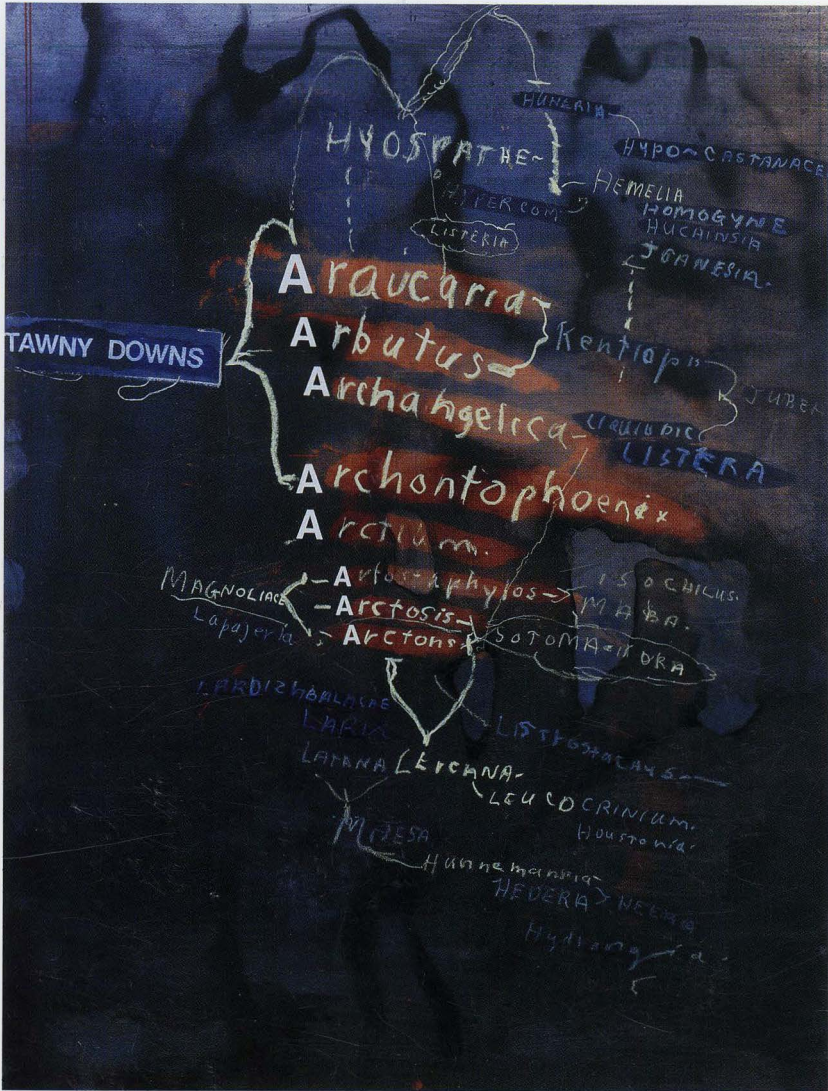


THE CAPILANO REVIEW



*You are half-open doors at which grave-diggers wait. And this is
your reality: 'Everything is worthy of perishing'*

it's amazing to be pushed out of shape a lot of the time, and the
amazement is a cultural gift

someone said, the stones of _____ [fill in the name of
your own home town] are saturated with poetry

Robin Blaser

1 November, 1990

Nietzsche whispering

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Graham Gillmore

Front Cover: *Tawny Downs*
Mixed media on paper
94" x 68" 1990

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PREFACE

Though this issue appears later than planned, it comes at a time when the voices in it can remind us of plain speech, open searching, generous embrace. Now that we're surrounded by the "news" of the Gulf War, we need to remember that not all language is designed to disguise reality or valorize brutal force. The language of the artists in this issue is not the language of propaganda or the language of euphemism. The writers here have no interest in making events and experiences opaque. Their interest is in a fully human speech which can deliver the *news that stays news*, as opposed to the toxic ephemera the cable networks now disperse to cloud perception.

William Carlos Williams rightly said that *To write badly is an offence against the government, for the government can never be more than the government of the words*. If the fact of this war offends many, the language of this war should offend all. No beneficial "new world order" is likely to result from governments that use unnecessary force and reduce language to a techno-speak in which real people vanish as "collateral damage."

Against such brutalizations of people and perception we have the wit and delicacy of bpNichol's concrete poems. We have the moral force of Robin Blaser's articulate anger. We have George Stanley's tribute to resonant sources in "San Francisco's Gone." We have the explorations of individual trajectories in the work of Merrily Weisbord and Ven Begamudré. We have Myrna Kostash's evocation of Jan Palach's tragic heroism. We have the surreal and disturbing fables of Bill Gaston. We have Stan Persky's delicious tale of irony and desire. We have the beauty of swift perception itself in the poems of Vicki Walker and Toni Sammons. Each of these writers honours language and human experience, takes us to, as Blaser puts it,

the intersection between life and thought

Pierre Coupey

Bill Gaston / FIVE PIECES

PHYSICS

It seems possible that people engage dumb as billiard balls or apples clicking off each other, bouncing, missing, falling, as the case may be. There appear to be laws about this, to look at. I'll start.

A law called magnetism. It needs two surfaces that attract each other. In the cases most important to people, this surface is skin. Eyes put the final lock on things. It feels like a simple law. Much harder to understand is the law of one magnet letting go. To the magnet that keeps pulling, it's virtually impossible to understand the one that lets go, for it looks like lawlessness. It feels like a goddamn crime.

A law called momentum. It was years ago, maybe twenty, that you left me. My life smashed face-first against an irresistible object. Yet my love kept going, right through the wall, following you blindly. It's an odd split. A part of me, I don't know the proportion, loved you after for a long time. Somewhere in my body, I still do. Everybody knows this momentum.

There are other laws. Gravity almost saw me a suicide. Inertia had me wasting a life in front of the TV or in dreams — though I could hardly recall your face anymore. And there was the peculiar velocity — it had a lean to it — of my search for you, or someone like you, in bars. Friction made me dance like a maniac. It made me look at my watch to see how much time I had left.

But momentum is more interesting than velocity. Velocity, and the hairy damn friction that law says must come with it, needs a body and feels blind, like fever. Momentum doesn't need a body. Momentum is a comfy spirit that cruises along and doesn't like change. Momentum doesn't even acknowledge change. I think the spirit of momentum would be afraid of you now.

I remember when I first learned to skate. I mastered gravity and velocity enough to stop pushing and just glide. I stood there up on my skates, gliding fast, the wind roaring in my ears, hair whipping

my neck. I had no destination. I could not stop in any case. And when I reached the end of the rink and smacked loud and final into the boards, something just kept going, fast, beyond a body, something that feels like harmony, a law that flies in all directions if we let it go.

A UNIVERSE NAMED RICK

He was one of those guys whose neck was thick as his head. This was the first impression. If you looked again you saw he simply had a small head.

A very small head. He knew this. He carried on as if this was all he knew. You saw in his eyes he wanted women. He couldn't have one. At the bus stop he wouldn't look at them so carefully it was worse than looking. He wore green, for once a colour analyst told him green was the colour he should wear. Their meeting had been brief.

His name was Dana. The name of his universe was Rick. Dana's nose was also of normal size, that is, too big for the head. Both eyes had been born straddling the nose, too close against it. If he looked to the right, his left eye could see only his nose. Same if he tried the other eye. Anyone, if they looked at all, could see his sadness, which seemed quite appropriate, and not worthy of comment, unlike the size of his head.

Dana held onto a fairly good job, for his life did depend on it. Not even the company knew they kept him in the stockroom because of his small head. But who would buy a leather coat from such? Who would trust a head like that sounding the words, "It suits you"?

Dana was unaware which silent bend the universe once took to dictate the natural hierarchy of appearance. Yet he sensed this law, for its evidence was undeniable. He watched a lot of TV, though for his confidence' sake he shouldn't have. He thought TV wrestling ridiculous, but he left it on for the bodies.

Back when Dana sought manhood on the prairies he shot gophers after school. Each casual hunt took the tone of him biding time until his head caught up. Sighting along the barrel at a dusty pelt, he always said, "Rick," then pulled the trigger. He didn't know why, and didn't think about it. Perhaps Rick was the name of an early bully.

Once a prostitute turned him down. He looked the type who might do something. He took from this a sense of humour — limp, unformed, not manifest on his face, but humour nonetheless. If he had had a friend to confide in, they both could have laughed about the hooker. His friend would've been younger than him and not as bright, but handsome. Dana saw his friend wearing mostly red. Dana would've added to the joke, admitting he had offered the prostitute double.

One year he'd thought good-looking thoughts. He'd dressed well, the start of his green wardrobe. But soon he sensed that with good clothes he was only heightening the fatal contrast. He gave in again, to appropriateness.

He had been raised amongst barnyard animals, he had known the tunelessness of runts. More than once he watched his father smash the feeblest kitten with a hammer, when there weren't enough teats to go round in the barn-defined universe of cats.

THE SUNDAY LISE SAW JESUS

Lise had just got back from Sunday school and was sitting in her holiday whites troubling over some Campbell's vegetable soup and a tuna sandwich. If her mother saw her eating red soup in a white dress she'd crucify her. But her parents were next door and Lise's troubles were bigger. Though she was only eight she knew that what they'd spent an hour talking about wasn't Jesus, though they'd used the name over and over. It all sounded too easy or something, like rules to a game. When you were good he was like a giant friendly lady, and when you were bad or bad he was mad, worse than dad. Her little rhyme had failed to amuse the teacher.

At that point Lise began to feel bad for believing differently. That is, for unbelieving. But that man in the pictures. The way they said you could talk to him. Well, you couldn't talk to him. In the pictures the colours were bright like comics. All the roads and lands were dirt, but no one was dirty. Lise had asked if they even had toilets back then. The teacher thought a moment, then ignored her, and this made Lise suspect that the mystery of Jesus did have something to do with toilets, or the lack of them. In any case, the mystery had to be about something not in the book.

The last thing the teacher had said was, "Jesus is still alive." This made Lise sit up straight and think.

She was still thinking as she ate her sandwich. And as she chewed, back straight, eyes unfocussed, her unbelief grew. Jesus had to be something not in a book, something she'd never seen, and which no one had ever told her about. Jesus had to be something brand new.

Lise told herself — first as a game, then it became serious — that if she could forget everything she could see right now, plus everything she'd ever seen, plus everything she'd ever heard about, then whatever was left might be Jesus. She tried this, and it only took a second.

It scared her. It was like an invisible hinge the whole length of her

body opening, wings within her. She shook her head in an attempt now not to know, but the shock of knowing only grew. She sucked in a breath and dropped her sandwich into her soup. Her spoon landed on the table and soup splattered her white dress. Lise looked down, the red spots were a complication that could wait. Breathing hard, her eyes darted there, then there. She bounced in her chair, expectant. Under the table, Butch whined and thumped his tail.

Lise checked the corners where the walls met the ceiling, where spider nests appeared any day out of nowhere, but she saw nothing new. She studied the sunbeam that made a window shape in front of her on the table, but that wasn't it either. Something in the slowly floating dust puzzled her, but then she decided, no. It didn't speak. Jesus would speak.

Then a good idea came. You can feel him inside, someone had said. So Lise felt where her collar pinched. She felt the circulation in her legs cut off from the chair edge. But, no. Listening harder she detected her heart, which she sensed might give a clue. Its beat was warm and teasing because it never changed, yet was always new. But that wasn't it either. If Jesus was who they said he was, Jesus would be watching, and Jesus would know. Not the other way around.

Lise's eyes went to her soup bowl. Something had happened in it. The quarter-sandwich was there, bigger than before. All the red broth had silently entered the bread. Was this something? A lot of church was about bread, especially bread that got bigger on its own.

But she'd missed it. If that was Jesus, she'd missed it. The bread now just looked soggy and stupid. A potato square sat beside it, and on the other side was a broken alphabet 'G'. The tuna, the fish part of the story, hadn't gotten bigger at all.

So maybe she'd missed it, while it was happening. The important thing was not what had happened, but that something had happened. Jesus was too quick for her. Maybe it was always this way.

Feeling hot, Lise looked quickly under the table, catching Butch by surprise. The dog's head jerked up, eyes blinked awake, and a burp escaped his mouth, rippling his lip. Lise smelled it.

What she smelled in it surprised her.

Lise didn't have the words to explain why to her parents when they came home to find her under the table, her dress soiled, hugging a

dog she'd never much liked, and whispering to it, 'Jesus'. She tried to but saw they didn't believe her that dog burps are new and old at the same time; the only word she could think of to use was 'history'. Nor did they believe that sunbeams on the table are Jesus, but only when a cloud moved across and made them start again. And it was too hard to tell them — when she jumped up and cut her elbow on the table and hugged herself and the little blood and said 'Jesus' — it was about not missing it, not missing the blood when it first came out and talked to you. It was about not missing anything again.

And when Lise told them — she couldn't stop, she had to tell — that she could hear them in their bedroom when they cuddled and bounced together, but that up till now she'd never known she was listening to Jesus, they told her they were taking her out of Sunday school. And Lise said that was fine. The only time Jesus would be there, she said, holding her arm and looking at it like a lover, was if it ever got hit by a rocket.

SNOW WHITE, AFTER

You woke to those rough lips pulling back, the waft of stewmeat venison on his breath. His eyes fell shy at your look.

You stretched, wary. You didn't know you'd been asleep. Music started, and the waiting squirrels and bunnies — fluffy, heads and eyes overlarge, infantile — rose in joy at your eyelids' flicker. But they relaxed as drama died, as you climbed stiff off the platform, grabbed your knee and cursed a Germanic 'auch'. It died when all saw your unwashed hair, ugly-flat from a season pressed to the pillowboard. So it was you who moved romance to the real, you who cut the studio's gossamer strings which held the butterflies there, and the row of fat bluebirds fast to their branch.

A prince, he was nonetheless young and untold that no woman is perfect awake. Both of you were bred in clans that never bathed, and your smells did not match. Once, a month on, waking up further, you heard him say 'Ah, the taint of her!' to his groom. And he took to using you quickly, head turned to the side, then driving hard and long, like his father before him. How could he have known? At the wedding he'd complained of the cost of your clothes, and your insistence on having Bambi and a few bunnies brought back.

You are gladdest when he is gone. How could you have known? You had no say in any case and wonder at this often, embroidering by the winter fire, fumbling over waking woman-skills, he out hunting deer and rabbit. Your bunnies have long since hopped off to gather for other beginnings.

The bedclothes lay scattered from the morning. Another maid has fled your temper. You hate the furniture his cousin carved rough. You

don't like his friends or the beer left crusting on the pewter. You are bloody bored, but not eager to see his face, or the taint of his ways, or the beard he has let grow to attest to a damned comfortable manhood. Other faces draw your dreams these days. While your face is sagging. While you might be pregnant. You sneer at this thought: a baby you will kiss awake into life, watch its infant eyes open.

Now a surprise to you, dreams. Strange, you dream of sleep. You dream of bunnies, of butterflies untethered and tickling up into the sky. And you dream of other girls out there, young, unaware, royalty till they wake. As you did, and as you always will, to find yourself gutting your prince's shot hare.

WHY I HATE SURREALISM

I hate surrealism because, leaving the dentist, I look into a shop window and the young man dressing a mannequin sees me and faints. I look closer, at my reflection that is, and see the reason: sewn permanently to my lower jaw is half a goose's bill. It is black, though pink and tender inside, and, again, it is only half a bill, for it is split end to end. I find a washroom. God I hate surrealism. Do you know that geese, and now I, have a row of tiny tiny teeth? The injury to my bill is apparently new. The blood is crusted but breaks and beads up when I touch it, and it hurts. I clean the bits of sea-weed caught in fissures and teeth; I find a tick; I clean the wound as best I can. Doing so, I catch the odor of rotting flesh. When I was a boy I kept a frog sealed in a jar. When I found the jar a month later and opened it, the frog smelled much like my bill does now. I do hate surrealism, and distrust it so much I quickly kick off a shoe, but my toes are not, to my relief, webbed. But once outside, my brief respite from surrealism is over. The sky has just now opened in an ostentatiously sexual way and is dangling all manner of primal icons. There, a huge crimson horn; there a peach. A glass cauldron full of raw egg white has center stage, to the left of which, near some real clouds, a pleading eggshell is trying to have some of it back. It cracks from within and a wet, swollen tongue stretches out, straining at the cauldron. The egg-white inside churns like viscera, unsure of what to do. The eggshell and its tongue moans, then weeps, and at last whimpers as it shrinks and, cracking feebly, dies. I hate surrealism for making me feel guilty. And I hate surrealism for the connections it makes and for what it's doing now, which is to put my mother, my real mother, in black wispy lingerie and have her fly at me, naked underneath; I can see the nipples riding gently under the fabric, she a foot off the ground and gliding, gliding right past me — even when I call out, her pace doesn't slow. I call, It's me! Some of the black wispy trailings of cloth brush

my face as she passes and begins to gain speed and altitude, and the smell coming off it is my mother's smell when I was three. I hate surrealism for these reasons and fear it. I hate poetry too, any poetry that has imagination in it or images that come from places we have no business being. For that reason I hate the neurotic and very surrealistic image the sky has now become: it is solid dirt, the earth having flipped to hang upside down, black and foul dirt from which protrude bones, some with shreds of human meat still adhering. The whole sky stinks, my mother has gone there, and the smell of my bill suggests my place will soon be there too. Since the sky and earth has reversed, the ground is transparent, and I fear falling into it. Luckily I am approaching my favorite pub. I walk up, grateful for its floor, one I know is very solid for the many times I've lain on it during previous bouts with surrealism. Once in I order a beer. The money I hand Ed, who thinks my beak disgusting, turns to butter and runs through my fingers. But Ed pours me a beer regardless. Some things, unlike surrealism, you can count on. I drink the beer, or try to — God I hate surrealism — for half of it falls out of my damaged beak onto my shirt. Still, what I get down steadies me. I believe I've now cottoned onto the trick of surrealism. I must adjust to the outrageous, the startling, the simply crude. If surrealism is going to carry on this way, I will be ready. But, of course, as soon as I rise in this strength, surrealism fools me and becomes subtle. My goose beak, I feel with my hands, has at last fallen off, but I have been left with the lips of a woman, full, lip-sticked, old fashioned. Men begin their approach. I see their hunger. Should I kiss them? I have, after all, a woman's lips. My lips themselves remember the rasp of whiskers. So should I kiss them? With the kissing would come false hopes, for I still have a man's genitalia. Or do I? I check, really hating surrealism now. Discreetly bending away I feel with my hand a mound, a smooth bulge that tells me it could go either way. Jesus. I know it's up to me, like all surrealism. In surrealism, one is supposed to explore. But I'm too cowardly for surrealism, always have been. I decide to be a man again. With a quick tilt of thought, visualising rodeos, an oil can, a dusty leather chair, I recreate my penis. I check. It's very small. Oh I hate surrealism. I dream harder this time at an oak tree, and feel again. There, that's fine. I consider dreaming a mountain, a tidal wave, a leaping Orca, but am wary of what protruberance I might be

delivered with. Surrealism is so damned creative, and greed will lead to an instant justice: neurosis to a hellish vision, self-absorption to a room of mirrors, and gibberish. So. Steadiness. Here at the bar, I lift my beer tentatively. Bolder, I lift it head high. I plant my foot squarely on the brass rail, striking the straight-ahead pose of a man incapable of imagination. I dedicate my life and vision to the actual. Beer raised up, I stand shaking with the effort of seeing this way. When at last — for a fleeting second, but that's enough — I manage to look myself right in the eye, surrealism disappears.

Vicki Walker / THREE POEMS

THE LONG BLUE COAT

muffled sounds of men talking below in the kitchen
33 years! one voice said with excitement
a radio played Shostakovich or Prokofiev beside the bed
a long flight of wooden steps in her red Chanel suit
she descended slowly the steps of the house
dim hallway with no carpet click click of her black Capezios
behind her him in leather boots and gloves
his long blue coat brushing the walls of the hallway
first nite of sex
and the taxi and
Jack's cello all night playing Dvorak
let's go to Detroit to see Rivera's mural
radiant she face casting a golden light on her complete lover
a simple animal with no roses
darkness
and the desire for splendor

(for J.)

