

THE CAPILANO REVIEW



they bring in their bright eyed cubs to face the small term,
in a land that is hostile to foxes,
that striking red coat is one year into its sentence,
its hunger inland on legs

— Coral Hull

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THE CAPILANO REVIEW

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FRONT & BACK COVERS

Alexandra Dikeakos

Nightmare, 1990

pen & ink, watercolour, 30" x 44"

PHOTO CREDITS

Covers and plate #2

Kim Clarke

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D.C. Reid / TEN POEMS

HOLD ME

The weeping when nothing comes out
says hold me.

The green earth in its envelope of air
says never let me go.

Me in my nakedness
mouth, I be strong don't I?

The ceiling has cerebral palsy,
my limbs twitch like useless vegetables,

and Vanessa
shivers in my arms,
hiccupping in the news. Divorce
has penetrated the voluptuous flower
of the cerebrum I have betrayed.

Continents are ripping free, constellations in the sky.
Hold me hold me hold me hold me hold me.

I LOVE MY FAMILY

One year after disintegration,
the body of a family
becomes ribcage, skull, rising through

soil in some forgotten farmer's field.
The note arrives,
pinned to the most ordinary fridge:

I love my family.

Nine years old
and the message follows her paper heart,
her assurance in the solidity of things,

the necessity of mother, father,
the older sister who finds puberty
a thing too hard.

A second shadow she is to me,
head in the hollow above my hipbone,
doing homework on the couch

before a fire that may be the only one left.
She ruptures my convalescence
with guilt, he who pulled the plug.

She loves her family, and I do too.
I would gather the bones

of murdered relatives
and hate until death,
the brown-eyed traitor

who stuffed their bones behind the furnace.
But she pokes out.
how she rises

her smile lifting through
to me

that scribbled heart of hers,
one step always and only

ahead of despair.

PAPER HEART

Head at my rib,
handing across her paper heart, pink
to glue a family together.

8 years old,
a collection of 200 pliable bones,
small metacarpals pressed to the back
of my hand.

Divorce is bone dust
in ribs of sun from venetian blinds
laid across her bright eyes.

Wind and agony are invisible,
the dissection of a marriage,
the spurt of *dissecta membra*.

A butcher knife would be a blessing,
blood in gutters, carcasses
hung like weird dolls.

Behind doors, food in its freshness rots,

Vanessa's fragile skull with its net of veins.
The inverted retina of an eagle
sees far but does not cry. Lucky bird.

March 26, 1994, ordinary,
lethal with shame.

Her paper heart strips off
and I press it back, hopeless,

weep uselessly against the fridge, pour
orange juice on the floor.

STANDING IN THE DOORWAY

Standing in the doorway,
Sammy knows the family eating disease
has come for us.

I steal her being young.
I make her clairvoyant,
make her eyeballs stand on end.

All she's known is war,
the pibloctu scream
of an iceberg letting go.

There should be amber, a pimply boy for her,
greedy lips that would kiss their way to love.
Not this. Not this.

Numbness is a howitzer, brown-eyed shame.
Hear the silence at the end of a marriage,
the casualties. How it radiates. How it infects.
How they drop like plums.

She takes the big pill.
Her head is near the roof
stuffed with Shakespearian weather.

Thinking bulges in her eyes.
Tears freeze like thumbtacks.

I am a thief to make her well. I would be God.

MY DAUGHTER WHO WANTS TO LEAVE ME

The moon rises in a window across the street.

Samantha clicks out my heart
and walks away.

Love is a disease
with a special surprise:

the white heart:
I spill freedom I never thought I'd offer:

yes, you may go.

But first tell me the years shall also rise,
that a parent's love is more

than the smile of the blind.
And then again the golden moon,

days before the rain.
I am not ready for this.

Driving her to destinations deep in her heart
I should be happy. That other house.

The heater opens up the glass.

The moon returns with me
sliding through the barren trees
the long way home.

Who lives in windows anyway?
Loved ones? The lost?

The moon doesn't care.
Let me be the moon.

OUTSIDE THIS DOOR

Outside this door the lawn, the curve of the shore thrown up
for the eye,

this docile city I might offer my lungs to wake.

Instead one of my hips twisted forward just so, the quadriceps a little
violin.

this day I think into that other time and within that thinking also the
belief this day will not come . . .

 a far light in the stirred-up morning, like the fear of children.
Real as if my children died, not poetry pain.

I believe myself up the mountain on St. George Terrace where hope is
set sail among the high white houses, the sour taste of a ladybug
signifying spring.

The sun is this moment visible, the bell dong, donging in sea light
under clouds spring wet and red as lips.

How then what I avoid comes after me: Vanessa's high-topped purple
runners, against a bedroom wall of my home, dust . . .

my tendon, as I said, the bow, the violin of my hip.

To play such riddled music, wake this whole damn city the name of a
dead queen.

This way I run, sixteen miles into middle age, and this I don't believe.

SIMPLE THINGS

Like being someone else:

imagine a man with greying temples pausing with his spatula over the first element. *Water*, he thinks and some of it sizzles to salt in front of his astonishment.

If there were a slow camera to record such a thing, a photograph to protect all that is unique about this man, the promise of his greasy-cornered photos, kids smeared through various rites of passage.

"It must be the ocean," he says, longing for his daughter and props himself against the rose-flowered walls, here and here, as though the room were soft and padded and would enfold him.

Imagine his daughter sitting down to dinner with its forest above her kitchen green and lurching as a petrified wave; he knows that photographs cannot in themselves cause agony:

the halloween V was the Phantom in her great grampa's fedora, and S was Tina Turner though no one could tell.

The roses come and go as he wades the rolling kitchen, pokes his dinner for one.

For all his lorazepam blandness, his "I'm fine, just fine." he cannot focus on metaphor. The salt he can taste, that fecund almost rotting air of the sea that pulls with hidden strings. They are the same as those that stream from the 25 photos of his S&V growing older and older.

He tongues white from the corner of his mouth and cannot for the moment rid his mind of iguanas. "Nothing's going on in here," he says though for all he and I know no one else is here or within miles of this little grey house on this woody little block.

There are the usual miracles of course, boiling water for tea from the inside out by vibrating its molecules. "That makes life sort of almost okay."

The man with greying temples in his rosy-walled room puts his hand on the element to see if it'll burn. This failure to trust himself

is a cobra that dips forward and the wee nip hurts only a little but its small deposit, as easily missed as a shot or two of semen, grows into something altogether different.

S&V learned the speed light travels away in the languid green classes in the too long days of September, afternoon lounging gently on their shoulders.

O, for him, the weeping jumps out of me at the most inopportune time.

Here I am with my dead broccoli, my strips of ginger chicken. Touch a napkin to my lips. Imagine I am cleansed.

TELL ME WHAT I HEAR THROUGH A TELESCOPE THE WRONG WAY

Here I open my eyes on the day you do not come home.
Now it is winter, and my washed hand smokes in the winter air.

This would be the place obligation and desire have no quarrel,
the calm of a leathery sea. 16 years after you crossed over
into this world.

The curtain flutters as though dropped
through the fingers of someone not there, Elvis Presley perhaps,
with those spaghetti legs and gold trousers, unquellable nigger legs

on a white boy, his never-again drips of hair another era away.

A stylus skips in an unimportant
corner of my thoughts:

here I convince myself of hope — crazy, and complete, and all:

I think I hear my daughter take my heart
with a smoking hand

ALWAYS LEANING THROUGH THE EDGE OF MYSELF AND FEELING NOWHERE

How when daytime comes to extinguish the night do we know the
moment, do we say, now, now we are
completely changed;

the time Samantha ate a mouthful of guitar and I slept with her in the
hospital, folded to a linoleum chair; the wall where my head kept
hitting I would later decide to call a pillow.

Through a nearby window of the past, a child's face, black eyed, intent,
and the surprise that it is my own, or a face much as my own:

the child, not a man or woman just yet,
discovering the shock of the first orgasm, and coming back from
that place, becoming a thing again, sentient, then the smell of lemon
oil, the dusty piano.

How then the body lies open-handed in the indolence and beauty of
perfect sleep.

For me, the problem in all this well-phrased nostalgia is this: real life,
and it is always rushing towards me, like a wasp
the more it is pushed away.

Truly, I confess it, I came of age in an oxbow.
I had walked into the foothills and taken off my clothes. Warm mud,
intricate with trails of insects.

There is no other English for I fucked it and I
fucked it,
and found no relief; what boys are reduced to in the time before
women.

When her time would wait no more, Samantha left a tampax
wrapped in tissue, a little bun
on the windowledge. The bathroom
with the smell of steeped blood
behind the door.

Then the way a human person becomes aware of himself when he is
being watched.
I looked up from my spent poem to a cliff which will always be there
but also here.
There I find the horse on two thick legs fingered with veins.

Then the eye of the horse, a flash of judgment, blue and deadly
as the pools where old plutonium decays.

I pull my muddy penis from all that's beneath me. My daughter flies
right through me, her wild corona of hair or mane, call it what you
will.

And the memory is seared by this light that finds the crack in things.

So the old fear or shame is once more upon me, I am no longer
certain of the term,
the knowing there is no one I can turn to and ask, am I a man?

OCCIPITAL, PARIETAL, SPHENOID, FRONTAL,
TEMPORAL, ETHMOID

Rain when it touches the face like the ends of swimming hair.

I do not easily forget such precision; how naturally
the eight bones of her skull came apart, how they
flowed

through her mother's hips which had previously known only the love
we rode one another to.

"You have your retirement for hobbies," her mother
called, and called my name
from her naked body on the stairs.

In the flooded basement of the duplex Richardson I
listened at my electric typewriter and went insane.

Adjusting that October night to redefine the decisive moment

I put my hand under her warm, wet, five-minute head,
terrified. Memory insists the room was white, or maybe green.

The room where I smoked and passed out. Winter fire flared across
the wall like a kind of intelligence. I could not understand anything

as blurred as the future,

the passionless efficiency with which a birthday
candle would one day set fire to her hair.

The way an orchid becomes part of a tree, I carried my daughter those
years.

The days I ran with her down the long hall and circled the fireplace in
a room that smelled of fish.

Her mother brought home her breasts, milk letting down through her
brown silk blouse.

The news detached itself from its paper and rose up the chimney.
“If you loved me, you wouldn’t write that poetry anymore.”

Years distant. The far and peaceful end of a Sunday.

In the untamed street the wind-chime now peeling,

the afternoon paper
wrapping late spring peonies, a dripping

of petals on the unwashed stairs of
the other house.

This has all been true and passing time makes it no different.

Tell me what a father is.

Tell me to let go: the exact way a Siamese fighting fish will turn and
rip its own image to pieces.

Jack Hodgins / MRS FENNEL IN WAGGA WAGGA

"You are flirting with the waiter again," said Mrs Fennel's son, though he'd barely glanced up from his chop.

Mrs Fennel laughed, and said loudly enough for the waiter to hear, "At eighty-three I'm glad of attention from *any* good-looking man."

She was sure that her son did not care enough to be properly scandalized. His head would be filled with Jackie Chestnut's sheep. She almost said, "*Must* you eat so fast? And with your elbow on the table!" But she didn't want the waiter to make a story out of her in the kitchen. Australians could be appallingly quick to jeer.

"A person mentions her age because she can't quite believe it," she explained. She bit into a cherry tomato and felt it explode in her mouth. "And because there is so little else to boast of."

"Yes," George said. "You're well past the age where people brag of their children."

Oh, George! She had never boasted about her only child. When mothers had exchanged competing anecdotes she'd remained silent. She had tried once to crow about the infant George, but had not liked feeling dishonest.

She worked at her salad, while George hacked off slices of lamb to chomp down. Because she had taken a dislike to the smell of sheep fat, she now confined her eating to fresh vegetables, and sometimes fish. In Wagga Wagga she would lose weight.

She was already slim, had always been a tall slim woman. She was still remarkably straight. Nothing about her had gone soft with age. Her long face, which had never been considered pretty, had become quite handsome in recent years. When she saw herself in a mirror she sometimes thought: You'd make a good-looking sixty-year-old man, if you threw away the pearls.

It was obvious she'd make a far better-looking man than her husband had been. Or her son George. Pale, pudgy George was in fact sixty. Or sixty-one, she supposed. (George's son, however, had

inherited her eyebrows, and long strong bones. A good-looking young man, who caused female heads of every age to turn for a second look. She had shocked a tour group in Florence by introducing him as her gigolo. He'd gone along with it, bless him. He'd even said, "We're thinking of marriage." So that everyone laughed and noticed how they looked so much alike.)

As soon as George had mopped up his plate with the remaining bread, he pushed back his chair (wiping sheep grease from his mouth with a linen serviette) and glanced at his watch. "Jackie will be by in five minutes, to pick me up."

"But you'll take the time for a cup of coffee?"

"His wife'll have the tea on." He folded the serviette and placed it on the table. "If you want dessert, then you must order yourself some dessert, Mother." He glanced around the dining room. "If your waiter friend hasn't lost interest."

"I can't imagine the attraction," she said. "Day after day."

"Jackie and I were friends as boys. There's much catching up to do."

"Have you discovered you have the soul of a farmer after all these years? Have you dreamed all your life of mucking out sheds?"

"You should glance over the dessert menu before the waiter arrives."

"Are you thinking you made a mistake, not following him? Are you planning to emigrate now, at your age? Perhaps you'll not return one evening and I'll have to fly home by myself, to explain to your children."

He had been this tight-lipped as a child. He had resisted learning to talk — she believed it was because he feared he might give something of himself away. "I think you should invite Jackie Chestnut to join us for coffee and pie. Before you run off to play at boys amongst the sheep."

He narrowed his pale eyes at her. "You've had a long day. I've driven you up and down every road around this countryside."

"Dust. Heat. Flies. Dead kangaroos flung to the side."

"And tomorrow, we can drive to Canberra."

"Canberra is hardly Rome. Canberra is not Stockholm. I have not paid for the two of us to fly seventeen hours through the sky only to sit

in a dull bush town a million miles from nowhere."

"What you mean is, you're bored. You want to poke at poor Jackie, to amuse yourself."

She ignored this. "I shall go out to the street when he arrives," she said, reaching for the walking stick which she carried in memory of a fall in San Francisco. "He cannot avoid me for ever."

Edna Fennel would prefer to be travelling with her husband, of course. But Martin Fennel had died eight years before — suddenly, in the middle of lunch. She'd eventually recovered from the shock, more or less, but did not like discovering that she was alone. Her parents had gone long ago. And her only brother. George lived half a continent away in Ottawa, and she seldom saw the grandchildren, who were already grown up and lived in the Ottawa Valley as well. Mrs Fennel stayed on in the small house she and her husband had bought when they'd retired to Vancouver Island.

She and Martin Fennel had travelled a great deal together after his retirement. London. Barcelona. Rome. After his death she wished to travel still, but would not do it alone. She would not attach herself to one of those tours, where artificial and temporary friendships sprang up on bus rides, followed by Christmas cards and vague invitations from people whose faces you could barely remember. She would not set out on her own — train schedules and foreign money confused her, customs officials frightened her so thoroughly that sense deserted. She recalled one old widower on a cruise to Alaska — the last trip she and Martin had taken before his death. Mr Whisker, his name was. He'd gone ashore with the rest of them in Ketchikan, but at the end of the day he'd somehow got on the wrong ship — heading home, while theirs was still travelling north. It had cost the poor old fellow a thousand dollars to have himself flown up from Vancouver to rejoin them. And he had looked so foolish — looked as though he *felt* so foolish. His wife, he'd said, had been the one to make arrangements. Without her, he turned in circles.

So she'd fallen upon the idea of treating her grandchildren to trips they could not afford themselves. George's children had gone nowhere in their lives. They were all in their twenties — Carola, Richard, Eleanor. She'd asked them in order, one a year. No one had

refused, though Eleanor had insisted on Scandinavia rather than Greece. Thus Mrs Fennel had discovered an effective manner of guaranteeing herself a familiar and patient companion. Being related, they were willing to tolerate her weaknesses. It did not hurt that they were also grateful.

She allowed them to choose from a list of possible destinations. Carola had been content with a cruise down the Saint Lawrence and up the Saguenay to hear beluga whales singing around the ship. Richard, however, had been more ambitious: architectural splendours of Italy. Eleanor managed to have their Scandinavian tour extended beyond Helsinki to Leningrad, Moscow, and Kiev. For her second trip, Carola had looked over the new list Mrs Fennel had prepared — New York, New Orleans, Edinburgh — and said that she had always wanted to visit Argentina. She was a married woman by this time, with a small child, but she would not mind leaving husband and daughter behind for Argentina — whereas, she could save New York for a time when she and Geoff might go there together.

But Mrs Fennel would not put herself in a position where she was forced to witness extreme poverty, or to listen to mothers speak of children who had disappeared in the time of the military dictatorship. She suggested Ireland instead. London. Even Tokyo.

It was while Carola hesitated that George Fennel, listening in, had said, "I would not turn down Ireland myself. Or London either, for that matter," and laughed awkwardly. Mrs Fennel was a guest in his house at the time, but had not responded. After all, imagine travelling with George! It had never occurred to her that he might want to leave his boring little box of a house in Ottawa, or his monotonous routine of bowling and wood carving. He was, she thought, content.

In Dublin with Carola, however, George occasionally nagged at her thoughts. Over breakfast at Mrs Fitzgerald's B and B one morning, she said, "I'm afraid I lay awake all night worrying about your father. I keep thinking I should have pushed him harder to go to university. He might have done more with his life. Instead of working day and night in that store."

