

## TRUMAN CAPOTE

### *Music for Chameleons*

Toronto: Random House, 1981.  
Pp. 265.

The first story in this collection of recent writing by Truman Capote clarifies what must seem a gratuitously mystifying title. As the aristocratic old lady of Martinique entertains her guest at the piano in "her cool Caribbean salon," dozens of chameleons gather at her feet, and give every evidence of listening attentively, while she plays a Mozart sonata. At the close of this unusual concert, the old lady stamps her foot, and the chameleons disappear "like sparks from an exploding star." It is an arresting scene that Capote conjures up for us, and he uses it not only as the title of his introductory story, but also as the title of the first of three sections into which the work is divided, and finally as the title of the book itself. And by the time the reader has finished this volume, he finds that he too, not unlike the chameleons in this brief recollection of an almost forgotten murder, has been hypnotized and enchanted by one of the most artful and accomplished writers of our time.

The first section of the book comprises six selections, most of which are based on direct personal reminiscence or experience. The author uses the first-person singular to establish a point of view, but is otherwise careful to let the "story" or the material he is dealing with dominate and shape the narrative. One of the most subjective of writers, he is at the same time, paradoxically, one of the least personally intrusive. Or, as he himself notes in a brief, but informative, preface which traces his own literary development: "Actually, in all my reportage, I had tried to keep myself as invisible as possible." From the vantage point of the discreet or innocent observer, he is thus able to resurrect or illuminate strange fates ("Mr. Jones"), kindly horrors ("A Lamp at the Window"), obsessive passions ("Dazzle").

The whole of Part II consists of the long story "Handcarved Coffins," a brilliant study of calculated murder inspired by the desire for revenge. A wealthy western rancher sends each of his victims a small, hand-carved coffin to forewarn them of his intentions. The victims are members of a local committee who had diverted a part of

the water supply from "his" river to other ranches in the area. In spite of the dedication of a very patient and resourceful FBI agent, the killer escapes arrest, because he has been careful enough to cover his traces: nothing can be proved against him. Subtitled "A Nonfiction Account of an American Crime," the story instantly recalls the "narrative journalism" technique of Capote's immensely successful novel *In Cold Blood* (1966). Like the novel, "Handcarved Coffins" also aims at "something that would have the credibility of fact, the immediacy of film, the depth and freedom of prose, and the precision of poetry" ("Preface," p. 7).

Part III comprises seven "Conversational Portraits," and traces encounters that Capote has had with the great and the anonymous. His account of how Pearl Bailey ("Derring-Do") helped him escape the California police at the L.A. International Airport is hilariously funny, and will probably surprise readers by the boisterousness of its humor. The encounter with Marilyn Monroe ("A Beautiful Child") successfully recalls the curious blend of earthiness and wistfulness that animated that ill-starred celebrity, and like other accounts of Marilyn Monroe that have appeared recently, persuades the reader again that, in spite of her beauty and renown, her life was hardly the splendid adventure that so many of her fans likely imagined. However, the "conservations" that Capote records for us are not simply exercises in name-dropping. The encounters with the anonymous are just as entertaining and revealing as the meetings with the famous and the notorious. He makes the rounds with a charwoman ("A Day's Work"), and gives us brief, but telling glimpses into the lives of each of her customers. The conversation in "Hidden Gardens"—with the powerful female owner of a waterfront bar—not only retrieves moments of a shared past, but is also a fond evocation of the qualities and street scenes of New Orleans in the spring. In California's San Quentin prison, a grim encounter with a young inmate, who was peripherally involved with the Charles Manson gang and the Sharon Tate murders, supplies the basis of "Then It All Came Down."

The reader soon discovers that Capote's fondness for the bizarre, the inexplicable and the gothic are alive and well in this new collection of stories and conversations. He is reminded too that the writer's thought and experience also embrace sunnier days

and happier hours, even if only retrospectively, and that the shining horrors of life are frequently redeemed by unexpected rewards, by situations of high comedy and shared laughter, and by moments of memorable beauty. The private hours may be dark and filled with unanswered questions ("Nocturnal Turnings"), but the public experiences often distill into hints and clues that may yet lead to answers. The author's preface will be of special interest to serious students of Capote's work, and is in itself worth the price of admission to his surprising world.

Harold E. Lusher

## RÉSHARD GOOL

*Price*

Charlottetown, P.E.I.: Square Deal Publications, 1976. Pp. 186.

"Promise-keeping and truth-telling are, perhaps, the most final social values. Without them, no society can function." So speaks Henry Naidoo, the protagonist of *Price* (p. 186). Naidoo is the lawyer son of poor Natal Hindu parents. His story, narrated by his friend, Adrian Van der Merwe, "golden-haired representative of Afrikaaner Herrenvolk" (p. 2), is the tragic story of the destruction of the liberal option in contemporary South Africa.

With a strong sense of the dramatic unities, Gool sets his action in Cape Town between Dingaans Day, December 16, 1947, and the New Year of 1948, the year in which the Afrikaaner Nationalists are to assume power. Political forces mobilize with Sophoclean inevitability to shape the last few weeks of Henry Naidoo's life. In Katherine Holmes, younger daughter of an old Cape Colored family, Naidoo finds love, destiny, and "the liberal spirit of the Cape" (p. 118). The love-death paradigm is strongly etched. Love and the political ideal also come together in a single design: ". . . there is for me only one kind of true love," Henry asserts, "and that is responsible compassion" (p. 186).

Indeed, responsible compassion is a marked feature of Gool's treatment of his major characters and themes. Both Henry and Katherine are required to bear a substantial burden as representative figures. Both, nonetheless, are rendered with warmth and individuality. We are allowed to know Henry through his introspective diary and letters (pp. 3-25). Here are reflected his earnestness, romanticism, and "ironical rationality." The controlling voice, however, is that of Adrian, Oxford-educated lecturer in sociology, an "Anarchist of the pacifist type," and author of a dissertation on historical determinism. Adrian's link with determinism warns us that the sense of fate that pervades the novel springs not only from the bias of events and from the requirements of Aristotelian catharsis, but from the particular point of view of the narration. It is under this triple doom that the three major personae of *Price*, Adrian, Henry, and Katherine, capitulate, through exile, through death, through intimate loss, to the inexorable tragedy of the land. Each pays a price to participate in that tragedy—Adrian the price of Ishmael, that he may tell the story; Katherine the price of lovelessness, that, though ravished and barren, she may at least survive; Henry the price of a brutal death, that, no longer an "outsider," he may act out the principles of promise-keeping, truth-telling, and responsible compassion.

The rewards of reading *Price* are many. In no small measure they are due to the sensitivity with which Gool creates the ambience and to the exuberance with which he endows the supporting roles. Cape Town on a midsummer holiday (p. 27), for example, and the estuarine Eden of Henry's childhood (pp. 8-9), are described with rich nostalgia. Gool's versatility in re-creating the idiosyncrasies of colloquial speech give keen memorability to such characters as the promiscuous Doc (p. 32), and the Cambridge-educated Marxist, Yussouf Rycliffe (pp. 101-02). The masterpiece among the fixed characters, however, is the "gorgeous, and repulsive, figure" of Shaikh-Moosa the entrepreneur, archbetrayor of the Categorical Imperative, which Gool quotes as his novel's epigraph: ". . . treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end, never solely as a means." The spider at the center of the web in which all *Price's* characters are entangled, Shaikh-Moosa is "reality" itself, ruthless capitalism—protean, inventive, flam-