

INTERVIEW

nowun duz it like yu

*David McFadden interviewed bill bissett in Toronto in the Spring of 1997.
This is an edited version of that interview.*

DAVE: Do you spend too much time alone writing and painting?

bill: I've thought that sometimes but I think that's not as true as it was. I think it was true for a while. Less so now. I think I've put more in my own life to focus on myself. I don't have such a reclusive need as I did for a while. And I'm enjoying the writing again in a deeper way. I've always enjoyed it but for a while I was thinking, my God, a writer spends a lot of time by him or herself. I was wondering if that developed propensities for isolation that people in other jobs don't experience, cuz they're working with other people and stuff. And they know when they've gotten off work, so they can party or chill, or do what they want to. But for us as writers we never really know when we're off work. And it makes it tricky for us to live with other people too. Cuz they might want us to be off work and go see a movie or something and we may be in the middle of a poem which is only occurring now. And we can't, like agendize it to occur later necessarily. But I think the longer we're at it we can get more flexible. I'm thinking, I don't know, it's only a theory. But we can sort of almost agendize it and we'll get back to it later. But still I know, if I go through a whole day and value a lot, and I feel very lucky to be a part of all that, but towards two-thirds of the day being done there's a sort of nagging feeling inside me that, oh God, I better start writing or painting or I won't feel I'm all right for myself. I'm sure that's true of other jobs, where people really love their job. But it's just the hours are a little tricky. Other jobs have that too though, like a lawyer's job, all kinds of jobs actually have that trickiness, where they might get an

idea about their job in the middle of watching the ballet. But I'm more used to that now than I used to be. I think. I can handle it better.

DAVE: What would you attribute that to?

bill: In my case, becoming less co-dependent in my relationships. But that's just in my case.

DAVE: Do you talk about this in the new book?

bill: Yeah, a lot. *loving without being vulnerabl*. And the follow-up book, *scars on th seehors*, addresses that some more too I think I'm starting to understand something about life now. It's not required to be constantly married, whether in a church or whatever. To be constantly living with someone is not required for a useful and happy life. A lot of single mothers and single fathers are realizing this too. It's not required to have the other mate there, it really isn't — that's just culturespeak. You know, previous generations. So a lot of people are coming around to this in different ways and from different contexts. Like you can go dancing without looking for a mate, you can be into the music for your own soul and body getting together. It doesn't have to be socialized by looking for a mate. So those are things that if I started understanding earlier my life might have been quite different — not necessarily better at all, but just channelling change. It's all developmental. I don't know what's true.

DAVE: So no one escapes being brainwashed by our culture — not even bill bissett.

bill: I don't think anyone escapes that. We all spend a large part of our lives unravelling it, trying to find our own place for ourselves in life. But it provides a lot of humour, all these societal constructs, a lot of slapstick. And of course a lot of tragedy too. A lot of people feel really terrible that they haven't been able to sustain a lengthy relationship. But that's not the only game in town.

DAVE: You certainly portray these problems in a very gut-wrenching fashion. For instance in one poem there's a character who's saying "I'll do anything if only you'll stay." And the beloved says "I know you will, that's why I'm leaving."

bill: That's right. That's a true conversation.

DAVE: I just felt like crying.

bill: Well thank you.

DAVE: What a horrible thing to happen. It's true though. And you can see yourself on the other side, saying the same thing. But you find yourself mostly on the masochistic end, do you?

bill: I wouldn't say "masochistic," I would say co-dependent. But I don't know if I would say "mostly" either. I was given the task of writing a lot of unrequited-love poetry — more than a lot of poets are given the task to do in that sphere. I was just given that genre to really plumb.

DAVE: Who gave it to you?

bill: Yeah, I think the writing guides gave it to me, and eventually I thought I'd done enough in that area. And they've given me other tasks to explore.

DAVE: But you're still dealing with it in the current book.

bill: It's a genre that's there. But sometimes unrequited-love poems have a lot to do with longing for God, or for the Goddess, or the infinity of goddesses. You can interpret them on so many levels too. I think that's why they're a handy genre, but that's not the reason I've ever written them. They were written because it was a way to find expression for what I was feeling But I have done the other thing too, where I have left people because they were too dependent on me. And I think admitting that I've done that too helped me release

myself, to the extent that I am released, from that whole dynamic, cuz if I thought I was playing only one side of that then maybe the suffering would never end. But I've begun to admit, which I think is helpful for everyone, that they play both sides of it, and they too have left people because someone else was too clinging or whatever, the life changing. So then why do I need the dynamic then? So it's very liberating. I don't think that was the main characteristic of all the relationships I've been in, the live-in relationships. But there were times when it was a potentially debilitating ingredient of the dynamics, and of course that's usually what comes up when people break up. But it's not required to.