Carola threw herself against the back of her chair. "I can't believe it! Still worrying — in your eighties! — about whether you've been a good enough parent."

"Well, naturally!" said Mrs Fennel. "One day your little girl will tell a lie about where she's spent the night and you'll wonder what difference you might have made if you'd turned down this one little trip. You will always be in the wrong."

"I'd rather hear you say it will end," Carola said. She pushed her fork into cooling scrambled egg. "I'd decided to give it seventeen, eighteen years."

Mrs Fennel said she suspected that was the reason marriage ceremonies were invented. And graduation exercises. So that parents could go home and tell themselves *There, it's over, they're on their own, I'm not going to think about anyone but myself from now on*. "Fifty years later they are still wondering if they'd be punished with fewer disappointments had they done a better job as a mother."

Carola regarded Mrs Fennel from beneath a frown. "Dad disappoints you?"

"I meant on their behalf. You go on wanting to give them the world." Mrs Fennel pushed the great chunks of deep-fried potato to the back of her plate. "Of course in your poor father's case — he has never striven to achieve much."

"We love him as he is," Carola said, smiling. "He's a good, kind man." She kept her eyes on her plate. She was not enjoying this. "You haven't spent any time with him to speak of since he was a boy."

"That is precisely what I've been thinking. Don't imagine I haven't noticed how hurt he is, that I've taken his children on my trips and never invited him."

"He has always said that he'd like to make one journey in his life — Australia."

Of course he would want the farthest. "I am too old for Australia."

"A childhood friend — someone who left when they'd barely grown, but has written ever since. He would like to visit Jackie Chestnut on his sheep station, he said. To catch up."

She'd supposed that it wouldn't kill her, this once, though plodding George would be hardly an ideal travelling companion. He would certainly not be so demonstratively grateful as her grandchildren. Nor would he be so capable as the children, when foreign currency confused, or customs officials became offensive, or tour guides were lost. He would consider her perfectly capable — his

mother, after all. He might even be confused by all of those things himself. She would have to train him to take over settling the bills, figuring out the confusing business of tips — but she would never be able to relax about it, as she did with the children. Still, she'd approached him about the matter, suggesting a week at the slot machines in Reno. "I know people who fly down twice a year."

He had not fallen for Reno. No doubt he suspected there would not be a second chance. The name of Jackie Chestnut was brought up. Yes, she remembered him, a scrawny redheaded kid. That big family — poor as mice — off the road to Ferguson Falls. The sheep station was not far from Canberra, he'd said, he was sure she would like Canberra, she could stay in town if she preferred and not even set foot on Jackie Chestnut's property.

"Good God!" she'd said. "What would I do in Canberra?"

It is not even Canberra, she wrote to her eldest grandchild. It is beyond Canberra. A small hot town out in what they call the "bush" but which is actually brown rolling hills with only a few clumps of spindly trees.

She hadn't intended to offend anyone last night, she wrote. You know how mischievous I am inclined to become if I'm bored! I thought only that I would sit your father's friend down at our table and allow him to discover that I was not someone to be avoided. I wanted to see what had become of Nellie Chestnut's son. I wanted to discover why your father wished to spend so much time with a fellow I remember as not very interesting at all.

The waiter had requested that they lower their voices. How was I to remember that Nellie Chestnut shot herself when her son ran off to New South Wales? How was I to guess that he would be furious to hear me say that the only thing I remember about his mother was that she had been a little disturbed. In the head, I meant. I meant only that he should not blame himself. (She was a filthy housekeeper, too, I remember. Her shack smelled of chamber pots, with a minefield of rubber boots and toys to stumble through. I did not mention this, however, since it was entirely possible that he had married someone exactly like her.)

Of course she was curious about this farm she had not been allowed to see. She was equally curious about his Mrs Chestnut, who had not yet shown her face in town. *You know that I never hesitate to ask questions. People are generally flattered to be asked about themselves. But Jackie*

Chestnut seemed to think I was putting him through the third degree. Your father says it is because I adopt this silly approach that appears to be almost flirting, when I wish to make others believe that I am interested in them. Of course I didn't care two hoots what Jackie Chestnut thought (flirting at my age!) but apparently this was something his mother had objected to. She thought it was disgusting for a friend's mother to talk to a newly-grown boy as though she found him of interest. He could not come home from visiting George without enduring a cross-examination about my behaviour.

Of course I was horrified. I was only showing an interest, I explained. It was because George was so uncommunicative. It was because your father would not allow me to discover anything about himself, anything private or personal. He kept himself bland, so that he could hide from me. I imagined I might find a way to him through those friends who were allowed to see what I was not. Apparently my efforts were not appreciated.

Afterwards, he'd told her that she was doing it still. "Put poor old Jackie under the spotlight." He mimicked her: "Has George demonstrated talent in the shearing shed, Jackie?' 'Are you sure George hasn't got his eye on your wife?' Couldn't you see how you were annoying him?"

"If what you say is true," she'd said, "you might save us all a great deal of trouble by being a little more communicative yourself. Then I wouldn't find myself wondering how much I have never known about my own son."

"There is nothing to know," he told her. "Be content with that. No amount of grilling will reveal that you've produced a human being who is any more remarkable than mud."

She told him that she no longer looked for signs of distinction in him, that she'd given that up half a century ago.

"Why did George get home so late last night, Jackie? You know he is useless at the store when he's been up most of the night. His father becomes impatient. A young man needs to pay attention to his work. Were you out as late as he was?"

"Oh yes, Mrs Fennel." His manner of speaking was so slow and absurdly serious you could shake him. "I was playing at a dance in Renfrew."

"George was with you, I imagine."

"For a while . . . yes . . . he was, yes."

"And afterwards I suppose you went somewhere nice, you and George and your dates. To chat. To have a sandwich and coffee. Does George drink an awful lot?"

"Not very much, Mrs Fennel. Just a little. But Mary-Lou likes her beer."

"Who is Mary-Lou?"

How else would she ever have learned anything? George would say "I dunno," or "Can't remember," making it clear that he did not consider it her business to know where he was or who he was with. He certainly did not consider it her business to know what he was thinking. Unfortunately, Jackie Chestnut was to become almost as bad.

"Now tell me, Jackie. What do you think George's chances are with that Wilson twin? Do you think they are serious, Jackie? Do you think they are in love? Of course he'll never tell me, I'll be the last to know, I would be the last to know if he'd got a promise of marriage out of Princess Margaret Rose. Do you think he will marry Janet Wilson?"

The scrawny, dirty, red-headed little boy had grown up to become an awkward lanky youth, the skin of his pale face always peeling, it seemed. The rims of his eyes always red. He'd found work in a lumber yard, stacking two-by-fours onto delivery trucks. He played an accordian at old-time dances, though not very well. Soon after they'd started working, George and Jackie had bought a '38 Chevrolet which they used to go out on double dates but sometimes arranged to have to themselves. Jackie liked to visit an uncle who lived on a farm near Kingston — a real farm, with fields and healthy stock, not a one-cow dump scratched out of the bush like his mother's, with rusted car bodies and washing machines along the lane.

"Do you think George likes working at the store? His father says his mind's not much on his work but we can't get him to tell us what he's thinking about. Does he talk, Jackie? When you're out on a date, does he say what's going through his head?"

"He talks, Mrs Fennel. He's always talking. Janet Wilson says if he doesn't stop talking about himself she will call it off."

"Call what off?"

"She'll start going out with other fellows, she meant."

"So what does he talk about, then, if he tells you all his business?"

Does he tell you what he *thinks*?"

"Oh my goodness, I don't know, Mrs Fennel. I never remember that sort of thing, I hardly even listen I guess."

"Well, you're not going until you give me an opinion of this dress. Do you think it's pretty? I ask George what he thinks but he won't say. He thinks I'm an ugly old hag. What do you think, Jackie? Do you like the dress? Do you think I'm an ugly old hag?"

"There is nothing to know," George had always insisted. But of course things could not be as simple as that. No human being was entirely grey. No one went so far out of the way to appear grey unless there were frightening splashes of brilliant colour to be hidden. In George's case, she could believe there were only pastels, but would not be content until she'd seen them.

The thought frightened her a little. She did not like to stumble upon too many surprises while she was travelling. And here she was about as far as she could be from home. She hadn't made a friend in Wagga Wagga. She hadn't attached herself to a tour. She'd depended upon George and George had been interested only in that sheep station, from which she had been excluded.

Well, she would not remain excluded. Two days after the exchange in the dining room, Edna Fennel decided that she was being made a fool of. She had paid for his fare between Ottawa and Vancouver and for both their airfares between Vancouver and Sydney, she had paid for two bus fares between Sydney and Wagga Wagga, she was paying for two hotel rooms and meals in a town where she had found nothing of interest. This was not what she had forked out good money for. This was not seeing the world. Her grandchildren had never treated her this way.

Eleanor would say, "Now Gran, you mustn't get yourself worked up." Dear Richard would laugh: "So forget the boring old fart and find yourself a man who'll show you around. There must be rich old coots in that town wondering if all the good-looking women have died." Carola would frown, and worry about her father. In fact Carola said, when Mrs Fennel called Ottawa, "It doesn't sound like Dad to be so inconsiderate." Edna Fennel took this to be as good as a suggestion that she investigate. She lifted the telephone receiver again and called for a cab.

"He spends very little time here, actually, Mrs Fennel." Jackie Chestnut did not seem surprised to see her. Nor did he send her away, as George had suggested he would. He'd been out in the dusty yard when she stepped from the taxi, in the faint light of a single bulb which shone down from a scraggy eucalyptus tree, but led her to the door of the house. Roosting hens complained, and went flying off the verandah to make room for them to pass through. If it hadn't been for the corrugated metal water tank up on rusted legs by the corner, or the unfamiliar brilliant flowers beside the post, you might say that Jackie Chestnut had created here a copy of his mother's farm.

"Then where is he? Where has he been all these evenings?"

"It is not for me to say."

He ushered her inside a large kitchen, which was perhaps the main room of the house. Certainly she was not invited into anything that looked like a living room. Jackie Chestnut pulled out a chair for her at the long wooden table. Salt and pepper shakers stood at the centre. When he removed his battered wide-brimmed hat and placed it on the table between them, he ran a hand back over his nearly bald head — little of his wild red hair had survived.

"You know he would never give away a private thought to me if it killed him."

Jackie Chestnut sat down across from her and leaned forward. "Now the trouble with you, Mrs Fennel, is that you think giving birth to someone means you have the right to know what he thinks." As if his solemn drone were not bad enough, he had taken on his crazy mother's blunt and highhanded manner of speaking.

The kitchen might be a country kitchen of fifty, sixty years ago, she thought. She might have been sitting in Dolores Chestnut's kitchen. Boots were piled behind the stove. Coats hung on the wall. Striped wallpaper had been torn away beneath a window, a great irregular patch of fuzzy grey. Paperback books were piled on the linoleum in leaning stacks.

"You believe you have the right to see your expectations fulfilled," he said, "but that isn't the way it works. A man like George has the right to your respect as he is. Plain as an old boot."

"If you have a telephone I will ask the taxi company to risk their shock absorbers a second time on that road."

Before she had risen from her chair, however, Jackie Chestnut's wife came in from outside. She was a broad red-faced woman in a striped low-necked blouse which exposed much of the crepey flesh of her bosom. She kicked off her boots at the door and padded across her kitchen in bare feet. "You'll not leave without a cup of tea," the woman said, and rubbed her large hand down her blue-jeaned hip before sticking it out for Mrs Fennel to shake. "Welcome." Then she lifted a kettle from the stove and held it beneath the water tap over the sink. "I've been out settin' traps," she said. "Something's gettin' me chooks."

"It may be that there is a widow he has decided to spend his evenings with," said Jackie Chestnut, ignoring his wife. "A neighbour of ours. A Mrs Darby."

"Amelia Darby," Mrs Chestnut said, setting the kettle back on the stove.

"Good lord! George?"

"Amelia Darby owns a beaut station just back of the hill," said Mrs Chestnut, settling herself in the chair at one end of the table. She spoke with a broad accent, as Jackie did not. *Beaut sty-shun jus' backa the heel*. "I reckon she's got the grandest house this side of Temora."

Jackie Chestnut shrugged. "Or, it may be that he has made a new mate who takes him drinking nights with the blokes at the servicemen's club. Kirby Masters, say."

"Amelia's hubby died at sea, poor thing. Off Queensland coast. Washed in half-eaten by sharks, he was. This was years ago now."

Mrs Fennel decided to ignore the woman. "I believe you are withholding something from me. He has been coming out here to shovel the manure for you, to fix fences or saw up pieces of meat or weed the turnips. Pretending that he had the nerve to emigrate when you did, and take his chances with the soil of a foreign country."

There were crumbs on the table, which Mrs Fennel found herself gathering into a cupped hand. Then, when she realized what she had done, there was the question of what to do with them. Jackie Chestnut and his wife both looked at the little collection in her palm.

"Or it may be that he is investigating a little business that is for sale in Gundagai after hours, when the present owner Donald Beston has the time to explain things."

"It's clear I won't hear the truth from your lips." Mrs Fennel turned over her hand and let the crumbs drop to the table, where she gathered them into a small neat pile and left them alone.

"You do not deserve to hear the truth, Mrs Fennel," said Jackie Chestnut. "To deserve the truth you would have to have been content with George just as he wanted to be. But you interfere. It may be that he has found a lady who has taken a fancy to him, a lady who is not exactly beautiful shall we say. A homely woman, of mixed race. It may be that he is in anguish about taking this crippled woman home to live in Canada with him."

Making a sort of grunt behind her closed lips, Mrs Chestnut nodded. A quick little chop with her head.

"George would not hesitate a moment, since my good opinion has never mattered to him."

"But you are not the only person who has an opinion to express, Mrs Fennel," said Jackie Chestnut. "You are not the only person with something to say about George's behaviour."

Mrs Chestnut leapt up, and went to the cupboard where she started setting down cups and saucers along the counter. "He is a parent, you seem to forget," she said, "like yourself." She tossed a handful of leaves into the tea pot. "His children will have their opinions. Carola, Richard, and — what is it? — Elizabeth? He may be disappointed that they have not become the sort of adults he might have wished for."

Mrs Fennel glared at the wide back of the woman, who ought to have known that this was none of her affair. "A person could not hope for better children," she said. "They're polite, considerate, and intelligent. And it is Eleanor. There are no Elizabeths in the family."

"Yes. Well," the woman said. "They grew up mostly without a mother, didn't they? They have had trouble settling down, he tells us. They have not been quick to find careers, or someone to love. Perhaps they do not feel lovable, he thinks. He thinks he has failed to let them know how he cares for them. He finds it difficult, you see, to show."

"Mavis." Jackie Chestnut seemed to be warning his wife against saying more. "He has not said any of that to us."

"He has said enough," the woman insisted. "I can read between

the lines, if no one else can."

Mrs Fennel addressed herself exclusively to George's childhood friend. "So you have introduced him to some woman, Jackie. Someone he's ashamed to bring out into the daylight where normal people can see. He wrote you that he is lonely, I suppose. Then you wrote to say that there is someone he might want to meet."

"That may be what happened, Mrs Fennel, but I'm not saying. Amelia Darby could be the one he is visiting at this moment, on Mullara Station. Or Kirby Master's drinking mates. Or Donald Beston's little business, for sale in Gundagai. A secret life, Mrs Fennel. Do you tell me that we don't have the right to a life that is entirely ours, however small it is?"

"I think you are as crazy as your mother was, if you must know the truth. I think transporting yourself across the globe has not been good for your brains. You can tell George, when he returns, that his mother is making arrangements to turn in her ticket for a more immediate date. He may wish to speak to me at breakfast about his own plans."

"You'll not go without your tea," Mavis Chestnut threatened. She held the kettle's handle from the underside, and poured into the pot. "You just sit where you are."

"Since there are lights coming up the track, you may not have to call for that cab," said Jackie Chestnut. Mrs Fennel could see for herself that headlights were making their way up the driveway. "He has borrowed my utility truck, you see. Once we've had a cup of tea, I will drive you both in to town."

George did not look like a man who had been secretly going over the books of a business for sale or visiting with a homely woman who'd taken a fancy to him. He looked as he'd always looked, grey and collected. Pudgy, pale, and calm. He was not even flustered to find her here. "Ah, Mother! Up well beyond bedtime. Could not stand another minute in that hotel, I take it. And Jackie has not run you off his property yet."

She could think of nothing to say to him. This man, her son, had kept himself a stranger for sixty years. And yet, there was something, some dark acid that rose within her to protest this, and everything. Could you say it was not love, this inability to bear the thought of being excluded? Could you say it was not love, that she wanted him to

make a little more effort on his own behalf?

"Mrs Fennel was interested in knowing where you have been," said Jackie Chestnut. "I needn't add that Mavis and I have been discreet."

As George Fennel sat down across the table from her, she saw that things were not about to change. His soft lips were set tightly together. If she pressed him, she would come off looking ridiculous. "I am no longer interested," said Mrs Fennel. "At least I am not interested in hearing it in this kitchen. If George wishes to tell me what he has been up to he can tell me when we are without an audience."

"There!" sang Mrs Chestnut, as though something had been accomplished here. She brought down a fourth cup and saucer out of her cupboard and carried them over to the table. Her bare feet squeaked on the floor.