THAT BLUE

it was that blue
the iridescence of that colour
blue across your breast
the way the light fell
the softness of your blouse
the song i heard then
the song from long ago
long before you were born
long before i was born

and

the light on the porch
in the heat of July
you were humming a tune
your arm on some red wood
your hand with its carved silver ring
your arm with a few freckles
your white skin
in that blue blouse the song

(for Camille)

WITH RED

you were sitting on the bed
in my grandparent's bedroom
in the old house in Wisconsin
in the lakeside house
with red-winged blackbirds
with irises wild in the lake
in Little Doctor's Lake
with loons with clear & i
was sitting on the bed, there
beside you, there
were poppy leaves covering the windows
the east window, the south,
green lacey poppy leaves
but no red poppies, &
you had on a green shirt
on the end of the bed &
i kissed you
i kissed you &
kissed you &
kissed
you on the end of the bed &
my mouth was a lake
a lake & the sky &
in it with you, me moving
through time with wings
with black wings, with red
with red

Toni Sammons / SEVEN POEMS

NAGAME

Gravel puddles
on the way to kindergarten —
water and early consciousness

Yellow leaves under cold water
more beautiful than on the sidewalk
than even in the trees

to contemplate means
long rain
this you always knew
but not
that it won't always be this way:

the smell of gravel
rainwater running through the leaves
the piercing yellow, clear water

— the moment already gliding from you
like a sketch
on ice or twilight

CAKILE

So much seems reasonable:
those things connected
by consequence or choice

a pink star moth
alight on a pink flower
an echo blue
on powdery ceanothus

when chickens make meals
out of cheeseweed
you can whip their eggs
into a pink meringue

the stamen hairs of spiderwort
exposed to radiation change
from blue to pink

and the refined face of a falcon
in pink granite
and handmade jars
from the blue clay of Nara
left for ceremony on the mountain
rescue us from trivia
if not disaster

But love isn't intention, no matter what you thought

the only thing you might choose
is a bird, a name, a gesture

or a flower: hardy sea-rocket,
sand abrading all its roots
and fleeing lavender fingers
crossed against the wind
a flower spitting back
at the wild salt,
the spinning waves

ALMOST HOME

unidentified birds on Bolinas ridge
hidden in the wild arms of the oaks
the oak wood wrestling with the light
turning bronze, turning green again

drinking a Tsing-tao beer, emerald neck
sharpened by light already sunk
the sky a pale melon suffused
with lilac, with luminous smoke

your child and loss an ache
to the point of insanity
unlocatable crickets skipping notes
penny-colored leaves twisting
from the ancient trees
light gone, thinking
of whom to kill

months later you smell the sea
before you see it, and feel it
before you smell it
as though the door of the world
had opened right next to you again
snapping heartstrings
in the old way

and although every empty trail
is stepping off possibly toward nothing
toward no place toward strangers

you can't sustain unhappiness — it's lighter
than the wind that blows
the violet lupine into shakey fits
against chalk-green serpentine

paths break on the smooth, dangerous beach
the prussian of open sea, cerulean close-in
and startling, like glass breaking
long line of turquoise where the waves are bending

the shock of memory
intensifies love, though memories
by their nature frame a loss: bright flowers
stumbling down yellow cliffs, the scent
of iceplant warming in the sun
the other-world colors of the water —
you can't be unhappy,
or content

SCARCE VAPOURER

*Although Schroedinger was sure that electrons were
standing waves, he was not sure what was waving.*
Zukav

*We are a dispersed people whose history
is a sensation of opaque fidelity.*
Seamus Heaney
"The Land of the Unspoken"

Within this twisting time earth still contains
a language of mimics and metalmarks
white turtleheads tapping at the gate, and flowers
with red dragon-faces signaling the birds

glass-wings in the cloud forest, and glass frogs
in the threading, tinted rain
leaping through complex transparencies

and ghost rains in the desert, live nets beneath
this trained to grasp
existence from a shimmer

and our ghost voices hitting
the luminary limit, slow echoes silenced
just before collision

though possibly this is not final

perhaps some Celts sense being, loosely speaking,
reassembled stars, and reach
across a teapot toward the universe
of right and left-handed molecules
trying to be part
of an infinite handshake

movement is what matters
without impulse, nothing

and language why
should it not be
also inherently
uncertain

even on our burdened paths
we may be able to exhale
a short-lived
radiance

LAUREL

*Neither witch nor devil, thunder nor lightning,
will hurt a man in the place where a Bay tree is.*

A dark amber honey for the brood

No more. *if only this*

Surfeits are from something else,
another time

I wouldn't be strong
or good: I'd wear bereavement
like a caul

cursing the sanctimonious
and acquisitive

but the land has patience
and if you can find a house
will give some to you, too

There is a lightness
and heaviness waiting in each thing

you could bring into your kitchen
branches of sassafras to dry,
sweet strength of sassafras:
like orange blossoms,
and vanilla orchid

or roast peppernuts in ashes
and learn that
or rinse your hair with bruised
cinnamon leaves, and find clarity
in the hour

or steep yourself in hot water
and narrow bay leaves, to cure
an ailment of the heart

all the sounds of the tree
rise up in you
the strong scents of the
dark earth may save you
may do something

for you, green heart,
greenheart

THURSDAY WAS A DAY OF WOOD

Thursday was a day of wood
manzanita in sealed bloom
douglas-fir branches lying about
needles going every which way

pushing aside wet leaf litter
in the trunk of an old bay
I disturb a little spider
nearly invisible
but dry like velvet

a glaucous glaze
stiffens down the side
on an injured pine

and at home my hand
raises a scent
of broken bay leaves
leaky resin, earth-colored spider

Friday metallic light
separates the clouds
strikes the city like a bell
makes narrow side streets glint
like ice wedges in the tundra

we hum through the nectaries
of Chinatown and bookstores
like bees looking for the other side of blue

and at night silver and gold fly everywhere
flatten against windows, dive ten stories
the city is a collapsing kaleidoscope
in conversation I am like someone
waiting for sleep, only watching
you and thinking: *this is like*
reading hieroglyphics:
you have to remember
to read into
the faces of the animals

because
Saturday there's time enough for waking
into the old rumpled feeling
that will turn things up for
twenty days or so
like a flush of chanterelles
smelling like apricots
breaking through leaf mould
and the sweet, black earth

MIRROR FOR TIME

*many of the things the words were about
no longer exist*

W.S. Merwin

"Losing a Language"

Now that we no longer have the river
or the security of the simultaneous

only the slender strands of sequence
and our ambiguous experience

in a conditional existence
we choose our way with time
and our ceremonies

a salted salmon for the new year
guests and silver rice

taking a measure
from the beginnings of intent
the rich ochre
and manganese on clay
or the first cared-for oil plant
four thousand years ago
blooming in the Kurdish mountains
fields of blue flowers
bright as dragonflies

and prehistoric Anatolians
scribbling in the highlands
perhaps not images
but sounds, *first*

touchstones rise like ash or pigeons
toward the grey ceiling of the city
carts sink against curbs, weighed down
with branches of budding quince
flowering on cold Northern time
and yellow pumelos stacked up
like leftover suns from the time of Yi
and dense layers of mandarins
burn toward you
through the rainy air

Marvin asks, *Did you ever feel*
you were from another planet
— I mean literally
and you look around you, thinking
this is really a nice planet
but you're not from it

where you really are is walking
down a San Francisco street
on a Sumerian seventh day of rest
making a seam in space, disturbing time

breathing an openwork of fog
the only vaporous drifts that you can stand
smelling like lichen though no lichen can survive
your skin remembering unremembered rivers

when you follow the lines in your palms
all you can see are the disappearances:
birch, salmon, bees

GEORGE STANLEY
SAN FRANCISCO'S GONE
& OTHER POEMS

for Gerald, much love



*in memory of Edward Dermott 'Ned' Doyle
who taught me poetry
and gave me reasons to travel
north of California St.*

SAN FRANCISCO'S GONE

The story recognizes the village only as a momentary scene, not as a place to be visited at length.

Adorno

1

For a fraction of a second behind tired eyes
image of SF waterfront circa 1950
from deck of SP ferry

emerging from beneath
double-deck Bay Bridge; splayed piers flank
Arthur Paige Brown's Ferry Building,
'20s skyscrapers, Russ & the phone company,
& the nozzle atop Telegraph Hill, in scale
w/the human houses, high-ceilinged neighborhoods,
ascending steep slopes of bluebrown Twin Peaks.

All night drinking on the train
from Stockton: USF football game,
Dons beat COP 56-7 (?)

— the train must have been shunted over Western Pacific tracks — I think we passed through Tracy — or held on sidings, to take all night to get from Stockton to Oakland (80 miles?)

I started drinking beer that summer, with Tom Gallagher, Bert Schaefer, and Neil Battaglia, in Tom's car, parked somewhere out in the Sunset with the lights out, a weekday night, cold quarts of Burgie or Regal Pale in paper bags

In June I'd graduated from SI, walked up the center aisle of St. Ignatius twice — once for the Martin Latin medal and once for the scholarship to USF — then last, in alphabetical order, to accept the ribbon-tied scroll from the priest sitting in a carved armchair below the altar (my rival, LaForest 'Frosty' Phillips, beat me though; he went up for three prizes)

I was a sissy in high school, & got picked on a lot, & so, started hanging out with these older guys, Tom, Bert, and Neil (whom I'd impressed w/my wits, I could make them laugh), I'd met working as a page after school at the Main Library (McAllister & Larkin, architect George Kelham, 1917 (?)), & drinking beer (so maybe it was earlier than that summer)

Drank vodka (in a bag) for the first time at a college 'smoker' & woke up the next morning in the back seat of somebody's convertible, splattered w/the necessary dried vomit, said car being parked not on any street but askew in the parking lot at the center of campus, many students at 10 o'clock class break peeking in the window

& became a football fan. That year the Dons went undefeated, so, traveled on the chartered fans' train to Stockton to see them whomp COP. Next

Monday USF was ranked 10th in the UPI coaches' poll. 1951, Ollie Matson's year.

San Francisco, as it looked then.

2

*Her first day at the office
all lunch hour she walked round the block
too shy to go in a restaurant*

One of several times I visited my Aunt Catherine, my mother's younger sister, a nun in her seventies, at the convent in San Jose, she told this story. We were sitting in the sunny visitors' parlor, on spotless upholstered furniture, that had been my mother's.

If she went to work at 17, that would have been 1921 or 2. I imagine the building as Kelham's Standard Oil of California headquarters at Bush & Sansome (that went up in '21). After her dad lost his coal & wood yard in Daly City (gas now cheap enough for cooking), she had to go to work. Big corporations were hiring women for office work — SP, Standard Oil, PG&E (that sold the gas). Catherine would have been 13.

California corporations put up neo-Gothic skyscrapers
(25 stories, tops) on landfill placed in the '70s
over the wrecks of sailing ships (the original
waterfront was just east of Montgomery)

I imagine the block she walked around as Bush
Montgomery Pine Sansome, every building new
or under construction, bare steel & the flash
& sputter of oxy-welding, excavations, wagons,
horses, men: a boom built on fire insurance
proceeds (five Eastern companies bankrupted)
& loans from the new Bank of America (backed
by grain & fruit receipts)

Jack had come out from Cork in the '90s. (His
cousins in Menlo Park who had emigrated earlier
thought of Jack (and Mamie, whose father Michael
was a day laborer) as 'Irish,' but considered
themselves 'Californians' (this is also Catherine's
memory).) When he lost his business he went to
work for C&H Sugar, the Hawaiian growers' refinery
in Crockett. Boarded, came home weekends & Christmas.
The gold 25-year pin w/diamond chip, which he
received on retirement (and which was sent to me
after Catherine's death, in 1985, by the Sisters)
reads: *J. Hennessy 4-16-41*.

25 years a farm boy in Cork, 25 or so an Irish-
Californian worker, then merchant, then at 50
a sugar worker. Mamie and the four children moved

back downtown, to a flat in an alley off 15th &
Church. Marie would have taken the 'J', or one
of the Market cars, to work. Mamie (or Mary, as
she wrote on job applications) went to work for the
SP, when Catherine and Francis were older.

*For it was Mary, Mary
long before the fashion came*

Marie, a French name, why? A cachet
of elegance, before the Fire?

*Though with propriety, society
would say Ma-rie*

And the shyness, of the Catholic girl,
near country girl, grew up on a kind of farm
next to a coal & wood yard

Brown hair, fair skin, freckled.
Hazel eyes. *Petite*, five-one.

Learned her Palmer hand
at Mission Dolores, typing
at the office. Early as I can remember,

the grocery list with one or two items
neatly crossed out. She cd balance her checkbook.

3

The first-born, her brother Emmett,
graduate of Sacred Heart, attending
night law school at St. Ignatius, working days
on the front desk at the St. Francis: their hope.

Imagine a weekend excursion to Santa Cruz.
The SP train leaves from 3rd & Townsend.
Emmett, his sister Marie, his girl friend Regina,
his friend George Stanley from the hotel.
Cousin Mary gets on at Menlo. They take

a couple of cabins in a tourist court
near the beach. Do they bring
blankets from the City or borrow the ones in the cabin
to spread on the sand? The striped
beach umbrella goes up, the girls in one-piece
suits (& caps if they go in), the men
in baggy trunks run in the surf, their feet
slap the wet sand, they bat
the beach ball. Big green waves
off Monterey Bay break.

In the evening
they walk the boardwalk, or 'invest'
a dime in the player piano w/seven
percussion instruments banging in the Casino.
Throw the baseball, knock over the milk bottles.
The booth lights glance in the soft waves
of the girls' hair.

& back at the cabin play swing records
on the wind-up Victrola (I guess),
& later in the decade
mix orange blossoms: canned juice
& bathtub gin. Young, happy
white collar workers

Happy to return to the City

4

George (there was a photograph, part of his face
in slanting shadow, the mouth obscure)
was in the Navy,

was out in the Atlantic once, on a destroyer but
not far, nowhere near the U-boats
(the war — for improvement — like the Panama Canal)

At Pelham Bay Naval Station, New York, he had 'flu.
Discharged in '19, sailed for home, & to return
to his widowed father, George Albert Stanley, civil
engineer
and Grand Secretary of the Young Men's Institute (the
Catholic 'Y'), club & baths at 50 Oak St.,
living in an apartment on Turk, or Octavia...check
the city directory.

The ex-sailor was George *Anthony* Stanley,
the friar patron of lost belongings exchanged
for the Prince Consort. And that was his mother,
Molly McCormick's, gift.

Did Marie tell me he wrote poetry? Or that, enroute,
 he stayed, several days, a sojourn
(or was it just a shore visit, a few hours?)
in Havana, Cuba, & thought of not
coming back, but going on to Brazil?

because that's where I imagine him, a serious —
 a dreamy, dark, narrow-headed boy,
 w/stiff black hair. I see him at a table (marble top)
 in a sidewalk cafe, or walking the Malecon
 into a summer wind, but can't imagine how he imagined

that break, what image, song, or deeper will
called him —
 but instead returned

to the Grand Secretary, who lives at the William Taylor
 Hotel on McAllister, & takes all his meals out now,
 accompanied by his boy,

and a job on the front desk at the St. Francis.

Emmett invites him up to his mother's place, at 11 Carl.
In the front room Ma plays the upright, a
vigorous base, bright treble, plinking

above high C, rippling streams.
Then the girls gather round chorusing,
'Come, Josephine, in My Flying Machine'

& the men, in good clothes, seated
on Mamie's mahogany furniture, served
cake & claret.

5

They were good houses, built by small contractors
working out of sheds in alleys, mixing concrete &
pouring foundations, blueprints on site. On the
side streets —
Clayton, Shrader — wider types of Queen Anne Victorian —
big, gabled attics, broad sidewalks for play. On
Carl
(the arterial, later the car-line) older, narrower styles,
flat roofs. The Haight
is forty years or so old, in '33. Sunny Jim had been Mayor,
now Governor. You repainted your house every five years,
you & your brother-in-law. Borrow the ladder. With
a hoist you cd tar yr own roof.

Now down the north side of Haight of a Spring morning
comes Mrs. Murphy, a fat (not stout) French (Franco-
American?) lady, in black (like the other morning
shoppers) — black straw hat, black purse, & in the
purse the worn leather change purse; from the

Superba, crossing at Cole, in front of the stopped Haight cars, wagons & trucks, to Romey's, to get canteloupe or celery 3¢ cheaper. Her new downstairs tenant, Marie Stanley, often accompanies her, but not today, she ran up Carl to her mother's place, number 11.

The front parlor of Ma's upstairs flat (Marie walks down the hall) is silent, as is the back dining room. Jack is in Crockett. Marie sits at the kitchen table. Ma comes up the back stairs with marigolds, picked from slat-bordered beds in the backyard. Pokes the fire in the grate, moves some stewing apples away from the heat, pours coffee. She sits down across from Marie, who tells her hesitant secrets.

Sunlight sparkles in the high windows; outside, clothes on the line wave, trees in other yards. The bride & the bride's mother talk, of the new husband and the old one, the one away, the father. The things to be done for the men who come home.

(When I saw the bride's face at Carew & English not looking upward from the satin,
I saw by the line of her jaw it was my grandmother's,
previously concealed by amiable laughter)

6

& George went to the PG&E for a year —
on the iron monster, through the new Sunset Tunnel —

then the Hall, with its green-patina'd dome
 (was it gilt in '15?), Arthur Brown, Jr.'s
couchant sphinx-headquarters, w/wings for legs
 (when whizbangs flew & mustard gas crept
at Ypres), colonnaded tribute to Sunny Jim Rolph's
 honest administration, and symbol
of the new City risen from the ashes, after

years of graft, trials of the Board of Supervisors,
Boss Ruef's creatures, interrupted by the Fire,
 was to be

the major effect in Daniel Burnham's 'City Beautiful'
 plan, if hungry businessmen had not
sunk that dream (hardly vision), gone back to
 making money on the
old plat, stacking the bricks the morning after
the Fire
 (and well they did, can you imagine the City's hills
draped in landscaped avenues, like ramps on the contours?)

The Fire that George remembers (he was eight,
walked with his father to the north/south ridge of the City,
 Laurel Hill cemetery (they were living somewhere out
on Turk), walked with thousands up to the Park, there
 they turned around, looked east.
On that April day, winds blew. Sky was red. 50,000 people

stood & watched
the red sky, & then the red & black sky, & heard
all day & all night, the roar
of the flames, & the falling of buildings.

& on the weekend, smart guys neatly stacked the bricks
(but who could, Bean says somewhere, tell the lessees
from the looters?)

7

Late afternoon. Fog comes, in gusts, streamers,
then a damp wall over the Park. The custard-white
spires of St. Ignatius shine bright above. Like bishops.

Sand is still blowing in the Sunset, houses
hammered in the sand dunes, boys climbing in the unbuilt.

8 Under the Dome

A 12' oak-paneled office, upper walls off-white.
Black tabulating & card-sorting machines. The boy sits
at an unused desk, randomly fingering the keys
of a comptometer. The man turns

from the women in black smocks w/white
lace collars (who turn too), a white card

in a black wood frame, held out,
a word in black caps, glassed:

T H I N K
IBM

Then down the marble corridor
of the north wing to a second office.
Women looked up from their typing,
they worked for him, as he worked
for Mr. Brooks, & Tom Brooks worked for Mayor Rossi.

Part of the dome is seen,
chalk-green, in a window above him.

FDR was President, Pius XII Pope, Joe Louis
heavyweight champion. We were winning the war,
a sure thing, but he, though complacent
as any Democrat, disliked the routine.
He knew the City was built on sand and an
underground river, that they pumped
water out of the Opera House basement
24 hrs. a day.

What was in front of
my face when he held out
that card in its black frame

but his body, white shirt, Paisley tie
hanging, belt & buckle. (The card lay
in the top drawer of the highboy years,
under socks.)

When he threw me in the ocean
I can't even remember yelling,
only running back up the sand
to the umbrella, remains of picnic lunch.
Ocean Beach. (The sand was dirtier now,
there were things in it. Bottle caps.)

In his office he tried to show the boy
the trustworthiness of the City, souls
shaped by official duties.
He couldn't believe it.
So we went back to water.

In the clammy indoor pool
of the YMI, the boy
willed his body to sink, would not
be buoyant.

Of what
importance is it except to do
justice to the pain of his want,
his lack, holding out a gift that was not
his to give, his version of manhood, boyhood.
He was not a giver. He was a poet,
a sailor,

manqué. The boy rejected
the mirage projected
from some beyond
& bounced off Ireland.

We stood naked in the shower room
& his will backfired on his eye,
his secret passion stole the boy away
on waves of adventure, & in that moment,
his lostness
was the true gift.

9

Once, on the streetcar, the 'L', going downtown,
a sunny Saturday, maybe the fall of '47,
him 48, me 13, heads bent, an intense
conversation, in the dark, varnished seats
at the back of the car. It had begun

even before we sat down, taking transfers
from the conductor (were we going
to the ball game?) I could tell
he wanted out, that he looked towards San Diego
(we had spent a couple of weeks there, that summer)

as he had to Brazil. There were breezes & shadows,
the iron monster rolled smoothly along Market
from Castro to Sanchez. He had a grey hat on

with the snap brim turned up
all around. We wore thin McGregor jackets,
grey or beige. We were almost friends.

He told me what it meant to be
George Stanley, with only wit as a plea.
He tried to pass on to me
the name, Anthony, his mother had found
to replace the alien Albert. He wanted me

to be Tony, it fit the land, he sd, like Mission
architecture, women liked it. I cd not
take that talisman, happiness, from him.
Loyally I chose to continue his fuckup.

10

Ten years later he comes home on the 'L',
the pink *Call-Bulletin* folded under his arm,
takes off his hat, in the kitchen
lifts his glass of Roma port to her, tells her
(again) how he hates the place,
the Hall. The leisurely civil service manner
adopted by Blacks or Samoans seems to him
misconduct.

11 Islands

*All the islands swam across the Atlantic
and became parishes in New York.*

James Liddy

But James, some of them must have swum
further, by Panama portage come to a Golden Gate,
a Catholic country whose cathedral debt was paid
by transcontinental train time ('69).

Shanty Irish

south o' the slot, & lace curtain Irish
sticking flowers in vases to place on tables
even when there was nobody dead.

Tobins

of the Hibernia sucked deposits to the
heights (like, Ashbury?), & lent them out
past the panic of '73 when even Ralston
(of the Bank of California, he who had planted
eucalyptus seeds in the Panhandle) jumped in the Bay;

small factories, one or two story buildings,
iron workers, brass founders, flour millers,
stitching bags to fill, wagons to carry
cross town,
living in flats over stores, yet building,
out Mission & Howard & Folsom (where Mission makes
the big bend towards Spain), *palaces...*

on the Parkside slope. Retained damp sand
by concrete wall, water pipes
the City put in, big creosoted redwood poles,
crossarm'd, upheld the wires (as they still do).

Each bungalow, stucco'd, painted white (a few
pink, yellow, green — the colors of frosted cakes)
looked down blacktop streets w/white lines

to the Pacific. And the ocean breathed its condensation back
high as Twin Peaks over my head
all spring & early summer, morning's womb.

13

From the earliest she dwelt in Heaven, its brown,
 sloping hills,
that California bruited as an afterlife
for suffering Ireland. Gossoons,
unmarried at 40, made their way here,
stepped stiffly from the train at Oakland Pier,
bachelor uncles needing to be cooked for.

These were the duties of the daughter, to turn
the profusion of Paradise into family meals.
The gas range saved her labor but demanded
by its white enamel hauteur more devotion
(& kneeling polishing Mondrian linoleum)

than her mother's wood floors & coal hod
& lump coal in dusty bags leaning.

Then needed a green car to drive her mother
to doctors. The young men of the good time still wearing
collar & tie toed it to the Park from the rest home run by
'that woman' to whom she wrote checks.

She was on *some other work*, her clothing,
serviceable coats, hats w/perfunctory veil,
showed it: determination & later hair color.
She wore flowers like they were ornaments.

In the bath she wd wash my hair, then rub it dry,
brisk, detached. The phone wd ring during dinner.

And kept all the accounts. Angel of mercy
arriving on time, Hayward or Hayes St.

Later schoolchildren
knew her reliability, her love.

In the hospital, on Darvon, she patted her thigh
where the cancer grew & said, 'My friend.'

14

After her death, George & George & Gerald
walking up Taraval from the Riviera Restaurant

(not North Beach of the '50s, but credible Italian food,
water & a basket of bread on the table before ordering),

Dad walked away into the shade of a building
to pee. So there we were, like we didn't need
facilities. No longer separate in time, but in fact
friends, boys, three sons of a dead saint.

15 Her Dream

In the Sunset, in the '50s, her soul breathes easy.
She walks to the retail, noting w/approval
disappearance of vacant lots, sand & iceplant,
houses & stores going up, even without lawns,
flush w/the sidewalk; & from her back window sees
terraced houses, white blocks,
covering up the dunes, leaving only
a strip of beach: families moving
in, taming finally this almost empty
Spanish shore, home to seagulls, a sense
of reward for rightness.

Now there's happiness,
a living room furnished from the Emporium,
rose brocade drapes, gold sofa & chairs,
tables, & friends make up a club, a parish
salary-rich, a new church, bell
tower & baldacchino (fixed canopy
over the altar)

rises from the striped parking lot
(Archbishop Mitty charged the going rate on the loan).

The City is built now, it stays
poised here for a moment, respectable,
inviting speculation, till a generation
dies or moves down the Peninsula.

Marie has the club over
after Christmas midnight mass.

A police lieutenant, the vice-president
of Cal-Pak, big men in blue suits,
gripping highballs, stand in her living room
(& George stands among them, in white shirt & tie,
but not quite
of them, something odd about him, McGinty, the VP,
has said,
not unkindly, mind somewhere else.

Marie bustles
among the men & their wives, with hors d'oeuvres.
The blue & silver balls gleam on the artificial tree
& Crosby sings on the hi-fi, 'Adeste...'