DAVE: What about your early life in Halifax? Are your parents dead?

bill: Yes, they're both in Spirit.

DAVE: And your sisters?

bill: My big sister's in Spirit, and my slightly older sister is still in this dimension. She lives in Nova Scotia. We're in contact now. My big sister I got along very well with too. But back then the elements of the struggle to be a poet, cuz that's what you want to do, and to be surrounded by people who benignly or less benignly believed in the work ethic — art was considered threatening, and being gay was considered very threatening. And so I ran away from home more or less when I was sixteen. Because I didn't see at that time I'd have an atmosphere congenial to what I wanted to do. It's much more congenial now. A person could do now what I wanted to do then in Halifax, I'm sure, and not have so many challenges and put-downs laid on them.

DAVE: Did you know you were gay then?

bill: I knew from when I was six or something except for two relationships much later. And then there's a long period of adjusting to the family and how they feel about it, and of evaluating how restrictive your avenues of socializing your sexual orientation are, and how much opposition there is to it. But people don't mess with you today the way

they did when I was a little boy — so much, although it still occurs. Nelligan, that couldn't happen to him if he were living today, he couldn't be put in jail or a mental hospital because he was gay. That could not happen, and that's a huge progress.

DAVE: You're referring to that film about the Quebec poet Emil Nelligan you saw on Bravo last night.

bill: Right.

DAVE: What kind of a kid were you?

bill: I was sick a lot, with all kinds of stuff. I was in the hospital for about two years with peritonitis, which is inflammation of the peritoneum. And I had a bunch of operations. And I sort of had interest in ballet which I was never allowed to pursue. Also an interest in figure skating which also I probably wouldn't have been allowed to pursue. These were considered "sissy" occupations.

DAVE: Were your parents alarmed about your sissiness?

bill: I think my father was, but I think he was more alarmed that I wouldn't have job security as well. So I think these two issues were combined for him. My mother was very sick with cancer. Endless amounts of operations. So that there was a lot of turbulence in that home life, as there is in any home life with a lot of illness in it. And the peritonitis resulted in taking a lot of abdominal muscles out, with all of the operations. And so I thought that I would become a writer, and a painter, so that way there could be some dancing on the paper. This wasn't done out of self-pity, this was courageous. I was eleven and I just said fine, cool, it wasn't like oh me! And at school I couldn't do sports for a while, and boys wouldn't play with me cuz I was gay. I wasn't effeminate. Some people who are effeminate are actually straight

Lyrical poetry was starting to happen in my head, and I think a gift for lyrical poetry is partly neurologically based. So when my mother went

to Spirit I helped take care of my dad for a few years — cleaning, cooking and stuff. I was fourteen, and fifteen, and when I was sixteen I left. My big sister came back. She'd been away for a couple of years at McGill I think it was. There was a mini-Emil Nelligan episode a few years later when my dad was very concerned about me and I was writing writing and writing visually and not spelling correctly and, for me, wanting writing to be really different than it was introduced to me in schools and stuff, though I liked a lot of that, no question. So I think my dad was considering some kind of drastic measure cuz I wasn't turning out to be a lawyer. I understand parents worry about their children, and that their children won't be able to take care of themselves. I think that was part of the ingredient too. So my big sister flew out to Vancouver and then she protected me and told him that I was totally fine. Her name was Elizabeth. She went to Spirit five years ago.

DAVE: You wrote a terrific poem on her death.

bill: Thank you. *my big sister is dancing*. It's in *th last photo uv the human soul*. Elizabeth was the buffer between me and the family. I was actually disowned by my father.

DAVE: Was that ever rescinded?

bill: Well, he's in Spirit now, it's kind of . . .

DAVE: And you didn't inherit any of his dough?

bill: No.

DAVE: Your sisters got it?

bill: Yes. And that was like okay with me. When he went to Spirit I really grieved for him. Even parents who have sometimes done things to us that are harsh, they're a part of us and we have some of their characteristics good and bad so-called — quotes quotes.