If she had tried just a little harder when he was a boy might she have made a difference? Because it must not be pleasant to be someone who cannot speak his thoughts. A mother should be able to think of a way to make him trust the world enough.

"A nice cup of tea to warm our tummies before bed," said Mavis Chestnut, giving the pot a shake before pouring.

It seemed that while Mrs Chestnut poured tea George wished to study his mother's face from across the table. But when Mrs Fennel raised an eyebrow — she thought of it as an invitation — he looked away. She thought she'd seen a flash of sympathy in those pale eyes, she wasn't sure. She couldn't imagine what it might mean. She had never known what he was thinking, she didn't know what he was thinking now. He might have been the child of someone else — Dolores Chestnut. She could have decided right from the start not to take on any regret or blame for the disappointing fashion in which children grew up to disappoint. She might as well have decided to live her life for herself.

Coral Hull / FOUR POEMS

ROAD FROM HILLSTON TO COBAR, VIA MOUNT HOPE

a committee of apostle birds, tiny black eyes looking out at the world
from their group,
during a morning feeding, the grey flock eating amongst leaf littered
red soil,
by 1080 fox and rabbit poison, on the edge of a nature reserve, nature
reserved for us,
a pine covered ridge on the road from hillston, is assembled through
glimpses,
a little cemetery and a tennis court, in the middle of nowhere, like at
twin rivers,
where the women all brought cake on a saturday afternoon, while the
men got drunk,
too drunk to play tennis, one fell off the back of a ute and hit his
head,
his dog looked concerned, it was very boring,
blue bonnets, parrots, flash red, blue, 160 km south of cobar,
it is the face of the blue bonnet that is blue, with the sky washed up its
cheeks,
they have thrown a bucket of sky paint from timid cunning eye to
beak, wise parrot,
the little blue bonnet in the tall open mallee, on the ground, beneath
the trees,
or up in the trees at midday, or in the deep galaxy of night, extremely
quiet, hard to find,
a patch of painted sky thrown up, awash and finally rested on a
branch,
95 kms south of cobar, mallee ringnecks in the pine woodland

break the fatigue of the drive with colour, with a look like a started
paper fire,
they pause to drink at sunrise, unlit the feather is lit,
there is nothing as precious as a wild bird at this moment, the flare of
feathered colour,
the small squawks and workings of bird societies throughout the day
of perfect weather,
the winter rainfall triggered hormones in them,
the cracking of branch and seed on the moist forage trail, deep along
the shady ground,
coming into cobar, the last 30 km stretch, of white cotton, fleece of
the plant,
and sheep fleece turned dust red, gone to seed, brutalised sheep, on
the red clay,
hard rose quartz beneath the broken hoof, hurt cotton, soft sheep,
white-winged choughs gliding across the roads, eject their soft
parachutes,
spreading their tails like fans, fanning the red earth hard,
they scoot across the road, the ground black bird of open woodland
and scrub,
easy targets for shooters when they are not still and quiet, they fall
with insects in their beaks,
they say, *'we were only taking what we needed,'* precious sheep, precious
choughs,

EUROPEAN RED FOX (VULPES VULPES)

the black and white rooster whose tail feathers blew like emergency streamers,
puffed out his chest for the nervous hens and crowed all the short afternoon,
there was a starving fox prowling around, night comes so soon in august,
rock and tree sundials predict the short day ahead, hens go to the sheds early,
the ice that blows off the snowy mountains is a cool wind clock,
the european red fox was first released near melbourne for recreational hunting,
it is hunted still, hounded deeper into the inland from the snowy country,
in fifty years it was in western australia, driven towards the edge, widely spread,
slimline, on the red trot, like a ribbon blowing between trees and roots,
vulpes vulpes throughout the lightly wooded areas, rarely a life beyond four years old,
trapped, shot, run down and a lack of prey, they are exposed to this life in the full,
born to be hounded for four years, four years of the great disappearing act,
four years of flooded silence, four years of sunsets, aridity and drought,
they bring in their bright eyed cubs to face the small term, in a land that is hostile to foxes,
that striking red coat is one year into its sentence, its hunger inland on legs,

as it makes its way towards the desert marsupial, chook pen, the
wildfruit, the dying lamb
and roadkill carrion, it makes its way towards a darkness greater than
sun down,
it has learnt to be adaptable, by keeping its secrets close to the
crumbling edge,
in a land ruled by the minds behind machines that harvest wheat and
cattle,
it slithers along the same routes taken by the rainbow serpent,
prisoner to an island,
vulpes vulpes watches the extinction of the numbat and the black
faced rock wallaby,
it is witness to them being chopped up into dirt by transinternational
cooperations,
economical compost for big crop growers and animal harvesters,
one fox is blamed for the extinction of a nation's wilderness, yet it will
soon join them as nil,
as we turn everything into meat, the meat for us to eat and shit out,
it comes red with blood from ripped hemorrhoids, soon we are busily
shitting out foxes,
we bring in our buckets to the government offices, for the payment of
a bounty,
when proof of death is provided, the more elusive variety are poisoned
with 1080,
poisoning campaigns are carried out, by the politically correct, the
greenie,
biological control combined with conventional control, animal
murder is conventional,
for vulpes vulpes, slim red dogs, with soft white bibs, a long way and
time from europe,
one half grown cub was curled up in the middle of the road mid
morning,
an unsealed back road that no car had driven along for at least that day,
there is something about a pristine road that no-one has driven along,
that warm red dust that hasn't been disturbed, that an australian red
fox can curl up on,

COBAR AND BYROCK, N.S.W. LANDSCAPE DESCRIPTION

welcome to the cobar and byrock shires,
incorporating wooded undulating country, with rugged hills and dry
water courses,
the shire boundary is formed by the darling river in the north
and the lachland river in the south east,
much of the land used around the town district is for sheep grazing,
emus, echidnas, snakes, lizards, giant goannas, 200 species of bird,
including parrots, major mitchell cockatoos are common,
along with the eastern and western greys, the euro and the red
kangaroo,
fork tailed kites, and wedgetail eagle feeding on rabbits, kangaroos or
sheep,
in reservoirs and farm dams; heron, ibis, ducks, wanderers or even
gulls and terns,
other common birds include honeyeaters, wrens, robins and the
apostle bird,
a walk in the bush can reveal a suprising variety of wildlife,
one or two ranges of rocky hills dominate the landscape in the east,
flattening to sandy river plains in the west,
the water supply forms a 135 km pipeline to nyngan,
the floodplains are naturally treeless, saltbush and mitchell grass
communities,
here, the banks of the rivers and minor creeks are lined by red river
gums,
in the south and south east of the cobar shire, lie extensive areas of
mallee vegetation,
most of the district is covered by semi arid woodlands,

some common trees are bimbale box, red box, rosewood, behal, and mulga, vast expanses of wildflowers bloom in spring, before european settlement the area had a park like appearance with stretches of perennial native grasses scattered with trees and shrubs, more than a century later much of it is dominated by shrubs, such as turpentine, buddha, hopybush, puny and mulga, they are known as densities and have been insidiously increasing, creeping over the dune dominated lands, at the expense of pasture for livestock, warning; the increase in density of these woody weeds is the largest threat to sustainable pastoralism, land holders are now using fire to reduce woody weed densities, other methods being utilised are goat grazing, sage chemicals and clearing by mechanical means, where there is predominately the grazing of livestock, byrock, a small village 78 kms south east of bourke on the mitchell highway, named after the renowned 'rock-hole', a natural gilgai formed in a table of granite rock near the present site of the village, the old saying was '*meet you by the rock*', which gradually became '*bye-rock*' then later *byrock*, or more recently '*bye bye byrock*' or '*bye bye outback*,'

ROAD CONDITIONS WHEN IT WAS FLOODING AT BREWARRINA

winter rain affects the local roads from walgett to brewarrina
whereas flood water moves down slowly through the rivers,
seeping across the flat land, it whistles at the billabong's perimeter
and cuts the dirt roads off,
rain and flood; each have a different effect on the road's surface,
making roads impassable and places inaccessible, locals are frightened
of their own roads,
even in an eh holden station wagon, built for australian conditions,
the annual rainfall 352 mm, this decreases as you travel further west,
where rainfall is unreliable,
where there is a winter rainfall dominance, and prolonged periods of
low rainfall,
soon we are fully submerged, obsessed by rain and flood,

there is always the last road out of town,
it was a long stretch of road, would you do that stretch again?
we had a long dry stretch around december/january,
as long as a dry spell from broken hill and that stretch of road to the
accessible outback,
in the rain I learnt that the desert can turn damp and grey,
and the way in which the desert disappointed me in the cold, as
though it was now unwild,
but I spotted its crumbling dry edges just beneath the thunderheads,
in the untamed rain that followed, the washaway, flash flood and the
art of the 3 point turn,
*'don't touch the red clay on the sides of the roads,
or you'll slide into the table drain and get bogged,'*

dad woke up, *'more rain,'*
'fucking shut up will you,' he woke me
and wanted to buy emma a bottle of scent with a few scratchies
wrapped around it for her birthday. (*'get her a bottle of scent coral, women*
love scent')
and called homosexuals 'shirt lifters' so john, coming from melbourne
asked him, *'what about curtain raisers?'* (to dad this sounded pretty
serious)
and in reference to my second book from penguin, the one that
displayed red on the spine, dad said *'red's a pretty colour, the black*
fellas will like that,'
(meaning that the book should sell well in the outback)
well, I don't know about that,

road conditions;
caution, water is over the road at carter's swamp, please check with
the shire council
before traveling in goodooga or the weilmoringle area,
the shire workers are really pissed off, mud up to the axles, they're
buggered,
you've only got to smile at them and they'll throw a rock at you,
whilst doing nothing well,

meanwhile, birds are feeding in the floodways, coot, black ducks, wood
ducks, pelican,
white necked heron, sacred ibis, straw necked ibis, egret, seagulls,
grebes,
wedgetail eagles along the roads,
we are dodging black beetles around 11.00 am on the unsealed road to
coolabah,

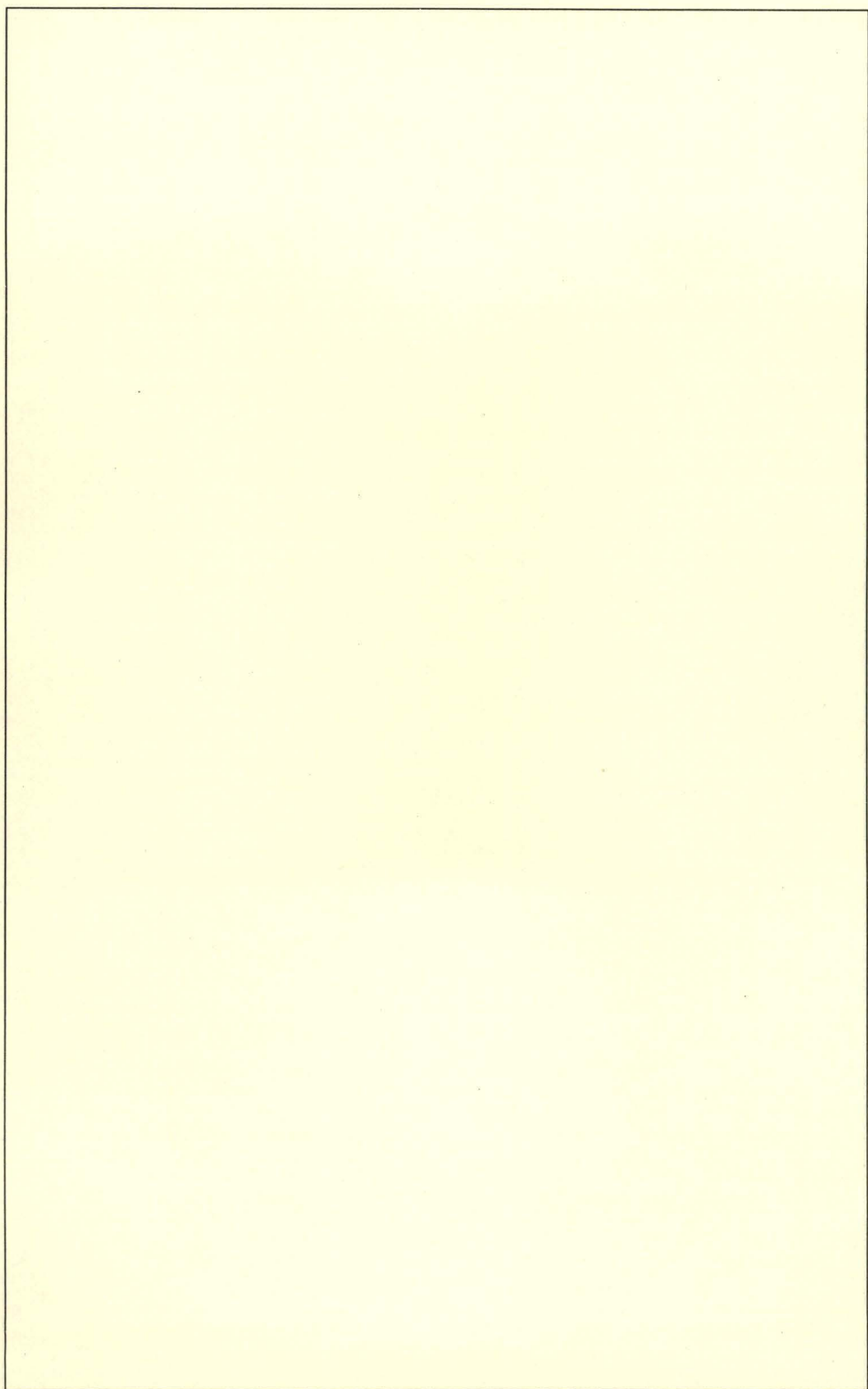
rainfronts are coming, in the way that the animals behave,
the wet red mud eating away at the bitumen, signposts toppling,
brown rivulets streaming over roads, graders along flood affected
causeways, flooding,
traffic hazard ahead, ahead of the rivers not ahead of the rain,
this rain will affect unsealed roads, whereas the river's flooding will cut
through the bitumen,
will create flood affected roads, will intersect and isolate,
worried mothers, stranded sunlight in the window glass of stranded
properties,
took me six hours to get to bourke from bre, trees placed in the
middle of the road,
to indicate where the big holes are, roads submerged and washaways,

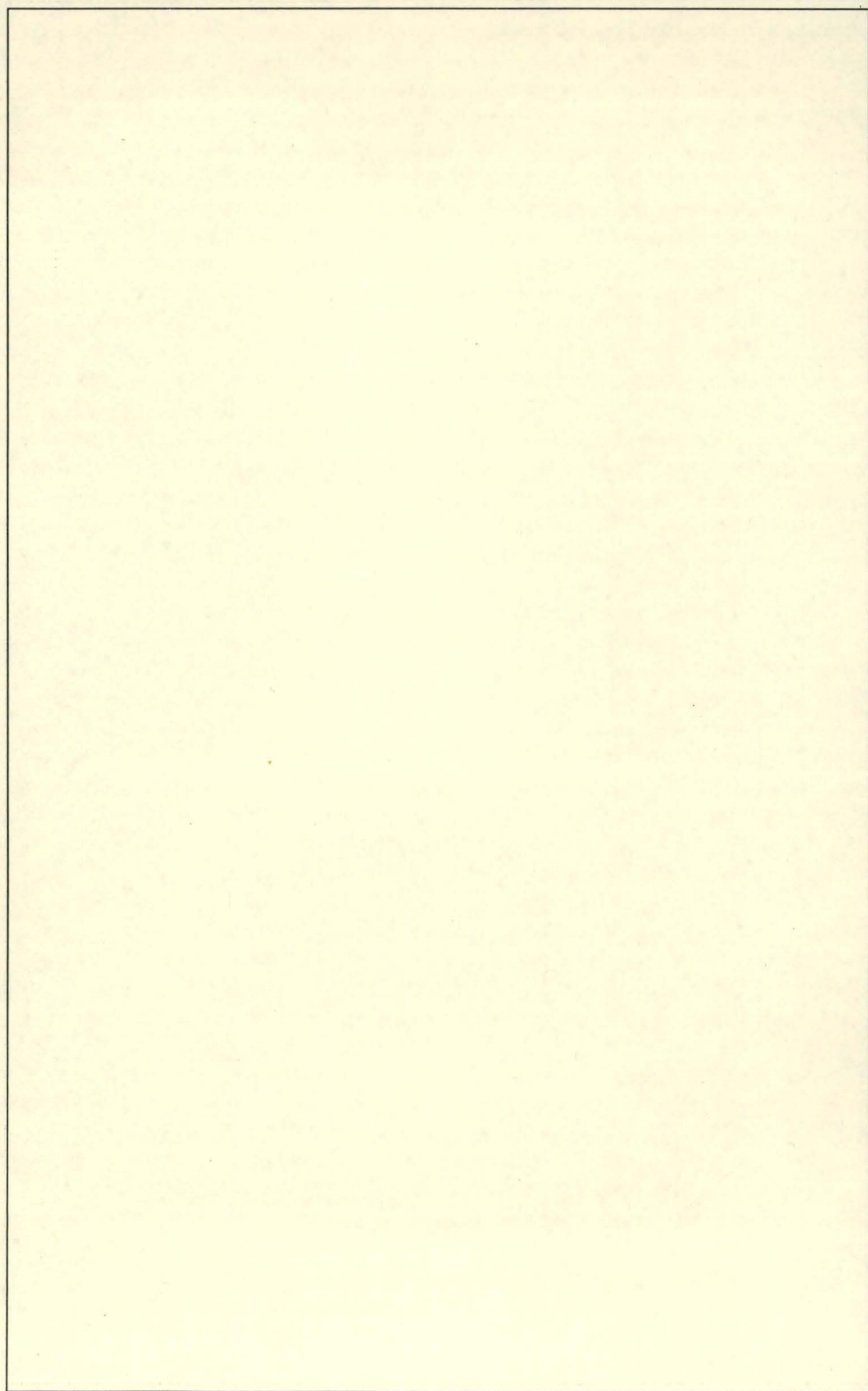
eddie's from the city, doesn't know any better,
put it into four wheel drive to go through a bit of horse piss on the
road,
but now the road is flooded, you can't see the ground, cloudy weather,
gary's from the bush, waited til it all dried up,
he'd been caught out before, mud up to both his ankles, sticky black
mud,

if it rains along this stretch we're up shit creek without a paddle,
big thunderclouds moving down across the tarrion,
the blue heeler's tail is low with moisture, a barometer for wet
weather,
in the summer she wags her tail in a more economical way,

cyclone; a clockwise circular motion, a flow of barometric winds,
a mini cyclone lifted everything, all our swags,

kevin laughed when a swag was lifted, until he found out that it was his
swag,
my father is underneath the old mattress with his mother, and seven
other brothers and sisters,
she prayed for all her children and covered all the mirrors,
my father is with his father and brothers, out in the great grey winter
storms,
holding pieces of rubber hose that had been chopped up for them
like a python,
my grandfather grasping the big knife, *'hold on tight or you'll get your
fucken arses fried,'*
as they all ducked down along the fenceline, holding onto their hats,
lightning striking like rain,
it killed five hundred head of cattle out on the cato and ten thousand
sheep,
striking the ground was easy for this kind of weather,
two aboriginal kids got blown away from the edge of the darling river,
lightning killed one and the other was unconscious for two days,
dad said, *'it was similar to rose street, when I went up to the hardware shop to
get a globe
for the toilet light and one of you kids switched the power on as I was fitting it,
I lit up like a blue flame, but I had rubber thongs on,'*