After they leave something takes her back.
A holy card in her missal. Her thoughts go back
to the Mission, she sees again
the crowded streets, where it all went on
in flesh and blood. Streetcars clanged,

priests hurried past, to the sick,
her aunts dressed in black for shopping,
butcher on 16th St. with the sawdust
& pink butcher paper — living world —
& all seemed to know it was one —
bread meat fur flowers —
moves her heart, not Paradise
but plain reality lost.

Illusion, I want to tell her.

Like the Milky Way, the galaxy seen
through its longest dimension, packed w/stars.

I want to tell her the stars walk alone.

Time packs truths closer, events flock on
hills of knowledge
(& she nods & smiles, dreaming alone)

Her truth now wakes in my mind
& where there was bleakness or a gash in meaning

(George & George & Gerald sat in the coffee shop
on Polk St., a block down from the hospital,
commenting lamely on the service, the waitress, even
half-heartedly joking, for each other, then in silence
turned back to her again, her worn, sweet face — she
loved — it doesn't matter who

We can part, Marie & I,
if we can each remember
a mother whose eyes showed care,
the home look

Sometimes, a heart waits
unable to answer, or do more than
look from the window, fondly, unseen

Marie, who bore me.

•

Terrace 1989

'The world is the case'

This point in putting together
a picture puzzle,
when you've almost got the border
complete, & pieces of faces
& roads are becoming recognizable,
masses of foliage, lanterns,

that your heart begins to sicken
of it (just the point when
each gap closed
yields maximum information)
is what it's like, here
or elsewhere.

POEM

I'll listen to the news the day I die,
to hear who was elected, & if
the New Jersey Devils won the sixth game
of the Stanley Cup —
not because I care about these things
(truly I care less & less),
but the game is worth the candle,
lit by the candle.

At Christmas, when lovers' eyes meet over the candles,
their thought is not 'you,' it's pure meaning,
infinite horizon. I'd rather be a spectator.
I'd rather be a spectator, than play games.
I'd like my mind to be dumb as a lover's.

Late at night the middle-aged play Monopoly.
One spills a drink. Slurred voices,
a peal of laughter. Like the old
balls & wreaths on the tree, that dully gleam
from the darkened living room, their thoughts
come out again, sure of welcome.

MOZART & COLD CUTS

(Flight 513, Vancouver-San Francisco, 1 June 1990)

Do you think
each day
is one less?

Does the sunlight
include a ray
of its absence?

Flying
to once 'home'
(Mozart & cold cuts)

Curved cabin,
blue ocean,
surf spatter,
brown hills —
reality
never answers.

San Francisco's
there —
cool, timeless,
like it was
before nostalgia.

Faint memory
of flushed boy-face
in 1950.
Running for judge.

Mary, born
1906, says,
'When I die'.
Bowl of pink pansies.

Orators:
on streetcorner, 'George
Herbert Bush...';
on traffic island,
'Homosexuals...';
on steps of Sproul Hall.
'If I had
30,000...'

Hard, the men
with blankets
& shopping carts.

In Jess's painting,
Time Becomes Part of the Picture
in the form of a fly.

Blake's fly
is a man
believing.

Here, in this blue
air, do you fear?

Here,
in this blue air,
do you fear?

Under the bay,
the train
speeding in the tube
rests on mud.

Would you give
the black man
(& the woman following
pushing the cart)
3 dollars & 20 cents
for bacon & eggs?

Why cry
for Matthew Broderick
in *Glory*
and not for them?

RAFT

On the raft, floating down
whatever flows, Huck & Jim
close at the center, one facing
upstream, trying not to remember,
feels the pressure
of the other's shoulders, facing down

remembering
boardinghouses, communes, bars,
working in offices & mills,
wedding & funerals & wakes

sitting smoking behind barn
(or was that a story?)
sitting in the bleachers at ball games,
riding in cars, once over a bumpy field
in Gordon's Buick

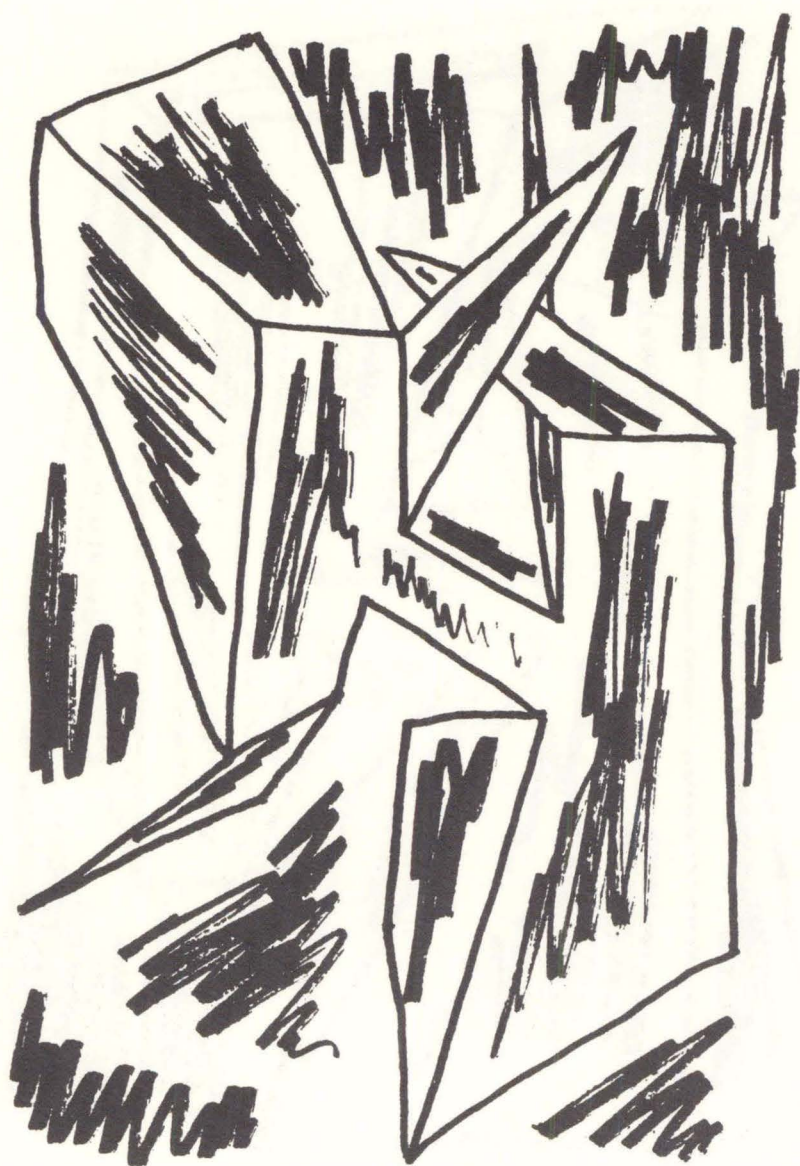
sex...
a lobster dinner...

I think I knew those places.
They were the world, each one,
mountains beyond mountains, kingdoms,
wisdom & shining gold, territory,
& there was a mother, a lover, a future.

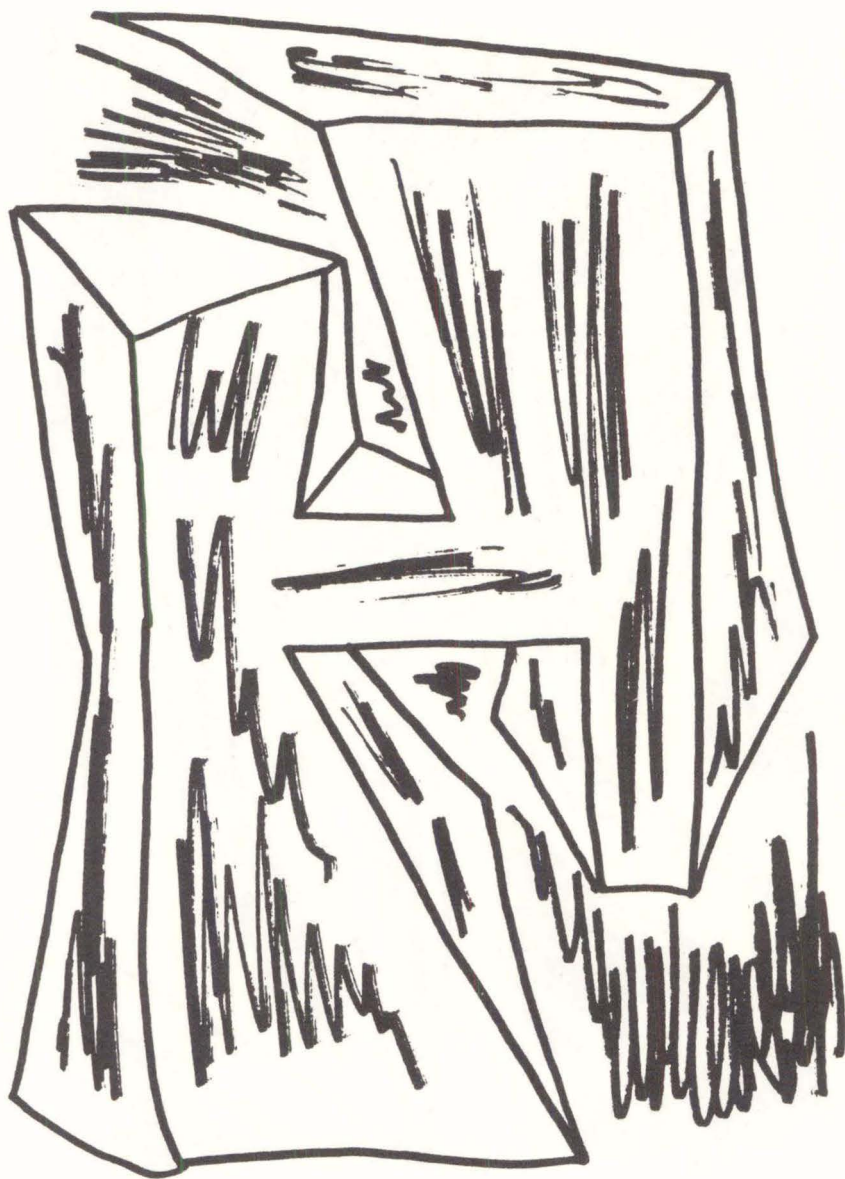
Now this raft goes faster & faster
& I hold in my mind a map
that is the map of the world

& at my back my other
watches the islands come swooping
past, & feels my back
warm against his, his precious one.

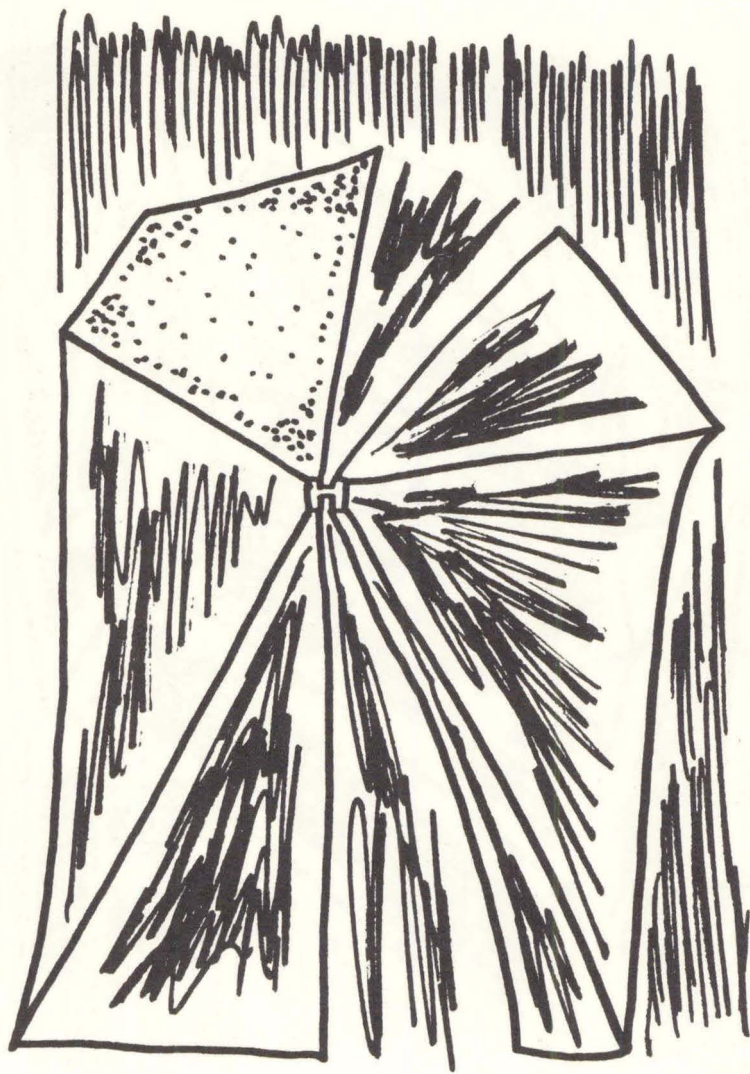
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44 CONCRETE POEMS



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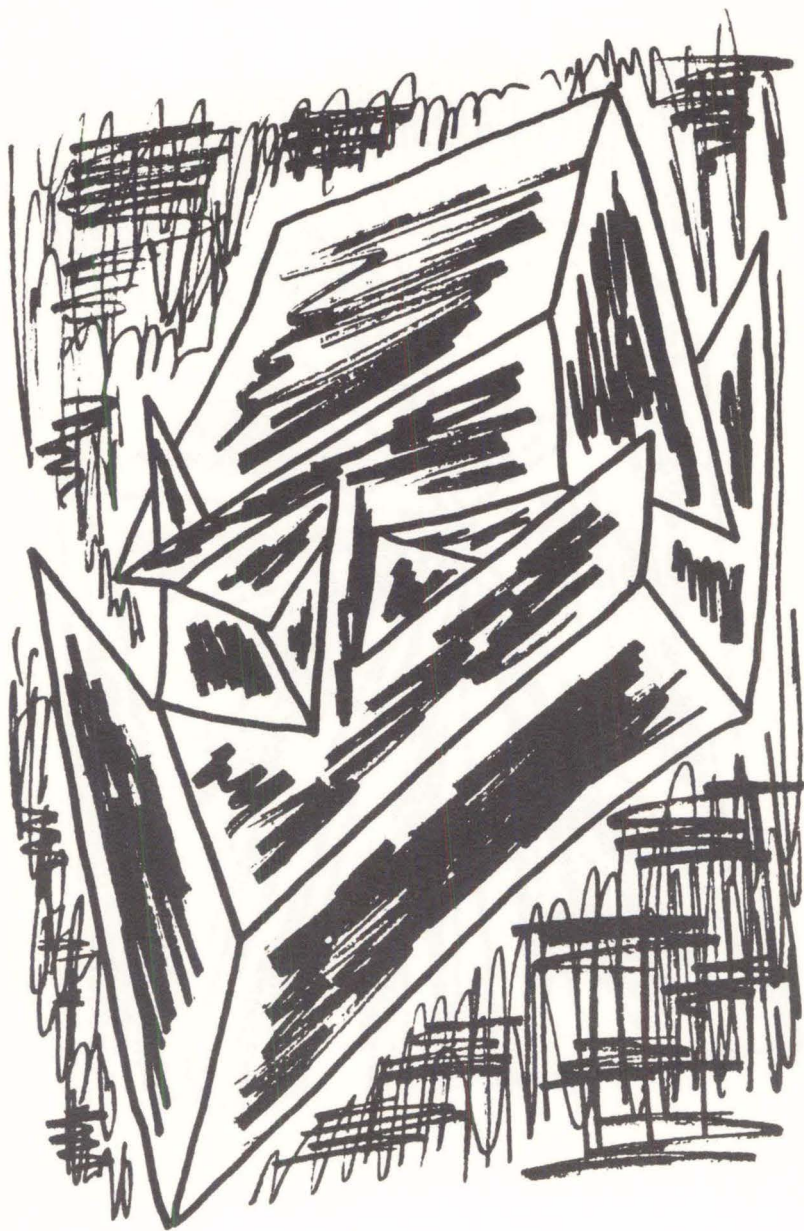


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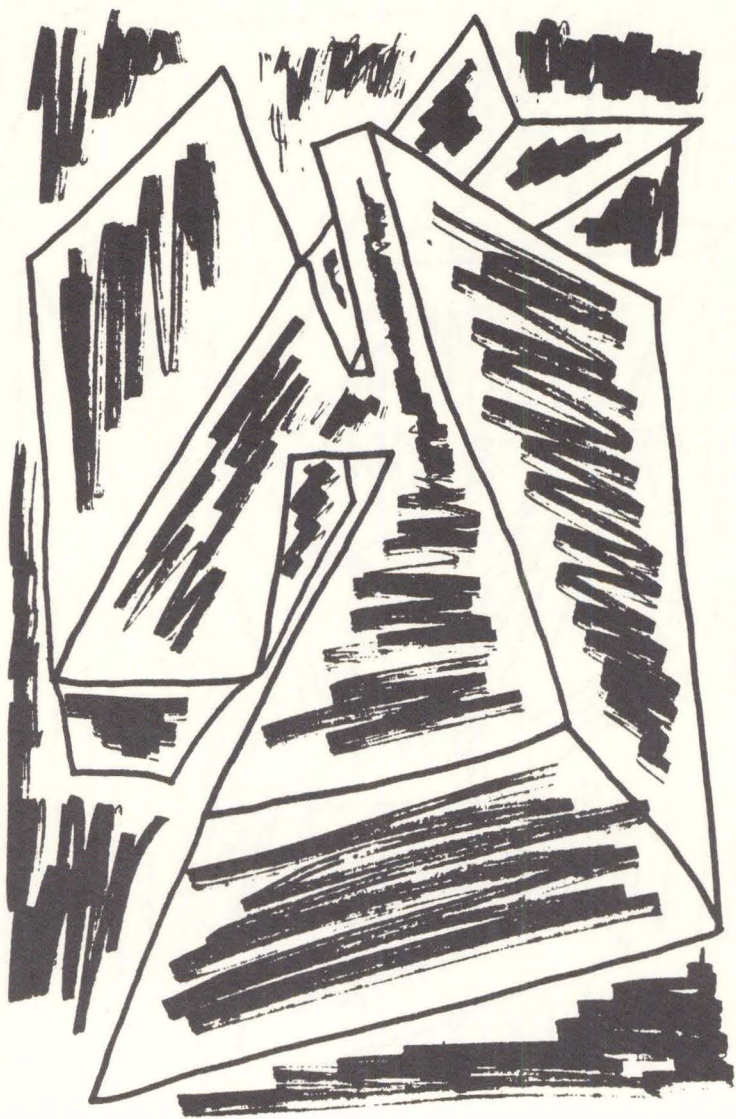


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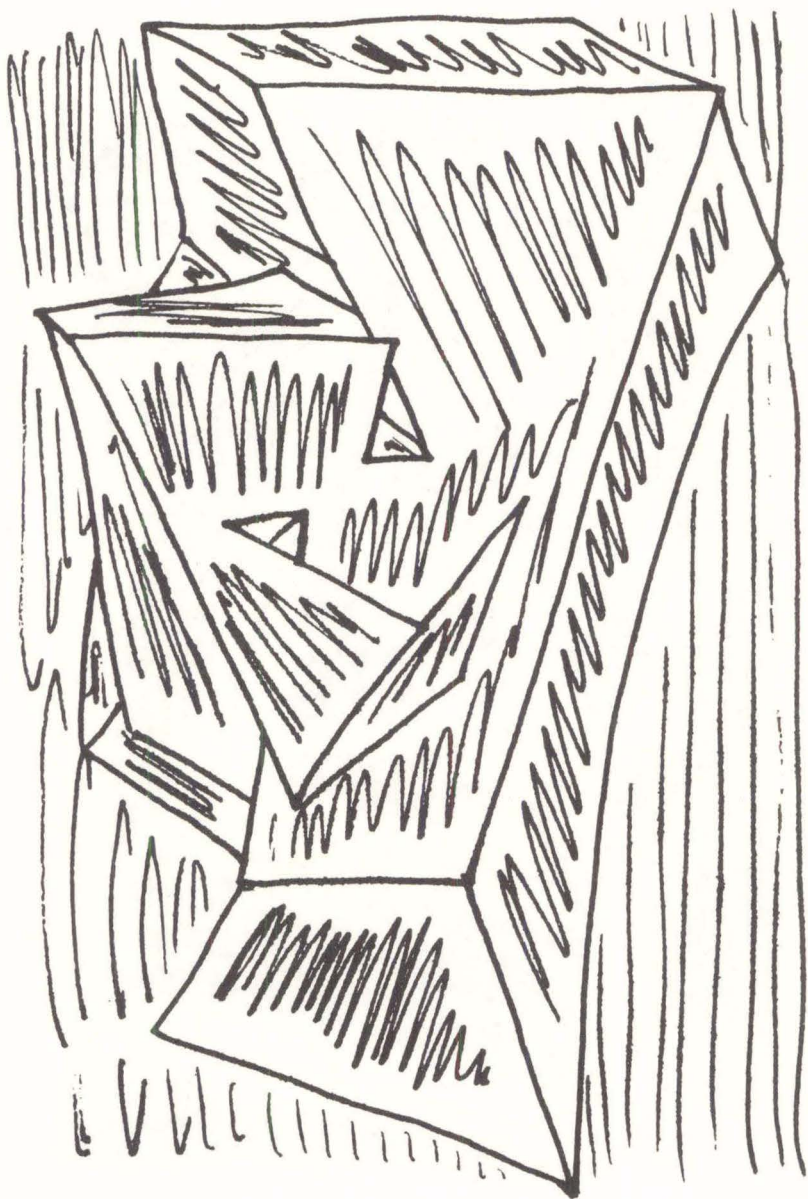
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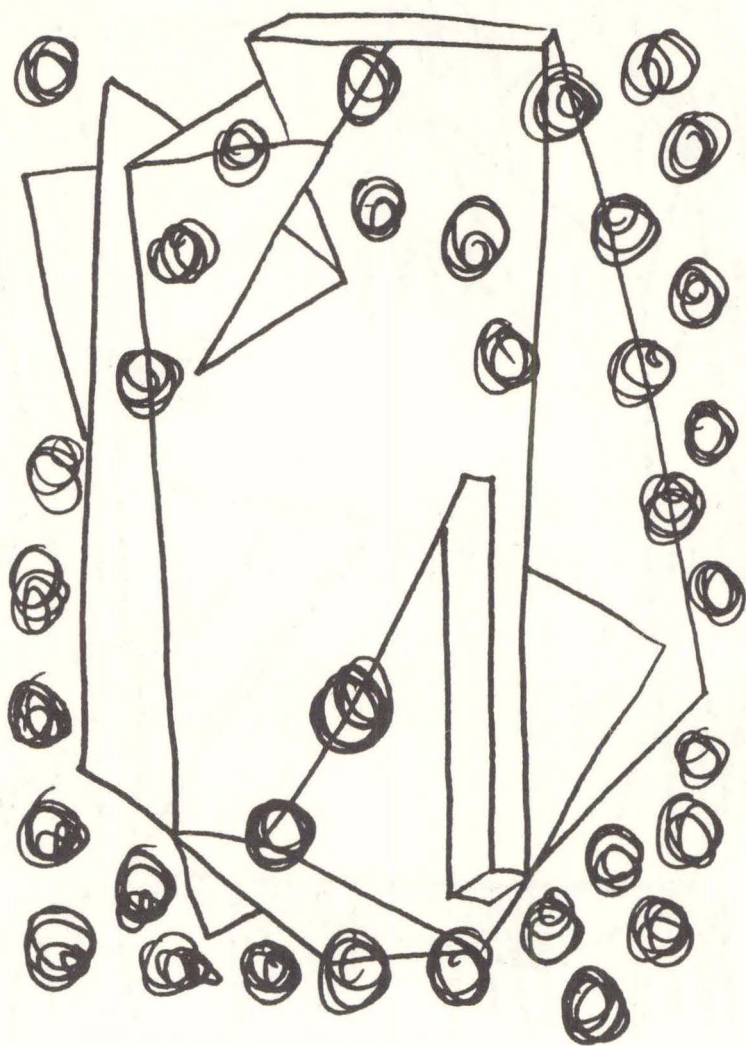


