

Brian Fawcett / A SPECIAL SECTION

"History crowding against the Personal"





TEN ISLAND POEMS

Gabriola Island, 1977

Another thicket
of white roses
out my window

competes with lilacs, red poppies, wild
grasses & weeds. "My life".

But here the roses
take over, small & perfect
thousands of them.

I don't walk among them tonight
preferring the prospect
of this sheltered sea
the rocky shore

Before it reached me your heart
(hart, hurt) got hit

by a car. The dogs & ravens found it
in the bushes & my son

each day on the way to the store says
"It sure stinks." Why

do I make up these poems
a propos of almost nothing but you. Why

to tell you before it reached you
my heart (hart, hurt) got hit

by a car

It's another way of saying
love stinks. Its intentions
are not our own in this troubled world. Mostly
it gives aid & comfort
to our enemies. Out here
where the roses drop & stink
there is no television
but the memory of thousands of prerecorded sentimental journeys
hangs in the air of human love
like the smoke & stink from the pulp mills
a few miles distant from this haven
from the stink of love, the wrong kind
of heaven

The tide comes in the tide
goes out. A mild night
on Gabriola. At midnight
I walk out to sweep the beach
clear of the mess I made with the chainsaw
cutting beachlogs. The dog
growls at me & the kids
rapping an outboard & yelling in the bay
don't need to know. I know I love you
& you love me. So
what. What if someone had seen me
sweeping the beach? Or the dog
howled at the absent moon. Madness.
Nothing will deliver us
from these mild nights, the comings
& goings sweep us
before them

Goings on
on the island, fat
fishermen in the store
buy lures, some of the last hippies
on the planet sell pottery & vegetables
in the parking lot
the white roses out the window
drop in the rain
& last night's storm, more
driftlogs, foghorns while you slept in my arms
I can't say I've done my job well, I'm here
to rest
& the best
is yet to come. I take up
your hand
& you lead me
to the car
someone selling old junk & tarts
at the south road hall
let's go

White roses
in a winebottle some
still unfurled

the back door
slams shut, the dog
noses it, upset by the break
in his routine.

We are
creatures of habit
we creatures of the Rose.

The dog nuzzles my leg, whines,
uncertain & hungry. I've forgotten
to feed him, that's it, everything
has finally to do with food. I've forgotten

the Rose, the goddamned roses
a little water is all they need.

Salt water from
the ocean storm
or human tears that feed

the whiteness feeding
on the will
to be alone

Sunday Night July 9, 1977

Silence.

 The wind
dead. The drunks in the park
gone back to Nanaimo. The roses

turn to steel in the moonlight
in the light of human events
& real things

 the starfish
turn over & drift in
to suck the shore, despite
the falling current of the Moon
those last dim stars
never purple in the morning light

nothing left to guide us
but the steel
of human events
real things

The white roses are mostly gone
stale, that was
bullshit from back when . . . &
now all the dogs are barking
a bunch of drunks down the beach
are singing wild &
windblown that's how
you've grown. Who
can cling to
A ramblin' rose?

Walked out to look at the sky
hazy, the shooting stars, dynamite
in Nanaimo brighten the sky
to obscure Venus, both Jupiter
& Saturn visible

I was telling the dog which are planets
which stars & he wasn't looking, wanted
to lick my face didn't care
that the planets are constant the stars
flicker. The dog
doesn't celebrate anything, he eats
& he barks too much,

love each other with a purity
I can't know, worrying
about their futures apart
& how to get all our junk into the car
to drive back to the city
without forgetting or losing
pure love & the things
we live with

INTERVIEW

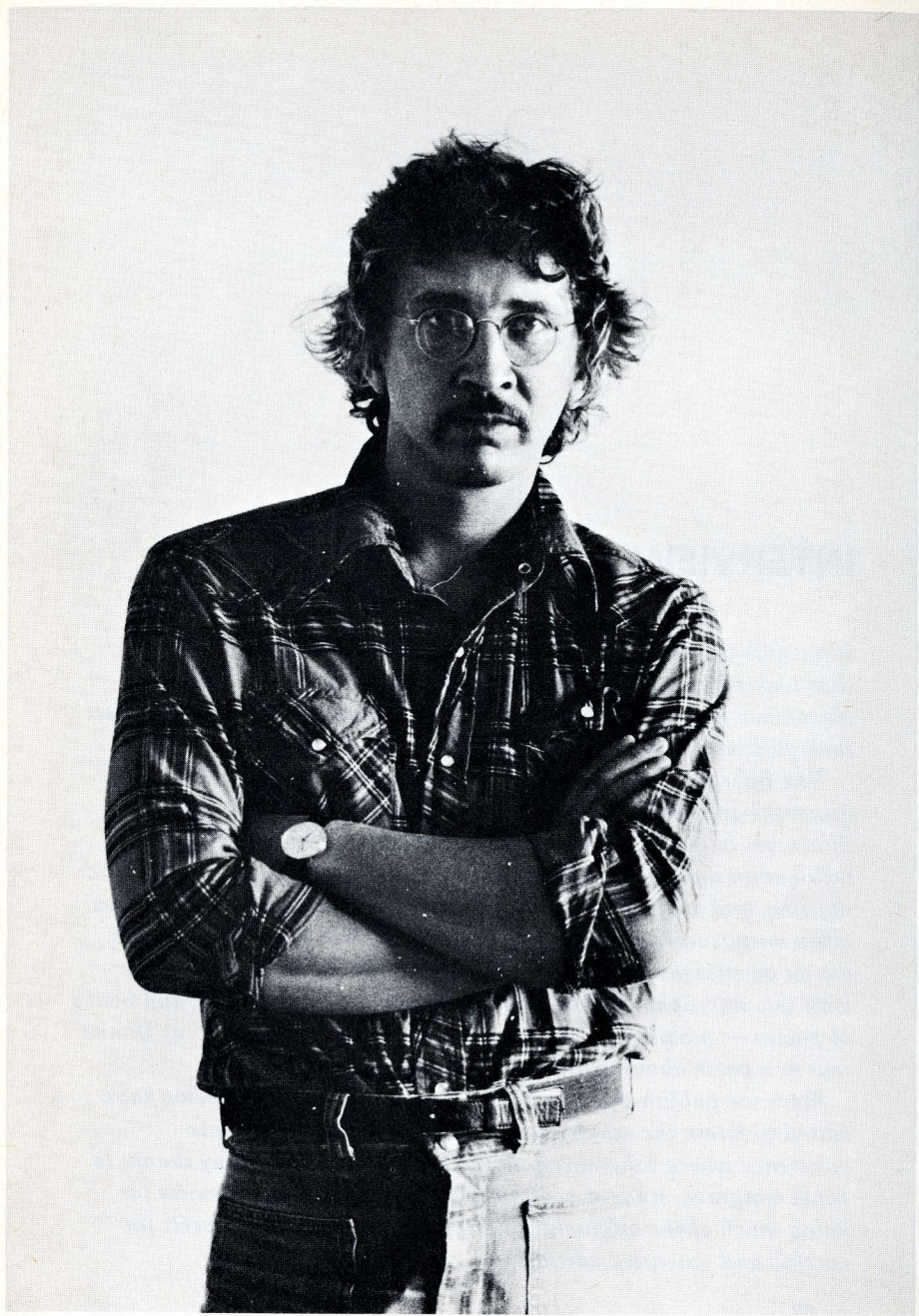
What follows is the rendition of an interview with Brian Fawcett that took place at Bill Schermbrucker's house on the evening of November 15th, 1977. Brian, Bill, Pierre Coupey and Sharon Fawcett took part in the conversation.

The interview encompassed not only the more or less polite questions-and-responses that appear here and in most of those discourses in print that fall under the heading "interview," but also colloquium and debate, irruption and disruption, shouting match and diatribe, and whatever other absurd and lovely commotion can go on when writers talk about the State of the Art. For three hours of this, we sat on straight-backed creaky chairs around a rectangular table with two microphones, bottles of wine, pages of manuscript, and books of poetry — making of that "one little room an everywhere" as Donne says in a poem about world and exchange and love.

Since we publish this interview for informative purposes, we have edited to retain the major queries and issues, and to recreate coherence where coherence faltered in the original. (Many thanks to Janet Cotgrave, student poetry editor of The Capilano Review for doing much of the original transcription, and to Brian Fawcett for careful and extensive editing.)

— SF

December 9, 1977



SF As a writer, as an editor, as a city planner, as a citizen — I'm curious about all those ways you are in the world and how your writing has, over the last three or four years, come to concern itself more and more with what I see in the 5th Serial Run as a kind of dictum: "The social the form of the poetics." I'm talking here about the connection between the social and poetics, but also about the formal if not didactic or polemical concern in your writing.

