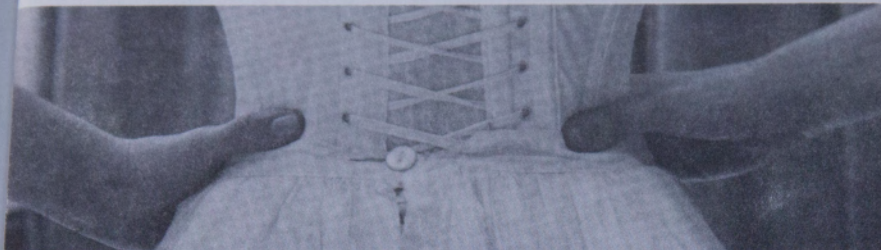


*from* PARTIAL PORTRAIT



ROBERTA ALLEN





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He is only a bystander now that the process has begun he can't change the way it goes though he started it. He longs to shift it a bit to the right, or to the left, as the case may be, but he can barely follow the trail of smoke and the train has left.

1

He stops at obsolete stations where everyone turns away. **WHY HAS HE LET THIS HAPPEN?** But he was only playing he said. And the more he keeps track of its whereabouts, the further it flees from his grasp.

Precisely measured he draws the line.  
The end is always too short.

Doesn't he deserve to have some fun; to change its color, or its form, from time to time? Surely the person who began the process ought to have some control, he thought.

But everyone agrees that he should have had a dog if he wanted something underfoot all the time. This process he began, well, there's no limit to what might happen, and in the end perhaps, it's better that he doesn't know it all.

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Wedge Press, Inc.  
141 Perry Street  
New York, NY 10014

ARTISTS'  
BOOKS  
AL 538F



Produced at The Print Center, Inc., Box 1050, Brooklyn, N.Y., 11202, a non-profit printing facility for literary and arts-related publications. Funded by The New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts.

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He stands behind himself because he is at the edge. And the one upfront is either he or she. But he can't take one step closer to find out. Nor can he back away. Because the one behind him is also either he or she and he should feel protected being so many but instead he is afraid for each, lest any of them take one step in either direction. It is a precarious equilibrium and in truth it doesn't matter if he is he or she or both or three.

But it is a thankless task to stand there like that and keep watch. He is tired and hungry. The phone rings and each one picks up the receiver.

\* \* \*

The fireman returns and he is hard to breathe and black smoke obscures his face and he is not the rescuer after all he only answers his own sirens.

And what is she doing with this man who says, "YOU HAVE GREAT TITS!" And always spills the wine but lights the candles.

His blackened hands like leather soles, pry and separate and open. "YOU'RE TOO ROUGH!" she cries. And sometimes he learns when she shows him how, but mostly he does it his way.

And when he is soft and sleepy she is still waiting. She brings a candle closer to the bed.

\* \* \*



He slapped her in the face. And the world  
changed instantly he longed to embrace  
hundreds of thousands and millions he'd never  
met. But everyone had gone, even the  
strange ones.

\* \* \*

#### A SUMMARY

Where he is:  
He is on the outskirts  
He is near the edge  
He is in the way  
He is out of reach  
He is over the hill  
No one knows where

Where he thinks he is:  
He is on the tip of his tongue  
He is under his nose  
He is at his fingertips  
He is within earshot  
He is a hair's-breadth away  
He is around his corner  
He is a stone's throw from himself  
He is at arm's length

Where he is when he is she:  
He is wide of the mark  
He is removed  
He is remote  
He is inaccessible  
He is unapproachable  
He is out of the way

\* \* \*





THE PHYSICAL WORLD

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