

from
THE ARMS OF THE INFINITE
CHRISTOPHER BARKER

WHEN THEY WERE WORKING, THE TWO ROBERTS USED A creaking wooden shed at the back of the garden as a studio. I think it had been purpose built for this because one of its walls was a large window that had an outside shutter that could be raised or lowered from the front. When I smell oil paint from a tube the wild mess of the interior comes tumbling back and my eyes smart with the memory. There was usually an easel in one corner with a work in progress clamped to it. The palette was no more than a square of plywood mottled with smeared colours. Amongst a tangle of crossed brushes lay leaded tubes of paint, curled up like winded toy soldiers. Their fallen caps were beside them as different coloured gore oozed from their severed necks.

Colquhoun spent most of his time in there while MacBryde tended to our needs, but sometimes he would emerge, beaten back from his work by the weight of his hangover. Then we would all sit around the kitchen table and compete to see who could draw a perfect circle. Although Colquhoun's circle was frilled, as if inked by the trembling stylus of a Richter meter registering an aftershock, he always won. MacBryde's mischief sometimes knew no bounds. He once put on a special tea and the treat was a plate of newly baked cakes. Among many old favourites was a particularly toothsome looking meringue, nestling in a frilly white cake-cup. Presenting the plate with this speciality foremost he asked me to choose. Of course, how could I refuse? As I bit into the glazed sugar carapace my teeth cracked on a lump of rock that MacBryde had gleefully baked into the centre. The tea-time table of siblings fell about with laughter.

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