

Kathy Ford / Truth be told, by any other name, bill bissett

The poem I have been working on, in my head, on paper scraps, doilies, napkins, bits of old chequebooks, restaurant menus, book promos, starts like this: "*I'm writing you this now because you will never leave me . . .*", that's the line of life *channeling* he's done . . .

Someone asked me once, what is it anyway about bill and you, I said quite truly, bill and I love one another, but before that, I love bill, you might as well know why, the *context* is personal, I said also, when Dorothy Livesay died, forgive me, sex & death . . .

Then paintings I have loved which I could not gather in, someone else already lives with them, *even in this I am not alone*, the perfection of one which made a book cover, the other pointillist dancers around a north loon lake, bill's work, spirit singing . . .

Charms, the sailor, loon call, all this doubtless more important to me than to him, but bill is gracious, his politenesses early childhood training, *the care of the person* since, bill's book titles send me into raptures, entire volumes, paintings, words too, on canvas . . .

Conduct, and diffidence, bill's contribution to the community, the common unique bettering, the commonly held belief, *close to your art, heart*, is real work, the truth a cold deep water, colour you can taste it, taking it in your mouth, enchanted, shaken . . .

The difference might be said to be, in part, there are those met as you work hard through your life, even those who are obviously, closely connected to the very *thruline* of what it really is you're doing, who never actually connect; then there are winged saints . . .

So these things are not misunderstood, bill has not done me favours, although he has, of course, nor have I done him any, we haven't levered one another, or likely anyone, up, doing your own work, and doing *homage* to those you love is fulfilling all the time . . .

The postcard that came was *astonishing*, said something like this, as if I couldn't remember the exact words, *dere cathy, ive seen yr pomes in*

3c pulp nd stuf nd wundr if u hve enuff pomes 2 make a bk, and after that he phoned from the booth on robson street . . .

When bill called me, the traffic was screaming by, it's fortunate I have truly exceptional hearing, I could hear, he was surprised I answered the phone, *I knew his voice* even then, I was surprised he had found my unknown unlisted number, he was surprised . . .

It will be about six weeks, I told him, I'm going away on a camping *exploring* trip right after I marry, we won't be back for six weeks, so after that, he can't believe it, six weeks, he *can't wait that long*, so now you know I made a book on my honeymoon . . .

There is the smell of woodsmoke, *simplicities* blend with your cosmic experience, call it whatever you want, *canada geese mate 4 life*, bill said, and much more too, with the emerald lakes shimmering beside, *so do loons*, this made perfect sense to me, over again . . .

The point is, I do remember everything, although sometimes it takes longer or more static to connect the electricity, meeting bill, *blessings*, his utterly organized mind, those brilliant, foolproof juxtapositions, deliciously wickedly humorous *common sense* . . .

I sent bill every poem I had, too many, thinking he would make a book out of them, he did, with every poem I sent, right there in that book, that was only the beginning of our *expressional* love affair, it would be silly now in retrospect, standardly to call it . . .

A writer publisher relationship, sometimes begins and often ends badly, I didn't know it then, within twelve months after I *submitted* the manuscript, the book appeared, 1975, an even more *radical* concept now, collating on the floor, doing it, getting it done . . .

Galeforce, he has moved through my life, it's his merit that brings fortune, the Chinese luck, work indefatigably, and luck will come, you cannot fault his *tenacity*, and the rooms in the houses across Canada called bill's room, Montreal, Victoria, moving on . . .

What will you do with how we love you, I asked him once, *what will you do with how we*, *all of us love you*, that's when he told me about honour, jealousy, the throwing of chairs, things we learn, pain hurts faithfulness, from him, I sought to learn *temperance* . . .

First knowing the words of a person, then meeting the physical being, it's a kind of love relationship *first*, before it has any real *comprehending*, this has to do with *discretion* as well as not holding back, I

understood *first of all* that bill would be shared by many . . .

Once bill told me, I've always been *faithful*, and I'm still not sure if he meant, or means, he has always been faithful, or he knows I have always been faithful, or both, these things happen all the time, what else can you be but beholden, gilding with gratitude . . .

Wasn't it Virginia Woolf who said, *life is not a dress rehearsal*, I trust this, it's not a garden party either, *but life might be a poetry reading*, life and death, or sex and death, what else is there, the sound of the wind in the trees, bill would say, and has said . . .

