subverting the lyric

essays rob mclennan

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subverting the lyric: essays

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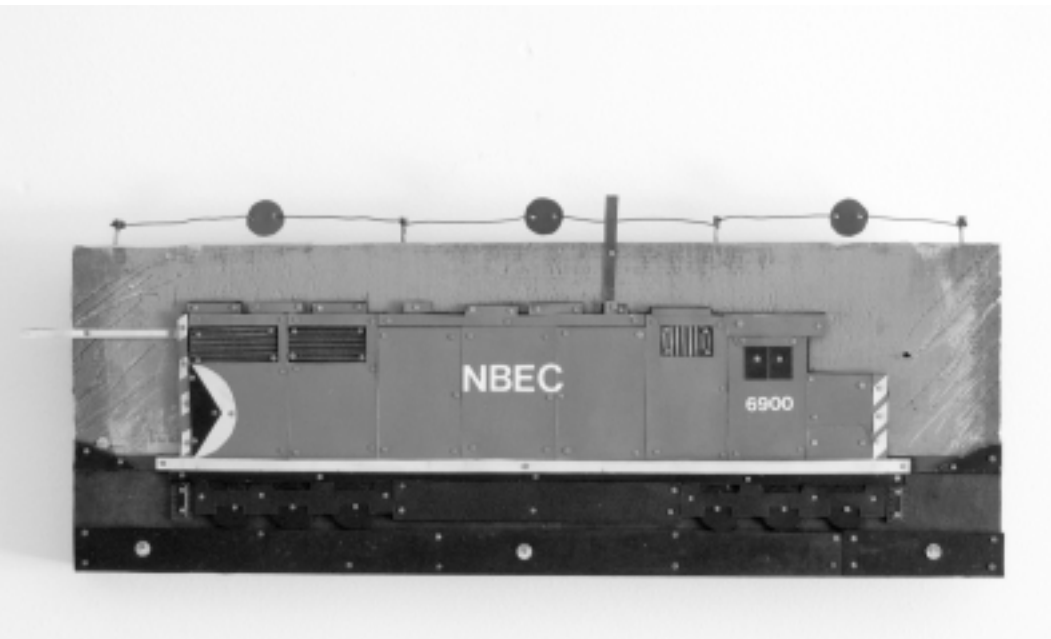
essays by rob mclennan



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for derek beaulieu and Stephen Cain

contents

I have no interest in *contemporary* as a sense of the *latest.*

— Robert Creeley,
Contexts of Poetry: Interviews 1961–1971

introduction

After nearly twenty years, I've come to realize that writing reviews and essays, organizing readings and book fairs, attending other readings, producing chapbooks, and, most of all, reading as much of the work of my contemporaries as possible are essential parts of my own writing process. They are intertwined with and cannot be separated from my own creative work. The pieces that make up *subverting the lyric* represent some of the activities that make up my writing day and subsequent writing life.

My writing life has involved a series of contradictions, from the quiet study of writing (the summer I spent apartment-sitting for jwcurry and studying the work of bpNichol as well as the critical journal *Open Letter*) to a dozen or so cross-country reading tours, anywhere from three to eight weeks long (with brief forays into the United States, England, and Ireland as well). I have left stacks of chapbooks, books, and broadsides and picked up new reading material along the way. As much as I admire particular writing "schools," and lean toward some more than others, I've never been a joiner, preferring instead to simply visit them and take what I need of styles, shapes, and ideas from a range of sources.

So how did I create a coherent collection from a disparate series of thoughts and essays? Most of these pieces were originally crafted as reviews that went too far and wouldn't let go of my attention, pushing me until I finally exhausted myself (the piece on Jon Paul Fiorentino, for example, was originally written as a brief review for the *Globe and Mail,* but it wouldn't let me be even after it was submitted). This book wasn't written as a collection of essays per se; rather, it's a series of pieces that eventually collected themselves into something roughly the size of a manuscript. What else was I supposed to do? Still, shaping these wayward pieces into a collection has made me think more seriously about where I might go next.

These essays represent half a decade of a few of my writing threads (the earliest essay goes back to 2002). My writing projects have always adapted as my interests have shifted, and hopefully these pieces reflect that joy of discovery. I found myself easily spending eight months (or more) writing a piece on Barry McKinnon, for example, that took me far deeper into his work and taught me as much about knowing how to read it as about knowing how to approach some of my own material, from an alternative direction. For reasons that still elude me, my interest has always drifted toward the poet whose work hasn't received enough critical attention. There simply isn't enough criticism on the likes of curry, Quartermain, or Christakos, and I can only hope that I have helped to open up a larger conversation about their work.

rob mclennan
Edmonton
October 2007

chapter 1
Dubliners: Irish Utaniki

Leaving Ottawa: January 12, 2002

Steve Brockwell and I are barely at the airport, and already we are upgraded to first class, thanks to his Air Miles. We don't know exactly how it happens, or at least I don't. Not that it matters.

In the airport lounge, it takes me a few minutes to realize the food and drinks are free. We enjoy multiple pints of Guinness in our attempt to acclimatize. It's going to be a long flight. To London first, staying a few hours at Heathrow, and then to Dublin. A five-hour layover.

Steve had a job interview a few days ago for a vice president position at another company, with less travel overall but more of it international. The only reason we're flying now is for his accumulation of Air Miles, that he travels so much for work. Most of his travel now is to California, often at the last minute and against his will, two laptops in tow.

After a year of planning on my part, we have three readings together in Ireland. I take an armload of powerbars from the lounge for the coming flight. A combination of years of cheap touring and watching Joe Blades, with a decade's worth more experience touring.

On the plane, the first glass of champagne, and the gin and tonic.

Once airborne, they tell us we're moving at about six hundred kilometres an hour ground speed.

so, this, then, a
blue

mark in my eye
against the cloud

four pounds lush
of gentle seasoning

stephen collects miles
& dust

Arriving in London: Heathrow Airport

Travel involves an altered state, the ability to move from place to place without the distraction of the day-to-day. It's about learning a new place and getting a better sense of comparison.

On my third gin and tonic, my second glass of wine. This is about discovery and justification.

After years of travelling across Canada, I have a basic sense of the country. I'll admit I have much to learn yet, even after tours stretching from Montreal to Vancouver, Windsor to Prince George, and throughout the East Coast.

What is travel? To go into another country, another continent, and have little idea of the groundwork. An unfamiliar topography. I don't know the basics. Not really foreign but foreign nonetheless. I spent the preceding weeks reading up on Irish histories, standing stones, and geographies.

At Heathrow, we spend time in a Harrod's. Bears, policemen,

and dogs seem to be the range of London tourist products. *Please look after this bear*.

Steve disappears to find a bank machine since he only has euros, and I've spent my measly four pounds plus. It's what ten dollars Canadian turns into. Enough for a coffee, a Snapple, and a postcard I'll send to Kate when we come back through next week. I leave poems on empty tables.

Only in the gift shop does it actually feel like London, with bobbies, British flags, and red phone booth tins filled with butter candies. The rest of it is an expansive, generic mall that could be in any large Western city. Toronto. New York.

In the bookstore, stacks of Margaret Atwood and Michael Ondaatje. Local pride.

In the airport, I make a point of using words such as *boot*, *bird*, *shag*, and *fag*. My mad-mod moments.

Steve and I eat powerbars and talk about writing and whatever we are working on. We spend an hour or two in a sleep-deprived haze, try to sleep on benches, bags in hand.

Arriving in Dublin: January 14, 2002

Steve and I spent most of our first night in Dublin in a pub with three smaller pubs inside, a compartment of compartments, after an hour's walk downtown from our bed and breakfast. The two most common letters in the Irish language, I joked, B&B. Every second building, it seemed. That five-hour time change.

The pub supplied free postcards. We wrote a few to send home. Somehow I couldn't believe we were there. Sending home proof. Of course, I'd send a postcard to Kate from every stop.

We listened to traditional music, being in the tourist pub, St. John Gogarty's. Three boys who really didn't want audience participation, frowned on clapping, the old fella in the corner playing spoons. Sitting with his wife, who looked barely conscious, the old fella came over and complimented me on my hair. The long

line of grey. Repeated himself constantly. Said he used to play in folk bands twenty, thirty years ago, even in Kingston. Is that near Ottawa? Said he used to be a musician. Cozied up for another drink.

So far we'd been mistaken twice for Americans. My response: "What part of Scotland are we in anyway?"

A fragment from my journal at the time:

a pub of particular times, sleeping
windsor jugs, & a waitress
from south africa

the cobblestone streets are not the same

no wonder, a cigarette, small
distraction, news a mention
on the wrong corner

makes a mole-hill from a handful of earth,
makes a
    mountain from a valley-crease

hats off to this, then, waits
for the silence
to suddenly make the break

Dubliners

Steve and I went to a local writers' group in Dublin to see what the local flavour was. Two Americans, three Irish, with at least one of them not a Dubliner. Where were the locals?

So much like Ottawa. No one in the city limits ever from there.

Neither of the Americans, from the poems they read, seemed to think a lot of Dublin, or the Irish, although they both claimed to love the city. The college girl, there but a few months, and the

older man, years. The American man argued vehemently with me about the "lack of resolution" in the poem I read and was much less friendly afterward. The Irish in the group seemed to understand completely. Or they didn't seem to mind.

> the oldest pub in dublin. so far,
> weve found two / one back
>
> to viking times (at this location)
>
> phone numbers a barcode
> against certain implements
>
> still a descent mark,
> in the math it takes from one

Heathrow

By the time we get the time change worked out, we'll have to go home again.

My friend Ian is to meet us at Heathrow a week from today. How will we know where to meet him? The biggest fucking airport in the world.

Steve and I spend the afternoon looking for a camera shop so he can purchase a flash. He refuses to work without one.

> from languages heard
> on the city bus, & english
> only us
>
> the fella in the pub says, old
> mailman blown up
> that morning
>
> well into his cups

thirty years back, a musician
that performed in kingston,
& toronto

remembering the days

the traditional music, sure, he says,
but what abt pete seeger?

Davy Byrne's Pub

At Davy Byrne's, Steve said, "I'll have the fish and chips." A pub featured in *The Dubliners*, with markers around to remind us, in case we forget. In case there's any doubt. Every second bar in Dublin, we notice, claims "James Joyce drank here." Steve suggested that it's more plausible than I thought.

I wrote some Yeats postcards to George Bowering and Kate. Only when I'm away, it seems, does she get the best of me.

In Greene's Book Shop, I found a copy of Ed Dorn's *The Gunslinger Book 1* for three euro. A long poem of the American west. I went in looking for local Irish poetry but found nothing.

Steve found it warm in the pubs, to the point of passing out, he said. The days hadn't been good to us, or at least the mornings. Sleep was all too desirable but not always attainable.

We got up at seven every morning for breakfast, Steve insisted, since it was included. I'd return to sleep until noon.

Steve asked, "Is globalization a good idea?" The Irish euro was two weeks old. The only way to force a sense of your own place, I think. But what is lost too. The smallest euro coin already discarded on pub floors, not worth picking up. I returned home with pockets full.

Irish radio, in English, plays all the same stuff but for the reminder of the accent. On the B&B television, we watched *Star Trek* reruns with fewer commercials. The Weather Channel,

temperatures ranging from minus twelve to plus twenty-two, from Portugal to Dublin to Moscow.

television, at
an eclipsed speed

fox mulder's voice
a higher pitch

two cats fight
but im out cold

dubliners pitch
& guinness swirl

what else is a man
to do w/ time

Dingle

In Dingle, we met a German girl at the pub whom Steve and I both had an eye on. An ear. She reminded me of an Irish Elizabeth Hurley. Here for fifteen years, her accent more Irish than German.

The night's reading went well. We read at the Institute of Irish Language and Culture, housed in an old nunnery, attached to the Catholic church. Half the crowd a group of Americans here for a course in Irish history and language, a cross-program with a Massachusetts school. The best part was that the American Irish from Massachusetts were all from Dingle just a few generations back. The group had roots there. Fourth cousin to the priest.

Brita. The German girl's name was Brita.

The area contained some of the earliest settlements in Ireland. Standing stones and archaeological finds going back half a million years. Stones like stars up the hill. Plenty of sheep littered the ground. We drove past peat bogs, rust-coloured swaths of wet earth.

We read to about two dozen folk, half of them local. Brita in the crowd, before we knew her. One woman a writer in residence somewhere in County Kerry, published in the same issue of *The Drunken Boat*, an online journal from Texas, as Steve. Another, a Dingle resident, grew up in Steve's Montreal neighbourhood and also studied under poets David Solway and Peter van Toorn. After the reading, the canon complimented Steve's work and my voice.

Steve prefers "fuss-pot" to "fuss-bucket." I think I'm "cheeky."

In the pub, when Brita approached, we could barely believe our ears. Behind the bar, a small CN Tower souvenir from the 1970s, staring back at long geography. You aren't that far from home, it said. From this distance, the new shape home became. Its compactness became larger inside.

A Poor Photographer

Driving through the Irish countryside from one reading to another. No one told us, one hundred kilometres an hour in Canada, but in Ireland more like five. Sheep trails become roads and wind incessantly. The Irish drive too fast, Steve swears, another car veers around a blind turn, one of millions. The tension is palpable; one of us might not live through this trip.

Whenever we stop so Steve can take a picture, I watch him. Setting up tripod and shot, up to twenty minutes. I step back ten or twenty paces and surreptitiously photograph him.

He visits Yeats' tower. Still closed to tourists, too early, and in the wrong season, the building is locked, deserted. I can't tell if Steve's prostrations are religious or sexual. A clear awe.

All around Ireland, in churches, abbeys, and fields, pictures of Steve from the back, looking down. Fiddling with an unseen camera. After we return home, he thinks it looks like he's peeing in all my photos. In sacred places all over Ireland.

Cobh: January 19, 2002

Three readings up, down. At the bed and breakfast, we woke up in the morning to a flat tire. Steve continued to joke about me driving. It would have been different if I knew how to drive a standard, or how to drive on the left, but not knowing both was too much.

We read in an art gallery housed in a building built by the oldest yacht club in the world as their second location. The sweet old bastard, Sean O Huigin, who ran the gallery, used to be a Canadian poet. One of the founders of the Bohemian Embassy reading series in Toronto in the 1960s, where folk such as Michael Ondaatje and Margaret Atwood began. Now he introduced the locals to documentaries on bpNichol and brought in various poets from back home.

When Brockwell offered to buy him a drink, Sean claimed he was expensive. A quadruple paddy. Two downed between Steve's original offer and the time he returned with one. Of many.

Once in Toronto hanging out with the likes of Shaunt Basmajian and Ted Plantos, O Huigin was now the director of an arts centre who no longer produced art. Some of his books he no longer had copies of, and others had sold millions of copies that somehow he didn't see a dime from. In Cobh, he seemed to have a good sense of who he was and what his role in the community was.

After the reading, we went next door to a pub called the Titanic, originally the White Star Line building and the last stop for the doomed liner, too large to accept passengers from the small cove but for rowboats. The top floor, where once first-class tickets were purchased, had been turned into a high-class restaurant. The back, where other tickets were sold, had been turned into the pub, decorated much like the inside of the ship.

About ten years earlier, Sean told us, when the same room was used to dispense local pogey, one of the unemployed men won the lottery, bought the building, and threw everyone out. He opened

both restaurant and pub. At the back of the pub, dozens of photographs taken by a priest who got on the *Titanic* at the original port and off at Cobh. The decor, then, modelled on what he had taken. He must have felt like the luckiest man in the world.

chapter 2
Not Exactly Two Cents' Worth: jwcurry's *1cent*

a mere roar

— jwcurry, "Reflecting on the War," *1cent* 2/*Curvd H&z* 10, November 2, 1979

Despite protesting that he's "just some guy," jwcurry has been a persistent force in writing and publishing in Canada for almost thirty years. One of the strongest proponents of visual and concrete poetry (once called "the best concrete and visual poet in Canada" by Christian Bök), and other "non-traditional writings" (as he calls it), as writer and publisher curry has encouraged and published the works of writers such as Stuart Ross, Richard Truhlar, Randall Brock, Steve McCaffery, Mark Laba, David Aylward, Marco Fraticelli, Peggy Lefler, Don Garner, david uu, Daniel f. Bradley, John Riddell, Steve Ross Smith, Shant Basmajian, bpNichol, and hundreds of others. For years now, part of curry's importance has been not just the design features of his work but also writing and publishing a particular *kind* of writing and publishing that doesn't always get acknowledged,

whether bpNichol's work, including his Ganglia publications, david uu's *Lodgistiks* titles, or Stuart Ross's *Mondo Hunkamooga*. So much of this ephemeral and unusual material in Canada is often overlooked and rarely encouraged, produced, collected, or catalogued, let alone all of the above by the same person. Often much of the material is barely remembered or acknowledged by those who produced it. Today curry's place as a collector and archivist, indeed repository, of this kind of work is third only to that of Toronto's Nicky Drumbolis and Paris, Ontario's, Nelson Ball. It is sadly telling, in a way, that the largest collection of curry's own work as a writer and publisher isn't even in Canada but part of the Ruth and Marvin Sackner Archive of Concrete and Visual Poetry in Florida (the world's largest private collection of its kind).

One of the earliest and main components of curry's publishing ventures has been the *1cent* series of "handouts" — at least two cents of writing, as curry says, "matching the idea of a publication to a pennys worth." Handmade and ranging from variously hand-printed, mimeographed, or photocopied items that he sells for a mere penny each, the series is described in his own index *CAO1687* (*1cent* 333) as "initially a single-poem-per-leaflet series, things (thankfully) changed in each of those linkwords & it is now a variously-formatted series of various content, incorporating group issues." In an interview conducted by Jason Sherman in *What* 7 (November–December 1986), curry said, "I've been publishing books and leaflets and postcards and blah blah blah, but that's not what I want to be doing. I want to be publishing objects. You know, I want to be publishing all kinds of just totally bizarre things that ordinarily don't get published, because nobody has the desire to sit down and work at these things. Because it's a fuck of a lot of hard work."

Starting his *Curvd H&z* publications in Vancouver in 1978,

curry began his smaller series of *1cent* publications as "pomez a penny," a twisting of James Joyce's *pomes pennyeach* (republished by Faber & Faber in London, England). The initial *1cent* publications were issued November 1979 in Toronto but moved with curry to Ottawa in 1996 (the first Ottawa publication being *1cent* 313, "Fucked Up," issued December 7, 1996). He has produced 377 items (at last count), many of them reprinted, most of them with the stamped image of a 1973 Canadian penny on the back (with a few variants), and all of them sold for the same. With the precedents of Arsenal Pulp's beginning as Pulp Press, with its *3¢ Pulp* newsletters, and bpNichol's Ganglia *5¢ mini mimeo* (which included full books for only five cents), curry's *1cent* series has included small poems, booklets, and even books, and reprints of other small items, including those originally appearing as issues of the *5¢ mini mimeo*.

Not that this was the first of curry's ventures in writing. His *moebius in a bottle* was published in 1977 (when curry was just seventeen) by bill bissett's blewointment press: a collection of poems written when curry was between thirteen and fifteen and submitted a year later, just before he left home for the last time.

Early design considerations were minimal, with financial constraint becoming the aesthetic. Pieces were printed on borrowed or stolen photocopying opportunities, mimeo machines, or a scammed rubberstamp set. The first *1cent* publications look rough, but through practice curry has since achieved a polish unlike anyone else, making him perhaps the most careful producer of mimeo publications in the country. Today curry's mimeo publications are far more polished than anything bill bissett or bpNichol ever achieved, and they involve screen printing, hand stamping, and linocutting. To look at curry's aesthetic as a whole, including *Industrial Sabotage*, *news notes*, *1cent*, as well as other publications, is to discover an appreciation of detail and found objects, with clear images mimeoed on found paper, used envelopes, and fabric.

In Michael Dean's introduction to *Heads & H&z* (Underwhich Editions, 1985), the *Curvd H&z* reprint anthology coedited by Dean and curry, Dean touched on some of what curry's kind of aesthetic achieved: "Consistent through curry's publications is this sense of a text being complete only when it has found its format. And as the text achieves its format this achievement tends to turn the text back on itself, reflecting automatically, and more deeply, on its content." Drumbolis also wrote of the range of curry's enterprise in a review of the early issues of *Curvd H&z* in Kevin Connolly and Jason Sherman's *What* 7:

> As in the famous line of least resistance, accommodation leads from recreation to the creation of new missiles. John started out with a series *Curvd H&z*. Included in this was another series, Pomez A Penny, later *1cent*, which made minimal works available to the great unsure for next to nothing. The series for his magazine named *Industrial Sabotage* is also part of *Curvd H&z* and has had two issues appear in 1cent. *Th Wrecking Ballzark*, another subset, is reserved for non-linear writing. *Toybox* is for fiction. *Hangnail* is a series of signed broadsides, some of his loveliest productions, while the counterpart *Sticky Lights* is devoted to free street posters. There is a postcard series as yet unnamed and one for catalogues called *Systems Retrieval*. *Spider Plots in Rat-Holes*, not part of *Curvd H&z*, is a collaborative series with Mark Laba, while *Utopic Furnace Press*, also not *Curvd H&z*, is a series of found anything. Ariadne's clew to all this involuting is to string a line about the very way in which it comes about, the organic growth of a veritable beast: a filing system you develop as you go, a private universe.
>
> An early decision, beyond these intersecting serializations, was

to accommodate other publishers, such as Coma Goats Press (Mark Laba, Toronto), Pangen Subway Ritual (Daniel f. Bradley, Toronto), Proper Tales Press (Stuart Ross, Toronto), Runaway Spoon Press (Bob Grumman, Port Charlotte, Florida), Gesture Press (Nicholas Power, Toronto), Nietzsche's Brolly (Marshall Hryciuk, Toronto), and even my own above/ground press (Ottawa). One of the ongoing collaborative publications was the *Spider Plots in Rat Holes* series, made first with Mark Laba and later with Steve Venright (who went on to produce his own work under Torpor Vigil Industries). They were odd little pieces, by John Riddell and others, exploring whatever a "spider plot in a rat hole" might be. The series was later abandoned, as collaborators moved on, in favour of its offshoot, the Canadian Small Change Association. The idea of the series internally splintering came from bpNichol's *Gronk*, as Nichol included non-sequential multiple series that eventually completed (something since picked up by derek beaulieu through housepress), with a secondary source being bill bissett's blewointment, with publications having non-sequential issues and even misleading and missing numbers.

It's interesting how the *1cent* series traces curry's development as a publisher, writer, and even archivist from the first piece deliberately starting from the "too much curry" notion in the *Curvd He&z* series, after curry moved back to Toronto from Vancouver. Barely a dozen items into the *Curvd He&z* titles, which had almost exclusively to that point been his own writing (with a bit from probably-then-partner Peggy Lefler), the first of the *1cent* publications would include works by Bob Lee, RD Hanson, Peggy Lefler, Gregg andely, and Jasmine Jupiter Silverwind as much as works by jwcurry. On the way across Canada, where curry and Lefler lived on the streets, they picked up pieces as they went: Hanson from Calgary, Lee from the streets of Toronto, Jasmine from Vancouver, and andely, an ex of Lefler's, from Vancouver.

Even as the two of them lived on Yonge Street, sleeping in

Dundonald Park or High Park, they continued to make things on borrowed bits and scraps. Each time copies and variants of every piece were squirrelled away into a building archive. When he was younger, curry says, he made anthologies for himself, typesetting on an old Remington and learning bookbinding, to collect poems he wanted to keep. In Vancouver, the first reading he went to was part of the Writing in Our Times series, which included a performance by the Toronto Research Group (Nichol and McCaffery). Later, back in Toronto, curry went to sound performances by the Four Horsemen, Bob Cobbing, PC Fencott, the CCMC, Mark Laba, and Stuart Ross, and soon after arriving in Toronto he reprinted one of David Aylward's *5¢ Mini Mimeo*s as an act of indebtedness.

It was around the same time in Toronto that curry began creating an archive, which later became Room 302 Books, and he began picking up duplicate copies of some of the books that he had read. As he became a more careful and deliberate reader, the duplicate copies became just that, and eventually it made sense to him to continue picking up copies to build a repository of items that he saw few others collecting or selling. This is when he began collecting the works of bpNichol and Mark Laba, collecting not just books and chapbooks but also pamphlets, posters, and back-cover mentions.

For the first hundred "pomez a penny," curry wanted to produce indexes at numbers 33, 66, 99, and as the series continued he would produce further indexes at numbers 111, 222, and 333. Only the first one appeared, as *No Cents: pomez a penny 1–33* (issued May 13, 1980), with a second index not appearing until number 333, *CAO1687* (issued May 28, 1999), fully annotated, with cross-references to authors, publishers, and mere mentions. At number 100, the series changed permanently to the current *1cent* to include more than just poems. Most of the pieces in the series remain short works, but for a few exceptions, such as his *news*

notes issues, which include longer critical reviews by curry, and a range of poems. A few larger publications have appeared as items that curry considered "would be funny to do for *1cent*."

news notes began as a posthumous result of bpNichol's own *news notes* publications, with curry simply continuing what Nichol had already started. After Nichol's death in 1988 (of complications during surgery), jwcurry and Nelson Ball bought the remaining Ganglia archive from Ellie Nichol. They found a number of incomplete and unbound publications, including more than one hundred copies of what would have been the last issue of Ganglia's *news notes*. With his own sheets of *news notes* sandwiching in, and invitations out for others to do the same (only joe o' sullivan responded, then the proprietor of Bolton, Ontario's, A Scenario Press), the issue was bound as *at least 2¢ worth*, *1cent* 250, issued April 12, 1990, with eighteen pages of 8 ½ x 11 sheets. Issued for only a penny, it was called a co-publication between A Scenario Press, Ganglia Press, and Room 302 Books and became the first of curry's ongoing *news notes* (unstated at the time) and the final Ganglia publication. This new version became, like Nichol's, a review/mentions publication, with contributions by Fernando Aguiar, Carlyle Baker, gary barwin, Richard Beland, bill bissett, Charles Bukowski, bob cobbing, jwcurry, Rene Daumal, Brenan Donegan, Nicky Drumbolis, Jochen Gerz, Dwayne V. Higby, bpNichol, joe o' sullivan, Stuart Ross, and Henry W. Targowski. A number of issues have appeared since, exclusively written by curry, some with fiction and poetry submissions, on a range of paper and envelope stock, printed in a number of different styles.

> every (all at (toge (forever) ther) once) thing
> — bpNichol, "The Martyrology Book V: Chain 10,"
> *1cent* 80/*Curvd H&z* 125, issued February 6, 1982

One of the few variants of the Canadian penny image that curry had been putting on his own publications was produced by American writer and publisher Geoffrey A. Huth, who released two different issues of curry's series, *1cent* 269 (issued November 30, 1990) and *1cent* 292 (issued August 25, 1992), hand-stamping text directly on the backs of his business cards right after he had changed jobs. Huth replaced the Canadian 1973 penny that curry had been using with an American penny stamp (unfortunately the year of the penny is unreadable), making it an entertaining change in detail for anyone keeping track of the series.

Part of the ongoing reprint work has been to correct things along the way or to improve on a design — a concept that didn't really click for curry until 1982, circa *1cent* 81. A number of pieces were reprinted as the box anthology *Heads & H&z*, edited by jwcurry and Michael Dean (of the sound poetry group Owen Sound), published by Underwhich Editions in 1985. As Dean's introduction explains, the pieces included were "a selection of writing from the publishing concerns of jwcurry — Curvd H&z and eight imprints: Th Wrecking Ballzark, Sticky Lights, Industrial Sabotage, 1cent, Hangnails, Systems Retrieval, Toybox, and an as yet untitled postcard series." But it was also an anthology of the aesthetic sense of a writer, publisher, and archivist whose main focus appears to be ephemera.

One of curry's more recent efforts in the realm of small press publishing followed the gift of a second-hand Gestetner mimeo machine, built in 1926. One of his first publications on the machine, a *news notes* issued as *1cent* 336 on December 20, 1999, as a double-sided 8 ½ x 14 with covers, includes the various fades and hard readables, but curry eventually worked up to immaculately clean copies on future publications. Being the kind of publisher and printer he is, the end of this *news notes* acknowledges the technology, with "a formal note of thanks to Diane Woodward for the donation of the 1926 Gestetner mimeograph

this sheet was printed on & to gustave morin & Tom Snyders for compatible inks. I'll get the hang of it yet." (This statement seems especially ironic when we consider that he would quickly manage to master such equipment, and within weeks of acquiring the machine from Woodward he was producing cleaner sheets than most of his predecessors throughout the 1960s.) One of the offshoots of curry working on such equipment came in calls from every corner by others who had materials from days gone by that they were willing to donate, to the point that he now has over six thousand stencils and boxes of ink tubes, in various colours, from Nelson Ball (Weed/Flower Press, Paris), Gustave Morin (Stained Paper Archive, Hamilton/Windsor), and Joe Blades (Broken Jaw Press, Fredricton).

NO(AH) pARKING

— David J. Paul, "Flood," *1cent* 61/*Curvd H&z* 97, issued June 22, 1981

Curry's aesthetic has unfortunately created misreadings and misunderstandings, notably in print from Jim Shedden. Dean's *Heads & H&z* introduction just about says it all:

> To a large degree, however, this "making precious" of the single poem was the result of necessity as much as aesthetic deliberation: in the early days curry was publishing within the constraints of a very finite budget.
>
> This budgetary requirement could have resulted in curry using poor-quality means of production, turning out broadsides and chapbooks on Gestetner for instance (or turning them out, less frequently, on Offset or Xerox).
>
> Instead it resulted in curry waiting for his discovery of the hand-stamp, hand-set rubber type, as his chosen (and unique) means of production. If curry wanted fifty (or

150) copies of an item he would hand stamp the letters fifty (or 150) times.

One, hundred, &, fifty, times.

Out of the ideology of necessity came not the "shoddy" book, but the "scaled-down" book, a book that remained both literarily anarchic and typographically refined.

Curry says: "There is a trance in reading, and there is a trance in transcribing. I like the trance in transcribing. You notice all the peculiarities in notation and the little imperfections in the type.

Despite this description by Dean, Shedden's review of *Heads & H&z* (*Mondo Hunkamooga* 5, January 1987) misreads what Shedden calls "the planned rarity," claiming that "the 'planned rarity' side definitely eclipses any notion of disposability in the work." While seemingly appreciating parts of curry's aesthetic, Shedden also misses out:

There are two sides to the John Curry coin.

The first of these is the creator of commodities, the quintessential postmodernist whose work[s] have a built-in, "planned obsolescence" (Fredric Jameson): consider his postcards, street posters and stickers. Furthermore, most of Curry's work agrees with Jean Baudrillard's declaration that "the commodity always manifests its visible essence, which is its price." One need only look to Curry's series pomezapenny / one cent for the truth of this statement.

On the other hand, Curry's work embodies the values of bourgeois high art preciousness. For example, while I know Curry and a few of his customers (like myself) *do* send his postcards, most are probably filed away neatly, awaiting the day that their value increases. Furthermore, while the one-centers treat poetry as cheap — temporal

> and disposable — they quickly become "collector's items." Curry himself fetches $4.00 for a leaflet by bpNichol (The Martyrology Book V: Chain 10), which originally (only four years ago) cost a mere penny. One would be naive to assume that Curry did not plan this: it's a pretty safe bet to guess that an edition of only 100 copies of a poem by one of Canada's most prestigious writers will garner big bucks in a fairly short passage of time. With the "planned obsolescence" of Curry's work, then, there is also a "planned rarity." In other words, his "throw-away" items are also collectable wares.

As much as Shedden "appreciates" the work, he disparages it with backhanded compliments of "Curry's painstaking creations." It's as though he wilfully misunderstands the aesthetics of small press (the opposite of mass market and mass appeal) and sheds light on his own potential reasons for involvement in publishing, such as the future saleability of such works. Shedden seems to put his own values far above those of curry. In the process, his statement "One would be naive to assume that curry did not plan this" seems out of place considering how the second-hand/rare book market works, as curry's *1cent* publications would have appeared in stores for as much or more with or without Room 302 Books marking a similar increase. Shedden assumes that the pieces are made for the sake of selling later on at a higher price instead of accepting what the publications themselves suggest: the publisher taking exception to the market for what something is "worth," for a piece he was willing to sell for only a penny on release.

In a response to the possible contradiction (between the anarchist and bourgeois aspects of his publishing) in an interview with Chris Kubsch (published as *The jwcurry Experience* by Kubsch's Suburban Home(made)Sick Press in November 1994), curry said,

> i don't see there being any contradiction there because the term anarchist actually, when you get down to it, means without government, right? now in fact everything i do is governed by some set of rules, even if only self-imposed. those rules that you are self-imposing are responses to other sets of rules, or traditions, or whatever. and i don't buy that notion that it would be anarchistic. and i don't see the problem with insisting that books, certain books, have value. because they do: thought has value, perception has value, social observances have value. if i offer a book for sale that has a high price on it, it means that there is value contained in that, and that i don't want it to just go off to somebody who goes "oh what a neat thing, how much is that? oh $2, here." and then what happens is that it's used to light the fire one night or something, because they don't really care. so for somebody to care, one way of making a point is through economic models. i don't expect to sell these books [laughs] but i have them here in case somebody does want them. if they want them they're here. but also if they want them there's got to be some way to gauge somebody's interest, and unfortunately but true, economic models are one way to gauge it. so i price things to sit. that way i don't have to think about it, 'cause i know no one's going to buy them [laughs]. so i don't have to even address the problem.

The argument between rarity for its own sake and seeming rarity is interesting, especially since derek beaulieu has encountered the same argument about his housepress publications, including from me and curry but without the "mark-up" comments. We simply want more than twenty or forty readers to have access to the material. curry at least gets around some of this issue by reprinting various pieces, such as his own "Reflections on the War" (*1cent* 2), Stuart Ross's "The Pay-Off" (*1cent* 127, 181), or

the aforementioned bpNichol piece, "The Martyrology Book V: Chain 10" (*1cent* 80), reprinted with the curry piece as part of the *Heads & H&z* anthology.

A more recent reading/misreading evolved from Neil M. Hennessy's discussion of *1cent* 177, a John Riddell piece that was part of the Spider Plots in Rat Holes series: "spring will tell you / which foot your left shoe is on." Without any other notation or explanation on the business card-sized publication, Hennessy read the series title as that of the small poem and built a visual response piece that appeared in *Endnote* 2 (2000), titled "*From* Spider Plots in Rat Holes: Readings in Riddell." The piece resulted in a response from curry in a letter to derek beaulieu, excerpted in *Endnote* 3–4 (2001): "what exactly does he know of 'Spider Plots in Rat Holes' (sic) & why does he feel compulsed to use it for his Riddell thing? does he understand the context he's plunked himself down in? o what a bunch of serious jokesters we are."

