

# Butades

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Titus Books

What is good is form-giving. What is bad is form. Form is the end, death. Form-giving is movement, action. Form-giving is life.

Paul Klee, *Notebooks, Volume 2, The Nature of Nature*

## ONE

I live in a small town with frequent murders. Every now and again a voice comes on the phone.

—Butades.

A short time later, I'm on my hands and knees. I'm alone. I insist upon it: a clear space in which to work. I look up at the sky as if waiting for a sign. A bird, a cloud, the slightest hint of a breeze. Then I fall to it.

When the rest have gone, I go back in. That is, I 'go in' a second time—that's how they say it, and it seems appropriate. I circle around and point the camera, one-handed. A steady click, click, click.

They know I do it. I know they know it. But no one says a word, at least not until today.

Back at the studio, I work up the shots. Still wet, they swing from their pegs. Black and white, and already beautiful.

Later, the slides come. I'm working and I hear Jonsen the Swedish postman come whistling up the drive. I let him call and run his fat face along the screen door. Then the sound of a small parcel dropped on the porch. I wait all day until dark, knowing it's out there. Then I clear away the few sticks of furniture. I do it in a clean arc of movement, with long arms and my weight all inside of me. I light a cigarette, just to feel the time stretch, and project the slides up on the one good wall. The smoke pours upwards, blue in the beam of the projector. The projector fan whirrs. The ceiling fan too. I turn a chair, lean forward, smoke, and look at slide after slide.

## TWO

—You come down here from wherever you come from—

When he gets like this, I don't look up. I make it a point not to look up.

—And you chalk up bodies, and—

—I don't *chalk up* bodies.

I lean too heavily into a line and the charcoal snaps.

The Chief looks across, with that look. He needs to know. It's in the Chief that he needs to know.

—Well. What's all this?

It's hot, he's a big man, and he turns slowly, his voice pitched above the heat. He waves a large hand in the general direction of the walls.

I say nothing. I just rub the line back into true.

Some days he just stands and looks, breathing badly. Some days he slicks his hair—black as a new tyre, still—and presses his hat back on. But he doesn't leave for the longest time. He stands at the screen door, looking down, thinking those thoughts.

After he's gone, I turn the key in the lock and slip it into my pocket.

I work quietly now for the rest of the day.

And when I get to feeling right about it, I pin it up. With the others.

### THREE

Out there, there's mostly just the heat. A patch of weed, trashcan with no lid, flies most days up against the screen door. I pay no attention.

Out there, where for miles there's no one, you can wait a long time for a breeze. It's cooler then, and you have the sky too, high and bluest blue. There's nothing up there. Nothing but the odd cloud drifting, holding and losing its shape, until the last trace goes.

But after a while you get to thinking about it: what business a breeze has, stirring about up there and blowing cool down here. And you go back indoors.

## FOUR

At first the Chief didn't understand.

He would come in all restless from the heat and the work. He would pace about, feeling intrusive and useless, with an excuse that didn't survive even the telling.

When he got to know there was beer, and where the beer was, that eased the problem. Pretty soon he would say his hello and nothing more until he felt cooled and maybe even a little doused and the first bottle stood empty. This I preferred.

At this point, having nothing to say, he would talk about the case. He would walk around the walls with a second bottle in his fist. He had a way of raising his head. Some days he would ask a question. Just as often not. Then he would look to the bottle in his hand.

—The one thing that puzzles me—he would say eventually.

And each time it was not a detail but the whole thing, that it was happening here, and we were in

this small house, the two of us, and it was our business to discuss it, *really* our business.

On this particular day, he said of the drawings:  
—You don't label them.

He was right. I didn't. I didn't know, after a while, after the third, or the fifth, which was which. But that wasn't the issue. It was the issue for the Chief but not for me. He needed to impose an order on things, and not just for the sake of the town. I guess that's why he was Chief of Police.

—I don't know what they are. Yet.

## FIVE

—When was the first?

—My first, or the first?

—Your first.

It was in early fall. In this part of the world a long shadow comes across the earth, the leaves come down without wind. People stay indoors, and the wooden houses throw up smoke. A person could

tramp about all day and not meet another.

They found him a mile or so out beyond the edge of town, where the Welcome sign stands.

First murder in eleven years. (So their first too, in a way.) A sixteen-year-old farm boy.

Back broken. Clean as a snapped stick of chalk. Only bleeding internal.

The Chief got on the phone and couldn't pronounce my name. There was an awkwardness.

—This ... thing. You don't have to do it ...

—I'll do it.

—You'll do it?

I'd say he didn't want me to do it. He didn't want some fool woman—some out-of-state appointee from some crazy federal work scheme—gettin' mixed up, and maybe messed up, in an already bad situation. Murder was bad. And a woman was bad for public confidence, if word got out.

Gonzales was worse. Wouldn't stay back when I told him. At first.

I let them know how I was to do it. The conditions. The set-up. They fought it, but I did it.

—How did it feel?

—Feel?

It didn't feel. I didn't feel. I just did it straight.

The boy lay across a knot of grass, as if set up there in the sun. He wore a plaid shirt. I saw straight away that chalk wouldn't do. I prepared some lime. It left a too thick line, but I didn't graze the clothes, or the shiny new work boots, hardly worn, or the hair, or the pink young hands. The line ran true and came up strong in the shots, white on grey. The brush sounded dry on the stiff grass as I dragged it around. I closed the line, saw it was good, and called. I could feel them breathing as they came, snorting distaste. They hauled the boy and set him in a pick up. Only the Chief stayed.

I had to tell him about the photos. He disagreed. I reminded him of my contract, and he sat in his car, a way off, the whole time.

The camera clicked with a strange, empty sound unlike before. And I noted that an unsteadiness had entered into things.