotch is damp. He thinks the civilized thought that he stinks mightily. On further examination, he finds it's the odour of putrefaction, the same smell as that of the decaying meat flapping in the current. But the boat is through the last barrier and carries on safely towards open water where grey meets grey.

A: 2.

"Last night? He chased me away. I couldn't help it. He chased me away."

Alphonse starts digging into the ground with a small stick.

A stammer, a confusion of blood: "Who... who... the... the... fuck... fuck... bandaged me up?"

Alphonse points downriver.

"Him."

The dead man with the filthy bandages bellows like a deranged bull. He whirls and kicks the air. One of these kicks sends the fire leaping in all directions, sparks hissing on the water. He sobs in frustration, slashes at some torment in the air.

"I'll get that bastard. I'll get him. Where is he?"

Alphonse's hole is six inches deep by now.

"He's gone."

"Gone? Whadya mean gone? Where?" He whirls, spinning like a broken top, then falls dizzily to his knees, holding his head.

"On the river. Where the shit else could he go?"

"So what the fuck are we waiting for, eh? Let's go get him. He can't have gotten that far. Let's go."

Alphonse's stick has snapped in two. He continues with his hands, occasionally pulling out pieces of bluish metal that seem to glow.

"But you can't see."

The dead man leaps up again and the static in his voice reaches a high-pitched resolution: "That's all the more reason for us to get that cuntlicking bastard. Come on. Come on!"

As if forgetting his blindness, he runs towards their boat and stumbles headlong into the mud. Alphonse rushes over to lift him up, but is pushed away. On all fours, the dead man searches for the boat. Then, splashing through the water, he climbs over the side like a crab, falling in head first. He fumbles for the rope and prepares to cast off.

"Wait for me, you idiot," Alphonse cries out.

"I ain't waiting for no one. Come on if you're coming."

Alphonse picks up a twisted crow-bar and jumps into the boat. He hands the crow-bar to the dead man who fondles it, feels the metal closely from the blunt end to the forked tongue before kissing it. Alphonse rows. He now wishes he hadn't mentioned anything about last night. Or had lied. Just a little white lie. They should be searching for food or a shelter or a woman maybe, not chasing after some dangerous madman. But he continues to row.

After about half an hour, they catch sight of Stork's boat. At this distance, it seems to be in a state of semi-existence, appearing only when a wave lifts it up towards the sky. It floats along leisurely. Alphonse whispers to his friend that the boat is ahead of them. Now, they can hear phrases from a strange incantation. The man with the bandages is using the crow-bar to follow a beat. Alphonse orders him to keep quiet.

They're almost upon him before Stork hears the slight slicing of oars in water and looks up. For a moment, he's transfixed by the sight of the bandaged man waving the crow-bar. He can feel layers of his mind being stripped away, eaten by a creature that's all teeth. For a moment, he has the terrifying feeling he'll defecate all over himself but regains control of his sphincter and begins to row furiously away. Calmness is all. He can hear the voice of the bandaged man as if he were whispering sweet nothings in his ear, as if there were suddenly no distance between them.

"Come on, you little motherfuckin' lump of shit. Come and get what's coming to you."

He slams the crow-bar against the edge of the boat; Alphonse rows grimly.

Show no mercy, Stork's mother is saying. Show no mercy.

"You piece of rotting cunt! You prickless, wormy slab of dog meat! You just wait there now. Just wait for little old me. I'm coming for you."

Kick them when they're down because they're naughty if they get up again.