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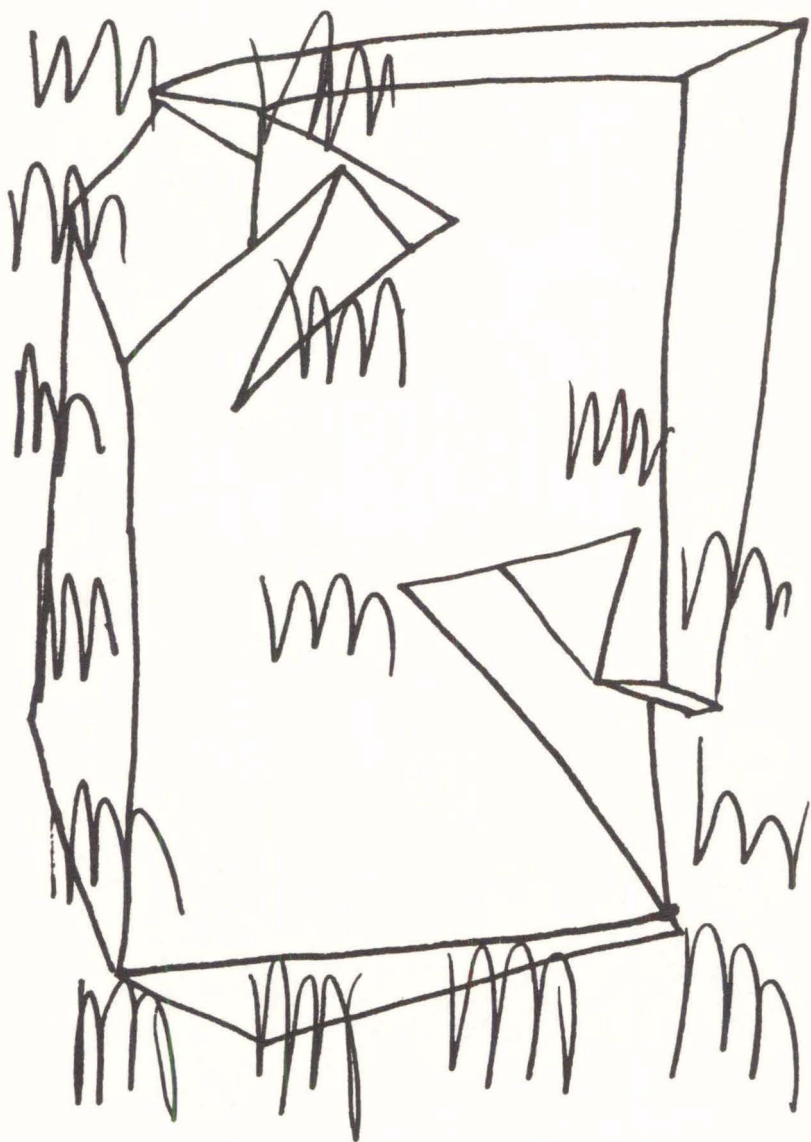


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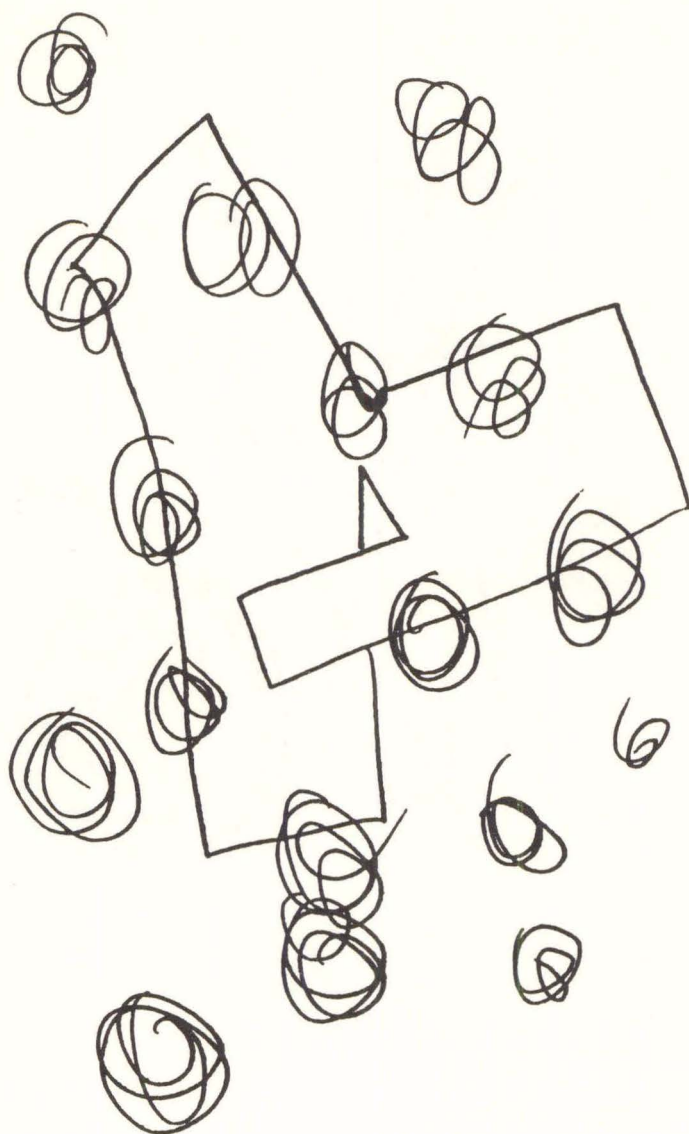
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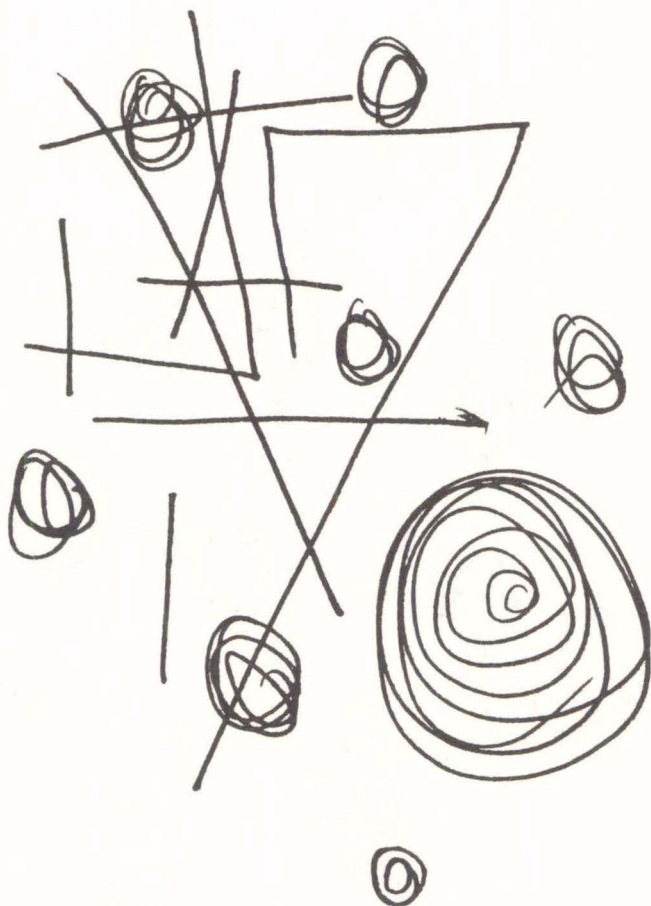
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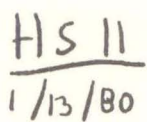
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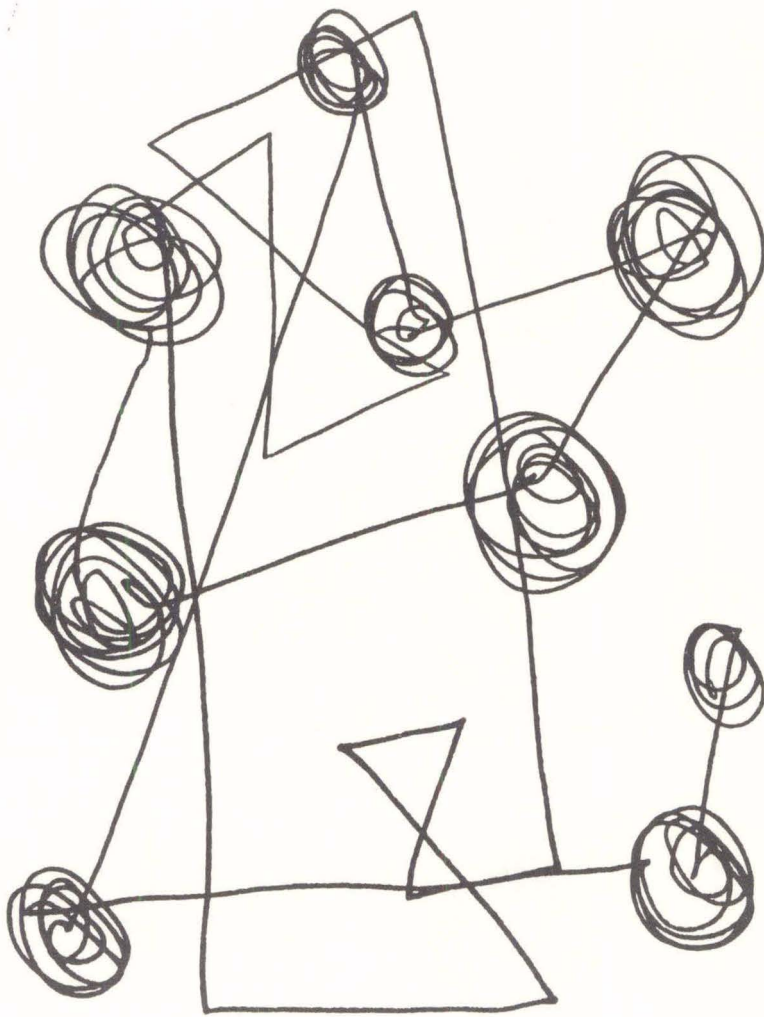
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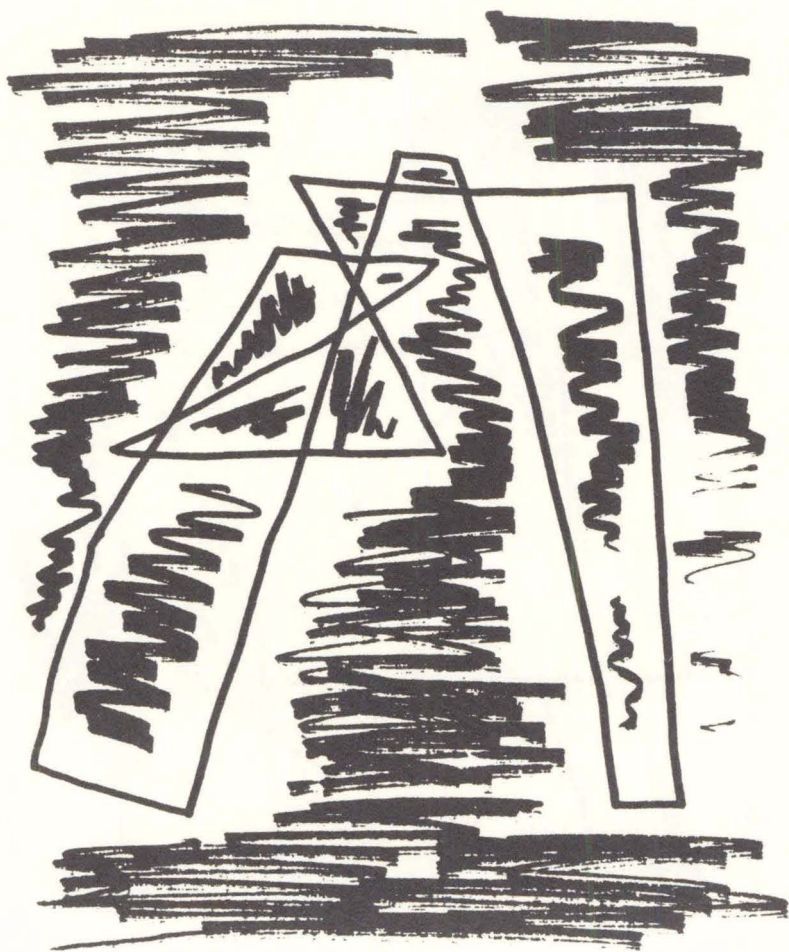
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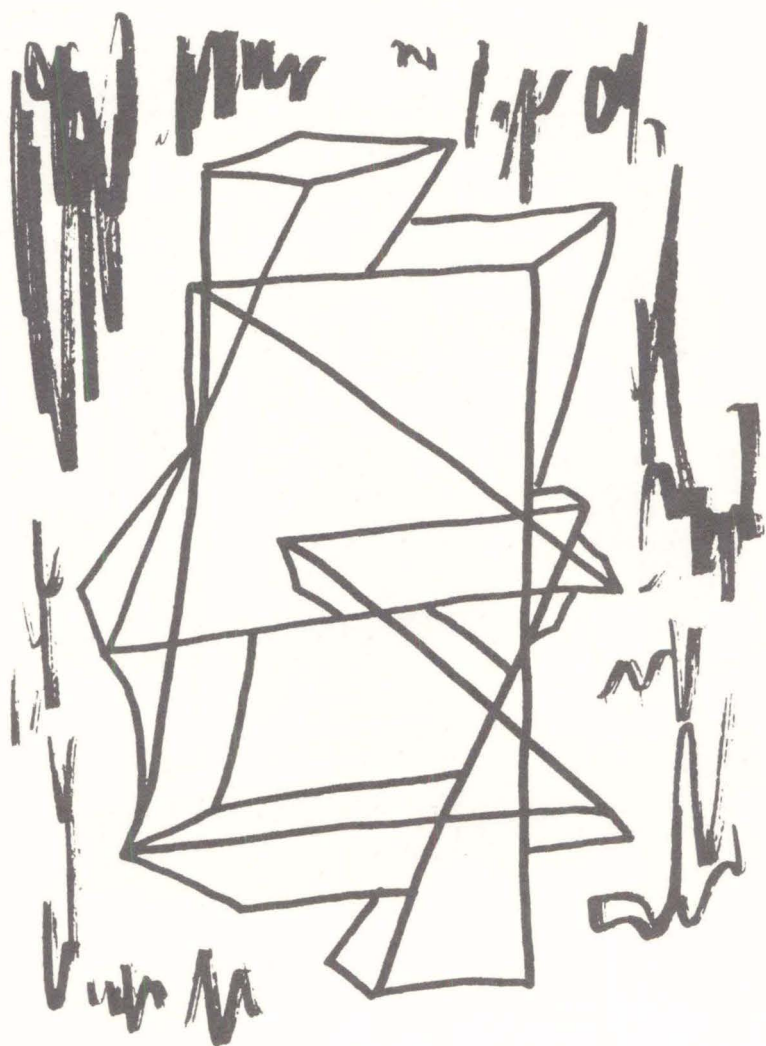


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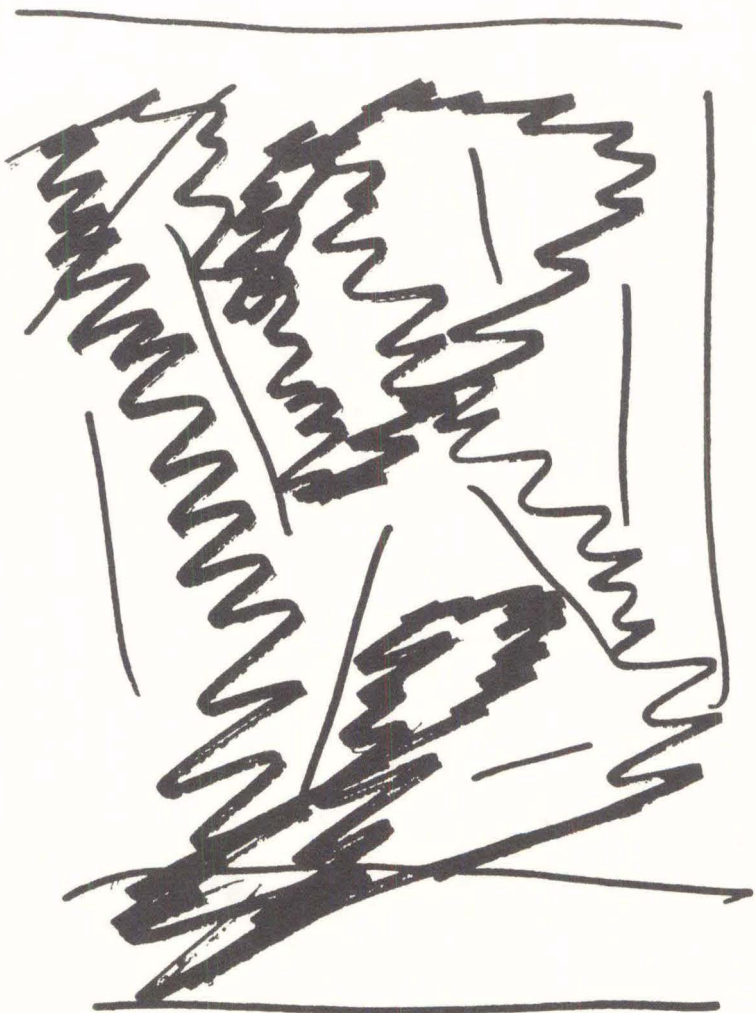
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HS 15

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HS 16

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i wrote about the dog

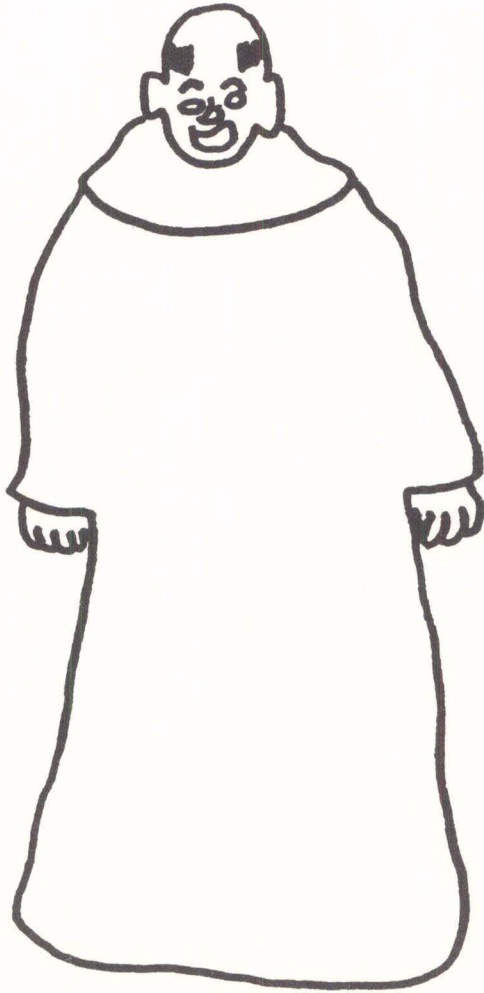
i tried to arriving the absolute point where sky & sea meet

i wrote about the sea





FOR SAUSSERNE

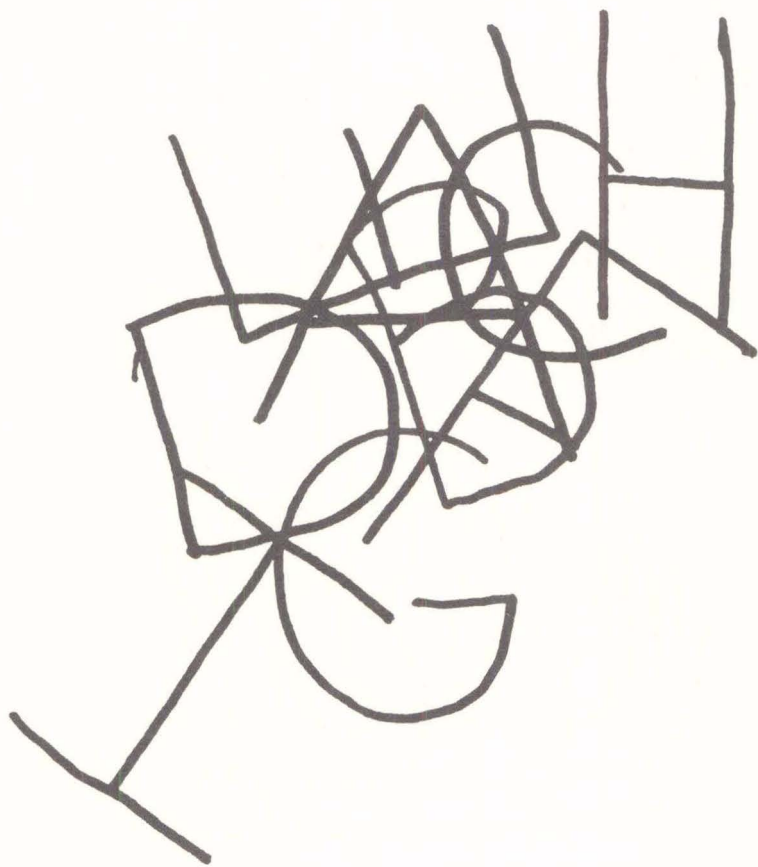


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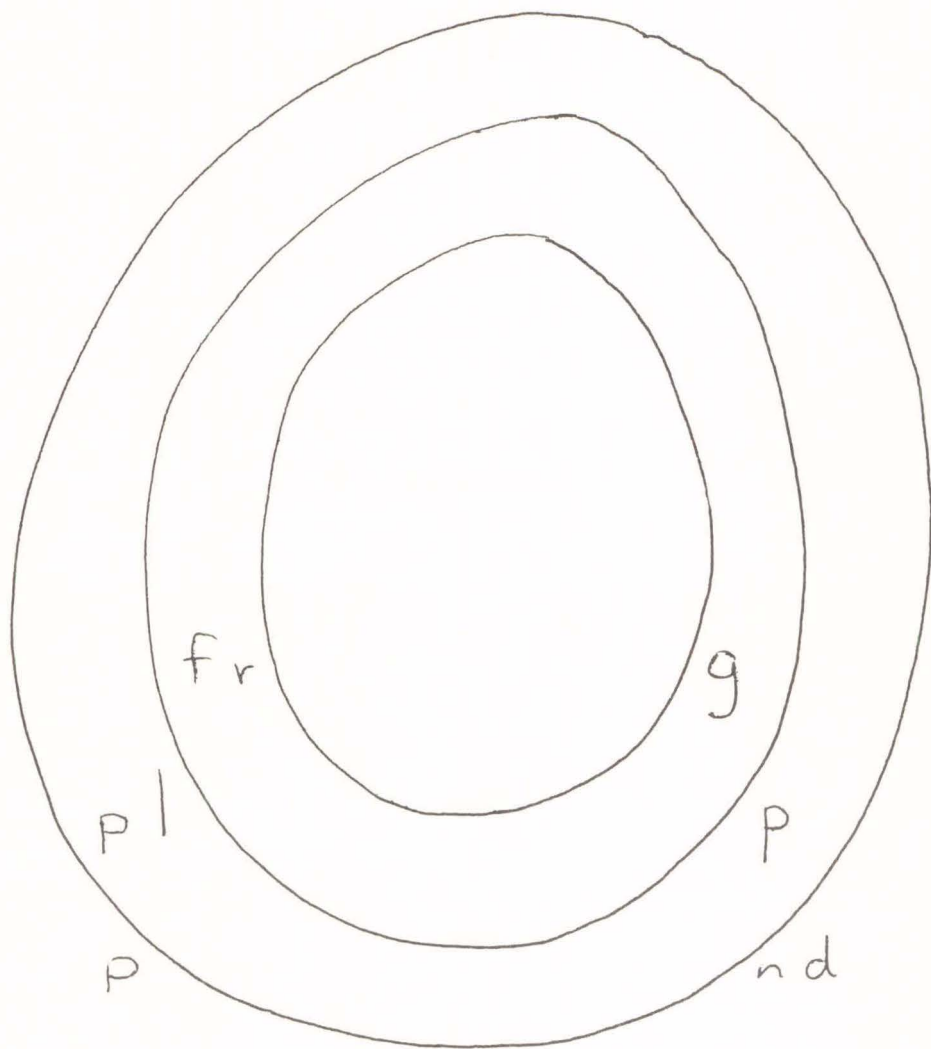
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CONCENTRIC TRANSLATION