Unfortunately, curry deliberately offered no explanation, and Hennessy asked for none. Offering only (in the same issue) his own explanation for why he used the title for his undergrad thesis on Riddell, and the visual piece that ends it, and that he knew nothing about the "missing context," Hennessy wrote, "I couldn't find anything that I felt was apt, and then when I came across the 1-cent from which I stole my title, I thought 'If I can't come up with a good title, why not pick one that doesn't make sense (as a title for the project)?'" Without acknowledging that he might have missed something, Hennessy went on to say that, "Since I have no particular attachment to the title, and its use causes you some concern, henceforth the title of the thesis shall be simply *Readings in Riddell*." It's unfortunate that Hennessy would simply abandon the title on the suggestion of another set of contexts. (The visual piece was later reprinted as the cover image for beaulieu's housepress bibliography *Housework*, issued December 2001, retitled *From "Readings in Riddell."*)

One problem in assessing these publications is the amount

of detail and context surrounding an individual piece. To talk of jwcurry at all is to acknowledge him as a writer, a printer, a publisher, a musician, a bookseller, a reader, a collector, and an archivist working on, among other things, a detailed bibliography of the work of bpNichol, some twenty thousand entries large (one of which was a leaflet from the Spider Plots in Rat Holes series). Even the "accidentals" are painstakingly deliberate and don't come near to suggesting all of what is happening throughout the other contexts referenced in his publications. curry says he enjoys the brevity of the pieces, the "presumption that it's kinda quick," whether in wit or in chronology, and the ability to give "everyone a sense of that end of the scale [of publishing], no matter who they are." As well, curry's ideas of publishing and production extend back to the early notions of other writer/publishers, such as Nichol, Ball, uu, bissett, and others, and continue rather than simply reintroduce concepts of bookmaking and ephemeral publishing. curry's work has been an influence on more recent small enterprises such as derek beaulieu's housepress (Calgary, 1997–2004) and current No Press (Calgary), david uu's Berkeley Horse (Vancouver, 1987–94), damian lopes' fingerprinting inkoperated (Toronto, 1990–98), Nicky Drumbolis' letters (Toronto), John Barlow's *Oversion* (Toronto), Jay MillAr's BookThug (Toronto), and even b stephen harding's *graffito, the poetry poster* (Ottawa, 1995–97).

Consider an issue of *Industrial Sabotage,* printed with hand-stamped inks, exclusively on business cards, or even how the pieces within the *1cent* series vary widely in form and production. Truthfully, the best way to get a sense of curry's aesthetic is to live inside it, with a handful of his own publications in front of you. Still, they're nearly impossible to find unless you get them directly from the source. curry issues regular lists of what he has available and can be written to c/o Room 302 Books, #302 — 880 Somerset Street West, Ottawa, Ontario, K1R 6R7.

chapter 3

What's Love Got to Do with It? Margaret Christakos' *wipe.under.a.love* and *Excessive Love Prostheses*

> I don't know if I feel excess is my porch it was too much or not all the problems with men, the same. enough for the now of my life. with me, sure, but it does not make a difference I tried to keep an open view came from loving excessively, one could argue through a window that looked onto dance floors all the problems I have had with women where your torsos were individual sinews flickering on where I appealed to various possibilities.
>
> — Margaret Christakos, "Orange," *wipe.under.a.love*

The author of five collections of poetry and a novel shortlisted for the Trillium Book Award (*Charisma,* 2001), Toronto's Margaret Christakos has created a series of texts that turn in on themselves; pieces are rewritten and twisted constantly into other forms, both within and outside collections. One of the most original Canadian writers currently publishing, Christakos makes books that sidestep the banal repetitive rut of narrative geography in which so much Canadian poetry seems to be trapped. Considered neither lyric nor language poetry, her writing crisscrosses with what she calls "various vehicular engines," pushing hard the "belief in both as important currents."

Poems in her two most recent collections — her fourth and fifth, after *Not Egypt* (1989), *Other Words for Grace* (1994), and *The Moment Coming* (1998) — operate on various levels of narrative from the same mechanics, even as Christakos reworks lines and phrases from previous collections. Her poems reconsider notions of "excessive" love (hetero, homo, and familial), mothering, sex, and gender wars, and in *Excessive Love Prostheses* (2002) she adds pornography and cautionary nursery rhymes. In *wipe.under.a.love* (2000), for example, the piece "Grounds 11B" cribs from the piece "Mercure" from her first collection, *Not Egypt,* which includes the filament of orange light that runs through her poetry:

> There is an orange light in the test-house window. It extenuates in an orange beam bridging its leprous yard, indicating the track, the bluish field. In the train's wake the glow ignites, shroom like spilt baskets of garbage, exhuming the house's carcass.

In the first section of *wipe.wnder.a.love*, "Orange Porch (Book of Reminiscences)," Christakos cribs lines from her first piece, "Horizon," to create the second, "Offshore." A longer poem than the first one, "Offshore" spreads the language of "Horizon" forward and, in the second half, backward: "porch view on sinews or possibilities. her out reminiscences shoulder laughing / recently distance literature writing" becomes

> porch difference with all I feel view
>
> on neighbours through looked sinews
> or nor where various possibilities.
> her holy just where estimate and I cotton out[.]

In the third piece, "Staircase," it becomes

> porch excess same. all difference
> with argue came women all
> I don't know if I feel
>
> on flickering streetlamps neighbours
> through a window that looked[.]

And again, in "Offshore," it becomes

> out I and down her
> possibilities. where nor radical or
> sinews through neighbours streetlamps on
>
> view not it I all have porch[.]

Christakos' poems are built like microcircuitry; no matter how deep you fall into the poem, there is still another level of text and component materials. There are no flat surfaces or endings here. Christakos knows how to fragment the poem and then widen, scalpel, and explore her life in an increasingly generative series of texts, defining and redefining, opening up new possibilities through the same language.

> THEREFORE:
> from this poem of the impressionists
> or after sex, different art results
>
> — Margaret Christakos, "Grounds 4C.," w*ipe.under.a.love*

Each part of the extended sequence "Grounds," in the first part of the title section of *wipe.under.a.love,* includes a brief "therefore" as coda, using words from the text boiling down the meaning and consequence of each consecutive piece. No simple

retelling, the piece becomes an extension as revision, revisitation, twisting each poem into more than what it already was. In this collection, Christakos works the two-headedness of poems (almost working Borges' notion of the "double"), with a foreground and a background in some, an interior and an exterior in others. She even includes an added layer of "therefores" as Greek chorus, reinterpreting what has gone before, as she references her twin children and Margaret Atwood's *Two-Headed Poems* (1978) in "Grounds 4B.":

> all right, when nudged under atwood is
> *women and bisexuality,* another sort of two-headedness
> the one lower body straining toward two lovers
> always imagining the counterpoint, double desire
> in cold storage awaiting a free bookshelf. come on now
> i'm not unhappy, i'm happy, two ways of saying
> the same thing and reflecting a perfectly calm
> exterior

In sections broken and still breaking, *wipe.under.a.love* moves in leaps and jolts through tales told around feminist theory, a birthday party for her five-year-old child, and moments stolen to write on the computer as toddlers sleep, or not, with the coffee metaphor riding through the section titles of the second half ("Grounds," "Grounds for Action," and "Free Refills").

In the Poetry Spoken Here bookstore section of the League of Canadian Poets website, Christakos describes *wipe.under.a.love* as

> a book-length generative structure of linked poetic texts. There are two major sequences: "orange porch", in which I write from a deliberately nostalgic position, calling up a collage of memories and reflections, hashing through the playful terrain one gets to at some point

(mid-life, perhaps), particularly sifting through bisexual positionality in relation to a current life with male partner and three children, etc. The other sequence is called "Fresh Coffee", with many poems each numbered and called a "Grounds", and leading to an accretive manifesto-text called "Grounds for Action" and, of course, "Free Refills". In the "Fresh Coffee" section, each individual poem iterates three modalities, beginning with a lyrical domestic or epistemological poem, then proceeding through a set of specific, desire-led "word processing" operations which form a sort of filter for the piece, and a final procedural capsule that concentrates original lyricism and some sort of epiphanic self-inscription.

Whereas my previous collection dealt largely with birth and mothering, "Fresh Coffee" strives to be a proprioceptive sidebar to the experience of living the mutually mutational identities of writer, lover and mother. Themes of inspiration, relationship and intellectual environment are always delivered in midst of the practical realities of having left the scene of mothering in order to write; and written within the aesthetic of routine required by anyone living among young children. Accessibility has some purchase. That is, the lyrical is always subject to the methodical, rudimentary assignation and sorting processes one uses as well for folding laundry or loading a dishwasher. What one might consider assemblage is always also disassemblage, an economical reassemblage of utterance and density of recombinant experience. As in much of my writing, I'm working with the limitations of the lyrical form, discovering the intensifying yet de-romanticizing strategies that will lead me to a more original poetic voice.

In *Excessive Love Prostheses,* as the title suggests, Christakos writes with "extra" love, and it's unclear whether the "excessive" prostheses suggest replacements of missing limbs or extraneous. As with Gerry Gilbert's *Moby Jane* (1987) or *George Bowering Selected: Poems 1961–1992* (1993), Christakos' book begins with text, even before the half title, colophon, and dedication, almost as though the poems are breaking through the physical bounds of the book. The collection is bookended by a piece called "Uncomforted" at the beginning and "BeHeaded" at the end. As well, a middle section, "L: Mother's Lessons," is printed on a different colour and weight of paper, making the short sequence within the book-length sequence stand out.

Where *wipe.under.a.love* moves through domestic blisses and frustrations, *Excessive Love Prostheses* seems to be more restless, wary, less sure of what is coming next. Here nursery rhymes become warnings, as in "E3. Father":

> when I was little I used to steal candy
> if you were a child and you worked here
>
> I would leap out from my closet and say,
> a prairie of the appetite. I can't abide

There's a strange sense of déjà vu while reading through the first two sections, "A. Repetitive Strain" and "B–G. Career Paths," until you realize that words are repeated. Shifting the order, and therefore the meaning, Christakos tells a different story of employment, from "A1. Accountant" to "B1. Construction Worker" to "G3. Social Scientist." As the celebrity personal assistant speaks, "when she corkscrew-pinched the back of / my arm last week I adjusted my perspective" ("B2. Celebrity Personal Assistant"), we later relive the other side of the conversation through the same language, spoken by the person whom the assistant (presumably) assists in "B3. Female Rock Star":

I myself

feel so she thanks me for it not
angry but full of corkscrew-pinched the back of
spew about to erupt, like adjusted my perspective.

The middle section, "L: Mother's Lessons," subtitled "Six and Twenty Lessons," reads as variants and fragments of Victorian nursery rhymes and children's stories. (Hence the cover image from *The Babes in the Wood,* the story of two children who are abandoned in the woods and die horribly, thanks to the woodcutter father, or stepfather, of course, but the woodcutter dies horribly at the end.) The lessons and warnings of Victorian tales are meant not only for children. Unlike in Christakos' previous work, where the process of revision is easier to track, the first step (the source text) is referenced but not included. Instead, Christakos drops words and meanings directly into the mix, or in this section from old stories, and twists them around. Through these poems, *Excessive Love Prostheses* reads as far less naive, more wise, more wary, and even darker than her previous work.

this is not your home." Pussy's neck then swing A very heavy brick, And then she suffer'd ten times more, All

— Margaret Christakos, "Nine Lessons," *Excessive Love Prostheses*

Christakos' work continues to be highly sexual, as in the section "H–K: Journal Notes," from "Carry me // for your storm of semen. I'll carry you about like dropped teeth" ("I. Anniversary Journal Notes") to

inside that gets to thoughts of him as I
drifted full water, as my belly untightened, reverie conceding
the point of getting to his wildness

> [. . .]
> unintelligible bursts, messily here so much I'm getting when
> in the groin.
> ("J1. Heterosexual Affair Journal Notes")

For Victorian children, the distance one had to travel to ruination was never far. Christakos references without the moral judgment of Victorian storytelling but leaves aside the looming inevitability of earned disaster for which Victorian storytellers were famous. The poems read less like punishment than inevitability, writing of what will happen to you if you stay, or go, or do anything. In her review of *Excessive Love Prostheses,* Toronto poet Sonnet L'Abbé wrote that Christakos

> is known for her fascination with the extreme borders of gender politics, and has earned her reputation by throwing her lived, embodied experience in the face of critical theory and laughing at the mess. [. . .] Sentences are ripped apart and tacked back together in random orders, sometimes pseudo-syntactic, sometimes grid-like, as though, when it comes to their arrangement, the words are merely binary bits of information signifying no more than their presence or absence. (*Globe and Mail,* November 2, 2002)

I'd argue that the apparent randomness of the "binary bits" is far less random and that the individual poems are less individual than part of a "random" whole, with Christakos writing poems as fragments or building blocks of a larger project. Perhaps this is why so little of her work appears first in magazines or anthologies — the individual poem isn't necessarily the point.

For Christakos, the book is a unit of composition. There are deliberate boundaries between the back cover of one and the front cover of the next, but so much still bleeds through (the excesses,

turning love on its capsized side). *Not Egypt* and *Other Words for Grace* combined with her third collection, *The Moment Coming* — the first of her three collections on domestic matters and how the domestic matters — read as a trilogy, almost as one book for each of her children. Consider, too, the small matter of a double author photo on the cover of *wipe.under.a.love* (arguably the second book of the trilogy) and a triple author photo in the back of *Excessive Love Prostheses.* These three collections (Christakos' third, fourth, and fifth) together read as a considerable shift in form and content from her first two since *Other Words for Grace* dealt with mothering from the other end, with the narrator speaking instead as the daughter and of the narrator's own mother, and the back cover called the collection an extended piece on "the coming of age of a little girl in the 1970s" while still cribbing from *Not Egypt* in underlined phrases and words scattered through the text. On the other hand, *Not Egypt* was a lyric diary of travel and love from eastern Ontario to her hometown of Sudbury and beyond, writing of travels from Montreal (where Christakos was living at the time) into Ontario, and past Alexandria, in Glengarry County, her "Alexandria-not-Egypt." She creates distance by reworking bits from her first collection while simultaneously providing a stronger link to that work. Unlike most authors, who have breaks between collections, or books that advance a linear writing career, Christakos turns her collections in on themselves even as they continue the narrative line of her writing, bringing her earlier books along with each new one. Her books don't forget the past or even build upon it; they rebuild from the ground up each time with the fragments of her acknowledged past into a restructured present.

The Moment Coming provides a further break from her first two collections not just of substance but also of style. As the earlier texts burst forth in full measure in the remaining three, poems become less individual pieces held in a section than fragments of a fragment of a further fragment. Each new piece is part of another

whole, broken into (presumed) thirds. Christakos, whether consciously or unconsciously, moves her writing as her life moves. Weaving autobiographical notions as themes before the specific details of her life, she writes of "herself" through young love and feminist theory, looking back on childhood, to three collections of domestic matters, with mothering and love running through the trio as a constant.

> Now you think you know it all, but in a lit-tle time
> you may have for-got-ten past, and will be glad to read it
> a-gain.
>
> — Margaret Christakos, "Lesson of the Past," *Excessive Love Prostheses*

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chapter 4
Train Journal: Vancouver–Toronto

November 10, 2002, 7:17 p.m. Pacific Standard Time
Leaving Vancouver, a familiar trance — new faces and those that will become increasingly familiar over the next day. It's already dark, I don't know where I am.

I have already written the first draft of a poem on Reg Johanson, Vancouver poet, thinker, and musical encyclopedia.

The laws are different over there. Hardly the Wild West anymore, when bars give last call at midnight and buses no longer go all night. The air was continually damp. The cold of it went right through me, into the bones. Turning to mush.

I'm expecting snow in Edmonton.

Apparently, it's already in Ottawa, but I haven't seen it. It arrived as I left. Ten days ago, trading places in the snowy capital.

Reg has given me much to think about. Last night some offhand comment in a bar that he later started to apologize for, for its harshness. To give up this false notion of the national and embrace the local. Embrace Maxville.

"All you ever talk about is your ex-wife and what you don't have," he said. Or something like it.

When they see you coming, they think of the RCMP. They think of colonialism.

In the smoking car, during non-smoking hours, a young boy threatens his safety on the railing up to the dome. It's entirely the point. "Oh, no," he says to himself out loud, looking around for acknowledgment. He wants us to be afraid for him.

Whenever I get into Edmonton, there is Andy Weaver, Warren Zevon, and the bad beer of the Strathcona Hotel. The sameness provides comfort. The memory of an affair, a blonde girl from Calgary. I cringe. It's difficult to forget.

There is a lot of nothing between twenty-four hours of train. Vancouver to Edmonton. Kamloops. Jasper.

Before getting on the train, I found a friend I hadn't seen in some time, Guy, working in the first-class cars. I used to know Guy during his theatre days at the University of Ottawa, when he worked in a coffeeshop on campus. About six years ago now. Apparently, he's been working for Via for three years, about the time he moved west. Now he's been here three years and dresses in Via blues, from here to Jasper and back.

Old fella in the dome car plays acoustic on an electric guitar. His young son sings. Neither of them is very good.

November 11, 2002, 8 a.m. Mountain Standard Time

On the coach class train, a shower and a bed seem like a commodity, much like cigarettes in prison. What is it that lets us be treated this way, the four-day Vancouver–Toronto, sitting up asleep. I've done it too many times.

About midnight last night I was woken by Guy and shown an unused bed in first class. There seemed to be nothing more beautiful. As I drifted off, I thought of lines concerning Vancouver hats

(if I can remember any of them). I was too tired to get up and write them down.

The sun burns slowly off the mountains.

Started reading André Breton's surrealist novel *Nadja* last night, before the lights went out. I'm not sure yet what I think of it. Somewhere in Montreal, Susan Elmslie puts the finishing touches on a poetry manuscript on Nadja, the real woman behind Breton's surrealist muse.

I write somewhere, although I don't know exactly where.

Before that, I finished Laisha Rosnau's novel *The Sudden Weight of Snow.* The thickness and breadth of the novel impressed me. I quickly and easily forget the author as I read. The sudden detail, little things I might know but have long forgotten.

She has the most beautiful mouth.

I don't think I should be writing that down.

The woman in the dining car who gave me breakfast, Miss Kitty. She said she'd heard enough of those Matt Dillon jokes.

"Much obliged," I said, "for the coffee. The grub."

"It's mah pleasure," she said, laughing.

There comes the first snow I've seen on this trip. Curling around ponds and on hillsides. Brief patches.

We pass by a bed-and-breakfast. By cabins in the woods. The woods. Until I hear otherwise, the British Columbia woods. That probably makes sense. We make Jasper by eleven, ten Pacific Time.

Part of this Edmonton trip, launching three chapbooks published by greenboathouse books — mine, Andy Weaver's, and Douglas Barbour's. Mine, dedicated to Weaver, Doug is Andy's

thesis supervisor at the university, and I wrote a back-cover blurb on Doug's last book. How complicated, really. How incestuous.

The train moves north as it moves east.

And if we were foolish enough to learn geography from Dudley Do-Right, in the Canadian North, with the Rocky Mountains, where the daffydills bloom. Nell, bring my horse.

I've said before that Andy Weaver is the best poet in Canada without a book. Oddly hit and miss, but when he's on he's on. With the right editor, he can have a book that could cure cancer, kill weeds, bring evil dictators to their knees.

Tell George W. Bush, send Andy Weaver poems to the Middle East. Don't invade. Let the people know what it means without bombing their homes.

He once gave me socks the colour of magpies. Always one outside his kitchen window.

The mountains are so beautiful. We don't have these back home.

Twenty years ago, when this used to be a school holiday, all of us in our Boy Scout uniforms at the cenotaph, usually raining or snowing or both. Freezing our prepubescent asses off. Afterward filling ourselves sick with hot chocolate and Timbits.

How Canadian. Awfully.

Any time I looked like I'd fall out of line, the Cub Scout leader would give the evil eye. It didn't help that it was my mother. You're gonna get it when you get home.

I never fell out of line. Another thing to add to the end of awkward geekiness.

Ah, Guy, I'll tell him when he returns from the back, you run the best B&B in the west.

The reason I'm here so early for breakfast: they're all still on Pacific Time. I changed my watch last night. Before I tried to sleep. What do I know?

Talk about getting ahead of yourself.

A sign outside says "Yellowhead." I thought we'd be too far south for that and west. The Yellowhead Trail, they call it, from Winnipeg. The first white fella the Natives saw, a blond one, who mapped a trail out. From the one end.

"So you're a writer," Miss Kitty says, when I give her a poem. Writing as we speak.

"Look!" a woman says. "A moose!" Without horns, probably a cow. The dining car spends five minutes discussing the plurals of moose.

Valley. Ridge. Pass.

Watching everyone in the dome car take pictures of the mountains, I think about how easy it would be to tell stories, to lie. Mount Baldy, twelve thousand feet. Ten people have died trying to reach the peak.

Two Asian boys, a camera crew, shoot the mountains. One with shoulder cam, the other with tripod. They talk back and forth all morning.

We pass Mount Robson, the tallest peak in the Rockies, obscured at the peak by mist.

We enter Mountain Time. Moving forward quickly. At a higher rate.

I scratch a quick poem in my notebook:

the clouds hang low over the water

but for the train, a small
hidden lake
glacial wedge, between
two peaks
a matter of rock
that only break, the rare

fallen tree
at the shore
& ripples, in
the wind

After I finish, the speaker announces Lake Moose, the largest in the Rockies, and the source of the Fraser River. Simon, you were here?

He who was buried in my area, St. Andrew's West, eastern Ontario, just north of Cornwall. Penniless and with a stone that gives not even his wife her own name.

12:30 p.m.

After an hour in the cold, slowly we leave Jasper and Guy. Another shift back into Vancouver, when the next train arrives, from the opposite direction. Where we are headed. I gave him a copy of my new poetry collection. He was replacing tablecloths, cleaning before the new crew arrived.

"The best B&B in the west," I said.

I wrote Kate a postcard in the station, with the picture of a bull moose, telling her about the moose I saw earlier in the day. Even though there were differences.

Deer hiding in the woods as the train rolls by. Still as trees. Hard to distinguish between them.

2:00 p.m.

The longest stretch of any ride seems to be the home stretch, the stretch just before you get there.

All around me, happy couples wrap around each other. Read or sleep.

The mountains have disappeared. Alberta has most certainly entered the picture.

Everything is a shade of blue. Even the trees.

From my notebooks, a poem I wrote out from memory, to read in Victoria, after a reading that Andy Weaver and I did organized by Jason Dewinetz through his greenboathouse books last summer in Vernon.

poem

cold lake, and the threat
of the empty lake

wwII bombers
stalk the shore

a towel
that doesnt cover everything

burning a hole in
bare pant legs

The reading where I met Laisha, among others. The fire, cold Lake Okanagan, and the beach so dark, not even a trace of Ogopogo.

The sight of Dewinetz in the interior, an Okanagan boy if I ever saw one, driving around in his snappy white sportscar. Left to him by his late grandfather.

Even the building we read in, owned by his mother's family for years, her father and grandfather, when they owned a shoestore. A long history under one roof.

By the water, the converted boathouse Jason slept in, painted a dark shade of green.

Now where the train rolls, the landscape caught up in the throes of deep winter. I left home before it arrived, and now I'm heading east to meet it.

I had to wear my toque in Jasper. Still warmer than the pre-snow days in Ottawa.

It's too late for sage. It's too late for so many things. A memory of Calgary, the long short road to Banff.

We pass by towns that no longer exist. A farm and a line of hydro that goes on forever, disappearing over the horizon.

How far are we from that imagined Mile Zero?

The whole notion of time moves differently on the train. We sleep when they turn out the lights, we wake when they turn them back on or the sun rises. We eat when they tell us. We smoke. Bathe if they allow it.

We pass a river and valley. Thin wires slide across, around red and white markers to keep them from swaying, keep them from catching small planes like flies. Who wouldn't see them?

There is blowing snow ahead of us and smoke.

I look forward to Edmonton but not the cold air that will greet me when I arrive. Andy and Kelly's car.

Reaching Edson. The train, one of the few opportunities to focus on reading fiction. Last fall I went through three Robert Kroetsch novels.

A woman named Alberta gets on in Edson, says it's been snowing hard since Thursday.

Since leaving home, I've read Kroetsch's *A Likely Story: The Writing Life* and a book of essays by Eli Mandel. Poems by Anselm Hollo,

Phyllis Webb, Fred Wah. An issue of *Open Letter, I Am Not Greg Curnoe,* after a symposium I wanted to get to but couldn't.

I could get here, but I could not get there.

The wind is blowing harder now. The trees all look like Christmas. The rail line an unbroken path run through the bush.

The snowmobiles are out. Animals are in.

I rode the rails a few years ago with jwcurry to read at the Toronto launch of my second poetry collection. He's been doing it for twenty years, as far as Vancouver. Hardly anyone does it anymore.

When I told my editor what I was doing, he paused and said, "Be careful."

We had to get a ride from Ottawa to Smiths Falls and then caught the Iron Highway about midnight or so, jumping into the second engine during a thirty-second crew change.

It went up to sixty-nine miles per hour. We could almost feel it lift from the track. The digital speedometer would sound an alarm if it got to sixty-eight to warn the engineer he might be going too fast.

We hopped off in Toronto as it rolled slowing toward the rail-yard. Too far in and they would have found us.

Rarely has curry had a problem; he's been offered coffee and a ride up front. Once he did get caught by the wrong person and was charged with trespassing. The judge let it drop. Guess how he got to Toronto for the court date?

During the Depression, when everyone was seeking work, the rail men would run chains underneath the cars where rail-jumpers had strapped themselves in. Beaten to death by the quick metal.

That doesn't happen anymore.

In the old cartoons, Bugs Bunny rode when he could if there wasn't safe passage underground. You can't, he would tell us, always

trust that wrong turn in New Mexico. If he couldn't get out of his current jam by putting on a dress. If only the rest of us could.

4:47 p.m.
There are forts in every second tree. Under the snow, a line of birds.

November 12, 2002, 11:45 a.m.
Mountain Standard Time, Edmonton
I wake up in Edmonton with a slight ringing in my head. A remnant of last night's drink. Today the snow covers all. Today they have named Vancouver poet George Bowering the first Canadian poet laureate.

When you are from the east, there is a tendency in this place to dehydrate. Probably too if you are from the coast. Even the snow feels like sand.

The inordinate will of the magpie. Even on the coast, they complained of a dry season. The streets were constant slick. The pretty Swedish girl in Gastown smiled and took her intoxicated friend home.

Today I am at a loss for shiny objects.

For a neighbour, a leaf blower removes snow from Weaver's front walk.

The magpie outside his kitchen window. There, what did I tell you?

November 18, 2002, 8:25 p.m., Leaving Edmonton
It is already dark when the train leaves the station.

I watch the girl across the aisle from me, every so often, out of the corner of my eye. The stain of an old affair is nearly gone.

There was talk, in a pub in Calgary, there for one thing, but succeeding in something else, providing me with much-needed closure.

I have moved through the impulse to mourn this particular loss. I have moved through the impossible. It is no longer a loss.

It has become the past. A memory. It has become a gain.

Even the dark in the prairie is complete. Complete and in two dimensions.

An older couple are unhappy with their confinement, having to sleep in their seats, with no leg room to speak of. They complain, they growl. She eyes me suspiciously. He can't see me, a seat in the way. But I can hear him.

I'm reading a Neil Gaiman novel, *American Gods,* that Ann-Marie told me I had to read. I would have read it anyway. The best storyteller I've read. The way he writes makes a body feel as though everything is happening to you.

November 19, 2002, 3:27 a.m., Central Standard Time

I remember a lake.

All my dreams on a train become more vivid, being on the surface of my memory. Wake up every couple of hours to shift, once a body part stalls. Usually a leg. Four feet too long to remain here comfortably.

Where is Guy when you really need him?

7:47 a.m.

An argument about the death penalty going on in the smoking car. People actually smoking.

What will my clothes smell like when I leave? My shoelace finally broke.

Small hills rolling like waves, about a mile on the south side. Right up against the right.

Ten minutes before they stop smoking. About forty minutes from Brandon.

The coffee hummed up against the table. Styrofoam shaking against the rhythm of the train. The ripple in the coffee cup.

The return of Miss Kitty, serving coffee now, another eastern shift. Doc Festus must be jealous somewhere. How could Dillon keep his peace without her?

Shadows of square bales of hay along the Manitoba fields, tinged with snow. Bales larger than the regular ones, equivalent maybe to four or five smaller ones.

Old tractors and other farm equipment sit barren in fields.

8:59 a.m.

The train is quiet, calm. Only one car of coach, the population resting or rested. Some are reading. For some, it's already day three of a four-day trek, like the girl across the aisle, eighteen if she's a day.

For breakfast, I have two cups of coffee and wait the two hours to arrive.

I, I, I, how selfish. There is so much more going on here. The smoking car behind me, the complaining couple, quiet, reading. Cars stream by intersecting underneath.

A passage of time. This is all about the passing of time.

The girl is asleep. Eighteen years old. Born in 1984. The year, not the novel. When I was fourteen years old, I ordered a copy of the Orwell classic, just to see what all the fuss was about. It seemed appropriate at the time. Now it feels barely memorable.

The year my grandmother on my father's side died and I started high school. The year I met the girl who would one day be the mother of my child.

A lot can happen in eighteen years. The prairie outside looks cold.

11:30 a.m.

Two boys, six days by train from Vancouver to Halifax. To see the country, they say.

Would be cheaper to watch television, for all the country they come into.

The only way to see, to enter into. Feel the sage between your fingers.

Although others say you can't know a place until you've lived there. A mile in a man's shoes. And others still, you can spend forty years in a place and still find things that surprise you if you know how to look.

November 24, 2002, 12:35 p.m., Leaving Winnipeg

The glare of noon sun off the snow as we leave and fields of ice.

A few days ago an ice storm over the city limits. Since then, a thin sheen of white overtop, making it just that much more treacherous to move. Just that much more fine on the eye.

The theme of this trip, as of any, barely a thread between stops, but for me. Entering into a whole new locale and then leaving, starting fresh somewhere else.

Yesterday a birthday party for Liam Diehl-Jones, oldest of Charlene and Bill, turning five. His short blond hair a blur around the living room. His sister, Anna, pulling toys out of the toy trunk, ignoring the multiple older kids in her space. Somewhere in her own smaller one.

This is the longest part of the trip. Noon Winnipeg to 8 p.m. the next night in Toronto. How many hours before we get there? And only one more ahead.

Until I first rode it, I had no idea Ontario was so big.

The end of a tour, where things have gone and gone and gone wrong. Things cancelled, flights missed, and borders stone-cold. Glad for the return, with a few days in Toronto in the provincial archives, and staying with Margaret Christakos.

In Calgary, found online the lyrics to "Wild Horses" by the Rolling Stones. In Winnipeg, the sheet music to Beethoven's sonata number fourteen, the Moonlight Sonata. On Charlene's piano, still on the first page.

6:42 p.m.
Arriving in Sioux Lookout, where the pretty girl from Kenora gets off, three weeks into a breakup. Two different engagement rings under her belt, the second with a child attached.

Surrounded by dark, the snow comes down in diamond flakes through the headlights of trucks and single bulbs outside shed doors. Passengers breathe in wind chill for the sake of cigarettes, walk in low lines close to the coach car door. It's cold. That much, at least, is obvious.

11:45 p.m.
I tried to sleep again. Sitting down, I even heard myself snore. Tremulous, in my throat.

November 25, 2002, 8:24 a.m., Eastern Standard Time
Another morning of mist and burning. This time over trees.

More snow than I want to see right now. The day I left home, three weeks nearly four, was the day it began.

The landscape like Christmas cards. Untouched, unseen. Probably spoiled in ways that don't seem obvious.

10:16 a.m.
The smoking lounge fills and empties. Fills and empties. Smoking from 10 a.m. to noon, 3 p.m. to 5 p.m., 8 p.m. to 8 a.m. Around mealtimes so fresh smoke won't swirl through. As though there were fans to take the old smoke elsewhere, somewhere other than swirled inside the pleats of my last clean sweater.

What choice do I have? I could always go back to my seat. But I like the company, even if we don't actually speak to each other. I like the table and the window and the coffee.

12:08 p.m., Capreol, Ontario
We non-smokers have very little to do when the train stops, even

for half an hour. There'll be snow enough when I get home. So there. I don't even really have anyone to call. I'll call Margaret and ask for directions when I get in. I should have called from Winnipeg to remind her.

A few years ago, taking the train *before* it was this cold. An October, maybe, heading west instead. A small group of us huddled a hundred or two feet back from the train passing a small lit joint and a thermos full of tequila gold. That was a far better trip.

October. No, that was April. Touring with Anne Stone, our eight weeks across the country in 1999. I sold five books on that train to Winnipeg, and Anne a few of hers too.

How did we ever have it in us? I wonder.

I don't even leave the train. The snow falls slowly, but the wind is strong. Fierce. I leave poems on people's seats for them to discover. Sparingly.

I wonder, too, does anyone ever miss the train, distracted from time and stuck the two or three days before the next one pulls through? Has anyone ever run, working against the inevitable, that what brought them this far would only leave them? And do any of the train folk watch for them? Would the engineer stop if they did?

1:20 p.m.

After Capreol, wondering where the young British fella is. His absence a conspicuous presence.

Starting it last night, I am nearly finished reading Steven Heighton's novel *The Shadow Boxer*, found remaindered in Edmonton for five dollars, paperback. Even though we went to his launch, a carload of us, about two and a half years ago at the Indigo bookstore in Kingston. A packed house. The same weekend the Writers Union AGM was in town, back when Stephen Cain and Suzanne Zelazo still lived together, their year in Kingston. Queen's. How long ago was that?

Sudbury junction. The Sudbury landscape. It always makes me

think of lunar scapes and the set of Catherine Bush's debut novel, *Minus Time.* Seeing all the way up to the stars.

A few miles down the track two stolen signs nailed to the back of a shed: Ghost River and Ozone Cr. Presuming "creek" or "crescent." Do they even still exist, or are they out there lost and nameless in this, what from home we call North? From where we are, nearly anything this side of Barrie gets that. North.

The British fella, whose name I never got and was never offered, asked last night if Canadians go north at all. London being far more north than here. I said no, we pretty much stay at the bottom and complain.

Closer now, the inky black rock the colour of stout and what trees there are shorn. Formidable is all there is to say.

In Toronto, I will spend two days, hopefully, in the provincial archives, picking out names of McLennans long dead — when and where they were born, lived, married, and died, and everything in between. Whole lives reduced to dates in a ledger.

In many ways, I'm lucky — Glengarry County has great records. Another, Bruce County, Ontario, has them just as well, where Robert Kroetsch's grandfather was from. How his *Ledger* was born.

The train grunts and snorts, creaking along the long track.

I've been watching all day for an attractive girl I saw briefly last night, the one from the next car over. I wouldn't have made her up. Mid- to late twenties, with short dark hair and quick eyes. She must have got off somewhere in the middle of the night. This is what I will tell myself.

2:27 p.m.

Going obviously south. More trees and less snow. Heighton's man goes slowly mad, then quickly. There is very little left.

3:56 p.m.
The snows begin again. So much of this like cabin fever. The increase in numbers of houses and roads, turning dirt into asphalt. Repeating rivers and lakes. Even in the thickest brush, something there the eye picks up, a trick or fooled into hoping. The colour blue, the colour red.

The English feller has reappeared in the smoking lounge. I remain in my seat, only briefly in the smoking car, until I realize it is cooler there. I remain, as does the warm.