Alexandra Dikeakos

DRAWINGS AND COLLAGES



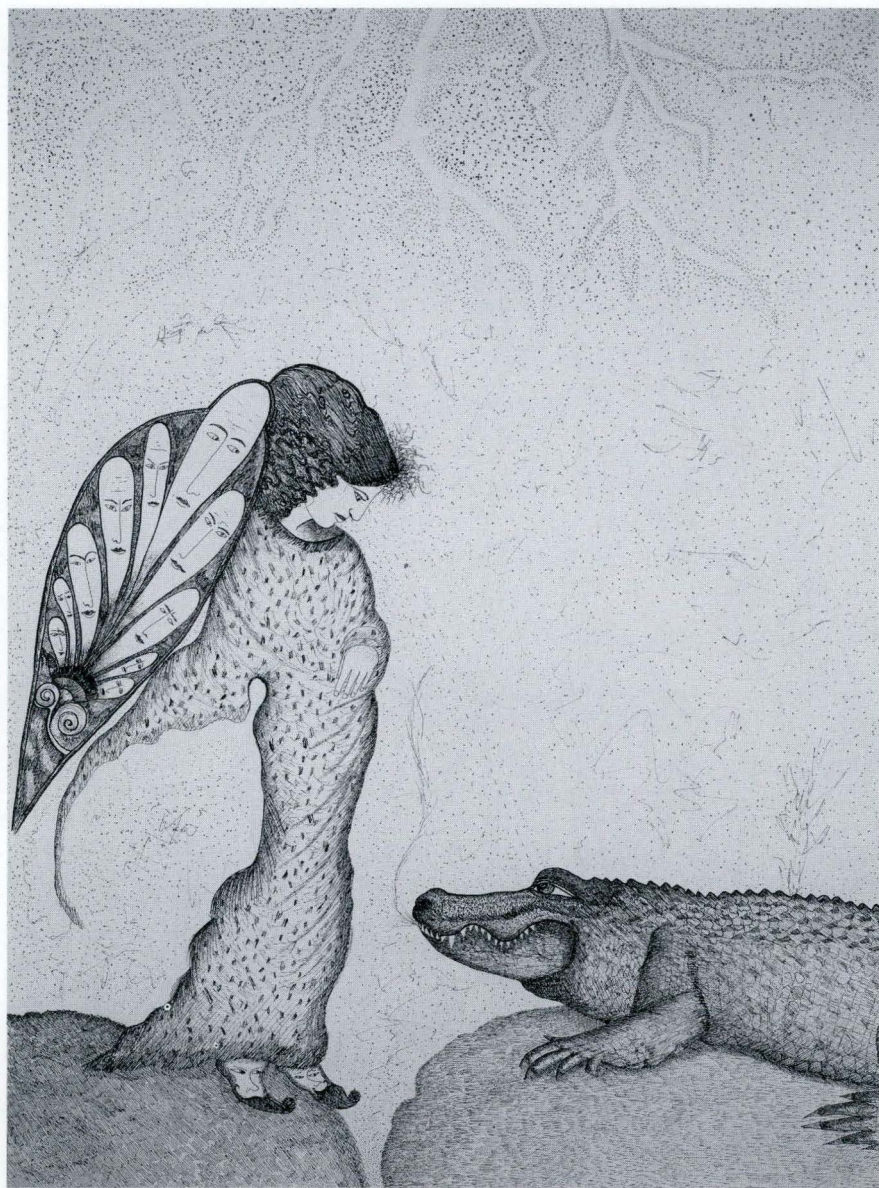


plate 2



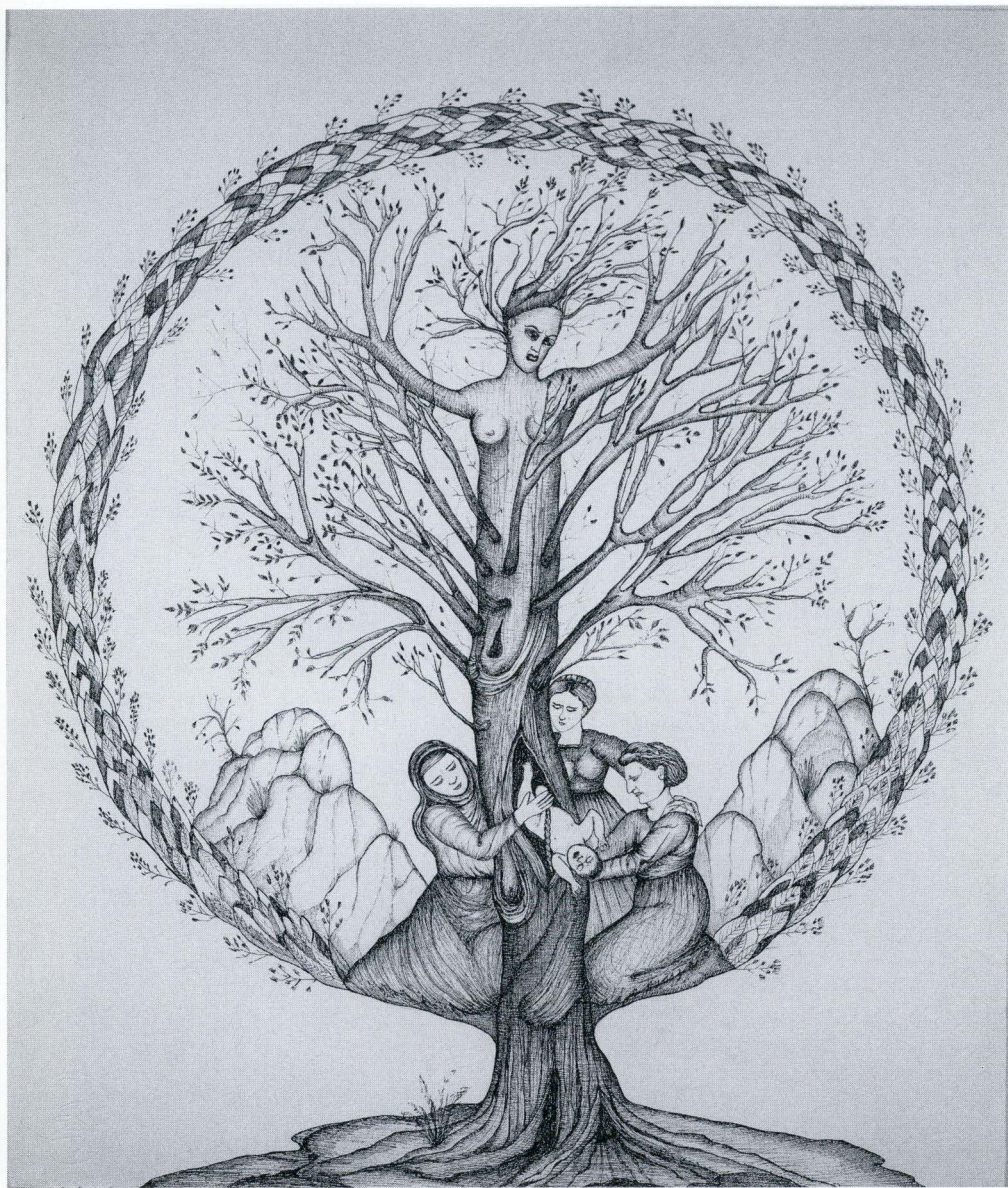
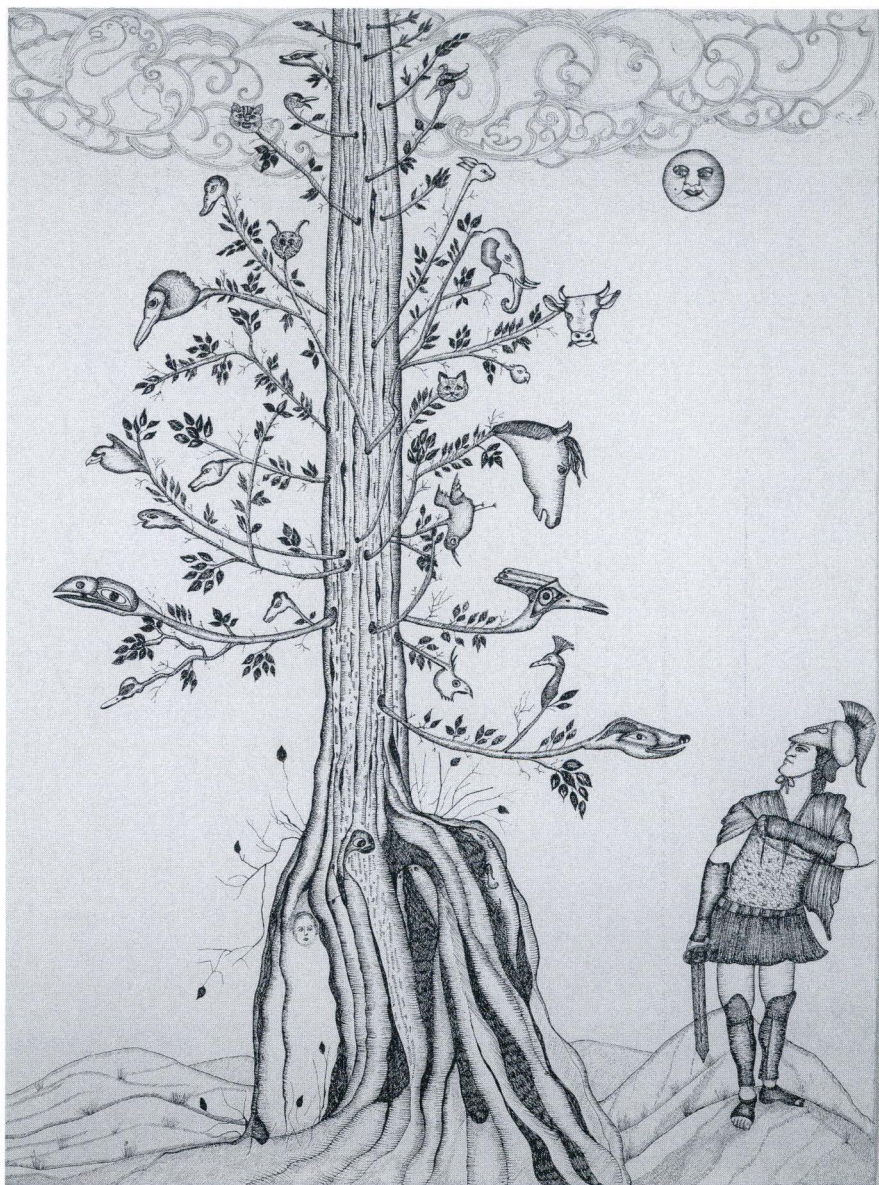
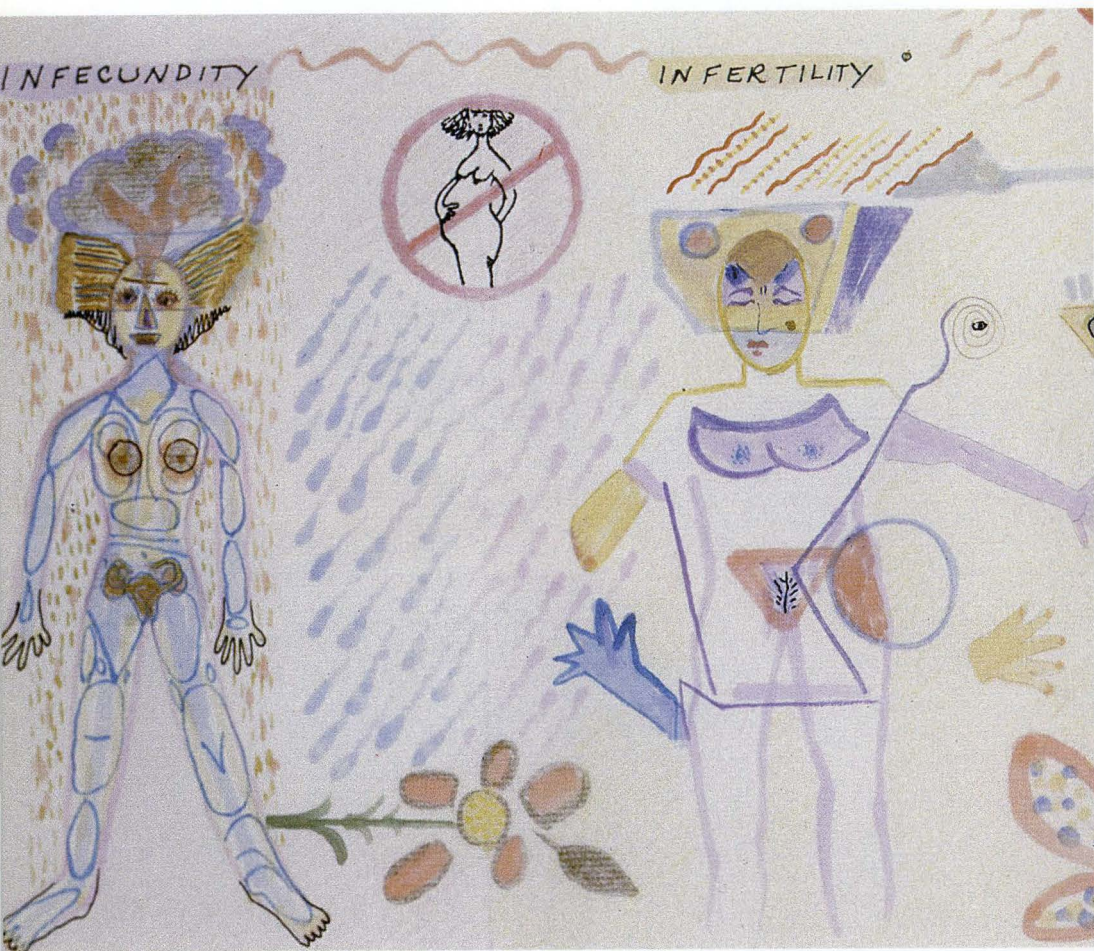
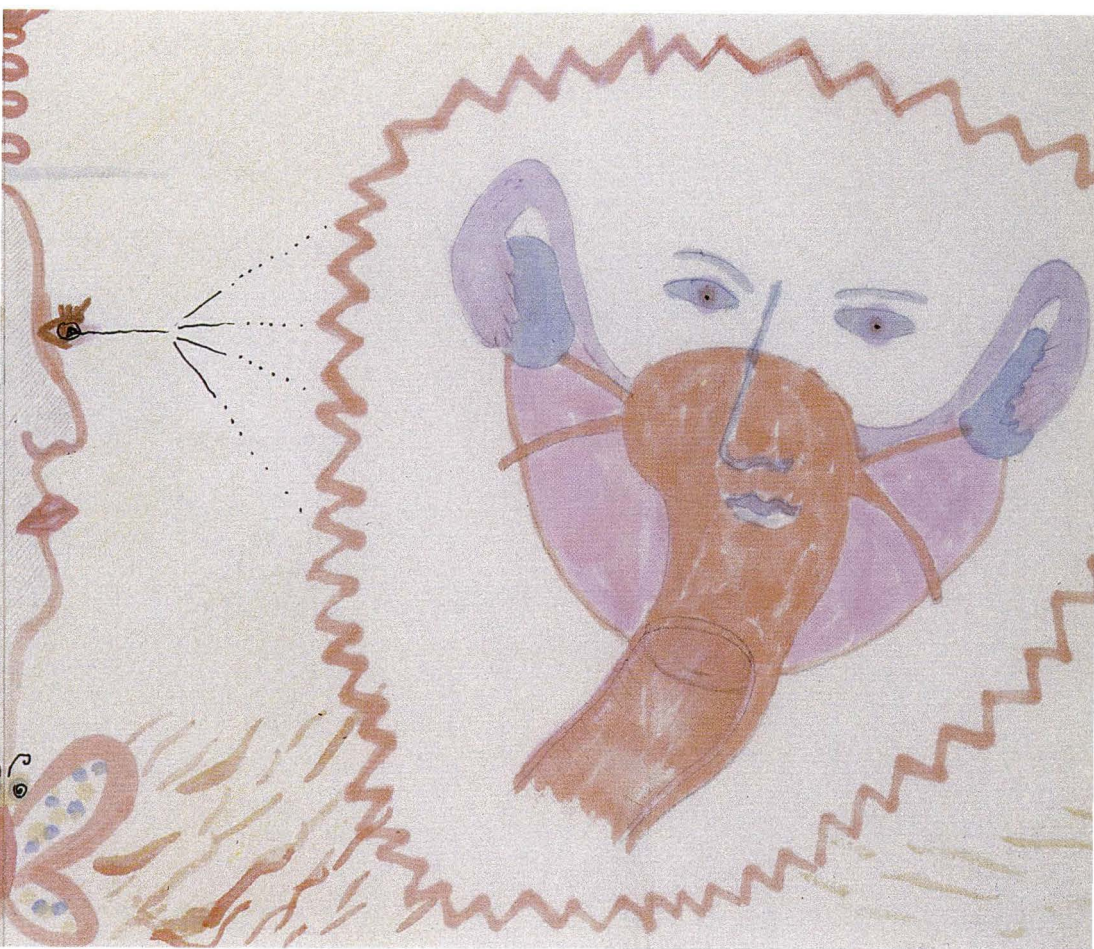
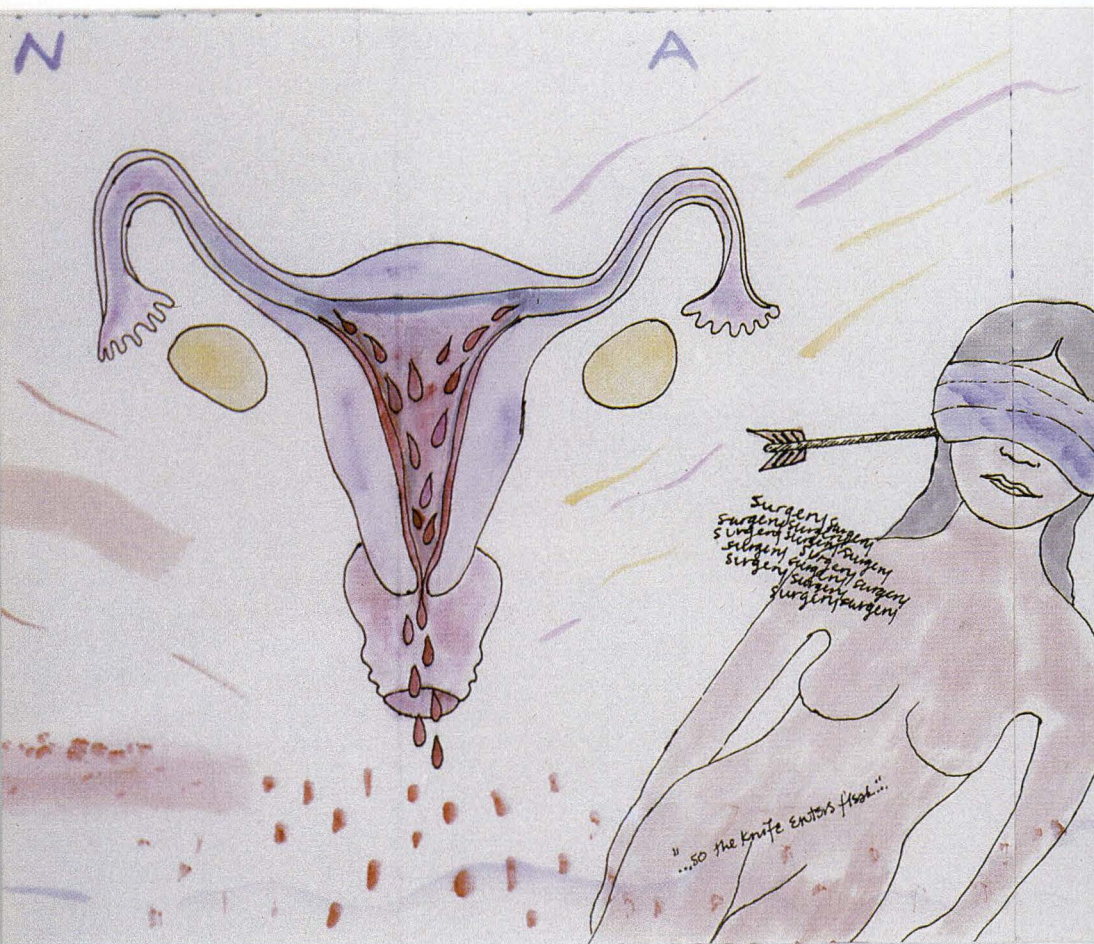


