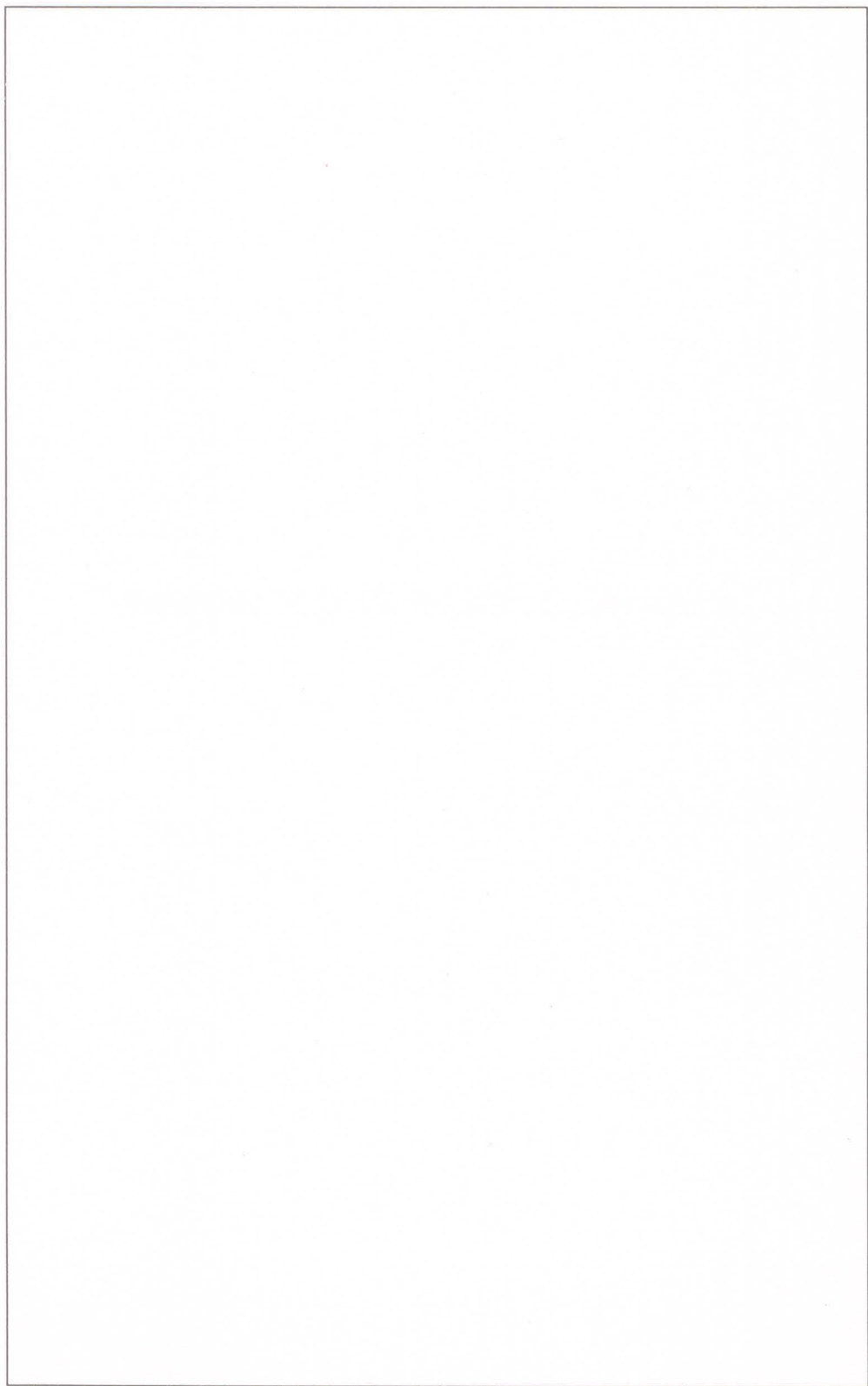


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NORTHERN POETS

*the closer to the raw resource
the rawer the intelligence*

Bill Bailey, *3rd & George* (1978)