May 12/87

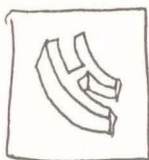
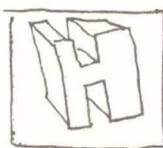
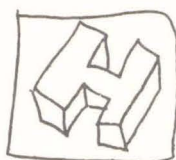
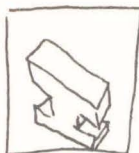
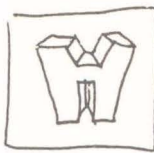
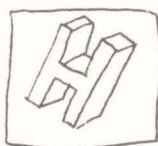
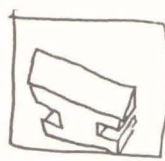
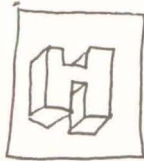
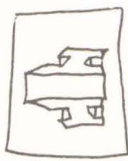
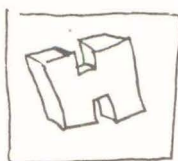
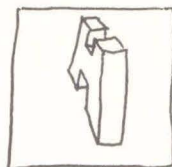
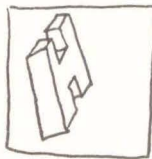
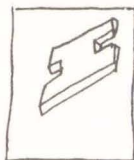
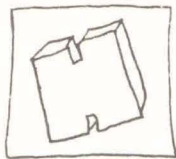
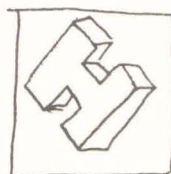
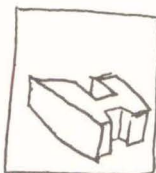
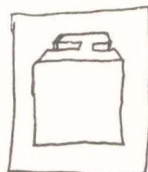
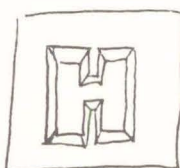
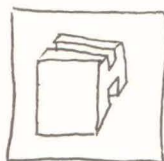
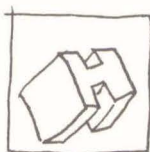
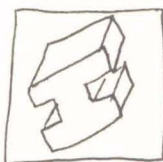
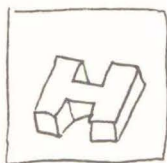
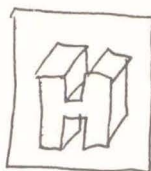
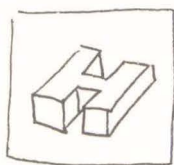


Victoria / May 31/88

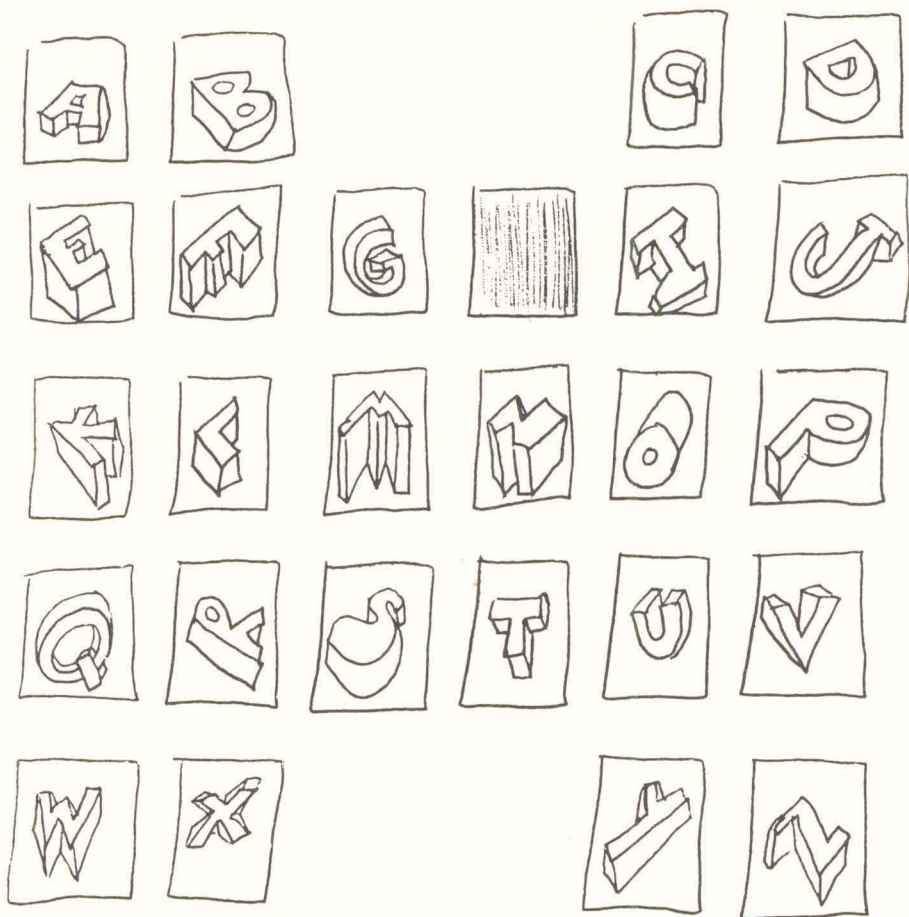
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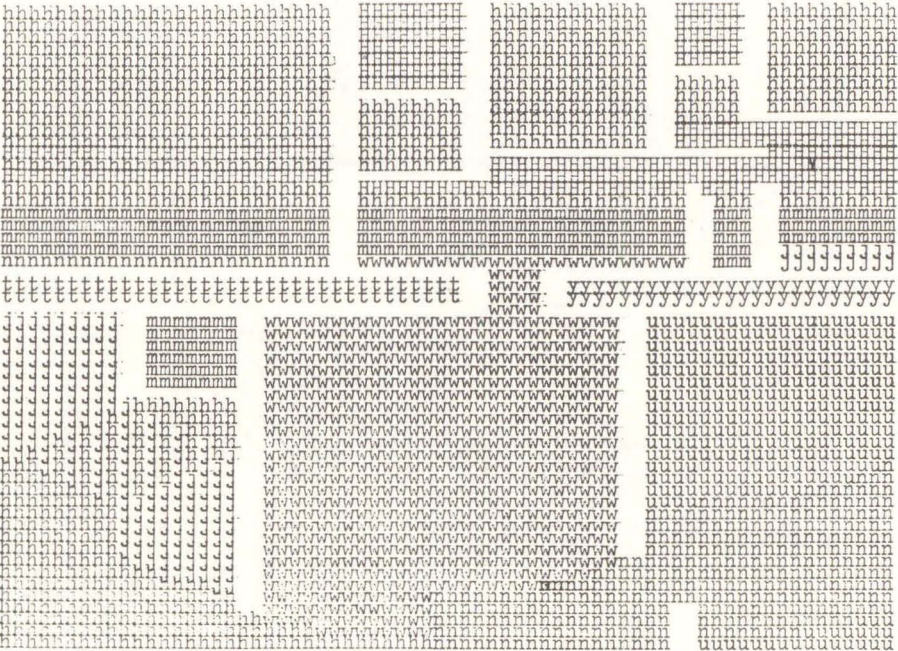


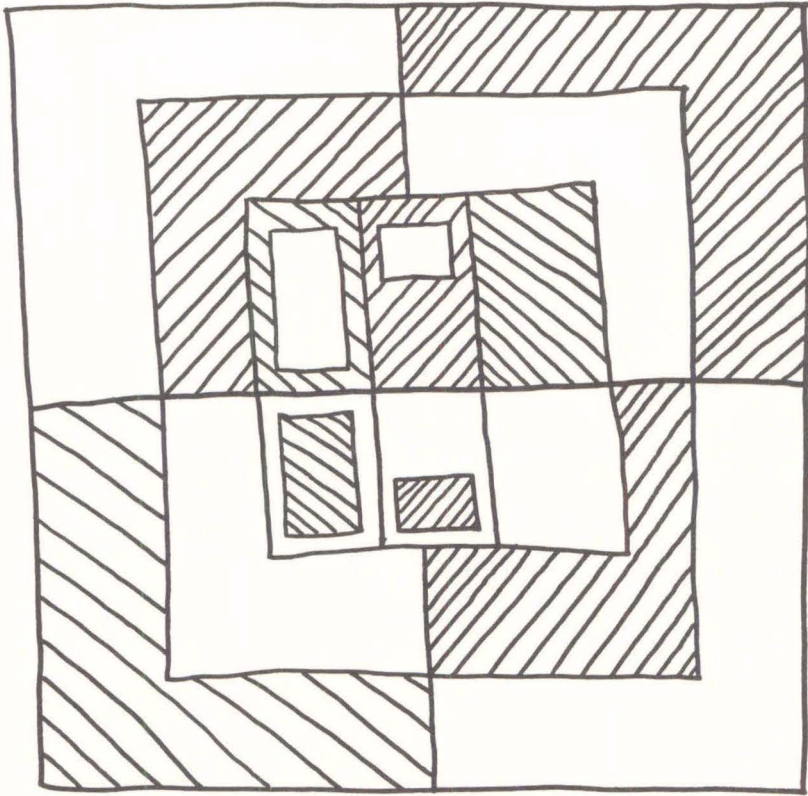
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ROLL, TURN SPIN after Len Chandler

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PARTICULAR MOMENT IN THE MIND
March 72





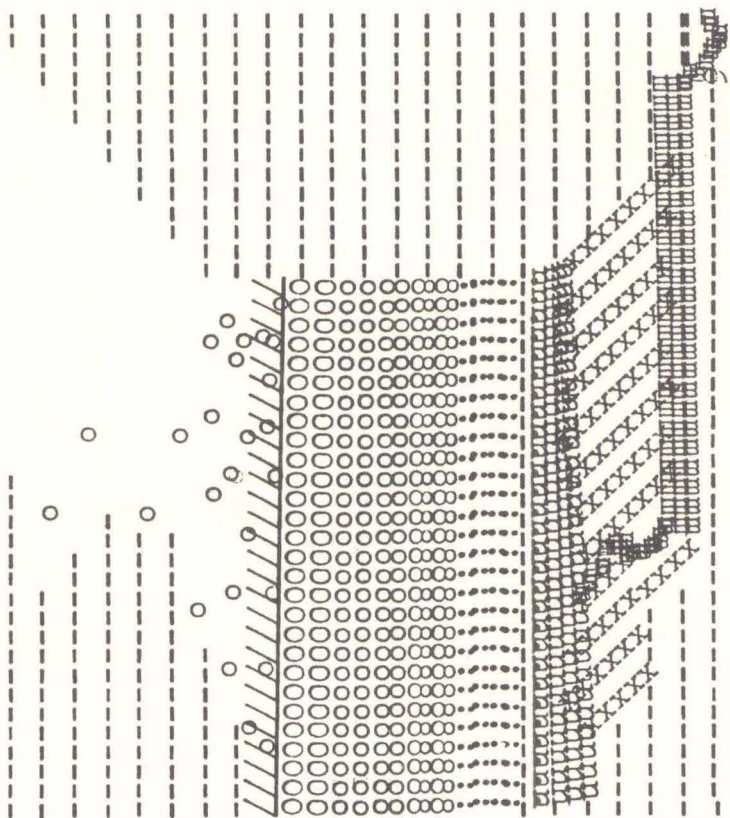
unkeyed semiotic

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LAST WILL & TESTAMENT OF BILLY THE KID

A large, stylized letter 'G' is formed by a dense arrangement of the lowercase letters 'g' and 'u' in a cursive script. The letters are arranged in a way that they overlap and interlock to create the overall shape of the letter 'G'. The 'g's are more prominent at the top and left, while the 'u's are more numerous in the middle and right sections. The overall effect is a textured, calligraphic representation of the letter.

UNTITLED



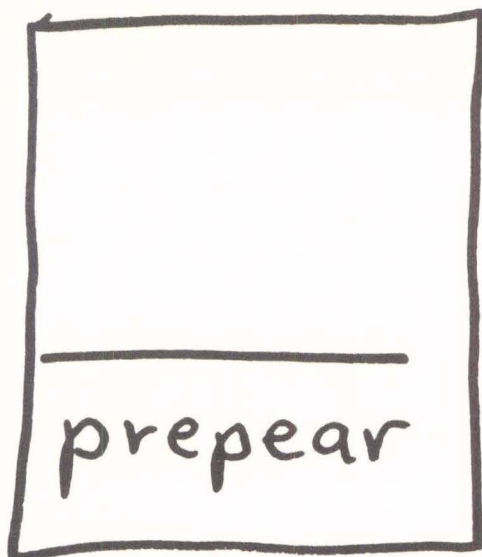
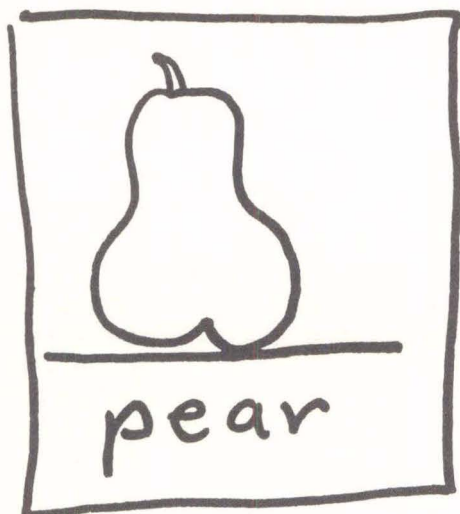
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LETTER TO DOM SYLVESTER HOUEDARD

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TRACKING SOME ADMITTEDLY SLIGHT SHIFTS
December 17 1980

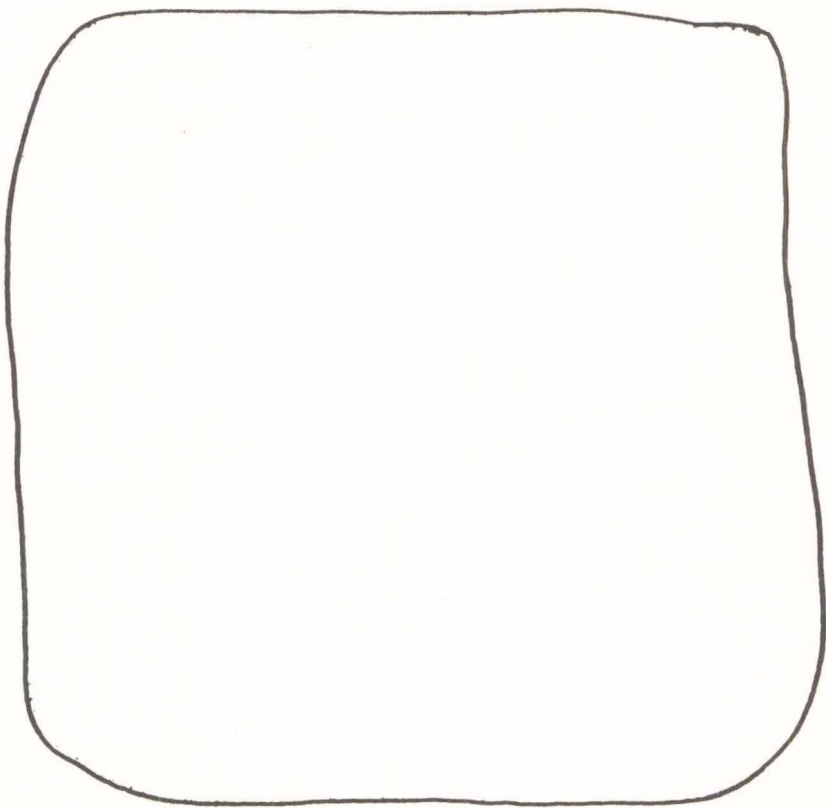


SELF-PORTRAIT / 79

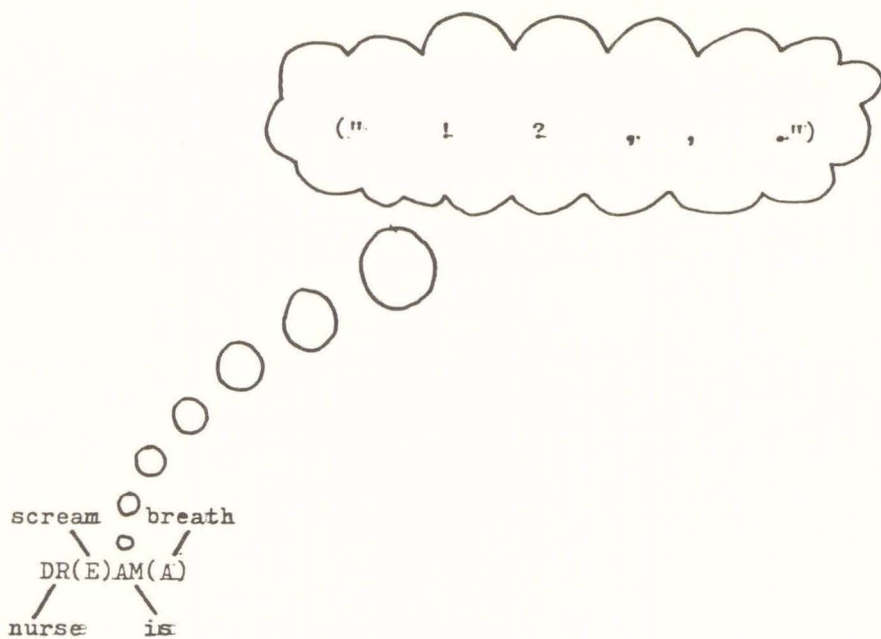


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REAR-VIEW OF COMIC BOOK FRAME
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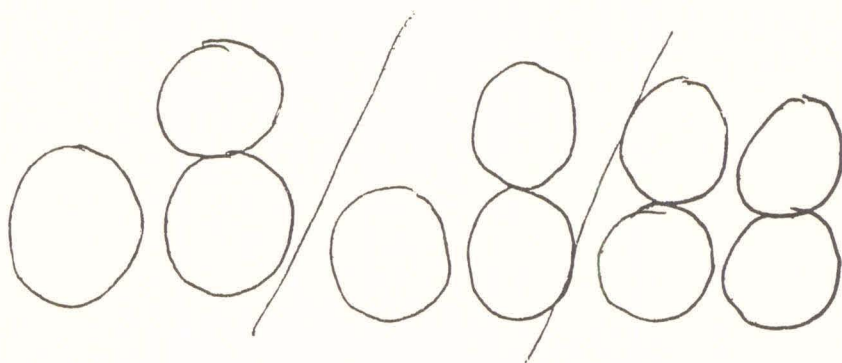
SPEECH 1
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ABSOLUTE STATEMENT FOR MY MOTHER 2:
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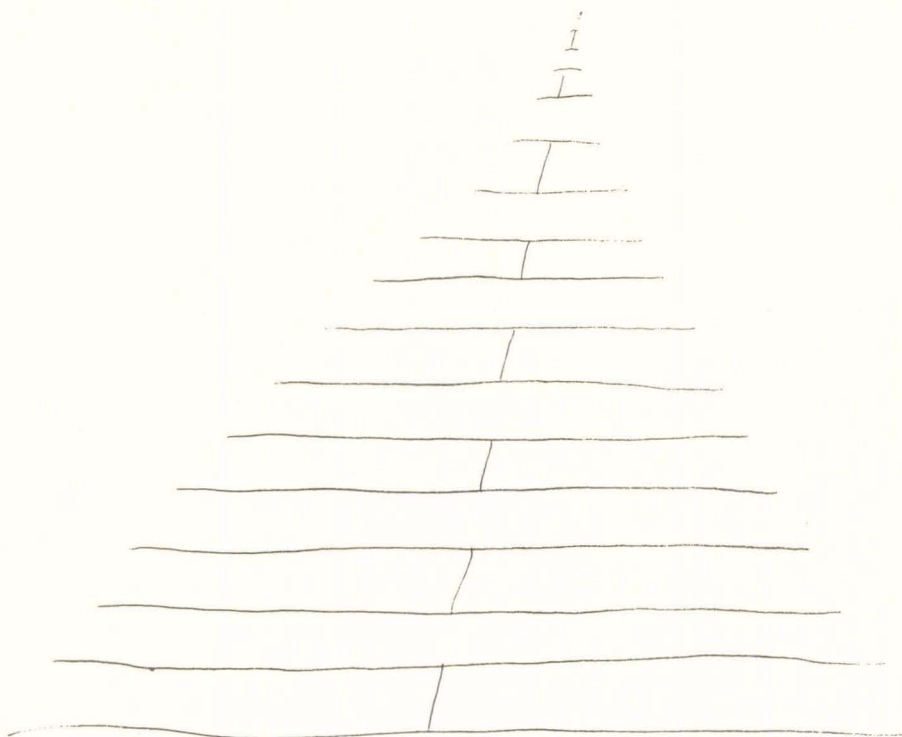
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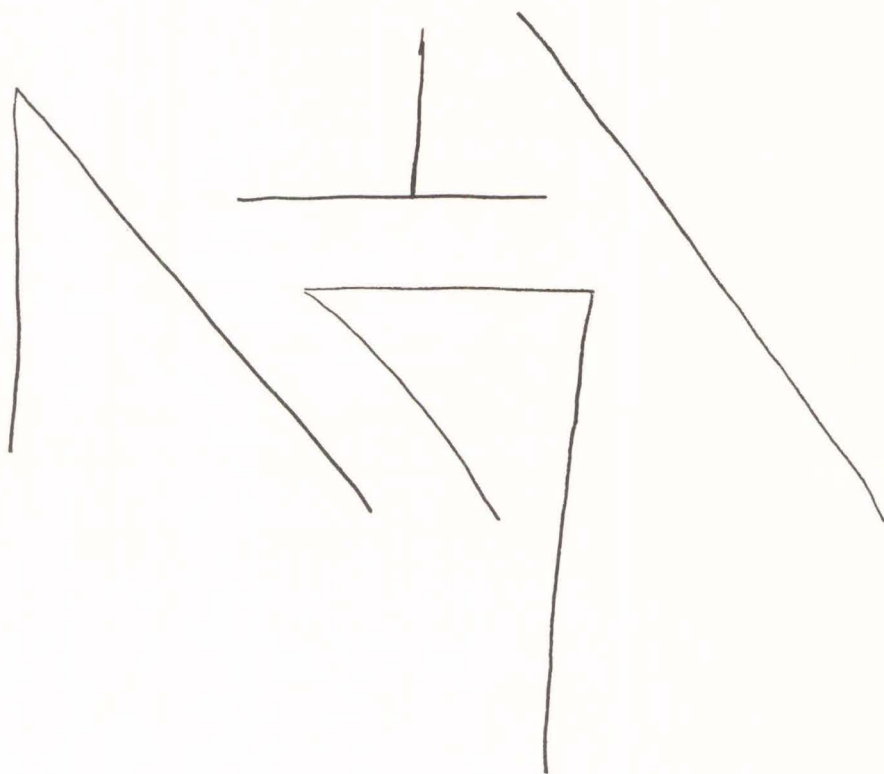
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EIGHT LINES

Feb 18/87 — 1:30 a.m.



bpNichol : IN VISUAL RANGE

bpNichol (1944-1988) is probably best known to poetry readers for his epic transmutational poem *The Martyrology*. Yet however diverse and engaging is *The Martyrology*, no less so is the large body of visual language work that Nichol pioneered throughout his career.