A: 2. a)

With a lurch of his whole being, Stork is ripped from the boat and hears it splintering as he lands on a submerged rock. He's hurt and can't get up. The world is a warm sticky place. A thick splinter has caught in his throat. There's laughter behind him. He cries out, but his vocal cords don't respond. His hand reaches for the splinter but never makes it. The crow-bar is almost comically soft as it crushes his brain against the rock. There's no need for the second blow, but it comes anyway. Alphonse insists he must have a turn as well. Between the two of them, they pound Stork so that the ragged bones stick out through his muscles and skin. And stop only when they're exhausted. Then, tossing the body away, Alphonse and the dead bandaged man turn to get back into their boat. And Alphonse can be seen gesturing wildly as it floats beyond his reach and heads out towards the open. Neither can swim. At first, they sit there. Then the bandaged man can be seen chasing Alphonse around the spreading pool of blood, stumbling, rising again, slipping on the greasy water and connecting once in a while with the crow-bar. But then Alphonse decides he's had enough. He waits for his friend to come around and gives him a vicious blow across the face. The bandaged man falls; Alphonse squats, pulls his friend by the hair and makes as if to finish him off with the crow-bar. But then he changes his mind, lifts his friend's face out of the water and places it gently on his lap.

A: 2. b)

Something just scrapes the edge of Stork's boat and turns it sideways. He loses an oar. With the other one, he pushes off and circles around the obstruction. Behind him, Alphonse angles in his direction. He knows about the rock and can already see Stork crashing into it. But Stork slides by. Alphonse knows now they'll never catch him but, on his friend's insistence, they keep after him for most of the day. The bandaged man falls asleep; Alphonse's shoulders ache.

"That's it. I ain't going no further."

He pulls up the oars and turns the boat around. It's dark. All he can see are the fires along the riverbank, warm and inviting like a series of false advertisements. The man in the bandages wakes with a scream.

"Alphonse," he says, his voice barely audible.

"What?"

"Are you there?"

"Sure I'm here, you idiot. Otherwise, how would I be talkin' to you?"

"Alphonse?"

"What now?"

"I'm scared. Do you think I'll see again?"

"No!"

* * *

Stork finally lights his kerosene lamp. He has been floating in the dark for hours, fearing they were still following him. He's proud of himself. After all, they couldn't catch him. For some reason, the lamp reminds him of the girl he had passed the day before. He closed his eyes. From this distance, he can easily visualize another scenario, can easily make love to her. Her body smells of clover and parsley—or so he hopes as he has never smelled these things. She takes his hand and leads him to an old mattress. A rat scampers out as they collapse on it. She kisses and kneads him till he's ready to explode. A bubble pops on the surface of the water. He trembles as he descends to her, but it's not nervousness. Only an excitement that knows no bounds. The bubble spreads thickly over the water. The automatic motions take over. It's easy, he thinks. Just pretend she's your mother, forcing her legs apart, probing for the fatal wedge. The rat crouches behind a tuft of grass and waits for the humans to finish, beady eyes wary, nose sniffing for danger. The girl opens her eyes and thanks him. They sit down cuddled against each other and tell their stories: how she wandered out from the city, how he had almost rowed by, how fate threw them together. A slice of earth corrupts and falls into the water. Stork wants to circle her nipple with his lips. He wants to fall asleep in her arms. She, on the other hand, is busy marvelling at the way a penis shrivels from a formidable serpent to a frail worm. She remembers a dark foul room filled with bats where her mother and father drank, fought, screamed, kicked, stabbed, screwed and . . . but it's not true. She was born in a mansion, in a test-tube, in the jerking off of gigantic mechanical sex objects that sixty-nined each other and then carried the little bits of metal sperm around until they could spit them out at the first available signs of life.

A drop of perspiration burns his eyes. He finds himself surrounded by a vast network of lights, bobbing up and down. They are scattered at varying distances, like stars. He rows towards one; it rows towards him. He sees now it's a red row-boat like his. There's a man in it. He holds up the lamp towards the man's face and the other reciprocates. Despite the wishful thinking, they are not one and the same.

THE SINGULAR MAN

The singular man lives in a cave outside the city's electric gates. The cave is an artificial creation, quarter-spherical in shape, with a flat façade, a diameter of pi-squared and an elliptical opening through which only one person at a time can squeeze. In it, equidistant between front and back along the central arc, is a small plastic three-legged stool on which he sits during his hours of contemplation. An imaginary wire brings electricity to a light-bulb that hangs directly over the stool. It can be turned on and off by the pulling of an imaginary string. He turns on this light when he sleeps. Otherwise, contemplation is done in the dark. The cave itself lies at the bottom of a warped mountain which serves to separate "his" city from the next where perhaps another singular man lives. He doubts this but has, till now, not ascertained the facts, as he detests travel and won't move unless absolutely forced to.