The poets of northern B.C., five of whom are presented here, have over the past quarter century made a community, centred on the city of Prince George — in particular, on the residence, the presence, of writers Barry McKinnon, John Harris, and others — on the support they have given to writing and to local publishing, relying as well on the post-secondary institutions of that city, the College of New Caledonia, and more recently, the University of Northern British Columbia. In this community of poets there has come to be not a common poetic, but a shared premise, an indispensable responsibility for, and to, a particular type of content. The place where the writers live, the natural environment and the human communities — village, town and city — particularly as they have been subjected to heedless and accelerated change by the changing priorities of economic exploitation, have been more than just a background refracted in the personal concerns of their poems; they have been the subject of the poems as lived experience. In a sense there is no background in the north. All is figure, all is ground.

What has happened in northern B.C., over the past quarter century is that the work of human beings, wrongly termed unskilled labour, has become peripheral to the machine harvesting of what is left of the raw resource, still shipped out to be fashioned elsewhere. At the same time, the people of the north who have felt, and still feel, themselves to be citizens, have now become exploitable in another way: as semi-finished consumers. The world is awash in what the system calls product, and the game is to sell it. Brian Fawcett writes, in *Virtual Clearcut*. "Thus I have gone directly to the ground level, even though the ground in the Bowron River valley was

destroyed before I arrived, and the ground in Prince George was experiencing, and continues to experience, something worse than mere destruction."

It is probably rash, maybe even misleading, to try to interpret poems as reflections of social reality. Yet it still seems to me that the underlying context for each of these poets has been their experience of the gradual disintegration of a social world based on real work, more intensely felt here than in the metropolis where the cultural amenities incident on proximate wealth tend to shelter people's minds from the brute reality. These poets' responses to devastating social and cultural change account, in part, for the widely differing, idiosyncratic, often expressionistic, forms the poems take, reflecting (as I see it) something like a frozen explosion or lava flow of feeling, recorded at the moment it ceases, and fashioned so that its form suggests the impact of the precipitating event. "Inertia is law / and it comes to dictate / the forms of surrender" (Simon Thompson).

The "I" in these poems is not the locus of an interpretive sensibility; it is more likely to be interpreted *by* the world — the house, the mall, the institutional setting. The repeated "I" in Simon Thompson's "Something about me" is almost an unstressed syllable — "as forgotten an empire / as ever existed" — a character whose blood leaks out and drips away over and over. For Greg Lainsbury there is no "I", only a voice that speaks, with Beckettian staginess, of a ludicrous, pathetic "we" that seeks an escape debased ("Must we resign ourselves . . . / assume a sidestreet vegetative excrescence / alongside our sceptical neighbours / their faces stubbled with frost") or utopian ("How many of us seek a country where nobody else lives?"). Si Transken initially places herself beneath "civilized" notice, repudiating all social standing ("i am a base blot; a bit of snot / on a dignified person's sock"), and from this unassailable vantage delivers a detailed bill of particulars regarding the culture.

Reading a number of Ken Belford's poems together, my sense is one of a survey, or reconnaissance — not merely of "The Suicide Economy," where "Hard hatted angry men / with the faces of wolves / rip through feral lands on machines," and "fleshy academics with lasers / demonstrate the conversion of forests / to garbage," but of

the living natural world around it, into which the poet withdraws for relief, or to save what he can.

Barry McKinnon's Prince George poem is an inquiry, beginning "in Hades' hot air," into "not form but what / shapes the city / a body / to its / soul." The city appears at two moments, that of McKinnon's arrival, "the hot day in mid / July 69," when its downtown had a "sense of here" and the present where "a swirl of stink / in the citizenry / penetrates / the corpus." The labour, or burden, of the poem, in the sense of an upward passage from hell, is to discover how to conceive of the city after all, to give it form "in an attempt to define it."

Life in the hinterland, on what was once, with pride, called "the resource frontier," may now require a conscious and continual resistance to consumerist ways of thinking. All the more raw the intelligence of poets when the resource the system seeks to exploit is human souls.

George Stanley
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