

MANFRED JURGENSEN

THE REUNION

*"Not to be born prevails over all meaning
uttered in words; by far the second best
for life, once it has appeared, is to go as
swiftly as possible whence it came."*

Sophocles, **Oedipus at Colonus.**

If there was a person he hated more than anyone in the world, it was his mother. Not because of something she had done he could remember, a traumatic event during childhood, an act of betrayal or violence committed against him. There was no single incident to explain the malice he bore towards her, no one occurrence which could be held responsible for the depth of hurt and resentment he was harbouring after all those years. He had left his native country immediately after school, anxious to create a distance between himself and his home. The immigration officials did not accept his statement that he was a refugee, but they let him qualify for the assisted passage. It was a time when young men were needed to work on the railways, build roads or fire blast-furnaces. Except that he wanted to be a painter. While other migrants worried about their future in the distant land, he sketched them on board the chartered liner crossing the Indian Ocean, sitting on suitcases, playing cards or simply keeping watch on the upper deck. One of the first paintings he sold was that of a refugee family eating in front of a lifeboat.

It was as far away as he could run. Yet when he had moved into his first room, in the back of a terrace house with a view over yards which reminded him of home, he sat down and wrote a long letter to his parents, assuring them that he was well, that he had a job already and that he missed them both. He felt protected by such lies, certain that they would comfort his family who were at a loss to understand why he had left. In the meantime he earned his living by assisting an S.P. bookie who operated from one of the homy backyards. Unknown to his employer, he began to draw a series of illegal betting scenes, rough and unfinished outlines of the life he led during his initial months in the new country. Later, after he had transformed the spontaneous sketches into opaque gouaches, the sequence became one of the highlights of his first exhibition. His paintings had always dealt with human passions bordering on the criminal. From the beginning he was drawn to the margins of rational existence, not by choice but by a combination of events and temperament. He met Ernesto, the Italian sculptor who lived two streets away, a former monk who made love to his own statues. The oil pastels "Artist and Model", a collection of 14

sensuous and dreamlike paintings, were purchased by the State Gallery and did much to enhance his growing reputation. When he was introduced to Angela, the transvestite who worked for *Collins' Gallery*, he painted her as soldier, policeman and footballer. Partly as a result of the scandal the pictures sold at highly inflated prices. While attending a murder trial he composed a self-portrait, his first and only, entitled "Life Imprisonment". The art critics had a field-day. Within a few years his work was recognized, celebrated and imitated. His exhibitions became major social events in the cultural life of the nation. He was asked to lecture at galleries, art colleges and universities. The refugee had arrived.

He had sent newspaper clippings of his first successes, programmes of exhibitions and full-colour reproductions of his favourite paintings, but his parents did not reply. When he finally rang them, he was told that they had moved to another town. The new owners of the house could not help him, the previous occupants had not left a forwarding address. Perhaps the City Council might know. It didn't, and he gave up trying to find the couple he had known as mother and father. He was surprised by their move, he couldn't imagine his parents starting a new life somewhere else. Surely they had left it too late. The only thing on which they agreed was that nothing would become of their son, nothing "decent and proper", nothing they could be proud of. Now it seemed they had fled together to God knows where. He felt cheated. His parents still had his address and could get in touch with him whenever they wanted. Wherever they lived had nothing to do with him. It would be a place he knew nothing about. He thought of his mother and his father before he was born. They hadn't told him much about their earlier life together. He could not tell whether they had been happy; in fact, his parents on their own was something he found difficult to accept. It was like their new place. He had no part in it. They didn't want to know him any more. Perhaps they wanted to return to the intimacy of their younger years without him. They too had escaped, migrated back into their youth.

There was no need for him to follow them. He was still young enough to stay put, now that he had found his place. Nor was he ever tempted to have children of his own. He loved other people's children, but the thought of having sons or daughters confused him. There could be no extension of his self, he felt, without parts of him getting lost. Despite his artistic and commercial success he thought it preposterous to perpetuate himself in the lives of others. That's what his paintings were trying to do, but to give birth to a life that depended on him was a different matter. Besides, he was not in love, didn't have a regular woman and needed to finish his new collection by the end of the year. There was to be an exhibition at the Tate, an auction at Sotheby's and a lecture tour across the Continent.

Shortly after he discovered that his parents had moved he started having problems with his painting. It was difficult to say what went wrong. His concentration seemed to lapse. He could not address himself to one subject for any length of time. After a while it would disappear from his mind and the images on canvas meant nothing to him. He lost the vision of his art the way a migrant gradually forfeits the natural mastery of his mother tongue. The familiar began to look strange, foreign expressions assumed native authority. It took him months to realize that he was painting all the things that he was not. Each line, each form and colour alienated him from a self he had never questioned. Suddenly he felt as if he were being painted. He was no longer in control of his craft. His imagination was feeding him a knowledge to which he could not relate. A stranger had taken over his thoughts and his emotions. He felt possessed by a power determined to destroy his art.