BF Okay. This is how it got started. In 1972 I was about two-thirds of the way through a Canada Council grant when I was offered, quite casually, a job as a community organizer. At the time I didn't know what that would involve, and didn't much care. I was bored, and I was also looking for a way out of some personal problems I was in the middle of, so I said, Okay, I'll take the job. The minute I got into it I recognized that I didn't understand politics either as a human being or as an artist. I didn't understand why people did things in relation to other people the way they did. I didn't understand the relationship between my own life and the sorts of things that have happened to me in my life, and I didn't know if those happenings had any relationship to the kinds of things I could see going on around me. At the time I was *philosophically* convinced that there *was* some sort of relationship between personal experience and what was going on around me in the city I'd been living in, at that time, for about seven or eight

years. I had no politics or values beyond the kind of democratic sentimentality that most of us acquire in elementary school and I was suddenly thrust into a situation where I was literally under the noses of the people who run the city. In retrospect it was a big privilege for someone as naive as I was about political life. So I became a community organizer — I read Saul Alinsky and began to explore some things other than personal power. And very quickly it became a matter of learning how to transpose or displace my personal power and of understanding the kinds of power one acquires by playing recognizable roles in a communal situation. The story “The Organizer” is very interested in the relationship between the role of a person organizing people to understand what *their* lives are about and what’s really in them, and what I now see very clearly as my function as an artist. You can only displace personal power by abandoning the privileges that accrue to role-playing, by trying to see things from the perspective of people who don’t have a privileged vantage point — sort of as a “public eye” instead of what we’re used to, as a private eye. After a couple of years it became clear to me that I had to abandon the privileges of being an artist as well if I was going to get beyond personality and the artistic conventions that both protect and alienate artists from the lives of everyone else.

SF The idea of the social being the form of the poetics involves the question of what responsibilities an artist has to the community. In much of your writing there seems to be a feeling of lamentation for the lack of passion and intelligence in communal or public life.

BF Yeah, there isn’t much intelligence, no interest in ideas, and that was one of the first things I discovered, or rather began to see as a problem I was going to have to take seriously. I also discovered that there is a direct relationship between this and the general misery that is rampant inside the personal lives of most people.

Despite the fact that most people spend most of their mental and emotional energies trying to make sense of their personal lives, nobody seems to be able to make them work because there aren't any procedures to secure common values or agreements about what's valuable and what isn't. The things that have been offered as values by the society we live in have always seemed to me pretty inadequate to the complexities we all face. Institutions like the Junior Chamber of Commerce are the standard form of community I grew up in and with, and I could see, pretty early on, that they didn't match the needs people have. The truth is, we have no way of having a decent relationship within and with the world outside ourselves. Inter-personally we don't, and on a political or social level there's even less. So how come? Well, it has to do with the fact that we live under a system of economic relationships which govern nearly all the other relationships; we live in a capitalist democracy in which the basic mode of human interaction is to exploit one another and our environments. You can see that going on in people's personal lives, you can see it out in the street, you can see it in government, you can see it everywhere, and it's unsatisfactory. The way I live and work brings me constantly into contact with that rather simpleminded truth, and it's led me to an increasingly critical view of contemporary human relationships and contemporary political and social institutions. At the same time it involves what you're identifying as sadness. But it's the critical view that's interesting, not the sadness.

BS Was it the taking of the job that changed your social outlook in that way?

BF Okay. You've got to recognize where I'm coming from. I have, to begin with, none of the "impressed" enculturation that Europeans and most Americans have. That's been an advantage to me. When I was younger, I read absolutely indiscriminately, meaning that I could study, say, Ezra Pound and Sartre without any sense of contradiction and without the clutter and interference of a traditional cultural taxonomy that would have told me I couldn't read and respect both. Then, secondly, I went to a liberal university and got trained as an academic practitioner of the New American Poetry. With all that under my belt I had no social outlook, or any really thought-out social or political values, only a natural scepticism and an innocence. I had a lot of personal values like "people ought to be nice to one another" — very vague. They retain a kind of vagueness that I've learned to protect because of the great attraction of intellectual force. There's always the temptation to simply get behind one of them and let it take you.

SF So what intellectual force did you get behind?

BF I haven't ever done that thoroughly. It's like asking me "are you a Marxist?" My response to that is to say "Huh?" Do I think Karl Marx is the most brilliant thinker in the last 200 years? Yes. Can anyone really carry on a relevant discourse that ignores Marxism? No. But I've got lots of misgivings about committing myself without reservation to any inclusive set of ideas about what's real and what isn't.

SF I think those misgivings are the things that contribute to a consistently lyrical voice in your writing, no matter how "socially aware" the poems are. There's the presence of that lyric and that's why I speak of the sense of lamentation, that it often goes beyond any particular ideology.

BF First of all, ideology and didacticism aren't the same thing. Nor do lyric and didactic writing exclude one another. If you watch the way this new stuff is working, you'll see that the minute the thought goes to one extreme (and it's constantly trying to reach extremes because that's where you get the goodies) it either gets lost or it calls up its contrary. For instance, the lyric (or personal) is still one radical, and the political is another radical, and if I can push the boundaries of the political I begin to see the whole field, and that's what I want. But I want the personal to appear *in the context of* the political. Organized Marxism seems to have the fault that it can't handle the personal. It ends up saying that individual life is not important, and if it doesn't say that directly it will say it structurally.

SF What your writing seems to say is that individual life is made unimportant by capitalism, and that that is somehow worse.

BF Yes of course it's worse because that's the form of government we live under, and as far as I can see it'll be like that for a few decades yet. Its effect is to make personal life unimportant and incomprehensible. It does so by merchandising the personal as if it were a commodity one can buy and sell, and finally it denies dignity to people's lives in a way that Marxism or organized communism would never do. But knowing that still isn't going to allow me to make the move of saying, Okay, I'm going to espouse Marxism as it's presently practiced. Marxism is hung up in an intellectual fundamentalism that resembles the Christian fundamentalism that empowered capitalism more than it does what Karl Marx intended. Marx believed that the purpose in overturning capitalism was so people could have good decent lives.

- BS* What's interesting me is that Sharon is putting a fair amount of pressure on you to "overcome" contradiction, but it seems to me that what energizes your critical writings and probably your poetry too, is that you are struggling with physical and intellectual contradictions. For example, in *Permanent Relationships* you staked out a very small territory and you're investigating the entire question of "fucking," and yet already tonight and at other times you've said that when life comes down to just fucking, there's something profoundly wrong with that.
- SF* What you're proposing to do is to push at the edges of both the public and private sensibilities, as a dialectical act.
- BF* Okay. You can't resolve a contrarium because it's painful or because you need simplification to support the other things in your life. It's still going to be there. Most of human life involves contrarities and the complexity of them just grows as I learn more. So it's fairly natural to me that with the increasing politicization of both my life and my work I haven't decided that it's all political.
- SF* I want to get back to the business of "the social the form of the poetics." I'm not clear whether you're proposing that the social *ought* to be the form of the new poetics or whether you're saying that anybody who's writing poetry and is involved in the new poetics is also interested in the social to the extent that you want, in which they recognize that "poetics are caught in profit and the complexity of technology" as a first fact. Are you saying that poetry that doesn't recognize those things is a poetry that is not to be recognized as poetry?
- BF* Let's put it this way: I do believe in an intellectual realm for which as artists (or as people) we're responsible. The intellectual materials of the 1970's are fully cognizant of the effects of capitalism and of the importance of communal reality.
- SF* Well, I don't believe in full cognizance, I believe in the full value of the incognito as well, not as a form of monstrosity or threat or ignorance but as something integral to reality.
- BF* I'm not quite sure what you're saying.

SF There's a distinction between the communal and the political. I can't imagine any art, let alone poetry, that's not in some fundamental way informed by the condition of the communal life. But it does seem to me that at the root of the poetics you're talking about is a rational and sociological intellect.

BF Well, that's not true. It's like telling me I'm not a poet. What I'm saying basically, is that the poetics of the New American Poetry believed that the psyche, that the life of the mind, can stand alone. My proposition is that it cannot. And that's about as far as I'd go with it, and if you check through the work it isn't being any more certain about it than just that. It's also saying that the mind exists, which is what Marxism keeps on denying in practice. And incidentally, the place the New Criticism has in this, is that of a petty industrial squabble. This isn't a literary argument. The psychological now has to meet — and I don't mean it has to overwhelm by its force or stand second to, just meet — the issues in our lives that, given the kind of human and environmental resources of this planet, are now involving us in a communality that we have not had to face intellectually or in any other way until now.

SF You're talking about a poetry that for you contains a sense of what it is to be a public as well as a personal being; you're not rejecting poetry that doesn't have political description for its content. But your insistence on "understanding" as a primary criterion concerns me. It implies an attempt to disarm what I've called the incognito, which rational consciousness cannot approach, or can only do so on its own terms.