Perhaps more than any other Canadian writer (or American writer, for that matter), Nichol explored a range of expression and creativity in the visual language media that was unsurpassed. This range included concrete poetry, visual word puns, semiotic and semaphoric puzzles, visual alphabet systems, panellogic narratives, watercolour wordscapes, abstract letter drawings, alphabet studies, and more.

As evidenced in his notebooks, Nichol spent as much time exploring the visual nature of the alphabet and language as he did in writing works like *The Martyrology*, *Still* or *Journal*. Each creative work informed the other, and were often in progress at the same time. In his notebook *The House of the Alphabet*, for instance, Nichol pursues his visual H Studies 1-16, while at the same time writing a narrative entitled *The Realism Publishing Co. Inc.*, making notes for a segment of T.R.G. (Toronto Research Group) theory, and writing a lengthy footnote to Book V of *The Martyrology*.

The poems in this issue of *The Capilano Review* should give the reader a broad spectrum of Nichol's visual work spanning nearly a 30-year period, from the mid-1960s to the late 1980s. Although most of the work here is previously unpublished, we've included a few works not readily available to a reader due to their having been published in obscure, hard-to-find periodicals or chapbooks.

I want to thank jwcurry who was invaluable in the selection of the works presented here, and wish to thank Ellie Nichol for allowing both of us the opportunity to discover works we had not encountered before.

Richard Truhlar
November 1990

Stan Persky / "I DON'T WRITE NON-ANYTHING": ON SO-CALLED CREATIVE NON-FICTION

Thinking about the difficulty of defining writing genres, Edmonton-based author Myrna Kostash recalls Dorothy Parker's snarling quip: "I don't write non-anything." So much, then, for the cumbersome notion of "non-fiction." A moment's thought ought to be sufficient to understand that defining a body of writing that might stretch from Plato to, say, Terry Glavin's *A Death Feast in Dimlahamid* (New Star 1990), in contradistinction to novels and short stories ("fiction"), or even "literature," seems like a bizarre and sloppy taxonomy.

As for the administrative use of the term "creative" with respect to writing departments or courses at high schools, colleges and universities, most real writers I've known have always regarded such usage with muffled guffaws. Nor is the word saved by appending it to something other than "non-fiction" (my friend Susan Crean has occasionally field-tested "creative documentary," with mixed results). And pull-eaze, spare us the prefixing of "new" to any genre term (as in "New Journalism," "New Narrative," etc.) except as the most temporary patch on a flat tire until we can get to the nearest service station.

So, call it what you will (Kostash favours "literary journalism;" I find myself digressively remembering that some editor dubbed some of Albert Camus' writings about living in Algeria "lyrical essays," a phrase that rather caught my fancy). I'll content myself with a behavioural description: here are some writings by Myrna Kostash, Ven Begamudré, Merrily Weisbord, and Robin Blaser that meet the (only relevant) criterion of being sufficiently interesting as writing about the world, in a way that, say, a prime ministerial press release (a sterling example of "creative non-fiction") doesn't.

Myrna Kostash has written about ethnic life (*All of Baba's Children*, Hurtig 1977), left-wing politics (*Long Way From Home: The Story of the Sixties Generation in Canada*, Lorimer 1980), and teenage females (*No Kidding: Inside the World of Teenage Girls*, M & S 1987). As Max Bell Professor of Journalism at the University of Regina, she's given

much thought and patience to describing this kind of writing, and in particular, in distinguishing it from "straight" journalism. The succinct version (in a January 1990 letter to the Writers' Union of Canada newsletter) goes like this: "... moving in from the margins of 'pure journalism' on the one side and 'pure literature' on the other to introduce at the centre of creative writing the idea that non-fiction/journalism is a literary genre." Inspired, in part, by the work of Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, she's currently working on a manuscript about Eastern and Central Europe, from which this selection is taken.

Ven Begamudré, who lives in Regina, was born in South India, and is the author of a novella, *Sacrifices* (Porcupine's Quill 1986), and a short story collection, *A Planet of Eccentrics* (Oolichan 1990). This selection is from a manuscript with the working title *Load Shedding* ("an Indian term for conserving electricity through scheduled blackouts," he explains). In Begamudré's hands, load shedding "becomes a metaphor for surviving cross-cultural and intergenerational conflicts, and it suggests the idiom 'shedding personal baggage'."

On her most recent visit to the West Coast in late 1990, Montreal-based writer Merrily Weisbord was working as a consultant to an aboriginal woman filmmaker, and the year before, she scripted a documentary film, *Songololo*, about South African cultural developments. Both of those chores seem exemplary of one of the reasons that Kostash cites (in a recent lecture) for the appearance of the kind of writing presented here: "the pressure from the previously-excluded or the dissidents of our culture to be heard (ethnic minorities, women, nationalists, gays, hippies): their first task is to document *who* they are, *where* they come from, and *how* it feels." Weisbord, author of *The Strangest Dream: Canadian Communists, the Spy Trials, and the Cold War* (Lester & Orpen Dennys 1983), is currently working on the subject of women and sexuality, which is reflected in the selection that appears here.

Vancouver poet Robin Blaser, professor emeritus at Simon Fraser University, is included here, with mischief aforethought, to show that the most unpopular of the popular arts, poetry, might also fruitfully be reconsidered in terms of genre. Blaser's most recent book is *Pell Mell* (Coach House 1988); the selections here are from his lifework-in-progress, *The Holy Forest*.

Robin Blaser / EVEN ON SUNDAY

I don't know anything about God but what the human record tells me — in whatever languages I can muster — or by turning to translators — or the centuries — of that blasphemy which defines god's nature by our own hatred and prayers for vengeance and dominance — that *he* (lower case and questionable pronoun) would destroy by a hideous disease one lover of another — or by war, a nation for what uprightness and economic hide-and-seek — and *he* (lower case and questionable pronoun) is on the side of the always-ignorance of politics in which we trust — the *polis* is at the “bottom of the sea,” as Hannah Arendt noticed — and *he* (lower case and interrogated pronoun) walks among the manipulated incompetences of public thought

where I had hoped to find myself ordinary among others in the streets — a “murmuring voice of societies”

and so one thinks them over — blasphemies all, against multiplicity, which is all anyone knows about god — and one can only hate them so much without becoming *halt and lame in their kingdom of single mindedness* — their having taken a book to have been once and forever, the language behind language that no one has ever spoken — god's what-knot and *mystical rags* we call flags

as a friend said, “I'm going to become fundamentalist and call everybody asshole”

and what would the gods be if I asked them — our nakedness didn't quite fit — out, as it is, of nature — yet, there is a sentiment at the *intersection between life and thought* — streaks of beyondness in that careless relation

October came in August and petunias straggled, sprawling white faces one at a time, lobelia browned and continued blue — the neighbors cut down the sexual cottonwood which kept the whole block from repainting door-steps for over a month — by the

fluffs of its happiness —

so we are in the midst of a *metaphysical washout* — take for example, Verlaine and Rimbaud — as Hans Mayer says: *Being shut out of the social order, they sought to heighten their condition by, say, publically embracing in Brussels and thus providing the formula for a new ‘condition humaine’ that called out to be created* — both failed — both remained in *outsiderdom* — one continued to rhyme, the other gave up the whole damned creation — behind this, an Enlightenment, which I’ll return to

and Sylvie asked,

“But what became of the Man?”

“Well, the Lion springed at him. But it came so slow, it were three weeks in the air —”

“Did the Man wait for it all that time?” I asked.

“Course he didn’t!” Bruno replied, gliding head-first down the stem of a fox-glove, for the story was evidently close to its end.

“He sold his house, and he packed up his things, while the Lion were coming. And he went and lived in another town. So the Lion ate the wrong man.”

*This was evidently the Moral...*said Lewis Carroll

the moral is that something does devour the *existential given* — Rimbaud, Mayer writes, *does not intertwine with visions of Sodom in order to provoke heaven’s fire; it is simply the sole possibility of his own self-acceptance*

being shut out of the social order — Rimbaud writes *de posséder la vérité dans une âme et un corps*, which Mayer interprets to say *being alive in the full sense of body and soul* — the truth is being alive, until you break on it

ah, Laius, when you ran off with the youth Chryssipus, the Sphinx flew to a whistling stop in Thebes — and fire fell on Sodomites, on each one of them, and, I’ll be damned, almost everybody — tell me a tale to explain sublime biology — then, tell me another to explain sublime human nature — and murder, unmythologized, fell on 20th-century outsiders — pollution of what in the momentary hangup of the vast biology of things, desiring? — a covenant with whom?

androsphinx, recumbent lion with the head of a man, answer me — that is to say, each one of us

the sublime, dear everybody and everyday, is not so simply human — overwhelms — *uncanny* is Hannah Arendt's word for the face of it — *dangerous* — *severe*, as a blow — *mysterious* — on which the *existential given* floats — the passions of

and Hans Mayer notes the tying and untying that confines things: *At the height of the Victorian era, the Bible is once again, as in Cromwell's time,...the spiritual and social foundation of everyday life* — O, the once-again in which we trust — *Declaration is made in the Bible of what is proper for woman and what is not. The Bible depicts that which God punished in Sodom. St. Paul only confirmed the curse* — one's mind may have a certain affinity with Christopher Marlowe's, if it is true, as his roommate Thomas Kyd tells us, that he thought the apostle Paul a swindler — who taught a curdled godhead and a curdling view of the *existential given* — and the black milk of it is blasphemy, so to revile existence

in the midst of this, an Enlightenment which first and foremost posited an *equality of men and women, including homosexuals* — religion and sexuality go hand in hand in the apple-light

it was not to be merely law, like free speech, but a *mental practice* — what developed, in the guise of a Darwinian terror advancing in evolutionary form, was the lion body with a man's head, walking in the garden, so that *the underlying principles of liberty and equality, not even taking fraternity into account, inordinately encouraged combatting all forms of outsiderdom in favor of what Ihab Hassan calls 'quantities of normed phenomena'* — normed existence excludes the *existential given*, not being alive in the full sense of body and soul — and *extends, not merely perverts* that which calls itself normality into political form but Mayer asks, *what is it then if the precipitating step outside, into the margins, is a condition of birth, a result of one's sex, parentage, physical or spiritual makeup?* — Then *one's existence itself becomes a breaking of boundaries*

we can thereby return to ourselves a *measure of freedom*, and take form — the work of a lifetime — in this breaking of boundaries —

against, as Mayer says, a *global disposition of thought toward annihilation, which thinks to admit only majorities in the future and is determined to equate minorities with 'worthless life'* — *Worthless are the Jews, there the blacks [and*

aboriginals], somewhere else (and everywhere) the homosexuals, women of the type of Judith and Delilah, not least the intellectuals keen on individuation....

"They should all be gassed": the expression has crept into everyday language

Woman is not equal to man. Man is a manly man, whatever is to be understood by that: the feminine man stands out from the race and thereby becomes worthless life. Shylock must be exterminated: the only final solutions are fire and gas

extreme remedies — pharmakons — Mayer reminds us, have been proposed: for example, Klaus Mann writing in 1949 — remember when that was! — *calls for...the concerted mass suicide of intellectuals: to bring public opinion in the world, in the integrity and autonomy of which he quite clearly still believed, to its right senses*

well, we know now that this would disappear with a headline in the Entertainment pages, or it might make the Arts and Books section along with obituaries and sportsmanship, in the *Globe & Mail* — and intellectuals? — Mann had not noticed that point in the space of intelligence where they join the system, higgledy-piggledy — I think of that recent hustle in the United States, offering the end of history like a dinky-toy, democracy, pinking, blueing, and off-whiting in plastic — "My goodness!" everyone said, "They've discovered Hegel!" and *Time Magazine* thought he was little known — and I said, "My goodness! Francis Fukuyama, so we finally got here, there, anywhere"

so to be reminded once again of Puddin'head Wilson: *It was wonderful to find America, but it would have been more wonderful to miss it*

this unified mankind — for that's who's there, quantity or lump, at the end of a materialist's or an idealist's history — *conceived*, Mayer writes, *as a homogenized humanity. Woe to outsiders*

so that was it, was it? an *Enlightenment that promised equality to men and women, including homosexuals!* — an age in the hole, running three centuries, surely allows one to say, "Listen, you assholes, a *metaphysical washout* means you've lost your top soil"

and this system aims exactly — *at the heart of our social existence* — to be an outsider *by virtue of our existence* — like statues come to life by moonlight in the child's desiring mind — has the advantage of voices, and their attentions, each to each, among quantified multitudes who wander *the computations and rationalities that belong to no one* — also going, going, gone into the *corpus Christianum* with its sadly separated body and soul

among these voices, I think of Montaigne: *Embraces remembered (or still vaguely hoped for) are 'our final accolades'*

in whose arms

even on Sunday

with considered use of
Hans Mayer's *Outsiders*
written for Gay Games III,
Vancouver, August 1990

Robin Blaser / GIVING THE GLITTER TO SOME BODY ELSE AND NOT WANTING IT BACK

with his hands on the paternal pronouncement — patrikoi logoi

O boy!

tall buildings smile silver and a brick brightness on
sailors' minds at night delight tomorrow palm-court
music, its sweet raveling before moving on to what's thought
to be wanting a stranger reading or a *glass scholar* of
the model of divine being as an original presence to itself

Wow!

doing without of course *the father of logos*

Gosh!

a tiny, striped body lands on the page of my book, its
rainbow wing broken by the mishap, it was short of the golden
pot sly thoughts on the white table, sunlit, slip offward
and othergates where guesses are

a properly human language transgresses the Law of the Father

All ways!

somewhen, somewhere, one was *the father's other*, wasn't one

Today!

and my discourse sexualizes a running to and fro in order to
make an arrangement of which the syntax was mostly disarrayed,
unable to *rehearse that family scene*, or reluctant, after begging
the statues to nod their heads and once-upon, Spicer said, "just
another love poem," and laid the manuscript aside rightly and
Jeremy Prynne said, "all that sexual posturing — read Spinoza" I
already had, and I wandered around an echelon of language, dis-
paralleled, that my desire among things might play in the offing,
dis-

continuous and continuous

O!

bewaring the sacred, according to instructions from an otherwise
mind-full the sexual-aside of that binding is its vocabulary —
largeness of nouns — fundamental to its covenant and exclusions
of an obedience to body-sound and of rebellion in mindness

My!

pronunciation of *shiboleth* nearly killed me among things
the politeness of watchwords — governments of cosmos, nationhoods,
and jobs at a loss — passing

Go!

the panic of the car stalled in *the absolute passage between*
opposites — he-she-it-they of just and unjust likeminds — stuck
in the mind of or as Derrida said of godliness gone shopping
for the nouns of *father, son, and himself*,
sly, slippery, masked, an intriguer, a joker — sort of — a wild
card no *jack*, perhaps, but a supplanter all-the-same, who
dreams ladders out of the mess, and tosses

Jackstones!

yes, tunnels, playing in a vacant lot at the margin, excavated,
the author-eyed is almost gone to his happiness someone is
planting twigs to look for a day like trees through which
toy cars, revved-up, speed to their parley

I!

domesticity loved, sit here writing and try to find
the home of it

11 September, 1990

Robin Blaser / OF THE LAND OF CULTURE

I flew too far into the future: a horror assailed me

think of it as fissiparous

an Other who is no longer God or the Muse, but anonymous

a CBC interview on China: “Business is above politics” thereby:
beyondness and “politics” seeks equality in *kakistocracy* and
its professions

the psychiatric patient said, No, I don’t want to go back there —
the place is full of fallen angels trapped in human form

strangers in the existing order, which the ordinary woman or man
can’t narrate, though h/she is the most recent and only narrator
left to an anonymous culture and is promissory

she said, someone broke in last night and stole my sexual organs,
I’ve called the police again and again, but they won’t do any-
thing the doctor said gently, let’s have a look, and he told
her he’d found them where they should be and she left without
even a thank-you

was her thought of the loss really of the burglar, for whom most
of us wait?

age deepens politics and the wonderful world — oh, dear! body’s
and mind’s it-ain’t-what-it-used-to-be decays in cliché, and is
beside the point — because it never was — in order to say, your
smile is true at the cut

how many centuries has Christianity had in *kind* hands our other-
ness, one to one, here & there, & beyondness? “christians” —
now manifesting — should all get together and play patty-cake, for

that is the size of their cultural heaven

everyone said, thank you for your bright and careless eyes

Ethan Mordden said, *it could not be that paranoid Old Testament sheik with the plagues and tantrums* stopped by briefly, doing all over again goodness

a song on the radio today sang, "To our God we are in debt," so to describe the deficit

the shills said, confidentially, cultural haven is under one of these three walnut shells, named O.T., N.T., and materialism — try your luck!

Hustle, eyes watering, bent over the *tabula rasa* and his hand trembled

Then I flew back, homeward — and faster and faster I flew: and so I came to you, you men of the present, and to the land of culture I laughed and laughed, while my foot still trembled and my heart as well: 'Here must be the home of all the paint-pots!' I said

You are half-open doors at which grave-diggers wait. And this is your reality: 'Everything is worthy of perishing'

it's amazing to be pushed out of shape a lot of the time, and the amazement is a cultural gift

someone said, the stones of _____ [fill in the name of your own home town] are saturated with poetry

Myrna Kostash / THE JAN PALACH SCRAPBOOK

He had stood at the bottom of the steps of the National Museum at the end of Wenceslas Square in early 1969, had doused himself with gasoline and set himself on fire. In his agony, he ran berserk down into the square that lies in the heart of the city and died, at the base of the statue of good king Wenceslas. So I had been told.... So I remembered — a fuzzy memory of a winter's day in Toronto, a black-and-white still photograph from a newspaper, some details of a horrid suffering, the hairs standing up on the back of my neck, a dead student, bitter, charred, martyred, one of us.... And so I caused myself to be photographed in 1984 at this monument, just outside the heavy chain loop encircling it, and, because I was thinking that my motive must be obvious to everyone, including plainclothes policemen (that this touristic spot where I was standing at the feet of Wenceslas was a magnetizing zone of meaning for all of us who first heard the news in January, 1969), I look furtive and impatient, as though I didn't mean to be caught here by the photographer, that I was just passing by, on my way to the museum.

(Ludmila, the grandmother of Wenceslas, was murdered on the orders of her daughter-in-law. No motive cited by source. In 929, Wenceslas himself, the Christianizer, was murdered by his brother Boleslav the pagan at the door of a church.)

I stood in front of a record shop just one street over from Wenceslas Square, at that end of it where the statue sits. The shop had outdoor speakers and the voice of Bob Dylan yelping out "No! No! No! It ain't me, babe!" had drawn me in from my stroll in the square. I stood in front of the shop and listened. The young people milling about inside were probably not even born at the time of the invasion by Soviet troops and the death of Jan Palach, student, but the awareness of the proximity of the square and its statue, long since swept clean of ashes and suicide note, pressed on me like a rock on the top of my head. It felt oppressively odd to be a foreigner here and the only one remembering.

During the first days of the occupation, an eleven-year old boy, standing on the steps of the statue's pediment, tried to push a Czech flag down the snout of a Soviet tank, and was shot dead. The spot instantly became a shrine — candles, flowers, pictures of the vanquished leaders, Dubcek, Svoboda and Smrkovsky — for those who heard the story and passed it on.

I've never seen a picture of Jan Palach but I imagine him thin and blond and agitated. He was a student at the Philosophy Faculty at Charles University, he was twenty-two years old, and he was buried in Olšany Cemetery. He came from a village, Vsetaty, and by a turn of macabre Communist protocol, he returned there. Because his grave in Prague had become a point of pilgrimage and demonstrations for his mourners, the authorities activated an ancient regulation that required bodies to be buried at the birthplace of the deceased. And so Palach's mother came to Olšany Cemetery and took his coffin home. So I was told.

(In June, in the Whitsunday Uprising of the revolution of 1848, students and workers together erected barricades in the narrow streets of the old quarters and held them for five days against the attacks of the Austro-Hungarian army. They were finally crushed under the bombardment of the guns of General Windischgratz.)

Students. Throughout the Austro-Hungarian empire they rose up in 1848: in Cracow in March, in Prague in June, in Lemberg (aka Lvov, Lviv) in November.

