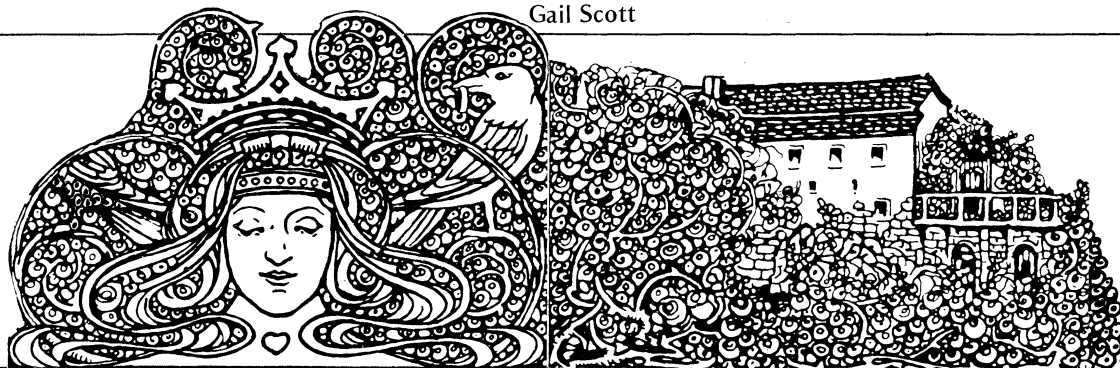


Withdrawal Symphonies

Gail Scott



Around the house on Cherry Hill are raspberry bushes whose country-coiled berries grow on the very tips of stiff branches. Snow is no deterrent to the thriving of this fruit. In fact it seems to be in winter that it is at its reddest and ripest, so ripe it is almost falling off the soft conical tips of the fat branches.

I live in the house behind the bushes, which is shiney. Or rather, I lived there until one day I was sitting on my bed in my room, which is darkly panelled with pine-stained slats, looking into a cameo-shaped mirror. Suddenly, holding my chin in a certain way, my face became that of my mother. She died some time ago of a dreadful parasitical disease. There was no doubt about it. It was my face, and yet, seen from below while I held my chin pressed down sideways against my throat, it was exactly the face of my mother.

Soon after, I was speeding down the highway. It was a bright sunny day. The snow was well-plowed. I raced along with the exquisite child in the back. My mother always thought this child belonged to her. Suddenly we were skating light as the wind back and forth across the pavement, the steering a loose too pliable object in my hands. I awaited the sickening crash of metal, the split second when the oncoming stream of cars would be unable to concede. Make way for my dizzying spectacle! I awaited death as the sliding descending car brought the snow straight into my eyes.

A second of shock. I blinked. The child sat like a deserted rag doll on the snow, limp, the skirts of her coat ecarted over her red and white striped stockings. But there was no blood. I knew immediately it was my mother who had saved us. The thick line of traffic that ought to have been crushing down on the rigorous logic of my spiralling car was nowhere to be seen. The highway was bare.

CRESCENDO

I awoke on my bed in the dark-slatted room pinching myself to see if I was a ghost. She'd come back. I didn't know why. Unless I needed her. Maybe she needed me. Shadows fell across my face like the sun shining through a fence. 'I'll sleep with her if I want. When I want if I want when I want.' Inside me the house exploded. I wore a broken nose. Water leaked through the wallpaper roof of the sunken foyer. I could see all his teeth. (A priest in a white mantle led his flock over the mountain.)

Outside the raspberry bushes creaked heavily with their weight of fat fruit and frost. He slept deeply. A strange violin played over the snow. She did not appear before me in any sort of form. Nor could I hear her voice. But I awoke in the night and I knew she was there. Like a magnet she drew the words from me.

'You always said I won't get a man. I don't know how to love.' I whispered to her. The violin struck a high note. The country-coiled fruit shivered. I showed her my eye which had turned black and blue, the blood vessels bursting on the side of my face.

'Maybe now you see things different, eh? Look at you. You're nothing.' I said. The strange violin stopped moaning. The moonlight glittered off my teeth as I talked. 'Father's forgot. Married after the first. You gave him your life. Now look at you. No flowers on your. . . .' I raised the cameo mirror holding it sideways under my chin. She stared down at me.

The wind and snow crackled around the shiney house. The exquisite child whimpered. He tossed and turned, chanting in tired tones 'I love youu, I lovve yoou, yees Mary I love you' then smashing the pillow and screaming 'Stop asking stupid questions just leave me alone.'

The priest in the white mantle withdrew over the mountain. And with them my mother who'd become a Protestant during her life. On the other side was the glass restaurant where we once sat. The sky was the colour of honey. 'I love you', he said. On the snow was a bouquet of roses. He put his arms around me. I climbed into his young chest occupying the place of his heart.

The doorbell rang until the house shook. The cross at the end of the road cast its shadow over the snow. 'Where's my baby?' I could hear her crying as he opened to her. She flew up the stairs, her body lightened by the parasite that consumed her, and knelt at the cradle by my bed. 'That child is divine,' she declared. The father stood by the bed taking the small pink fist in his hand. A slow smile spread over his soft rosy lips.

The house sparkled like a magnet in the sun. The raspberries were swollen and ripe. I lay on my bed in the dark room. She took over the child, dressing it in striped stockings and calico, playfully arranging its golden orange hair around its porcelain pink cheeks.

His beautiful body cast a restless shadow over the sheets. 'I know you two have been living in sin,' she said to me from behind the plump doll which grew wordless and bouncing on her knee. Her face was dark and was red like an aging bird and her lip twitched. He slammed the door.

'Besides, you never knew how to love,' she said.