4:08 p.m.
Along the highway, saw a sign for Parry Sound and Sundridge. The poet Judith Fitzgerald lives up here somewhere, writing her column on country music. I haven't heard from her for nearly two years. I wonder what she is doing now. I hear rumours about a new collection of poems.

In the 1970s, there was a sound poetry group from Owen Sound that called themselves — what else — Owen Sound. Made up of Steven Ross Smith (since moved to Saskatoon), Richard Truhlar (since moved to Toronto), David Penhale, and Michael Dean. I don't know what any of them is doing either. But I know Smith still publishes. I don't know anything about Penhale.

Call it the North. Blame it on North.

The train used to go farther south, through Sault Ste. Marie, along the rough border of land and greater lakes. Coincidentally, where much of Steven Heighton's novel is situated. I don't see any of that. But close. The land there is much like the land here — black rock, frozen lakes, rough streams, and thick, thick bush. At least six kinds of blue, the sky fading into aquamarine toward sunset, just beyond Parry Sound.

With the Parry Sound station just in town, it feels like the first real civilization since leaving Winnipeg. It feels like reentry.

Only four more hours to Toronto.

In Parry Sound, not even a patch of ice on the water.

chapter 5
A Life Built Up in Poems: Intersections with Some of George Bowering's Lines*

Men who love wisdom
should acquaint themselves
with a great many
particulars.
— Heraclitus, epigraph to Bowering's *Curious*

When it was announced that Vancouver's George Bowering would be Canada's first parliamentary poet laureate, those of us who care for writing but not for politics or correctness couldn't have been happier. Bowering is like a crazy uncle, saying those things you should and shouldn't say, sometimes getting himself into trouble, but far more clever and crafty than anyone around him. When the announcement was made in the fall of 2002, Bowering was quoted in the *Globe and Mail* as saying that Ottawa hadn't given him as much as a bottle of "Alberta plonk." (The British laureate gets a case of something. Whisky?) So, when he read in Ottawa the following March, my friend Jennifer Mulligan and I were there, with the requisite bottle to hand over, Alberta Springs rye whisky,

* With apologies to Alice Notley.

as recommended by Talonbooks publisher Karl Siegler. When we asked Karl what we should get George, he said, "Why not take George at his word?"

His oft-quoted (and each time slightly modified) line, whether epigram to *Curious* or included in the poem "Desert Elm," is as sound advice as Bowering gets: "Men who love wisdom should acquaint them- / selves with a great many particulars" (*George Bowering Selected*).

What was it that first triggered my own connections? Poems when we were seventeen, my eventual ex-wife handing me a paperback copy of Eli Mandel's *Canadian Poets of the 1960s?* My favourite John Newlove poem still lives there, his stomach of contents. Was it the pared-down speech? Was it the consideration of the local that made me look at me, at mine? Was it simply the lack of anything else that tweaked an interest in (deceptively) simple speech? This after years of the religious bent of Ralph Connor novels and Dorothy Dumbrille poems.

Moving later into his solo collections, was it the consideration that the books were different compositional units, trying something new each time? Bowering as BC's Coyote, the trickster god, as seen in so much more, including one of his own favourites, Sheila Watson's celebrated novel *The Double Hook.* Bowering the shape-changer. Of his best friend for so many years, the late London, Ontario, painter Greg Curnoe, they used to say that he was worth watching, partly, because they didn't know what he'd do next. Do you see the connections here?

Poems on other writers, poems on his wife and daughter, friends, teaching, what he'd read or seen, history, what his day was like, on the back of his own life.

Smoking Mirror

For the longest time, this was the only book of his I wanted that I didn't have, twenty or thirty volumes into his production, pub-

lished in 1982 by Edmonton's Longspoon Press. From the first part of the opening series, "Smoking Mirror," asking

> Who is teaching me
> to climb down to heaven
> to fall upward to
> my reflection?

The questions of body and soul, of God. A series of pieces each leaning toward the suggestion of another ear. There are parallels in the title poem of Robert Kroetsch's *Advice to My Friends* (1985). The story of a legend. A legend of another long telling. As Bowering writes later in the same series, "It is in the brain's shared work / we discover the music."

Delayed Mercy and Other Poems

A book filled with questions as important as the answers. Or, more importantly, a book of learning. They tell me that *Kerrisdale Elegies* (1986) is supposed to be Bowering's best collection. (It's his "translation" of Rilke's *Duino Elegies.*) But I disagree. Structural resonances to that later work, *His Life: A Poem* (1999), repeated phrases that exist in both, clipped questions, and mentions between the body and language, passion against reason. A resonance with God, and how the senses come into play, in the work and in the play — ear, brain, heart.

Less a matter of claiming favourites than returning to one of his collections continually. There is always something new to learn, admiring the way Bowering leaps off lines and phrases, taking the pieces into a direction made mostly by language, much like previous works of his, such as *Autobiology* (1972), taking a moment and simply running. At a recent reading, I heard a friend say, to my astonishment, that the writer there once told her that a poem isn't just about language but also about telling a story. Wrong. If it's not

about language, then it's not about anything. It's the language that propels, whether poem or story or grocery list. It's the language that makes you sit down and listen.

> These pronouns are confusing & so personal,
> I can eye birds in the sky & fat,
> well, maybe not fat flying toward the brain.
>
> Tell me, if you can, old fat, what's the difference
> between brain & the blue sky? Is it
> that the brain will never cloud up & rain?

What I've always liked about Bowering and his work, wherever he goes he's always willing to take others with him. His poems are like reading lists, what else I should be looking at to learn. He's not there to tell you how great he is, he's there to tell you how great other people are. He's not there to tell you how great he is. He expects you to know that already.

Urban Snow

Canada Puzzle

When I was a little kid fifteen miles from the border I got a neat Christmas present. It was a jigsaw puzzle map of Canada.

I put it together and took it apart, over and over. It was not a game: it was a puzzle.

I got really good at it. I could put Canada together upside down. I could do it in the dark.

Then as often happens I lost a piece. I did what people always do when a jigsaw piece goes missing.

I threw the whole thing out.

A simple and complicated piece about a complicated (but somehow extremely simple) issue, an issue of different sorts and proportions depending on where you are situated. Quebec? British Columbia? Ontario? Anywhere but Ontario? It's the brevity that gets me and the boiling down of a simple puzzle. A man from the provinces (having a regional or even provincial mind) he ain't, having taught in three and even been schooled in another, but for the longest time anthologies published Bowering as the guy from BC. How much and how little it all means. It's only just a puzzle.

George Bowering Selected: Poems 1961–1992
Do Sink

1.
When I have fears that I
may cease to be
open to pain that shines
wet on the side of a gold
fish in my own, I thought,
pond

I ought to forget
comfort, forget family
history, drive a black sedan
over thin prairie roads
looking for a town even
my mother does not believe
was ever there

knowing
pain is not colour, not value
but condition, the cost
of starting a damned life
in the first place, where no
thinking man ever was.

A piece that needs to be heard more than seen, a fourteen-part piece of three stanzas per piece, each includes a consecutive line from the Keats classic "When I Have Fears that I May Cease to Be," originally composed in January 1818. Driven by this fear, the author/narrator tells the story of going "home" to find a town that is no longer there, of his mother's family, of the graves that went with the town. Great to read aloud just to hear the inherent rhythms. It must be a George thing, to watch either Bowering or Elliott Clarke read, with such an attention to the musicality of a poem, the rhythms, one hand keeping beat, keeping score. Does Stanley do the same? Conducting yourself, as one might say. Conduct yourself, Bowering.

Another poem, originally in the collection *Urban Snow:* "My Family's All in Bed." A great simple piece to end the selected, starting

> I'm up
> against the silences to come.
>
> They keep telling me to talk more,
> write less —
>
> but I can't figure this out, I
> will be doing neither
> soon enough.

Writing not only of a life but also against a life. Life and death. His running joke, trying to publish a collection under the title *Death and Other Poems* for years, with his title poem "Death," which eventually ended up in *Urban Snow* and later this *Selected,* which includes this section, pulled out of the middle:

> You see? said D, you announce that you are going to say
> something straight about death, and there you are talking about

> life, as far as I can see. That's just my point, I said. Death will be horrible because it won't have anything of life in it, no matter how many fancypants graduate students have told me that you can't really submerge yourself in life unless you are fully conscious of your death. They have all been reading Albert Camus lately, & they are so much wiser than I am.

After another publisher would say no, that no one would buy a poetry collection with that name, Bowering claims, he'd pull the title poem and include it in the next attempt. And so on until something else happened, and it was left in *Urban Snow.* An urban myth propagated by Bowering himself. Another lie perhaps. Another misleading direction. Not how much he has written about life but how long, instead, he has been thinking about death.

His Life: A Poem

> Island, Island, I wish I were no man.
> In the basement, doing laundry,
> in the kitchen, doing supper,
> in the lineup, buying canned goods,
> four-year-old at the table.
>
> …
>
> He wishes he was at most an isthmus,
> a continental compromise.
> ("Fall 1976. Vancouver")

A book of fifteen years — and thirty in the making — a poem for each season, no matter where he was, from "Summer 1958. Merritt" to "Summer (Winter) 1988. Canberra." Bowering, sly trickster, retracing thirty years of seasonal steps, going back through his life with wife Angela, daughter Thea, parents, friends, students, writing, and travelling. In short, a life. Taken from notebook entries on equinoxes and solstices and the arbitrariness of the entries from

those dates, what I think Bowering's strongest book of poetry since *Delayed Mercy* (1986), tracing quirky movements and the reflective voice in the pinpoint accuracy of short takes. In *His Life,* Bowering gives us what he's known for — strange and sharp poems that don't always make sense, rife with puns and bad jokes, hidden tricks and the occasional namedrop (although fewer than usual), and the turns that drop even the most expected wretch on his ear.

Certain chords repeat throughout the text, which touches in on itself, such as the thread of reworked "Classical / relation makes a family of us all" ("Summer 1958. Merritt") to "Classical re / duction makes a family of us all, / even his happy daughter" ("Summer 1980. Vancouver") and "Classical re- / lation makes a family of us all" ("Fall 1986. Vancouver"). Threads run not only the stretch of the text but also back into previous work, such as into a series of related poems, "Paulette Jiles & Others" in *Urban Snow* (1992), displaying his interest in pieces fixing friends and family in a specific time and place, or back further, to *Delayed Mercy,* where Bowering took a phrase or foreign point to leap a poem out of it, talking about small family moments. Those thoughts at home writing late-night poems, expanding on his localized time even further, from

> This long disease, my life
> lets me some days stand
> & even walk where my eyes
> have shown me a path.
> ("The Pope's Pennies," *Delayed Mercy*)

How much an extension, then, from where he sits now (and then) at his west window, writing "This long disease my life / is much the same this year" ("Fall 1977. Vancouver") or "Island, Island, I wish I were no man" ("Fall 1976. Vancouver").

As much as anything, this is sincere and classic Bowering,

illuminating new corners of phrase and personal/public history and expanding others, of home and life and love and ordinary moments, beyond all the familiar and unfamiliar tricks.

> Any symphony by Bruckner, played loud enough
> will please you if you've just started middle age.
>
> If he just didn't have this terrific desire
> to be taken seriously. But I sympathize too.
> ("Summer 1978. Vancouver")

These poems move because they are ordinary, and familiar, and because they are unfamiliar, opening up to new turns. There are such layers woven in that it's hard to keep track, synapses firing in the kitchen light, even as Bowering starts "Fall 1961. Vancouver" with the phrase "Oh clarity to come," just where he ends "Fall 1981. Vancouver," bookending thirty years of awareness that arrives too late if at all.

> Later outside, the liberated boys and girls
> were learning to make snowballs.
>
> This, he told his daughter,
> is what happens when you marry the sea.
> ("Winter 1981. Venice")

"Sitting in Vancouver"

> who the hell works here?
> offers hard-eye love
> at most
>
> not a ghost in this place,
> no real
> tracks, no smell of sausage

this train station's
a museum, like
the notion of Calgary
("Sitting in Vancouver: Central Station")

A sequence of nine poems from the *IV Lounge Reader* (2000, edited by Paul Vermeersch), an anthology celebrating a range of past readers at a regular reading series in Toronto. The disconnected series harkens back to his *Sitting in Mexico* series (1970), composed after Bowering took two trips to Mexico in 1964 and 1965 and published as the twelfth issue of his *Imago* long-poem magazine. Sitting in Vancouver, in hospitals, malls, and the Simon Fraser University cafeteria, a different setting each time. Sitting in Winnipeg as well, in a one-piece aside (almost):

my old time
Metis girlfriend,
I made her arm green

wearing my ID bracelet in Manitoba.

Was that history
or mistake —
("Sitting in Winnipeg: West End Cultural Centre")

In the series, echoes of his late wife, Angela, between the UBC Hospital and a multiple sclerosis clinic, and a strange yet personal distance, if there can be such a thing. In one piece, moving from asking

Chinese woman stares
at setting sun, black cedar things,
her hands wrapt around tea,

—where does she
truly live? Where is her life?

to asking "My dear woman in a machine / reading her, another chapter, // a good sentence or two?" ("Sitting in Vancouver").

The wisdom hindsight allows, seeing Bowering's poetry as a single unit of fragments broken into fragments, with countless links between, writing out his whole life, again and again. What originally struck me about his work was the language, the play of leaps into the unknown, and his willingness to shift between books, altering style, tone, purpose. No long thread broken into books but working dozens of small asides, still with that unmistakable Bowering line, no matter the size. Tongue planted firmly in Okanagan cheek.

Bowering, known more for books than for individual poems. For more than the poem "Grandfather," in how many Canadian anthologies since the 1960s? Now the author of dozens of books of poetry, fiction, essays. Two young adult novels. Three books of history, including *Stone Country: An Unauthorized History of Canada* (2003). In 2002, a collaboration in prose, *Cars,* with Vancouver poet and former student Ryan Knighton.

Troublemaker George. Foot in a new direction every time, with firm links back to a core. A ball thrown out to start the game despite the rain. A game sent into endless innings.

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chapter 6

Yes, I *Have* Published a Lot of Stuff: A Dozen Reasons Why I Will Not Apologize: A Schizophrenic Text for a Talk I Will Probably Not Follow

for lynn donaghue

The first thing to say is that I didn't come up with the title. When Jay MillAr first approached me to do the talk that originally precipitated this piece, with the suggested title, I realized that merely by his asking I had won my argument. Not that there was really an argument to be made; this is simply how I work and will continue to work. I feel no pressure to change speed, really, and for the most part let the work itself decide where it will go next. I refuse to apologize for any of it but don't mind speaking as an *apologist* in the classical sense. (An idea I have always liked. In titling his selected poems *Apology for Absence,* John Newlove wasn't telling you he was sorry for being gone; he was telling you where he was.)

Having said that, I have published a lot over the past few years, with thirteen collections of poetry since 1998 (and another forthcoming) and over eighty poetry chapbooks since 1992, with various book-length poetry manuscripts finished, another half dozen in various stages of completion, and a multitude of other projects. I've edited roughly a dozen anthologies of writing since *Written in the Skin* appeared with Insomniac Press in 1998, and I've written

hundreds of book reviews for various weeklies, dailies, journals, and magazines since 1993. After fifteen years of work, I've abandoned three novels, published one, and started two others. The first two were returned by publishers so many times (with very polite letters at least) that I don't even bother with them anymore. (They say you're *supposed* to abandon your first novel anyway, so it feels less awful knowing I'm simply following a long and established tradition.) I've started various collaborations with photographers, visual artists, and other writers, and I'm working on two separate collections of essays and a collection of interviews with Canadian poets. After years of putting out chapbooks and subsequent books, I can think only in the format of the whole book as a unit of composition. There haven't been occasional poems for years and years and years. Occasional poems become occasional manuscripts, and lately I've begun two different works that might be up to four full books each. The further I work, the more complex my constructions become. The multiple book as a unit of composition.

Since 1991, I've forced myself to write almost every day, finding a schedule by 1993 or so that had me writing six days a week, at least five hours a day. For a few years, I would write my poetry and reviews during the day and then retire to the pub in the evenings, where I would work on my fiction. Ottawa poet Stephen Brockwell once suggested that, simply due to the time we individually allow ourselves to write, he and I are forced to be different writers. For him, with a poem every few weeks if he's lucky, the individual poem becomes the thing, the important unit, with the book as a whole becoming mine. Even poet George Murray, who has given me grief over the years for what he thinks is my publishing "too much," presuming I put to print everything I write, says that in the long run I'll be known more for books than for individual pieces.

Not just working in the literary, over the past decade or so, I've also been working on a genealogical project; in 1995, I started to update a long-ignored family history my late great-aunt Belle

began in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Going through what she had, and doing my own research, I found a third of her information wrong and a generation she didn't know about. After a few years of working on the project, still stuck on the book as the unit, I decided to expand my research to include every single McLennan and MacLennan throughout Glengarry and Stormont Counties, going back to 1770. With the history of my area producing numerous books of the same — McLeod, Campbell, McDonald, McRae — it only made sense. And I like having a non-literary project I can be obsessed with, for a few weeks at a time, a couple of times a year. With my travels for reading tours, I've been able to do research in Toronto and Regina, finding out more and more details of who came before me. I've read up on early Ontario history, about the "Indian wars" that preceded the Scottish immigration to Glengarry County from 1770 to 1820 (with more recent forays into Saskatchewan and Alberta histories). Someday, once the genealogy is complete, my research might even produce a book of non-fiction on Glengarry County (as well as a book-length essay I'm fifty pages through). I don't imagine the genealogy being anywhere close to complete for another ten or fifteen years at least. Still in the mid-1800s, I've found at least forty-five unrelated McLennan families (apart from eventual intermarriages), with a main document of some three hundred manuscript pages. Luckily, I'm in no real hurry. Although sometimes I am.

I multitask rather well, depending on what kind of week I'm having. Every so often I do have to pull back from projects that start to overwhelm me, to focus on only a couple. Two weeks of doing nothing else (writing-wise) but working on my piece on jwcurry for *Open Letter,* for example, or the more than six months of writing an essay on the entire span of Phil Hall's (published) poetic output. The sort of thing I really need to wrap my whole head around. Or, whenever I'm working on fiction, I'm able to do almost nothing else. I usually get a few weeks of that before

something else happens, whether a weekend jaunt to Toronto or Montreal for a reading or book fair, and I'm back into poems again, my million manuscripts.

Part of my considerations over the past few years, to effectively *slow down* the appearance of my speed, has been to focus on various prose projects (which, through learning new forms, automatically take more time) as well as to send the bulk of my poetry submissions to non-Canadian publications so I don't use up Canadian journals. (Hell, I've been in most everything I want to in Canada already.) Every six months for the past seven years, I've sent about forty or fifty submissions to American journals, with varying success. My submissions to Canadian journals are much rarer these days. Canadian readers who pay attention to such things already know who I am. There are other things I could be doing. I don't need to be in everything anymore, at least not up here.

My first writing models were West Coast, from the 1960s and early 1970s, and their slow movement into the book-length work. Everything I do stems from that. Ken Norris has been saying for years that he's second-generation *Tish* and that I'm third, but I don't see it that way. I was influenced first by the writing of George Bowering, Fred Wah, Daphne Marlatt, and John Newlove well before I was ever influenced by Artie Gold or Sharon Thesen. (Most of my earlier structures can be traced back to Bowering's work. A good game for that party going nowhere.) I feel almost like a late-bloomer, second-generation Canadian postmodernist, whatever the hell that means. Maybe on this I should just shut up.

(I've always felt somewhat out of synch. At my mother's side in the 1970s, for example, growing up, effectively, on 1940s black-and-white films.) I'm a big fan of the extended poem, the serial poem, the book-length poem. It goes without saying no matter how many times I've said it before.

1. How can you be the best there is at what you do unless you focus on it? It's something I learned years ago from Judith Fitzgerald

— aim to be the best and accept nothing less. She was one of my earliest supporters, telling me that, yes, what I did was important, did matter, and that she understood what was going on. I don't have a job, didn't get a university degree, and I'm not terribly interested in doing either. Eighty percent of my time goes into the work. Why should I spend the bulk of my energy on employment that, in the long run, doesn't matter? I'd rather be writing. History doesn't care if I have money in my pocket, but it might care about the writing I could be doing instead.

As well, with the amount of work I've done in a relatively short time, I'd rather get the bad work out of my system earlier as opposed to later. I work hard to vary my reading, in literary and non-literary texts, printing off thousands of sheets of paper from the Internet, ordering books, and scouring used bookstores as I travel, mailing home far more books and magazines than I started out with. Working so much and so quickly also means having to take in a lot of information in a relatively short period of time. I take in lots of reading, and I'm constantly distracted by other books I've gone through over and over. I am always running out of things to read, books piled over my floor I still haven't got to.

Fragments of a Self-Interview

rob mclennan: Through my last few projects, I've felt my formal considerations shifting. Over the past five or six years, I've tried my hand at the ghazal (after John Thompson), the collaborative renga (with Stephen Brockwell, Dean Irvine, and Shane Rhodes), various other individual collaborations (with b stephen harding and Matthew Holmes), and am working the utiniki (after Fred Wah and bpNichol), a travel journal written as a mixture of prose and poetry. A decade back I was still content to work on more all-encompassing projects that still happened two or three at a time, composing concurrently. For example, *Paper Hotel* (Broken Jaw Press, 2001) and *what's left* (Talonbooks, 2004) were written with an almost

complete overlap over a two-year period. (A third in the "trilogy" is still unpublished, the collection *ruins: a book of absences.*) Now my projects might take longer, but I'm currently working on over a dozen prose and poetry projects, each one working another strain of formal consideration and breaking down still.

rob mclennan: Do you worry about confusing or alienating your reader through not just the variety of production but also the sheer volume?

rob mclennan: I do and I don't. Really, I can't imagine everyone picking up everything I publish, although there are a few that try. I thought the response to my three poetry collections in 1999 was very telling. Kevin Connolly (an ECW Press author) preferred my ECW book, derek beaulieu at *filling Station* preferred the fragmented style of *Manitoba Highway Map*, and Mark Cochrane (a Talon author) preferred what was happening in my Talonbook. People go to different books for different reasons, and my reading is all over the place, so why shouldn't, then, my books be?

Over the past number of years as well, my reading has moved far more into international poetry than Canadian only. I decided early on to focus on Canadian writing so I could get a sense of it before I went anywhere else, and I think I have that now. With recent explorations of the work of CD Wright, Lisa Samuels, JL Jacobs, Cole Swensen, Robert Creeley, Fanny Howe, Rachel Zucker, Joshua Marie Wilkinson, Noah Eli Gordon, Lisa Jarnot, Alice Notley, Ted Berrigan, and Anselm Hollo, among others, my work has been forced to move in another direction still. The most interesting part of any writing, really, is not knowing where it will end up. It's the exploration that makes the whole process interesting, to me anyway.

rob mclennan: Why do you have to be such a jerk?

2. I write at my own speed. Despite what folks might think, I have spent up to seven years on my first novel (since shoved into a drawer) and six years on my second poetry collection. Books aren't written over the course of a weekend, although there are always exceptions. I work at my own speed, and pieces can go through as many as thirty or forty edits before being sent out. Some pieces don't get seen at all. Despite what some people think, I don't publish everything I write. There are manuscripts that have been seriously reworked before going to press and whole manuscripts that have been abandoned, including a sequel to *bury me deep in the green wood* that fits between *Bagne, or Criteria for Heaven* and *Harvest: a book of signifiers.* I doubt anyone will see that collection as a whole, although there are parts of it I wouldn't mind seeing in a selected at some point, with selections over the years variously published in magazines and anthologies.

3. I make as many slots as I take. Despite what some people have claimed, I don't think that my activity as a writer is obscuring the work of other writers. If you don't like what I do, don't read it. It's pretty simple. With the editing work that I do, as both publisher and non-publisher, I'm getting numerous works out by lots of other writers that deserve as much or more attention than mine do.

4. What the hell is too much? The Canadian standard for poetry collections seems to be every five years, with the occasional writer publishing a book every two years or so. Still, there's a context — bpNichol, George Bowering, and Daphne Marlatt were all publishing "too much" for a number of years (although I do understand that the 1960s and 1970s were different times in Canadian publishing. I think that's when folks used to buy books, right?). I'm certainly not the first one to try it, although a few who've decided to take me to task seem to act like it. Bowering published three books of poetry in 1969, the year he won the Governor General's Literary Award, and Marlatt the same number in 1980. Stan Rogal

does the same thing now, between poetry and fiction, although I don't know if he gets the same complaints thrown at him. I've always thought, if the books individually sell well enough to make the publishers happy, it really shouldn't matter. If the work is interesting, and different enough that it simply isn't a repeat, then it really shouldn't matter. Again, I'm of the Bowering school, where every project is different and has its own individual concerns, with poems that can't necessarily be included in any others. Of the three books of poetry I had in 1999, by the end of the year a thousand of them had sold. That's not too damn bad. That includes five hundred of my first Talon book, gone within the two months between appearing in October and January 1st.

5. I enjoy making books, and what's wrong with that? As both publisher and writer, I learned long ago that I'm apparently not in it for money, fame, or women, so self-amusement is all I have left. Once it stops being fun, I'll stop doing it. Bowering said early on that he would only publish his long poem magazine *Imago* for ten years and twenty issues. I've made no such claim. I'll keep publishing as I see fit, until it's no longer fun. From here, I can't even imagine that happening.

When I was still a teenager, my interests were varied — writing, music, visual arts. Thirteen years of piano lessons, musings on guitar, drawing classes, short fiction. It was only in my early twenties that I decided to focus on something, and to do it well, before moving into other areas. But for god's sake, why did I pick poetry? I have no idea. I should have started with fiction. At least I would have made some money by now.

It seemed like a good idea at the time.

chapter 7
Tads: An Appreciation

TAD*s* is a table.

A table in a bar on Robson Street in Vancouver where on any given Friday you may find some or all of the writers represented here. **TAD***s* as text had its genesis here. This is difficult to reconstruct. Something to do with the fact that many of the people around the table had been around the table — or others very like it in various bars around Vancouver — since the 1970s. And something to do with the fact that others around the table were barely born in the 1970s. And something to do with the dissolute afternoons of two blind guys. Our median age is around 40. This is the first time some of us have met.

So **TAD***s*, as text and as table, is an intersection.

An intersection at the corner of *Tish* and *Open Space*. Of Vancouver and San Francisco. One of those crazy intersections with left- and right-turning lanes appearing without

> warning on each side, and the traffic careens willy nilly through yellows turning to red, like at Main and Terminal. Accidental ground. The greeks dedicated crossroads to Hecate and left trash-offerings for the dead who went back and forth there and the dead, eager recyclers, built their underworld from the leftovers of the day.
>
> So **TAD***s*, as text/table/intersection, is a gathering of parts fallen out from disparate collisions, tacked together in homage to the Ancestors.
>
> — Introduction, *Tads* 1

The Vancouver zine *Tads,* started in the mid-1990s by a group of writers who met weekly for drinks and conversation, has achieved only six issues since its conception, but their effect and appeal have been wide ranging. Started out of a weekly "pub night" of older and younger Vancouver poets, consisting of Jamie Reid, George Stanley, George Bowering, various friends, and other strays, *Tads* was produced as a free publication by its contributors, with each issue edited and photocopied by different parts of the informal group of Shenanigan's regulars, whether as a solo or as a group effort. Almost a late extension of the 1960s newsletter *Tish,* each issue consists of inexpensive production values (taking the 1960s version of gestetner to current photocopier), with at least one issue produced on Tom Snyder's photocopier at the SPAN (Small Press Action Network) office at Commercial and Franklin. Produced irregularly, each issue of *Tads* was then distributed to interested parties in Vancouver and beyond (I got issue 4, for example, from Bowering and Le Heup both). Very much a community publication (à la *Tish*), *Tads* included some of the first published work by younger Vancouver writers (the tads) Jason Le Heup, Reg Johanson, Chris Turnbull, Wayde Compton, and Ryan Knighton, alongside the work of more established writers (the dads) such as Bowering,

Stanley, Reid, Meredith Quartermain, and Renee Rodin.

As Reg Johanson responded via e-mail, *Tads*

> got started when Ryan Knighton was a student of George Bowering, 94 or 95. George invited Ryan to hang out with him and George's old buddy, Bill Trump, and Bill's old buddy, Ken Cobert, in legions and eventually at Shenanigans on Robson Street. Ryan and I were beginning to be friends, and he invited me. When George invited Chris Turnbull, another student of his (Aaron Vidiver has an amazing video shot in GB's postmodern poetry class from 95, where he, Roger Farr, Steve Ward [the friends of runcible mountain], Ryan, Chris, Karen Moe [musician, photographer] were all in the same class — legendary!). Thea Bowering came often; George Stanley and Jamie Reid became regulars, pretty soon we were getting drunk together every Friday night, picking up a tradition of a "poet's table," or pub night, that had been recurrent in Vancouver since the seventies. George Stanley suggested we start a magazine. Ryan and I edited the first one, Chris Turnbull and I the second. I was teaching English in Korea (97) when Jason started hanging out (invited by George Stanley). His hijinx and madcap antics livened things up quite a bit. He punched me in the face once, just for fun, when he was high on rye and ginger ale.

The community literary magazine seems to be very much a Canadian West Coast idea, apart from, say, individuals on the East Coast or in the "centre" thinking more about individual work and careers. It was something the 1970s Véhicule poets also picked up from Bowering, starting up their press as a group, in the back offices of the Véhicule Art Gallery, to the magazines *Writing* and *W,* both out of the Kootenay School of Writing.

Wayde Compton wrote,

> I was happy to find a bunch of people who took writing seriously. For me, Tads and all the pub night talking in the late nineties and early naughts was a transition from an anarcho-socialist milieu to a literary one. Tads was a loose thing, but the quality of literary discussion seemed rigorous to me. I'd already had *49th Parallel Psalm* half written when I first met Ryan, but then I finished it under the boozy influence of these new friends.

For Jason Le Heup, it was a different matter:

> My first night at the pub was a disaster. I didn't know Ryan was blind and got pissed at his insistence on taking my seat. Then Chris Walker and I floated some plan we had at the time to project a lit mag on the side of Eaton Centre and George B. said, "If you think I'm going to support some stupid little magazine you're wrong, the last thing we need is another little magazine." I didn't know any of the writers they were talking about that night and on the bus back to North Van Chris and I bitched about how stupid everyone was. Then we came back, again and again and again. After the initial hissyness wore off and we discovered that George couldn't be taken seriously and that Ryan wasn't avoiding my eye out of hostility it all made a whole lot of sense.

The title *Tads* is another title taken from Walt Kelly's *Pogo* comics, from which Bowering also took the title to his *Autobiology* (1970). Bowering even went so far as to include a couple of panels from *Pogo* in *Tads* 4, showing where the title came from, the word the older characters used to refer to the younger ones. "*Tads* was

coined by Bowering (I think)," Le Heup said, "because he used to call me and Reg the tads and them (him, George Stanley, Jamie Reid, etc.) the dads. Reg and I used to piss and moan about that for hours. Now we dig it. . . ."

Bowering also explained the origin of the name:

> Sitting around the pub, as we mainly did, mainly at Shenanigans, which we went to because one of our friends could get into it in his electric wheelchair and from his place nearby, Willy and I started calling the youngsters "Tads" because that is a word we had carried with us since we were tads ourselves, this word being used here and there, but especially in the comic strip "Pogo." In *Tads* 4, the issue I edited, there are reprints of two classic daily *Pogo* strips in which the word is used. I paid a lot of money to get that issue out. It has a scene from "The Tall T" starring Randolph Scott on the cover. I did not pay royalties for that or the *Pogo* strips, but it still cost me about $500 because I was not as good as some of the other editors at snaffling free this and that. We, at the table in the bar, split the population into two: Dads and Tads. Prominent Dads were Willy Trump, George B., Jamie Reid, George Stanley, a few others. The tads invented something at the pub, called "Dad's round." It involved things such as a tray of tequila shots rather than beer. George Stanley somehow became the Commissioner of Poetry, and his word is final regarding any disagreement on anything.

Of Bowering's issue, Knighton added that "*Tads* 4 was edited & PAID for by Bowering (that's the only reason the cover was ever permitted to be pink)."

Johanson offered his version of *Tads:*

> It was very much a pub thing, very informal. Paid for out of pockets of the people responsible for the issue, printed on the sly at the various places we worked at or wherever we could get photocopies free or almost free. Two editors for each issue. Roughly about two hundred copies each issue. Sold but mostly given away. Distributed quite widely through friends of friends, interesting given the very local, almost private, circumstances of conception, submission, and production. Lots of in-jokes but certainly serious work (I was serious, anyway). Definitely inspired by San Francisco-Vancouver traditions of DIY like the mags produced around Spicer and the *Tish* adventure. Strong sense of this history in the poetics and the sociality around it [. . .] but don't want to overstate the pub table. The plans hatched there, but when you look at the tables of contents, as opposed to the table of beer, you see we knew all kinds of people and really got around. As George Stanley has said, Shenanigans on Robson Street was Mecca but Bourbon Street on Cordova served as Medina. I had been writing alone (i.e. with no contact with other writers) for years (I was already a second year grad student before I met any other writers!), so pub night/Tads was an unbelievable gift — just what I dreamed of. But I remember a warning to me from Angela Bowering: "Be careful. A lot of people have graduated from that table to full-blown alcoholism."

In his "Editor's Comments" to *Tads* 5, Reid calls *Tads* a forum for "useful dialogue":

> There are no underlying current[s] or thread[s] of theory that [hold] all these poets together, though the Shenanigans regulars will certainly insist that all of us are

> faithful to the community of poets and their conviviality. *Tads* is an extension of that conviviality, if nothing else. In the post-modern environment of U.S. American rock 'n roll, Hollywood, television and the Internet, poetry is perhaps an obscure, archaic and obsolete survival of ancient language modes. It is hard to know where it fits — hard to know its present, never mind its future. Amidst the modern and post-modern noise and speed, poetry and art alone, along with certain kinds of music, seem to preserve some space and time for silence and contemplation, as well as useful dialogue.

Instead of critical pieces or manifestos, the dialogue of *Tads* occurred at the Shenanigans table and by example in the pages of the magazine, making the poems themselves the dialogue, making the magazine itself merely a sidebar to the weekly pub nights. As Knighton said, "*Tads* was just the tab at the end of the night when the real thing had already happened. Kind of."

For Le Heup,

> Personally, TADS as a publication seems far less important than the gang of people who made it possible. I'm not sure that I ever found a shared "writing concern" in the group, though Chris Turnbull and I shared a lot of "problems." Keep putting things in scare quotes 'cause they don't seem to have the same import they once did, like the "problem" of the lyric poem just doesn't seem like a problem now. My own interest was less in the poetry and more in the visual, so what I got out of it was more social, more reassuring, more about feeling like *finally* I had found a group of people that included adults who didn't think I was an idiot for caring about making art.