His waking time, approximately twenty hours a day, is taken up entirely with the question: "Why must I die?" He asks it not in the apocalyptic, hysterical manner of preachers and those about to go, but in the way others ask the time of day. He has filled copy books, walls, clothes, calendars and even mouse traps with this question and its variants. Nothing else ever intrudes on his thinking unless it's connected to the central mystery. He knows all the clichés: there is a cure for everything except death; death cures all; you only live once; to be able to live well, you must learn how to die well and vice versa. His dreams are just as skeletal, a profusion of coffins and pocketless suits (he has one already prepared) and dreaded figures in white uniforms. Often, he is blind in his dreams; still more often, deaf. Most of the dreams end in a rage of suffocation.

At first, during the early years, a steady procession of philosophers, scientists, poets, writers of prose, etc. came from the city and wound their way down to the cave where, one at a time, they entered the oval opening to answer his question. The philosophers said it was because of the inevitable decay of being as it gradually acquired meaning; scientists attributed it to genetic programming; poets answered blissfully: "Because you were born"; writers, of course, lost the thread of the argument and wove their own patterns of description, narration, characterization and time-sequences, complete with new techniques of I-you-he manipulation. The only certified wise man to visit him answered simply: "Because." As can be imagined, none of these answers was the least satisfying for the singular man. He grew quiet in their presence, refused to ask his question, developed a moroseness that would burst into laughter the moment they left. This attracted even more to his cave as the password for the age was enigmatic silence. Then he struck on the idea of switching on the light every time he sensed a visitor. They found him asleep on his stool and totally unresponsive. He practised till he could pull the imaginary string at precisely the moment they were crawling through the mouth of the cave. The sudden light repelled them as if they were some type of anti-moth.

Now, only his wife visits him—to bring him food. This wife, haggard, rundown and crone-like even though only middle-aged, is a relic of the days when, as an electronics and logic circuit expert in the city's power plant, he kissed the ground and thanked heaven for his existence, for his position in the natural balance of things. An acute reader can easily differentiate his present attitude from the former. The food, however, might as well come by itself or materialize in the cave's fetid air for all he notices. In fact, if asked, he probably wouldn't be able to say the last time he was aware of his wife. He notices only things that excite him, that stimulate the question, that irritate. With respect to the food itself, he eats nothing but meat, meat on the verge of going bad. And it has to be real meat, not the plastic-produced stuff so popular in the city. The realization that something somewhere has suffered, screamed, died to produce this meal adds immensely to his excitement. But that's just half of it: the half-digested meat is always vomited up afterwards, spewing up in lumpy, accusing pieces. This is the duality of the singular man.

The city's attitude towards this man has developed into one of acute indifference. (They once sent a Health Inspector to investigate the rumour that he was keeping bisexual chickens without a licence, but this proved false and the inspector excused himself profusely as he fell out of the entrance like a cracked egg.) The city tolerates him as long as he remains outside the gates. It has more important problems: roads continually to tear up, garbage to be strewn, sewers to block up and, of course, the power plant to prevent a darkness from creeping in through one of the chinks. Electricity is the city's pride and pre-occupation. Someone capable of flying over (not possible) would see it as a song in a bubble of light, a sizzling, sparking song but a monotoned song nevertheless. All those who work in the power plant are accorded the highest places in the city's hierarchy. The mayor himself (herself lately) is traditionally gleaned from the former superintendents of this plant. The singular man never got beyond the first engineering level in his few years there. The personnel department had made a psychological report on him which cast a shadow on his future (as well as predicting it). It said that, unlike most of the workers who were truly contented, satisfied and prepared to assume the posture and attitude of their superiors without question, his good will, bonhomie and ready smile were nothing but "sugar-coating over the rotten apple core" of his personality. He left to take up his position as the singular man shortly after a six hundred volt shot of electricity jarred loose some of the neuron synapse connections in his lower brain. He had been the singular man for all time. And singular men live in perfect damp caves sitting on three-legged stools with naked bulbs dangling overhead to remind them of former glory.

