



George in Joan Huberman's apartment, West Point Grey, 1959.
Photo credit: Joan Huberman (Payne)

REBECCA WIGOD / The Three-Ring Binders

The summer before he turned twenty, George Harry Bowering set out to become a poet. He made a pact with himself: whenever an idea came to him, he would sit down with a pen and paper and work out a poem. He figured that if he approached the task seriously and devoted enough time and effort to it, his skills were bound to improve. As he would put it many years later, in the preface to one of his books, “Just about everybody writes poetry. It’s just that most people never try to write better poetry.”

He was a tall, skinny, creative, book-loving teenager. Then, after spending a less-than-stellar year at university and failing to hang onto the love of his high school sweetheart, he joined the Royal Canadian Air Force in July 1954—a gesture that seemed bold and romantic in the moment but one he regretted almost immediately. Although he had been an Air Cadet as a boy, he was constitutionally a leader, a joker, and an unapologetic eccentric, so he didn’t have much patience with being told what to do. (There were compensations, though. Thanks to Air Force training he became an aerial photographer.)

The following summer, time off brought him back to his parents’ house in the village of Oliver, British Columbia. He had grown up in the Okanagan Valley, where irrigation had made the province’s south-central desert bloom extravagantly, its orchards sending crate after crate of apples, peaches, apricots, plums, pears, and cherries off to market. In late June 1955, against that backdrop of ripeness and abundance, he wrote “Pessimism.” The first poem he thought worth keeping, it reeks of youthful *Weltschmerz* and is bitterly satirical. The “I” of the poem is so jaded that birds’ songs sound to him like “horrendous cacophonies”; where others see beauty, he can see only cysts. The last line—“Thank God I have money!”—confirms the reader’s suspicion that the poem’s “I” is an invented character, not the young George. Was he suggesting that wealth strips people of the ability to appreciate nature?

He gave titles like “Waste,” “Failure,” and “Dismay” to poems he wrote in the next few months. But when I began reading through his early poems—they are stored in Ottawa, part of his voluminous archive at Library and Archives Canada—I

could see that he outgrew his youthful nihilism fairly quickly. It is also evident, from the record, that practice made him an increasingly fluent and versatile poet. As he experimented with form, rhyme, rhythm, and tone, his poems came thicker and faster. "Saturday Night," the seventeenth poem he saved—written in August 1956 but never published—came from a write-what-you-know place and throbs with dangerous energy. Military men and their girlfriends are drinking in a bar when jealousy flares and a fight breaks out. The poem begins: "Saturday night / And all the guys are / Yelling and running and belching / Beer runs with blood and lipstick."

The pact Bowering made with himself involved not only perseverance but also careful documentation. With a penchant for order and neatness (acquired partly through marshalling sports statistics when, as a teenager, he covered sports for two Okanagan newspapers), he numbered, dated, and typed out his hand-written poems. When he had a stack of a hundred, he filed it in a three-ring binder, typing up a single-spaced table of contents for the front. What a fiddly job that must have been, and how unexpected it is to learn that a man who gives the impression of irreverent, joshing looseness is a meticulous record keeper, at least in his writing life. He gave each binder a title. The one containing his first hundred poems he dubbed *The Immaterialist*; the titles he gave the second, third, and fourth binders are *The Adventurist*, *The Projectionist*, and *The Psalmist*. By the end of 1984 he had filled eighteen binders with 1,700 pieces—mostly poems, though in the '70s he began letting essays, stories, and book reviews into his filing system. The titles of the later binders include *The Haruspex* and *The Duodenum*—he has always been a fool for recondite, toothsome words.

When he was starting out, eager to be published, he sent copies of his poems to magazines across North America and beyond. His early diaries—he began keeping a journal in 1958, and keeps it to this day—are peppered with comic groans about his work being rejected. In 1959, he lamented, "It's about time I was published. Hell, I'm 24!" The next year he wryly noted that *Esquire's* rejection letter began with the words "Sorry, no." But rejection wasn't the norm for long: enough acceptances came in to ward off despair. He noted them in ballpoint on the typed poems in his binders. According to those notes, the first of those poems to be published was the twenty-fifth, "The Intellectual Turned Artist." It appeared in *Raven*, a University of BC literary magazine. (He enrolled there after leaving the Air Force in July 1957. He finished his bachelor's degree and stayed to do a master's.)