BF I can answer that in two ways. The first is to simply state that there's not much evidence in my work that indicates I'm afraid of what I don't know. The second is to dismiss the whole question of Negative Capability by making the prescriptive statement that at this point in history artists ought to be more interested in what they can do with the material conditions of human life. That doesn't exclude all those marvellous things in the shadows, it's merely an admonition that there are more pressing problems in front of us all. I'm a student of Robin Blaser's, don't forget, and I still respect his work and his inquiry into the world. But I'm responsible for my own life and intellectually I'm responsible for the activities of my own generation. The mandate and the problems of the last generation are different from the one I'm part of. It's time we grew up.

BS Let's shift the ground a little. In what you're writing and saying there's the implicit desire to have people listen to poetry. What I would like to ask you is, given the kind of generosity you extend to the world now as a poet with a social vision and a sense of social responsibility, how do you attempt to write poetry that people will listen to?

BF That's a problem because at the same time as I'm committed to making that demand, like most poets I'm ill-equipped to deal with it. Most political writers today are not working with poetry, they're working with drama or with the novel — forms that most people can deal with. I have to concede initially to having fundamentally academic and intellectual intentions. I'm trained to be a lyric poet, and after years of not liking it very much, I also now recognize that I have the senses of a poet. I'm not naturally a dramatist or a novelist or even a propagandist. I don't know the answer to the question you're asking. A large part of my energies is oriented to the theoretical, not in the contemplative sense but in the sense of how do you actually deal with the world, what are the methods, and how do you empower poetry to be as effective and as public as Science in its God help us belligerent and brutal way is. We have to reform this world — as in re-form — we have to remake the world we live in. If poetry doesn't any longer have the tools to figure out how to give people a paratactic sensibility that allows them to see the connectedness of the personal and the political and even the cosmic, we aren't going to have human lives. This planet will simply not survive, and I think it's that urgent.

PC I think the thing that Brian has been doing in his poems and in *NMFG* is to call forth the question of how we make our lives real, and what comes into that. The reason why kids can't even listen to the TV news or the radio news or aren't even questioning the things that go on in their high schools and why they can't read the newspaper let alone read a poem, is that they don't believe in the reality of their lives. In short, they haven't ever been given the possibility, or been forced into the possibility, or entertained to the possibility, or seduced into the possibility, or kicked in their asses until they know the possibility is there to listen to themselves even before they listen to a poem or to a radio broadcast or read something or whatever.

BF You can't listen to your life and you can't listen to yourself unless you can listen to and understand your life in the context of the rest of the humans around you, and that's exactly what capitalism denies us.

PC Yes. But it denies first of all the possibility of listening to yourself. You don't have a voice and you don't have ears. What it is first of all is a means of depriving the senses. Second of all it's got the techniques to deprive us of sensibility, and as a consequence of those first two, it deprives us of being active alive thinking beings in the world. So when we encounter Brian as a practicing poet who has obviously affected us, it is that he as well as Stan Persky remind us that even the people who have been academically trained don't listen enough and don't bring enough into themselves, don't bring enough attention to themselves and to their relationship to the world to really know what's going on.

SF Well I don't know who the hell has the handle on what's *really* going on. It seems to me that any poetry we can take seriously has dealt more or less explicitly with the question of a new heaven and a new earth.

PC Yeah, only it's the substance of it we've got to get to and the superficial of it we've got to get rid of. Out of *Creatures of State* we get the sense of a drive for (a) a new poetic, (b) a new politics, (c) a new city, and finally out of that, some kind of new vision. It's something that obviously we're all concerned with because we've been feeling in the last year that vague shift in the winds of poetry. One of the things we've got to talk about when we're talking about a new poetic is the particulars and the technique, the line lengths and breaks, the use of metaphor. In listening to the more prosaic line that the serial runs have taken, I saw no necessity for these line breaks which give them the appearance of a lyric poem. And that is a matter of substance, not a matter of appearance, Okay? And when I hear these poems, and listen to the things we've been hearing in the last year, I think what we're hearing is the questioning of the whole enterprise.

BF The whole free enterprise system.

PC Yeah, sure. And poetry as it's practiced now is free enterprise, and that's what you're saying is wrong.

BF For sure. There's now the problem of the training which I suspect is common to any writer today, which has to do with Olson's Projective Verse, which is no longer open at all, ironically, or maybe typically. I'm subject to its conventions and they don't work in my favour or in anyone's. Conventions are supposed to help us interact with whatever is around us. But the conventions of poetry don't. I hassled, for instance, with the notion of the perfect poem for years. At this point, though, the only poetic convention I'm interested in is disjunction. I see the disjunction occurring because I want its contrary, parataxis. I see the world shifting, see the synapse points, and if I catch it there my line breaks are accurate. But that isn't often — most of the time there's the edge of the page and if I go off that it won't be writing anymore, it's scribbling on the desk. But when it works, there's a parataxis; the line breaks are suddenly saying, Okay, bang, here's a jump in the Real. Watch out! Because something extra happens when I break those lines. In a funny way I'm reversing the normal identification of parataxis, because we're all in the condition of not knowing, as Pindar did, when they're *supposed* to happen.

BS From the earlier poems, which were far more economical, there's a change in the recent poetry. It's more fluent and less concerned with the particular placement of individual lines, and phrases in a line. Does that indicate a shift away from technique to content?

BF Not exactly. It's coming from the effort to hold onto more things. If you look at *The Opening*, I was writing those long lines because I desperately wanted to believe in a world that had long lines in it, that, willy-nilly, had continuity. Consequently, that's what the book records, the belief in a world that I didn't want to end. Similarly, if you go to *Permanent Relationships*, the same kind of willful technique is operating. Only from the opposite end of the stick. During the entire composition of that book, I showed the poems to no one, and talked to no one about them, and not surprisingly the lines are short and the language very clipped. The book was written in isolation, and I had to fight for and with each word, because basically I didn't want to talk to anyone in those days. The book is about refusing to talk to anyone.

BS It's certainly not a book about flow.

BF The trouble with both is that I was getting used by the lines and they were building, almost by themselves, a reality that didn't meet the facts that were there. The convention of poetry at that time knew more about me and my abilities than I did about them. Now I've gotten to the point where I've lost my awe of Poetry and I want to know what *I* can do with lines. Fuck determinism.

BS But you're not about to abandon what you've learned, you're just frustrated. There's a frustration with the end of the page, so you go on to the idea of serial runs because there's more to say.

BF I solved that by writing on teletype rolls, where the end of the page isn't a problem — the poem just goes on until it ends naturally, instead of having to cope with that nonsense about, oh, holy shit, here comes the bottom of the bloody page. But to be serious about it, the use of an extended compositional serial method allows more than the use of words and sentences, speech born of one's own thought and that derived from external sources (dictation). It allows one to recompose relatively complete poems and fragments of poems within a structure similar to but larger than the single serial poem or series — the purpose of which is to provide a range of content both larger than and/or external to the single lyric poem. Each run, then, is a serial structure which becomes the seven runs and eventually *Creatures of State*. The purpose of stretching the boundaries of the serial poem is to attempt to overcome a built-in limitation of serial composition; that the Serial Poem requires a privacy in composition that makes it difficult to amass the concentration necessary to write and yet remain clearly in touch with ordinary reality.

PC In terms of where we're coming from and in terms of where we want to go, which is very important in your work, we've got to make some of the ground clear. Back of tonight's discussion is a whole year of intangible conversations, I mean, intangible to an audience who might read this. That is, I feel like just saying straight off the bat to our eastern friends, don't ever bring up to me again, or to any of us again, the whole question of Black Mountain poetics. It's been gone as a directive for five years. What we're talking about here isn't a rebellion against Black Mountain or the New American Poetry. It's something new.

BF Stan Persky was the guy who turned me on to what the New American Poetry was about. Charlie Olson, he said, was a guy who, around 1950, suddenly understood, for about three years, what was happening. That's very rare, rare anywhere, and even rarer within poetry in the last 200 years. He understood what was to be done, and not just in poetry, in the world. Pound never did; none of the others ever did. Olson understood that what was to be opened up *in his time* was the freedom of the body.

PC Proprioception.

BF Yeah. And that was what the 1960's were all about. We found out that personal liberation was marvelous, and that finally it didn't work. What we found out was that finally the forms that are outside individual will are more profound than the personal. In other words, collective and external forms of experience will dictate the experience of the personal and they dictate the limits to which liberty can go. So you end up at Kent State. They said, Okay, you can't be free because it threatens the interests of the people who've got the goodies, you must be governed. And at that point the necessities of understanding shifted. Government became the prime issue, and you can include everything from Ecology to the police messing around with the mail in that. The truth is, we have to accept government because there's so damned many of us. The question that's up in the air becomes one of how we will govern and be governed, not how to be free. So, Pierre, you were talking earlier about the absence of what we would conventionally refer to as The Line. That's an interesting word. What is a line? A line of bullshit? A party line?