After the problem of death itself, the thing that worries him most is what he'll say on his death-bed. Will he be cryptic and enigmatic, leaving behind a set of mysteriously-encoded words to be deciphered through the ages? Or romantically brave? Perhaps, even smiling un peu as his lips form the last irrevocable vowels and consonants? Silence, a piercing stare at one of his sloping inscribed walls? No, for then he would burst, not die, fly apart like an overripe squash. A rhetoric of the soul, talking on and on, climax after climax? In the long run, the singular man concludes it's better not to dwell on it—hope it occurs spontaneously—and to concentrate on the act itself. Certainly,

he would die well: a little fever, a little delirium, a little cold, a little death rattle, a little . . . Who does he want at his bedside? Everyone. (The whole universe, animate and inanimate, gathered into an incandescent ball to pay its respects. Every face whispers: "Soon, you'll be part of a wonderful new creation never before imagined, let alone seen: a leg, an arm, a spirit, a flower petal, a piece of charcoal filled with ancestral worms." Big deal, he manages to answer, trying to focus his eyes. I want to remain me. It's no use my aiming for something better. It could just as easily turn out something worse. And I despise gambling. They cite examples: Tithonus, Sisyphus, Prometheus. All sought immortality in their own way; all received it in another.) And no one. Absolutely nothing. A vast blankness; a blank vastness. Out floating in a desert where he sees only the undulating sand and his own rot, his own limbs falling off, sizzling where they touch the dunes, screaming as they turn to glass.

At first, his wife lived with him in the cave, doing all the wifely chores. But she couldn't get used to sleeping with the light on. She would get up in the middle of the night from the far corner where she slept and would pull the string. He always awoke with a scream that caused her to start beating at him with her fists. She moved outside and slept under the stars. (They were there but not visible.) The climate in that part of the world is excellent, regulated as it is by the surrounding mountains. This seemed the perfect compromise, close enough to provide for him yet not so close so as to be disturbed by his eccentricities. And it worked well—till the ones from the city began to arrive at all hours to have a look at the cave-dwellers, poking at her while she slept and reading out pamphlets that described the two of them either as "neurotic misfits unable to cope with the growing pains and complexities of our technological-mythological-astrological society" or as "precursors of a new dawn, ready to restore the human animal to its proper place at the centre of the web of existence." From then on, she was at his side day and night, whispering in his ear, invoking her body, prying open his, closing hers, saying it was enough, he'd had his little joke on the city. Now it was backfiring on them. All one had to do was return to the city and recover one's old job. Become important again in a normal way. It was then that he spoke for the last time to his wife: "I'm the singular man. It's my duty to off-set the false life of the city with my own true sense of

death. I don't need you any more, so you may leave." She left but soon returned with a doctor who recommended a psychiatrist who convinced her that his disease was both incurable and highly contagious. Not yet entirely certain and not wishing to feel that she'd abandoned her husband prematurely, she consulted the medicine man who was protected by the city and held the only licence within a pi-squared mile radius. That proved the last straw for, after a few incantations, invocations and bush burnings, the medicine man burst out weeping and ran off, muttering something about finding a cave. The present arrangement was initiated by her at that time. She re-married (an engineer from the power plant) and he was very understanding when it came time for her to bring her former husband food. The realization he would eat only meat came after several dishes of vegetables and fruit were left untouched. The next time she attempted a mixture in the form of a stew. At first, she thought he'd rejected the whole thing but, on throwing it out, she noticed the pieces of meat were gone. Thus she fed him only meat. Money—and real meat was expensive—was no object. Her husband had virtually unlimited credit. So, the singular man alternated between spare ribs and pork. On Christmas Eve, he ate fried eel; on Good Friday, fillet of sole. He imagined they were some type of holiday but couldn't tell them apart.