plate 4





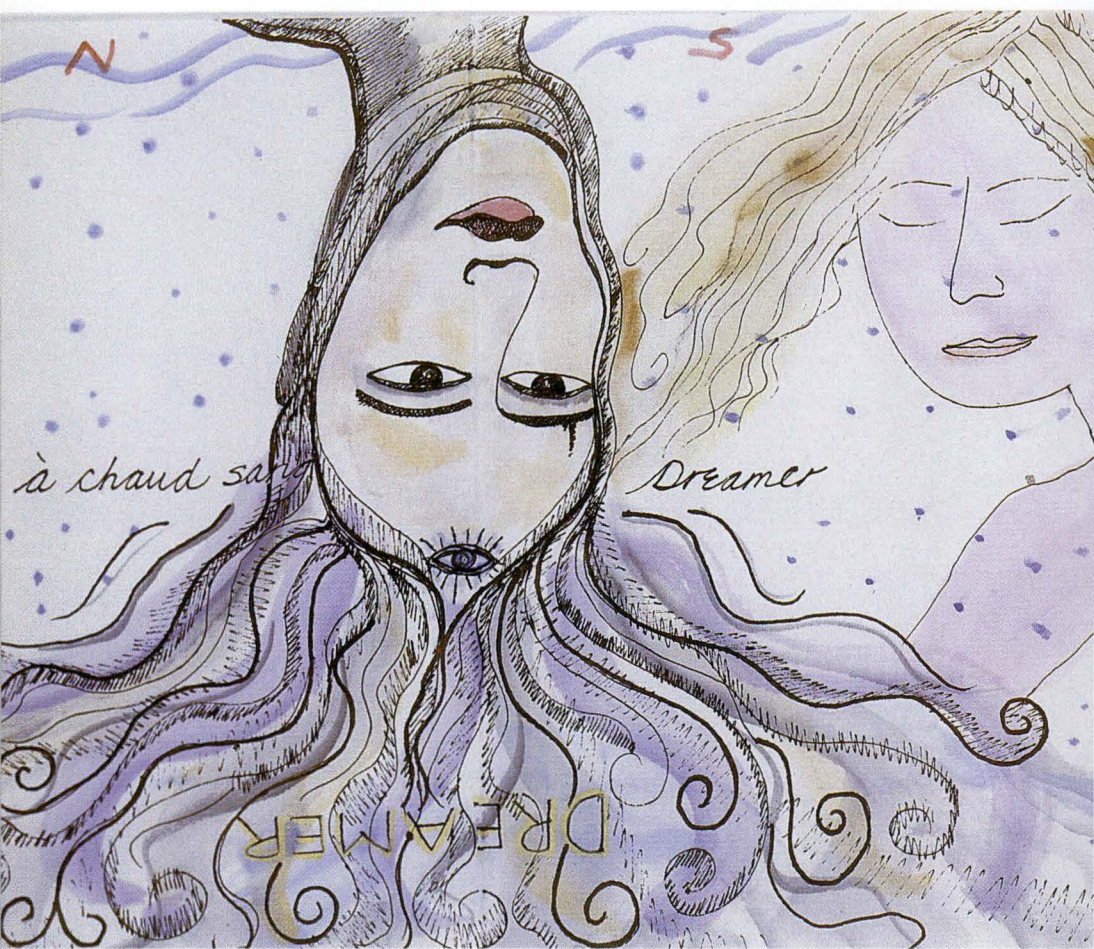












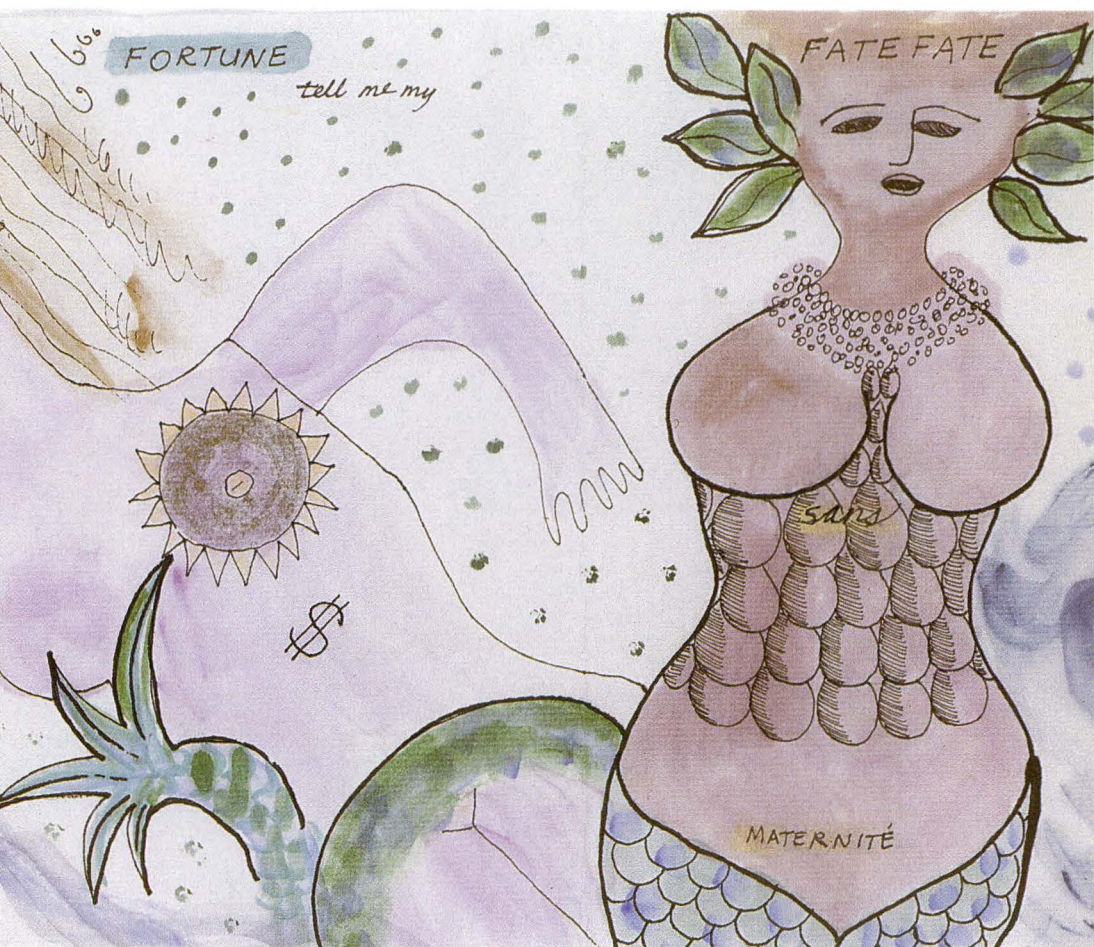




plate 14





plate 16

LIST OF WORKS

| | | | | |
|--------|-------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|------|
| 1. | Colossus | pen & ink, watercolour | 44" X 30" | 1990 |
| 2. | Crocodile Tears | pen & ink | 30" X 22" | 1988 |
| 3. | Couple | pen & ink, watercolour | 30" X 22" | 1997 |
| 4. | Birth Of Adonis | pen & ink | 26" X 22" | 1985 |
| 5. | The Oracle Tree | pen & ink | 30" X 22" | 1985 |
| 6/7. | Infecundity Infertility | pen & ink, watercolour | 7" X 18" | 1988 |
| 8/9. | Hormone Stimulations | pen & ink, watercolour | 7" X 18" | 1988 |
| 10/11. | Le Rêve | pen & ink, watercolour | 7" X 18 ³ / ₄ " | 1988 |
| 12/13. | Dreamer Fortune Fate | pen & ink, watercolour | 7" X 18" | 1988 |
| 14. | Al Neil's Forest | collage | 9.5" X 7" | 1997 |
| 15. | What are you left with? | collage | 9.5" X 7" | 1997 |
| 16. | Medusa | pen & ink | 18" X 14" | 1996 |

Alexandra Dikeakos — SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1994 — Paintings, Baird/Delano Art Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.
- 1990 — "North of the Border," Contemporary B.C. Artists, Whatcom Museum, Bellingham, Washington.
- 1988 — "It's Classical," Surrey Art Gallery, Surrey, B.C.
- 1987 — "Images and Objects V," Annual Vancouver Juried Exhibition, Community Arts Council of Vancouver, Vancouver, B.C.
- "Artropolis," Exhibition of Contemporary B.C. Art, Vancouver, B.C.
- 1986 — "Vancouver Young Artists 1986," Simon Fraser Gallery, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C.
- 1985 — "B.C. Women Artists 1885-1985," Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Victoria, B.C.
- 1984 — "Paintings," The Charles H. Scott Gallery, Emily Carr College of Art & Design, Vancouver, B.C.
- 1983 — "Printmaking in B.C. 1889-1983," Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Victoria, B.C.
- 1981 — "Couples," Optica Gallery, Montreal, Quebec.
- 1980 — "Young Contemporaries '80," London, Ontario Art Gallery, London, Ontario
- 1979 — "B.C. Artists' Show," B.C. Credit Union Building, Vancouver, B.C.
- 1978 — "The First Canadian Biennial of Canadian Prints & Drawings," Alberta College Art Gallery, Calgary, Alberta.
- 1977 — "Mythic Fantasy," Intaglio Hand-coloured Prints, 1973-1977, Surrey Art Gallery, Surrey, B.C.
- 1976 — "Prints & Collages," Pender Street Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS:

- 1996 — "Buddha Like," Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden, Vancouver, B.C.
- 1991 — "Paintings, Drawings, Prints," Bau-xi Art Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.
- 1982 — "Sesmographics & Iridescent Women," watercolours and prints, Granville Island Graphics, Vancouver, B.C.
- 1979 — Hand Coloured Etchings, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Victoria, B.C.

COLLECTIONS:

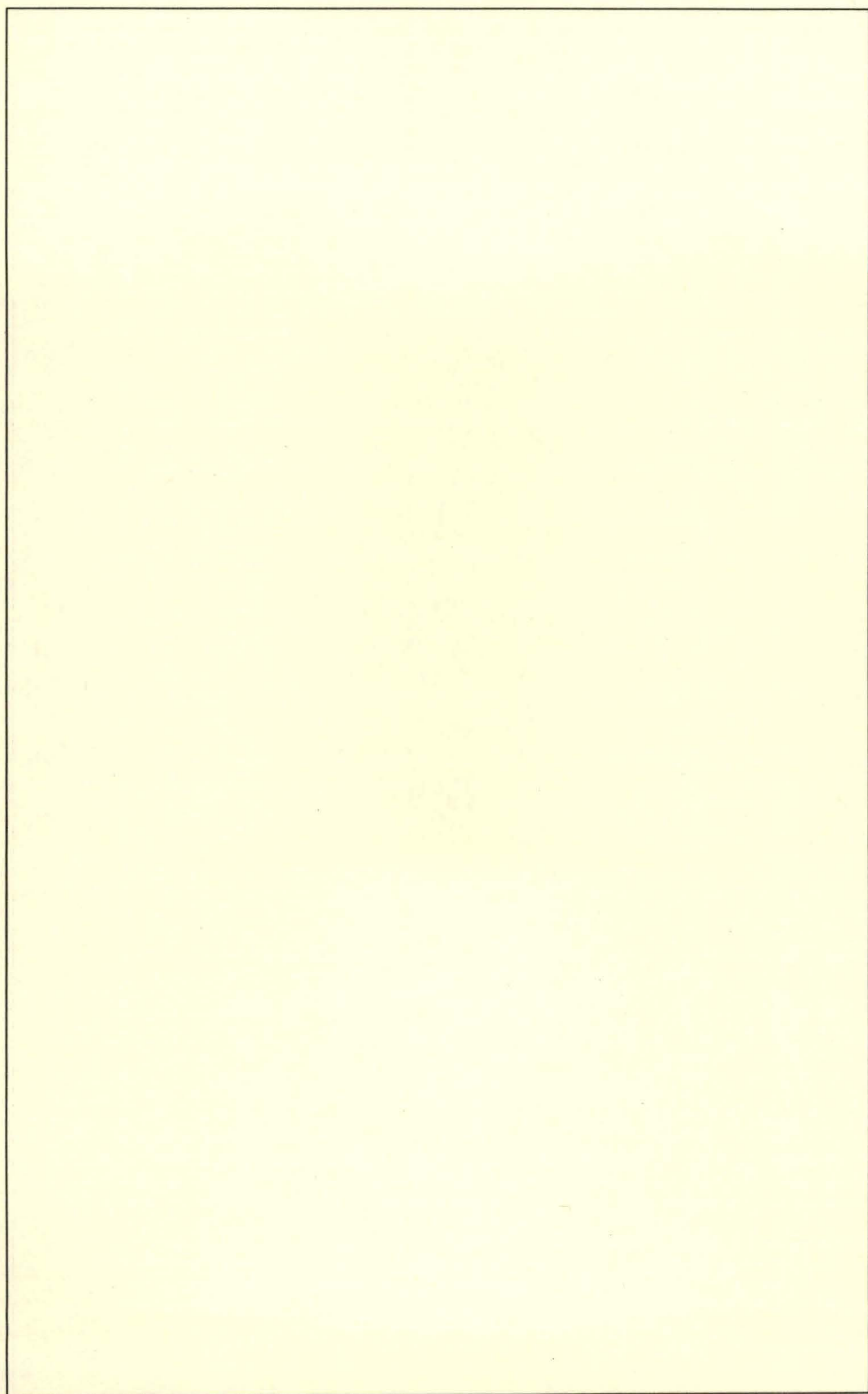
Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Victoria, B.C.