SF Where you happen to end an utterance.

BF It's how you govern an utterance. Or whether the utterance is terminated by conventional nonsense or some external force like the police, or the side of the page. It's the same question I've said everything is tied to.

SF Or where an utterance fails.

BF Exactly. How do we get effective utterance, not just out of poetry but out of the whole paraphernalia of human language and interaction. I'm suggesting that we drop this dorky notion that imagination is something that arrives with us from the realms of mystery or whatever . . .

SF Well, you're talking about inspiration . . .

BF I'm proposing that there's a purposive taxonomy that can be worked out, and that we can and should stop mystifying the problems of composition.

PC Inspiration is just another word for accuracy.

SF There are two takes on the lyrical — the Beautiful and the Ugly.

BF There's a third one which is the True.

PC Yeah, the Accurate.

SF Then the True lies in the incorporation of the Ugly into the Beautiful, and vice versa? That's a lyrical thrust . . .

PC Whenever we've had the term "lyrical" I've wanted to translate that into the broken heart that is not private, but public.

SF Otherwise one is simply unknown. I guess it depends on what one conceives to be the most invisible, that is, the personal impulse or the public demand. The admonitions in this writing are political but behind that the language of the sorrow is lyrical, or as you see it, personal.

BF But Pierre is saying that it has to go to the political, public,
communal for resolution. I agree. (Reads) :

My heart will break before it comes
the revolution will not come before
all of it is broken, the revolution
will break all hearts.

Let the hearts
of poets & politicians twist & break
for their poor imagination
of what we might have

let them pump into the streets
let us see what we have, this

*pattern for subdivision
& progressive alienation
of public lands*

despite the discourse
of all those white sheets on the clotheslines of the poor
behind Main street
whipping in the polluted breeze.

All our plans will turn red
from the gore of the Personal

& we will lift it, finally
from us

breaking our hearts (Creatures of State, p. 125)

SF Your heartbreak in those poems is your personal heartbreak

BF . . . in the face of material reality.

SF In the face of material reality which is heartbreaking.

BF I'm more interested in the material reality.

BS I want to offer Brian a chance to respond to Bowering who is accusing him, in *A Short Sad Book*, of seeking, as the phrase is, "Love in the Shadows." He's constantly making a kind of stock figure of Brian and I want to hear Brian answer Bowering in terms that both understand.

BF Okay, first of all you have to recognize that George is running a practical joke on a practical joke. The novel is a practical joke on Canadian literature, which is a practical joke. The second thing is that George can't imagine actually fucking a tree. He doesn't have that kind of literalism.

BS But beyond that, he's making some kind of statement about your poetry.

BF I don't know. I regard George's "attack" as a kind of fond admonition from the other side of the same desire. Actually, I think George would *love* to fuck a tree. The only error he's making is the error most practical jokers make: he's attacking something that doesn't any longer exist. That happened eleven years ago. The literalism of that has grown into what we're seeing in *Creatures of State*.

BS You're being accused of being a Romantic. How do you feel about that?

BF It's not a love of shadows or a fear of shadows, it's a preoccupation with the relationship between light and darkness. If I'm constantly ducking into the shadows it's because the Shadow is the form and power of the system of relationships that determines the way our personal lives will go, meaning, mostly, Capitalism. I'm sick and tired of holding people responsible for the things that happen to them, the things they do. It is cruel to do so. Holding people responsible implies that I believe in the omniscience of individual will and enterprise. And that's shit. If you keep wanting to go over this question, that's where I'll go. (Reads) :

What of our lives, our bodies
wasting in misery we can see
no reason for, simple despair
despite the new car parked on the street, the T.V.
on & making dinner in the kitchen.

History crowding against the Personal.
The things that break hearts
also exist in history. But the artists
have forgotten history & the politicians
have forgotten the broken & breaking
hearts. & those of us who know both
or learn that broken hearts mean nothing
unless history mends the world that breaks them
ask of our lives, our bodies wasting
in misery, more than simple despair
we can see complex reasons for

(*Creatures of State*, p. 119)

I guess I want to hang in there in the middle of *that* construct, because that's where the understanding we need lies. You have to get up there in the middle of those two things and goddamn well hang there with all the pain and anxiety and terror it involves. That's the one thing poetry can do that nothing else can do.



BS As a writer you're in a period of crisis. What is the crisis and why?

BF The crisis is one of what to do next. The forms of expression given to artists, and particularly to writers, are unsatisfactory. I'm not arrogant enough to say I know exactly what the cure is, only that what we're doing and what's been done ain't enough. It isn't going to change the basic condition of our lives. I think that crisis goes beyond my own work. It's a general crisis in Art. *Creatures of State* tells me I can't continue to work conventionally, that I've got to go further into what I'm doing, although a lot of the work since then has been involved in working out some of the immediate aspects of the things raised in *Creatures of State*, the "Invisibilities." I'm not entirely satisfied with what *Creatures of State* has done, I mean, it ends so grandly that it makes me a little nervous. So I want to explore, in a more focused way, some of the world — the pleasures and pain one experiences in that — and the objective pain of being in an unjust world. The prose piece, "The Organizer," tells me I'm working on a novel though I don't quite know what a novel is anymore.

BS Does the interest in writing a novel come out of your experience of writing serial poetry?

BF I hope it would be informed by what I know about narrative from the serial form, but I don't think the one leads to the other.

BS The novel is a larger format.

BF The novel is in some ways a smaller format because it involves a number of aspects that make the writing purely conventional, like pretending people are talking all the time, so you're not up against fundamental questions all the time you're writing.

SF Don't you think it would be quite easy for you to write a novel at this point?

BF I would have thought that but it isn't turning out to be that easy. I'm not very gifted at some of the things you need to be a novelist, and since I'd want to write a "popular" novel, meaning an accessible one, things like writing dialogue drive me crazy. And how to use metaphor, and so forth. I've been so much involved in melding the textures of language and meaning, I don't quite know what to do with that preoccupation. You can see it in "The Organizer." I have problems with the interpolation of the peculiar world you're in when you're writing — which is quite different from the physical material you are writing about and the ones you're making up, and it keeps on interfering. The story begins to explore that problem quite directly.

BS Bowering's *A Short Sad Book* was concerned with a lot of these problems, wasn't it? George was really writing a novel about refusing to write a conventional novel, or about how it wasn't possible anymore.

BF Yeah, for sure. But that novel is going to puzzle people for years to come, because it's hard to figure out if George really is pursuing some very fundamental truths about narrative and/or fiction because the novel is so cluttered with extremely personal detail and with obscure gags. It puzzles me when I'm not doubled over with laughter. But at the same time what I really respect about George Bowering is his willingness to experiment when he damn well doesn't need to. There was a period about eight years ago when George could have been a national figure in the way that Margaret Atwood is. I'm not sure whether it would have been more fun, but in any case he didn't do it. He went on with his fundamentally arcane, sometimes nasty, and usually fascinating experiments, and he keeps on doing it and it's more interesting now than it ever was. George has a lot of guts as a writer.

SF There seems to be, from what you've just been talking about, and particularly with the publication of Duncan McNaughton's *A Passage of St. Devil* and *Sumeriana*, not only a new movement but the passing away of something else. I'm curious to know where you think poetry's going.

BF Duncan McNaughton's books, as Karl Siegler pointed out, marks both the end and the fulfilment of the New American Poetry. What occurs in Duncan's work is very frightening because it's exactly what Olson wanted but could never quite achieve — a totally animate universe. And it's scary, it's nihilistic because of the way the orders can cross into one another. What the hell can you do with the New American Poetry after you've read Duncan McNaughton — except enjoy it and the contemplative pleasures it makes possible. With all due respect for Duncan, and I have lots, I'm pretty sure he doesn't know what to do now that he's done it. Duncan's capacity to do etudes on any of the masters of the New American Poetry means that it's all over, that all the formal and intellectual possibilities in it have been explored.

BS I'd like to hear more from you on your contemporaries.