The singular man is casting about for a way to cheat fate out of its unexpected yet fully predictable booty. Perhaps, coming down with a one-hundred-per-cent fatal disease would reduce the uncertainty to a minimum? But a minimum wasn't a small enough approximation to please him. Traditionally, of course, he knew of only one way to cheat at that game: suicide. Suicide has one big drawback. He rejects it as self-defeating. In fact, he no longer feels it's that important to anticipate or control the coming of death. What does eat at him (like the fat white larva of a dung beetle) is the question: "Why must I die when everything else remains, seeing what I no longer see, feeling what I no longer feel?" He concludes the worst part of death is knowing there are some still living, some still quick: add a few at the beginning, push a few into/out of the middle, chop off a few at the end. If we all die at once, he reasons, there will be nothing left to exist, to pity, to laugh, to cannibalize, to dance. What a sweet thought! Everything must die when he dies. He will become a murderer, killing all the unsuspecting blue-eyed creatures with their bodies wrapped around the living fuel pump. He will kill the fuel pumps as well,

those with the paunches first, then the mean lean ones. He will leave the deformed creatures till the end for they resemble him in some strange way. These he will destroy as humanely as possible, some type of pill or drug to put them to sleep. And himself? The action must turn on the actor. Wouldn't he be left to exist, to pity, to laugh? He must attempt the annihilation of all at the same time—and that included himself. He must practise the art of bloodthirstiness for it definitely was an acquired skill and not inherent. This is the reason for the mouse-traps. They philosophize in their own way. Such a pleasure would a mouse receive from them if it could read that famous question: "Why must I die?" The cheese would turn into his own body and he'd scamper away to relate to his family the narrow escape. Instead, the cheese does become his body. The singular man catches several mice each day but develops no thirst for blood. The little trickle on the side of their mouths induces him even before he's eaten to vomit—a thin, yellowish spewing.

The days pass in disharmonious equality. He begins to wander outside the confines of the cave. He marvels at the well-defined separation of light between the inside and out. Here it is dry. The cave is a world of primitive damp and artificial light. And lately, his light bulb has begun to flicker. He points to the sky: there is the hazy sun, everlasting Sol; and here is the earth, the infinitesimal Earth. And these, these are the rays connecting them, tugging, trying to pull them together in fiery embrace. The singular man lies between the great presses and, suffering excruciating pleasure (to the point of pain), is moulded into a new singular man, much wiser than the first and less latent. This singular man dresses in pocketless suits. He asks no questions but talks of beauty and meaning, art and life. He addresses himself at the foot of the mountain, talks of love and death, of man and wisdom, of suicide and murder.

In the beginning, his wife is wary of the change, frightened that it might be but a new form of the old illness. She, however, is gradually convinced that he has turned into something better, a synthesis. She leaves her new husband and rejoins the old. She listens intently as he talks. She thinks it a pity that the words are being wasted on rock and sky and wind, for she's certain now her husband's a genius. She hires a secretary to take down, in short hand, all that he says, no matter how trivial it may sound. This secretary sleeps when he sleeps and writes when he talks. The singular man feels the creation of a world inside himself. Out of a gamble he never knew he'd taken, there has evolved the something better that the universe bowed to at his death bed.

The philosophers, scientists, poets, writers and solitary wise man return, each from a banquet where the food was scarce. They proclaim him the singular man and accept his word without question. It is his profound suffering, his intense magnification of the idea of death that has formed him, they say in unison. He talks on, oblivious of their presence. They rush away to base philosophic systems, scientific laws, epics, trilogies and wise sayings on his spoutings. Modern man, they say as one, has lost his voice. Here it has been regained. Silence is an unnecessary evil, they warn, created by people with hideous secrets. The city once again files towards him, a few (misfits and malcontents one and all) denouncing him for having spoken, the majority carrying pamphlets that speak of him as "emblematic of its serenity and fortitude in the face of ineffable mystery." It names streets and buildings after him. Pictures of his white hair and calm face abound. A huge electric sign proclaiming "The Singular Man Lives Here" lights up the sky. He talks on; the secretary writes it down. Finally, as the grandest of grand gestures and bearing in mind the fact he was once its top electronics expert (so say the records), the mayor offers him the job as the power plant's superintendent. He does not acknowledge the honour at the time but several weeks later he stops talking, builds an acrid fire around the stool and gets rid of the secretary (who agrees to resign on condition he can follow the singular man about even without remuneration). He then moves back into the city. The cave is surrounded by guards and declared a municipal shrine.