In Prague they were buried in Emaus Cemetery, now destroyed. Czech patriots duly made the pilgrimage to lay heaps of flowers at the graves until — so the writer Jiri Grusa tells us — Austrian minister of the Interior, Alexander Bach, tiring of the ceremony, had the remains dug up in 1851 and transferred under cover of night to an unknown place.)

The day after Palach's death, thousands of his fellow students demonstrated in the square in front of the Philosophy Faculty building. The square is called Red Army Square. They tore down the street

signs and, under the dark and ponderous portico, black with soot, they set up a big placard and named this place Palach Square.

For Jan Kavan, later the editor-in-exile of Palach Press in London, “it became clear to me that in order not to feel permanently guilty, not to disappoint Palach’s trust, I would have to place my deeds on the other side of the scale for the rest of my life.”

Then the anniversaries — the communal revival after nineteen winters of private remembering: on January 19, 1988, at three in the afternoon, three Charter 77 spokespersons laid a wreath at the statue of Wenceslas and flowers at the Philosophy Faculty building. Police removed the wreath after twenty minutes, and the flowers within two hours. A year later, on January 15, in spite of an official prohibition against them, some four thousand people showed up in Wenceslas Square to mark the twentieth anniversary of the immolation of Jan Palach and the next day they were there again, and were set upon by police with dogs, tear gas and water cannon. Far from dousing the resistance, these tactics set off a six-day wave of violent demonstration and riot, arrest and detention.

“Palach lives!”

On the following weekend, a pilgrimage of human rights activists, intent upon paying their respects at the grave of Palach in the village of Vsetaty, thirty kilometres north of Prague, were thwarted by a cordon of police cars blocking all the roads in, by a helicopter menacingly circling overhead, by commuter trains that ignored the scheduled stop and — should they overcome all these obstacles — by a sign on the cemetery gate: Closed For Technical Repairs.

On Saturday, January 21, 1989, almost exactly twenty years to the day of Jan Palach’s death, participants in a roundtable discussion on state television robustly condemned the youthful demonstrators as hooligans. At a meeting of ideological activists, Jan Fojtik, member of the Presidium and Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, described the demonstrations as “provocative,” especially in light of the fact that 1988 had been a year of “active development of ‘perestroika.’” He could not know, of course, that ten

months later the hooligans would sweep him away.

This, in fact, is how Jan Palach died. At 3:30 in the afternoon of January 16, 1969, Palach, carrying a small can of gasoline, stepped out of a creaky Skoda in front of the National Museum in Wenceslas Square, took a seat on a block of stone in its muddy forecourt, poured the contents of the gasoline can over his head, and set himself afire with a cigarette lighter. The driver of a passing tram, seeing a human torch, in flames from head to foot, run into his path, jumped from the tram and threw his coat over the torch. Palach suffered from third-degree burns over eighty-five per cent of his body and died in hospital three days later. He left behind a letter.

[...]Our group consists of volunteers who are resolved to let themselves be burnt alive for our cause. I have the honour to draw the first lot and thus obtain the right to draft this first letter and become the first torch. [...] Unless our demands are met within five days, i.e. by 21 January, 1969, and unless the public demonstrates adequate support (i.e. by an indefinite strike), further torches will burst into flame.
Signed: Torch No. 1.

He made two demands. That censorship be abolished immediately. And, contradictorily, that the scurrilous Soviet occupation broadsheet, *Zpravy*, with its fabrications about “counter-revolutionaries” of the resistance, be banned. There was one other torch, Jan Zajic, a nineteen-year old student from Moravia, who died in Wenceslas Square a month later. But it is reported that Palach’s last message, whispered from his death bed, was that all the other would-be torches should in fact stay alive, and struggle on.

How Palach was buried: another version. One night a group of secret policemen crept into Olšany Cemetery, dug up his coffin, and delivered it to a crematorium. In the village of Vsetaty, his mother received the urn of ashes, and buried her son again.

Ordeal by fire: once, and then again.

Merrily Weisbord / HOW ME AND MY FRIENDS HAD BABIES

Robbie Robertson on the box.

Last time I was here, twenty years ago, it was The Band at sunset. Music from the Big Pink. My favourite. Still does it to me. Low-down rock-and-roll beat. Strange medicine. Me dancing, above it all. Me. Alone like I will be when the chimera of motherhood, the patina of sexiness, the gorgeous warmth of daughterhood are gone. Me with my eyes wide open, looking at the world from inside whatever was born, grew, and solidified, through it all.

I decided to write a story about how me and my friends had babies. We were in Mexico City. I was telling Mari how happy I was that all three of my daughters were coming here for Christmas. And I ended up telling her how I had my first baby. Then I thought about Susan and Eva — all the mothers and all the babies born in peculiar circumstances. But born. That recurring image of a woman, holding the hand of a small child, walking down a long, lonely road. Corny. But for all the lip service to paternal caregiving, we have, I have, Susan and Eva have, brought up the children.

Yesterday, Anna, my youngest daughter, told me she might live in California with her father, my ex, ten-days-in-court divorced husband. Cleo, twenty-one, said she was considering a TV internship in the States, where the industry is. Kim, twenty-six, thought she and her pilot boyfriend might live in Australia for a year. I couldn't believe it. Stripped clean, to the bone. Stripped naked. Exposed. Me.

And Robbie Robertson, of course. He's still here. And an unfailing, or sometimes failing, responsiveness to a beat. In Mexico it is the women and children's smile. A gift for the sun-starved soul.

I was sent to Europe when I was nineteen to separate me from my boyfriend. He wasn't a mean person, but in my family's eyes he was unworthy. He didn't read. His father was in the shmatte business. He was a big talker, a great con, good-looking, muscled, but soft. I was getting tired of him, too. I just couldn't get out from under the sex.

I got a job teaching skiing at a private girls' school in Switzerland.

I had a steamer trunk and my skis. There were streamers and flowers and we sailed. I watched my family shrink and the water between us get enormous. I was seasick, but I met people, including supercilious fraternity boys, whom I arranged to see in London. When we docked, my boyfriend was there as planned. I wasn't pleased, but he had a motorcycle. I got on and waved gaily to a future I never saw again. We drove to Earl's Court, found a room, and made out. I got pregnant that night. But I didn't know it. Who the fuck would ever get pregnant. Not me. Not at nineteen. I didn't even like children. I didn't even look at my cousin's kids. What did they know about existentialism.

Me and the boyfriend drove to Copenhagen. I didn't feel so good. We lived in a youth hostel, in separate rooms. It was a relief. I spent all my time in Tivoli, except when I was hearing stories about seances. My boyfriend seemed more and more a bore. Except for his motorcycle. We drove back — those long, flat Dutch roads, cruising. I felt decidedly queasy.

We separated on Bastille Day in Paris so I could meet the girlfriend I was supposed to travel with. I was relieved to be stationary. There was riotous laughter and firecrackers. I waited in the Quartier Latin for Mia. She came and we ventured out. By now I had realized I was pregnant, but that's as far as it went. I was pregnant. I felt sick. My breasts and stomach were getting bigger. I would have to tell my family. There was no baby attached to the thought. Not yet.

On the boat to Greece, by accident, truly, we found my boyfriend sleeping on the deck. He was happy to see me, for which I was grateful. He was familiar, implicated, and he'd help take care of me. We went to Greece, which was beautiful, and I knew I'd be back. In Italy, he gave blood to get money. He found out about abortions, but I couldn't really conceive of it. Neither it, nor the alternative. He bought me a gold wedding ring in Trieste. He said he loved me. We'd be all right.

When we got back to Canada, I told my mother first. I'd always been closer to my father. I was his girl. His dancer. His scholar. My mother told my father. He didn't look at me like he used to. I had betrayed him with my lies. My mother smoothed things over. She was diabetic at a time when the prognosis was not good. She was happy she would have a grandchild.

I was married in a tight, wool Italian dress. It was white and longer

than I normally wore. My breasts bulged. My hair was short. I had not accepted the suggestion of my future mother-in-law to go to a quiet, safe place, have the baby, and give it away. (God, Kimmy, forgive them for they didn't know you.) My body and my hormones gave me no choice. I was three-and-a-half months pregnant. No matter how sick I got, and I did, I couldn't get off. Not in mid-ocean. Not in mid-sky. And then, of course, it was interesting. Everything new was interesting.

I stayed in my phys. ed. course until I was seven months pregnant. I synchronized-swam like a graceful whale, vaulted like a kangaroo, dove where gravity could not longer hold me. I loved it. I was young. And it was obvious I'd been around.

At seven months, the bones of my pubic synthesis separated and I couldn't walk without excruciating pain. I moved back to my parents' home, where I had to lie still so the bones wouldn't rub and where my brothers carried me, on their entwined hands, to the toilet. Now the days seemed long and I wanted the baby to come, I knew it was a baby. I could feel its outlines in my belly. My mother could feel them too. She would pat the baby, and me, and make musical, soothing sounds. My father, awkward, kept his distance. My boyfriend, husband now, came sometimes. But he didn't really have anything to do with it.

I was taken to the hospital in an ambulance. Shaved. Enemaed. I felt like a dumb cow. Nobody told me anything. Not even my very advanced mother. I knew dick about breathing. Maybe neither did she. I floated above like Frida Kahlo in her surrealist paintings. They propped me up and stuck a needle in my spine. The doctor was listening to the hockey game. The epidural took the pain away. They broke my waters. I felt the coldness of fluid on my frozen thighs. They said push. I pushed. And pushed. After fifteen hours Kim was born. I was scared she was dead. They hit her and she cried. They put her on my belly. I had no maternal feeling. Not yet. I said to myself, This kid is going to be my friend. We'll do things together.

I was so happy when all three girls came to Mexico. I waited in the restaurant of the Manzanillo airport and saw the airplane come in like greased lightning. Like a spark. Like magic. I watched my daughters come off the plane and walk down the tarmac. First Cleo,

alone, and then Kim and Anna together. I blessed the pilot and skipped down the stairs to meet them.

This afternoon we took pictures of the three girls playing cards. At supper the two eldest squared off in the dusty street outside Valederos, like two cocks about to fight. One had monopolized the conversation. Had put her back to us at table. The other had felt at odds, excluded. The excluded one snipped. The other blared. One was crying, the other angry. When I was growing up, I spoke at the table and my younger brother suffered. He suffered so hard he got a stone in his heart. The only way to survive the children is to stand back. Two of me. The one that is there and the one that watches.

I was twenty-one when I saw Susan coming down the steps of the French building at McGill. Her long hair was blowing in the breeze, high cheekbones, full lips, she was beautiful. I stopped my motorcycle. My best friend had just left to study in London. I asked Susan if she wanted to go for coffee, which I hadn't yet learned to drink.

She was living in a one-bedroom place on de Maisonneuve Boulevard and going out with a Frenchman from Toulouse who made her feel bad because of her accent and her lack of breeding. There was no one like Susan for breeding. She had it in her every slow, considered move. I took to going over to her apartment after going downtown, late at night. I had moved back home. My dad built a room for me and Kim in the basement. My kid brother covered for me when I went out. I had to get out. I had to drive my dad's car late at night. Through the empty Montreal streets. I had to make out. Once bitten, taken, given, gone. My kid brother was fourteen, but he understood. Full-moon nights I'd come home in the early morning to find him feeding and rocking Kim. Singing to her.

Susan was the first to have a room of her own. She married Serge, a painter as unlike her as beauty and the beast. Serge was talented, inarticulate, and gross. He walked like a squat toad and slapped women's asses. Susan put mauve, pink, and other sweet colours in her room. Downstairs was Serge's studio and the long work table where the veterinarian botched Susan's first abortion. She lay in her room sicker than anyone I had ever seen. Serge was pissed off. She had been there for days when I came. My doctor took her to hospital hours before death. Later there was an abortion on a dark street in New

York, a septic high-priced abortion in Montreal, PID, kidney infection, and another abortion. Almost thirty, when thirty set off the biological clock, with damaged fallopian tubes and no prospect of a man she wanted, Susan decided to have a baby.

She balled Silvo, Yves, and Jim. Not for love and marriage. Jim won the high-stakes sperm shoot. Lawyer, petty pundit, man about town, he was suitably impressed when real life happened. The flowers were live. The wedding was white. Susan's colour was high. She looked as beautiful as the first time I had seen her.

Susan's marriage bust on the rocks of ice and scotch. But the baby grew. Into a red-haired, freckled, long-limbed filly of a girl. A young woman, a photographer, a temporarily lost teen-ager. Telling Susan they didn't get along. That she wanted to move. That Susan was the only one who could affect her. That she couldn't stand it anymore. It hurt too much. Irrevocably, umbilically tied. Francesca, Susan's baby.

We all have to wean ourselves. Mothers from daughters. Daughters from mothers. I held onto Anna because I knew she was the last. She pushed my breast away and looked around. She had teeth. She was ready but I wasn't. It's hard to let go.



When Kim was sixteen, I moved from our country home to Montreal. I didn't want to move. I couldn't afford it, didn't know, alone with two young kids, how. But Cleo was being attacked at the country school. Taunted and pushed around. One afternoon she announced that I could call the cops if I liked, but she wasn't going back to school. She was nine, but she wasn't kidding. I got her a tutor to finish the year and, with the help of my boyfriend, moved to east-end Montreal.

Kim was sixteen and I was thirty-six. I had dragged her with me on my travels. She had lived through lovers, marriage, dope, uncertain work, hectic trashing, precarious stability. Now she had roots. Near my father. Near her friends. She decided to stay alone in the country. And I alone in the city with the younger kids. I came back weekends. The house was a mess. I was outraged. I worked and kept house in the city. I still thought I should be dancing. Music from the Big Pink. Some beauty. Romance. A thrill or two. A good time. Fun. Some concept of whether I was hot or cold. I was losing it, that expectation.

It was draining out of me, the life-blood of someone shot through with reality. But there was enough left to yell at Kim.

"You have to clean up before I get here. I can't clean up there and come north and clean up here too. Who the hell do you think I am?"

"But," said Kim, starting to cry, "but you're the mother. You have to clean up."

"I am not your mother," I said to Kim, my first-born, my friend. "I'm not your mother. I abdicate."

Kim ran to her room crying, and cried for a long time. In red-hot, angry frustration. I let her go. Until, days later, she came back. And I came back. As the kids have come back to each other here in Mexico. As we will do always. Even when I am alone. As I will be. As I am.



Eva picked me up at a backgammon bar on Mackay Street. I was recently separated, out with Susan after days in court in a vicious custody case. I didn't like men, and Eva smelled it. She took us dancing at a gay bar where she knew everyone. She was short and bowlegged, but she could dance. And, boy, could she talk. She wove garlands of words and laughter around our mundane, mildewed minds. Eva was cock of the walk. Queen shit. She twirled and turned me. She halloed and flirted. Susan and I danced our toesies off. And Eva and I became friends.

Six years later, after she had seen the end of her masochistic stripper lover who wanted to be a clown, and the departure of her pre-Raphaelite French-Canadian lover with the two-year-old, Eva found a lover she knew was for her. The lover had a young child. They set up house — shopped, ate together, watched TV — a family. Eva hung up her dancing shoes and decided she wanted to have a baby.

I went with her to the urologist she'd heard did artificial insemination with a minimum of hassle. I wore my straightest clothes. So did Eva. She looked positively dowdy. The doctor was a balding, rotund, sandy-haired fellow behind a large desk. He asked Eva a few questions about her health and didn't seem perturbed that she was blind in one eye or decidedly less athletic than I'd like my mother to be.

"Why do you want to have a child?"

Eva told him she was the last of her Nazi-exterminated line, and I added that Eva would have oodles of money, which clinched it. The doctor explained that insemination might not take on the first go, and each try cost one hundred dollars. Then he asked, "About how tall?"

Eva and I looked at each other.

"Not too tall," Eva said.

"What colour hair?"

"Brown," Eva said.

"Eyes?"

"What do you think?" Eva asked me.

But I couldn't. I had fallen into babies and Eva was ordering one.

"Blue?" she said, as if it might be too much to ask.

"Fine," said the doctor, who had blue eyes. He told her what time of month to come, they made an appointment, and we left, me stunned, she relieved. Eva was going to have a baby.

Lilly was a healthy, placid infant who looked surprisingly like the insemination doctor. Eva's parents came across like mine, like Susan's, like I knew they would. For them, Lilly was a poignantly joyful present. Life where none was expected. A pink, gurgling bundle of flesh to coo at around the condominium pool. A being to love. A phoenix for the family. Eva's baby.

A long, empty road leading to somewhere. Trees on the side, shading the path like the photograph from *The Family of Man*. On the road are a woman and a small child. The woman is holding the child's hand.

Kim brought this Robbie Robertson tape to Mexico, to the bay where we first came twenty years ago, when I was Kim's age, and Anna was not yet born. Now the children are women. They and my companion have a multitude of signals to keep me off their backs. To keep mothering under control. They don't know the fire that sometimes rages in me. The urge that comes from a beat, deep in my sex, in my thighs, in my head — to spring up, and out — into the arms of a beginning when there was nothing. No slate, no tracks, no past. Not even the sad, beautiful, enveloping memory of my own lost, elusive-mother.

Ven Begamudré / APPA, MY FATHER

1: Patricide

The poet Patrick Lane once told me, "All sons kill their fathers." He knows much about such things. His own father died young, shot in the back late one night at his desk. Not by Patrick. And he is not the sort of man who goes through life guarding his own back. We met over ten years ago, when he settled in Saskatchewan with the poet Lorna Crozier. Even then I saw myself in him: the same love of beauty and truth, the same impatience with fools.

He gave me hope without trying. That's the best kind; the kind of hope that goes deep. I was watching his poetry class once, marvelling at the loving impatience in his voice, at the beauty he could impart to even technical words: *form, ghazal, villanelle, imagistic, lyric, caesura, masculine rhyme, feminine rhyme, paradigm, closure*. Words I even now don't understand: sounds to be savoured. "The only thing that separates me from him is twenty years," I thought. "If I care about writing as much as he does, if I pursue it with his singlemindedness..." Twenty years, give or take a few: only that.

Later, we discovered I was nearly as old as his eldest son. He laughed in amusement and shock, for he had forgotten he was already middle-aged. In jest I called him Dad, and he called me Son. We are as a father and son should be once the son learns life is full of betrayals. We are friends.

We even have similar dreams. Mine is to finish the basement in the house Shelley and I own, a house we bought from Patrick and Lorna. His dream is to build a greenhouse in their new backyard. Reality has forced us, he and I, to lower our sights. Not for our writing; those remain often impossibly high. We have lowered our sights on life. But to say we are like father and son is misleading, for I have never wanted to kill him. His book *Winter* begins like this:

The generosity of snow, the way it forgives transgression,
filling in the many betrayals and leaving the world
exactly as it was....

My father and I are not friends. In the twelve years since I stayed

with him in India during my first trip back, I have seen him only three times: once for three weeks, once for a week, once for a day and a half. Just over a month in twelve years. I often wanted to kill him. I no longer do. It's not simply that I have forgiven him. There is that. I no longer want to kill him because I discovered how easy that would be.

We were at my Uncle Nagasha's house in the Jayanagar district of Bangalore, the same district in which my grandfather Krishna had lived out his last years. Nagasha commented on how much my father resembled my grandfather. I secretly refused to believe it. I admired my grandfather. I could afford to, since I hadn't known him well. He hadn't raised me; my father had. He was standing to one side while Nagasha and his wife posed for my camera. Suddenly it struck me: how old my father looked. How frail. I could have broken his neck with one hand. Or that's how it seemed. Better yet, I could have closed one hand on his throat and slammed his head against a wall. Of course I did neither. But in that instant, his hold on me fell away. The father I had known was dead. Finally.

Until that moment, whenever I remembered him as he once had been, I remembered the bad things first. Now I remember the good. And perhaps because I learned to remember them so late, they remain with me now. It took twenty-seven years, from the time I was six until nearly thirty-three, to forgive him. Twenty-seven years, give or take a few: only that.

I will not grieve for my father when he dies. I will grieve for the man he could have been.

2: Promises

My mother works in Toronto, and I live with my father in Ottawa. "He will take good care of you," she promised. She promised that for two years while we waited in India to join him. I call him Appa, which means father in his mother tongue, but I don't think of him as Appa. I have only met him once before she left me with him. His visit to India, two years before, was a quick one. As quickly, I forgot him. I was only four then. Now I am six.

He is cooking supper, omelet again. Eggs congealed around onion and tomato, diced. In India I tasted egg only once. Our servant, Mary, boiled an egg because my mother wanted me to learn Canadian ways.

The experiment was not a success. Here we have omelet every second night. One night, I rebel.

"If you don't eat, you'll fall ill," he says. I refuse. He slams the table and shouts, "Eat!" I begin to cry. I get down from my chair and sit on the floor with my back to the wall. That was how we ate in India, but only on special occasions. He rises with my plate, sets it on the floor, and crouches in front of me. He is a large man with a thick neck and hairy arms. He cannot abide it when I cry.

He grabs my throat with his left hand, shoves my head back against the wall. His palm presses into my throat. My hair scratches between my scalp and the wall. He begins shovelling omelet into my mouth. I am six going on seven, but I know: I can either eat or choke.

He leaves the plate on the floor, rises and backs away. This is not the man my mother promised would take good care of me. "You're not my father!" I scream. I am only six, but I know, and I tell him again: "You are not my father."

3: Another One for the Evil Eye

I once asked my cousin Prakash, a psychiatrist, why I could never please my father. "It's called the evil eye," Prakash said. "Sometimes parents are afraid of praising their children in case the evil eye is watching."

Grade eleven, Vancouver. I am enrolled in a humanities course taught by two teachers, one social studies, the other art. It is based on Kenneth Clark's book *Civilisation: A Personal View*, after his series on BBC. A pilot project, the course. We watch each episode, research names and terms, watch the episode again. I lose myself in the book. Find a world I understand.

Charlemagne: "saviour of civilisation" yet unable to write

Imagination: scientific hostility to

Vasari, G.: *Lives of the Painters*

Inquisition and Index

Leonardo (da Vinci): study of man, attitude to women

Industrial development, Victorian England: as creator of
middle-class philistinism

Smiles, Samuel: *Lives of the Engineers*

Art patronage as "atonement"

Tulip craze of early 17th-c.

India: spiritual enlightenment in
Odo of Metz
Neo-platonists

"It may be difficult to define civilisation," Clark says, "but it isn't so difficult to recognize barbarism."

I write him an aerogramme, address it to "Sir Kenneth Clark, London, U.K." Only that. Describe the pilot project, how much we are learning. How much fun. His reply is also an aerogramme, typed and signed. My teachers are delighted.

Meanwhile, my father is trying to make a fresh start. In teachers' college. We have little to say to one another, little that is personal. One day he attends a seminar on pilot projects. "It seems they're extending a course based on a series by Kenneth Clark," he says over supper. "One of the students wrote to him and he wrote back."

"Oh," I say, "that was me."

And my father says, "It couldn't have been you."

4: Sportsmanship

Try to avoid questions that begin with "why."

— *Family Ties that Bind*

My father once played cricket against what later became the Pakistan National Team. He was playing gully, the most difficult spot: near the batter but off to the side. The batsman up was their best. He could hit centuries, a hundred runs, and he made only one mistake that day. He nicked the ball, and my father lunged. He missed. When he tells this story, he shakes his head.