The truth is, bill bissett taught me everything important about writing, publishing, even editing, now I know that is a lot, especially since the learning's painless, joyful, went rhythm *riotously* something like *you don't know his work until you listen, hear his voice* . . .

About literature *openly*, there are all kinds of criteria, you hear it in the voice, on the page, don't be afraid or threatened by it, every day, there is a word or a writer or a poem or a poet you wish you were, one is excited, and just can't wait for it to come . . .

About books, your publisher will do whatever you want, ask, as to cover, as to design, as to where to send it for review, as to how to spell the words, cast the spell, spill the tapestry making of your life's work, your will spoiled utterly by someone *supportive* . . .

Celebrant, you know bill has done more for me and my work than I could ever do for him, or his, this is *an ordinary, extraordinary experience* for people who have worked with bill, the stretch of the imagination is, how many, he began it, *ten or ten thousand* . . .

By seeing *visionarily*, bill began it for more writers than many writers even read, in a serious way, that is the shocking part of how important a writer he is, his work as a publisher too, is only part of the real work he has done, people almost take it for granted . . .

It has affected at least the three so-called generations in, around, between us, I keep reading work in various places, in *shapechanged* ways, poets whose work bill first published, Fred Cogswell too, it isn't strictly mathematical counting but astonishing faith . . .

In some quarters, we say, bill bissett should be *running* the country, he'd be the best minister of supply and service Canada could imagine, no one would go hungry, soul satisfied, everyone would believe utterly + forever in art, but especially poetry, + buy it . . .

From bill I learned this, *loving* poetry, be clear about it, it's not a secret, unless it becomes a society, then, we do look out for, take care of one another, also, that you treat someone else's work like your own should be treated, don't touch it, cause no harm . . .

Necessarily, one's work having received such support, makes one work harder, truer, the bone shaken strength of real support is that it makes you revise, improve, while keeping absolute fidelity, *faith*, never settle for, push less than the best you really can . . .

In face of the *integrity* of the material in the first place, the voice comes true, and needs print, that medium, to carry it, the book too, is an art, not just an object, carry it, the integrity of the form is *imperative*, bill taught me errata sheets, he didn't hide mistakes . . .

As one of the poets bill published through *blewointment*, I never had to fight for respect, I fought for *clarity* when he gave respect, expected me to be forthcoming, what a *revelation* in deed, you can hear the wind he is talking about in his own work . . .

Let it carry you, freedom as a writer has nothing to do with style, the status quo dictating of languages, theory, gauging one another's social status or the money made doing that or other things, they are all just jobs except the writing of poetry, *bill knows* . . .

You cannot be a poet if you do not do the work, your own work; posing about as a poet doesn't aid or abet much, although some are mistaken about this and the great Canadian poetry ladder; accept, once you work purely, *wanting*, there's no going back . . .

I remember bill and I met at a diner kind of coffee shop on Robson Street three books later, just after *by violent means*, 1983, he said he was selling *blewointment*, moving on, *desire*, let the press stand on its own feet, I felt in my stomach it wouldn't . . .

Without bill, *blewointment* wasn't the same, it changed its name, *passion*, *protest*, wasn't all, I could see too much, knew it would be gone if he didn't do it, I cried, he said, you don't need to worry, *we've done too much work together, we won't lose* . . .

One another now, not now, he said, one another, is what I turn to, he's taught me, have faith, he will be in touch again, there, that voice comes over the phone, from an apartment, a room, another city, always wanting him to move back west from *centralia* . . .

How what bill does, and has done, is so politik, keeps on being so,

keeps one being so, he's doing the work of a lot of people, the ones who would much prefer to do only the safe art work, entertaining, out of their heads, not out of their lives, howl, how *political* . . .

And he said to me, *you can't be tired, you can't be tired yet, not yet*, when I meant, yes, I was tired, just that day, of not being read, of the struggle to be heard, of the difficulty of poetry in our daily reality, that one works too, for a place in society daily . . .

The first time I read with bill, 1984, I was a little crazy, I wrote it that way, crackt, crazed, grieve-stricken, covered in death, *exit-ready*, I was, looking out over the cliffs from the Malahat, restaurant, the cliff edge, same year my youngest brother accidentally died . . .

The year of bill's VAG retrospective show, it all came together, so busy, yet he was one who saved me then too, by *seeing death* on me, there, don't deny it, you can't deny it, *you just have to let it go, honey, you just have to*, while he held me in the crowd . . .