Along the same lines, Knighton wrote that

> *Tads* pretty much had no poetics. The table had a poetics for sure, its own mutating rules and idiosyncratic charms and negotiations.
>
> Getting home was one of those more demanding negotiations, especially when Willy would insist we ask beautiful Robson Street shoppers if blind guys were good looking. We, of course, couldn't tell. The poetics of a table are layered and contradictory, and that's why George Stanley became our Commissioner. Somebody had to have final say and sort out the rules nobody could remember. Sure, sure, everybody would, given the chance, willfully make up rules to serve their own purposes, and did, like any way to win Traditional First Piss credits (never the trophy, which i still don't believe is in Alice Munro's shed), but without some authority somewhere, how were we going to save Wayde from his anarcho leanings and make him a good law-abiding Tad? The Commissioner of the mag could be a judicious and vengeful sort, too. Once he booted me out of poetry just to reinstate me as punishment. I'm still suffering, thanks. But the mag was a round. We each took turns, as Reg says, putting together and paying for a round of Tads and it was always about as cohesive as our varying tastes and orders. Bowering the idiot knocked an entire tray of beers over one night when he threw his arms open to say something or other was really THIS big, although we all knew it wasn't really that big. He edited issue four shortly after. It was his round. When i came to Tads, which was at first small, me and Reg and Bowering and Willy and Ken and sometimes George Stanley, and then it grew (Willy and Ken never published but they pubbed and contributed much to the poetics of

> table life), when i came to it I didn't know what a mag like this meant. George Stanley suggested it, i think, at McDonald's while Willy was eating pizza and fries. A natural response to Willy's strange tastes, I suppose. Anyways, he said we need to make a bar mag and GB agreed and they said it the way someone says we should go for dinner next week and everyone agrees like it's something that's just done and expected to be done. Was all new to me. I think only three or maybe four poems i ever put in Tads actually made it into a book. But the mag is a social history of the table and by the end you can see the table was big. Wayde and Karina's issue was more like an anthology and the table wasn't pinned to a Vancouver floor anymore. Poetry, it seemed to me, was quite incidental to the whole thing. I was there first with Willy to learn how to become a blind man. I was also there to hear jokes. To have beer. Later, to meet Wayde and Chris and Jason.

They might not have shared any particular aesthetic in their poetics, but whether through osmosis or anything more deliberate it would have been impossible to spend that much time together and not have created *Tads* to at least *favour* a series of overlapping concerns. A number of ideas would have come from the dads, from Bowering, Stanley, and Reid, about the processional poem, challenging traditional forms, engaging with *polis,* with place (after Williams). There would have been blending and twisting of traditional forms and the idea of working the book as the unit of composition, ideas also particular to the poetics of *Tish.*

Where *Tish* took paper from the UBC Bookstore (stolen at least once from the back door by John Newlove, who worked in the bookstore, and loaded onto the waiting *Tish* truck), parts of *Tads*, issue 5 for example, were produced on paper supplied by Reid's wife. Produced, as many great things are, by hook and by crook.

Knighton explains that "*Tads* 6 was edited by Wayde Compton & Karina Vernon & looks more like a serious anthology than a zine. *Tads* 7 was edited by Michael Ondaatje & Thea Bowering — they only did fifty copies coz the dad has to pay for it & Ondaatje didn't want to pay for more than fifty copies, so this one is, I think, the rarest." Of course, Ryan is a friend and a fan of George Bowering, who also loves to toy with interviewers and bibliographers. I've found no evidence of a seventh issue.

Since then, various of the young contributors have gone on to publish a number of their own books, chapbooks, and magazines.

Wayde Compton: trade collections *49th Parallel Psalm* (Arsenal Pulp Press-Advance Editions, 1999) and *Performance Bond* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004); edited *Bluesprint: Black British Columbian Literature and Orature* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2002); included in *Companions and Horizons: An Anthology of Simon Fraser University Poetry* (West Coast Line, 2005). In 2006, he founded (with Karina Vernon and David Chariandy) the publishing house Commodore Books (commodorebooks.com), the "first and only black literary press in Western Canada."

Reg Johanson: chapbooks *Mi Gook* (Lefthand Press, 1999), *Disjecta Membra* (Lefthand Press, 1999), and *Should* (Pulley Press, 2000); *Chips* (Thuja, 2001) and trade book *Courage, My Love* (LINEbooks, 2006); *W* magazine, issue 4 (with Rhoda Rhosenfeld, Kootenay School of Writing, 2001); in *Companions and Horizons: An Anthology of Simon Fraser University Poetry* (West Coast Line, 2005).

Ryan Knighton: trade collections *Swing in the Hollow* (Anvil Press, 2001), *Cars* (with George Bowering, Coach House

Books, 2002), and *Cockeyed* (Penguin Canada, 2006). For two years, he was editor of the *Capilano Review.*

Jason Le Heup: chapbooks *Skim* (above/ground press, 2001), *Oxford-Duden Dictionary* (Pulley Press, 2000), and *Blazontrash* (housepress, 2001); trade collection *The Spectacular Vernacular Revue* (a collaboration with the Prize Budget for Boys) (Roof Books, 2004). He also edited the two-issue "little magazine" issues of the *Capilano Review.*

Chris Turnbull: chapbook *Shingles* (Thuja, 2000); pieces included in *ottawater,* as an above/ground press broadside, *Companions and Horizons: An Anthology of Simon Fraser University Poetry* (West Coast Line, 2005), and *decalogue 3: ten concrete/visual poets* (Chaudiere Books, 2008). She is also the editor/publisher of *Rout/e.*

Karina Vernon: pieces included in *Prairie Fire, Bluesprint: Black British Columbian Literature and Orature* (Arsenal Pulp, 2001), and *Companions and Horizons: An Anthology of Simon Fraser University Poetry* (West Coast Line, 2005).

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Tads 1, edited by Reg Johanson and Ryan Knighton. Pieces by George Stanley, Thea Bowering, Jamie Reid, Mark Nakada, Jennifer Conroy, Jim Quilty, Ryan Knighton, Dolibor Krnetic, Reg Johanson, George Bowering, and Chris Turnbull.

Tads 2, edited by Reg Johanson and Chris Turnbull. Pieces by Chris Turnbull, George Bowering, Patrik Sampler, George Stanley, Reg Johanson, Thai An Nguyen, Ryan Knighton, and Jamie Reid.

Tads 3, edited by George Stanley. Pieces by Cath MacLaren Morris, Martin Hayter, Joanna Beyers, Ryan Knighton, Jason Le Heup, Meredith Quartermain, Chris Surridge, Chris Turnbull, George Stanley, Reg Johanson, and Joe Dunn.

Tads 4, "edited, typed and paid for by George Bowering." Pieces by Reg Johanson, Chris Turnbull, Wayde Compton, Ryan Knighton, David Bromige, Karina Vernon, George Stanley, Cath MacLaren Morris, Jamie Reid, Jason Le Heup, George Bowering, and Thea Bowering.

Tads 5, "compiled and designed by Jamie Reid and Jason le Heup." Pieces by Cath MacLaren Morris, Michael Czuma, Curt Lang, Stephen Bett, Zoran Bognar, David Bromige, George Bowering, Ryan Knighton, Chris Turnbull, Alice Tepexcuintle, Leslie Layne Russel, Zonko, Kedrick James, George Stanley, Reg Johanson, Wayde Compton, Martin Hayter, Chris Walker, Karina Vernon, Jason Le Heup, and Renee Rodin.

Tads 6, edited by Wayde Compton and Karina Vernon, 2001. Pieces by Janisse Browning, Thea Bowering, Stan Persky, Janet Neigh, Roy Miki, Ryan Knighton, Bob Sherrin, Mark Cochrane, Hannah Calder, Cath MacLaren Morris, Suzette Mayr, Miranda Pearson, George Bowering, Reg Johanson, Renee Rodin, Chris Walker, Adam Rudder, Sarah Singh Parker-Toulson, Nikola Marin, Steven Collis, Megan Fairbanks, Karina Vernon, Nancy Gillespie, Andrew Mills, Rita Wong, Roger Blenman, Jamie Reid, Chris Turnbull, Phinder Dulai, Wayde Compton, Jason Le Heup, Anne Stone, and George Stanley.

There was no *Tads* 7.

chapter 8
Sex at Thirty-One, Thirty-Eight, Forty-Five, Fifty-Two, et cetera

The ongoing "Sex at 31" series was initiated by Prince George poet Barry McKinnon, his pal, the poet Brian Fawcett, and a couple of others in the mid-1970s. Starting the first poems of the series when they were around thirty-one years old, their idea was that a new piece would be written every seven years, said to be the length of time for all the body's cells to be replicated, basically making a new body from the old. As McKinnon himself writes in an e-mail,

> Fawcett and I were goofing around years ago; I think we agreed that the hardest thing, or one of them, was to write about sex. We were both 31 and I think simultaneously started working on the sequences. For some reason we agreed on a 7 year span, or at the age of 38 decided to try it (sex and the poem, ha) again. Since it was a 7 year stretch we set the pattern at 7 years: sex at 45. sex at 52. Etc. So? Anyone who picked up on the idea was welcome to write their poem. The condition was that you had to be 31, or 38, etc. to do it. Artie was in PG at one point and wrote

> his lyric. George Bowering wrote something I think called 38 at sex.

Most of the pieces have been difficult to trace, whether buried in old magazines or out-of-print solo collections, except for McKinnon's often-reprinted original "Sex at 31" (which also appeared in Bowering's *The Contemporary Canadian Poem Anthology* from Coach House Press in 1984) and others by George Stanley and Artie Gold (editor Margaret Atwood included Gold's piece in one of the Oxford anthologies).

"[T]here is nothing to understand," McKinnon wrote in "Sex at 31." Who was it who said all literature, in the end, is about sex or death? Al Purdy even titled a book after it (*Sex and Death,* published in 1973 by McClelland and Stewart). Half a dozen or more poets have written their own variations over the intervening years since the publication of the original pieces. Just what is it about sex that continues to inspire poems? The original "Sex at 31" poems *began* with the idea of open-endedness (a notion on the "serial poem" borrowed from Jack Spicer), writing every seven years seemingly forever. It was an idea that, in the end, only McKinnon and Fawcett have continued in serialized pieces. Still, after multiple years and multiple poems, the last few of McKinnon's poems are difficult to find (his first two reappeared recently in his spring 2004 selected/collected *The Centre: Poems 1970–2000* (Talonbooks). Fawcett, while still writing poems, appears to have abandoned publishing poetry altogether, focusing more on non-fiction such as his online Dooney's Café (his collection of essays, *Local Matters: A Defense of Dooney's Café and Other Non-Globalizated Places, People, and Ideas*, appeared with New Star in 2003).

Fawcett's version of the series' beginnings, in an e-mail, gives a few more details:

> I think it started off in North Vancouver between Barry McKinnon, Tubby (David Phillips), Pierre Coupey and I. Others might have been involved, but I can't remember. One night at the Kypriaki (a restaurant where we used to get pissed all the time) someone said, hey, we should write what we know about sex. Someone suggested we call it Sex at 31 (we were all about the same age, except Pierre, who was 2 or 3 years older) and that we should repeat it every 7 years, which is the time it takes for all the cells in your body to change — or so we thought. Brain cells aren't replaced, which is why we get more stupid. I know McKinnon and I wrote Sex at 31 — a short poem, for us both. The others did, too, and then it kind of took off, and more people did it, although I don't think anyone ever collected any of it. McKinnon and I did Sex at 38, in much lengthier form, and I did Sex at 45, which really formed the basis of *Gender Wars,* although the poems never appeared in the book, and nobody has ever seen them. 45 was the point at which I thought I understood sex (I didn't) so I had a lot to say. By 52, I'd figured out I didn't really know anything except specifics and so wrote one poem, and Sex at 59 is under construction. McKinnon has done versions at 45 and 52, I think.

Later collected in his *The the.* (1980, shortlisted for the Governor General's Literary Award for Poetry), McKinnon's first piece in the series was originally published as *Sex at Thirty One (a Poem)* by his Caledonia Writing Series in 1977 (and, as McKinnon responds in an e-mail, "also pubd in brians *no money from the government*"). In two parts, each written in small fragments, it probably remains the best of the entire series:

I must invent you. I forget the
greek gods. who will replace them in
this tawdriness

this timelessness of sex

[. . .]

what was it I was going to say. these years pass
without a moment

so I return to what was simple & intended, had no
more to do with any thing

than a hand & flesh. some kiss, stolen I thought

what humans do in this other
difficulty. despite it

[. . .]

sex at 31. men so lost in talk they will not
see her. I must look in the dictionary
to find aphrodite. look again to wives who
inhabit these kitchens, cursed by what
they think they are — the bodies drawn, or fat.
I will hold you. I will wash
these dishes. heat up this food

for where did you go

rake men as
the early going moon. imagine us
at 31 more in love than what we thought could
be.

Fawcett's "Sex at 31," dated June 1975, is less fragmented than McKinnon's but still written in four sections. It begins thus:

> Sex at 31 is the disappearance
> of ease, the thoughtless grace
> of innocence becomes graceless ignorance,
> the human body a different instrument
> you are must begin to play with skill.
>
> [. . .]
>
> You've been 31 years in this world now
> long enough to discover that
> nothing works the way you imagined at 21.

I like the way Fawcett's piece explores the two notions inherent to the series as a whole, of "sex as the great mystery" and the fact that no one knows *anything* in his or her twenties (presuming we learn anything after them).

There was even a small publication by Pierre Coupey and Barry McKinnon issued around the same time called *For Wally Stevens / Sex at 31* (1977) in an edition of fifty copies. The short piece consists of "Only the awkwardness remains . . . / I'm almost happy . . . ." The second of the two-page publication reads *"This is the most depressing poem in the world. / June 4 1977."*

This wasn't their only collaboration. In our e-mail correspondence, McKinnon mentions that he and Fawcett "did a collaborative version of *splicedversions* — as a gorse press chbook. I think I only did about 5 copies. . . . We also read collaboratively I think at the western front (sex at 31). We spliced versions. Worked well — a 2 voice thing that balanced out in terms of equal length etc."

One of the seven Véhicule poets from Montreal, Artie Gold wrote a few versions of his "Sex at 31" poem. Only one was ever

published, appearing first through McKinnon's Caledonia Writing Series (physically run through the press by Gold himself) in an edition of about eighty copies in the spring of 1978 during a trip through British Columbia before returning to Montreal. The piece later appeared in his last collection of new poems, *before Romantic Words* (1978), and later in his selected, *The Beautiful Chemical Waltz* (1992). It's short enough to appear here in its entirety:

Sex at Thirty-One

Is like love at seventeen. it plies deep
Affords the illusion there is nothing else.

Every few years kicks sand in the face of everyfew years
Love, only a pornography of the heart has a habit of being

Waylaid, it had a habit of suddenly throwing down
Its basket of roses and running. rape, basic call of thing

Changed. suddenly and love dies like drool on a napkinless chin
Love gives way to one of love's perversions. dry skin

To wetness. even the idea of sex glistens. like the heart
Thinking of where it left its bubblegum. the heart

Is a dry old taskmaster. its puppies are like the grains
of sand dragged on to a picnic blanket. as the afternoon

Turns into death. count love with a slight chill. too many
Times love has occurred, reared its beautiful head. we are sick

Sick of change. sick of wind change. sick of lifeguard change
Sick of the tides of the heart.

According to Gold's papers, the poem appears to have been written in Prince George during one trip and published there during another. Among his papers, too, are a number of variants on the theme, each composed during the same period. They include the three-line "Love at Thirty-One" ("sensing something phony / the gods deliver longstemmed roses to / the wrong address . . ."), a longer untitled piece (with Gold's own notation at the end, which reads "June 4.77 Kathy's PG") that begins with

> sex at thirty-one
> a golden shower for the
> milkman
> the sun setting on a lake
> regret,

and a third piece, dated June 20, 1977, written once Gold was back in Montreal, as "Sex after Death" (referencing, perhaps, the literal translation of the word *orgasm* in Japanese into "little death"). One of his last seems to be the short "Love at 31" poem: "The word / stands against the idea / aug 19/20.77." There has been no evidence that Gold wrote anything further, but judging from the number of poems he attempted under the original "Sex at 31," the resonance of the series stuck with him. Even before he died in 2004, there were rumours perpetuated for years, even by the author himself, about piles of unpublished poems in his apartment. Unfortunately, with little of his writing after this period seeing print, there hasn't been any real attempt to put any of his unpublished or even previously published writing back into the world.

Another BC poet who entered the project was Vancouver writer George Bowering, perhaps the most likely to be in the widest range of projects of any writer of his generation in the country. His piece has never appeared in one of his collections and manages his usual twisting of forms and dry wit, taking jabs at, among others, the League of Canadian Poets. The piece was originally

published in an issue of *CrossCountry: A Magazine of Canadian-U.S. Poetry* (edited and published on both sides of the border by Robert Galvin, Jim Mele, and Ken Norris), and one of the few that really plays with the title.

Thirty-One at Sex

is a general meeting of the North York
psychology & sundry therapies club,

is the League of Canadian Poets
getting nothing, not a wink-off
out of each other,

is the locker room of the winners
after the Grey Cup, 7-3,
& the cheer-leaders are back at the Holiday Inn
watching Gilligan's Island,

is you imagining me in the shower
& I imaging you in the shower
etc, etc, etc, etc, etc, etc, etc,

is what the Marxists seemed to promise us
when they started
& now they are right, you could drive
a ten-ton truck thru this country
& never hit anyone.

So where are they all now?
Inside insulated bungalows
filled with fancy
dreaming of three at sex
just once.

Apparently, no women poets have written equivalents to these pieces, making this a male-dominated series, and, despite various participants publishing their poems in various parts of the country, the series has remained almost exclusively in British Columbia (with the exception of Gold, but even he wrote his contribution while in Prince George). About the lack of female participants, Fawcett later responded in an e-mail that, "If women are going to talk about sex, they write novels." (A female Canadian poet of the same period suggested, instead, that women poets were too busy *having* sex.)

Another participant who added his voice is Vancouver poet George Stanley in his "Sex at 62," originally published in *Tads* 4 and later appearing in his collection *At Andy's* (New Star Books, 2000). His three-page piece is more emotional and physical than most of the others — and it's one of the few that *revels* in getting older:

> the lighted-up minutes, desire breaking
> through fixations, making me
> glad I'm old, glad they don't hold
> no more, letting him, body against mine,
> turning & turning over — but going
> too fast — doing too much too fast — not
> loving the time, slower, better next time
>
> never get any closer

As much as Fawcett's earlier comment about David Phillips as a participant made me hopeful (after a couple of collections from Talonbooks, Phillips published his selected poems, *The Kiss,* with Coach House Press in 1978 and nothing further), McKinnon writes in an e-mail that "pierre & I did the 2 line thing & I don't think pierre did anything else. david, I don't think wrote one." I haven't been able to ascertain directly from Phillips whether he did or not.

Other pieces by McKinnon and Fawcett have been completed.

McKinnon's "Sex at 38" was published in *The Centre* (Caitlin Press, 1995), and the nine-page "Sex at 52" appeared in his self-published — *a walk* (Gorse Press, 1998). It has since been inserted into the long sequence he's currently working on, "In the Millennium." As with much of McKinnon's work, both poems build slowly to a particular phrase or single line and then spend the rest of the poem moving slowly away, the crux of each piece being a single line on a single page, moving from "we're dummies" ("Sex at 38") to "in beds in fields in green" ("Sex at 52"), the poem as a whole boiling down to that one fine element. Of a "Sex at 45" piece, McKinnon responds over e-mail that "I have [it] in note form, but it never came together." His continuation of the series makes it interesting to track his own shifting skills as a poet as well as his shifting considerations on the same theme, in roughly seven-year increments. He writes in "Sex at 38" that

> there is the outer. here is the inner. there is a point
> where it doesn't make a difference
>
> [. . .]
>
> *talk*: thrust of verb and fragment becomes our sex —
> the world opening female, trees & birds & shoots
> & rushing spring northern creeks, dusty grass & fiddleheads . . .
>
> my head is in the clouds. so be it. fuck the tree. hug the rock.

His "Sex at 52" begins thus:

> *it was not so much sex*
>
> [. . .]
>
> to hazard a guess: there is no angle in paradise

a curve we don't deserve: *sex at 52*, in life

I had to go into the dark to be alive.

[. . .]

what I do, driven that it gets
no better, a world of thin design

of what men have done and said, becomes opposite in the obsessive blind
reliance on their gizmos. in this life I'm driven

to the fuck, a joke
so the coat leaks & lets me
to the weather/dull suburbs as landscape when I look out
the bus — *despondency*
to sex
as a force against it.

As Fawcett mentioned, he has written a number of follow-ups to his original as well, but few of them have seen print. He did a lovely follow-up to "Sex at 31" that cheated, perhaps, without the delay of the full seven years before he wrote his "Sex at 34," dated summer 1977. It also merits a new reading and is short enough to include here in full:

Rain in the swaying evergreens,
rain on the laurel hedge,

and if not that, then
overcast, overcast:

But what has become of my wonder
at the delight
that women do not get
from men?

Ashes in the burning forest,
acid on the laurel's waxy green,

tears in the darkness
women seldom see

in men.

Fawcett's "Sex at 45" is a series of over a dozen unpublished poems under the umbrella title, including the title poem. The individual poems are punctuated by moments of casual wisdom:

It is the world I desire,
with its complexities,
[. . .]
but alas,
I tire more easily.

For whatever reason, few younger poets since the 1980s have done their own versions of "Sex at 31." When I was in Prince George in the fall of 2000 for a reading I was doing with Barry McKinnon, he challenged me to do my own. Later published as the chapbook *Sex at 31* (2001), it had its beginning in November 2000 in Calgary (where my tour took me after Prince George) and its completion in Ottawa the following March, the same month I turned 31 (it was later reprinted in my collection *aubade*). Having already read the McKinnon and Gold pieces, I took it upon myself to read the Fawcett poems before finishing my own fragmented version of the series. It begins thus:

sex at 31 competes w/ its own failures

*

& always has a spare key

[. . .]

sex at 31 neither condones,
nor condemns
but is

It even refers to the Coupey-McKinnon collaboration:

the most depressing poem, returns
into the dream
hands
in the shower, break
a cold sweat, this is

the awkwardness remains, only

ever in the world

*

between disbelief
& true comfort
overwhelms unlike
any other

The same year Vancouver poet Mark Cochrane published his second trade poetry collection, *Change Room.* It includes a "Sex at 31" reference in the poem "Mad Dad" (ironically, the two-page poem begins on page 31):

Coffee toxic, with spinal
pinch & neuro-
static down thru
hamstring & groin — I give

my kids dinner, nuggets & tots, snappish &

short, then
plug them in, *Pinocchio,* all-time
worst parenting, I have been months

loving & in love with
a woman not their mother &
nobody knows yet, the lumbar
in moral spasm but
a chronic case
might as well dance, bad physic, on the numb
extremities of loss, which
trashes every pleasure
in advance, professor, this is
irony: even in cheating
sex at thirty-one, caresses
reach the brain
but low-fi, by frayed fibre, so ii blast

REM & the kids flutter
    (they cannot hear their show
— to dance:

After my first visit to Prince George, McKinnon and I toyed with the idea of editing a "collected sex" anthology, challenging various poets around the age of thirty-one to write their own "Sex at 31" poems. Apparently (with my prodding), versions were written by Edmonton poet Andy Weaver and Toronto poet Stephen Cain, but to date they remain unpublished (the anthology has since been compiled as *Collected Sex,* edited by McKinnon and me, and was published in spring 2008 by Chaudiere Books).

At the advent of my thirty-third birthday, I too cheated (unaware at the time of Fawcett's "Sex at 34") and wrote a "Sex at Thirty-Three." It was published first as a broadside on my thirty-third birthday (above/ground press broadsheet 166, March 15, 2003). Through the publication and announcement of this broad-

side, I quickly received Mark Cochrane's "Rotator Cuff at 33 1/3" as a response, a poem written when he was thirty-three (three or four years earlier than my poem). Cochrane's appeared as a broadside (above/ground press broadsheet 167, published a few days after my piece). A short piece full of shock and verve, Cochrane's reads like a thing alive:

> Body is a made thing, time-share, a Christ
> or T.S. Garp. At 33
>
> [. . .]
> Beached jogger, advised to rest
> his swollen feet. Tongues pop from the Nikes, saying
> Shuddup about it, already,
> damn: oracle
>
> e.g. husband
> to the winged goddess. Fatigued
>
> like any fan belt
> or vinyl on long play. Never again
>
> to rev like a single.

My own poem, on the other hand, worked to keep to the fragmentation of the McKinnon originals:

> is mere a fragment, rotation
> of a memory
>
> scratch at songs in daytime,
> & dance mix all night long
>
> some days i remember little,
> need a few bars hummed

to start
[. . .]

a day like any other, sure,
burning sawdust

on the tongue

Both poems later appeared in the chapbook *33 1/3* (2003) with other "response" poems by Hamilton writer Gary Barwin ("Sex at 03"), Toronto writer Gordon Phinn ("Sex before Birth"), and Ottawa writer (since moved to Calgary) Peter Norman ("Sex at 45"). The short collection was my own response to the frustrating lack of response to the "collected sex" invitations and was published as a small chapbook to coincide with a party for my own thirty-three-and-a-third birthday on July 15, 2003. Predominantly, the interest in following the form set down by McKinnon and Fawcett seems to be generational as the writers from the 1970s get older and the numbers on any further pieces only get higher.

Postscript

After reading an earlier draft, Brian Fawcett e-mailed me: "Don't be frustrated by the failure to cohere. Sex doesn't. That's why we keep going back to it. If human beings could remember sex, we'd mate the way cattle do. Nature equips us by destroying body memory, which causes us to return — out of curiosity. (i.e. what is this, anyway?) Cheers//bf."

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chapter 9

A Displacement in Reading: Meredith Quartermain's *The Eye-Shift of Surface* and Other Writings

In an essay on Susan Howe, American poet Cole Swensen argues that

> Words on a page or on any other surface constitute a different event from words presented in any other way. Poetry amounts to a partially heightened instance of this event because, with its attention to line break and page space, it accentuates the visual aspect, engaging our two main senses, seeing and hearing, and in much contemporary poetry, because of an emphasis on form, these two senses are engaged equally, resulting in an overload, an overflow, which spills into another zone of perception, some active hybrid between the two senses.

What some "language poets" occasionally fail to realize is that words can't help but *mean.* Vancouver's Meredith Quartermain never suffers from this lack of awareness, though. Instead, she plays off meanings, weaving in and out of things understood.

In recent works, such as the chapbooks *The Eye-Shift of Surface* (2003) and *Highway 99* (2003), and trade collections *Vancouver Walking* (2005) and *A Thousand Mornings* (2002), Quartermain moves comfortably over shifting terrain, exploring fluctuations, embracing them. A beautifully designed chapbook in an edition of fifty-two, published by Jason Dewinetz's greenboathouse books, *The Eye-Shift of Surface* is a numbered, forty-part piece in which a final fragment works as an unacknowledged coda: "Eye was here. Eye was open. Eye was near. Eye was a little further, was there. / Eye was all there was, eating and eaten. Eye was blue and read and closed."

Even the act of watching changes something; a passive action remains an action. Quartermain is no passive observer; she is a writer capable of formidable play and patience. In her texts, shifts run close to the ground in a mixture of contemporary language and older forms, including Old English, with lines such as "The is trains run on eye rails" and "With an O and an I men waven what they wede to wear." She speaks of omens and other supernatural abstracts. In "I Came Bearing Bears, a Novel (Manuscript)" from *How2,* the narrator speaks of these shifts, asking "But then who am I and who are you but people I invent?" and again, in the last line, "Can one ever cease to invent one's self? Apart from death?," or writing, in *The Eye-Shift of Surface*, "Deliberate I am fixed. You are flickering — a light. Him to have slain beside / the haystack the gazers strike. Quick eyes gone under earth's lid — I, an epic."

In an interview with Aaron Peck on the greenboathouse website, Quartermain says,

> The self is a medley of discourses carried out on behalf of the state and social institutions such as the family. There is no I, but rather a myriad of I's, chattering away the texts already formulated by the social grammar. Moreover, these same social institutions have an interest in maintaining

> our addiction to a phantom I, a prosthetic I, so that we imagine ourselves heroes in a narrative of life in which we have real choices.

Her shifting of the I/eye in this work is the focal point, well before meaning or intention or whatever else comes through the text as secondary: "The eye moves, as does the I. A mixture of being and seeing."

In *The Eye-Shift of Surface,* Quartermain manages to bring in a whole range of "everything." Less a collage than a deliberate weave of various threads, it evokes all that the eye or the I can see. She writes about the difference between looking and actually seeing:

> I WAS HERE IMMEDIATE CONSTITUENT OF INTERNAL Combustion Engine. I was intermediate frequency and instrumental landing system with flight rules identifying friend or foe.
>
> Time the radio tuners carried IC's like Spicer's. Integrated circuits must have reverence to write by the sea side, waled wide.
>
> ICE will make great use of the future.

Even through her presence as a writer, Quartermain cultivates an absence, with poems and other writings hiding out in various small press publications (meaning, usually, regional and hard to find) over the past decade or so, including *Terms of Sale* (1996), *Abstract Relations* (1998), *Spatial Relations* (2001), and *Veers* (1998). More recently, she authored the collaborative chapbook *Wanders* with Robin Blaser and *A Thousand Mornings,* both published by her own Nomados. Despite all this activity, Quartermain has remained elusive in her publishing — a poem surreptitiously appearing in *Xerography* from Vancouver, another in an American journal, *Birddog* — and her first trade collection of poetry (apart from the self-published *A Thousand Mornings*) appeared in spring

2005 with Edmonton's NeWest Press. But it's hardly a deliberate absence, she claims. (She makes the point quietly, I might add. Almost in a whisper.)

The Vancouver collection, *Vancouver Walking*, even covers much of the same ground through multiple poems, writing her Keefer and other streets, repeating geography and even nationality as a tool to step out into something further.

There is also a repetitive shift in pieces such as those in her collection *Gospel According to Bees* (2000), from the title poem

> Spell binding like book binding.
>
> […]
>
> Spell spider sprue
> Spell spool boil
> Spell spry spume
> Spell sugar spiro
>
> […]
>
> Spell our prayer, spell our casting, spell our temple, spell our masking

to the end of the piece "Forensic Pleasure: Jubilate":

> For pleasure's bent for jewels and justice
> For pleasure's bound for ashes and money
> For pleasure's drink and write for morning
> For pleasure's made for foreign rain
> For pleasure's itch embrace its fissures fishers fish in foreign leisure
> For line for line, point to point, pleasure's dome swamps all pastures
> And therefore sail
> And therefore come
> And therefore cities are there for her
> And therefore she will punish money
> And therefore play hard her sure desire

Hear ye therefore and therefore be sailed
Hear ye obscure and therefore be sacred
Hear ye beauteous and therefore be forest
Hear ye gentle and therefore be won

The pieces in *Gospel According to Bees* work not only off the repetitions but also off the surviving fragments of the free-verse "Jubilate Agno" that the English poet Christopher Smart (considered a forerunner to poets William Blake and John Clare) composed from 1758 to 1763 while confined to a madhouse (the entire surviving text wasn't published as a single unit until 1954). Quartermain's repetitions work like reverb, as movements in sound that the sameness adds through its differences. Through its breaking down. In the same greenboathouse interview, she says,

> Perhaps now we can only write of the experience of language — the experience of this chattering of discourses running hither and thither through our brains and bodies — the experience of arbitrary grammar in social relations — a grammar of global capital and the master narrative of capitalism. There is something in us that experiences. Some have called it desire. Against all of this, I set out to explore the word I and its intimate connection to eye.

Quartermain's writings become more physical and less the matter of the chant, instead walking down particular streets in her neighbourhood, in the chapbooks *Highway 99* and *Inland Passage;* all work with the variation of the "eye," writing the "I" of the narrator, walking through history and physical geography. In these works, references aren't necessarily descriptions, and the poems themselves are less contained, spread out across the page. Listen to these fragments of "Frances Street," for example, a long piece about a particular Vancouver street that begins thus:

how many have walked it?

boxed against coastal mountains

[. . .]

1905
Sister Frances at St. Luke's
torn down for Turbocharger Service Centre,
Pacific Plating Bumper Exchange & Custom Chroming

no person shall destroy desecrate deface
no person shall demolish a building or structure
the facade
the unsolved eastern question

Working through the same kind of physicality introduced in her works, Quartermain also seems to be fascinated by maps and ideas of placement. It's no accident that *Inland Passage* and *Highway 99* sport maps on their covers, and Quartermain merges a knowledge of local history with the contemporary in ways that make all of it relevant, even *essential,* to the poem.

Along the same lines, *Vancouver Walking* is a passenger train that works its way 2,235 kilometres from Seattle to Los Angeles, with major stops in Portland and Eugene as well as Sacramento, Oakland, San Jose, and Santa Barbara. This is from the title poem, "Coast Starlight":

clackity clack down the track
words make rooms in our heads
rushing along
see a golf course, tiny bipeds
with tiny carts in the smooth
greens, then a sod farm's vast
perfect grass
for putting on with clubs
or putting on with gloves

And again, from the chapbook *Highway 99*, it's interesting how Quartermain moves the "I" back through the lines of her geography in a completely present and even marginal way (bringing it all back to that "I/eye"), as in the title poem, "Highway 99":

> I Canadian fly past hop fields, hopping woods,
> hopping grog-shops and Brimfield's puddles
> clasping the shining sky in their furrows of earth.
> I hop the gables that shoot past the roofs
> at the end of houses, I bound up notches and curves.
> Is the next stop heaven? On the train line of thought.
> Is there an anger car? A Stupidity Line?
> For the magic juice of rebel words.
> Where's the platform for Unschooled?

As in so many other fragments of her work, *Vancouver Walking* is a physical book of the city, amid a new generation of texts of geography that includes Stephen Cain's *Torontology* (2001), harkening back to other such collections, mapping William Hawkins' *Ottawa Poems* (1966), Daphne Marlatt's *Vancouver Poems* (1972), bpNichol's *The Martyrology Book V* (1982), Eli Mandel's *Out of Place* (1977), and George Bowering's *Kerrisdale Elegies* (1985). There is so much specifically physical of Quartermain's Vancouver in this collection, as in this fragment of the poem "Commercial Drive":

> Commercial Drive
> man with silver hair at Norman's Fruit & Salad
> smiling, running his hand over a long English
> cucumber.
> Young man with movable yardsale on the pavement
> 20 CDs, 10 pocket books, a pair of pants
>
> Plump woman setting herself up
> on the concrete at Third Ave
> near a line-up on the city bench —

cups, tins, hats at the ready —
guy comin' at her:
Don't be stupid, man. Back off. Don't be stupid

White car at a stop sign, Hey man, I got knives
I got knives, I got knives.

Compare that to a fragment of Marlatt's poem "For What Part: My City" from her collection *Vancouver Poems:*

monotonous under cloudbank hums,
throttle unseen, barge accidents, the fog. Merged with its
rocky margins, rain, trees' arms (internal dark) a dilute
sun records . . . scuttle of craps in the soakt bark. The
Sudden Jerk, steaming, vacant (oolichan runs now april),
no sound towing's quite compete without . . .

(hands, all, downed in water swell)

Or the poem "Park, Ground:" that begins thus:

Vancouver dreaming early, cold-bound
Cold Harbour wraiths, 3 of them, knew early foliage
in excess steaming. Now from bridge space, the
tracks, the lumber stacks all traced, white. Have
winters gotten colder?