Bowering's diary shows that in the fall of 1958, when Marianne Moore came to the Vancouver campus to do a reading, he was able to talk with her privately and read her "The Intellectual Turned Artist." He was thrilled that the great American poet, then in her early seventies, had "nice things" to say about it. The poem is short but not easy to fathom: it mentions both the Jivaro, a tribe of Amazonian headhunters, and Beelzebub. One line reads, "Laugh, hyena, and swallow quick your innards."

Of his first hundred poems, "Soliloquy on the Rocks," No. 87, impressed the most editors. It was published four times, according to his notes on the typed copy. He wrote it in the spring of 1957, when he was twenty-one. A group of friends is at the water's edge, walking across rocks at low tide, crushing mussels underfoot and feeling "crackling, crunching guilt with every step." A line that brings the reader up short comes when the voice in the poem wonders whether the mussels are "seaweed-shawled in effigy of our own waterfowl existence." Why "effigy"? Why "waterfowl"? *Raven* published "Soliloquy" and so did *Prism*, a UBC creative writing department magazine that made its debut in 1959 and is still going strong.

As he kept working at his poetry, its appeal grew and the hurdle of publication became easier to clear. Several poems from his second binder were published. The third contains the still exciting "Radio Jazz," its barrage of words conveying the thrill of hearing raw, urgent improvised music pour from a "shelf radio in a hot night kitchen." Jamie Reid, a fellow BC writer and a friend of his for decades, says this early Bowering poem has influenced him throughout his writing life. "I like the way that it doesn't draw conclusions but makes the thing manifest in an important way." By the time George wrote it, he and Reid were members of UBC's *TISH* poetry collective and so had a say in which poems appeared in the brash little lit mag. As Bowering would put it forty years later when writing about the era of little magazines, "the means of production [had] got into the hands of the unwealthy young."

With his poem No. 383 he hit the jackpot. "Grandfather," which he wrote on October 8, 1962, tells his paternal grandfather's life story on a single sheet of paper with as much idiosyncratic verve as anyone could wish for. It spoke loudly to editors compiling anthologies to showcase the virtuosity of Canada's poets. His notes on the archived typescript indicate that it has been published thirty-one times—first in *TISH* and later in such anthologies as *15 Canadian Poets* (1970), edited by Gary Geddes, and *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* (1982), edited by Margaret

Atwood. Frank Davey, the first editor of *TISH*, recently described it to me as a teachable poem: it is relatively short, has a clear, formal structure and comes to a firm ending that has “portents and implications which students can identify and talk about.” Bowering is almost embarrassed by its enduring popularity, especially since it doesn’t conform to his theories of poetry. In “Rewriting My Grandfather,” a funny five-part essay first published in 2005, he said the poem’s exaggerated centrality in his oeuvre helps him to understand why, after a certain point, Allen Ginsberg demurred when asked to read “Howl” to audiences. No one likes to be seen as a one-trick pony.

In 1964, while living in Calgary and teaching his own university classes for the first time, Bowering started a literary magazine called *Imago*. He told potential contributors it was intended as a home for “the long poem, the series or set, the sequence, swathes from [a] giant work in progress.” He urged poets to send him their thick manuscripts, the cumbersome things that “the ragbag mag won’t have room for.” So, before he turned 30 he was a poetry publisher and could, if he chose, publish his own work in his magazine. (His poem sequence *Sitting in Mexico* filled the twelfth issue.) Some of his poet friends also had little magazines and asked often to see his new work.

By 1970, he was established enough that McClelland & Stewart was ready to publish a book of his selected poems. The poet John Newlove, who was about his age and worked there, wrote him from Toronto, saying: “It’s a damned good idea, with all your small and various books and booklets scattered about.” Fifteen years after Bowering had begun writing poetry in earnest, he was an admired practitioner of the art.

He feels obligated to write poems—it is a duty, he has said—although no one gets rich doing it. In a 2005 essay, “God Only Knows,” he pronounced that writing poetry probably pays about eleven cents an hour, “less than I got thinning apples in Naramata, B.C., when I was fourteen.” Mind you, when that essay appeared in his book *Left Hook: A Sideways Look at Canadian Writing*, he had just wrapped up his two-year term as Canada’s first Parliamentary Poet Laureate. Glory, if not gold, can come to those who do it well.