BF Well, let's see. There's no point in talking about the writers I admire and enjoy. There's lots of those. So I'll talk about the ones I think I can learn from. McNaughton's one, and Stan Persky's another. Stan is very much the contrary of McNaughton. He can do almost anything Duncan can but he chooses to work from a deliberate perspective. Persky is challenging the whole procedure and the whole possibility of the New American Poetry, and from a perspective that has much more substantial and profound values. That interests me. Then there's Barry McKinnon. Barry, since you've wanted to talk about lyric poetry, is the guy at the centre of that. Barry's utterly willing to sit inside that uncertain universe and whine and fuss and fume and get one line out at a time — he's the only one I know who can deal directly with the uncertainty of poetry without doing anything arbitrary. The other person I've learned from, particularly in the last three or four months, is Pierre, who's been putting together drawing and writing more successfully than anyone I've heard of. He's been turning what, if it had been left to itself, would be fundamentally sentimental and enclosed writing into something very moving by using those incredible color drawings to deconstruct the speech. It's fascinating to me even though I can't work visually because I can learn from the chances Pierre will take. I'd also include people like Christopher Dewdney, David McFadden, Victor Coleman, and Pat Lane.

BS I would have thought, looking at your stuff, that Persky has been a strong influence and that the "Phuoc Bhin Statement" has been particularly important to you.

BF Yes, although the most important impression Stan has made on me occurred in 1968. In the middle of one of the writer's meetings we used to have in those days, and in response to this very elegant and closed poem I'd written about angels and birds and essentially the kinds of images I still use, Stan said "You can't write a poem any longer that can't have a line in it like 'please pass the tuna fish sandwiches.' " You've got to be able to fit that into any poem without it looking out of place. A poem without that possibility is not contemporary speech — that is, if your poem has a tuna fish sandwich suddenly land in the middle of a line and you panic and throw it out, say Yuk, you're on the wrong track. Sacred speech, which is what poetry was always supposed to be, now has to account for, be written in the vernacular. That's nothing new, except that it hasn't been practiced. "De Vulgaris Eloquentia" is Dante's demand.

BS You've worked extensively over the years as an editor, first of *Iron* and lately as Gordon Lockhead of *NMFG*.

BF I'm not the editor of *NMFG*.

BS Who is Gordon Lockhead, then?

BF Well, Lockhead has been around since 1969 and did a number of things before he got involved with *NMFG*. Tom Grieve and I used him first to hoax an English professor who thought he had Shakespearean Criticism in the bag. He'd quote all his esoteric critics and Tom and I would respond by quoting long passages from Lockhead to contradict him. He showed up a number of times in that kind of a context and I think there's probably still subject cards in the SFU library for some of his articles. Some of them were quite brilliant and a few actually got written — one in particular about Chaldean Botany and its influence on Marvell, Donne and Pope got to about 60 pages. Since then he's published reviews in places like *Open Letter* and has sent poems to a number of magazines. He became the editor of *NMFG* one January day in Bill Hoffer's bookstore. When *NMFG* started he was actually four people — myself, Bill Hoffer, Bob Rose, and Tom Grieve.

BS What happened?

BF Well, that's an interesting story. I'd been talking about doing a magazine for some months and Bill suddenly challenged me to put up or shut up, and generously offered the use of his typewriter and his Gestetner. The idea was to keep it simple and small enough so that it could come out regularly without using government grants or any snazzy and expensive and time-consuming printing techniques. The other important intention I had for it was to get people talking — the people clustered around "movements" or government-funded organizations or agencies of one sort or another. The writing scene most often resembles a very small pond overcrowded with bullfrogs all bellowing aggressively at one another for territory, which is ridiculous since writers have no *real* status or importance. So the first mailing list tried to ignore all those territorial boundaries. But the joint editorship didn't work. Tom Grieve went to Johns Hopkins and Bill never did do anything except lend us the equipment, and Bob left town. At the same time Bill was rightfully getting nervous about being identified with the magazine so I went out and bought a typewriter and after that Lockhead began to take his present identity — running the stencils off, answering most of the correspondence and making the editorial decisions.

SF How is *NMFG* different from *Iron*?

BF *NMFG* comes out regularly and it's politically more alert. *Iron* went through a number of phases — from being utterly and adolescently pretentious to, towards the end, being mainly interested in hoaxes. *Iron* had a huge complement of people to put it out but no one except the people typing it did any work. It got printed through all kinds of half-legal means because nobody had any money and we were all too middle-class to do real production work. The first 15 *NMFG*'s came out monthly and people would actually expect it — I'd go down to the bar on Friday night and if I didn't have it people would be mad at me. The other thing is that more people read it than there were copies printed, which is extremely unusual — readable news that people want!

BS There are similarities and differences. *Iron* would publish a note to the effect that it would come out whenever it felt like it. It was very relaxed and sort of deliberately anti-regular.

BF I believed in those days that literature would take care of itself. *Iron* was labouring under the great liberal illusion that if you did things right then everything would take care of itself. That isn't true.

BS But the kind of anti-regularity that showed itself in *Iron* coming out whenever it felt like it or whenever it could shows up in *NMFG* being *NMFG*, No Money From the Government.

PC I think the big difference between *Iron* and *NMFG* is that *NMFG* is opening a conversation that just about anyone can get into.

BF . . . instead of acting as the arbiter of literary taste. That's the greater virtue that Lockhead has. He can say anything he has to, and all the interest that focuses on him as editor immediately dissipates because of the uncertainty about his identity. Lockhead has had some fascinating correspondence with people who probably wouldn't have talked openly with me. He's not a persona in the sense that a lot of artists and writers use personae. That's occurring all over the art scene in particular, and it's meant to elevate personality over the other elements of their work by turning identity into a work of art. It involves both an avoidance of the personal and an inflating of its formal importance. The personal isn't that interesting — even in striped pants and a top hat. The avoidances are extremely bourgeois and the pathology of it resembles that of fascism. Lockhead isn't that kind of figure because nobody has ever seen him. All he does is *meet* people. I like him because he keeps me from having to deal with all kinds of irrelevant bullshit that would prevent me from keeping my eye on what I have to do.

BS What do you mean by "Creatures of State"?

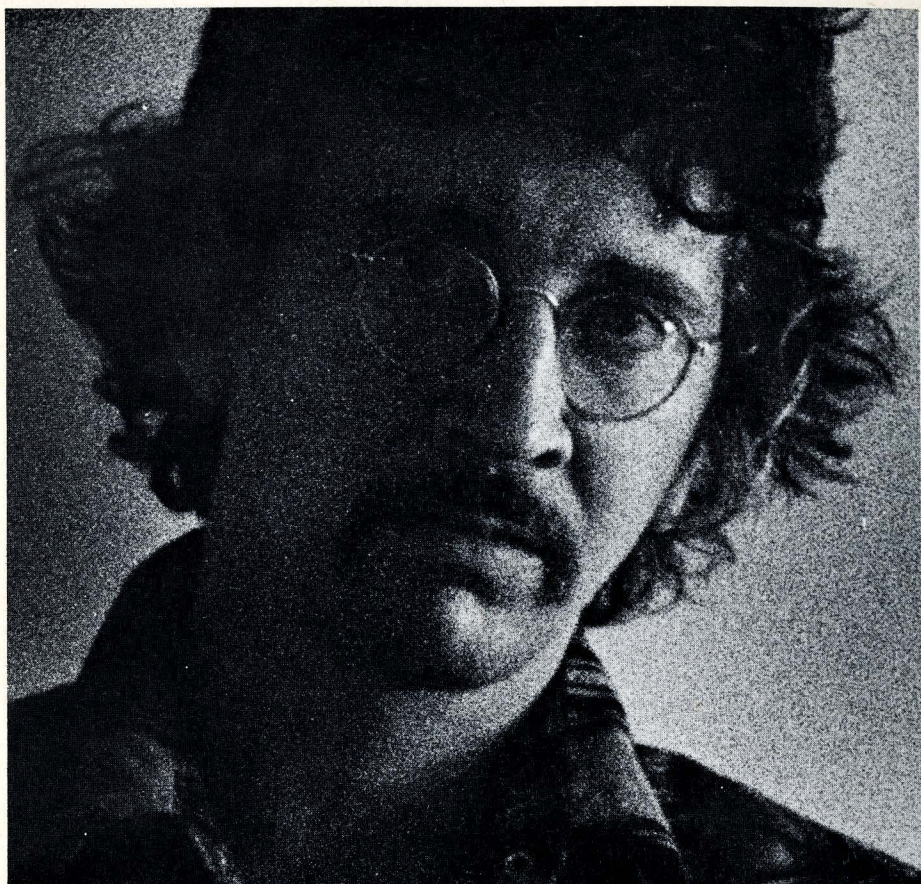
BF Well, it hangs on the word "state." Instead of defining the word "state" to an exactitude which isn't going to match up with all the kinds of understandings of it that, for instance, are around this table, I've made it into a cross-referent, a juncture. The state means the government, which we understand as a number of things all the way from the State as an instrument for providing services for human beings to something that is set up not to provide them. It does both, and it does it on a very rational basis. Then there's the state that I'm in, the state you're in, and the states of mind that individually and collectively everyone is in, which is tied irrevocably to the physical state — we're no longer creatures of ourselves, we're creatures of state.