Know this only old CNR
station by the Ivanhoe, its hanger echoing glass
solder holds, old shafts stamping (cold) musclebound.
Steam, diesels, even diesels do. Enter CP / CITY
rails made & remake in mind (immigrant) world open:

As Quartermain told me in an interview published on the *Alterran Poetry Assemblage* website,

> Geography means writing the earth, or you might say writing the world. It seems to me that the act of writing the world is the act of creating it. […] As to whether geography can amount to self-definition, I think it's completely impossible to define oneself in the kind of world-writing in the public realm I've described. The whole point of a public interaction between world-writer geographers is a story that must be told by someone else. Who the geographer is unfolds in the interaction. However, that said, I am constantly aware of the geography of language, the contours, rifts, subductions, tectonic plates of the medium in which we exist. A sculpturing of our land-base has already occurred over the millennia of linguistic evolution and we too can erode it, or upheave it, and we can also map it.

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chapter 10
Jon Paul Fiorentino's Transcona, Winnipeg, and the Poetics of Failure

> i have read seed catalogue and the wind is our enemy and fielding and still i will fail to present you with this prairie long poem because if anything they have taught me to write against this form and to be discursive and elusive and most of all they have taught me to desire each other and so to perpetuate an incestuous notion of poetry which is discretely referred to as intertextuality.
>
> write fragments. not full sentences. but most of all disobey all instructions toward poetry.
>
> — Jon Paul Fiorentino, "Prairie Long Poem," *Transcona Fragments*

Winnipeg/Montreal writer Jon Paul Fiorentino's *Transcona Fragments* (2002) and *Hello Serotonin!* (2004) are part of a longer poetic project. Along the lines of Robert Kroetsch's ongoing *Field Notes,* Fiorentino's second and third trade collections reference his particular place in the world and work to further hone his lyrical skills. All of his writing feels part of a single, ongoing project — one that somehow always seems to involve pharmaceuticals,

disappointments, and the geography of Transcona, a Winnipeg rail suburb slowly disappearing as it is absorbed into the city. It is an ongoing lyric wrapped together in sincere irony and where everything Fiorentino writes is "true":

> unpacking that metaphor the unkempt gravel
> or tar of a transcona side street driving with your
> third eye on the road splaying yourself out the side
> window, with both eyes on what you know
>
> that taste, that region: gravel, tar, spit leaves
> of glass splinters on the dream road tin am radio
> chevrolet and a block heater and an electric blanket
> and a six pack for christmas
> ("Transcona Fragments," *Transcona Fragments*)

> It's all mine —
> the endless substantia, the terse
> lyric, the dream that cringes
> awake at daybreak.
> ("Mine," *Hello Serotonin!*)

There are, of course, numerous ways for an author to place his text. Fiorentino very much weaves his placement through geography, invoking the failures of the past and the present, exploring not only the prairie in his poetry but also the genre of prairie poetry, especially the long poem, a tradition established by poets such as Dennis Cooley, Robert Kroetsch, Nicole Markotic, Barry McKinnon, Eli Mandel, Aritha van Herk, Rob Budde, Andrew Suknaski, and so many others in the Prairies. In an unpublished e-mail interview I conducted with Fiorentino toward the end of 2002, he wrote that

> The prairie long poem is an important, inevitable tradition for me to work in. I was drawn to poetry because of texts like *Seed Catalogue* (Kroetsch) and *Fielding* (Cooley). I'm not sure if I think of my work as one large prairie long poem. I always revisit the lyric/confessional form, and the semantically-challenged "language" rant as well. Perhaps one could read my poems as one large, disjunctive, hybrid text; but that might be a frustrating project. My new work is an extension of the "psychotropes" project from *transcona fragments* and *resume drowning* is a response to *hover* so it is fair to say that there are at least three expanding texts.

Later in the same interview he mentioned that,

> For me, I think altering the compositional process comes through the act of revision. It may seem conventional, but it is a very effective way to "trouble" authorial intent. When you take some time to appraise a text and revisit and revise it, you necessarily challenge and alter the compositional process. I am a fierce self-editor and I would like to think this serves me well. My editorial obsession is evident in a poem like "prairie long poem" where I am not only addressing the tradition I am working in, but also providing a kind of pseudo-formulaic tract for the prairie long poem, which of course, fails.

Transcona, Manitoba, was founded by workers on the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway, originally surveyed by them in 1906 or 1907 for the site of the western repair shop and the town of Transcona itself, incorporated in 1912. According to the Transcona Historical Museum website, it was claimed that the name "Transcona" was chosen from thousands of contest entries and was a combination

of "transcontinental" (for either the CPR transcontinental trains that passed through or the National Transcontinental Railway, which constructed the Transcona shops in cooperation with the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway) and "Strathcona" (Lord Strathcona, Donald Alexander Smith, who headed one of the groups responsible for constructing the Canadian Pacific Railway and the man who drove the last spike into the CPR line in 1885). Filled with a history of both rail workers and chronic unemployment (the town even went bankrupt in 1921), it was amalgamated with the City of Winnipeg (along with 11 other communities) on January 1, 1972. Known now as "The Park City," Transcona is (according to The Transcona Historical Museum's website) a "large urban community in the City of Winnipeg with a population of approximately 40,000 people."

i collect everything i choke on
never choke on substance
i never write about transcona
never
but this summer
full of sick collectable sewage
finds me with something
to write about
and i don't have to rename it
(but i probably will)

[…]

transcona is not sicker
quicker than any other
suburban subtext
in subversive verse
but transcona has/had history
that does/did not elude me

[…]

transcona is perhaps not the epicentre of things:
dust
cemeteries
rain
dimensions
scattered abstractions
but then again
("Trans/Coma," *Transcona Fragments*)

For Fiorentino, *Transcona Fragments* is so much placed in his own memory of Transcona that whenever he mentions it he talks about the personal, about failures and disappointments. Immersed in the lyric and postlyric, Fiorentino wraps his lines around pill-popping and his disappearing rail suburb. Not that he is the first to conceptualize any part of the Prairies as poetry. For example, there's Patrick Friesen's *St. Mary at Main* (1998). After multiple collections writing his Mennonite heritage, this is his last "Winnipeg" collection, published just before Friesen moved to Vancouver, and what I would easily consider his strongest work. Writing Winnipeg and jazz, Friesen remade his city from text, as in the title poem:

the city getting drunk
on saturday night
the city teetering
between savagery and bliss
there's so much
to drink away
so much to drink toward
everyone looking for good news
trying to break through
the blue glass of heaven
there's all that love
on the streets

you can see it brawl
its way into forgetfulness

As in Fiorentino's work, there is a lyrical darkness; Fiorentino's, however, is far darker in content but lighter in approach. The drug abuse, self-deprecating awkwardness, and teen angst in Fiorentino's texts are heavily countered with irony and humour, where the awkwardness *itself* is a firm stance. Fiorentino's geography isn't as neat or contained as Friesen's and writes allusions to small moments instead of specifics. Existing almost entirely as allusion in *Transcona Fragments,* Fiorentino's geography exists in the act of writing itself. Structurally, then, his texts are closer to those of other Winnipeg poets, such as Dennis Cooley and Rob Budde, reworking their own open-ended and (amid shades of the academic) postmodern lyric. I wonder if echoes of failure in Fiorentino originate in Budde, who mines similar kinds of expansiveness in some of his poems and who has been both friend and teacher to Fiorentino. This fragment from Budde's *Traffick* (1999), for example, springs to mind:

> This is about the failure of saying. The failure of language taken one more step. About the man writing who must annihilate himself, cut out his tongue, crush the bones of his hands, gouge out the empire in his eyes. What is left is breath, rhythmic, self-contained. No, what is left is the sensation of breathing. Knowing that alone . . .
>
> . . . I will be breath.

then the world will open up to earth
(when the earth underneath our world
becomes unconcealed).
objects will rise into things, and wordless
they will gather outside my house,
all those things without purchase,
all those things without names

> While anxiously eyeing myself for signs that I am not who I say I am.
>
> > the earth escapes us, us
> > concealed beneath the techniques of the world
>
> The cab did not come. We stood, the two of us, unsure of what to do. Our knowledge of each other was sketchy. The sky was growing dark. The conference was on poetics of resistance. The evening was a poetics of resistance. We crossed the street again and again. Language crossed our hearts again and again. Praying, languageless, for the divine.

In an article by Jim Agapito on the *Youasthedriver* website, Fiorentino says that "Moving away brought me closer to that home place. Since I moved to Montreal, Transcona (a neighbourhood in Winnipeg) began to emerge as potential subject matter. The book itself [*Transcona Fragments*] takes Transcona/Winnipeg as half of its subject matter. The other half is about self-mythology, self-help and self-medicating." He continues, "But it wasn't an easy book to compile. It has taken the book four years to be published."

Still, before *Transcona Fragments,* there were other moments of Fiorentino's writing placing itself. The chapbook *Hover* included a section of Montreal poems, writing from the city to which Fiorentino had moved to further his postsecondary education. In *Hello Serotonin!* the two geographical threads merge, with his Montreal still placing second against the weight of his previous life in Transcona. As writer and Concordia professor Mary di Michele wrote in her blurb for *Transcona Fragments,* "There is music coming from these Manitoba streets!" Fiorentino's *Resume Drowning* was also filled with Winnipeg but in a fleeting way, with the long poem sequence "Lyric 1" referencing bpNichol, Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich, as well as what Fiorentino calls in the postscript

"the true inspiration for this collection," Stevie Smith's poem "Not Waving but Drowning":

> i am what fails to drown —
> bp's insistent possibilism
> emily's sour breath
> the mark of winnipeg
> the remarked palimpsest
> appropriated and sick
> and adrienne introduces "we are"
> into the bedsit landscape
>
> it can be done in plurality
> resume drowning when needed or every twelve hours
> and i'll get back to you just as soon as we rise

In a statement that Fiorentino wrote for his section of the anthology *Evergreen: Six New Poets* (2001), for poems that later appeared in *Transcona Fragments* and *Resume Drowning*, he goes further:

> I often explain my poetry to others as a process of transmitting secrets. I am interested in creating a personal mythology; I am drawn to the notion of hauntings, of the persistence and inevitable indeterminacy of memory. Much of my poetry is personal/lyric. Often there is a "lyric I" and a "lyric you" and the tension between these two poetic devices allows my poetry to work (if or when it does work). Occasionally I will slip into a persona or write in a third person narrative voice but I am still most intrigued by the intimacy of the lyric.
>
> Poets like Emily Dickinson, Stevie Smith, Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath and Nicole Brossard who are both political and confessional have helped to shape my poetics.

> Like most poets (who are willing to admit it) I desire language and semantic possibilities. Often, the "lyric you" of my poetry can be read as language as easily as it can be read as physical "other."
>
> Poetry is performative language. I want to perform acts of revelation and deception. I want to perform new ways of transcending and drowning.

As Fiorentino suggests, his poems, transcending and then drowning, managing to achieve through their inevitable failures. In a recent issue of *dANDelion* (2.29, *The Poetic Project*), Fiorentino writes specifically of the piece "Transcona lol" from *Hello Serotonin!:*

> I officially began my obsession with my hometown of Transcona with the publication of *Transcona Fragments* (Winnipeg: Cyclops Press, 2002). My Transcona poems are nostalgic and digressive — heavily influenced by *Seed Catalogue* by Robert Kroetsch and *Paterson* by William Carlos Williams. *Transcona lol* uses the idiom of the internet chat room as its primary rhetorical strategy. It fits well into the larger *Hello Serotonin* project, which is immersed in the language of brain chemistry, pharmaceutical recreation, and geographical mythology. Transcona, a slowly dying railway town, persists in this collection — it is my Paterson.

At the same time, the poems in *Transcona Fragments* are also about the failures of history and memory — both of which are crumbling and never to be trusted. As much as there is a sadness in the collection, there is the belligerent push against the failures, as seen in these fragments of the poem "Queen's Court":

hangover boy
in your unremarkable bedroom
you fail to sleep in this
frigid early morning
you are guided by
memory in the
luminosity
of winter

[…]

notes from the Transcona Historical Museum with interruptions

The Queen's Court was demolished in 1973.

that was two years before you were born
but you somehow remember it —
the hardwood, the hallways and rooms marked with the same sour scent
the tenants slack under the permanent deconstruction:
the lazy creak under feet
the hardwood lunging toward
the ground, praying for burial

. . .

you live in a region so starved of anything real
that you have to fictionalize history in your dreams

Referencing the Prairies, Montreal, and chemicals, *Hello Serotonin!* is less self-consciously disappointed and even more comfortable with the idea of failure. With titles such as "This Poem Is Andy Kaufman," "Let's Burn Down Westmount," "Transcona lol," and "Let's Hear It for Hydroxytryptamine!" (which includes the lines "Meet me at the postsynaptic wrap party. // I'll be in the adrenaline room."), Fiorentino unabashedly rakes through all of his nervous / geographical energy, evoking all his "neurotic" tics,

as in "Tracking": "Tracks in the prairie snow: here's a regional tic. / Follow them to a fence; berate the demarcation."

Hello Serotonin! exists in what Fiorentino calls "synaptic syntax" — "poetry that performs the very nature of neuronal activity" (as the book blurb calls it). As well, as Transcona slowly ceases to exist, it will remain as an entity only in Fiorentino's text, as a ghost or myth of itself. Divided into three sections — "Neurotransmissions," "Hello Serotonin," and "Homecallings" — each a separate step toward creating the myth of Transcona, *Hello Serotonin!* includes kids popping pills, a violence often muted, an acute awareness of geography and history, and lyrical confessions of a love for the confessional lyric.

> Dreamed of paracrine parasites
> Woke up in Winnipeg
> Revived with an excitatory blunt object
> ("Some Thoughts on Strict Cons," *Hello Serotonin!*)

The language that Fiorentino uses represents an economy of neural leaps condensed both on the page and in the synapse. He writes the realities of Transcona not as Romantic but as something other, something more or less real. "It's a prairie sky after all, with a pristine / meaning," he writes in the poem "The Switching Yard Song." It continues, "The switching yard takes you to all of this / and if you lived here you might even concede / that it's almost lovely." And then he moves slowly from disappointment into elegy and from elegy slowly into love song. The final poem in the collection, "Prairielit," works from histories of prairie literature and Transcona, writing "Piles of hometrips. / Strips of Mallkids. / Dreams of sleeptext."

Over and over, Fiorentino refers to "failure," even a "poetics of failure." Fiorentino the fraud knows he will be found out, so he announces where he thinks he has gone wrong. He also mentions this in the unpublished interview I conducted:

> Failure is inevitable in the compositional process so the acknowledgment of failure can only be a good thing. The poet moves on despite this knowledge. Poetry is a kind of doctrine of expressive failure. I desire failure. Bring it on. Isn't that what Canlit is all about? Think of Atwood's metonymic depiction of the Canadian-as-victim. If there is any truth to this formulation, then what does that make the CanLit poet? The prairie poet? In "prairie long poem" my poetic voice is ironically prescriptive. The irony informs the notion that all literary prescriptions are subject to the same failure that haunts the compositional process. Does that make sense? I'm a little drunk. . . .

In so many other pieces from *Hello Serotonin!* his self-conscious voice works and reworks itself into what Fiorentino once referred to as his "poetics of failure":

> I'm sorry. I failed. I think you would have been proud.
> [. . .] I will
> never write another poem. I will write only this one. One day, it will be on television.
>
> Your fraud,
> JPF

Consider how he places the poem "Let's Burn Down Westmount," written from his new home in Montreal, directly before the short piece "Let's Burn Down the Author": "letting the author's ember / flicker us to sleep."

Phyllis Webb has also spoken of failure in the "Poems of Failure" at the beginning of *Wilson's Bowl* (1980). In the preface to the collection, she writes that her "Poems of Failure" are double failures: failing in themselves and failing since they were written as

part of a larger project that was never completed, "The Kropotkin Poems," later included in *Wilson's Bowl:*

> My poems are born out of great struggles of silence. This book has been long in coming. Wayward, natural and unnatural silences, my desire for privacy, my critical hesitations, my critical wounds, my dissatisfactions with myself and the work have all contributed to a strange gestation. And in the meantime a projected work begun in 1967 became a small literary legend. *The Kropotkin Poems* were never completed. Too grand and too designed (the "body politic" and "love's body" as interchangeable polymorphous analogues in an ideal world), they were perhaps too big and too weak for me. The infantile ego could not solicit that beautiful anarchist dream poem.

Part of the "small literary legend" of the manuscript-in-progress perhaps came from the fact that Webb read the pieces as part of the CBC Radio program *Anthology,* recorded June 25, 1970, and broadcast August 1, 1970, later transcribed in the *You Devise. We Devise* festschrift for the Phyllis Webb issue of *West Coast Line* (1991–92), guest edited by Pauline Butling. As Webb said in the broadcast, "'The Kropotkin Poems' revolve around many subjects but centrally around power, the problem of power, as I see it, and I think the theme is failure. The failure of so much — one's own personal life failures, the failure of societies to live without repressive authority, the seeming unevolvingness of political and social life, and the grand failure of the human experiment. Pessimistic? Well yes. But there was a dream."

Like Webb, Calgary's Aritha van Herk, in an interview conducted by Christl Verduyn and published in *Aritha van Herk: Essays on Her Works* (2001), suggests that failure exists in the unwritten:

> People often ask "What do you do?" I prefer to answer, "I write," instead of, "I am a writer." It seems very simple, but it's quite a powerful distinction because being a writer, that person who occupies the body that writes, is very, very different from writing, which is an uneasy, liminal, litigious, nervous, paranoid, ecstatic, and in many ways a completely conflicted, state. The act of writing engages with process in a way that "I'm a writer" does not. In order to name yourself as a writer, you have to other yourself, you have to stand outside. It's much more comfortable for me to say "I write" because there's no room in that act for failure. "I'm a writer" leaves no room for failure of any sort. [. . .] People only see the finished book. They see the product — they don't see the writing that's behind that book, which may be four books that failed, or maybe only twenty pages if you're a fortunate writer. But writing isn't merely the finished written thing. It is what you are doing all the time: the notes that you compose; the notebooks that you cart around, full of unfinished stories that you may never get a chance to finish; the ideas and the titles that never have stories; the stories that never have titles — all those things that are a part of the process, a part of the action. They're the way you look at the world; they're the way you look at the landscape; they're the way you talk to your friends. So it's an ongoing process. ("The Grace of Living and Writing")

But where they see failure in the unwritten, Fiorentino suggests that his failures are in the poems he has published. In this fragment, the first two lines of the first poem in *Transcona Fragments,* he suggests that even the accomplishment of one skill is the loss of another: "if you spend all your time on social skills / then you will never learn your scales."

Perhaps the failure is there in his subject matter, in Winnipeg itself, which exists almost as an extension of his personality. Fiorentino, at other times, has suggested that Canadian literature exists only as a notion of failure (as opposed to Atwood's dictum of "survival"), but I think it's more specific than that, much smaller than the country as a whole. At one point, Winnipeg was called the "Chicago of the North," and the city itself was built and developed speculatively, including what was once the largest Eaton's store in Canada (as half of the Winnipeg location was for mail order). In the early days of the twentieth century, with Winnipeg being roughly the centre of the country, and with the railway running directly through it, everything going from the east to the west and back again went through it. That is, until construction of the Panama Canal. The old Eaton's building was finally demolished in 2003–04.

In Winnipeg's visual arts crowd, there is a joke that goes, "If not for Winnipeg, Toronto would have no arts scene," and the Winnipeg band The Weakerthans, a Fiorentino favourite fronted by his friend John K. Samson, has a song focusing on the local, with the chorus "I hate Winnipeg," suggesting that even those who love the city don't necessarily like it. Yet still they remain. And then there is Robert Kroetsch, who has lived all over the Prairies. Listen to the first four couplets of his poem "The Winnipeg Zoo," from *Completed Field Notes:*

> yes, I am here, exhausted, a wreck, unable
> to imagine the act of writing, unable to imagine
>
> I am here, it is quiet, I am exhausted from
> moving, we must take care of our stories
>
> the moving is a story, we must take care, I am
> here, I shall arrive, I am arriving, I too

have waited, the way in is merely the way,
she takes her lovers, reader, listen, be careful

Still, it's probably Norman Levine who comes closest to Fiorentino's estimation of failure when he writes, in *Canada Made Me,* "I like the lower towns, the places across the tracks, the poorer streets not far from the river. They represent failure, and for me failure here has a strong appeal." Even Laurie Fuhr has subtitled her first poetry manuscript, of Ottawa-Winnipeg-Cold Lake, Alberta, poems, a book of *Failed-Love Poems.*

Fiorentino takes care in developing his stories of home and his own local myths, and he understands the importance of them, knows his place, even if he can't live there at the moment. Not that these are exclusive threads in his writing, but they are strong ones. Even after the publication of these collections, there's evidence of his ongoing failure in the poem "Dispatches from Graham Mall," published in a recent issue of *Prism International:*

All around Graham Mall the abandoned walkers glimmer, the mad
trams tremble.
All day where shoppers won't tread the windows beckon soot, the
doorways settle in.

If I had the means, oxygen would burn through these grey expanses,
bloated babies
would beguile from these storefronts, the mayor would breakdance daily
at noon.

I have a loudspeaker and some free time. I have a mind to not stray.
Mallwalkers of the post-prairie, unite. I will make the posters and you
can buy the blue.

Come down; join my empathic strike!
But on second thought, don't leave your home; don't dream of leaving.

> Just throw me a phone call and we'll meet in between the Graham Mall and another nowhere.

Perhaps the failures (and successes) come from those things that can't be helped, whether geography or a chemical imbalance. Instead of turning away from what you are born into, in the end you can only embrace it.

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chapter 11

The Trouble with Normal: *Breathing Fire 2*, *Pissing Ice*, and the State of Canadian Poetry

With the publication of the first volume of Lorna Crozier and Patrick Lane's *Breathing Fire: Canada's New Poets* (1996), the complaints and the compliments were almost immediate. One of three poetry anthologies to appear around the same time (the other two being Michael Holmes' *The Last Word* and Jill Battson and Ken Norris' *Word Up!*), *Breathing Fire* was the one that claimed definition of a generation, looking at over two thousand poetry submissions from across Canada from poets under the age of thirty, only to pick what appeared to be generous sections predominantly made up of former students, all writing similar kinds of lyric, narrative poems. On deeper inspection, unfortunately, the complaint came also from within; various contributors have since suggested that their sections reflected stylistically on the editors far more than on themselves.

For those who have lost track, the first collection included work by Marisa Alps, Stephanie Bolster, Lesley-Anne Bourne, Thea Bowering, Tim Bowling, Sioux Browning, Suzanne Buffam, Alison Calder, Mark Cochrane, Karen Connelly, Michael Crummey, Carla

Funk, Susan Goyette, Joelle Hahn, Sally Ito, Joy Kirstin, Tonja Gunvaldsen Klaassen, Barbara Klar, Evelyn Lau, Michael Londry, Judy MacInnes Jr., Heather MacLeod, Barbara Nickel, Kevin Paul, Michael Redhill, Jay Ruzesky, Gregory Scofield, Nadine Shelly, Karen Solie, Carmine Starnino, and Shannon Stewart.

Even the introduction, coauthored by the two editors, gives an indication of their slant: "During the sixties in Canada, a whole new generation of poets came of age. Born within a few years of one another, Margaret Atwood, John Newlove, Dennis Lee and Gwendolyn MacEwen, to name a few. . . ." It's a deliberate list, one that would be stylistically different had it included George Bowering, Fred Wah, bpNichol, Steve McCaffery, Nicole Brossard, Phyllis Webb, or Daphne Marlatt. By polarizing "Canada's new poets," the book made everyone notice, from all sides, and became a lightning rod. How many poetry anthologies these days, or books of poetry at all, get reviews in the *Globe and Mail?*

For years, I've been hearing that there is an ongoing battle between two "sides" of poetry being written in Canada — between a more conservative poetic and a nebulous "other." Part of the lack of coherence of this formless other side is that, at times, the fight appears to be one-sided, with many of the more conservative (or neoconservative) writers writing reviews and essays taking potshots at the other side, who seem, for the most part, quite content simply to ignore the whole business.

David Solway's essay collection *Director's Cut* (2003) spends a great deal of time telling us who is doing it wrong. His infamous essay on Anne Carson ("The Trouble with Annie") is one example; the way he takes shots at the idea of the parliamentary poet laureate, jabbing at George Bowering and others ("Reflections on the Laureateship"), is another. *Director's Cut* not only revels in its large targets but also, at least in the Carson essay, makes many a reader wonder if the piece is really about the lack of attention his own work was getting. Reviewing the collection, the Montreal *Gazette*

all but called it a book of whining by a minor poet. Considering Solway's obvious intelligence, it's unfortunate that it was wasted like this.

In issue 49 of *Arc* magazine (2002), Shane Neilson moves in much the same direction, from backhanded compliments to outright dismissal of Toronto poet Stephen Cain's second collection, *Torontology* (2001):

> This is a book enjoyable for its obtuse virtuosity. *Torontology*'s rich wordplay sacrifices meaning on a garish altar, and is consequently fearsome for its eviscerated coherence but beautiful for its martial acoustics. The poetry is uncompromising: there are no narratives, only verse soundscapes where words have utmost importance. As Cain puts it in the first verse of his first poem, he's "fishing for virtue in syntax lexiconical clusters of suckers & octaves." The poetry is therefore L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E-driven, a meshwork of fragments and phrases constituting paragraph soup. Thus it's useless to describe how Cain registers on an emotional level, because his chosen format (at least in *Torontology*) precludes great themes or subjects, although his punning does suggest a sense of humour.

It's staggering how far Neilson goes to sound like he is trying to understand the work on its own terms, yet he always judges the work as wanting, based on his own models of poetry. He even goes so far as to suggest that Cain return to meaning and away from the supposed "empty polemic" of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, which Neilson doesn't seem to really understand, often looking for and not finding the "message." The problem with this kind of reviewing is that it is essentially pointless, working not to understand Cain's writing for what it is doing and has come out of, but to further the stylistic models favoured by the reviewer. After all, why would it

be any concern of Neilson's that Cain's poetry (in Neilson's view) exists without any narratives?

At the same time, Montreal's Carmine Starnino, halfway through his thirties, has made a career of regularly attacking writing and writers who aren't part of his accepted oeuvre, including critical pieces telling us how awful the work of Al Purdy and Susan Musgrave is and how we are but fools to pay attention to it, writing on the pointlessness of Christian Bök's *Eunoia* (2001) and Oulipo poetry,[1] or eviscerating Louis Dudek's career in a review of his last collection in the *Montreal Review of Books.* But, even though I might not often agree with Starnino's aesthetic, I still looked forward to seeing his collection of literary essays, *A Lover's Quarrel* (2004), because he is capable of insight. I wanted to be able to read him argue as a champion of a cause, as someone who is not just a mere slash-and-burn critic.

For a number of West Coast poets of the 1960s, their points of origin can be seen as twofold: the publication in 1960 of Donald Allan's *The New American Poetry* anthology and the Vancouver Poetry Conference of 1963. These events directly or indirectly influenced the work of many locals at the beginning or near beginning of their careers: George Bowering, Fred Wah, Frank Davey, Phyllis Webb, bpNichol, Daphne Marlatt, Red Lane (Patrick's older brother), Judith Copithorne, John Newlove, Jamie Reid, Gladys Hindmarch, and Roy Kiyooka; two boys from Ottawa, Roy MacSkimming and William Hawkins, even drove out to participate.

A few years later, after a number of the Vancouver kids had made their noise with the publication of their poetry newsletter *Tish,* folks such as Robin Mathews fought back, saying that, because this group's work was influenced by American models, it made the writing non-Canadian and even anti-Canadian. Back

[1] A counter to this is the brilliant essay by Marjorie Perloff on Christian Bök's *Eunoia* in Australia's *Jacket* magazine, "The Oulipo Factor: The Procedural Poetics of Christian Bök and Caroline Bergvall," at www.jacketmagazine.com/23/perlof-oulip.html

in those days, up to the early 1960s, Canadian poetry was pretty much a thing run out of Montreal, Toronto, and Fredericton (the Confederation Poets' heyday of Ottawa was long over). Vancouver is far closer to San Francisco than it is to Toronto. Unless Mathews was willing to send books and writers on a regular basis over the Rocky Mountains, there really didn't seem to be a point to his complaining. But those were the days of "national identity" and whether or not we had one, whether we were Canadian merely because we weren't American.

If you want to completely overgeneralize, the difference between Canada and the United States is that the latter gravitates toward the new (leaving England behind), while we embrace the old. Another difference could move along the east/west divide: the farther west you go, the less conservative the poetry (with the obvious exception of Victoria, which includes not only the *Malahat Review* but also Victorian gardens and afternoon tea). As Bowering once said of their *Tish* days, they had to make their own history.

It's easy to lose track of different kinds of writing when you don't always see the book. Ken Norris likes to say that in the 1970s it was entirely possible to know about and read every poetry collection that came out in Canada in a year. Now I can't even keep up with the Canadian publishers of poetry books that keep popping up, let alone with the books they're publishing. Even bookstores, when they have no reason to order a book published by a small press from another region, can't keep up. Trade books theoretically have equal distribution, but distribution doesn't necessarily mean that the books get *out* into the *world;* distribution doesn't mean *anything* unless a bookstore actually puts in orders, compounding the disconnect between groups. Through all of this, Canadian poetry and Canadian writing in general are becoming increasingly regional. There are more voices than are expressed by the binary "conservative" and "innovative," which to me makes the whole argument of right and wrong completely foolish. Does any-

one writing in rural Saskatchewan give two figs for Ottawa's *Arc: Canada's National Poetry Magazine* or what might be happening at Vancouver's Kootenay School of Writing? I might think that the late *Queen Street Quarterly* was the best little magazine in Canada, but it still held a small audience, even within the poetry crowd. But it's been said that any artistic group large enough to have divisions and factions is a healthy one.

All of this, though, is just a long preface to a discussion of *Breathing Fire 2: Canada's New Poets,* the anthology edited by Lorna Crozier and Patrick Lane and published by Nightwood Editions. Larger than the first volume, the edition included thirty-three poets. As much as there are a few interesting choices, including Shane Book, Chandra Mayer, and Shane Rhodes, as well as Montreal writer Nathalie Stephens (who seems to be the strangest inclusion given the evidence of Lane and Crozier's otherwise lyric narrative aesthetic), there still resides in the collection a stylistic sameness, with too much of the writing bleeding into the work before. It becomes hard, side by side, to tell many of the poets apart. As the editors write in their introduction, "All we wanted was to give poets from across Canada an opportunity to present their writing. Our concern was not for the bias of a particular genre, but for the good poem finely wrought. The voices presented in this anthology confirm what we have always believed: that there is room for every kind of poetry regardless of taste, attitude or concern."

I won't bother presenting a list of whom I would have included; by doing so, I would be committing the same sin I accuse Neilson of doing through his review of Stephen Cain's poetry. What are the point and purpose of *Breathing Fire 2?* Even the phrase "the good poem finely wrought" suggests where the book is headed: no pages filled with concrete or visual poetry or anything else non-linear, for example. It's an obvious shift for Lane considering he was one of the founders/editors of the 1960s publishing house Very Stone House, with bill bissett and Seymour Mayne, publishing, among

other things, visual and concrete works. Does it matter that, compared to either of the *Breathing Fire* anthologies, Very Stone House had more *range?*

Ken Norris has long claimed that the creative writing programs in the United States have killed American poetry. Others in the U.S. have railed against the impressive writing program and faculty at SUNY Buffalo that have, for some reason, not yet produced a writer worth all the trouble. Unfortunately, too much of Canadian writing has suffered the same: creative writing programs that produce echoes of the kinds of writing done by faculty members. Why is this? And could this be said of *any* creative writing class?

Back when Al Purdy was working on his anthologies (the first edition of *Breathing Fire* is dedicated to him), *Storm Warning: The New Canadian Poets* (1971) and *Storm Warning 2: The New Canadian Poets* (1976), his job was probably easier than the one Crozier and Lane have taken on. There were fewer poets and even fewer who were doing great things. Even so, almost all of the contributors to his first anthology went on to real success — though considerably fewer from his second anthology were even heard from again. Have Lane and Crozier simply set themselves an impossible task?

The complete list of contributors to *Breathing Fire 2* reads thus: Tammy Armstrong, Sheri Benning, Amy Bespflug, Shane Book, Mark Callanan, Brad Cran, Joe Denham, Adam Dickinson, Triny Finlay, Adam Getty, Warren Heiti, Jason Heroux, Ray Hsu, Chris Hutchinson, Gilliam Jerome, Anita Lahey, Amanda Lamarche, Chandra Mayor, Steve McOrmond, Alayna Munce, George Murray, Jada-Gabrielle Pape, Alison Pick, Steven Price, Matt Rader, Shane Rhodes, Matt Robinson, Laisha Rosnau, David Seymour, Sue Sinclair, Nathalie Stephens, Sheryda Warrener, and Zöe Whittall. Yes, it's a bit heavy on Nightwood Editions authors (Nightwood is a division of Harbour Publishing, which produced the first *Breathing Fire* anthology).

Even if the introduction doesn't, the subtitle alone, *Canada's New Poets,* suggests that it is a collection filled with representation of all sorts, which it isn't. Geography alone isn't representation, and neither is gender. For all their claims of including writing that they find interesting, the book as a whole reeks of the same kind of writing throughout, of the lyric, narrative confessional (with only one or two notable exceptions).

Would the same be said of the anthology *Shift and Switch: New Canadian Poetry* (2005), edited by derek beaulieu, a. rawlings, and Jason Christie? Their anthology, in the works well before the second *Breathing Fire,* doesn't pretend it's a complete overview of all new young Canadian poets and focuses on the new writers in the avant-garde. Even Lane himself has said that he hopes for response anthologies to *Breathing Fire.* Does that make the stylistic bias in their choices deliberate? To see what will come next?

Canadian poetry has become far too big to get a handle on, with huge amounts of writing that have nothing to do with each other. There are simply too many people working from individual traditions, which, as they continue from whatever common points they might have had at their beginnings, extend further apart. (Is it any wonder that no one has taken on the mess that would be *Canadian Poets 1985–2000,* the next logical step from the series of McClelland and Stewart anthologies that ended with Dennis Lee's sprawling *The New Canadian Poets 1970–1985?*) As far as "tradition" goes, the whole idea of influence comes from reading, which allows for as many varieties of tradition as there are *readers,* let alone writers, giving less and less cohesion to what it means to have any singular "*Canadian* tradition." Vancouver's Ryan Knighton works from influences that include George Bowering and Sharon Thesen; Hamilton's Adam Getty works from A.F. Moritz; Calgary poet and publisher derek beaulieu works from, among others, Steve McCaffery, bpNichol, and jwcurry; Alberta poet Shane Rhodes came out of the prairie of Robert Kroetsch; and

Okanagan poet Jason Dewinetz evolved out of Kroetsch and Lane (these, I admit, are hugely simplistic overviews). Is it any wonder we don't get along? I wonder whether part of the problem is that, when Lane was starting out, the new Canadian poetry of the 1960s *did* look small enough that one could think he had a handle on it, simply by naming names.