That first time I read with bill, was the same year, I wonder if he set it up, bill does things, or encourages them to happen, it's hard to track, *why don't we just keep right on going*, he said, I would say going right on over the edge was hard not to do just then . . .

Reading in Port Alberni, I could hardly believe it was true, like in some of our conversations, so much of my life with bill is via *osmosis*, who could say, the frightening and the wondrous part, spheres music, we were coming down in the wet west coast rain . . .

They are birds, *little birds, the delta of venus*, and mars, bill's bright fast eyes, you cannot mistake the earth grounding *in sexuality* and its celebration, the enchantment with the body, of the body, of the soul, people open like flowers at his intelligence, his gifts . . .

He brings audiences home in tears, full of gratitude, as if they'd just found perhaps, not the Black Madonna, but the shadow she has cast, divine, certainly over him, fertility of life, of the imagination, *the sound* music, you don't ever forget his voice, neither do I . . .

In bill, there is the male female connecting, and will not split, even his grieving liquid clear, as celebration, like the Cariboo, Chilcotin sunsets are so literally a *conjunction* with dawn, it would be a paintbox connection in tone, mixing you could see, as a painter . . .

It's a wonder, bill loves where I grew up, thinking, some times go by when few of these *connections* are made, then suddenly, it's unavoid-

able, the light, all together, the story life, his accident, his marriage, his daughter, celebrating, *song of songs*, learning . . .

What I admire most about bill, possibly, is the fact that he learned everything over again, to speak, to write, to type, and to paint, to eat, to walk, to *revalue* what might have been taken for granted by too many of us, there is no compromising that amazing spirit . . .

The fact is, you could know bill for years, and not know about, unless he told you, what happened to him, he nearly died, not in a fictional way, but in a poetic *truth*, perhaps he holds to life, like poetry, which only blasts through, begins when truth is enfolded . . .

The time he cried telling about the tearing apart of his daughter's doll by the police, I thought he was telling the story of my doll being torn apart, but I knew he wasn't my father, I wouldn't like to give an impression I am confounded about that *relationship* . . .

The light from the comet trail, the sound it leaves as a *print* in the sky, a kind of inadequate description, maybe, but most of all, imaging, the imagining, *aura*, something from nothing, again and again, the scars on the *raptured up* human soul he reveals . . .

Once bill and I were walking, 1988, he asked me about my back which had been giving me trouble, an injury rather like a broken arm, my back is okay, I said, it's only the shooting pains down my right leg, *oh that*, he said, *the worst thing now would be* . . .

If your back went into spasm, that would be terrible, he said, *all the poets in Canada have bad backs, poets and publishers, it's really bad if you're both, we're all packing our work into our lives across a huge geography we call a country* . . .

On our backs, needless to say, my back went into spasm, it momentarily refused to support me entirely, then I learned all the rest of this is my real work too, writing and *publishing*, status of the artist and status of women, safety of women and children first . . .

There are others I have learned from, others who swear they too taught me absolutely nothing; one told me once I have a genuine *Canadian* voice, is that what bill heard first, before content, technique, structure, he saw with his wandering visionary eye . . .

Essentially, *grateful*, I am, thinking of the other poets in the blewointment family, how we spread and scatter, a kind of seeking out, seeding, each a different shape and colour, I learned too, *find a*

publishing house that isn't just publishing its own voice . . .

What is true is this - I am not mistaken about bill, and I expect the best from everyone, because he taught me, just one who taught me *everything and nothing*, poetry should come first, perhaps because of the way it is part of the body, *the body of work* . . .

The time, 1988, the League of Canadian Poets held tribute in Vancouver for bill bissett and Dorothy Livesay, I will remember until I die, the love in the sorrow, voice of Warren Tallman, talisman, he sang for bill, "*where have you gone billy boy billy boy* . . .

Where have you been darling billy . . . ", there's a video of that event, made by Lenore Coutts and Dermot _____*, you see, the name will return another time, perhaps bill can put in the blank, he often does, it's part of *remembering*, not forgetting at all . . .

The best book contracts I have ever had, I had with bill bissett and blewointment, they arrived on postcards, and they kept utter *faith* with their projections, as to relations, production, number of copies, distribution, price, royalties paid, in copies up front . . .

It is important to say, bill *saw* my work before I did, he gave me humility like a gift, there are days I rely on him to see it still, times I am in the dark about where I am going, there are always new poems, but they do not necessarily obey, why should they . . .