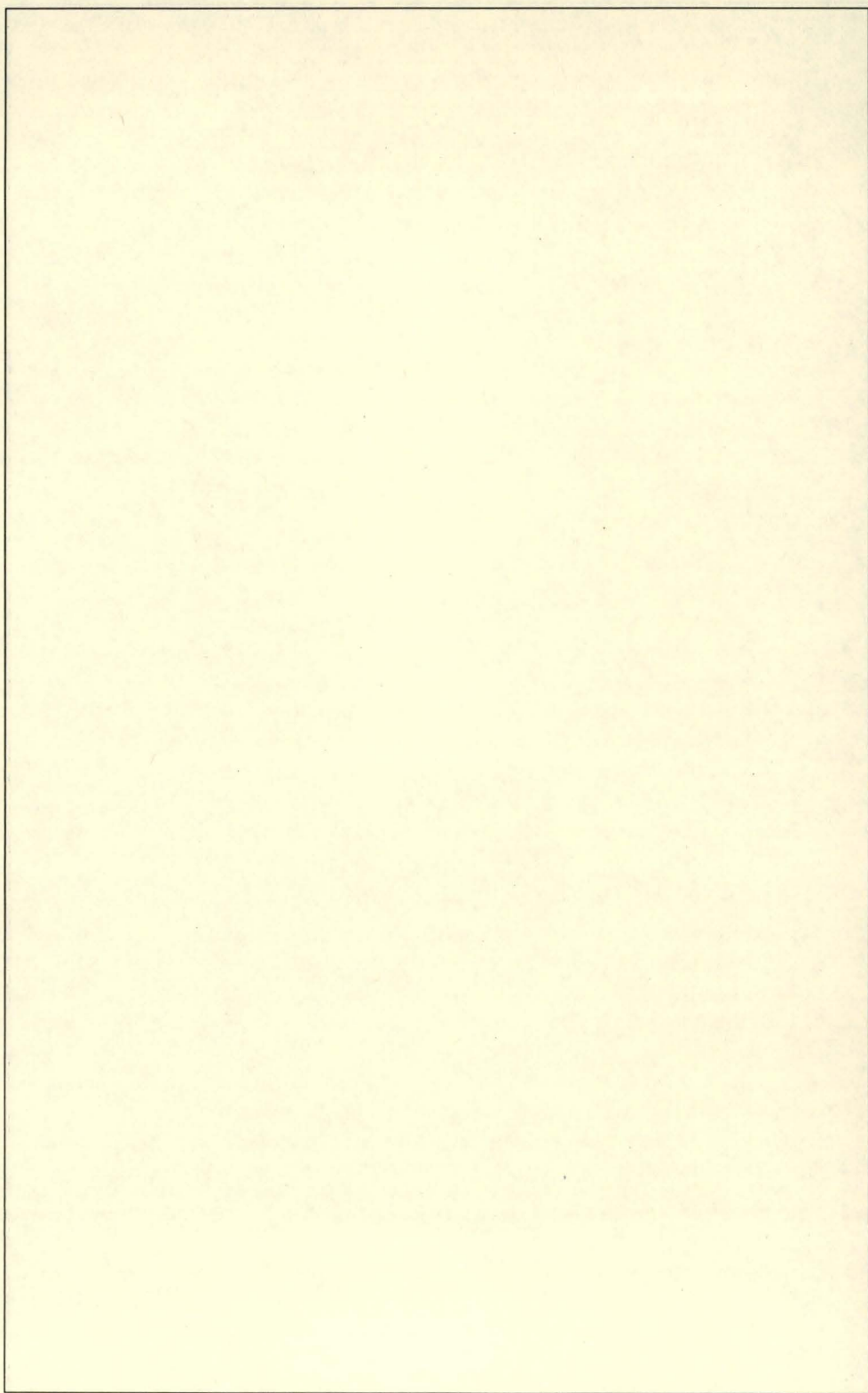
University of British Columbia, Fine Arts Department, Vancouver, B.C.

Surrey Art Gallery, Surrey, B.C.

Vancouver Art Gallery

The works reproduced in this volume are from a variety of projects and periods. The pen and ink drawings are of myths and mythical beings. The watercolours are a selection from *Infecundity*, a pleated fold-out booklet (7 inches by 15 feet). The collages are from a work in progress *From The Other Side I Am The Same*.





Keith Harrison / THE MALCOLM LOWRY
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT GRANT

As soon as the cockpit door opens (*aeropuerto*), your throat will begin to ache. You will remember having heard that breathing the air of Mexico City is the equivalent of smoking two packs a day. You will want to say to the not-so-tall but dark and handsome stranger (despite those pock-marks), "*Gracias, pero estoy ocupada*," but because you will not be sure of your Berlitz Spanish, the first of your potential Latin lovers will hear: "Thank you, but I'm busy." Walking down the aisle with your carry-on bag, you will touch the girdle-like money belt around your waist that holds your passport (*pasaporte*), American bills, paper pesos, and even your traveller's cheques.

A smiling, grey-haired man will take your visa, and you will be feeling for the Mexican coins for tipping that you will have secreted in the inner pocket of your linen jacket in Los Angeles, when you realize that somehow you have stepped out in front of a machine gun (a word not included in your Berlitz travel guide). You will have joined a line of people moving unfazed past the hyper-alert eyes of a young soldier guarding a bank. You will wonder why you didn't just go to Hawaii.

Your taxi will be a cute pastel green-and-cream beetle. The driver will zoom off, looking for any hint of an opening—right or left—to dart into, and speed along the broad highway with the VW hood centred exactly on a white lane line. First men, then packs of kids, and finally grandmothers, will run out in front of your hurtling taxi. Lurching like suicidal matadors, they will cross between buildings of warm pink, bleached purple, dingy and acrid yellow, and different shades of jungle green. Not once will your driver slow, or swerve, and you will remember horror stories and realize that you don't know what to do *when* he kills someone. Desperately, you will want to tell him to stop this macho stupidity, but the only Spanish phrase that will pop into your brain is "*¡Al ladrón!*" and you will fear that your command "Stop thief!" will enrage him to a sure act of vehicular homicide, which now will be your fault. After only ten minutes in Mexico, you will find

yourself wondering how many thousands of pesos it will take to bribe yourself free after the fatal accident and get back to the *aeropuerto*, and Canada. Your Berlitz Guide will have a chart in back for tipping porters, waiters, maids, hairdressers, and lavatory attendants, but no useful suggestions about *policia* or judges.

But soon your taxi will be spinning you around the huge *zocalo*—and the square's endless flatness will seem unreal in this gorgeous clutter of a city. One-way traffic will enclose your whining beetle as it rushes past the windowed symmetry of the stone palace, past the green metal scaffolding stretching up the high, impossibly ornate cathedral, and, when your driver brakes suddenly, you will cringe—look over your shoulder for the expected crash—but *nada*, and on stepping out, you will find there isn't a scratch on the VW's two-tone painted shell. Though your eyes will be stinging from the harsh air, you will be so glad to be standing alive and unhurt by the entrance to the Gran Hotel Ciudad de Mexico, and the money in your hand will look so strangely blue that you will pay the driver with *poco* anxiety about being cheated. At the hotel doorway, however, you will flinch when the little girl with a smudged face and a little crutch bumps into you with one hand out, "*Señorita, por favor,*" and you will be *mucho* relieved to get inside the chandeliered lobby with its iron-caged elevators and hanging papier-mâché *piñatas*—red and spiky and festive and bulbous with the promise of gifts and candies.

Dr. Sachs walked across the *zocalo* (officially known as the Plaza de la Constitucion), and entered the middle gate of the fortress-like Palacio Nacional de Mexico. Above the staircase a man with a metal jacket had his knee between the legs of an Indian woman who had been forced on her back. And beside a cauldron (like a kettle drum glowing orange) three men were branding a trussed-up brown human body. A two-legged beast with a jaguar skin, blood-red lips, and sharp white incisors lanced a falling Conquistadore in the back. There in the mural's centre was the founding prophecy of the Aztecs, an eagle on a cactus holding an orange multiheaded snake in its mouth. Dr. Sachs felt more bewildered than exhilarated.

The lighting, both clear (*claro*) and shadowy (*oscuro*), bounced

differently off the grand composite images framed beneath the seven deep, adjoining archways that folded in and out like a massive, half-defective accordion. There was also little accord between Dr. Sachs's expectations of Diego Rivera's art and this sombre, brilliant clutter of peopled violence. Neither the stone and marble architecture nor the brain's oxymorons (crude subtlety? lyrical Stalinism?) could contain the energies of these pulsating forms that were at once drab and garish. *Secuencia de la historia de Mexico*. But there was no evident *sequence* in these seven huge jumbled pictorial segments flowing and flaming and breathing into one incoherent panorama, only an intense feeling that the past must have been lived like the present: "confused, multiform, and unintelligible" (in the words of Paul Ricoeur).

The far *left* panel (that turned a corner) had Karl Marx in Heaven—the dead white European male painted above everyone else—leaning on a brick factory chimney of industrialization, a sun ringed orange-red dawning at his back, his arm outstretched and his index finger pointing, telling the Mexicans what to do with history, and offering the viewer a doubly consoling plot: narrative order and human triumph through class struggle. This story line would now displease environmentalists, feminists, "communists" who had ripped apart the Berlin Wall, and the intellectually decolonizing thinkers of South America. Could Diego Rivera, once friend of the soon-to-be-assassinated Trotsky, have been so willfully naïve as to paint ideological clarity into the unintelligible shadows of human experience?

On the opposite wall, the pre-Conquest alternative, the legend of Quetzalcoatl. His truncated, upside-down sun-face did not notice the tax collector below, or even the strange flying beast with two fiery tongues hovering above the molten lava of an exploding volcano. Staring at the inverted eyes of the pre-Hispanic sun god, Dr. Sachs's own eyes began to water and hurt.

Visiting time was over. But Dr. Sachs kept looking at Rivera's unsettling depiction of Mexico's national emblem. It made iconographic sense that the snake was the same orange as the Quetzalcoatl sun, the erupting volcano, the fiery cannon of the Conquistadores, the monks burning the codices, but why was there, near one end of the snake, a circling band from which four cloth-like cones terminated in four bright miniature balls? Dr. Sachs knew better, but rubbed at

irritated eyes. The snake's head, multibelled in appearance, looked like the cap of a court-jester. Mexican life, a joke?

After re-reading my mother's letter (Lucy, they're out there. You're just not looking!) I stare up at the dining room's elegant ceiling and want to take a stick to the fat red *piñata* hanging over my head. (Your second cousin Sam's new bride, Jessica, wanted to sing at her own wedding—"Stairway to Heaven"—but had a fit and threw her diamond ring at Uncle Max when he suggested the lyrics might be prophetic, given Sam's problems with his new pace-maker.)

By myself at dinner I feel the ache of the blues. This beer, with its two big red Xs, doesn't improve my mood. Maybe it's because I've got the two Xs of the female chromosome, Dos Equis, or maybe it's because I told the shy waiter *claro* instead of *oscuro*, and now this light-coloured liquid makes me see too clearly. (Get down on your knees and thank your lucky stars you didn't marry David who just got out of detox for the ceremony and was caught with his hand inside Aunt Eva's purse. First he said he was only looking for some Kleenex; then he claimed he was trying to find some Tums for the butterflies that always start flying around in his stomach whenever he shows up at a wedding, and finally he told Aunt Eva he wanted to borrow her vibrator! By this time his poor mother was crying her heart out, her face a black river of mascara . . .)

"Señora"

"Oui . . . oui, I mean, *si, si*." My brain tries to accommodate via the more familiar strangeness of French. "*Otra cerveza. Dos Equis. Oscuro. Oscuro.*" I wonder if he went to the wedding hoping to see me—this maudlin blob in a red dress in a foreign country.

My mother thinks I should smash my way to happiness—just blindfold myself, grab a long stick, and whack at what I hope is the *piñata*'s belly until the sweets of the world tumble down onto my lap.

David's sweet soprano sax I remember once, on a hot New York night, trembling with the sounds of love (maybe).

"Gracias."

You will panic when the commercial jet (*Servicio Azteca de oro*) tilts

suddenly towards the snowy peak just outside your window. When the plane immediately rights itself, you will relax, realizing that the pilot—like a barnstormer from an old newsreel—has just tipped his wings to Mount Popocatepetl.

Later, bouncing on the runway at the Puerto Escondido *aeropuerto*, someone will say, “It’s only eighty degrees,” and you will be happy to be a long way from Ottawa and winter.

And at the hotel, Flor de Maria, with its white hand-plastered walls, the cement floor gouged and blackened to look like huge tiles, and fiesta colours everywhere, you will feel a sense of exotic exuberance, especially looking out from room *número quince* (**keensay**), at roosters, cabanas, palm and banana trees, and *el mar*.

At the sea’s ragged edge, you will wade warmly. Then, lying on your new beach towel, you will watch three brown boys scoop up small fish trapped by the turning tide and then hand cast lines with this living bait to pull in larger fish (*pescado*). Pelicans, whose mouths are not so pouchy here, will glide above the glassy sliding crests, waiting, like the crouching blonde surfer with a black knee-bandage, for the right wave. A woman in a shimmering dress will offer you one of the twenty hammocks bowing down her back, and you will say, “*Nada . . . gracias . . . nada.*”

In the humid room Dr. Sachs took out a spiral notebook, disorderly scraps of paper, and tiny pallid postcards. If events were threaded by time, then Diego Rivera had cut the warp strings—had pulled the rug out from underneath history. (A)voiding chronology, he was both the monarch of all he surveyed *and* the king’s mocking court-jester. But the problem with seeing history as a joke was that it wasn’t very funny. Also, for a punch line to work, the joke needed a sequence. Did the religious zeal of the monks burning the codices (*naranja*) come before, with, or after the cannon fire (*naranja*) of the Spanish soldiers, and where did nature, the exploding (*naranja*) volcano fit? All those orange images in the mural must be trying to make history intelligible.

How was Dr. Sachs going to produce a paper on Malcolm Lowry, Diego Rivera, and narrativity that would justify the travel grant?

I look at a mother and daughter walking barefoot towards me on this

scorching sand, each with a wide straw basket full of sandals on their heads. For the bulky mother the burden seems automatic, unfelt, but the (seven-year-old?) girl needs to keep reaching up to hold this weight in place.

I can barely imagine the skills needed to craft the beautifully stitched tan leatherwork taken down from their heads. Pointing to my pink feet, to the moulded air-pocketed sandals whose raised purple letters spell "Nike," I again say, "*Nada*."

I hate to watch the brown-eyed *niña* lift her basket up towards the sun, see her fighting to get the balance right on that small, rounded skull, while her mother sticks the huge basket back up top as if on a spike and observes her daughter's efforts—wobble, slip, grab, not holding on now—just as Ma did when I was learning to skate backwards on the frozen canal.

You will be sitting near the pool, on the rooftop deck of the Flor de Maria, gazing at *el mar azul*, sipping your glass of chilled white wine, believing you must be the only tourist in Mexico who needs a laxative, when you will hear a rustling above you in the vines and open rafters. Up in the corner, sitting on a thin plywood board, is a largish *gato* with black patches on tawny fur and big, darkly luminous eyes, and you will say, "*Buenas tardes*" to the owner's pet ocelot, and feel contented.

Dr. Sachs unfolded the small poster of the mural. *If* the Aztec myth of the founding of their empire was painted into the very centre of the middle panel by Rivera, and the depiction of the class struggle (relegated to a side wall) separated from the eagle on a cactus eating a snake by many intervening, magnificently vivid, but collectively incoherent images, *then* the Marxist narrative itself, instead of foreclosing through teleological revolution the heterogeneity of history, might be exposed ironically as historicized fantasy.

Refolding *Secuencia de la historia de Mexico*, Dr. Sachs picked up the Penguin edition of Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, with its cover illustration taken from Rivera's fresco, *Day of the Dead in the City*, itself centred on a man downing a glass—his eyes pressed shut.