The problem with any book of *Breathing Fire 2*'s sort has nothing, in the end, to do with who is or isn't included but with the suggestion that the book is representative. Perhaps there is no such thing. Had Lane and Crozier written in their introduction "Here are a bunch of younger folk whose work we think is really interesting," perhaps there wouldn't even be an issue.

One small response project was the chapbook produced by Jay MillAr's BookThug out of Toronto and edited by MillAr and Jon Paul Fiorentino, *Pissing Ice: An Anthology of "New" Canadian Poets.* They include a few pieces each by Elizabeth Bachinsky, derek beaulieu, Daniel f. Bradley, Alice Burdick, Stephen Cain, Jason Christie, Jason Dickson, Paul Hegedus, Jesse Huisken, Jake Kennedy, Jeremy McLeod, Gustave Morin, Alessandro Porco, Angela Rawlings, Rob Read, Jenny Ryan, Nathalie Stephens, Mark Truscott, Andy Weaver, and Mike Woods. What makes this small anthology frustrating is that it focuses so heavily on Toronto and parts of Montreal, with little bits of the outside thrown in for good measure, including Weaver in Edmonton and Morin in Windsor but excluding equally interesting writers doing strange work farther west, farther east, or even closer to home, in Ottawa, Kingston, or Winnipeg. But, honestly, such a small book can't be expected to do everything, and MillAr and Fiorentino have produced a graceful little collection of strange texts and even a few visuals that are far more interesting than the offerings in *Breathing Fire 2.*

Perhaps it's the benefit of hindsight, but the second collection of *Breathing Fire* seems far less interesting than the first — which means that Lane and Crozier's anthologizing suffers the same

fate as Purdy's pair of *Storm Warning* anthologies. Who can deny the work that has since been achieved by Cochrane, Connelly, Redhill, Nickel, or Londry (we wait, still, on his perpetually forthcoming first trade collection), MacInnis Jr., Bolster, or Solie? And then there was the long-awaited first collection from CBC Literary Contest (poetry) winner Suzanne Buffam, published in spring 2005 with House of Anansi. But that certainly isn't the only work happening. What of Aaron Peck, Suzanne Zelazo, Rob Winger, or Matthew Holmes? Or other writers such as Michael Holmes, David McGimpsey, Ryan Knighton, Sylvia Legris, Rachel Zolf, or Margaret Christakos? Meredith Quartermain, Joe Blades, or Lissa Wolsak? But, with any anthology, there are, again, as many different ideas of the contributors that should have been as there are readers.

All of this wondering why the Canadian mainstream seems so intent on ignoring the fringe, why Lisa Robertson, Robin Blaser, or Steve McCaffery don't get any attention. Almost completely ignored in Canada, but McCaffery can still get a poem in the 2004 edition of *Best American Poetry* alongside Anne Carson and Erin Mouré. If we had a Canadian version (since originally writing this piece, Molly Peacock and Stephanie Bolster have started work on the first edition of a Canadian version), those writers probably wouldn't be allowed anywhere near it.

As Bruce Cockburn sang, "the trouble with normal is it *only gets worse.*"

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chapter 12

One Selected, Two Selected: *Changing on the Fly: The Best Lyric Poems of George Bowering*

I've already forgotten who claimed that an author is alive only for as long as he or she remains in print. If that's so, then I'm hoping that Canada's first parliamentary poet laureate (November 2002–November 2004), George Bowering, will live forever. Bowering, who recently returned to Vancouver after a few years in Ontario's Niagara region, has published more books than anyone can keep track of (although some do try), from poetry and fiction to young adult novels, from literary essays to volumes of unofficial histories of Canada. His fifth volume of selected poems, after *Touch* (1971), *Particular Accidents* (1980), *West Window: Selected Poetry* (1982), and *George Bowering Selected: Poems 1961–1992* (1993), *Changing on the Fly: The Best Lyric Poems of George Bowering* does what it says, focusing on the short lyric, even those included as longer sequences. What makes the volume interesting is that it focuses on a number of Bowering's poems that haven't been selected previously while still including a number of the old standards, such as "Desert Elm" and the breathtaking "Do Sink," which not only won the bpNichol award for best poetry chapbook in 1992 but really needs to be read out loud to be fully appreciated.

Part of his strength is that Bowering never lost sight of the smaller press even when publishing with much larger houses. A number of the pieces in the collection come from small press publications, including chapbooks from derek beaulieu's housepress (*Some Writers,* 2001) and Roy Miki's Pomflit (*Do Sink,* 1992). I've heard it said that "Desert Elm," for example, was long considered Bowering's finest poem, but the more recent "Do Sink" could easily overtake it. A fourteen-part poem, three stanzas each, rewrites the sonnet as a long poem, with each part including a consecutive line of the Keats classic 1818 poem, "When I Have Fears that I May Cease to Be." While "Desert Elm" was about his father, "Do Sink" explores Bowering's mother's family. It searches for a home that is no longer there with such a lyricism that it becomes hard to read the piece without hearing its music.

Do Sink

1.
When I have fears that I
may cease to be
open to pain that shines
wet on the side of a gold
fish in my own, I thought,
pond

I ought to forget
comfort, forget family
history, drive a black sedan
over thin prairie roads
looking for a town even
my mother does not believe
was ever there

knowing
pain is not colour, not value

but condition, the cost
of starting a damned life
in the first place, where no
thinking man ever was.
(from *Do Sink,* 1992)

In an interview conducted by Vancouver's donato mancini (originally published in the BC web journal *It's Still Winter* and reprinted in *Causal Talk / Interviews with Four Poets*), Bowering has this to say about the lyric: "Now I suppose that once a long poem such as *Allophanes* is in book form, one can move around in it as a reader; but the main excitement (of the senses, mind) come[s] from the moving line by line. *Allophanes* also fights that process, as you see, with the abrupt departures. Lyrics, yes, are just about music, temporal."

Temporal, sure, as long as the temporality (if it's important) is acknowledged. Unfortunately, even though my own above/ground press is referenced twice (in the introduction and on the acknowledgements page of the new selected), I've managed to find a typo regarding my little publications. I published the first half of Bowering's forty-part "Blonds on Bikes" sequence as "Blondes on Bikes 1–20" in *Stanzas* 12 back in April 1997. The poems in the selected that I'm credited with publishing actually appeared in Bowering's full collection, *Blonds on Bikes,* published later that year by Vancouver's Talonbooks. Also, it entertains me greatly that Bowering included poems from the chapbook *A, You're Adorable,* which I published in 1998 (not 1988, as claimed in *Changing on the Fly*), especially since, until now, neither of us has admitted in print that it was his work and not a sequence of twenty-six poems by the enigmatic Vancouver poet "Ellen Field." The "H" poem from that sequence, included in the selected, even appeared as a handout under "Ellen Field" at the bpNichol conference a few years ago in Vancouver. This isn't the first time Bowering's

pseudonyms have slipped into one of his own collections. A couple of poems that appeared in Pier Giorgio Di Cicco's anthology *Roman Candles: An Anthology of Poems by Seventeen Italo-Canadian Poets* (1978) under the name Ed Prato were later included in Bowering's poetry collection *Seventy-One Poems for People* (1985). Bowering is a troublemaker. Just reading his bibliography, you get a sense of some of his play. There are many alter-egos, including the "E.E. Greengrass" he created simply to review books in Vancouver's weekly independent, the *Georgia Straight.*

According to Roy Miki's *A Record of Writing: An Annotated and Illustrated Bibliography of George Bowering* (1989), Bowering has stayed out of the selection process of his selecteds (at least he had up to that point), saying, "Whenever anyone else is editing my stuff, I always just leave it entirely up to them." And the inside cover of his latest credits Lynn Henry as editor, although the acknowledgement is included almost as a tiny aside, hidden within the colophon.

Since Bowering became Canada's first parliamentary poet laureate, it seems as though he has deliberately not published a collection of poems, moving from *Stone Country: An Unauthorized History of Canada* (2003) (a finalist for the Stephen Leacock Award for Humour) to a volume of selected short fiction, *Standing on Richards* (2004). There are rumours that a volume of selected essays might appear at some point, but I wouldn't bank on it until it actually appears.

Changing on the Fly selects from twenty-four of Bowering's previous collections, including *Points on the Grid* (1964), *The Man in Yellow Boots* (1965), *The Silver Wire* (1966), *The Gangs of Kosmos* (1969), *Rocky Mountain Foot* (1969), *George, Vancouver* (1970), *Curious* (1973), *The Concrete Island* (1977), *Another Mouth* (1979), *Smoking Mirror* (1982), *Delayed Mercy and Other Poems* (1986), *Urban Snow* (1992), and *His Life: A Poem* (2000). Again, I appreciate the focus in *Changing on the Fly* on the short lyric (which Bowering claimed he had stopped writing when he was thirty).

I think there are whole collections represented here that haven't appeared in any of his previous selecteds.

Let Us Say

Let us say
this is as far as I, George,
have travelled,

the line
obscured still, the coast
I mean, touched, sighted,
mapped to some extent,
the islands
noted.

Now on this side, east,
it is that much,
water, pines, the Spanish
& their names, the savages
on the edge of the water.

I have seen some
of what lies in the mind,
the fancy of the British king
gone like fish odour
into the life-giving fog of that coast.
Aug 2, 1967 (from *George, Vancouver,* 1970)

A number of repeating themes, phrases, and ideas have become evident in Bowering's poetry over the years. Eva-Marie Kröller writes about the visual arts in his writing in her *Bright Circles of Colour* (1992), citing Bowering's friendships with and the influence of painters such as Jack Chambers, Brian Fisher, and, of course, the late London, Ontario, visual artist Greg Curnoe. But many other themes are certainly important: baseball (*Baseball*

and Other Poems; Great Canadian Sports Stories), Canadian history (*Rocky Mountain Foot; George, Vancouver;* "Uncle Louis"), writing on other writers (*Curious; Some Writers*), consideration of the local (adapted from, among other sources, early readings of the poetry of William Carlos Williams), and books simply written from what Bowering has called the "baffle," writing against a prescribed boundary (*A, You're Adorable; Geneve; Do Sink; His Life; Kerrisdale Elegies*), or written (somewhat arbitrarily) in a numbered sequence of forty-eight (*Autobiology*). Bowering has probably written more about America's pastime than any other Canadian poet, living or dead, calling baseball the "thinking man's game" — his poetry on the subject would make an interesting book-length study in itself. The other side, say, of another Vancouver resident, fiction writer W.P. Kinsella and his tales of "Shoeless Joe Jackson" (the stories that became the movie *Field of Dreams*). In an interview conducted by Ken Norris in the George Bowering issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing* (1989), Bowering has this to say of the "baffle":

> I have, of course, been guilty of many longer poems, certainly not long poems in the Miltonic sense, in the Spenserian sense. Maybe in the Shelleyan sense. I look back on "Desert Elm" with continuing respect, and it is only 10 sections long. Similarly with the 10-page efforts called "Old Standards" and "Summer Solstice." Among my book-length poems I rather retain a regard for *Allophanes.* I haven't decided on *Kerrisdale Elegies* yet. I have mentioned to people on previous occasions that I tend to write a longer poem the way Victor Coleman or Roy Kiyooka do; that is, I have what I call a "baffle," some rule I impose on myself, like writing a poem alphabetically, or using the tarot cards; that way I can prevent the individually desirous will from its ambition. That is, I can try to meet the dictates of the rule out there, while the real business of

> the poem is going on unbeknownst to me. That way I can keep the poem relatively free of expression, expression of my feelings or thoughts, etc., which is just a disguised way of saying expression of one's will. I like what is going on in Robert Duncan's never-ending series. He along with [Jack] Spicer . . . were of course the masters of us West Coast lads. They seem to accord to things [Alfred North] Whitehead would teach a poet — that whatever order he thinks to design for a poem must needs be picayune in the context of the great order already there for seeking out. I delight, when rereading one of "my" poems, in finding traces of that order.

Another echo that comes up in his writing, throughout his collection *His Life* and very much in this new selected, is his late wife, Angela, who died in 1999, in poems such as "For A," "Poem for My Wife Angela," "Rime of Our Time," "My Family's All in Bed," and "The Boat." Bowering isn't a poet who works sentiment or someone who could be called a romantic, upper or lower case, but he returns frequently to his wife, with poems praising her and their marriage.

> The Boat
>
> I say to you,
> marriage is a boat.
>
> When the seas are
> high enough to
> turn us over
>
> we must hold
> not one another
> but our own positions.

Yet when the water
is calm under sea moon

we can even stand up
& dance
holding tight, each to each.
(from *The Gangs of Kosmos,* 1969)

It makes me wonder, in hindsight, if the A in *A, You're Adorable* is Angela.

In *Curious,* Bowering wrote poems for other poets, including bpNichol, George Stanley, Daphne Marlatt, and James Reaney (all four are included in his latest selected), and in *Some Writers* he published prose pieces for others, both poets and writers of fiction: Matt Cohen, P.K. Page, and F.R. Scott. Along similar lines, Bowering's piece for Roy Kiyooka, which originally appeared in *Brick* magazine and was later published in *Blonds on Bikes,* is also included in *Changing on the Fly:*

Fill Our Houses

Every time Roy Kiyooka came back from somewhere he was wearing some shoes no one else ever had.

Roy Kiyooka had small feet and small hips and a big forehead and a few chin hairs and two missing finger tips.

His body was so small it could have been fitted inside his enormous laugh.

Oh dear, he would say at the end of that laugh, and m-hmm, m-hmm, as he returned to whatever he had been saying.

Once he laughed and said oh dear all the way down the 401 in a drive-away car from Montreal to Toronto, sometimes a little off the pavement.

He hardly ever looked through the windshield. I was in the back seat and he was looking at me. Scared me to death.

Guys like me will never understand Zen and *hokku* and hard edge ellipses, but we fill our houses with them.

Fill our houses with Roy Kiyooka, walk by him every day from now on, catch sight of a head band.

My keyboard always spells it Kiyooks. I have to correct it every time. I've written Kiyooks and Kiyooka five thousand times in my life.

Nevertheless, these ears would lend anything to hear that waterslide laugh again, ten more times.

We've all got him, Roy. Never saw so many friends. Students coming out of the walls. Family on the moon.

I lost my favorite old shoes around the time Roy was leaving us. I'd let them go forever if I could spend a life with old Kiyooks.

From painting and baseball to family and friends, to his work on other writers, I find it interesting that the editor of the collection, Lynn Henry (who has since moved over to Anansi), has managed to include almost every thread of Bowering's subjective interest in this new selected, showing her knowledge of the work through and behind the writing. This might easily be the first selection of Bowering's poetry that moves through subject, away from the "hits" or a selected based around more formal considerations, and deeper into the threads of his ongoing work. It couldn't have been easy for Henry to edit/select for such a thin volume, going back through dozens of collections to Bowering's first, *Sticks and Stones* (1962); it's an interesting choice for a writer who claimed subject matter second and movement first. As Bowering said in the interview with Norris,

Poetry, as far as I am concerned, is not interesting insofar as it is "about" anything, though I may out of curiosity read

> some poem about baseball or about Mexican food. I am not sure that poetry is interesting insofar as it is "about" poetry, then. But I do believe that when a novelist is making a novel, his intent is on the shape of the novel, not on the shape of life. If it were on the latter, why wouldn't he write an essay, or a letter to the paper, or anything else that is more often encountered than a novel? [. . .]
>
> I will tell you what art, what poetry is separated from life. It is the poetry that is written by somebody who has decided to use it to express herself. You do that by crying, or by hitting someone, or by wearing some stupid thing — three earrings in each ear. As soon as you start expressing yourself in a poem, the resources of the whole language, and the response of the reader are both infibulated.

Since Bowering published this new selected but no new poetry in trade form during his laureate tenure, I wonder whether he was simply playing a waiting game. *The Concrete Island,* for example, was made up of poems written from September 1968 to January 1971, when he lived in Montreal during a stint at Sir George Williams (which later became Concordia University), starting out as writer-in-residence. While there, he taught, among others, the young writers who would eventually become the Véhicule poets of the 1970s and 1980s. The "Blondes on Bikes" sequence was written during his time in Norway (hence all the nordic "blondes/blonds"). With Bowering's recent central Canadian stay, including a stint as writer-in-residence at the University of Western Ontario, in London, will there be a collection of Ontario poems?

This new selected is an impressive collection, made more essential by the fact that the previous selected poems from McClelland and Stewart was remaindered almost immediately, even though

it won the Canadian Authors Association Award for Poetry. (McClelland and Stewart has since abandoned its long-established series of selected poems by Canadian writers. The reason? Perhaps because selecteds are no longer eligible for most Canadian book awards.) Is this what we do with our old masters? I'm glad, at least, that Raincoast finally picked up the slack.

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chapter 13
Some Notes on Narrative and the Long Poem: A Sequence of Sequences

In the sequence "death and trauma: a deliberate play of births and endings" (*aubade,* Broken Jaw Press, 2004), I wrote a long poem as a loose translation of fragments of an essay by Robert Kroetsch, "For Play and Entrance: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem" (*The Lovely Treachery of Words,* 1989), that overwrites the story of the Frank Slide (Alberta, near Crowsnest Pass) disaster of 1903. Composed during the spring of 2001 (in Edmonton, actually, at the Second Cup at 104th Street and Whyte Avenue), the poem would talk about *delay, delay, delay* — the tantric nature of the Canadian long poem that Kroetsch describes. The tragic story itself is there, but hidden. (It's relatively well known, so why repeat it in the poem?) The landslide that erased the town of Frank, Alberta (in hindsight, Kroetsch + Frank + Edmonton = a very "Alberta" composition): the story goes, three days after the mountain came down, the remaining men from the mine dug themselves out (where the initial slide had trapped them) to discover that their wives, children, parents, and friends were gone, dead, and buried under tons of rubble. The town of Frank was rebuilt a mile or

so down the road, but the original town remains, as Frank Slide, buried under the mountain. For years, it was considered Canada's worst national disaster. The sixteen-part piece now sits at the end of the poetry collection *aubade.* It begins thus:

> **to un-name the silence back into name**
>
> survival of so few the thing,
> three days & a man
> rockslide the face, & whole town
> wiped clean
>
> who else
> knows what was once there
> surviving as testimony
> more to make over
> than could ever be recalled
> or rebuilt
>
> invisible tracks
> running through the thread of these mountains

In writing classes and other places, they keep saying show, don't tell. If you want a story, read fiction. A poem, I think, needs to be doing something else. Why tell a story if you aren't going to tell it? Well, why would a reader presume there aren't reasons for deliberately obscuring a story? Perhaps the strongest tool a writer of poetry has is allusion — not *saying* anything but in fact *suggesting* it. The delay. In an essay on David Arnason's long poem *Marsh Burning* (1980), Winnipeg poet and critic Karen Clavelle wrote about poetry that writes around what is there but never mentioned: "David Arnason is a writer / poet whose involvement in the telling of stories is both a focus and preoccupation. Arnason operates in full awareness of the fact that absence is a form of presence, and that all does not need to be revealed, indeed, that it is impossible

to reveal all. And this understanding opens the crux of a narrative problem."

I remember a real joy in the production of this poem, flipping through the essay from a second-hand copy of Kroetsch's collection (found a few days earlier in Calgary), picking out lines to shift and alter, seeing how far the series could extend. The poem was part of a series of compositions built while I was in Edmonton, assembled during my annual (or so) tour through the western provinces that brings me to the home of poet Andy Weaver. Now-familiar haunts, with the drive down to Calgary with Weaver to read, just before or after a similar event in his city, and a few days spent with him before the next train arrives, to take me either farther east or west. Almost every trip a self-contained project written at the Second Cup and/or the University of Alberta grad lounge (the late, lamented Power Plant), waiting for the inevitable delay. Drinks at "The Strath," the Strathcona Hotel.

The way I prefer to build is through the fragment, writing piece by piece, leaping from line to line, instead of composing from beginning to end, although even two words side by side presume a narrative thread. Through any of this, unless you are willing to put words on top of each other to produce a concurrent work, where everything is seen at the same time, there is no way to completely erase narrative and meaning. Unless you begin working with created non-words (obscuring the actual language itself), words can't help but *mean.*

& all those fucking tombstones

w/out clamour or blush, the lean-long,
at east w/ space & spacing, intruding
on the potential
in search instead of in vision

revisions of a father, grand

a miltonic scorn for economy
inside the longness, the long
rock slide

the model of the short

its offer of apprehensibility

So much of the craft of writing the long and even book-length poem comes from reading; there is so much to learn about structure through examining the "open form" sequences of Jack Spicer and Robin Blaser, the book-length poems of George Bowering (a mentor by example), and the lifelong poems of Robert Kroetsch and Fred Wah. So much of this from their influence. Their fault.

The delay and the inevitable. The long poem and the story of Frank Slide, of knowing how the story will end. My first girlfriend and I, years ago, would have sex in her apartment *before* going out so we wouldn't be distracted during the film, so we could properly absorb what we were watching. Putting the end at the beginning. Distracted for what was to come. The inevitable.

Calgary's *dANDelion* published five fragments of the poem (28.2 [2003]) just before editorial board member Jason Christie accepted the whole series for publication through his Yard Press (a publication that eventually never appeared). In angela rawlings' essay on the micropress (conducted as a series of interviews, http://commutiny.net/micropress/micropressay-why.html), Christie writes that

> rob mclennan's longpoem about the rockslide which buried the town of Frank, Alberta made sense to publish because I'm currently living in Calgary and could easily get to Frank. The reason I wanted to get to Frank is that I wanted to publish rob's poem in a bag of dirt and since I was so close to Frank. . . . Well, it just made sense.

It hasn't appeared yet (I've been anxiously waiting for some time), but there's something both marvelous and ghoulish about a chapbook on Frank Slide including a small amount of the Frank Slide soil. The delay. The inevitable.

Similarly, my poem *the true eventual story of buffalo bill* was inspired by a number of sources. There is always something fun (and even liberating) about continuing a line, and it's something I've attempted before, more overtly than in the Frank Slide piece, whether working my own "Sex at 31" or the novel I never finished, *A Short Fake Novel about Richard Brautigan,* which I started to continue the line begun with Jack Spicer's "A Fake Novel about the Life of Arthur Rimbaud" (as part of *The Heads of the Town up to the Aether,* 1962), to arthur craven's "A Short Fake Novel about Spicer" (which so far I've been unable to find a copy of). *the true eventual story of buffalo bill* follows from *The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid* (1970), bpNichol's eight-page chapbook that with Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* was a co-winner of the Governor General's Literary Award for poetry. What is it with Canadian poets and American outlaws? (See also Paulette Jiles and Jessie James.) According to the back cover of the most recent edition of the Ondaatje piece (2003), "When Michael Ondaatje won the Governor General's Award for Poetry in 1970 for *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid,* Prime Minister John Diefenbaker was publicly outraged by the work, and stated that it wasn't even about a Canadian." As far as Ondaatje's structure in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* is concerned, Winnipeg poet Dennis Cooley was hugely influenced and took the form even further for his own wild and expansive *Bloody Jack.* Written on the myth and life and myth again of Manitoban outlaw John Krafchenko, *Bloody Jack* is perhaps the best example of expansiveness and multiple (even opposing) narratives in the Canadian long poem tradition and was originally published by Turnstone Press (1984) and later reissued with various revisions and new pages by Cooley by the University

of Alberta Press (2002). Spicer, too, wrote a book called *Billy the Kid* (1959). One idea leads into another.

Although my poem was built on an entirely different premise than either Nichol's or Ondaatje's work, my own interest in Buffalo Bill Cody sprung from the fact that he was active in the creation of his own myth, eventually playing a caricature (nearly a cartoon version) of himself in the touring "Wild West Shows." I used the language of two articles on Cody as a base, reworking the same language over and over, whether with baffles (taking every second word of the article and creating line breaks where there were paragraph breaks) or by simple randomization (each piece writing from and through all the previous pieces). In the end, my poem writes through the man, and the myth of the man, while still following a particular order of events in his life, from his participation in the American Civil War to his tours headlining Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show.

hurts, the civil war

the united states army, continuously employed
by uncertain scouting. a hazard

across the ambush. a plain scout,
when born a new name kansas

given nickname, buffalo bill, when
he only twenty two. no single eye

a riding view of thieves deserving green,
recruiting army. the high breeze,

a peak of endorsement sales. firearms
and the glory of the regiment. considered lucky.
considered a head wound and his life
his only badge. buried everything

in gyrations. even a mountain
must preserve.

Published electronically in its entirety by *xpress(ed)* in Finland (xpressed.com), the twenty-six-part piece eventually breaks down, leaving the whole of a man's life and myth in a handful of words:

cody, coda

buffalo bill
wife louisa
a wagon train
twenty-two
army thieves
spectacular view
still a child
the wild west
pawnee east
lookout mountain
pony express
sitting bull
a ranch hand
fifty-fifth
cowboys and indians

So what is narrative, really? Is it the whole story, told in a straight line, or is it something as simple as the two words placed side by side? My own concerns about narrative in the long poem fall under the umbrella of the title (sometimes as peripheral as keeping the idea of the title — throughout the body of the poem — as far away from the title as possible) and writing as far and as much underneath the umbrella as I can. Does every poem have to fit together in a straight line? Does every poem have to be about what the story is "about" or reference said story at all? And, if not, should there even be a reason why?

A good example of breaking the narrative is this fragment from bpNichol, published both as an individual piece by jwcurry's *1cent / Curvd He&z* (1982) under the title "The Martyrology, Book V: Chain 10," and as part of *The Martyrology Book V* (1982): "every (all at (toge (forever) ther) once) thing." So much of the entire argument of this narrative is concerned with pieces that aren't (necessarily) built to work on their own but to work together as a larger unit. A fragment of a novel might be interesting to read, but it won't give you the whole *story.* Why does this always have to come back to *story?* Too many people have been suggesting to me lately that poems are made out of individual moments, of individual things, suggesting the absolute need for the poem to live on its own. As Ondaatje wrote in the introduction to *The Long Poem Anthology* (1979), "Poems should echo and re-echo against each other. They should create resonances. They cannot live alone any more than we can. . . ." Earlier in the introduction, he also says that "The stories within the poems don't matter, the grand themes don't matter. The movement of the mind and language is what is important."

In his statement about *Seed Catalogue* for the same anthology, Robert Kroetsch wrote that

> The continuing poem: not the having written, but the writing. The poem as long as a life. The lifelost poem.
>
> The poem as big as a continent. Roy Kiyooka's *Transcanada Letters*. (How do you like *them*
>
> apples, Roy?)
>
> And speaking of silence: see Phyllis Webb's "Naked Poems." It'll give you the shivers. The heebie-jeebies. Love is like.
>
> See David Jones' *The Anathemata.* I go on coming back to that book. Trying to read the poem. A curse, so much like heaven.
>
> And maybe *Blown Figures,* by Audrey Thomas, is a long poem disguised as a novel. The (at)venturing [in]to Africa. To neverywhere. Shore enough.

The writing the writing the writing. Fundamentally, I mean. The having written excludes the reader. We are left with our

selves
as critics. We want to be readers. The continuing poem makes
us
readers.

Poetry is not fundamentally *about* anything. It isn't even "about language." It *is* language.

monopoly/antiques (a number of which were first published in Australia's online *Jacket,* later appearing as a whole in chapbook form through above/ground press), the most deliberately lyric of the three sequences I'm writing about here, is a twenty-one-part piece working from the loose tradition of the English Canadian ghazal, brought into being from the late John Thompson's brilliant *Stilt Jack* (1976). Called the anti-sonnet, the ghazal (an ancient Persian form) works deliberately from the breaks that exist between couplets, constructing a poem that fits under the title only peripherally. How does one work that peripheral (reference nearly as anti-reference), especially in a longer sequence of ghazals, as Thompson did and later Phyllis Webb, Douglas Barbour, and almost every Canadian poet (it seemed) throughout the 1970s (but so few done as well as these)? My poem, although working from a reference to a breakup, a weekend of travel, the game of Monopoly, and visits to various antique stores around the Rideau Lakes, also works *against* those references, writing so much *around* them as well:

monopoly/antiques

fifteen hundred dollars each, & i
the milk bottle

wood replaces metal, or then
replaces glass

the rust comes over thru the rain

the implication is clear, if
your parents owned, nostalgia

anything earlier, an antique

she winds the victrola, & builds it
slow

speeds up to 78, until the belt
slips up

a hole where the rain

& from a young boys window, the eyes
then fill

Not built to exist in any particular order, the order still exists, whether arbitrary or otherwise, in a series of individual pieces, each with the same title. Does that make them twenty-one individual poems or simply one? Is this a serial poem or a sequence? I've always been relatively unclear on the precise distinctions of the "serial poem," but I don't mind borrowing from the example of its imprecise ways. Is the "serial poem" simply "ongoing," the poem built out of many poems, extending sometimes throughout the whole of the author's life, whether Jack Spicer, Robin Blaser, Robert Duncan, Fanny Howe, bpNichol, or Fred Wah?

In her work on the Canadian long poem, Smaro Kamboureli wrote that "Dislocation, a theme consistently used in the long poem, declares a yearning that exceeds the lyric's potentiality to locate the self. It is not that dislocation produces impediments not conductive to the prolongation of lyric intensity or that narrative can better accommodate what the lyric's brevity leaves untold; rather, the absence of epic nostos becomes a nostalgia for the lyric."

I would very much like to *embrace* that dislocation.

monopoly/antiques

the last weekend we will ever
spend, looking

at old tractor parts

the rusted metal palm
of john deere model six

indented into memory
& flesh

the treat out of the old car
withers

the carriage-house, a box
of doll-heads

brown couch left out
the rain, & suffered

& a technology of dogs
& darker bone

Written quickly in May 2002 in Ottawa, unlike the other two sequences, *monopoly/antiques* was written with no specific starting point or end point in mind; instead, I continued the sequence until I felt that it had run out of steam. The lyric or anti-lyric as it bustled forth. Both delay and inevitable. In the construction of each of these three sequences, I was not as interested in the individual as compositional unit as in a series of larger frameworks, with each sequence fitting inside a much larger, book-length work. Although, in probably all I do, I'm working the book (and even the

multiple book) as the unit of composition. Where are the lyric and meaning *there?* Where is the *story?*

The long poem *what's left* (Talonbooks, 2004) is part of a trilogy of works that started with *Paper Hotel* (Broken Jaw Press, 2002) and ends with *ruins: a book of absences* (unpublished). Reviewing the collection *what's left* on his blog (reprinted in *filling Station* magazine), Calgary's ryan fitzpatrick said,

> Effectively extending *Paper Hotel*'s project of sifting the fragments of self, *what's left* — a title invoking both the picaresque beauty of a ruin and the faint trace left by something moving — leaves us with detail[s] of history and geography, interested in the shift of people across the land. Vikings and settlers meet pop detritus and road trips, inviting slips between them, forming constellations of meaning. For mclennan, borders fracture like water freezing in rock cracks; we are left with rubble — narrative unanswerable in its native state — that can only be combined and not fixed (repaired or made static). mclennan deftly employs family history, ancient history, and recent event to enact an archaeology of self.

By fragmenting the poem, is all that seems to be accomplished, then, a fragmenting of the self? Are these instead a series of moments/snapshots that accumulate, all the way up into an entire life?

> **monopoly/antiques**
>
> do not pass go, do not collect
> the extra inning
>
> a three day weekend, despite
> the fact

a board game made, & opens
a range of contradiction

the way things work

how does the poet win, he wipes
the board

clear of competition

picking away, like a scab
until the blood flows

till there is nothing left
within collapsing veins

a thin light left
on the opposite bank

Of Kroetsch's poems, Robert Lecker writes,

> in [Kroetsch's] long poems, as in the best verse in *Stone Hammer Poems,* we note several points of tangency and ongoing concern: an involvement with establishing through poetic language and a particularly Canadian and western sense of place, a desire to represent a peculiarly double sense of Canadian experience, and a need to find a sense of personal and public origins that may be dreamed by the poet whose task it is to write his world into existence.

And there, at the end, is the part I understand best: "to write his world into existence."

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chapter 14
Barry McKinnon's North: Opening Up *The Centre*

Barry McKinnon's *The Centre: Poems 1970–2000* (2004) represents thirty years of writing and begins from his home base of Prince George a year after he moved from Vancouver to teach at the newly opened College of New Caledonia. Ottawa writer and publisher jwcurry once said that the first half of a McKinnon piece moved toward a central line, while the second half moved away from it. The collection is subtitled *Moving North,* and McKinnon himself places it in Prince George (halfway up the province, it's still considered culturally and otherwise remote), as it was there that he finally came into his own as a poet. It's telling that one of his first publications after heading north was the 1975 chapbook *The Death of a Lyric Poet (Poems and Drafts).* Finishing one stylistic consideration and beginning another, he was drifting away from the shorter lyric to the longer open sequence. But for the rough notes included in the original chapbook (literally "drafts" of some of the finished pieces), he includes in *The Centre: Poems 1970–2000* as a whole, including these lines from "Living Here": "The death of a lyric / poet is living here // at the end of the line." Working in the

poetic tradition of the procedural open form, McKinnon's poetry is finely honed. The craft is obvious, but it's the movement that brings the reader through the scope of the poem. As McKinnon said in 1983 (in an interview with Don Precosky published in *Essays on Canadian Writing* 32 in 1986), "For me, writing sort of accompanies what I do. I do write very quickly and I don't spend a lot of physical or literal time at it. For me it's a process of *waiting* for it to happen."

You can see this approach in pieces such as "Thoughts Driving," where he writes "onward up the road, it is you again driving some 10 / year path — ," or in the short "Cabin: *Early Morning/June,*" where

> not miserable
> but a sense of the end of things
>
> — the baby wakes
> singing —

Both poems are from "Thoughts/Sketches," which also appeared in the previous edition of *The Centre.* Even specific publication titles, used in this new collection as section titles, suggest the drift: *The Death of a Lyric Poet: (Poems and Drafts); The the. (Fragments);* and *The Centre (an Improvisation).* It's as though McKinnon works through deliberate incompletion, moving further out in each piece until there is nowhere else for him to go, writing lines precisely cut to further accumulate into a deliberate whole.

Included in this selected are pieces and sections from most of his previous trade collections, including the Governor General's Literary Award-nominated *The the*. (1980), *Pulp Log* (1991), and *The Centre* (1995), as well as from numerous of his chapbooks and broadsides, including *The Death of a Lyric Poet*, *Sex at Thirty One*, *Sex at 38,* and *Arrhythmia.* One piece that isn't included, and that's

glaring in its omission, is the poem *I Wanted to Say Something,* published originally by McKinnon through his Caledonia Writing Series in 1975 and reissued by Red Deer College Press in 1990. Considered an influential and essential poem in McKinnon's ouvre, *I Wanted to Say Something* composes a McKinnon family history (the Dalton and McKinnon families) — arriving in and farming the prairie — in a long poem of the prairie west (both the publisher, Karl Siegler, and McKinnon have suggested that the omission was made by McKinnon himself). As Andrew Suknaski wrote in the foreword that appeared in the 1990 edition, "And wherever I went with *Wood Mountain Poems,* Barry's poem was a beacon." Crediting McKinnon's piece with influencing his own work, as well as Sid Marty's *The Tumble Weed Harvest* (a poem later reprinted in Marty's McClelland and Stewart collection *Headwaters*), Robert Kroetsch's *Seed Catalogue,* and Eli Mandel's *Out of Place,* Suknaski goes on to say that "The simple truth is . . . prairie poetry would have been far different and poor without McKinnon's *I Wanted to Say Something.* A lot of us would have been a while longer in getting back home inside that place called the long poem."