The singular man is determined to create a meaning out of his life. He, therefore, sets out to make the city one huge, fantastic light. Nowhere a speck of darkness; nowhere an alley or park unlit. Even the sewers are as bright as operating rooms. People are asked to wear hats with multi-beam lights on them. The crime rate is thus cut in half. The other half can't be helped by lights as those are committed under their glare. Murder and rape in secluded corners are things of the past—there are no secluded corners. When someone is in trouble, he designates it by flashing a yellow light. Prostitutes still use the traditional red. Lovers signal each other through a variety of lights known only to each other. His engineers are working on a dome that will generate its own light. Some of the city dwellers don't know what darkness means. Others remember it as a primeval fear that loped leisurely through their childhoods. It is now as remote as gods and minotaurs, as incredible as living in caves.

The singular man himself lives in an office attached high to the side of the power plant. It is rectangular in shape, pi-squared metres per side. The stool has been replaced by a metal swivel chair, computer terminal and ergonomic desk. No philosophers, poets, writers or wise man visit him. Rather it is a steady stream of engineers, chemists, architects, technicians and salesmen. They pull down his statements in full flight. "Let the solitudes disappear," he says and immediately a campaign is launched to couple everyone or to build all the edifices so that they touch or to have the population join hands. He attends feasts where speakers pronounce him the ideal man and the paradigm for youth. In his closet is a pile of discarded mouse traps, the copy of a book written in short hand and a scrunched up secretary fed daily on his orts. These objects leech themselves to him in moments between drinks. He shrugs them off and joins the rest—a controlled revelation, a heart-to-heart discussion on the meaning of light, a free-wheeling denunciation of materialism and darkness. His wife smiles and keeps the intrigues away from him (imagine—there are those who long for the good old days!), but she's worried that he still eats only meat and wears clothes without pockets, that the true changes are masked by superficial similarities.

But those who blame her for what happens next are merely groping in the dark. On the first night, amid the luminous festivities to celebrate power and its electric acquisition, there is a flicker, a flicker like a subliminal message. Enough only to disturb for a moment the celebrations. On the second night, it is a flash of darkness lasting from five to ten seconds. During that time, the entire population freezes, stares up blindly at the vanished dome; fear's ozone rises lazily, followed by sweaty relief as the lights blaze again. "The power interruption just experienced," the loudspeakers bark, "is an aberration of the laws of probability. Not in a million billion years could it happen again. Rest assured." The people cheer as one and resume dancing. On the third night, the lights die permanently; the city itself disappears. The silent cowering, the inability to move, lasts for several hours. Then, there is that scream that neighbouring cities claim they heard as clearly as if all distance had vanished. And the killing starts. Revenges are settled, new ones started; the hungry-eyed child getting set to cross the street is gang raped by an entire troop of Boy Scouts; the mental hospital's and prison's electric cell-doors pop open as the auxiliary power inexplicably fails to kick on. After the first rampage, during which the greater portion of the population is destroyed, the survivors (those genetically equipped with better night sight) head instinctively towards their failed protector. On the way they pass the medicine man who has, alas, danced his last dance. Rats carry away his limbs; an eye stares up balefully from its cushion of earth. After waiting politely for a few moments (habits are hard to break), they burst into the office. The singular man is obviously there, sitting at his computer terminal. Mouse traps and a secretary, pulled out of the closet as if from a hat, litter the floor. "He has abandoned us," screams the erstwhile leader, a tall blond ex-games master holding a smoky torch which he shoves into the secretary's face. "Here I am, right before you," the singular man says, standing up to make himself more visible. But, while he's plainly there, it's plain they can't see him. "The wife! Where's the wife?" They turn and seek her out. "Hold your horses," she says, emerging from her toilet. "Just putting on a touch of make-up. Wrinkles, you know." Mercifully, she dies from