Waking to pee, I get an unexpected gift: the delicate pink light of dawn over fluttering palm leaves. Looking from the narrow bathroom window at the ruffled sea, I remember our family visiting David and his mother one spring, and his gift of cut branches. I was expecting all the buds to come out as pink blossoms. I still can't forgive my mother for the telling, and re-telling, of his gesture as "the terminal dumbness of Lucy's first boyfriend." Now I would be far from disappointed to see a bouquet of buds come out as new green leaves.

The sun is turning the rose sky blankly white.

You will stroll along the beach to the curve where *los pescadores* gun their boats up onto the sand above the tideline, where eager women with knives lift out and gut the silver fish. You will walk on, towards the rocks and the lighthouse, following a stone path, past the initials of lovers scratched into circular cactus pods, over foot-bridges crafted from cement, and will be startled at the scuttle of a huge iguana.

Returning for breakfast, you will hear pinging, as *los pescadores* hammer at rudders and propellers, straightening and fixing, while the women tie new knots in the drying nets. You will think you detect a cheeping noise from sand-coloured crabs chased by running shore birds.

At the table, to the polite, baffled waitress, you will keep saying, "*Oui . . . oui.*" The bananas, small and newly picked, will loll deliciously on your tongue, sweeten your breathing.

Spinning the pages of the novel, Dr. Sachs read:

The flare lit up the whole *cantina* with a burst of brilliance in which the figures at the bar—that he now saw included besides the little children and the peasants who were quince or cactus farmers in loose white clothes and wide hats, several women in mourning from the cemeteries and dark-faced men in dark suits with open collars and their ties undone—appeared, for an instant, frozen, a mural. . . .

Dr. Sachs knew critics had interpreted *Under the Volcano* ("backwards revolved the luminous wheel" at the foot of this page) in terms of cinema and Buddhism, but was this passage at the end of the opening chapter, and, more specifically, the word, "mural," a kind of *mise-en-abyme*, a miniature inner mirror to the novel's artistry? And was this putting into the abyss of endlessly reflecting mirrors related to Lowry's *barranca*, the ravine into which the hero's corpse is thrown on the last page? But the beach was not a place for intellect, or ethics.

Carleton University would not be pleased, Dr. Sachs suspected, to learn that most of the funded research time had been spent at the resort village of Puerto Escondido. What plausible narrative could be constructed?

(Lucy, they're out there.) I should send Ma a postcard in Hawaii, but the sun's too hot. A siesta?

She has a sense of humour for everyone else: Why not for me? At that first post-marriage party she gave, with Larry, my new, roly-poly stepfather, she must have sat on the floral sofa for three hours with a string of film negatives looped around her neck, her face expectant, amused. Wearing an Expos cap, he scratched at his crotch, and laughed like a burro.

No one could guess: Some day my prince will come.

I'm too tired to write.

At the neighbouring Hotel Santa Fe you will eat garlic red snapper with *media botella de vino blanco*, will say "*Muy bien, gracias*," and will wonder if you saw this headless *pescado* flopping on the bottom of a beached boat in the morning. Also, for a flickering moment, you will ask yourself why those seated have light skins while those carrying things have darker pigmentation, but you will remind yourself you're here on vacation—to have a good time—and the sunset will fill the warm Pacific sky with at least an hour of postcard colour.

And, after, you will decide to tell the tall, red-haired Australian, "*No, no me interesa, gracias*," and not worry about the Spanish pronun-

ciation marks you can never remember, but will feel cruel having to translate for him, "I'm not interested, thank you."

Returning along the beach, you will be listening to *el mar* and watching the light of *la luna* on the wave-tips, when a short man will hold a bright knife with a rusty edge in your face. You will give him all the paper pesos and confusing coins in your pocket *rapidamente*, and will get back to the hotel *rapidamente*.

Unable to sleep, Dr. Sachs found the light switch in the dark, sat up in bed, and flipped through the pages of the spiral notebook. There was the quote from Paul Ricoeur about "the undeniable asymmetry between the referential modes of historical and fictional narrative." But the problem was that the same word(s) and image(s) had to be used for both what had happened and what had been made up. Before Rivera painted his murals, horrible things like colonialism had *happened*, but *as* representation this knowledge entered a zone of mere "meaning," cohabiting with the fictive, or even with hate-mongering fantasy like the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

If there was no way to tell apart the telling of fiction from the telling of history, then the knife held to the throat might as well be made out of paper.

I can't say, "The weather is here, wish you were beautiful."

I can't forget to put the "Dear" in front of "Ma." This date, "Dec. 22," seems fraught with soft heaviness for me, like the postcard's image of Rivera's *Flower Day*, an enormous basket of cut white blossoms.

I guess there are no adventures without misadventures. Some times Mexico has the feel of a big family wedding gone wrong, but no one wanted it to end up that way, so, along with the harshness, there's a forgiving warmth. Say "Hi" to the "Prince" for me. Lucy

The man with tight pants, spare gestures, and pale sunglasses who

takes your ticket for the chartered flight will turn out to be the pilot of this twin-propped plane (no co-pilot), and as you are flying out over *el mar* as a way of gaining height before taking on the inland mountains, you will wonder if there is anyone in the control tower. Your ears will ache in the (unpressurized?) cabin, and you will be very scared at the way he is steering—just above the jungle ravines and *between* the mountain peaks which disappear into clouds.

Dr. Sachs re-read the echoing sentence, starting midway, trying to separate it from personal associations:

(. . . to persuade herself her journey was neither thoughtless nor precipitate, and on the plane when she knew it was both, that she should have warned him, that it was abominably unfair to take him by surprise.)

Skiping further down the page, searching for the word "Oaxaca," Dr. Sachs found where last night's re-reading of *Under the Volcano* had stopped:

The word was like a breaking heart, a sudden peal of stifled bells in a gale, the last syllables of one dying of thirst in the desert. Did she remember Oaxaca! The roses and the great tree, was that, the dust and the buses to Etna and Nochitlán? and: "*damas acompañadas de un caballero, gratis!*" Or at night their cries of love, rising into the ancient fragrant Mayan air, heard only by ghosts?

Dr. Sachs was half-puzzled by Lowry's language of elegiacal desire for a place where he had been thrown in jail for debts and drunkenness, and pondered if Lowry's prose here had become "sentimentalized" by internal focalization through the female character of Yvonne, and if this were a psycholinguistic gender stereotyping, or perhaps had its source(s) in the biographies of Lowry's first and second wives (whose emotional expressiveness likely had been previously (de)formed through hegemonic social construction). Dr. Sachs also

questioned the vague reference to “Mayan air,” since Mayans didn’t live anywhere near Oaxaca. Additionally, Dr. Sachs wondered why it was impossible to enjoy reading a book anymore.

I’m tired, and the cigar smoke is getting to me, but two wonderful musicians, Gil and Cartas, are playing on the violin and guitar in this roofed-over courtyard, El Sol y La Luna. I’m thinking about my hotel bed at the Parador Plaza, just across the street (*calle*), when I recognize the first bars of “Djangology.”

Felipe Moreno enters with an *amigo*, waves to me. Earlier, I talked to him at the contemporary *museo* about his weavings that had alternating patterns made by sewing strips of cloth over the wool before dying, then unstitching them to emphasize the bands of complete blankness among the colours (except where the needle’s piercings left dots of dye). He had suggested El Sol y La Luna for *la musica*.

As I clap for Gil and Cartas, Felipe comes over to my table, alone, wearing a silk shirt. I gesture towards the empty chair, and the musicians begin to play a fast dance. I order two Dos Equis, *claro*, and Felipe insists on paying for both drinks.

La musica begins to fill my head with the dizzying light of both the sun and the moon.

It’s not *claro* at what point I have decided not to use the phrase that starts with an upside-down exclamation mark, *¡Dejeme tranquila, por favor!* because I already know I don’t want to be left alone.

At the Oaxaca runway, although you were first in line, the pilot will board the heavy German couple and two male passengers before you, up front, to balance the helter-skelter stacking of bulging cardboard boxes in back where you will sit.

For ten minutes you will hear the twin engines run roughly without the left propeller going around, and then you will see the pilot step down out of the tiny cockpit, spin the immobile prop once by hand, and climb back in.

As the overloaded plane lunges forward and eventually stumbles off the runway’s end into the shimmering afternoon sky, you will feel an odd fatalism, and nod off.

Standing again in front of *Secuencia de la historia de Mexico* with its populist cartoon boldness, Dr. Sachs wondered some more about Rivera's wife, who had once been occluded, but had recently become a feminist cult figure. Dr. Sachs walked down the corridor to look for a second time at the husband's ambiguous representation of Frida Kahlo, the most prominent figure in his depiction of Mexico's Aztec origins—lifting her dress to expose one knee, her chin up. Was Frida Kahlo's own small-scale art and obsessive self-portraiture a necessary refusal and narcissistic strategy of survival under the masterful, monumental male gaze?

Or did Lowry have it right (at least, textually), "*No se puede vivir sin amar*," and the super-subtle critic had no useful analytic vocabulary (voyeurism? hierarchization?) for understanding that Diego simply wanted to paint Frida, the woman he loved to live with, as the beginning of everything? In fact, Dr. Sachs wondered if the shift in Rivera's master narrative from Marxism to Catholicism made public during his final illness could be traced to Frida's earlier death.

Rivera's dark and bright mural bits, Dr. Sachs sensed through stinging eyes, had to be understood as discrete parts implying the wish for a completed and intelligible whole, a way of making tangible the human fragments that are the open-ended hurt of history.

I am riding in a taxi through this city that's nearly as populous as my own country, and at Alameda Square it seems all the people in Mexico City have gathered. In lines blocks long, families wait for the seated red-coated figure on a raised platform in the park. The taxi halts in the middle of brown faces shining in the sun, and neatly dressed bodies cross over into the park, and I see another red-coated figure further down the long park, with its own enormous gathering, and yet another, further away and smaller, and still another, in a near infinite mirroring. Along the full length of Alameda Square there must be at least two dozen Santas!

And I think of David that Christmas time in New York, hopping down from the bandstand at the break, strolling over to the bar,

asking me why Santa had no kids. Thinking that this was a different David, I was shaking my head even as he said, "He always comes down chimneys." Why did it sound more brutal than hip?

During that final set his saxophone collected every last sixteenth note and muted half-rhythm from the other musicians in the quintet, and he put everything into one long solo that sang, honked, and soared, screeched and whispered and wailed, and sang again, but felt nothing like his gift to me of leafy summer abundance, just six months earlier. David's last solo seemed too self-regarding, aggrandizing, maybe only a magnificent performance of self, but what else is a *solo*?

And when I went to visit him in that cramped dressing room five minutes after the show, he just grabbed me under my sweater, under my bra, roughly squeezing my breast like it was a *piñata* to break open. "Not like this," I said. And he let go, his coked-up eyes wandering back to the beautiful tubular curve of his instrument lying diagonally on a chair.

This taxi won't get me to the *aeropuerto* in time for the flight.
Why should I want to send him a postcard?

December 24.

Dear David, I've been hanging out at the beach, trying to relate Malcolm Lowry's narrative structure to Diego Rivera's murals, but thinking how it's like melodic lines in jazz, something to jump free from, or like fishermen's nets just tied together to make openings. I never thanked you for those branches of budded leaves. To quote Malcolm Lowry, "*No se puede vivir sin amar*," meaning, "I-you-one can't live without love." *Gracias*.

Lucy.

This taxi's going nowhere. ¿ So? ¿ What self-imposed narrative plots my return to a cold grey city of colourless skins?

At Los Angeles you will have your passport taken as if it belongs to someone else. (You'll never make anything of yourself unless you go to collage.) Your identity will be read aloud, "Dr. Lucy Sachs," while his eyes fix on your face, before moving down to the official sameness, the photo that glints under the fluorescent lights, like a broken, half-dark blade.

You will be given back your picture, upside down.

With her name, in my hand.

Holding on.

Stephen Oliver / FOUR POEMS

FROM THE STILL WATCHES
(Nos: II, VIII, IX, XI)

II

The seeing wears away the seer:
twelve years further on Voyager 2 putts
out through the pin-ball solar
system, past Neptune and beyond the
reach of time. Another day in
the round and the cliché of uneventful
incident has not yet arrived.
The balloon that is so majestic on
the plump air tumbles as heavy
as a plumb-bob onto the countryside,
trailing its fifty seconds of life
huddled to impact. The cattle
scattered, the sky did not change but
released names into the wispy
afternoon. Then all is as it was
before the tragic flight, except
the calm that betokens fear.
And clouds rich as coalmines gathered
from open-cast horizons are
transported in carriages of wind
down the chutes of mountainsides, over
the belts of grainfield to boost
the corporate climates, and to market
each end of the world gyrally.

A blotting paper sky, the soft
tear of thunder, then lightning. Who
would demand of the wise a word
to steer by? Nostradamus throws his
hands in the air after the event:
'mark well my words, I told you so'.
Backward we look upon his bag
of tricks, and with each new calamity
a surreal rabbit lifts before your eyes.
Ribbed streets! Pneumatic heartbeat!
Prophecy is the Art of Boredom
for one who cannot stand his own company
from one moment to the next.
He pulls the hat trick, feigns the
future, argues the task of his breath
wearily on its way. Some ravel
dreams to catscradles in whose
uninhabited solitude, slowly as a yawn,
wish to pull forth the Super Strings.
Call it a living this space
between meetings. Those encirclements
that bind us together temporally.

VIII

Surgical strike of the Stars at
the Persian Gulf. Romance o the World!
How deadly our longing for peace
on this earth round as an Ideal.
Delicately, we remember WW2 bombers
romanced in archival film-footage like
forks tossed across a transformer dark sky.
David Niven steps lightly under the
arched stone bridge, he brushes
the dust of a crushed building from
fingertips by the flares of a London
sky. "Childhood is the last-chance gulch
for happiness", he says. Havel
plays the pied-piper astride his multi-
coloured cavalcade. A wave of the
hand old fashioned as anger, and he goes
home to the Democratic Mountain,
civilly. Salman Rushdie rides the magic
carpet quicker than Qantas. "The world
is surreal", he cries, "tis no more
than a game of hide-and seek",
and whizzes past into the future.
Lange gleefully corks the evil jinnee of
Baghdad, then flies onto the greenembrace
of Aoteora with the freed twelve.

Where once the melancholy bombs
from heaven fell to glut a village, 1000
grey cranes have returned to the Mekong
Delta in the month of pure light.
One herd of elephants also returned to
the tropical jungle where before
was none. A pure green is that light
and not the green of crouching camouflage.
I bend to my past, for there is
a corner of the sky forever my childhood:
Rupert Brooke frolics through the
soft Edwardian light with Virginia, and
dreams of fish-heaven. Bad William
thumps the shit out of poor Aunty Ethel.
Every poem is the last will &
testament of the soul, and every lover
that breaks from lover a crime unto
passion. Romance of the World!.

IX

Sun shines metallic off Footscray
and out across Westgate bridge. Silver &
green office blocks rise from a
dun plain. Superman, bearing a stash of
old money darts over the dockside
and the hidden sea, home to Melbourne.
The thought of you adds weight
to new memory — sad as lamplight on rain
sodden guttering. Sadder still is the
Romantic lapsed to obscenity,
the swine tides that clog the spirit.
Again, I drive my centre to the eye
of your hurricane. Remember how
the senses wrangled, anger like a vicious
exorcism of betrayals not worded?
To run is to hide is to freely admit the
hidden hurt. Volscian woman, we flung our
fire at each other heavy as fists.
The old man sits in the park feeding
pigeons; like his memories, they are
grey-blue and flutter about him.
My memory of you from any perspective falls
along the flatness of this earth.
No lamp lit up our consciousness,
only the blade figured the light, Psyche.

'The funeral of the sea'
sings the Italian documentary. The
world's rotting oil-fleet blanks
out the Mediterranean from the French
coast to the Bay of Naples. Six
hundred burning black candles turn crude
the Arab night and Red Adare pots
another well. Oil Magnates!
Corporate Cowboys! Have you built your
little ship of death, O have you?
And there in the deep the Great Underwater
Colonialist, Jacques Cousteau, laments
the dark night of the sea, his
eyes are the colour of basalt.
Today we have part-time cloud & the
hours work at it cruel as barbed wire drawn
across the face of the moon.
What then is this other? It is
the shadow personality, 'evil comes from
the power of evil'. It is the third
presence. O Romance of the World.

XI

An extended mobile of galaxies.
A prided installation. The dark, invisible
matter of a riot in L.A. Three thousand
buildings ripple out flame in the
city of Lost Angels. And then an open sky,
a banquet of beads after fire hoses
roll out the light on any upright
surface. Beverly Hills is alive with the
sound of security locks. The CNN
anchor-team is too well dressed for
the maddening flames, in the sear, ongoing
segment of a news flash. In the break,
gathered the rain as pure as static,
unseen, but imagined whitely and curfew-wide.
Along the crippled streets in the blood
blare of sirens, night arrived under
the guise of the National Guard.
Heat rises from the grid of these side-walks
and the spirits of the Indian, afraid
enough of death to die, whoop it
up round the big campfires. I wake,
uncomfortable in the lurk of a dream, and
my breath, draws up hope like an
anchor, lifts my thoughts into the day where
I follow. Let us go (You & I) into
the glow, hand in hand with Virtual Reality
and idly make up war-games. Let us pray
that a supreme silence will be down-loaded
at last. Moonrise, and a luminant coal

sifts through the western grate of the world.
In cornfields elsewhere, so remembered
though not so high as an elephant's eye,
images pressed round as a hot-plate
suggest some mystery or mid-night vigil.
This is what we wish, to stamp threat onto
the inexplicable, seeking out totems
and to hold the dance of the primitive sacred:
this city, too, let it stand as Icon.