Every time I've heard bill read in the last two years, I've said, or *written* him later, asking him to send a piece of what he has read, or performed, I can't wait to see it in print, some of those pieces have sent me into entire months of work, it's what happens . . .

Sometimes I send bill a poem, I say, I'm working, bill, someone should know, and I value he is quite clear about what I mean to say, both about the work and on the page, of course *notwithstanding* the time and place about the feminist caucus, 1981, he said . . .

The women were doing the work, it was getting rather nasty in some corners, and then there was this wonderful opening of the window, bill sent a small note in, a one man *revolutionary* kind of note, which said, "*it's about time*", loving women *and* loving men . . .

It would still be true to say that the League of Canadian Poets is the only arts organization in Canada that has a Feminist Caucus, not a women's committee, don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to stone anyone, bill taught me that too, real work, *patience* . . .

It's more that bill brings things to an *opening*, rather than a conclusion, even when a book is done, or he changes his life one more time, let other people talk about that, that's when I realize just how much influence he has on me, *divine impatience*, my work . . .

Now he tells me he is getting a new brain, 1997, *christ*, I can only imagine what *wave* he will crest next, I wish he had a little more comfort in his life, that is all, he carries the burden of forging ahead, *challenging* me every day, connecting, so lightly . . .

One of the best lunches ever had in my food-loving life was with bill bissett, 1988 I'm thinking, in his apartment, back alley west end, rooms full of paintings, constant state of *flux* and sublet as if he would share even that so freely, be trusting of anyone *genuine* . . .

That gorgeous day, the sun was coming in the windows, tangle of art on canvas, words stacked on paper, books everywhere, not to say anything was untidy or carelessly laid down, quite the contrary, there was a sense of peace, *watery glimmers* in the air . . .

I'm thinking how much, so much, work bill has done, how he did so much of it *freely* for other poets, writers, artists, filling that life, to date, *more to do*, what sense would there be in stopping or wasting a moment, but moving into the coincidences and . . .

The *unquittable* logic, so at least one more poet will not give it up, that's my gratefulness, then the poem he wrote for the Dorothy Livesay memorial, the "*Respecting . . . the unquiet bed*" tribute, 1997 Victoria, that he understood all so well . . .

The poem of Dorothy's he read; love, mortality, the company of parallel shadow influences; her poem from a volume full of spelling "errors" like this, from *The Uninvited*: "(scuffling the leave, laughing/and fingers locked)/goes a third lover his or hirs/ who walked this way with one or other once/ flung back the head snapped branches of dark pine/in armfuls before snowfall/I walk beside you/trace/a shadow's shade/skating on silver/hear/another voice/singing under ice/"**

The poem at play, "*live say*", you hear it in his voice, most of all, "*speaking the lunacies*" ***, isn't that just it, doesn't what is said silver lustrous reach that a little more, often, under, he's working ahead, *seeing ahead* of us, me, still, what he gives, has given . . .

Celebrating the serendipities and the times, satisfied with so little, there won't likely ever be enough, yet full, a boiled egg, a slice of toast,

a cup of tea, all on real china, every piece different, and you know I'm dead *serious* when I ask him, how did you do it . . .

Although I did not ask for him, bill came; I realized I was asking, for someone, something, bill came; you know he already had arrived, that presumably accounts for his beautiful sensitive smile, the kind of *holiness ghosting* about bill, simple life sacredness . . .

More than anything, I look for bill's work to be considered deeply, the sharp joy of it, the absolute constancy, it's a wonder, he works without praise nevertheless, prolific, he's nearly *gone to spirit* sometimes, then he snaps back, insatiable, but satisfied . . .

With *unshakable* sureness, his modesty genuinely in every surge of blood from his heart, how does one say all this, the heart shakes, heart aches, *enchanted*, without a profound sense of foolishness having to let go, *enchanted*, the best photograph of bill, shy beauty in the tuxedo, in the back alley, when . . .

And *thank u bill*.

*

* Foley, I think it was Dermot(t) Foley. And yes, I have a bootleg copy. Thanks to bill.

** Quotes from the poem: "*The Uninvited*", by Dorothy Livesay.

*** Quotes from the poem: "*doro thee live say*" written march 15.97. by bill bissett, for the memorial tribute to Dorothy Livesay, "*Respecting . . . the unquiet bed*", League of Canadian Poets, Spring (W) Rites, Victoria, B.C., performed April 6, 1997, Planet Harpo's, commissioned.