

## ROB TAYLOR / His Life: A Poem

Spring 1987. Vancouver

In shirtsleeves at last and  
standing in right field late  
in practice he said it is  
this day that makes you glad  
you didn't kill yourself  
in December.

The poet Brian Fawcett bent over  
the plate, finished his thought  
with an awkward swing, uttered  
a nasty disappointed word  
the man in right field  
handled with ease. (116)

The first thing *His Life: A Poem* teaches you is to refer to your past self in the third-person. Okay, I see him twelve years ago—my god, *eighteen years old*—hunched in front of the dozen or so titles arranged on the butt-end of a single shelving unit at the SFU bookstore. He knows the stacks at the library across the concourse are crammed with poetry books, but he is both suspicious of academia and attracted to the serendipity of uncurated grazing. It's Spring 2002, and the latest arrival on the island of damned books (he's the only one, he's convinced, who ever buys anything from this poetry section) is by George Bowering. He hesitates to even pick it up, considering the number of times he's been told to read *Kerrisdale Elegies*. But at least it's not *Kerrisdale Elegies*, it's some book he's never heard of (which years later he learns, to his chagrin, was short-listed for a GG). So he buys it, and George Bowering and his books slip into his life.

What a difference it makes to call your past self "he"—such a generous distance. I can almost love the fool that I was, love his stubbornness and scattershot passions.

As I reread *His Life*, Bowering's book of poems written in response to thirty years of diary entries (1958-88, four per year, one for each equinox and solstice), I feel as though I am reading my own journal, which happens to have been written by someone else. Not because our lives overlap, but because keystone books and poems—those works which shape a writer and a person, whether or not you know it at the time—become personal mementos, imbued as much with your own life as the author's. *His Life*, and "Spring 1987. Vancouver" in particular, represent a time in my life when poetry was new to me, and peripheral—a pleasurable secret, a hobby. A rescue from my life and not the centre of it. A time when poetry was all Spring and *shirtsleeves* at last.

*His Life* taught me just that, that poetry could be pleasurable—could socialize and play. Here were horses (early on), and baseball (increasingly, later), and hockey ("facing the real / forest or the Washington Capitals" 72). Here were bowling and golf and CFL football, and every poet you could imagine arguing and pronouncing and *handling flyballs with ease*. Poets everywhere, McFadden and Nichol most of all (I counted) and Birney, Creeley, Duncan, Fawcett, Kroetsch, Purdy, et al. in there too. Part way through *His Life* I began to think that Bowering played baseball with poets just so he could send a few of them into the outfield and gain a bit of distance.

*His Life* also taught me to be unafraid of jokes ("It was warm, or // what they call here / in the South Okanagan / cold," 28) and probable-jokes:

More and more the poets  
get their pictures in the papers.

He doesn't know whether that means our world  
is getting better

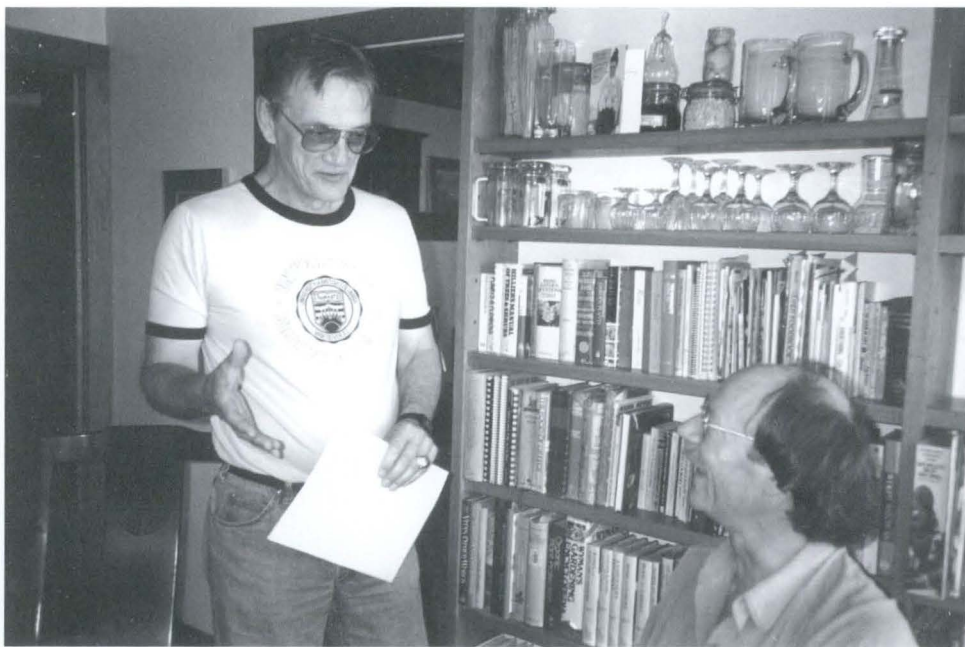
or falling apart. (35)

and writing about things like sticky pants (more than once) and Flying Dildos (a baseball team, I hope).

*His Life* taught me that a poet could communicate depth of intimacy through length of name alone: full names, first names, single letters. All the things not talked about when talking about baseball. And the power generated when suddenly the conversation swings, and there's a well-loved single letter staring you in the eye.

*His Life* taught me that every poem doesn't have to be an isolated moonshot, that meaning can accrue. In *His Life*, lines like "it'll be ghastly at the end" and "classical relation makes a family of us all" and "widening circle of word" and "dwell in my own house" and "tender stinking wings" and "half-crazed anarchist loggers" repeat throughout the book—keystone phrases, some (it's implied) pulled directly from Bowering's journals. These lines function in *His Life* as the poems in *His Life* function in mine—they return and return, become richer with each utterance, heavy with meaning or humour. They contain more than they ought to.

*His Life* contains more than it ought to. Random selections from a diary, drawn out. Some trivial, some dull. Made rich by giving them time and attention, by writing the damn thing out. *Write the damn thing out* was what he learned in the bookstore that day. Stop hesitating, stop waiting. Don't worry which page turns up, just write it out and out and out. And in it you will see a life. Yours. His.



George and Dwight Gardiner at 2499 West 37<sup>th</sup>, 1983.  
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