Farah Tejani / TOO HOT

"What you be looking at?" Sister come hobbling across the street, her eyes bugging out.

"Not much," I say. Knowing full well I be asking for a mouthful. Sister's on fire on account that she been drinking too much of that toledo torpedo shit over at Millern's Tavern across the street from my place.

"You can't be all criss cross at me, girl," Sister holding two fingers up at me and heading for the kitchen, "I only had two drinks . . . and . . . and a handful of them peanuts." Sister's walking the tiles. "See? Straighter than you. Go on, draw me a line. Go on." She only be staying with me four days, counting today, and she been at Millern's more than me in the whole three months I been in Gibbons. Don't know whatever made me come to a place called Gibbons except craziness, and Sister will tell you I had a lot of that when I was with Tiny, but she just being jealous because I was the last one to have some of him before he died.

It's too hot to start up on her so I go back outside and sit on the porch. I know she gonna follow, so I say, "Bring my Marlboros and you can have whatever be left of the beer."

The stars they out real pretty tonight. Even prettier because I ain't thinking of Tiny — unless thinking that I ain't thinking about him gonna count. It's dark enough to see them from where I'm sitting 'cause I don't have me one of them porch lights that all them other houses down the street do. I'm swinging on my sweet bird cage chair that came with the porch that came with the house and that's when I get to remembering why I picked this old broken down place in Gibbons. Lord knows it ain't because of the insides. The insides be all

rotting and decaying from the fire that hit it a year ago. No one be living in this house until me. I come along and the real estate guy must have smell me coming. He thinks I'm stupid because I go and buy the smokey house. But here's the thing. Number one, I ain't stupid on account that I buy the house with the cash Tiny's insurance left me, and number two, he be the one that's stupid because I sure as hell knew that this porch here be brand new. What they call an extension. Yes indeed, not even touched by the fire. So I ask him real smooth like, "I'm only buying if the bird cage chair comes with the deal." Well he look at me then like he know I'm not stupid and say he gonna be right back with them papers. I say, "You better hurry there, mister, I'm looking for a place today, not tomorrow." I say that real cool. I can tell by the way he be running to his car.

Sister come out grinning from one side of her face to the other. She be wearing one of them stretchy velvet-like dresses, them one-size-fits-all kind. Sure it fit me all right, but ain't look nowhere near as fine as on Sister. She come strutting in like the booze be telling her we in some mansion or something. She be happier than a pig in shit when she get her booze. But Sister can strut, drunk or not. Sister be making heads turn.

The night turn my house all blue in color and Sister's dress look purple but I know it's red. She got one beer in each hand and my pack of smokes in her bra.

"Get them out of there, you gonna crush them."

"Honey, I ain't got nothing up there to do that kind of damage, remember? You the one with the tits. Hell, I got stuck with the looks."

"Yeah, you sure did. You looking real fine with that booze in you, baby. Makes your eyes bug out like someone squeezing you too tight. Who been squeezing you tonight?"

"Shut up." Sister fall into the bean bag like one of them rag dolls been played with too long and before I can remind her it's broke a row of beans spill out and she so drunk she don't even notice.

"You sure have yourself a sweet place, Del." Sister still be smiling and swinging my chair with her feet.

"Don't start up with that shit." Sister ain't call me Del since we was three and nine years old—Tiny the only one call me Del after that—and the only thing sweet about this here place aside from my porch is that it be far away from all them other places I know.

Sister's looking over at Millern's and praying it be open before noon tomorrow. I know that's what she be thinking. She already almost done the first beer and I be hoping she's out before the second.

"How come they don't keep the sign lit up at night?" Sister's legs is as smooth as black plastic. She say she wax the hair so it look like that. Like plastic.

"Because I asked them not to."

"So they're going to listen to you?" Sister too tired to swing my chair anymore. She all bunched up in the bean bag and sitting so still no beans be spilling anymore.

"They sure as hot hell better listen to me. This is my house—"

"How come? It's a business, Delrae. People got to know where to find them when they're feeling down. Just because you don't drink don't mean you can make so many God damned rules for the rest of us." Sister's eyes, they look like they trying to focus on me. I know she mad. Sister's on fire. But she be mad about something else.

"It's because I need to see the stars at night," I say.

Sister look lost, like she forgot what we been talking about already. "Stars?" She says, looking up into the black.

"Yeah."

"Wow," Sister says. "You sure have a lot of them." She says this like I own the ones on top of my place. It sure look like I got a whole lot more than the other houses on account that I don't got me one of them fancy porch lights. Stars don't like anything that try and outshine them.

"Yeah." I try and show her the dipper but she can't focus long enough to see the whole thing—she can only see it in parts.

"Sort of like a big ice-cream scoop, right?"

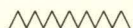
"Yeah." I light up a cigarette and the stars disappear for a second until the black comes back. "Sort of."

Sister, she right. She got the looks for sure. She be walking anywhere, even in a cemetery, and people be looking. She got them hips, you know the kind, big, black, mama hips swinging to the beat of matatu drums even when there be no drums playing. Oh yeah, and big brown eyes too, not mud brown like mine, more like coffee with a couple a drops of cream. She know she good. She damn good and she ain't never tried to hide it. Not even in front of Tiny. We be fighting like crazies and she walk in with that red dress in enough perfume to stop you from breathing— and even I be looking. Sometimes we all be sitting down and laughing together. Two or three minutes after she come in we forgot what we even been fighting about. And Tiny? Well, he be getting this look on his face every time they get close. And I know that look. I used to get it sometimes.

"Shit." Sister wake up in a start. The beer all over her dress but she don't move. It's too hot too move. "Shit. What time is it?"

"Time to sleep some of that booze off," I say. And before I can finish my sermon she be off again and snoring with a blanket of cool beer and a head full of them drunk dreams. Most of the time we be really different people, you know, but sometimes I know for sure we be dreaming about the same things.

Millern's clock say three twenty-nine but I know it's fifteen fast. Them drunks they just take so long to leave, so they set the clock fast and it work just fine now. I leave Sister outside. The booze be coming out of her skin and blowing into the house so I shut the door and leave her on the porch. No muggings or killings in Gibbons, just a lot of drunk folk singing the blues. Too small for crime. We only got two buses in Gibbons. One that run up and down Main Street and the other goes to the Greyhound Station. I picked Sister up from there and I be thinking she just coming for a few days to kick a bit of dirt in my face, but Sister she smart, first thing she say when she get off the bus, "I'm so glad I got you, Del, ain't nobody out there for me but you." She be packing a fifty pound suitcase and I know she going to be around for a while.



I start cutting about four o'clock. I'm late. Blood only truly look black at midnight, but Sister she be in the way of my routine. Normally I cut right there on my porch. The tavern folk be too drunk to pay me any mind. Even be some old black blood stains on the wood but nothing to notice really. But since Sister be here she be sleeping on the porch every night. She say she can't sleep in the house on account that the smoke get inside her head and make her all dizzy and stuff. I tell her that it can't be making her more dizzy than Millern's, and she just smile and carry a blanket outside to my bird cage chair. Tonight my chair is empty because Sister's on the beanbag, and I'm tempted but I know she gonna be waking up in starts so I do my cutting in the kitchen. I sit where I can see her and I let the blood drip onto the tiles. It be getting lighter outside so it's not as black as I like it, but black enough that I know it be my blood.

Sister be moving side to side like she dreaming of something bad. I know because I get the same dreams. Not dreams. Nightmares. I want to go and get her and hold her. I want to tell her that it ain't our fault. He did it all by himself. I want to tell her this so that she can be telling me the same. But I know, and she knows, nothing we say gonna make a hair of a difference anyway. And so we get by not saying anything. Two days after Tiny killed himself, Sister and I swore without saying nothing that we would never be talking about that day again. Now it be three months, and so far we keep our promise.

When she got off the bus in her yellow summer dress she look just like the sun finally coming to pay a visit to Gibbons.

"Surprise!" She say. I tell her she don't have to tell me to be surprised on account that I was already surprised enough.

"What the hell you doing here?" I say, half smiling, half serious-like.

"I just want to make sure you O.K.," she say.

We stand there looking dumb at each other for a while before we hug.

Yeah. O.K. Sure. I'm O.K. I know what she really be meaning is that she want to make sure she O.K.

"Oh," I say. "Yeah, I'm O.K." And since she be here with me, I be saying more O.K.s than I really like to be saying.

Sister stop moving now. She be back to the normal dreams. And I be back to cutting. I start cutting a week after Tiny die. The first time I think for sure I be going crazy, but after a while I know that I need to be cutting. I cut, and Sister, she drink. And between the two of us, we both got it bad in our own way. She need the bars like I need the blade and sometimes I want to tell her that my way be a hell of a lot simpler, but then I get smart and forget the whole idea.

La. La. Lalalala. Ooh. Ooh

La. La. Lalalala. Whoa. Yay.

Behind the wall in a dark cafe, me and my baby be drinking away.

And summer nights we slip away, behind the walls of another day.

La. La. Lalalala. Ooh. Ooh

La. La. Lalalala. Whoa. Yay.

Behind the shadows of the shady tree, forever together just wait and see

Nobody knows, just you and me, and that's the way it'll always be.

I sing this song when I cut and it always make things a whole lot better. Tiny and Sister be singing this song all day. They say they gonna be famous just as soon as they can get someone to buy the tune. And I believe them. I believe them until I catch them together. Then I know ain't no one gonna buy the song but them.

Sister say Tiny be asking her all the time and she always be saying no until one day he catch her drunk half near to death. She say Tiny be waiting to catch her like that, but I don't see how it be so hard. Sister drinking more now he's gone and all, but Sister get drunk almost once a week back then. I ask her why she gotta do it with him in my place, in my bed. Sister never answer that question on account that she say she don't remember nothing. Sometimes I believe her. Sometimes I don't. It all depend on her eyes when she be saying it.

My skin peel back like one of them chinese oranges. Easier now than the first times. Sometime I don't even cry. I mean I never cry out loud like babies or nothing. The tears they just fall out like they got nothing better to do but fall out. But some days, my eyes, they be dry like the air and I can be cutting almost twenty minutes before they get wet. Today, my eyes they drier than the sun. I look at Sister and she be sleeping so deep that she don't even move when I start singing.

. . . And summer nights we slip away, behind the walls of another day.

La. La. Lalalala. Ooh. Ooh

La. La. Lalalala. Whoa. Yay.

The cuts when they dry leave scars that look like smiles or sort of like fishscales. I got a whole bunch of them now. All going one direction. The first ten or so ain't so good on account that I was using one of them ordinary blades and all. But since I be using the stencil knife I found in the one and only arts and crafts store in Gibbons, they starting to look real clean now. Like they professionally done. Two of the smiles keep opening so they ain't so clean but the others look real fine. The trick is you got to lift the skin and put just a wee bit of fresh lemon in the cut before it get a chance to really bleed. I know when a scar gonna come out clean long before it dries. It's all in the cut. You got to cut to the white of the flesh. You got to cut clean and fast before the blood comes out and then you can't see so good. I do some test grooves before I actually cut. Then I take a deep breath and do a quick half circle smile in the same groove as the other ones. Then I wipe real quick and rub the lemon on it. Clean sting. That be the only time I make a real bit of noise. The sting part, on account that it stings.

"Sssssssssss. Sweet Jesus," I say. I say this after all the stings.

But Sister she don't even move. She sleeping like Tiny. Like she dead or something.

When Tiny sleep, sometime he roll over and put his big arm on my breast and squeeze. Sometime I let him be doing that, but sometime I get to thinking that he be thinking of some other breast in his

head. So I roll over the other side and pretend I be real tired, in case he want to start something. Sure. Tiny sometime even make love half asleep. He don't know what he be doing all the time, but it don't matter on account that Tiny always do that one thing right.

When Tiny start the white stuff that be when he don't want to do it no more. We go weeks and sometimes even months without no loving. Not even kisses. Them the times that I be sure he getting it from someone else but I keep telling myself, no. Tiny? Tiny ain't that way. And there ain't nobody he hang with but Sister, and they the best of friends. I never ever did think of them together 'til the day I saw them together. Didn't even look right together that day. Something look real wrong that day. And two weeks later we all be talking again like all's forgiven, but something was real wrong and no one could do a damn thing about it.

Sometime I start to crying for no reason, and the first couple a times, Tiny and Sister they come around me hugging and kissing me 'til the tears go away and we just laughing again. But after a while they get real tired of me crying so they stop. I could cry for hours straight and no one say a thing about it. I started going down. And Tiny? He don't think so at the time, but he be going straight down with me.

I come home from the butcher with back ribs for his birthday, but no one ever ate no backribs that day. Took me four days to even put something in my mouth after that day. Tiny, he be sitting on the dining table chair pulled out into the living room. When I walk in he be staring straight at me. Straight naked like the day he was born, except for a cigarette dangling from his lips and his clothes be in a wet pile on the floor. I walk in and the gasoline go straight to my head. I drop the meat and my head be spinning. Before I can say nothing Tiny go and light the cigarette. He look real sick in the eyes, like he not sure or something. I run to him but he already gone and drop the cigarette into the clothes. I try and try to put him out. Them men they try and try to put him out. Tiny, he didn't even say one word to me that day. But what be even worse than that is that I didn't even say one to him.

"Sssssssssss. Oh Sweet Jesus, help us." Sweet Jesus. Sweet Sting. And Sweet Sister. This for sure be the cleanest cut ever. Yes indeed.

I don't even fuss with cleaning the floor. I just go straight out to my sweet chair and sing to Sister with a piece of lemon on my breast. She out like a light. She don't hear nothing.

La. La. Lalalala. Ooh. Ooh

La. La. Lalalala. Whoa. Yay.

*Behind the shadows of the shady tree, forever together just wait and see
Nobody knows, just you and me, and that's the way it'll always be.*

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

ALEXANDRA DIKEAKOS was born in Greece and received her Fine Arts degree from UBC in 1974. Her art — which includes etchings, ink drawings, watercolours and other mixed media works — draws inspiration not only from contemporary themes but also from the myths and imagery of ancient cultures.

KEITH HARRISON has written three novels, *Dead Ends* (nominated for the Books in Canada First Novel Award), *After Six Days*, and *Eyemouth* (a finalist for the QSPELL Award). His short fiction has won the Okanagan Short Story Prize. He works at Malaspina University-College and lives on Hornby Island. *The Malcolm Lowry Professional Development Grant* will also be appearing in a collection of shorter fiction, called *Crossing the Gulf*, which will be published by Oolichan Books in 1998.

JACK HODGINS is a novelist who teaches fiction workshops at the University of Victoria. His books include *Spit Delaney's Island*, *The Invention of the World*, *The Macken Charm*, and a guide to writing fiction entitled *A Passion for Narrative*. He has won the Governor General's Award, the Eaton's B.C. Book Award, the Commonwealth Literature Prize (Canada-Caribbean region), and the Canada-Australia Prize.

CORAL HULL was born in Paddington, New South Wales, Australia in 1965. Coral is a full time writer and animal rights activist with an interest in photography. She is a Director for Animal Watch Australia. She completed a Master of Arts Degree at Deakin University in 1994 and a Doctor of Creative Arts Degree at the University of Wollongong in 1998. She has been published extensively in literary magazines in the U.S.A., Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom. Her first two collections, *In The Dog Box of Summer* and *William's Mongrels*, have been published by Penguin Books, Australia. Her third collection *How Do Detectives Make Love?* will be

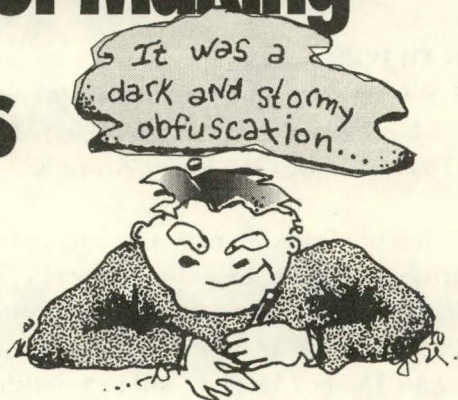
published by Penguin in 1998. Her fourth collection *Psychic Photography* will be published by Hyland House during 1999. Her fifth collection *Broken Land* has recently been published by Five Islands Press.

STEPHEN OLIVER is an antipodean whose poetic concerns are global. His several collections include *& Interviews* (1978), *Earthbound Mirrors* (1984), *Guardians, Not Angels* (1993), *Islands of Wilderness — A Romance* (1996). He lives in Sydney, Australia.

D.C. REID has published in most Canadian periodicals and has published four books to date, including a novel (*The Knife Behind the Gills*), poetry (*The Women Who Surround Me*), and non-fiction (*How To Catch Salmon*). His fifth book, from which some of these poems are taken, *Love And Other Things That Hurt*, will be published by Black Moss in '98 or '99. He is a former president of the Federation of BC Writers and former provincial representative to the League of Canadian Poets.

FARAH TEJANI is a 29 year old East Indian woman born in East Africa, Uganda, Kampala. She has lived in Canada most of her life and much of her work deals with either culture or the clashing of the two. Her writing won an honourable mention in the Federation of B.C. Writers' annual writing competition, Literary Writes X in 1996.

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