a bludgeon blow (stool leg?) before being reduced to a bloody pulp right before the eyes of her husband. Then the mayor, the philosophers, scientists, poets, writers and single wise man are rounded up and crucified. For students of anthropology and history, their bones can still be seen hanging from the X-shaped power grids. The few remaining people turn on each other, stumbling about in the massive dark, rushing through the city as if caught in an unstemmable hemorrhage. Who's to blame for allowing the singular man such power, such access to power? And a flurry of blows, a whistling of knives, a crystal snapping of necks.

The next night, one person emerges onto the brightly-lit streets. He repeatedly asks, as he heads towards some kind of termination: "Why must I live?" The acute reader can easily extract his former attitude from his present one. He thinks back to a time of lying in his damp cave at the age of forty with his light on, pulling the imaginary string, dreading to be born. They have destroyed it now, sealed up the entrance, smashed the bulb. Blind shadows gather behind him. The city isn't dead. Yet. For he leads an army of misfits, the mentally ill, the disturbed, the deranged, the diseased, the disordered, the demented over the mountain towards the next city where a similar army waits huddled in its bubble. He carries a nondecipherable book under his arms. He'll need it when they regain their sight.

Nancy Mackenzie / THREE POEMS

THE YARN

Buries the thread deep
in the pocket of her throat
finds out how to save things
by saying nothing

keeps the hiding place
of a circling in
to settle down in
yellow grasses
a secret.

Thimbleless & coatless
bereft of all
qualms about secrecy
she nimbly kicks her legs about
& slushes through the brush.

& afterwords

needlepoints the girl on the hill
& the brown of her arm
over the man's shoulders.

Yes, there is much that cannot be seen
the thorns on roses in winter
the flash of needle between lips.

Where blood seeps through the stiches
where others have walked the paths
the lifeline tangles.

She traces her ancestry to childhood
rocking, rocking
settles
midway in velvet & dream
thinking, doubtless this is only one side of things
as if the back of the picture
is loosethreaded knots.

PSALMISTRY

We do not know when the world will end
few of us have studied the prophecies
those who have say soon

soon the economic bondage
soon the age when talents are recognized.

Who wrote the song, creates the chants.

We all repeat and begin to believe,
we ask
who wrote that song?

Does it matter that the devil
is his own muse?

And the women write to free themselves
begin to believe.

The men stop their ears
to matriarchal language. The evolving
species
stops.

No,
One cannot manipulate destiny
manuscript of lifelines on hands.

What mantelpiece in heaven
could compare to our hearthpiece
stacks of manuscripts
fed to flames.

Burn the technical reports, and chaos
is still a brute fact.

Snakes begin to speak with men
that knowledge is chaos.

The god inside men wrings her hands
there can be no flowering
if no-one tends the garden.

Her hands caught up in the weaving,
a god makes garments for war kings
nurses the knowledge of her pregnancy
and the men of destiny
create guidance controlled
missiles.

The shepherd has lost his sheep, there is no wool left
there is no wool left to weave.

The mind of men encompasses
the universe
and when the nova bursts
war starts
and in the flames the lies die down
ashes sift.

A rattler moves
onto the sun warmed hearth stones

AT STROME GLEN FARM

There is a man calling out in the field

something wild and captivating
luring and frightening

is it the hunter or the hunted
is it something in the
dissipating
sound, is it
you calling

At the ocean where the oars splashed
and the chants meshed with the orchestral evening

I told you
of the tears you brought to cloudy skies

of the manshape on the fieldpath
thickets and fireflies
sometimes wild and captivating

was it you caught out in the field
a siren of red lights

the cattle that won't come home
the lost sheep

a shepherd cross with a coyote

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photography by GORDON PAYNE

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