In a review of the first edition, written years before his foreword and reprinted in Dennis Cooley's *RePlacing,* Suknaski wrote that

> *I Wanted to Say Something,* the book McKinnon wrote, bears this gnawing guilt (what poet Gary Snyder pinpointed as "that something gnawing away at the conscience of America — what we did to our Indians"). McKinnon fusing photo icon and word. Geddes following with *Snakeroot,* another book with photo as Prairie icon. Then Mandel — the Prairie graveyard as field, the Prairie vault as catalyst for *pamiat'* [Russian for orders, instructions, and injunctions], and further photos as icons to illuminate interwoven text.

The shape of this current collection, then, stems as much from McKinnon's interior life as from his physical geography, writing in and of Prince George: "it is not to get wood only, but to / be so quiet they'll never know you're gone" ("Birch"). The collection shapes itself there, in McKinnon's north, such as in the poem "Bayday," from *The Death of a Lyric Poet,* which references the dead logging town Giscome: "Giscome shack town, no more / Saturday nights there. one man remains / Bayday." Or as in "Pearl," also from *The Death of a Lyric Poet,* where McKinnon writes:

> I know everything & ponder the mysteries
> of the Prince George Hotel: dark, 4:30 PM ponder
> the imported Vegas singer — what does he think of *it* —
> the town, where someone sd everyone seems to be missing a
> finger & has a split mouth from an authentic drunken fight.

To really get to know McKinnon's poetry, one must also get a sense of the city of Prince George. The home of the Carrier Sekani people for thousands of years, the city rests on the site of a river junction discovered by Europeans in 1807 when explorer Simon Fraser passed through where the Nechako River joins the waterway named after him. (Had Alexander MacKenzie discovered the intersection during his canoe trip of 1793, the story goes, the town probably would have been named after him.) Fraser went on to build a tiny outpost on the site that he called Fort George, after King George III.

The whole history of Prince George's growth seems to be tied to the establishment of each new line running through it, whether the "discovery" of the two rivers, the building of the Grand Trunk Railway route to the West Coast (one hundred years after Fraser), or the John Hart Highway that in 1952 opened a route to the Yukon. Since the 1960s, the area has been known for its pulp industry and rough-cut white spruce for lumber. The incorporation of

Prince George Pulp and Paper, Northwood Pulp and Timber, and Intercontinental Pulp helped the city's population to grow from 14,000 to 50,000 in a short time. Very much a working-class city, Prince George is currently the province's fifth largest city and perhaps the north's most important regional centre.

In the Precosky interview, McKinnon acknowledges that *I Wanted to Say Something* was written soon after he first arrived in the north, with an ending set in a present that he never ended up writing. "So the third part," he says, "was to take up this bleak, depressed feeling I had about ending up at the beginning of the 1970s in this northern mill town where everybody seems hostile and against any of this so-called sensitivity to the world." Given George Bowering's suggestion in the 1970s that you can no longer write short lyric poems once you enter your thirties, the "last lyrics" McKinnon wrote after arriving in the north, in the section he begins with "The Death of a Lyric Poet: (Poems and Drafts)," seem to be part of this idea. So, in "The North" from *The Death of a Lyric Poet,* McKinnon writes,

> to own nothing becomes
> achievement
>
> a kind of ownership
> not to care

I'm not saying that this is simply a book of the north, of simple geography, but it is written *from* that north, a place beginning to inhabit McKinnon's sensibilities. Other pieces in the collection include "Arrhythmia" (meaning "irregular heartbeat;" the series, as a Gorse Press publication, won the bpNichol Chapbook Award in 1994) and the ongoing "Sex at Thirty-One." In *The Centre: Poems 1970–2000,* McKinnon includes only his "Sex at 31" and "Sex at Thirty-Eight" sequences (he claims not to have finished a

"Sex at 45," but his "Sex at 52" appeared in the self-published *A Walk* in 1998, along with the poems "A Walk" and "An Unfinished Theology"). McKinnon writes again and again about life and mortality, especially in both "Arrhythmia" and "Sex at 31," but the poems are built from almost an *inflated* sense of mortality. The opposite of death.

In one of his many journal pieces, "Journal: *After Pierre Coupey's Paintings,*" McKinnon balances between the old standards, sex and death:

> kept thinking how at 36
>
> — more aware of the moment — heavier,
> in the calm fear of death, less abandoned in sex — can drink
> more, yet am careful both:
>
> out there
> & in here.
>
> I'll be the last to go, but I'm travelling (this, is the difference —
> in wanting to see more, or go so deep into sleep I need
> less: eat lots of food. I've craved a smoke for years,
> but quit to see what it was. this is a slow note to David Phillips
> in gumboots & our jokes: this wish for the clear moment, nameless
> and which guides, as speech — shifting gears, drinking beers into
> the hamburger stands — a good life —

Another example of how the two sides blend seamlessly comes in the collection *Pulp Log (a Poem in 59 Parts).* The winner of the Dorothy Livesay Poetry Award in 1991, it too is included in this selected in full. *Pulp Log* is a poem about Prince George itself, about the culture of McKinnon's adopted city and his own place in the northern logging community.

pulp awakes me. dark hours / cover your face:
think: *will I get 3 pages to Pierre, cancel that class and get caught?* — now to know I'll never sleep, but must lie with a worried heart. in one day the chemical eraser erases my inarticulate thoughts of love — & sense of integration and being. the very nature of poetry is to sense your own limits and go beyond — suspect your haggly muse who says, *here, I'll solve the title.* (this pleasant slavery to the unknown.

forget it! buy a house in College Heights, live drunk and raw in the outer world. forget these pants are too short — that I did laps in the baby pool, sat blind in the heat, slumped — not even a conscious attempt to straighten up, tuck belly in —

Pierre Coupey is in the studio I imagine, — sees colour / combinations. what else can be done? (the pleasure of thinking in the arrangement of art that *you* are the problem, must be solved, become the splash within the canvas' eye.
("Forty-Nine/Fifty-Nine," *Pulp Log*)

McKinnon seems to be fond of the poem as journal entry, with a number of poems throughout his career including the word *journal* in their titles and the log entries of *Pulp Log* simply a more extended journal of Prince George life. This is where American poet Robert Creeley seems to be essential to McKinnon's poetry, not just in the line and breath breaks, but also in the poem as log/journal entry, quickly written, to respond to (not necessarily to record) something that the author has witnessed or heard.

my work is time and displacement of energy. this is nothing bad, this is nothing good. *I am writing this so Barry McKinnon will understand,* — therefore the stinking, or too high grade. say it's only a job, it's only your life — and it might be going out the window, into the October fog, — the euphemistic inversion of white mill cloud that I cussed last night until someone said, *would you rather live in Bangladesh?*
("Eleven/Fifty-Nine," *Pulp Log*)

As McKinnon writes in "The Centre (an Improvisation)," the title poem to both collections of that name,

> (the task: to make visible the farm, the heart, the centre
>
> [. . .]
>
> in the centre, know. they think this a last or beginning
> chance — and what you learn: the labyrinth of the dream — work,
> as in the old days — never seeming ending. the dutiful will miss
> it, those who don't, take a chance, make themselves an edge:
>
> the grammar machine unto itself. only humans
> in trouble: it is all human — (what we cover up
> when the centre falls apart

The dividing line between the two collections written before McKinnon moved to Prince George, and the ones after, is not only geographical. It's a line that separates life and death, lyric and postlyric impulses.

The Golden Daybreak Hair (1967) was composed when McKinnon was studying under Irving Layton at Sir George Williams (later Concordia) in Montreal. His other pre-Prince George collection, *The Carcasses of Spring* (1971), was written when he lived in Vancouver. A graceful collection of short lyric poems, *The Golden Daybreak Hair* was produced in an edition of 150 copies by William Rueter at the Aliquando Press in Toronto. The rhythms we know as McKinnon's are there, with certain poems that bring out some very fine moments, but it is in his second collection where McKinnon truly begins to shine. Merging the considerations of the west and the east, the biographical note in the first collection records the influences of both Leonard Cohen and Robert Creeley as well as Layton. In a series of short lyrics, he works between Calgary and Montreal, writing between city and

the prairie, in poems on his father, his grandfather, his wife Joy, and others. Here is "Spring Montreal":

> With some purpose
> these horns
> call me out of sleep
>
> as all ice divides
> for tired Atlantic
> ships
>
> or now when this
> night divides
> as the river
>
> (allowing this cal
> for me)
>
> and I find myself towing
> near an open window
> to watch spring
> all night

Going through his first two books, I understand why none of the poems from *The Golden Daybreak Hair* made it into his selected. It's not that they are bad — they are actually quite impressive — but compared to his later work they're certainly "youthful." But I'm disappointed that there wasn't room for selections from *The Carcasses of Spring*. Predominantly about his childhood and his family in Calgary (with a nod here and there to Joy), *The Carcasses of Spring* feels more closely linked to his collection *I Wanted to Say Something* than any of his Prince George writing. There are links to later works, such as parts of *The the.,* for example, with the same hearty optimistic pessimism that seems to be the touchstone of a Barry McKinnon poem, but *The Carcasses of Spring* and *I Wanted to*

Say Something focus far more on the long prairie journal of family and familial past, as in "Pages from a Prairie Journal":

> I lied about this place. a confession. is necessary (as the prairie night
> still has a way of touching the deepest conscience) now, procuring
> mine, as all are in bed, with only the stillness of a broken record player
> to disturb the necessity of a confession.
>
> the country is preserved by my grandmother whom I have not seen.
> tonight she declares my citizenship and am I waiting for her to die?
> all the others have died or I am dying with them with the sureness
> of a new moon (as the history of a farm and a block of houses where I have
> lived beckon the renunciation of a citizenship and the reality of boyhood
> reality of early manhood, tonight, now, when the curtains settle the moon
> for the funeral confession
> of someone who once
> lived
> here.)
>
> how can I love this place, or is it my imagination I love.

The Carcasses of Spring is a book about death and the things left behind; far less celebratory than the later long poem on his ancestors and their history, *I Wanted to Say Something,* it hints at the mature poet that McKinnon quickly became, but a few years later. But for all his youth, the idea of death keeps repeating in McKinnon's poetry, and, combined with the suggestion that the title of "Death of the Lyric Poet," so too did he enter his "post-lyric" (as Jon Paul Fiorentino calls it) in Prince George, when he moved north, killing off the idea of who he once was, in his combined Montreal/Calgary youth. Was it as simple as moving from one place to another to change from young man to mature poet? The lyrics themselves didn't die, just the poet, to be reborn, perhaps, in BC's north.

In the preface to his collection of magazine verse, *In the Flesh,*

George Bowering said of turning thirty and his own "post-lyric" writing that

> The following collection is made of magazine verse written after I turned thirty. It seems to me to be not of a piece necessarily, but of a period that was entered upon & is done with. For already in my early thirties I was no longer writing magazine verse, or occasional verse. Nearly all the poems I have written in the past few years have been a book long. When I'm kidding around I refer to this present as my symphonic period. But not really kidding — you know that.
>
> So what of that period just before the long poems. At about the time I turned thirty I moved from the West to southern Ontario. I found it difficult to keep on writing lyrics. I found it difficult but I did it. I kept on writing lyrics. But the poems were different from those that had come before. In my twenties in the West I'd been learning to write lyrics by finding my voice as it sounded according to my sense of place, in Vancouver, by the sea, the mountain valleys of B.C., the snows of Alberta's crumpled plains. But in southern Ontario there is no place. At least not the kind you can get lost in & find your way in. So I didn't quite know what I was doing, but I began to look elsewhere, inward, as they say, & into my personal time, around me in dreams, over my shoulder at the approach of the dentist & his friend the man in alligator shoes.
>
> In your twenties, I was saying, you are a cell, interacting. In your thirties you enter time, that is not only yours. In your thirties you become all ways aware of your life as a drama, of the cycle, the place in the pattern your life is now taking, who's been there & who's coming. You see that where you are is where Gilgamesh was. The passion takes

> over, & in art the passion takes over from mere worship,
> what you were doing in your lyrical twenties. To think that
> for thirteen years I was completely convinced that I'd die
> at twenty nine!

So perhaps this was McKinnon's invisible line, drawn in the sand, with his arrival in Prince George, though McKinnon obviously still had to get some of his prairie past out of his system in *I Wanted to Say Something.* There was so much it had to be a long poem — a new teaching job, a wife, and the beginnings of a family. Here is "Gestures" from *The Death of a Lyric Poet:*

> Claire has 4 teeth
> & can stand
>
> high enough to turn
> the radio off
>
> & throw my baby picture
> off the shelf
>
> what questions can I
> ask
>
> about these things
> I watch my girl
>
> grow. I am grown up
> & must bend down
>
> to turn the radio on
> & put my picture back

In her piece on McKinnon's prairie long poem, Lorna Uher (Crozier) wrote that,

In the years since its publication in 1975, Barry McKinnon's *I Wanted to Say Something* has received very little critical attention, yet it has influenced a number of poets who have felt the same need to define their roots. Andy Suknaski, in particular, once told me that *I Wanted to Say Something* was a necessary precursor to *Wood Mountain Poems* which, in turn, influenced Eli Mandel's *Out of Place.* I don't mean to imply that McKinnon's book has no value beyond the catalytic. To the contrary, I offer my analysis as an apology to McKinnon for the lack of attention paid in the past to a beautiful, well-crafted book.

I Wanted to Say Something is a long two-part poem with photographs chronicling three generations of Prairie people — McKinnon's grandparents, his parents, and finally himself. Unlike *Wood Mountain Poems,* however, McKinnon's book is not much concerned with descriptions of the people and their oral stories which so fascinated Suknaski; McKinnon is more interested in the process of his own telling, the movement from the desire to say something to the words actually said. Hence, the poem is not only about McKinnon's family and their past, but also about the act of writing, about the growth of the poet himself, and about the importance of finding a language of place and clarity, "speech to make its measure / and secure the / movement / now" ("Part 2: The Moving Photograph").

For all his modesty, McKinnon has long acted as a catalyst in Prince George (and far beyond), influencing both his northern BC contemporaries (even after some of them left), writers such as Sharon Thesen, Ken Belford, George Stanley, David Phillips, John Harris, and Brian Fawcett, as well as younger writers such as Donna Kane, Jeremy Stewart, Michael Armstrong, and Rob

Budde. In the introduction to his *B.C. Poets and Print* issue of *Open Letter,* McKinnon wrote that,

> In British Columbia, like no other part of Canada, there is an overwhelming sense of finally reaching where you are, happily or not. But the end of the line, so to speak, can be a place to begin. The next stop, beyond the big surf of Vancouver Island, is Japan. The wall of the Rockies to the east is behind you. To the north is the endless bush.
>
> In the 60s, for poets, Vancouver was the centre — a benign warm coast that drew countless lads and lasses from the interior mill towns, fruit farms, mining towns, and bush. *Mecca.* What did they find and create and experience in the grey rain of that coast? A partial chronology: *Tish* (1961); the U.B.C. poetry conference (1963) with the Americans, Creeley, Olson, Duncan, Ginsberg, Spicer, Welch; Takao Tanabe's Periwinkle Press, publisher for Gerry Gilbert, John Newlove, and Roy Kiyooka; the U.B.C. Creative Writing Department with Earle Birney and J. Michael Yates; Robin Blaser at S.F.U. (1965) and his *Pacific Nation* (67–69); bill bissett, throughout the 60s, "downtown" with *blewointment* and Very Stone House Press (edited also by Pat Lane, Seymour Mayne, and Jim Brown); and later in the 60s Brian Fawcett's *Iron* magazine; *Talon* magazine, and Talonbooks which begins in 1967; and throughout this period more conferences, festivals, readings, and years of nights for the writers, poets, and artists who met to talk and drink at the Cecil Hotel. The Vancouver Renaissance!
>
> In the 70s there was more to B.C. than Vancouver. Prince George, as Earle Birney wryly announced in the mid 70s, "is the *new* poetry capital of B.C.," with its active presses, reading series, and raw dedication to the poem.

> B.C. poets associated with Vancouver began spreading out to other communities. For some it meant going home: to Terrace (for poets Stan Persky and George Stanley), Castlegar (for poet Fred Wah), and Nanaimo (for poet, teacher, and publisher Ron Smith). Each town, it seemed, had its own local poet, press, and local college for poetry classes and readings. But Vancouver was still the major hub with new presses, new demands, and directions for its poets and publishers.

Rob Budde, a Winnipeg poet, editor, and writer who himself moved to Prince George for a teaching job in 2001, has since been influenced by McKinnon's example, even starting to produce chapbooks under the banner Wink Books. Publishing in much the same way as McKinnon did with his Gorse Press and Caledonia Writing Series, producing works by both himself and others. (McKinnon produced multiple works by writers who came through town to read, including Artie Gold, David Phillips, Robert Creeley, George Bowering, and Al Purdy.) In an unpublished interview, Budde says that

> McKinnon has reaffirmed my belief in the power of chapbooks, his poetic integrity (in the sense of stick-to-it-ness and bravery in the face of persecution), his sense of the page-space and sound, his generative models, his poetic apprehension of place as identity, his dark sarcasm, his art of whining. [. . .] The influences that are more predominant here than in Winnipeg are Creeley (he's everywhere — came up a few times for pivotal, influential readings), Spicer (via Stanley), Bowering (for some reason I can't remember Bowering ever reading in Winnipeg), Fawcett (although that's love/hate). It's very male — something I worry about.

Another thing that distinguishes McKinnon from his immediate contemporaries and predecessors (including Bowering, Purdy, Thesen, Phillips, Stanley, and Cooley) is his borrowing of the "domestic" from Creeley. Even something as simple, almost mundane, and day-to-day as spending time with his young daughter at a petting zoo at the local mall becomes a small poem:

> at the petting zoo, I
> wonder where the poem is our hearts
> (as humans, apart. I hug the lamb
> & we touch the bristles on the pig. the old of the mall in glee
> may remember youth and farms. for the young
>
> it's Blake's lamb (who
> made us miserable and apart? we touch the soft
> camel snout, watch ducks in a canning pot, swim.
> ("The Petting Zoo," *The Centre*)

There is something about the small moment in McKinnon's work. Unlike the hesitation, the tantric delay of a Robert Kroetsch poem, McKinnon expands on the smaller moment, focuses on it, making it clearer as he moves you toward it. What Monty Reid, for example, stretches into a longer line, McKinnon marks through graceful gasps and slow, deliberate hesitations. Much in the same way as one of his more important mentors, Creeley, here is a man existing in the world through language and family, involving similar kinds of line breaks and staggers.

You can really feel the influence of Creeley in "This Morning," from the "Thoughts/Sketches" section of *The the.*:

> my daughter with her brother
> on the way to a sitter
>
> — imagine

how we've tried to call love & recognize
its moment — pushed to it,
held to it when all else is a
heartless wasteland

is it not some human spirit at work
for me to see the orange light, to know this
as clear purpose —

But it isn't only Creeley who favoured the log or journal entry poem, in collections such as *A Day Book* (1972) and others. Another prairie contemporary, Alberta's Robert Kroetsch, uses the log entry in parts of his ongoing *Completed Field Notes* (1989, 2001), including *The Ledger* (1975) and *Excerpts from the Real World* (1986).

As part of the "Bio-Biography" of McKinnon for *The Contemporary Canadian Poem Anthology* (Coach House, 1983), Bowering has this to say:

> A lyric poet with a most exacting apprehension of syntax, [McKinnon] has always been fascinated by that first & last question, the meaning of life. He believes that meaning suggests itself more subtly at every moment, & that a life lived seriously is a constant meditation. Thus the details of his waking life, the weights & measures he allows access into his poems, imply non-stop ontology. There is always the sense, in McKinnon's poems, that language is not simply a response to the world, but that the world itself is made up of language. In such a surround the poet will have to be first a good reader. Then he will hope to find a good reader for his poems. They are often concerned with the fate of love in a milieu threatened by disappointment. The natural elements are there, bringing food & death. The imagination is there, too, learning to cease expecting perfection. The real-estate manipulators are there, packaging

> nature, ignoring the imagination & insinuating their message into the poems. McKinnon's work is, more than that of his contemporaries, a life story.

Budde suggests that there *is* an apprehension of geography — even as McKinnon titles his collection *The Centre,* writing so far from everything, while in the process of writing he turns Prince George into a centre of activity. The potentially ironic claim turns instead into its own reality. In "The Caledonia Writing Series: A Chronicle," McKinnon explains:

> To go back, I left Vancouver for Prince George in the summer of 1969, happy to have a job in the new college there, but also apprehensive and scared. The notion of poetry and the teaching of liberal arts in a town that was initially skeptical to this kind of change (represented by a tax hike for a college with a mandate to establish the liberal arts) quickly made me feel as if I made a mistake in accepting the job. I remember my wife, Joy, crying as we crossed the Fraser River bridge into a hot stinky Prince George, and later that day, my own compounded anxiety after visiting the so-called college which consisted of two portable trailers and an office in an unused gym storage room at the local high school. This was it. But the principal had an obsessive vision that art and culture were going to arrive in the form of the staff he hired: musicians, poets, philosophers, and scholars — and that this raw pulp / logging primary resource city would move, he supposed, from the primitive to the cosmopolitan as a result of these new energies. [. . .] For me I don't think it was totally a question of survival (I thought I'd leave after a year or two), but it was necessary to confront the constant pressure, and the task, of going against the odds of the environment and my own

> inadequacies, to deal with the demands of what turned out to be a handful of very serious students who really wanted a world of language and thought, and wanted me to give it to them.

In *Barry McKinnon* (1985), John Harris talks about the poet's view of the world outside Prince George. A writer of fiction who also teaches locally, Harris writes that

> Outside the circle of family and friends, society is a dark place. It may be represented by the "lit fluorescent halls" (85) of a college, the dimly-lit interior of a bar, a plastic suburb or shopping centre, or the gutted landscape of the interior of B.C. In all of these places, people are forced into some kind of compromise, and their personal struggles can lead to overt violence (in a bar) or (worse) the covert violence that is propagated by outwardly responsible and reasonable people.
>
> McKinnon, however, is no social reformer. He is the exact opposite. He does not believe that people (including himself) can be much better than they are, though they must try for their own sakes to be better, and he especially does not believe that some system can give support to human nature and make it better than it really is.

When it comes to McKinnon, it's almost too easy to talk about pessimism, yet anyone who writes and publishes has to be some kind of optimist. And how can anyone talk of pessimism when his own claims are optimistically self-produced and distributed? Such as the pessimism he talks about in this short lyric for Prince George writer John Harris:

A Draft
for John Harris

how I hide
away or am hidden — yet
  kept thinking, *this is a useless*
way to spend your life even tho
I was never promised heaven. that
wind outside from the south Oct. 19, 1978
is warm & is a blessing

In a letter to the chair and board of the College of New Caledonia in 1979 (anticipating trouble for McKinnon), Warren Tallman explained the importance of McKinnon and his unique centre:

> I think it would be most unfortunate if Barry McKinnon were no longer teaching at the College Of New Caledonia. In the long-ago 1960s, Barry was a student in a poetry course I taught (and still teach) at UBC. He has always, over the years, stayed in my mind and feelings as one of the best — with an intelligent, ACTIVE sense of poetry; and, equally important, a very human (and often embattled) feeling for it. Like bread and butter, or the way ducks take to water, Barry had an obvious feel for and involvement with poetry generally; his own writing efforts; others who were writing poetry; and, for the overall art as practiced from the Elizabethans on down *into* our time. He was (is) as they say, a "natural". And in my own sense of him he has continued to be just that over all the years he has taught at the College Of New Caledonia — a natural. I am all but certain that students from the Prince George area who happen to be interested in poetry and other forms of writing as either a reading or a writing art, recognize him as such a presence at your college. [. . .]

> In overall British Columbia I have always assumed that Prince George area as the centre of what we in Vancouver rather vaguely refer to as life "up north". I would assume that if young people all over northern B.C. decide not to go for fishing and canning at Rupert they might very well decide to go to college at New Caledonia. I don't know your teaching and staffing arrangements there, but have the feeling that if you subtract Barry McKinnon from them, you may very likely have made your central northern college one of the few places in B.C. that will not have an *active* writing program. [. . .] It does seem a shame that the very heart of the northern B.C. interior should decide to close up shop. The radius from which you draw students must be very large, perhaps the largest in B.C. Why should the young people from your place be the ones to be deprived? If you think that young people from your part of the province are not interested to participate in the writing activity of our time, I would submit that they must be very different from young people everywhere else in BC and on this continent. I wonder, have you asked his students as to their sense of Barry McKinnon's value?

The geographical construction of *The Centre: Poems 1970–2000* is certainly deliberate. The selection begins just past his former prairie and poems that came out of it and ends just before his geography shifted again, bordering north on both sides of the chronology of the book. Since writing the pieces that made up most of this collection, McKinnon has started a sequence of other poems that go geographically much farther, such as the chapbook *Bolivia / Peru* (2004), which won the bpNichol Chapbook Award for that year. Written from journals that he kept during a trip with his wife, Joy, it has physical reminders of his *Stamp Collection* (another short collection passed over for *The Centre: Poems 1970–2000*),

as the first includes a reproduction of his passport stamp and the second reproductions of the cancellation marks over used stamps. The colophon places the new sequence inside a work-in-progress, subtitled "IN THE MILLENNIUM. PART 10," and is part of a larger sequence that also includes the chapbooks *in the millennium* (2000) and *it cant/ be said* (2008), and possibly even —*a walk* (1998), which together already make up a substantial work. Moving his practised Prince George eye over other territory, the poem "Bolivia/Peru" opens thus:

> *Bolivia*
>
> — my life a chunk — language and mud abt
> to slide as thinking that leads to this:
>
> *Bolivia is not a place*
>
> in my head, air sick in La Paz, sd, *it's a measure*: what the first
> and second world take for granted without the 3rd — as an
> amazement
> when it's finally seen. firstly decide it *does exist* and make an
> entrance without preconception; now no exceptions. who you
> are or not is now arbitrary. scary.
>
> in Lima you land to trust it is enough to leave yr pack, go
> to the can (young lispy guys hanging out
>
> later, you get mugged

The poem explores and references geography in many of the same ways as his Prince George poems, using geography to talk about other things with the same kinds of dark optimism. Is this Barry McKinnon preparing to leave Prince George once he retires from teaching? Or has he already left it behind?

its over

the table — where light meets
dark, the vice versa

defined as time
every thing about to be
invisible: the countenance of flesh, language

departure

.

I'll weep later/thank
the blessing of some kind of surety
gone

bless the balance the music brings
(backdoor granville, the year 2000

life gone under

more allowance of
the necessary

gerry gilbert on
a bike
in the millennium

In an unpublished interview, McKinnon talks about his latest manuscript, *in the millennium:* "Lately, and this is to say, I'm coming more now to the sense of one long poem that I'll keep adding sections to; each section might present itself via singular big concerns, but it's all one thing: the title gives me the range: 'in the millennium'. I.e. What millennium? Ha. If it's this one, I've got lots of years ahead. Oh ya. I just turned 60, so please see the humour and irony in that."

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chapter 15
Notes on *a day book*

Ottawa poet Stephen Brockwell and I have an ongoing dialogue about the notion of writing as a daily activity. Is it a good idea? (I know at least one other poet who thinks it isn't.) Brockwell's reality is different from mine, with a wife and two children, a daily routine of work, and forced travel. It makes the individual poem essential to him since it (according to him) comes so rarely. A dozen poems a year, he says, might be the best he can hope to achieve. Even the best he might want to. I move in other directions: the notions of process and daily writing are essential to me, following similar paths of style and activity established by writers such as bpNichol, George Bowering, Daphne Marlatt, Dennis Cooley, Robert Kroetsch, Fred Wah, Victor Coleman, and Robert Creeley — poets who were working the procedural open form (which saw the act of writing as important as the final product and writing as an open-ended form that sees no specific end or "closure," as championed by poets such as Robin Blaser, Jack Spicer, and Robert Duncan), writing books as opposed to individual poems.

I do take Saturdays off for the sake of my lovely daughter.

And there are longer stretches spent with her as well, afternoons driving the countryside in a borrowed car or watching films or playing chess and arguing. Our routine. My ex-wife says you can set a watch to it. Because of my daily activity, writing, my unit of composition has become the book as a whole. In turn, I've become more aware of movement, of shifting where it is I think I'm going, where I want to be. I have to be willing to try different things.

It was an interest of mine for some time: the notion of the "day book." I've played with variations on it more than once, from straight journal entries to the utaniki (a journal mixing poetry and prose; bpNichol and Fred Wah, among others, have explored this form) to my current, ongoing project, *a day book.* What I don't want to be doing is a straight diary entry poem. Not only does that form not interest me, but I also think enough of these poems have been published that I don't need to write my own. Besides, I've never been capable of keeping a straight journal. It was only when I was starting a tour that I thought it was the right time to work on something new, something that had nothing to do with any of my projects at home (not that my projects are truly unconnected).

When I started writing drafts of the first few pieces, I developed the idea of writing a daily poem for three years, each titled under the day and month of composition but not the year, and only after that period editing the entire project down (merging three annual poems titled "January 23," for example, into a single piece). If a poem was written, say, October 3, 2006, and another October 4, 2004, an interesting break in the narrative structure would be to include each piece chronologically sans year, so that the more recent piece would actually appear before the other, and so on.

Gil McElroy creates his own version of the day book in a series of short poems that break narrative into sections that claim to be ongoing. His "Julian Days" poems appear in all three of his trade collections, *Dream Pool Essays* (2001), *Nonzero Definitions* (2004),

and *Last Scattering Surfaces* (2007). He notes at the end of his chapbook *Some Julian Days* (1999) that "The Julian Day system of dating was devised in 1582 by Joseph Justus Scaliger. Days are simply counted forward from an arbitrarily-chosen Day One of January 1, 4713 BCE. Today, the system is used by astronomers to date celestial occurrences, like the varying luminosity of certain stars. The Julian Day stems have nothing at all to do with the Julian calendar." As McElroy has since explained, he believes that by using this system a reader attaches no significance to a title that reads arbitrarily. This way, with most readers unaware of the Julian calendar, and thus unable to place any fixed date, the "Julian Days" series can (theoretically) be ongoing throughout McElroy's entire writing and publishing life without attaching themselves (or even *reducing* themselves) to the author's own biography.

Robert Creeley weaves his own system of days in *A Day Book* (1972) in a journal of poetry and prose (much like the utaniki) that ranges from Tuesday, November 19, 1968, to Friday, June 11, 1971. A hodgepodge, from notebook entries to ephemera, it reads like everything he wrote during that time. Whereas McElroy can reference personal information, such as where he is and what he might be doing, without giving too much detail, Creeley's poems manage to be elliptical and specific at the same time. But is it important to know that he wrote the poem "Knokke" in "Knokee, Belgium, 5:55 p.m." in a "room of Hotel Simoens, 9/4/70"? Does this information add to the poem or detract from it? Does it add to this poem that he wrote it for his wife, Bobbie? The poem ends with

> You aren't here,
>
> you may never be
> as I've known you
> again. It's a long way.

Do you need to know that I'm writing this in the middle of June 2004, three months into my own "day book" project? Does the outside Ottawa heat change what you're reading?

In *Such Rich Hour* (2001), another American, Cole Swensen, creates her own "day book," writing poems "loosely based on the calendar illuminations from the *Trés Riches Heures du Duc de Berry,* the well-known book of hours," using them "to explore the ways that the arts — visual and verbal — interact with history." Swensen's pieces sit side by side, consecutively, with the calendar days, but they also weave through the breadth of the 1400s. She breaks her own narrative thread through the decades. As she writes in her introduction,

> The poems that follow begin as a response to this manuscript, and specifically to the calendar section that opens this and all traditional books of hours. The calendar lists the principal saints' days and other important religious holidays of the medieval year in a given region. In keeping with the cyclical rhythm of a calendar, the poems follow the sequence of days and months and not necessarily that of years.
>
> Poems titled the first of a given month bear a relation to the *Trés Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* calendar illustrations for that month, though they are not dependent upon it. Rather, they — like all the pieces here — soon diverge from their source and simply wander the century. And finally, they are simply collections of words, each of which begins and ends on the page itself.

And then there's bpNichol's "A Book of Hours," part of *The Martyrology Book 6 Books, 1978–1985* (1987). Written from 10:35 p.m. to 4:35 a.m. two days later, Nichol's project is focused where I focus my own; there's less an interest in specifics and

naming than in using the hours themselves as templates. Much as McElroy's "Julian Days" are composed around the days they're named for, Nichol writes "Hour 1" to "Hour 27" and the final poem, "In Place of Hour 28," sequentially. His poems involve multiple processes, from direct wordplay to journal (the "utaniki" is mentioned within the text of "Hour 1") to poetic theory. "Hour 1" begins thus:

> met a physic
> on the road
> asked him
>
> so it is with journeys one is drawn

My own interest in this kind of project, currently, is in weaving ellipses and specifics into something that reads as unspecific. Not necessarily what is happening in the world outside, or around me, but ideas and the free flow of language — seeing where it will go. I don't want temporal markers to enter into the reading: to know what happened in a specific year places the manuscript as a whole. For what I want to accomplish, historical occurrences should ideally sit outside the final reading of the poems. Quotations from other writers appear throughout the text: this is something critics have chastised me about for years. *Fuck them,* I say. For me, the notion of existing as both writer and reader is in the response to other texts, whether in the work that I do or simply by sitting somewhere and letting my mind wander over something I've just finished reading.

So how do you manipulate a reading to play against specific information?

What I want from my poems is ellipsis, that break where the reader has the freedom to come in, sit down, and look around for a while, taking in what she can and leaving with something that is

uniquely her own. Every poem is half made of what the writer puts in. The other half comes from the reader.

For a few years, I worked deliberately to remove the "I" from my poems, and here I am, putting it all back in, with the hope that I finally know how to use the damn thing. Only Frank O'Hara managed to master the "I did this, I did that," kind of poem, all the while making them something else entirely. But who wants to remain static? The same river twice, you say.

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chapter 16
no more capital capitals: notes on *The Ottawa City Project*

Notes on Geography: Meredith Quartermain, John Newlove, William Hawkins, and *The Ottawa City Project*

A Private Life

I want to build houses in the dusk
of a late century

mud pits smudged with human feet

shapely cusps

sawdust grain cupped in my eyes
soft drywall smooth on beams and posts

prism, window
gather inside
— Julia Williams, *my city is ancient and famous*

For years, I've been interested in how Canadian poets, through individual poems or collections, write their own geography and increasingly, over the past decade or two, their cities (as opposed to bare country). They, or should I say we, even write our suburbs (not just ryan fitzpatrick's Ogden or Jon Paul Fiorentino's Transcona; does anybody remember John McAuley's brilliant *Nothing Ever Happens in Pointe-Claire?*). To write of any location enters that place into myth. There is the city, and then there is the dream of the city. Aren't definitions of self always self-definitions? Where do books or writers hold their boundaries? As Monty Reid wrote in "Small Town, Small World," his essay in the anthology *Trace: Prairie Writers on Writing,*

> Small towns, with their knowledge that they do not control everything, admit the tensions and thus re-create a place for the subject, perhaps articulate the subject in a new way, rifted by tensions it cannot control but dreaming nonetheless of meanings. Or they may provide a model for the subject as some other social context, marginalized but neither cynical nor indifferent. The subject's place must necessarily be created before the reader can again be engaged, can find a place for identification.