Terrified by this unexpected onslaught he took to drinking. His studio on the outskirts of the city became a scene of riotous revelry, all-night orgies and desperate bravado. He surrounded himself with the very people he had gone out of his way to avoid, an arty crowd of yuppie intellectuals and untalented spongers. One of the local critics warned him he hadn't suffered enough to qualify for true greatness, then offered herself to him. Amused by the connection, he informed her that he was a coward. On the following days he did not get to paint until the afternoon and found that his hands were shaking. He panicked. Europe was waiting for his latest work, anxious to compare it with its own contemporary art. He had nothing left to say. Perhaps his earlier paintings were little more than a record of his flight, taking stock of the new by celebrating its difference from the old, the native, the familiar. What if he had exhausted the images of otherness? How much room was there for the anger he had carried within him, the need to disown his birth? He had painted pastels of his childhood which he named "Not your kind". Could it be that he had reached the point where he had to name the world anew, recreate it in his own image, instead of reinforcing its partiality?

He wished he could have called his mother, if only to say that he had not forgiven her, that his hatred was as strong as ever. She would have understood that he was not referring to her own withdrawals into empty talk and absent-mindedness, the phraseology of fear and indifference, the cop-outs and exhaustions diagnosed as mental disorder. She always knew what was not safe to know, their shared crimes never to be repaid.

During one of her depressions she had told him about his birth, the life she was determined not to deliver. Pregnancy was a state of extorted horror, a violent intrusion that had forced itself upon her. Classified as mental patient, she was kept under constant supervision for almost a year.

She received regular visits from her husband while they prepared her for motherhood with plastic dolls, pre-natal exercises and daily lectures. Like a prisoner prevented from committing suicide, his mother was guarded around the clock to restrain her from aborting the growing foetus inside her womb. She hated the baby long before it was born; it had nothing to do with her. The birth was complicated, prolonged and painful. A child was released into the world that was neither wanted nor loved. In the first few weeks of its brutal separation its tiny body defended death with all its might. Life was a detour of the senses, the suffering of its make. Mother and child wanted no part of it. Infant organs struggled with a memory grown elsewhere, a knowledge of the species, unwilling to develop. Not once the baby cried, as if it did not wish to draw attention to its presence. Doctors and nurses sensed a deadly conspiracy of body and mind. Removed from the womb, it was more difficult to plot a double murder. In the silence of its protest the child stared at the reflected patterns designing the immediate world. It saw the shapes of objects still unknown, the form of motion as yet not comprehended. To be alive meant to perceive the arrangement of parts, the visibilities of intangible compositions. Existence painted itself.

They both lost. He grew up to recognize reflections of a different world, his mother was declared well enough to leave the sanatorium. Neither forgave the other for their defeat. Studying the French Pointilists as a schoolboy, he suddenly remembered: painting was the dissolution of the world into particles and incomprehensible relations, a perception of matter reflecting itself. He knew there and then that he was going to be an artist. It was the only way back to the hateful birth he and his mother had to endure. Ah, to kill the one who carried him into a flesh that would not come to live! The bodies of arbitrary names, the limbs of death casting their wilful skin! Only his uncorruptible vision held him back from trusting the senses. Yet there remained the curse to have to work with them, to turn their momentary splendour against itself, to expose the brutality of beauty. That was his art, his calling. The more physical his paintings appeared, the more they reflected their own composition. He always painted his art's perception, which to him meant the genesis of the world. There could be no other being.

His parents could not be found. He hired a lawyer and a private investigator. To no avail. It seemed they had left their home, settled their accounts, packed their belongings and disappeared. Their son began to search for them in his paintings. He gave up the pretence of shaping objects or matter as real existence. His much-praised power of observation (which led some critics to classify him a 'social realist') expressed itself rather differently; from now on he painted the imaginative reflections of his violent life (which prompted a whole school of critics to speak of a new

'abstract period'). Invariably, from the pattern of these kindred ties emerged the images of objects, nature, people. Immunologists and biochemists recognized molecular relationships, the formula of mind-changing drugs. Others thought they could identify geographical regions, cloud formations or town maps. His "Vita Violenta" was bought by an industrialist who believed it accurately reflected the rise and fall of his companies' shares over the past twenty years.

He finished his new series in time for the European showings. Back in the country of his birth, he was interviewed about the status of migrant art in his adopted home. How heavily was his work influenced by Aboriginal painting? Did he acknowledge a certain restlessness in his pictures? Was he going to spend a lot of time in his native land? He shook his head to all these questions. There was nothing he could say. Later that night, the investigator contacted him at his hotel. The decomposed body of a woman had been found in a wood near the border. Documents in a handbag nearby had identified her as his mother. It would be necessary for him to assist the police. He felt neither triumph nor horror. Nor did it surprise him to learn that his father still had not been located. He never could draw men.

ROBERT RANDALL

HAIKU

Deep in the cavern,
bubbling brooks and waterfalls
brush the mountain's teeth.

A marble statue
whispers cool chiselled secrets,
for anyone to hear.