SF Surely we're both.

BF I think we're primarily creatures of state now.

SF I think that's a lovely dialectic in the title. The "creature" proposes to me an ethos in the old sense of the word, in that it describes the lair of an animal, and the "state" describes the pseudo-ethics or ideological constructs we are in an important way subject to, or subjects of, or objectified by.

PC What interests me most about *Creatures of State*, and I think this is the difference in what you're doing, is that it's not an attempt to prove any mastery; it is not an attempt to demonstrate skill; it is not an attempt to arrive at a specific lyric instance or poem; it is not an attempt to resolve anything aesthetically. It is an attempt to go forward. Very simply, you're asking poetry to sustain the narrative and move more into the world.



BF We can close this off, if you can raise the orchestra to a crescendo. We're all exhausted, the tape is running out, the telephone is ringing. If I can use a distinction Robin Blaser gave me, I'm interested in the Prophetic possibilities of poetry, not the Visionary. I can't see into the future and besides, the joint is crawling with visionaries. I want my work to see into my own time, and I feel the necessity of seeing into one's own time, of making clear the consequences of what's been done and what is being done.

7th Serial Run

The *Substantial* is the grace, is not
materiel
nor is it *Spirit*

but rather the difficulty
of staying in an informed heart
Letting loose the hunger that is there
for substance to be informed also by
the *Otherness* of things, which likewise
is not *Materiel* nor is it
Spirit.

It asks me to ride
a black horse & a white horse,
so here I sit tall in the saddles looking hard
at the distances, hat tipped back
like Gene Autry
these *Blue Canadian Rockies*

I could sing
but the song is caked with
electronic technology & an american vision
via Billy Graham & the parasequent divisions
into binary functions, labours

losing both horses

& by which (since abt 1900) we can
sing our songs
but not in the streets
with all men & women

so that the songs we know
& those we hear
are not the issue.

For the personal
there is the search for horses

& beyond it great difficulty:
The *Substantial*, the World.
*Such that the song is heard
amongst our children.*

Noon News

reports a lone gunman on 3rd floor
4th & Fir, Vancouver
clear winters day, the air so clean
you can't taste it

The radio reports
from across the street & brought to us
by Money's Mushrooms sez the announcer
What Food These Morsels be

while the police
move to the second floor, sweating by doorways
with the barrels of highpowered rifles
pressed against to cool their necks the gunman
holds a woman on the 3rd floor
he threatens to kill, she whimpers in fear

so that I'm caught between that image
of a woman about 40, blonde hair
& Shakespeares dust rustling somewhere

Buses roll on Broadway, the News fades
& eventually all words shake loose
from the entanglement
to sharpen themselves against both time & events:

Eventually one man in critical condition, the woman
dead & the cops push the gunman into the back
of a black car & drive away

the News is brought to us
by Money's Mushrooms yeah

What Food These Mortals be

Point Grey

For Robin Mathews

Ten years looking out
at Black Mountain
& southeast Howe Sound/Burrard Inlet
rain & mist

which is what I was supposed to do
at Black Mountain — look into
what is my own.

The CP Ferry in the mist
w/ red triangle on stack
freights goods for industry —
the old confident shit abt industry carrying goods
for industry

but there is no propane on the islands
because the distributor is an ex-MLA hostile
to the socialist government & wont settle with the union

In the mist the clay banks of Point Grey pull down
from lack of silt redirected by the causeway on Iona Island
& the city govt wants to shore up the coast
with a road so the lazy can drive
away the last few humans in the city
go naked when the weather . . .

All of which ignores the question
of the governance of the elements

of Beauty &/or
the inland sewage pouring out of the Fraser
on the south side of the promontory

All of which
is mine

not as property
or even as most poets
now take the Local —
as resource
to be exploited

by which means generally the mist will remain
& the governance of language will remain
in the force of a translucence grows
more oppressive each day if

cargoless ferries ride this crest of sodden light
& our soft words carry us
& our loved ones willingly
to the other side

Silver limousines on Burrard & 4th
white heads, open-mouthed, within
turn from side to side
talking. Shades
for the bright sunlight, black suits
for the mortician, the mourners.

They must be hot in there, nothing on the street
acknowledges this death
the mourners & the dead
stopped by a light
one last intersection
of the journey to the grave. I'm going

the other way, downtown to buy a new pair of pants
& if I try to imagine a whole human life
all the things done & those
undone, I don't believe
the white heads behind the tinted glass
of silver limousines I believe

the honking horns, the limousines
glide across this intersection
to the next, the white-haired
men & women still talking
& looking out the windows

The Stone

Daily the weight of the stone grows
the difficulty of remembering
when I walk the streets I am

walking on the street, people
are starving & my car
has an oil leak. I keep thinking

its coming, *its coming*
to this, to me
at me, the weight

on my reluctant shoulders
& in this ancient story
what does he stand on, is it

the glory of the stone, the gravity
of the effort to right
a bad world.

Sparrows darken the air
love fails, women fail
as men have failed
to be just, the conditions
of our lives won't improve
unless the political & economic forms
that oppress us all

are broken, & yeah
women may lead us to it, even so

the stone is squarely on my
male shoulders, denying me pleasure
I might have to comfort me without misgivings
in this dark — lyric tensions
I know, but sparrows in the body
& the mind is winged
must lead
thru the systems of love & romance
that serve us in the absence
of a goodness we can earn & share

where the stone sits barren & silent
what our lives are
covering over
what might be

Song

What of our lives, our bodies
wasting in misery we can see
no reason for, simple despair
despite the new car parked on the street, the T.V.
on & making dinner in the kitchen.

History crowding against the Personal.
The things that break hearts
also exist in history. But the artists
have forgotten history & the politicians
have forgotten the broken & breaking
hearts. & those of us who know both
or learn that broken hearts mean nothing
unless history mends the world that breaks them
ask of our lives, our bodies wasting
in misery, more than simple despair
we can see complex reasons for

If the city is to be more than merely
a collection of loves
or attempts to love, if
it is not to go the way of most love,
mile upon mile of oily beach
for the ocean to drag into the ocean

& now I see our loves
without profit or loss
of form

our real needs
do not profit us

& the city
as we know it neither starves our bodies
nor fills our hearts

the rain

November 23, 1976

How to make angels matter
to what we are lost in the midst of
put those feathery monsters to work
in a more useful job than this constant
reorganization of our narcissism. The didactic
is angelic because the black smoke & stench of diesel
is now aether
the turning of their blackened wings
must learn to clear
the snapping of tierods
under a truck
so that the flight of
& the death of
broken bodies cushioned by
broken bodies
can cease

Discourse

now in the air
& it confronts us, my fellow

Poets. What we know of common things, e.g.
how this man in his economic relations to others
creates an effect which is felt in heart & stomach
be it he is a nice man & drinks heartily, makes speeches
of good things, loves children

this discourse
is the green forest, the wilderness
to which we no longer go alone
nor with fine & frenzied eyes a'rolling.

Said simply, there are so many of us
poets & other mortals, this discourse, how
we will live on this earth among many

is common cause, is the difficulty
denying the pleasure, the now false sociality
of image, metaphor in the isolation
of the mind.

These tools are taken, misshapen
to render the condition of all most profitable
to a few

who like us drink heartily, make speeches
of good things, love children

& use our tools
better than we, breaking words on them —

Our stiff branches, the curves of body
the sun, the self

are lovely but
Beauty is the glory of the Good
& the air is ugly with words crowding us

& too many starve, we starve, this discourse

is now the air, is
our lives, my
fellow Poets

Systems of production
have been thoroughly done
Love, Sex, Death
& Economics.

People need work to live
but there is no reason for humiliating them
or for sentimentalizing it. Like sparrows

human beings are hungry.
& will remain so despite systems
of production for Love, Sex, Death
& Economics.

The sparrows outside on the grass
consume all they find
of human waste, substance & seed

My heart will break before it comes
the revolution will not come before
all of it is broken, the revolution
will break all hearts.

Let the hearts
of poets & politicians twist & break
for their poor imagination
of what we might have

let them pump into the streets
let us see what we have, this

pattern for subdivision
& progressive alienation
of public lands

despite the discourse
of all those white sheets on the clotheslines of the poor
behind Main street
whipping in the polluted breeze.

All our plans will turn red
from the gore of the Personal

& we will lift it, finally
from us

breaking our hearts

Marxist Sparrows, Angels of Fascism, Creatures
of State: The winged creatures fall
from the air, the fog is so thick today
airplanes can't even land, no one can leave
or come home.

We won't find either love or political justice
in this city if each is a sparrow
chittering in the cold.

Our lives are as blurred by the business
of looking out for ourselves as the city is
by the fog. The planes can't land
or take off despite our wonderful instruments
of pleasure. And neither can we.