From Vancouver, there's Daphne Marlatt's *Vancouver Poems* (1972), or George Bowering rewriting Rilke's *Duino Elegies* into his *Kerrisdale Elegies* (1986), and more recently Meredith Quartermain's *Vancouver Walking* (2005). bpNichol wrote Toronto's streets most obviously throughout *The Martyrology Book V* (1982); then there's Stephen Cain's *Torontology* (2002). Consider, too, Joe Blades' song to the St. John River (which runs through Fredericton) in his *River Suite* (1998) and, of course, Leonard Cohen, who works his own magic in Montreal streets, cafés, and back alleys in almost every collection. More recently,

Calgary poet Julia Williams published *my city is ancient and famous* (2004).

In his essay "Mapping Raymond Souster's Toronto" in *The Canadian Modernists Meet* (2005), Stephen Cain writes, "That the city is an essential component of literary modernism — as image, as cite, as trope — has long been accepted in modernist studies. As Michel de Certeau most succinctly notes, the city 'is simultaneously the machinery and the hero of modernity.'" He goes on to assert that,

> For much of the modernist period, this city appears absent from Canadian poetry, and it is not until the rise of postmodernism, post-colonialism, and feminism that sustained and concrete examinations of Toronto and its districts begin to appear: Joe Rosenblatt's Kensington Market, the Annex environs of bpNichol's *The Martyrology Book 5,* the punk bars and Queen Street watering holes of Lynn Crosbie's "Alphabet City," and the city centre of Dennis Lee's *Civil Elegies.*
>
> Yet, long before Lee was officially made the poet laureate of Toronto, Raymond Souster was the acknowledged poetic chronicler of Toronto. Indeed, Souster has been represented, in both the popular media and in academic criticism, as *the* poet of Toronto for much of the twentieth century. While certain other modernist writers have occasionally used Toronto as a subject for their poetry — such as Miriam Waddington, and Dorothy Livesay in her "Queen City" suite — it is only Souster who has consistently returned to Toronto as subject and inspiration for his verse over a lengthy poetic career of nearly half a century. In doing so, Souster has created a significant body of work that explores the site of urban modernism, and an investigation of his work raises questions about aesthetic

> representations of the city and its functions in the context of Canadian literary modernism.

From modernism to postmodernism, then, cities are less the machinery that surrounds than part of the environment itself. For Jon Paul Fiorentino, the Winnipeg suburb of Transcona is the thread running through all of his poetry collections. In a recent issue of *dANDelion* (2004), Fiorentino commented specifically on "Transcona lol" from *Hello Serotonin!* (2004):

> I officially began my obsession with my hometown of Transcona with the publication of *Transcona Fragments* (Winnipeg: Cyclops Press, 2002). My Transcona poems are nostalgic and digressive — heavily influenced by *Seed Catalogue* by Robert Kroetsch and *Paterson* by William Carlos Williams. *Transcona lol* uses the idiom of the internet chat room as its primary rhetorical strategy. It fits well into the larger *Hello Serotonin!* project, which is immersed in the language of brain chemistry, pharmaceutical recreation, and geographical mythology. Transcona, a slowly dying railway town, persists in this collection — it is my Paterson.

From the capital, there's William Hawkins' less known, but no less important, *Ottawa Poems* (1966), a chapbook of twenty poems about the city he's lived in his whole life.

> #4
>
> What had she, Queen Victoria, in mind
> naming this place, Ottawa, capital?
>
> > Ah coolness, he said,
> > who dug coolness.

This crazy river-abounding town
where people are quietly
following some hesitant
form of evolution
arranged on television
from Toronto.

where girls are all
possible fucks
in the long dull summernights

& Mounties more image
than reality.

I've worked with the stories and mythologies of my own surroundings, my *locus,* in two longer pieces on Glengarry County (the other side of my geography, after the City of Ottawa; call it, after Borges and Mandel and Suknaski, my geographical *double*): in the collection *bury me deep in the green wood* (1999) and in the unpublished *glengarry: open field.* It's only been the past few years that I've felt comfortable enough (and perhaps capable enough) to work with a larger sense of how I have been reacting to this city where I was born (although *bury me deep in the green wood* did include a section called "bank street sonnets" — most of the collection was written at the corner of Bank and Gloucester Streets, in what was then a Dunkin' Donuts) and the city that produced at least one of my mothers (my adoptive, I mean, my "real" mother).

When I first returned to Ottawa at nineteen, a young know-it-all wandering Bank Street and filling notebooks with bad writing on city streets, the poems of Michael Dennis were extremely important to me. Here was a poet just a decade or two ahead of me, writing good poems about the same Ottawa streets, giving me a sort of permission to do the same, in his *wayne gretzky in the house of the sleeping beauties* (1987), *what we remember and what we forget*

(1993), and the bookstore window project, *poems for jessica-flynn* (1986). I can still remember the stacks of *jessica-flynn* that sat on the shelf in the early 1990s, hidden in a corner of the second floor with all the other poetry, in the now-defunct Food for Thought Books on Clarence Street. Only three dollars each; I wanted to purchase the whole lot and give them to friends.

> 1st in a series of poems from a bookstore window
>
> so, i'm finally here
> sitting in a bookstore window
> and trying to write
> of all things, poetry
>
> you have to get everything right
> you have to be sitting in the perfect position
> with the typer at just such an angle
> you have to be feeling a certain way
> and then you can do it
>
> you can let go
> of whatever it is that controls you
> whatever it is that sets the rules
> and you simply go the other way
>
> that's exactly what i'm doing
> here in this bookstore window
> in the middle of winter

It's been said that, to understand a place, you have to know its stories. Other authors have taken ownership of their cities, and the fiction of Ottawa abounds, from Elizabeth Hay to Elisabeth Harvor to André Alexis' two Ottawa books (the short-story collection *Despair, and Other Stories of Ottawa* [1994] and the novel *Childhood* [1998]) to Colin McAdam's novel of the nation's capital

and its suburban growth of the 1960s, *Some Great Thing* (2004). In poetry, however, Ottawa for the longest time was only claimed in subtle ways, in occasional pieces by the likes of John Newlove, Judith Fitzgerald, John Barton, and Eli Mandel. I wonder if this was in part because of the supposed transient nature of the city; how many writers can even claim Ottawa as home *and* birthplace? William Hawkins and Blaine Marchand were born here, but only Hawkins has produced a book lately, his first collection in thirty-one years (he's spent his days as a Blue Line cab driver since the early 1970s), *Dancing Alone: Selected Poems 1960–1990* (2005). Other writers, such as Norman Levine, Elizabeth Smart, Nick Power, Gail Scott, Richard Sanger, and Margaret Atwood were born and, sometimes, raised in Ottawa, but more often than not they left as soon as possible. I was born here but left almost immediately (put up for adoption through Cornwall Children's Aid) and didn't "return" until I had completed high school. And this was yet another sheer accident of geography: but one grade thirteen credit short of getting into Concordia University in Montreal, I sat three hours in Henry Beissel's office, watching his frustration as he spoke on the phone, while the university administration repeated to him how they couldn't let me participate in the creative writing program. Where else to go but Ottawa, with the more open-door policy of Carleton University (I lasted three weeks), moving two hours west to follow a girl? There was no thought of returning "home" to the farm. It could easily have been so very different.

John Newlove (d. 2003), Colin Morton, John Barton (who left for Victoria in 2004), Anita Dolman, and Nadine McInnis all came from the Prairies; Michael Dennis and the late Dennis Tourbin came from London and Port Dalhousie respectively (both by way of Peterborough); Stephen Brockwell came from Montreal; David O'Meara and his friend Ken Babstock grew up in Pembroke, just up the Ottawa Valley; Anita Lahey and Wanda O'Connor hail from the East Coast. Is anyone else actually from here? Gwendolyn

Guth was born in the capital but hasn't published much more than individual poems here and there and a chapbook with the University of Ottawa's Friday Circle. Through three poetry chapbooks and other publications, Max Middle has managed all three (having been born and raised in Ottawa as well as being a current resident), but he has been working far more with visuals and the voice than with considerations of subject, time, or place.

But one could argue: how different is this from, say, Montreal or Toronto? Read the biographies of the contributors to the annual *Headlight Anthology* published by the Department of Creative Writing at Concordia, and see the range of the authors' points of origin. Is it simply easier to be absorbed into the dynamic of Montreal than it is into the dynamic of Ottawa? Is there a difference?

> It's Winter in Ottawa
>
> The streets are full of overweight corporals,
> of sad grey computer captains, the impedimentia
> of a capital city, struggling through the snow.
>
> There is a cold gel on my belly, an instrument
> is stroking it incisively, the machine
> in the half-lit room is scribbling my future.
>
> It is not illegal to be unhappy.
> A shadowy technician says alternately,
> Breathe, and, You may stop now.
> It is not illegal to be unhappy.
>
> — John Newlove, *THE TASMANIAN DEVIL and other poems*

When I was contemplating my own collection of Ottawa pieces, I focused on the 150th anniversary of the City of Ottawa, in 2005

(the anniversary of Queen Victoria naming it the capital, making this the most obvious time to push anything Ottawa related). As much as I consider myself a resident of Glengarry County, where I have not lived since 1989 and might never live again, my personal geography does feel bifurcated: I was not only born here, but my adopted mother was also born and raised here, and this is where I've been since I left home and feel no need to leave; that it's the city my daughter lives in helps to keep me here too.

The Ottawa City Project (2007) works to inscribe various themes in different styles; I wanted the name to reflect the more conservative, even bureaucratic, aspects of the city, as well as the myths of the city, while at the same time establishing points of view that go completely against the grain. A whole section appeared previously as an issue of the long poem journal *stanzas,* the thirty-nine-part piece "ottawa poems (blue notes)" (2005), and another appeared as a chapbook, *the address book (erasure)* (2006); fragments of other sections, including "shipbuilding," which focuses more on the Ottawa River, have appeared in scattered journals.

shipbuilding (foundation

you were writing a paper on marriage
& wherein lies the question

, a question of lies

i was working on a poem
on the ottawa river

how you cant step into
the same truth twice

arriving too early for dinner, i read
an essay on homemade beer

by paul quarrington
you couldnt work with me in the room
i tried not to laugh out loud

at the essay, not at you,
half a glass of merlot

i could tell that you
were not impressed

i pictured a lemon, the shape
of an hour

My goal with *The Ottawa City Project* was to reference different aspects of the city, not to attempt to represent it as a whole. I might live here, but I can only be aware of a limited part of this place, as much living as observing, and both are finite, after all. Compared to me, the city is infinite, large, and almost unknowable in any way other than piecemeal. But I am the city, of the city. Although I have never stood at the corner of Baseline and Merivale (nor do I feel the need to). Call me, if you need to, a Centretown boy.

Not that Ottawa has never been poetry: a number of the Confederation Poets of the late 1800s and early 1900s lived here and worked for various government departments. It held like a bad joke that, if you hadn't written a poem on the Chaudière Falls or Rapids, you weren't really an Ottawa poet. One of the strongholds of Canadian poetry in the late nineteenth century, Ottawa modernism overstayed its welcome, pushing too far into the twentieth century. From a book he's currently working on about nineteenth-century Ottawa writers, literary historian Steven Artelle explains that,

> Among the "Poems, Songs and Sonnets, Written Chiefly in Canada" by the popular Gaelic poet Evan McColl,

pride of place was given to "The Chaudière. A scene on the River Ottawa," dated 13 September 1859, in which the poet proclaimed that "it seems almost a crime / To be ought else than mute near a scene so sublime" as "the mighty Chaudière" with its "God-speaking voice." In *Hesperus, and Other Poems and Lyrics* (1860), Charles Sangster affirmed the site's sacred properties with his claim in the poem "The Falls of the Chaudière, Ottawa" that he had "seen the Atheist in terror start, / Awed to contrition by the strong appeal" of "The wild Chaudière's eternal jubilee" (55). On 16 May 1876, William Pittman Lett recorded his own testament of the site's spiritual power in "To The Chaudiere Falls":

> Go, Atheist, stand upon its brink,
> And for a moment pause and think,
> While gazing on this mighty link
> Of grand Creation's chain!

Alternatively, some of the most interesting poems about Ottawa from the past few decades have been written by non-residents, especially Eli Mandel, Judith Fitzgerald, and George Elliott Clarke, whose breathtaking array of Ottawa poems is included in *Black*. John Bell even edited a whole collection of pieces about the City of Ottawa, from both locals and outsiders, called *Ottawa: A Literary Portrait* (1992). Published as a follow-up to a similar book he edited on Halifax (1990), it included the work of writers such as Norman Levine, Al Purdy, Raymond Souster, Hugh MacLennan, and Milton Acorn. As Bell wrote in his introduction,

> Not all the writers — be they short- or long-term residents — who have played a role in the literary history of Ottawa have chosen to portray the city in their work. Some, like

> Robert Stead, George Elliott Clarke, and Benjamin Sulte — and the many other Western, Maritime, and Quebec writers identified with the capital over the years — were, in a sense, expatriates who often found that distance compelled them to write primarily about the communities they had left behind. (Similarly, some of the best writing about the capital has come from writers, such as Robert Fontaine, Norman Levine, and Joan Finnigan, who grew up in the city and then moved away.) Other authors associated with Ottawa, like Wilfred Campbell and Elizabeth Smart, seemed more concerned with the depiction of nature or interiority, and thus offer only muted cityscapes in their work.

Part of that sense of "muted cityscapes," I think, comes from a general lack of push from residents to celebrate the city in the same way that other cities do. It is a romantic and edgy thing to be a Montreal poet and quite an impressive career feat to be a Toronto poet — there is a *presumptive edge,* the natural assumption that one can and should write about Toronto and Montreal but not, say, Ottawa or Halifax or Saskatoon. On the other hand, there's Vancouver, where myths were meant to be created, and the Prairies, where there exists more heaven above than earth. What does Ottawa have? A Victorian lumber town overrun by bureaucrats and bureaucracy, and the rise and fall of high tech. Where does that put us? A small town with only a big population? A world-class city that's also a provincial backwater? Does having too much capital mean there's little else, and does it mean that the City of Ottawa has a (perceived) lack of local identity?

As Vancouver writer Meredith Quartermain said in an interview published on *Alterran Poetry Assemblage,*

> Geography means writing the earth, or you might say

writing the world. It seems to me that the act of writing the world is the act of creating it. As such I would hope that this writing keeps rewriting itself, or that writers, as geographers keep rewriting the world-space, and keep approaching it as an act which must unfold in the presence of a plurality of such actors (geographers), so that there is no definitive world or definitive geography, but rather an ongoing discussion or network of stories. I am at the moment deeply engrossed in Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition,* which sets out the ancient Greek notion of a public realm where such a discussion could take place, free of the preoccupations of the marketplace, and free of the necessity of subsistence. She argues that this public realm is now completely filled up with the society of jobholders, leaving no room for world-writing in the way I imagine might be possible as a political discussion. Currently our whole lives are taken up with the two aspects of subsistence and necessity: labour, and consumption, which really are entirely private matters. This is not so because it has to be, but rather because of the forces that have come to dominate our culture. I am indebted to Robin Blaser for leading me to Arendt's work. Much of what has preoccupied Robin Blaser has been the recovery of such a public world, and of course Hannah Arendt's work is seminal to his investigations.

As to whether geography can amount to self-definition, I think it's completely impossible to define oneself in the kind of world-writing in the public realm I've described. The whole point of a public interaction between world-writer geographers is a story that must be told by someone else. Who the geographer is unfolds in the interaction. However, that said, I am constantly aware of the geography of language, the contours, rifts, subductions, tectonic

plates of the medium in which we exist. A sculpturing of our land-base has already occurred over the millennia of linguistic evolution and we too can erode it, or upheave it, and we can also map it.

The Poetics of Failure and Geography in "spare moments: seventeen (failed) ottawa ghazals"

While working on my essay on Jon Paul Fiorentino's "Transcona and Poetics of Failure," I became interested in the poetics of failure as presented not only by Fiorentino but also by others, such as Phyllis Webb. I had always been interested in her writing, but I was truly struck by her ghazals (she was but one of many who wrote in the form almost immediately after the appearance of John Thompson's posthumous *Stilt Jack*). There was something constraining about her five tight sets of couplets in *The Vision Tree.* Was that her idea of failure?

> Ten white blooms on the sundeck.
> The bees have almost all left. It's September.
>
> The woman writers, their heads bent under the light,
> work late at their kitchen tables.
>
> Winter breathes in the wings of the last hummingbird.
> I have lost my passion. I am Ms. Prufrock.
> So. So. So. Ah — to have a name like *Wah*
> when the deep purple falls.
>
> And you have sent me a card
> with a white peacock spreading its tail.

Part of what appeals to me about Thompson's ghazals is the sense that the couplet isn't absolute. His version of the ghazal is more a guideline than a rule, making the form far more open and

appealing. How to write something that makes sense to the language and cadence of the poem if it varies from the form? Does the failure that Webb and Barbour write about reside in the fact that their poems are more strict, or is it something more?

I have always been partial to the Persian carpet idea, working a variation of the poetics of imperfection and rough work; only God, it is said, can make something that is perfect, so a deliberate error is included in every rug (although what's meant by "precision" and "perfection" is decidedly different). Perfection and control are but fallacies and can only lead, in many ways, to purposeless frustration; there's arrogance in trying to build something perfect, according to the Persian carpet makers; it's the same ego trap that Mary Shelley's Doctor Frankenstein falls into, or the rabbi from Prague, who constructs the legendary golem. What is perfection in a poem? And, on the other side, why are so many working to embrace failure? Is it simply a holdover from modernism? Can or should a poem always be perfect, or is there simply a point in the process that the author just stops reworking a piece? Poets such as Earle Birney and Irving Layton tinkered with poems well after they were originally published, even in subsequent books, leaving behind multiple authoritative versions and a bibliographical mess. In an interview I did with Winnipeg's Dennis Cooley, he talked about this process of revision in reworking a second edition of his *Bloody Jack:*

> I remember many years ago Dorothy Livesay's inveighing against Earle Birney's reworking of some of his early poetry. This would have been about 1975 or so. It was misrepresenting the poetry, she said, it was seeking to alter the record. It was lying about history. I never found it easy to disagree (though I often did) with Dorothy, who was strong-willed and tough, but I summoned a modest demurral. Why would you think so? I said. The record is there, the

> poems as they earlier appeared enjoy their continued lives, as they were then published. (As they were then, are now, and ever shall be. Word without and.) Why can't Birney have another go at them, they're his poems?
>
> I still believe this. The poems are there in their stages and they are available to anyone who would wish to find them. To argue against that move is to deny a writer any chance of "improving" texts or of bringing them into new possibilities. Even if you left the texts "as they are," they still in crucial ways are not "what they are [or were]." Even "fixed" words come unfixed in reading — from person to person, from time to time. Why not accept that unfixing in the rewriting as well as the rereading? In any case, I had a lot of material laying around from the first go at *Bloody Jack,* and had written a few things since. I jumped at the chance to get the book back into print, but also to revisit it, re-imagine it. I was really pleased to have that chance. What else could become of this? What potential is there to be followed, what energies and soundings to be let loose? What tunings to be made? Who would want to foreclose on that? I am so given to molestation of language I couldn't keep my hands off the poems, wouldn't leave them alone.

To revisit a text isn't the same thing as acknowledging failure or imperfection, but it does demonstrate the idea that poetic craft is not always that of the diamond cutter; the one perfect shape is not always the goal. The poems that make up the work-in-progress "spare moments: seventeen (failed) ottawa ghazals" (a section of *The Ottawa City Project*) are a hastily written engagement with the ideas of perfection and failure that work through and against the disconnect of the John Thompson ghazal. Unlike with Thompson, there is no specific overarching narrative to my ghazals, the pessimistic turn of his thirty-eight years against his

final output; instead, my poems inhabit an arbitrarily (seemingly) chosen temporality that's geographically inscribed as a daily log, without real beginning or end. Still, the idea of "quickness" in the poems works toward imperfections, and the immediacy of the lines could not have been captured in slower rhythms, such as in this (yet another) variation on Fred Wah's "Drunken Tai Chi" from *Music at the Heart of Thinking*.

quick ghazal while having breakfast
at pubwells restaurant, preston street,
february 12, 2006

the forlorn sweeps of powdered snow
across womens hockey

the noonday sun bears bright
, italian down

catered boundaries; an elongated shore
of sidewalk; familiarity will erase

yesterdays *globe & mail*
a couplet lies
womens speedskating, elvis
costello, hockey

from the plant bath (table
of twelve); a brokered salvage

of highlights

there is little space on a sunday
for the spontaneous gesture

or the spartan fact

But working deliberately on a lack of control is different from failure. Why not just write "ghazals"? What is it that makes the author claim that his words are "not enough"? Edmonton's Douglas Barbour, a huge fan of the writing of Phyllis Webb, worked his own version of the "failed" or anti-ghazal when he published *Breath Takes: Anti-Ghazals.* What is it about the form that makes the author think that to succeed he must also ultimately fail? As Webb wrote in her note for the poems at the end of her selected,

> These poems, composed between November 27 and November 29, 1981, were written on unlined file cards (6″x4″ and 3″x5″), beginning as an exercise in the Ghazal form and ending in a quiet storm of six on Sunday, November 29.
>
> In the previous spring I had belatedly discovered the Ghazals of John Thompson in *Stiltjack,* published posthumously by Anansi in 1978. Knowing little more about this ancient Persian form than what Thompson had said in his preface, my plan was to write one a day, though I usually wrote more than one when I stayed with the discipline. The plan was to interrupt for most of October and November. But as I learnt more about Ghazals, I saw I was actually defying some of the traditional rules, constraints, and pleasures laid down so long ago.
>
> "Drunken and amatory" with a "clandestine order," the subject of the traditional Ghazal was usually love, the Beloved representing not a particular woman but an idealized and universal image of Love. The couplets (usually a minimum of five) were totally unlike the conventional English couplet and were composed with an ear and an eye to music and song.
>
> Mine tend toward the particular, the local, the dialectical and private. There are even a few little jokes. Hence

> "anti Ghazals." And yet in the end (though I hope to write more), Love returns to sit on her "throne of *accidie,*" a mystical power intrudes, birds sing, a Sitar is plucked, and the Third Eye, opal, opens.

Imperfection can be approached in the same way as intuition and can come with its own sense of surprise. It's much like the difference between knowing and unknowing. In the opening paragraph to his essay "Writing as a General Economy," Steve McCaffery says that

> I've chosen to approach writing and the written text as an economy rather than a structure. The latter tends to promote essence as relational, which has the clear advantage of avoiding all closed notions of the poem as "a well-wrought urn" but suffers from a presupposed stasis, a bracketed immobility among the parts under observation and specification. As an alternate to structure, economy is concerned with the distribution and circulation of the numerous forces and intensities that saturate a text. A textual economy would concern itself not with the order of forms and sites but with the order-disorder of circulations and distributions. A writing by way of economy will consequently tend to loosen the hold of structure and mark its limits in economy's own movement.

Going further into considerations of "knowability," writer and critic Stan Dragland, in his introduction to *Poetry and Knowing: Speculative Essays and Interviews,* writes that,

> For the writers of *Poetry and Knowing,* the world is not text. They feel the world's priority to words, its uncorability by words. Their homage to language honors the limits of

> words. Most of them are, with Dennis Lee, "summoned to a knowing outside of language altogether." "The world is its names plus their cancellations," says Tim Lilburn, "what we call it and the undermining of our identifications by an ungraspable residue in objects. To see it otherwise, to imagine it caught in our phrases, is to know it without courtesy." [Don] McKay senses that a line can be drawn between the poststructuralists who find plenty of room inside the prison house of language with its infinite play of signification, and those who badly want out, and *in* to non-linguistic states.

I'd worked with ghazals before, in various occasional poems, including the Phil Hall-influenced "52 flowers" (excerpted as the chapbook *perth flowers*) or the earlier, more focused effort of the collection *a compact of words,* a direct result of discovering my own copy of *John Thompson Collected Poems and Translations* (ed. Peter Sanger) and the opening poem of *Stilt Jack:*

> Now you have burned your books: you'll go
> with nothing but your blind, stupefied heart.
>
> On the hook, big trout lie like stone:
> terror, and they fiercely whip their heads, unmoved.
>
> Kitchens, women and fire: can you
> do without these, your blood in your mouth?
>
> Rough wool, oil-tanned leather, prime northern goose down,
> a hard, hard eye.
>
> Think of your house: as you speak, it falls,
> fond, foolish man. And your wife.
>
> They call it the thing of things, essence
> of essences: great northern snowy owl; whiteness.

I've also written poems of time and place before, exploring these things in short pieces that reference geography and locate themselves very much where they are situated; some have argued that temporal/geographical hooks are all, in the end, I *ever* write. The only way around an idea that holds too often is to write fully *through* the idea (and almost into the ground) in a specific project, whether pushing through references to other writers in the pieces that make up the ongoing books of *the other side of the mouth* or by writing daily ghazals that reference a specific time and place only in the title. In many ways, much of my seventeen-day series is interchangeable underneath the title; the writing is less the exploration than the inference or allusion of subject and moment.

The Ottawa City Project: "A Discovery Poem"

I wonder if *The Ottawa City Project* should really be subtitled "A Discovery Poem," like George Bowering's *George, Vancouver* (1971). It certainly feels like an individual piece, as opposed to a collection of pieces, as I slowly work my own sense of discovery through both history and geography. How does one write the self? How does one write a whole city? How does one write the self *through* the city? In the process of working both on this project and on a work of non-fiction for Arsenal Pulp Press, *Ottawa: The Unknown City,* I discovered a number of things about my Ottawa. Information that merged what I'd been collecting for years on my own and what was handed down to me by my mother, material that bubbles only now to memory's surface. Through these bits of random information, what choices do I make for the sake of both poem and story? Do I write Buffalo Bill Cody and his Wild West Show in the Glebe in 1893? Do I write the Stony Monday riots that occurred just before Queen Victoria made us the capital? Do I write of the series of amalgamations from over a century and a half? Do I write the story of the statue on Parliament Hill, about the man who may have been Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King's lover?

To chart this land
hanging over ten thousand inlets
& a distant mind of as many narrows,

an impossible thing —
no music
sounds as many changes with such
common theme.

A drawing of an Indian weed
is some surety,
an illustration of a leaf
with only a thousand lines in it.

To say the ship floats
in this water,
the sun sinks behind the offshore islands
of the inland sea.

That is the possible.

Daily longitude,
fathom markings,
depletion of the medical stores.

The charts will
take care of themselves.
— George Bowering, *George, Vancouver*

Further to Bowering's suggestion: the details, too, take care of themselves. Poems, obviously, need to appear as poems first and informative details second; not all discoveries need to be marked. I am not interested in writing the Andrew Suknaski or Tim Lilburn kind of poetic narrative history. For me, it's not about *telling* the story but about how it gets *written.* As Gil McElroy wrote in his piece in *side/lines: a new Canadian poetics* (2002),

> Though the facts of our feet daily kiss a ground now cooled & replete with roads, our youth of tides had the singular advantage of vulgar tons of water. At that tucked-in age of periodic lands & seas, the earth-oyster undulated with history.
> [. . .]
> But to fall back into myself, I will prod out some of the transient facts & surfaces I am supposed of: I have pets beyond bearing, & agitations about the right hats; the politics I harbour amuse me with misadventure; I feel it fitting to collect wit, & so gift my sisters & cousins with the crocks & fragments I rescue from years of two-reelers; from my mouth come disbeliefs & the dry rattle of my incurable addiction to language.

How do I use what I know and what I have yet to learn? How does one maintain balance while constructing not only a poem but also a longer sequence of events? How is order maintained? How, one might ask, do we eventually *discover?* George Elliott Clarke, who lived in Ottawa until the mid-1990s (when he worked for a Member of Parliament), has a magnificent series of poems that includes "La Vérité à Ottawa." Clarke manages to describe aspects of the city in real physical terms without getting bogged down by simply a listing of detail, amassing, instead, a photograph of the body and life (both current and historical) of the city:

> Leaving Afro-Arab-Asian-Italian Lowertown —
> The Coloured *arrondissement* of Ottawa — then crossing
> The Eddy Street Bridge, you'd see, on your left,
> The frothing falls of the E.B. Eddy factory, the clean
> White energy of the water charging into channels
> To electrify turbines and generators, with the Peace
> Tower behind you, in the rear-view mirror, thrusting,
> Marvellously erect — despite all the eunuchs droning
> In its bowels.

Some of the first reviews of Jason Christie's *Canada Post* (2006) commented on the deliberate "incompleteness" of the Calgary poet's collection as well as the larger idea of geography, of writing the "nation," his Canadian post, through troubling smaller moments instead of large ones. As derek beaulieu says in his *PoetryReviews.ca* review,

> *Canada Post* — which is Jason Christie's first book of poetry and the first book published by Montréal's Snare books — doesn't buy the nationalistic legend, and instead asks that the reader, the *you,* "build me a nation less like a pine tree but more neon." The nation and the individual blur into a single, insufficient myth-container: "Make it rain. Let me, I said, be defined as a container, a lake. [. . .] A nation guards against loneliness. A nation excludes you, it is a container, a lake, a geography" ("Language as a Vernal Confier Séance" 17).
>
> Throughout *Canada Post*, Christie uses the indicators of nationhood to interrogate interpersonal relationships. Nations are simultaneously created and uncreated through conversation: "When you said it rained, did you mean like Queen Victoria and I just heard the typo?" ("Deere John" 37).[…] But poetry is classically a tool of nation building, and *Canada Post* is acutely aware that the poetry is "a sequence of grifts where you move your wallet to, and then you move there too." In *Canada Post*, the grift is acknowledged and expressed in miniature — it troubles its support of nation in favour of smaller gestures: the neighbourhood, the street, the home and the DMZ between your couch and the television.

beaulieu suggests that a series of fragments works into some other kind of whole. One of my own examples of the same, fragments

working into some other kind of whole, the sequence/series "the address book (erasure)" from *The Ottawa City Project* came out of, literally, a series of addresses that no longer existed. The story is this: that every time my mother's family moved (they had four different addresses while in Ottawa, in three homes, not counting previous residences in Brockville, Kemptville, etc.), the house they had lived in was almost immediately torn down. It was always a strange counterpoint to my father's history — the McLennans have spent 150 years in three buildings on two properties that still stand, and he's lived in the same house since he was a year old. How does one compare the two realities? My mother's addresses, and the addresses I either lived at myself or various ex-girlfriends' addresses over the years, are thresholds that can no longer be crossed.

233 gilmour street

my mother own & baseball diamond, home
aint what it used to, last rites of houses
then not so, set & set upon
runcible, mountain high & the street
contained everyone, tender disgust
& cicadas sweet rapture, august moon
of red summer silk contradictions, plastic light
of fathers, her own a cold cigarette
plantation, stroke or no stroke, a
form of erasure; snarl of smoke
suspicious materials, brokeback colonies
anticipation of shores upon shores upon shore
once speaking clear, they moved; obtain
a clearer speaking picture, gilmour torn
& torn down; immediately moved
their material restriction impeded, & built
in nineteen sixty-six a tall brown
oval ship in harbour minutes, impressive
& leaving them no lesson to meet

As Michelle Hartley writes of George Bowering's "Discovery Poem," in "Finding Narratives: George, Vancouver, and the Process of Discovery,"

> The writing of *George, Vancouver* precedes the institutionalization of postcolonialism; however, its concerns with mapping, cartography, and the assertion of control that is the act of "discovery," rather than the process, through the naming of place(s) are all anticipated by the poem. Bowering attempts, therefore, to make the act of discovery, obtaining "sight or knowledge" "for the first time," an ongoing process in *George, Vancouver.* The book begins with an assertion of action in the infinitive: "To chart this land" is the proposed project. Bowering's charting, which is a scientific, geographic, and imperialist one. "Charting" the land in terms of language is the poet's territory, which Bowering accesses through his eyes and experience, precisely by noting the impossibility of geometry reproducing the complexity, the nooks and crannies and endless peregrinations of the coast/line, especially for the narrow mind with its preconceptions, assumptions, and expectations. Bowering foregrounds the tension between the goal and the reality. Even as he acknowledges the historical Vancouver's desire to explore, map, and pin down each detail: to discover in *The Discovery,* Bowering's insertion of the personal, experimental, and aesthetic thwarts a linear narrative of a controlled and contained geography.

The real challenge for this kind of project is to present its references and referencing, deliberately, in something that is both larger than and different from any previous idea of what the geography is "about." Where Calgary exists as a background character in Julia Williams' *The Sink House,* the City of Ottawa is first and foremost

the main character in *The Ottawa City Project.* Imagine *Thirty-Two Short Films about Glenn Gould;* imagine the poem written not as a biography or history of that place but as an ongoing series of explorations. The poem could be as large or as small as the city itself; the poem could go on this way forever.

Another argument I've heard lately is that the long poem has *used up* geography, that there has to be more to writing than ending or beginning with place — and perhaps that is true. Or perhaps the alternatives, in writers such as Christie, Williams, and others, have yet to be fully explored.

Acknowledgement

Thanks to Stephen Cain, who wrote "no more capital capitals" as an above/ground press reference hidden in his *Torontology.* I've borrowed it for the title of this piece.

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One of Canada's most prolific and engaged book reviewers of the past two decades, Ottawa's rob mclennan has slowly moved toward longer critical works, producing essays on writers as diverse as George Bowering, Jon Paul Fiorentino, jwcurry, Margaret Christakos and Barry McKinnon.

subverting the lyric tracks mclennan's years of writing, thinking and blogging through literature, as reader, writer, performer, editor, critic, reviewer and just plain fan. In these essays, mclennan writes about travel, Canadian poets in general — and some very specifically — as well as his own investigations into notions of craft. Together, these pieces re-map our literary landscape, "the contours, rifts, subductions, tectonic plates of the medium in which we exist," inscribing a poetics of geography, process and culture that is at once strikingly new and refreshingly communal. The breadth of mclennan's take on Canadian poetry alone is remarkable: his ability to reconcile the concerns, successes and failures of both the "mainstream" and the "fringe" of our literature urges — and begins — a critical overhaul that's long overdue.

Born in 1970, **rob mclennan** currently lives in Ottawa. The author of fourteen trade poetry collections in Canada, Ireland and England, he has published poetry, fiction, interviews, reviews and columns in over two hundred publications in fourteen countries and in four languages, and is the author of *Ottawa: The Unknown City* and the novel *white*. He is the editor/publisher of *above/ground press* and the long poem magazine *STANZAS* (both founded in 1993), Chaudiere Books, the online critical journal *Poetics.ca* (with Stephen Brockwell) and the Ottawa poetry annual *ottawater* (www.*ottawater.com*).

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