Another time, my father's team was playing away. The host team arranged lunch, ordered out from a nearby hotel. By mid-afternoon, my father's team forfeited the match. Food poisoning. When he tells this story, he always laughs.

I am seven. Civil service teams play cricket on the grounds of Rideau Hall, the governor general's mansion. In the pavilion, a wooden building with secretive changing rooms, is a soft drink machine. Bottles hang from rows of slots, different flavours in different slots. Pure Spring ginger ale, cream soda, lemon lime. Move a bottle down its slot and into the gate. Feed in a dime and pull up. I always choose Orange Crush. Even now it tastes of green pavilions, cricket whites, mothers on the lawn in folding chairs, cries of "Well caught!" Orange

Crush is cricket.

On the way home after a match, my father says the governor general invited him to tea but my father declined. "Georges Vanier?" I ask. "We could have had tea with Georges Vanier, and you turned him down!" My father says, "I couldn't very well go in my cricketing clothes." For years I boast, "I nearly had tea with Georges Vanier."

I am nine. My father has been trying to teach me cricket for three years. We are on the grounds of RMC, the Royal Military College, and I am tiring of his orders. I want to have fun, and he is making me do drills. My cheeks feel as red as the hard leather ball he bowls. Finally I throw down my bat. "I am not learning cricket!" I declare. He slaps me. Only once. But hard.

I am twenty-five. He is spending the summer in my second-floor walk-up near the tracks. A suite too small for a father and son. I ask a question unasked for sixteen years: "Why did you hit me that time I said I didn't want to learn cricket?" He looks up from a book. "What are you talking about?" he asks. "You always hit me for every little thing," I say, "but that time you hit me so hard. Why?" He says, "That's the way we were brought up. I didn't know any better." He goes back to his book while I fume. "At any rate," he adds without looking up, "I never once hit you on a cricket pitch. That would have been poor sportsmanship."

5: Moving Days

I never learned to play the piano. We couldn't afford one. Even if we could, we wouldn't have had one, because we moved every year. Often within the same city. For a while our living room furniture was patio furniture, because it was easy to assemble, disassemble, re-assemble.

Our addresses during the eleven years I lived with my father:

610 Montreal Road, Ottawa, in what was then called Eastview and is now called Vanier. I don't remember the apartment number. I attend Ashbury College, an exclusive school not meant for families in Eastview. He hires a man to wax the hardwood floor when we move out. My father dislikes leaving traces.

50 Selkirk Avenue, yet another apartment in Eastview but closer to the river, to Ottawa proper. I buy comic books at a corner store, the "Busy Bee." Lorna Going, my babysitter's granddaughter, tries to teach me to fish, with little success. She takes me to "Mary Poppins," and

for weeks we sing:

Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.

He has no idea what it means.

Bowling Green One, Kingston, on the corner of Bath Road and Sir John A. McDonald Boulevard. They are always digging basements for new buildings. In winter, boys and girls skate on the frozen holes; in spring, we pole rafts made of boards meant to keep us out. My father can't get tenure at RMC because he doesn't have his doctorate.

Then a basement apartment, so I can go back to Ashbury, this time as a boarder. In spring, the basement floods. Most of his belongings, packed in boxes, escape damage. Still, he vows never to live in a basement again. He doesn't have to: I decide I prefer public schools. They seem more real.

Another building on Sir John A, across from the Kingston Shopping Centre with its Bad Boy furniture store. This is the year he begins finding fault with everything I do. The year Mrs. Farrell gives me lunch. The year he takes me to New York City for Christmas. We stay in the YMCA. One night I go to the bathroom down the hall and pass a drunk. He is sawing the round wooden ornament off a banister. I don't ask why.

Building J off Westgate Drive, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. The year I learn to play baseball and my father finally earns his doctorate. The year I play the baritone at Nitschmann Junior High. The year I learn this song:

B-e-t-h-l-e-h-e-m spells Bethlehem!
Proud of all the years she's been a city.
Fifty years!
That is why we sing this pretty ditty.
Give her a cheer!
B-e-t-h-l-e-h-e-m so grand.
She's the town of renown,
Christmas City in the USA,
Bethlehem, give her a hand!

Bowling Green Three, Kingston. I may have forgotten Two; I'm sure we lived there as well. This will be the longest we live in any one city at one time: three years. We make trips to Algonquin Park and Expo '67: "Man and His World." My father's health grows worse from the dampness and cold and the long hours in his lab. I grow

moody, so he makes me take up sailing, join air cadets. Anything to keep me out of the house.

One Thursday in August, when I am sixteen, he comes home and asks, "Do you have any library books out?" I always have library books out. "Take them back," he says. "We're leaving for Vancouver on Monday. I've quit my job." And so we pack up the car and drive. He drives. I remember the sunset on the lake at Ignace, Ont. How he curses while he unloads the patio furniture and repacks it to send by train. The forests north of Superior. Bison at the zoo in Winnipeg. The sunset at Grenfell, Sask. In Calgary he says, "What river is that?" I want to say, "Fucked if I know." Instead I say, "Beats me," and he grows annoyed. "This is your chance to learn about Canada," he says. Yeah, right. And then the mountains, oh the mountains, the gondola up Mount Norquay near Banff, Peyto Lake on the way to Jasper. Imagine: a lake that changes colour throughout the day. We see it as turquoise. Then down past the Premier Mountains of B.C. and past the whirlpool at Hell's Gate. I remember the motel at Hope, a chalet. How he keeps repeating the name *Hope* to lift my spirits. And his. Our first night in Vancouver at the YMCA. No drunk sawing at banisters here. Just a question mark after the *Y*.

Two last addresses:

A highrise on Alma Street near Broadway. Nights lying awake listening to the fountain in front. The beginnings of my insomnia. Sixteen years of insomnia. Evenings spent alone walking in the rain to the library while he attends night class. Other evenings in the army cadets. His idea again: anything to get me out of the house. He begins talking about returning to India. I lay plans for escape.

The 3800 block of Fourth Avenue West. When the caretaker, Mr. Kostiniuk, falls ill, my father burns the garbage for him. For ten dollars a week. Mrs. Kostiniuk bakes round loaves of bread for us, slips a dollar bill to me with each one. Then he gets a job, part-time, but a job. Spends his first fifty dollars on a sportscoat and trousers at the Army and Navy. A flashy yellow coat to fit his new mood. But he leaves his wallet in the changing room and returns to find it gone. He still pays for the sportscoat and trousers, later, but he never wears that coat.

The following August I leave for university in the east, back in Ottawa. Swear I will never go home again. Of course I do.

And in the ten years between my first apartment and finally buying a house, I live in eleven different places: Ottawa (three), Saskatoon and Prince Albert (one each), Regina (six). But I promise myself two things. Real wooden furniture. And a piano. Much of our furniture is second-hand, but it is wood. Even the piano is second-hand, refinished by a friend from its pink roxatone to its original oak veneer. Someday, I will learn to play it.

Stan Persky / PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG MAN WITH SNAKE

In the Sunday tabloid, amid all the stories of Vancouver — which was overcast that autumn morning with chill, broken patches of swaddling-cloud — there's an offbeat feature about people who have snakes for pets. The story is about two guys in their mid-20s, respectively described as a gardener from suburban Langley and a West End bartender, who don't "know one another but they have a hobby in common," namely, keeping pet pythons and boa constrictors.

There's a sidebar called "Snake Snippets" that provides readers with several illuminating facts about reptiles which any educated person would be happy to know. E.g., snakes don't have ears so they don't hear; they have fixed eyelids so they can't close their eyes, but a scale over their eyeballs keeps dirt out, though in any case they have "zero to poor eyesight;" and finally, they smell by means of their tongues, which grab air and insert it into the sinuses, which allows them to identify, I suppose, things they eat, like live mice or gerbils. In short, a snake, if you think about it, is quite literally an almost senseless creature. If you think about it further — which I have only because a storywriter friend of mine, Ed Norton, has written about this at some length — you also have to remember that the "reptilian core," which is what the snake has for an animating mechanism, a kind of proto-brain, is, in the evolutionary scheme of things, also contained at the base of human intelligence.

None of the snake facts immediately register with me because I'm preoccupied with looking at the story's two accompanying photos. I check out the Langley gardener just long enough to detect no interest on my part. He's a beefy blond, barechested, with the python curled around his neck. Actually, the story quickly confirms that he's an air-head. He watches TV with Sultan — that's the name of his snake — and believes that the animal shares his taste for the music of the rock group Dire Straits, from one of whose songs the snake's name was derived, etc.; in short, he mindlessly anthropomorphizes the animal.

In the other pic, there's Howard DeSoto. Howard's face is slightly fuzzy-focussed to permit a sharp foreground image of the wrist-thick

sinuous patterned body of his boa, Babe, which is curled around his forearm. Howard is wearing a white T-shirt and a black leather jacket with military epaulettes; his hair is short and shaggy, his eyelids — unfixed — are closed, or gazing down at the snake. His mouth is still fabulous, wet-looking in the photo. I compare the newspaper shot of Howard, 26, with the tiny photobooth snap of him at 18 that I keep taped to the wall behind my writing machine, along with various runic-like instructions for accessing obscure crypts in the computer's reptilian core memory. The comparison yields no info. I merely recall having seen long ago — when I was younger than Howard is in his present picture — the painting in the Louvre Museum by Titian called *Portrait of a Young Man With Glove*.

In the story, Howard is his reassuringly, breezy self, "I take Babe to the beach in summer," Howard says. "He's a great conversation piece." The reporter adds that Babe gets as much sun as he needs at the beach "and helps his owner meet all sorts of people he wouldn't otherwise get to talk to." Naturally, the news story merely suggests the obvious — that the verb "meet" is a euphemism for "pick up," and that the snake is a convenient advertisement for Howard's dick (this, by the way, is one of those rare instances of Truth in Advertising). Howard's enumeration of the snake's virtues as a pet — "No noise, he only eats once or twice a week, and he doesn't care if I don't come home at night" — is, of course, also a stinging witty, if unintentional, indictment of the faults of his live-in boyfriends. Finally, Howard — in contrast to his mentally sloppy Langley counterpart — unsentimentally declares that he doesn't believe snakes capable of affection. "I have relationships for that," he sensibly, but primly points out.

The last time but one, six months earlier, in March 1990, I was delicately poised between the all-night road from San Francisco I'd just driven and an airplane that would take me to Berlin for what were billed as the first free elections in the German Democratic Republic. That morning, also a Sunday, I was sorting through hopeless stacks of accumulated mail, newspapers, dirty clothes when, out of the blue, Howard phoned.

It's a fiscal-logistic-spiritual crisis. He's moving, the ex-boyfriend supposed to loan him \$200 for the movers has picked exactly this moment to quarrel and split, it's Sunday morning, the movers are

arriving in an hour, he's halfway through packing, he's broke. Oh, and just in case I didn't get the message, he'll pay me back or "work it off."

I don't hesitate. When you've spent a lifetime being trained by the gods for such a moment, when you've hailed Great Eros under last night's full moon (okay, I know it's corny, but still...), you may experience a meltdown in the chest, groin, knees, but not uncertainty. Whatever calculations there will be, they've been made long ago.

"Where are you?" I ask. It's a one-bedroom in an apartment tower on Pendrell. "Near the old stomping grounds," he adds, referring to the days when he worked the streets.

When I arrive, it's at the site of a tenth-story disaster area, which I barely glimpse, as I feel his soft lips quickly blot mine, hug his again-slim torso against my bulk. Body runs through memory bank, while eye absorbs the set: water-bed drained and collapsed like a dehydrated starfish on a California beach, packing boxes, a pair of black jockey underwear with a white waist band (irrationally, I want to chew on it), crushed cigarette butts in the wall-to-wall carpet, strange potions in bottles and glasses.

The short version goes like this: Howard's quit the bartending job he's had for the past couple of years to avoid being fired; he's lost — or perhaps only misplaced — his current lover (a drug dealer); he's strung out on free-based cocaine and thinking about checking into a detox centre — and he's thought of me as the person most likely to produce hard cash on a moment's notice. Howard's wearing khaki shorts, and under that, black lycra mid-thigh bicycling gear, which creep out from the legs of the khaki. There's a black T-shirt commemorating the opening of the Berlin Wall a few months before (a gift from our mutual friend Tod, who also has the hots for Howard), and a goofy big brimmed green bike-riding cap.

He sprawls on a pile of cushions, smoking a butt, "I'm not mad anymore," Howard says, referring to the months of icy estrangement in our relationship that had only recently concluded with a low-key rapprochement. "I went too far with it," he adds, regretting something. Men had desired Howard since his boyhood; I had been among their company.

Given the mess around us destined to be shoved into boxes, the quarrel didn't require further unpacking. In retrospect, I was almost

fully aware that, while unavoidable, it was entirely my fault. Anyone who recounts his amorous adventures to a story-teller is doomed to hear them repeated as betrayed confidences. Howard couldn't possibly have known that; I did, but was in the grip of a greater power than desire. He had decided that my motivation was anger that we were no longer having sex. I was prepared to leave it at that: to argue otherwise would have been impolite.

I caress his bare leg. The calf is muscled from bike riding, but also — I note with that other eye, the one not dazzled by adoration, lust, love — the flesh is older. When he flips off his cap, his untamed mop of black hair spills out; he's thinner, the fat burned off by drugs. "I've just got to shut my mouth," he vows resignedly, as if to accept responsibility for not having his legend spread about in the whispers of the bars, or spilled in print.

Nonetheless, no sooner than he's said that, he immediately launches upon a tiny tale.

"I saw Pat last week," Howard begins.

"Pat Monaghan?" I ask.

"Yeah."

Pat's a butch blond, same age as Howard, an endearing mixture of rage and pain, whom I've known almost as long as I've known the owner of Babe. In fact, Howard arrived at my place once, years ago, with an earlier edition of his boa constrictor, and came into the bedroom where Pat and I were getting up to show off the reptile. Howard had always wanted to get into Pat's pants, the latter had been at least mildly curious and, obligingly, I'd often encouraged their fantasies of each other.

Howard, by his account, had been going to work one afternoon the week before, and Pat, who was driving his girlfriend's 4x4 pickup, stopped to give him a ride. Howard didn't have to be on shift at the bar for a while yet. "So what happened?" I asked. "Oh, we smoked a doob, and played around," shrugged Howard. My hand slides along Howard's calf. "What did you do?" I casually inquire. Who knows what's going on under the web of black lycra that snugly encases his groin? "Not much," Howard replies, "we just played around with each other's dicks." Stupidly, I forget to ask if either of them came. Instead, Howard goes on. "I think Pat would like me to fuck him," he boasts.

Between those two sentences, I'm left with the alluring image of Howard and Pat in the cab of a pickup on a spring afternoon, stoned, fooling around. Where did they park? Perhaps in a little-used asphalt lot by a grove of trees in nearby Stanley Park. Did they slide off their jeans and jockeys, or just unzip each other's flies? Howard couldn't have been wearing those spandex cycling shorts, could he? How do you get into *that*? I'm short of dialogue and details that will have to be filled in in later masturbatory imagination. I'm as enticed by the fantasies of my desirable friends making out with each other as I am by my own actual encounters. I wonder what the first move was. Were they sliding their fingers up and down each other's hard tubes as they passed the joint back and forth with their free hands? Dope is such a perfect cover-up if one of the partners is ambiguous about displaying his desire. Did Howard encourage Pat to go down on him? How, where, why, did it end?

"I doubt Pat wants to be fucked by you," I say, with a friendly sneer, the scene in my mind having exploded in the micro-second between utterances. "He says that it hurts him too much to take it up the ass."

Howard grins devilishly. "I'd like to 'hurt' him."

I raise my eyebrows. "I'll bet," I say. I don't have to add, You can hurt me, instead.

We were supposed to meet later that evening, but I knew cocaine's urgency spoke louder than obligation. In any case, I felt myself amply rewarded by his evocation of Pat.

On parting, a kiss or two from familiar lips, and a hug. Howard, I think, marvelling that he wasn't given one of the typical monikers of his age group — Mark, or Scott, or Jason — but an old-fashioned name that belonged to the boyhood friends of my generation. Out of the corner of my eye, over his shoulder, I find myself wondering if that's a used rubber lying on his night-table in the clutter of everything else. Or perhaps merely the sheddings of a snakeskin.

I reach down into the archives — a midden heap of memory chips and scattered artifacts — to match the photo of Howard in the Sunday tab to a much earlier one, also at 18, but taken before the photobooth snap, in which he's wearing only a floral bikini-style bathing suit, and is leaning back in an old wooden swivel office chair, one leg drawn up so that you can see the inside of his right thigh and the ripple

of stomach muscles, four rows of them descending toward his crotch. Some entrepreneurial type had talked him into posing for a “modelling” agency spec sheet. In the pic, he’s grinning. In the current one, featuring the riverine, muscular curvature of his boa constrictor, Howard appears pensive.

Three months after our emergency meeting, I ran into Howard in a gay bar one night in mid-June. In between I’d been to Berlin and returned, and of course, I’d long-since figured out that my small monetary contribution to Howard’s well-being, neither paid back nor “worked off,” had gone to the Medellin cartel in exchange for white powder. He was displaying his basket in mouse-grey bicycling tights and drunkenly weaving through the dark, crowded bar.

I’d just come from dinner with Tod and Gerard Anthony, a poet who was in town that week. They were seated at the bar now, on the other side of the room. We had argued about whether Habermas’ concept of The Lifeworld, which he opposed to that of The System, did justice to the dilemma. Tod, an erudite art critic about ten years younger than Gerard or I, knew some German and had insisted that the term *Lebenswelt* didn’t make sense. Howard pressed against me in the lighted alcove with the Wonder Boy pinball machine.

“I was totally strung out,” he explains, accounting for non-payment, but not making any further offers. I’m supposed to notice that he looks better now, being “clean,” but in fact, he appears a bit puffy. Cocaine, I’m afraid, successfully defined his beauty for a moment, made it austere, burned the little bit of flab away. “*What if the body goes,*” begins the song of one of my favorite poets — which I happened to recall at that moment — and which goes on to ask, what “*if that poetry goes/ whose power drank from the body, gavel the body, gave amor a skin*”?

The sound system envelops us in its noise, pushes us close. The monitors above our heads flash jagged images. “I love you,” Howard drunkenly insists, then adds, “but I wanted to hurt you,” and adds to that, “a little.” That’s as much attention-span as he can manage. Then, as in an underwater ballet, we float away from each other. I’m scheming with an old crony named Slim, one of those people who takes you from one place to another in the underworld; Howard’s momentarily sitting at the bar with Gerard and Tod. When I return,

he's left to join a middle-aged man seated at a nearby table. Gerard and Tod say they think Howard looks better than ever.

Behind Howard's right shoulder in the newspaper photo is a lush jungle growth. It blurs the boundary of his hair, merges with the wrinkled surface of his leather jacket. Howard's cheek is chalky white in the photo. I gaze upon his shadowed eyelids, the eyes cast down toward the snake on his forearm, as he prepares to charm it out of its skin.

CONTRIBUTORS

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GRAHAM GILLMORE is a Vancouver artist currently working in New York. He has exhibited widely in Canada, the U.S. and Europe. The paintings on the covers are from a series that "incorporates text as a method of ordering and as a way of circumventing an image."

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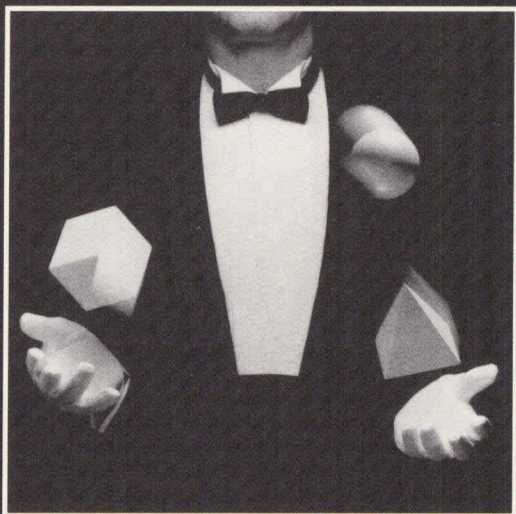
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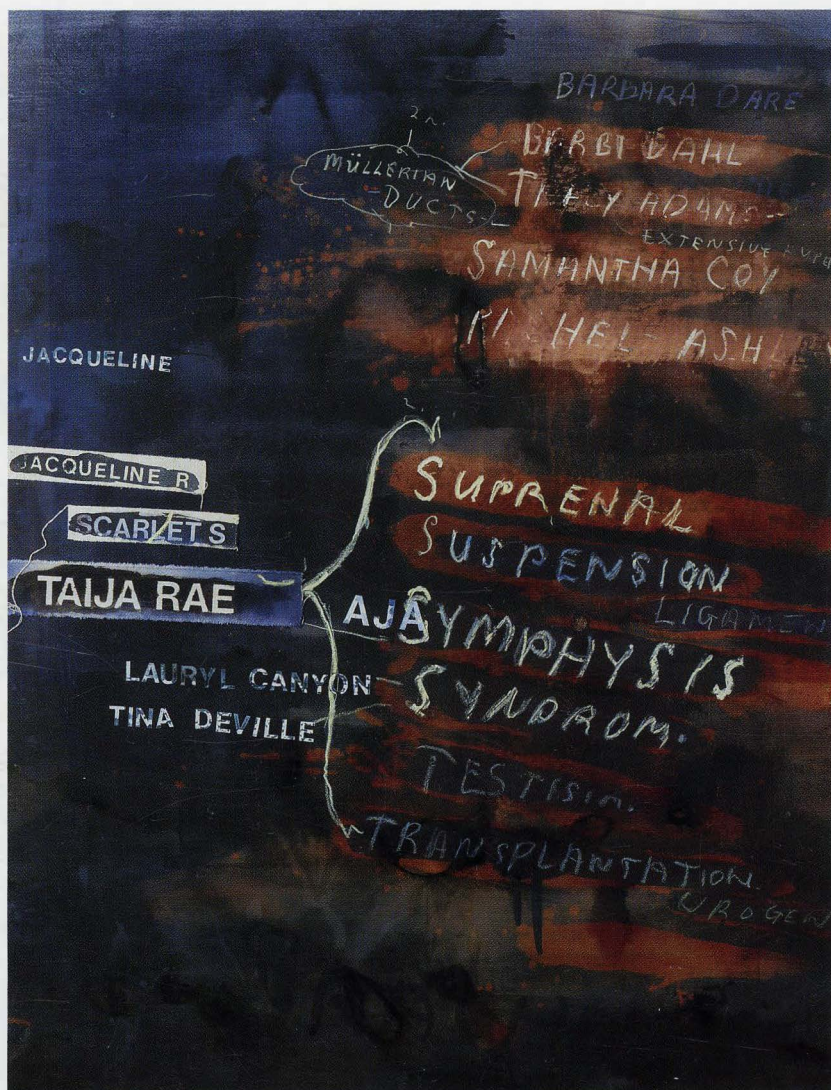
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