DAVE: You gotta forgive 'em.

bill: And it's the only parent you're gonna have. I forgave him, and I hope he forgave me for not living up to his expectations. Expectations are a huge problem in relationships and family life, all these things, aren't they? And people just want life to be the way they want it to be. I've certainly done that a lot too in other areas. And eventually we understand that life is not the way we want it to be, and even our disguised attempts to make it the way we want it to be are still just trying to make it the way we want it to be. And we can only do that with our own basic minimal self, if that, cuz everything else is open to all kinds of issues of other people's lives and wishes and our own health issues, our own genetics, our own thinking. We learn to be more flexible in our thinking. And it's amazing. I think it would be great if in the first years of school students were acquainted with the flexibility of thinking. And to acquaint students with the fact that there isn't anything black or white. It would help us to understand more the worry of our parents, and to understand that it's not required to be one particular kind of person. That way we wouldn't feel tormented or guilty if we don't live up to the expectations of someone else. A lot of things like that we could be taught at a much earlier age. I don't think it's always a good idea to teach only social tableaux. The terrible things people go through in divorces — the guilt, the accusations, and all these things — could be maybe lessened. I don't wish to trivialize the disappointment that people feel, I understand that's very real. But if they were taught more flexible things much earlier in life I think it might help them later, that's all I'm saying . . .

DAVE: How do you see your writing having developed over the years?

bill: Like I like to work in a range, except for the fusion poetry or the poetry which tries to dislodge meaning — or plays with meaning, or goes beyond meaning. Fusion poetry, I call it. I wrote poetry like that in the beginning of the writing, and then got more and more gradually into storytelling and narrative, which at the beginning was something I consciously didn't want to do. And I got more and more into actually doing that, which is of course how life is, it's surprising us all

the time. And then since *hard 2 beleev* (1990), I think, I started getting more into fusion poetry again, in a different way than at the beginning.

DAVE: A little more ambitious perhaps.

bill: Like in “*evreeewun needs a gud fuck n th rest is bullshit jack sd*” in *inkorrek thots* (1992), and the poem about going to the Spirit World in *inkorrek thots*, which is something about the mirror people. And those involve themselves with music and snippets of narrative but not necessarily a congealing consistently threaded narrative throughout the work, and parts of which are for sound only, not for the meaning, cuz sound poetry for me, sound is a big element in poetry and there are some poems in which it is a major element or the only element, so that’s outside of conventional or unconventional meanings.

DAVE: Why call ‘em fusion?

bill: Because they have elements from different things, like the way the word is used in jazz — so elements of different genres in the same work . . .

DAVE: You mentioned you’ve been using your own spelling since you were sixteen.

bill: That was sort of a gradualist developmental thing, where the spelling became more and more phonetic. It wasn’t as phonetic in the beginning as it is now. It’s become more phonetic over the years. Now it’s about as far phonetic as it’s probably going to go — although new things keep occurring and appearing to me. So that’s changed a lot. And for me it’s an important element how the poem looks — and how it sounds and stuff. And it adds an increased for me element of tactility, if it’s visually closer to how it sounds for me in that poem at that time it has an increased tactility and adherence to the paper. And it accentuates how it’s being said, or how it can be said, and hopefully makes for a closer relationship between the leader — the reader, heh the leader — and the poem. So that’s changed. And the other as-

pects, like visual poetry, sound poetry, anecdotalist humorous poetry, the humour I think is of more recent vintage, although the word “recent” is fairly ambiguous. But I think there wasn’t much of an element of humour until the seventies, which is a helluva long time ago now. So that took a while to kick in maybe, the humour thing. And it’s more fun for me now. Some of them I don’t think they’re funny when I write them, and I think I’ve heard stand-up comics say this. When they first write a joke or experience a humorous story they don’t think it’s funny, they think it’s just what happens somewhere. And when they say it, well this has happened to me, speaking of myself — I read it and people laugh and I realize it’s funny but I don’t really know that until people laugh. I would never set out to write something that was deliberately funny, cuz it probably wouldn’t be, and I don’t want to do that. Like I never really want to consciously set out to write anything, except what I’m experiencing or is being given to me. Some writers could write really great doing that, and I’m sure they do. But for me the intentionality doesn’t work. I’m the kind of writer who doesn’t do well with a lot of conscious intentionality

DAVE: What can you tell us about your head injury?

bill: Oh that’s when the humour came, after the head injury, also the chanting in non-English.

DAVE: What year was that?

bill: Sixty-nine. A longggg time ago.