Angels of Marxism, Fascist sparrows. Such divisions
bear witness to
the cold & the hunger
that divide us in the leafless tree the fog
that hides us & will bring us
inevitably to ground
in cities where angels bear arms
& the sparrows are fed at last.

May 11, 1977



THE ORGANIZER

If I try to recreate my initial meeting with the Cypress people in order to examine it & to discover the divergences from what I imagined did or should have happened, it turns into a morass; who are these people, what or who put them where they are, where do they want to go.

What are my purposes in choosing them & who am I to them. I can't answer any of those questions, so I begin with the theoretical proposition that recreation poses deeper difficulties than creation does.

Understanding the dynamics of recreation has not adequately occupied the intelligence of artists — nor that of any significant sector of our numbers that possesses the privilege of not being exclusively occupied with the problems of subsistence. The complexities are the same for an artist as for any organizer in recreating the primary reality of a given situation: how to (history, palimpsest, tape recordings) & what (the rational statements, passion, the pain in the bellies & eyes of others, & ourselves). One is looking for the answers not to play but of what is true to a common reality.

To begin any human analysis some fundamentals need to be established that satisfy the materials at hand. What do we have? What do we want? Given the absolute necessity of making a true & accurate account, how do we, I, account for the fictions & errors that naturally accrue to recreated reality when nobody but the organizer cares, & we are driven before the more pure force of events like cattle.

The material facts: Cottonwood Estates is, as someone put it, one of the better arguments around for public housing. It is a complex of some 260 apartments, blocked in some 18 to 20 semi-detached three-story walkup tenements. About 1000 people live there, 460 of them children, all of them on 7 acres. From the edges it looks like an ordinary apartment complex, but when I walk into it along a path between two of the rows of buildings and into a concrete courtyard crowded with people attempting to carry on different kinds of recreation my sense of common order quickly begins to slip. The complex, from the inside, appears infinite. The landscape consists of a series of asphalt & concrete terraces, each surrounded by buildings & each loosely designed for some form of recreation. In one courtyard two people are throwing a frisbee back & forth; another couple engages in a crude form of badminton, without a net. Some very young children play tag, and dozens of people simply mill about. To my left a group of kids play ballhockey in a pit made out of a tennis court, above which on the other side a terrace similar to the one I'm on, & across the edge of which, lined against a waisthigh galvanized iron fence perhaps twenty people watch the kids play hockey. I've lost a verb trying to describe it because there is something missing, some activity essential to its reality. All the verbs are intransitive. On the third side is one of the building blocks, & on the fourth side is an enclosed pool, & beyond that, more crowded terraces and buildings. The total effect is confusing, because the randomness of the human activity going on contradicts the rational pattern of the buildings & terraces.

Since I am here to attend a meeting, I have to find the day care centre. I don't know where it is, so I begin to wander. It is a hot summer night, the year's first, so I head in the direction of the swimming pool, not quite knowing why except that I assume children will be there. I still have no satisfactory imagination of the extent & boundary of the landscape I'm in. Nobody is in the pool, which, given the weather, is a surprise. I circle the pool, looking in, & walk into the ballhockey area, where I stop to break up a stick-swinging duel between two kids. One of them, the aggressor, is crying — another child has slashed him across the knees during the course of play, & because there are no referees and no penalties, he's caught, like most

people in similar situations, between violence & tears. I calm him, & ask where the day care centre is located. Are you a teacher, he asks, & I reply, no, just a person. It's down at the far end, you have to go back up & along there until the concrete fence & then you go down. I say, okay, thanks, & walk off, making a wrong turn which the kids correct by yelling, No, stupid, it's *that* way, brandishing their hockey sticks in the right direction.

I look up into the buildings, noticing the numbers of people in summer clothes sitting on balconies or walking from one building to the next. I'm feeling defensive, beginning to choke on the squalor, or on my fear of it. I force myself to want to see the place as it is to the Cypress people, but it is surreal, partly because they can't or won't define it (the children have no names for the places they direct me along, & partly because my sensibilities are too fragile & I transfer the actualities into symbols; asphalt, parking lots, ratmazes, jungle.

Eventually I locate the daycare centre, which is a converted ground-floor apartment with at this point about 35-40 people inside. It's shortly after 8 & the meeting is already in progress. Whereas outside, seconds before, the reality was solitary & creative & thoroughly blurred by personal conditions of perception, here it is irritable & crowded. Sterk is standing at one end of the living room waving his hands, has started the meeting in the absence of a number of the principal Cypress people, Candy Basalle in particular. He's discussing, mostly with himself, the minutes of the last meeting, which aren't here because Candy has them. I suggest that we hold up things so those who are still coming in won't miss anything — I can see that people want a little informal talk, heads are turning, eyes are focusing on the faces that most interest them. Sterk doesn't respond, altho the murmur in the room is positive to my suggestion. Sterk begins to recognize that my purposes are different from his own, & begins to eye me as one

would an enemy. For him this is an utterly different event from the one most people here are in the middle of & it's quite different from the one I'm trying to make sense of & organize. Sterk isn't aware of the people around him; he's aware that he's the centre of a dramatic event of which he is the hero & at the same time not responsible for in any way; he means well, & confidently believes that's all he or any social worker needs to determine the true reality of the event. It's about as stupid as my own more thoughtful but equally abstract conviction that all that's needed is the determination to secure reality on the basis of its material & phenomenal manifestations. Sterk's place in this event is that of an irritant, altho it may be that my irritation with him renders me incapable of recreating him properly.

So who are the people in the room? Norm Haskin from the Welfare Department is here. Les Fortin, newly elected alderman, comes in from a city council meeting. Bob Ball, the transactional analyst, wanders in, as does Jock Olson, accompanied by a woman I've seen at the university, a quite beautiful woman in her thirties with an air about her here (& in the other places I've seen her) of, what *is* it, an intruder, of existing in considerable discomfort except within her own imagination, and there . . . Look at this. My training as a bourgeois artist has lead me to focus on the atypical, the unusual, the exotic. I'm falsifying the event & the recreation of the event by my interest in this woman. Because she's the only beautiful woman in the room I'm creating a sexist & sentimental fantasy that has no relation to the event I'm trying to organize or to the difficulties people in this room are facing. The woman interests me because of the story I heard about her a few years ago; she was raped & beaten up in a university parking lot while she was acting as a decoy for a bunch of vigilantes trying to catch a rapist who had successfully raped & beaten a number of women in the same situation. She also, I recall, has a small child.

It's like being blind. What about the other people in this room, the ones to whom my skills are of use. Why not them. I come in, & I identify the outsiders, not the Cypress people. The particular coherence I'm making out of the meeting has a kind of reality that is normally adequate to narrative, deriving from the simple need to create a structure that allows for an understandable ordering of events & materials, even if the order has no relation to the particular situation

or the things in it — like building tree-houses for cattle because they need shelter. I will understand, but the understanding may be of no use to the Cypress people. I'm here as an organizer & these people want to organize themselves in order to make the conditions in which they live better than they are. I'm useful here only if I can recreate in a coherent form the true dimensions of their world for them to see & to work with — so they can change it. I'm quite useless if my recreation is obscure & personal.

But something is wrong with the meeting too. By the time the meeting is half an hour old I'm convinced that they won't be able to form an organization. The apartment managers have all been invited, the one from Cottonwood Estates is a large severe woman in her fifties & another, from a slightly smaller complex across the street. A third, a middle-aged woman who doesn't identify herself, writes down the name of everyone who speaks. My instinct is that it isn't very smart to invite the Gestapo to an anti-fascist rally, but nobody here wants to confront these three people who have real & extremely tangible power over them. Since most of the Cypress people don't even regard themselves as tenants they're supporting the illusion that the managers are their friends, leaving the managers free to identify & possibly evict those who emerge as leaders. & the Cypress people are in a way correct — they're not on the bottom. They're nowhere, & so they can't define their relationship to the usual urban hierarchy or to the class system. & so far, this meeting isn't helping. It's muddying the relationship further.

