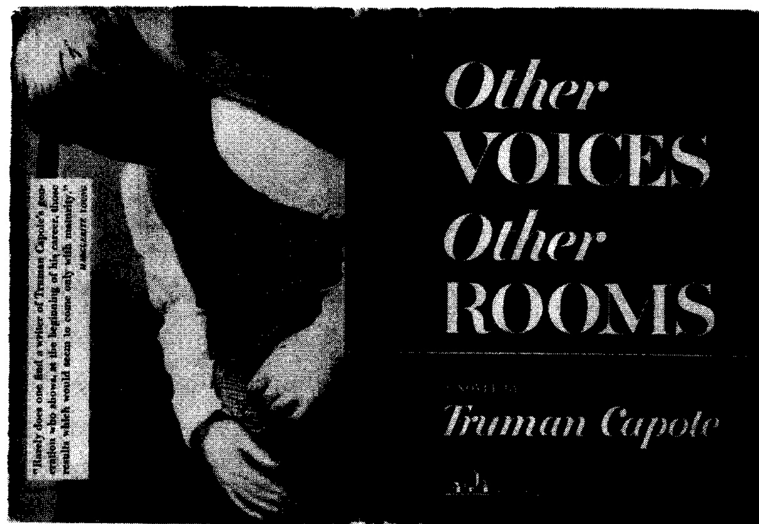

THE WOMEN

TRUMAN CAPOTE BECAME a woman in 1947, the year this photograph was taken. Much has been made of it since its appearance on the dust jacket on Capote's first novel, 1948's *Other Voices, Other Rooms*.

Actually, it is not a photograph, but a shadow ground through publicity, coming out the other side as something else. The mind cannot be blank in the face of it. It is an image that is an assertion, a point, asserting this: I am a woman.

In 1947, women did not publish books. So determined to be authors were they—Jean Stafford, Carson McCullers, Marguerite Young, say—that they buttoned themselves up on dust jackets in some Hemingway influenced image of a male American author. Truman Capote became a woman in 1947 just when "real" women would not or could not. And the woman he became in this photograph—itself

better written than *Other Voices, Other Rooms*—wanted to be fucked by you and by any idea of femininity that had fucked you up.

In his writing, Capote addressed this issue only once—in the "factual" short story "Dazzle," which appeared in his last collection of writings, *Music for Chameleons* (1980). The story is sentimental because Capote could never write of himself—of what he wanted rather than what he imagined for others—without being sentimental. Another form of lying. In "Dazzle" he wrote, "I had a secret, something that was bothering me, something that was really worrying me very much...'I don't want to be a boy. I want to be a girl.'"

By becoming the most famous woman author—not writer, an important distinction—of his generation, Truman Capote sought to limit or cock block other women writers in their quest to be popular, admired, celebrated. He did not want to share the female stage. At the same time, he thought of himself as the model of potential for women who wrote, and an image of what they might become if they continued to write: popular, admired, celebrated.

The *Other Voices, Other Rooms* photograph, which also shows Capote as an American woman of style—the vest as opposed to a jacket, his translucent, flat fingernails, the watered or greased hair flattening the top of his head with the light hitting it just so, his eyebrows plucked or raised in mild astonishment, something to be fucked somehow—was too much for a number of his peers who did not possess the kind of will it took to deconstruct their bodies and make them thought-fodder for the camera.

Capote's career as a woman author made a more interesting narrative than *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. And his generally male writer

friends realized that what separated them from Truman Capote was his drive to create a self that existed apart from the isolated, nowhere world of writing, the better to become an image accessible to publicity, a story in himself. Donald Windham's peevish response to this: "The publishing world is what I was aware of Capote's being in. We were both writers. Still, although I was twenty-seven and he was only twenty-three, he was in the publishing world and I was not."

We were both writers. A sentence that beats against Capote's concept of what the author's body means in the world—a narrative for other writers to write about. Windham again: "His defense in person was never camouflage; it was always boldness. Once, on a New York street, when he was telling me an anecdote in a high voice accompanied by expansive gestures and saw a burly truck driver glowering at him, he sassed, 'What are you looking at? I wouldn't kiss you for a dollar.'"

Truman Capote lied about this photograph in which he appears to be a woman. He lied about the photograph's intent, claiming in some instances that it had been sent to his publishers upon request by a friend while he was away, or that he was unaware of what he projected in the image. This was the first instance of the disjunction between Capote's image of himself and the meaning he ascribed to images of himself. It was also the first instance of Capote refusing to hear the weight of his affect as he effected it, a trope he would repeat within subsequent identities.

Perhaps he was aware of this: how images effect words in the contemporary world of publishing. "This subject [publishing] fascinates me, and I know so much about it I could talk for seven hours.

Nonstop. About how publishers work and why you should do this and why you should do that."

As he wrote less and less from 1966 until his death, in 1984, women authors—images of the new feminism—began to be packaged as such and, as such, they became the publishing world's new custodians of "other" language. (Elizabeth Hardwick "confirms her stature...[and] has as much to say about women in the world as...women on the page," reads part of the jacket copy of her book *Seduction and Betrayal* [1974].) Capote was left no other recourse than to become a man.

He became a man with the publication of his "big" book, *In Cold Blood* (1966), a book that focuses on one man, Perry Smith, a murderer consumed by vanity like the woman Capote believed he had been once. Which is to say that *In Cold Blood* set out to prove, in part, that Truman Capote was no longer a lyrical authoress (of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, he explained: "What [I] had done has the enigmatic shine of a strangely colored prism held to the light—that, and a certain anguished, pleading intensity like the message of a shipwrecked sailor stuffed into a bottle and thrown into the sea"), but a writer validated by his experience in the world of fact—*In Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences*—a primarily male literary tradition.

In Cold Blood means a number of things to any number of people; by adopting the non-fiction novel as a form, Capote also wanted to usurp male authority, or at least one man's authority: non-fiction novelist Norman Mailer's. In the nineteen fifties Mailer had called Capote "as tart as a grand aunt." This statement, a caricature and a diminishment of Capote's role as a powerful woman author, marked

how Capote's self-perception, and hence the public perception of him, would have to change. While grand aunts can be powerful, they are not generally perceived as such in the world of publishing. And as women writers eventually became what publishers could sell, albeit with reservations and marginally, Capote could, if asked, advise them why they "should do this and why [they] should do that." (Of course, Capote spent a great deal of his time advising significant women on how to become themselves, or his image of themselves. There was, for instance, Katharine Graham, publisher of the *Washington Post*, in whose honor he threw his famous Black and White ball. And, to a greater degree, he advised, molded, resented and loved Barbara "Babe" Paley—"She was the most important person in my life and I the most important in hers"—a woman made powerful through her association with her husband, media chief and CBS chairman William S. Paley.)

The image (or reality) of the maiden aunt is one that male power revolts against or finds revolting. Masculinity defines itself against such images, let alone realities. Capote was not a maiden aunt in the presence of male power; he was, however, a fashionable person in his attraction to, and fear of it. In a letter to John Malcolm Brinnin, Capote wrote, as he started to try on the role of the male writer: "Maybe I ought to...get drunk and play Prometheus like Norman." Which is to say that Truman Capote the woman realized that Truman Capote the man would eventually have to adhere to the publishing world's perception of the male writer if he were to occupy a place in it and be of continued interest to the press.

Capote identified this apparatus—the cultural press, media power—as male and Jewish. "The truth of the matter about it is, the