DAVE: What happened?

bill: I fell down some stairs, and there was a door that was disguised to look like a wall, and I was leaning against it, me and these other people, and then me and the guy who was closest to me that I was talking with, we both went through the door because I think we were leaning against it and the latch wasn’t there because, as it was said in court, they went down, meaning the people around the house, to feed their cat, or to put cream in the cat’s dish at the basement, this was consid-

ered testimony. And the person, they must have latched the door, which leaves the obvious question how did we go through it? Well it was after a certain time they always [he snaps his fingers and laughs] take cream down for their cat at say 10:15, and the accident happened maybe 10:30. So obviously the door was latched. So then I said "Excuse me, your honour. Does that mean the accident didn't happen?" I was serious. I thought well maybe my God it didn't happen. It took me a few years to get sort of what they used to call "right in the head." [He laughs.] So I don't know. I don't think. So it was very cool. Well no, it wasn't very cool. So I was in the neurology ward and blah blah blah, anyway I got better and I'm really lucky.

DAVE: What was the nature of the injury?

bill: I had an inter-cerebral bleed, aphasia which developed into epilepsy, partial paralysis on the right side . . . I remember my first epileptic seizure, my first grand mal . . . It was amazing. I was still paralyzed on my right side, and I still didn't miss not knowing my identity, cuz it was like a breath of fresh air. And then I think I was just totally lying there and little bits of memory were starting to occur and it was fine, but I felt very serene . . . And then it was like this huge eruption, and it was like lightning in my head, in my body, everything was crackling, and then apparently it was such a grand mal I broke the bed. In my head though I was transported to this village in Africa. And it was a village where all the grass huts were in a circle. So a person with knowledge of Africa might know where that would be, even, because different villages use different architectural motifs. And they might know something from that. And I was one of the persons living there. And I felt so good and so connected, like with the previous life, but I didn't know it was — quote — previous. Cuz you know a lot of the language we use is hopelessly linear, and it doesn't give us immediacy, does it? . . .

DAVE: You were telling me on the phone before our first taping that you think that this new book of yours, *loving without being vulnerabul*, is going to change the world when it comes out in the fall.

bill: That was self-mocking.

DAVE: And it's going to change the way people think about their relationships. Tell me more about that. Let's get it on tape.

bill: [Laughs.] Well first do you know when the Greendale Pharmacy Post Office closes? Five or five-thirty?

DAVE: Let's guess five-thirty.

bill: I went to get the mail today but now I have to xerox four copies of this. Okay, we'll get another paper clip. Okay cool. See if this fits into an envelope. I'll do a test here. What was the question again?

DAVE: *loving without being vulnerabul* changing the world.

bill: It's like the spiritual self-help spirit quest I'm on, that I think everyone is really on, how do we live with enjoyment, satisfaction, mutual sharing, agreed-upon ecstasies and pleasures, and work, work is really important for people or they don't feel a lot of good self-esteem — and without getting hurt by our disappointed expectations or situations, or hurt by other people. Some people don't come into our lives to give us pleasure, some come into our lives actually to hurt us, for their own problematics they're carrying, whatever, etc. And many people come into our lives or ask us into their lives to enhance the journey. And so how to find, how to experience, that fine line between sharing and becoming co-dependent. Okay? So we've discussed this a zillion times, haven't we? It's so great to think about. Because there's people we really love and all this, and we want them to be totally happy, and we're totally upset if they're not totally happy, and so like all human things, and they're all beautiful, and totally we don't want to get hurt if they're mad at us, and we don't want to get hurt if they leave us, and we don't want to hurt them by our leaving them, and all these things, and so loving without being vulnerable, that's a big thing we're all involved in. We want to love, and the dance inevitably changes, all kinds of reasons, all kinds of constructs, involve changing dances. And so how to go through all this, cuz that's the

inevitable destiny of all of us, without moaning and groaning all the time about the dance changing, and we didn't authorize it, so what do we do about our will and our ego, how to lessen those and downplay those, so we can have more serenity, instead of objecting in absolute terms: "I didn't want the dance to change." It's changing, hello? So all those issues, around all those things. And the goal being hopefully to live in the moment with one's own serenity, with neither a grandiose nor a too-self-deprecating belief in one's own being . . .

DAVE: I think that's all I can handle.

bill: Okay, cool. Is it too cerebral? Too intense? Too emotional? Too frightening? Too uninteresting?

DAVE: Not at all to all of the above. Certainly not too uninteresting. Particularly the questions. And we'll call it —

bill: *loving without being vulnerbul?*

DAVE: No there's already a —

bill: *scars on th seehors.*

DAVE: No there's a book with that title already.

bill: Okay.

DAVE: NOWUN . . . DUZ . . . IT . . . LIKE . . . YU.

bill: Oh thank you!

DAVE: Spelt your way.

bill: That's true of everyone, no one does it like everyone. This can be ironic or praising. Or many other things infinitely speaking. Very cool. Raging. Excellent.