The door slammed and he stepped into the light. I opened the door. The child sat on a shelf. In her hair the black-eyed susans

she called black-eyed saxons after her family name. I closed the door. I fumbled with my skis in the snow. Already he was far ahead and flying like a beautiful white bird. My body flailed heavily forward. I lunged after the rhythm of his beautiful bourgeoning. Faster. He flew over an embankment and onto a flatboat floating down the river. At the other side stood a woman with flowing brown hair and thick glasses. I failed to reach the edge in time. The woman smiled. She reached out her hand. He stepped off the boat and crushed her in his arms. Her glasses fell to the ground.

'Twas my friends told me you two were living in sin,' said the dark bird-face rocking in its chair. The dark cabinet was covered with flowered wallpaper. The small hard faeces fell into the china pot. The china doll.

'And don't try and tell me it was platonic with that boy you went to California with either.'

The clock ticked urgently over the dark mantle. The raspberries bloomed like roses on the snow. I waited. She had her hand in the chocolate. 'You never knew how to love.' Some cherry fondu showed on her lip. I waited. He came into the warm. He shook off the snow. He took off his scarf and sweater. He tore off his tie and collar. 'This place is suffocating,' he said. I waited. The whiskey tinkled tensely in the glasses. My stomach. 'You know,' he said 'I always thought we'd be killed coming to this place.'

'Don't you see the roses on the road?' I joked, in a small voice. He didn't laugh.

The child whimpered. He paced up and down. I gave him another glass. He seemed better. I moved my queen. 'I love you,' I whispered, watching out of the corner of my eye. His knight moved out mute before him. I spoke the forbidden 'Where were you last night?'

'I need space,' he screamed. I could see all his teeth. 'My life is my life. Everybody does what they want. Understand?'

He left, slamming the door until the cut glass pane broke. I covered it with plastic so you could hardly tell. I put the exquisite child, fists clenched, into bed. On the dresser the face stared up at me from the cameo mirror. Outside the raspberry bushes creaked heavier and heavier with their beautiful fat fruit. I closed my eyes on the cool counterpane. A bat whistled against the window. The dark wings fluttered on the sill. She had come back. I could feel her in the dark.

'I can see you see differently now,' I said. 'No flowers on your. . . You always said a woman musn't be too romantic but a woman must know how to love. Hah'. Again I showed her the blood vessels bursting around my face.

On the road the little car careened from side to side, bouncing angrily off the snowbanks. His beautiful soft ripe lips were twisted bitterly. Suddenly he braked and smiled. A faceless woman with wavy black hair stood by the side of the road.

'Daddy,' called the child, though she knew we were alone in the house.

The priest in the white mantle led the flock over the mountain.

'You're living in sin,' said the bird rocking in the chair at the end of the bed. 'What did I do to deserve a daughter like you?'

We stood by the fire. The ice tinkled in the glasses. I tried to decipher his frown. His lips hung in dismay berry red. He turned them full face. 'You give me bad dreams,' he whispered. 'I dreamed you dissected my spleen. The living-in woman saw you do it and saved me. I could hardly continue my elections.'

I put my hand on his arm. 'I love you.' I said watching warily from the side of my eye. The wind sang like church music around the house. I saw the sun dance through the mosaic onto highly polished hardwood beams. My hand closed over the priest's, hot on the chalice. The rose slip showed under the white soutane. She marched me out of there into the Protestant church across the road.

'Time you learned some responsibility,' she said. My father stood proud in his black suit. She plunged her hand in the chocolate.

'Time you learned some respons' I suggested close to his soft lips. 'I want to live,' he screamed.

The wind cried in the attic. He was putting on his coat. 'No,' I whispered. My hand closed hot over his sleeve. He flung me crashing away from his chest into the stone wall by the fireplace. My nose.

'I love you,' I cried. The door was opened. He was fleeing, his shoulders sinking in the snow like Ozymandias in the sand.

CLOÛTUS INTERRUPTUS

The room was dark. In the attic the voice cried more persistently. I looked sideways at our semi-profile in the glass. Outside the raspberries waved ominously, deliciously, in the night. I recognized the voice. It was my own.

She was close beside me. Perhaps even in my bed. 'I guess maybe I don't know how to love,' I said slowly. She lay there with her ragged gossamer wings. I could feel my nose swelling beak-like like hers.

The exquisite child stood in the door. 'Daddy,' she called, fearful. I smothered her hard in my arms. The limbs were limp. I caressed the porcelain cheeks. They were surprisingly soft. Slowly the little hands opened. The gossamer wings rustled restlessly at my side. WE THree. I dropped my soft package.

The stars danced in the sky like snowflakes. Far far away the violin. The gossamer wings. Suddenly dawn struck the window in pink stripes. I pushed the little limbs away from my waist.

He was driving down the road. His face hung to one side in repose as the caresses of the faceless woman worked up his body. On his breast pocket was a tiny bouquet of roses.

I went downstairs. Outside the old Seigneur's son stood staring at the house sparkling brilliantly on the snow in the first sun. The rang reached below scarcely rippling under the small shadow of the cross. I found a cereal bowl and slipped into the sun. I turned my back. He threw his body heavily over the horse and rode on up the road.

The raspberries were at their fullest and firmest, glistening on the snow. I hesitated. I took a soft tip in my cupped hand. The berry felt as if it would burst. In the field behind I saw a black shadow in the retreating flock make a swift flutter like a wing. I began pulling off the berries one by one. They dripped on the snow. I gathered the fruit in my bowl.

RETREAT INTO WOOD

Inside the house the limp limbed child filled the room with her dark gaze. At the table also sat the shadow. Soon I would open the door. I'd tear the plastic off the cut glass. The sun would shine in golden streaks. We'd be as radiant as the raspberries. I'd be host. And from the wooden bowl we'd drink a toast. Mother, daughter, bat-winged ghost.