Sterk, on his own initiative, has gone to speak with the Mayor on their behalf, & has told the Mayor of the need for a park. The Mayor has responded predictably — explaining the difficulties of land acquisition, & of resetting priorities in the middle of a budget period, but allowing that he'll look into it, & will do what he can. I can't afford to appear cynical to the Cypress people, so I point out to them that getting a park won't solve all their problems, & try to get them to talk about other things that bother them. One man asks me if I can see about getting the speed limit cut to 20 mph. I've seen kids 2 years old out there on the street. & why can't we get the police to enforce the speed limits we have. Someone else tells him it's because they're out on South Road giving us tickets for making left turns onto Cypress. Everyone laughs & I explain to them that the civil service isn't set up to help citizens but to keep things the way they already are, and I go on to tell them that what civil servants do best is write memos to one another about how things should, but can't, be done. They laugh at this too, & at the police siren that has risen to a crescendo while I was speaking. Someone says, A child has just been hit out there. Oh no. About half the people rush outside. There's no accident, but on the third floor balcony of an adjoining apartment building one of the women notices a small child about to fall. There is a ring of children below watching, & a woman on the next balcony is leaning calmly on one elbow watching. At a critical moment the child's mother runs out & catches the child & takes it inside. Ooohs & aaaahs. Why can't we make the developer make those balconies safe? a woman asks. My little one fell off ours last summer, she tells no one in particular, We live on the ground floor but she still got a fractured skull & one of these days someone's going to get killed. The manageress pumps her arm & bites her lip, but before she can answer a middleaged woman — a tenant — answers for her. It's not the developer who's at fault, its these parents. They just don't care. I think: people have to have a reason for caring & they have to know how to care. If the caring they have is largely incompetent, whose fault is it? How do they get here in the first place, where nobody in his right mind would live if they had the choice. But these people *do* have a choice, or is it they have an infinite number of identical choices. Later on I will tell Moira we *are* middleclass & our lives have been incredibly sheltered, & I don't know what protects us from falling into this condition of living. Taste? How does one acquire *Taste*. & is that the only choice & protection available

to an ordinary citizen. I used to think that everything would be solved if everyone had taste. But the truth is not so easy. Given my particular taste none of these people would live here. Where would they live? They would live where I do. & where would I live?

I keep on trying to get the Cypress people to talk about the things they see around them that bother them, careful not to speak of them, as problems. One woman wants those damned longhaired teenagers to wear proper bathing attire. They leave their filth in the pool she's never swum in. Get Management to regulate such things. But Management explains as always how difficult it is, how it takes time. A number of people want higher speedbumps, without the drainage openings thru which motorcycles can go without reducing speed. Management will look into such things, but everything they do will get back to the tenants, higher costs mean higher rents, or higher taxes for the taxpayer. Management will look into the costs & let you know. *When will that be?* It takes time, it took two months to get the bumps in in the first place. *When?* someone insists, *When?* We'll let you know. *When?* When we get our facts together. Someone in the back of the room says, quietly, but loud enough for everyone to hear: *Bullshit.*

The meeting breaks for coffee, with the promise from Sterk that after the break a new chairman will be elected, someone, I'm quick to point out, from within the complex. The evening is cooling off, but it's incredibly hot inside & so I go outside & walk along the side of the

building. The complex is only a few years old but it's already falling apart. Doors are scraped, concrete is cracked, plaster is falling. I try to imagine the place twenty years from now but that's impossible, the social imagination that created this place has replaced the concept of the future with one of profit. This place can't grow old because nothing but the people in it are alive; there is no grass, no trees to fill out. Nothing will age, it will only break down or just break. There is a kind of bacchanalia going on, but there won't be any growth of grapes or overgrowth of ivy. There's only extension, creation, development, more profits. When I go inside again coffee & donuts are being served, & someone has brought some foullooking brownies. I try one, & it tastes as bad as it looks, made, I think, with margarine. I begin the discussion by suggesting that they elect an executive & that they send around a sheet for everyone to sign as members. Ross Hughes is elected chairman, Al Robles is Vicepresident Candy Basalle secretary & Tina Sordo treasurer. Then they appoint a recreation delegation to approach the schoolboard for free gym time at a nearby school. Another delegation is appointed to approach city council for speedlimit protection. Norm Haskin & Les Fortin will help. Ross Hughes is caught up in the ecstasy of democracy & seems to think that they can solve everything by voting on it. They vote at least six times, finally to meeting May 28th at 8:00 P.M. same place. They're the Cypress Neighbourhood Improvement Association and some of them look pleased, others look a little frightened, & others look around themselves with a sense of their own importance & that of the group. They're better off than they were, & I go home.



POETRY AND THE 70's

Someone pointed out to me the other day that all those handsome and/or beautiful liberal poets who spent the 1960's so comfortably inflating their senses into a cosmology were now spending most of their time apologizing for their apoliticality. One remark that struck me during the conversation was to the effect that the self-consciousness of liberal poets was becoming obscure and perverse because the area of human understanding they are exploring is itself becoming obscure and perverse. But this is the 1970's and while the 1960's taught most of us that politics was at least there to observe, there is now no avoiding that understanding of reality. Except, apparently, thru Art. Artists in this country, and poets in particular, seem to make a virtue out of ignoring political reality. The more difficult, as a poet, I find it to avoid politics, the more difficult I find it to accept Poetry and poets as we now practice that activity and role. I find I have about three fundamental objections to what is written, and to the way poets act in the world.

The first objection begins in a criticism Charles Olson once made of Robert Duncan — Chaos is too easy. By that Olson wasn't proposing that the universe is ordered willy-nilly. He was saying that Duncan's concern with personal orders, along with the underlying assumption that if personal order is precise (from Pound) everything else will take care of itself, begets merely personal style and signature. Such an attitude on Duncan's part also tacitly encourages the disorder and dispersal that characterizes present human existence, and an antisocial or at least asocial phenomenology which proceeds more or less directly from the ego. What gets created, in less gifted poets than Duncan, is a personal style composed of defensive ethical tricks (wisdoms) that substitute for what poets should have — a stance that accounts for the elements of existence outside the singularity and signature of personal imagination.

Most of the books of poetry I see these days are *collections* of such wisdoms, and I mean first of all that they are *not books*, they have no demanding structural purpose, and usually consist of a string of negations connected only by the vagaries of egotistical experience. In short, they're kind of boring and inscrutable. If they're interesting, it's because the attitude toward the world that they display involves a romantic attraction to those areas of existence in which questions of social responsibility have been done away with. They titillate, but there is really very little to excuse them, except to point out, as English teachers are fond of doing, the quite exquisite skill in the construction of the verse, which is something about as rare these days as small collections of verse by Canadian poets.

Nor will anyone mumbling the aged term *Surrealism* make adequate excuse. Psychic automatism at this point in history is little more than buzz for the lazy and/or opportunistic both inside & outside Art.

The second objection I have, or rather the third because the second is to Surrealism, is to the passive socio-cultural role poets have accepted for themselves and for poetry in the last 150 years. Mainstream artists in general and English poets in particular in the 19th Century became so convinced of the centrality of the nonsense connected with writing poetry that they wrote and lived with increasingly little awareness of the difference between their eye-rolling poetic nonsense and the serious historical role poets have played in human society. Because they didn't pay attention to their real work, they became, with notable exceptions, clowns whose entertainment for others lay in the pompous privilege they made out of the internal machinations of The Poet. They insisted, almost to the man, on the divine madness of poets, often to the exclusion of the other attentions poets have brought to their work, preferring to believe and act as if the primacy of private imagination will bring us suddenly and collectively into Utopia.

So unwarranted & self-congratulatory a pronouncement was naturally taken as gospel by most of the lazy assholes who followed, and the power structures of the 19th and 20th centuries have naturally granted this divine madness because it places the job of determining the Real completely in their hands for the first time in human history.

Art, and Poetry in particular, can never be passive in reflecting its

time or culture. To do so today is to reflect a fragmentary, half-ignorant panoply in which, looming in the foreground, is the Self-grinning larcenously. Behind it are the streets, nature dimly visible in the distance. Others, or in philosophical terms, the Other, appears, if at all, in the form of partialities, possessions, sexual capacities, or by auras and spiritualities; never in wholeness, always disconnected from the Self. Underpinning this landscape is privilege and exploitation, which is goal and method.

The artists of my own generation can and should be accused of a lack of social imagination; they can imagine no other world than the one they live in, and worse, many regard the absence as a virtue. Such a condition can be explained as demoralization, and presupposes the need for a moralization. But while most artists are aware of the demoralization it is precisely the lack of social imagination that prevents them from really grappling with the problem of how to create social morale within a generation of individualists. Similarly, its absence deprives us of perspective, and leaves us all in the position of excusing our own time on the basis of what it does do, much like those people who reasoned that the recent U.N. Habitat conference in Vancouver was a good thing because some positive things happened to people who attended. This amounts to the same thing as saying that MacDonald Drive-ins are a positive social force because the french fries are tasty. An amazing number of intelligent people took that attitude about Habitat despite knowing that the real problems of the world's poor never have been and never will be solved in the Hotel Ballrooms of the highly industrialized and rich countries. Those problems are social and political in both nature and remedy, not professional and technical.

If I were to suggest that the problems of Art are the same, the entire establishment in Poetry would miraculously be joined by the Avant Garde in bellowing words like *totalitarian* and *Liberty of Imagination* as they collectively slither back into their frothy liberal privacy. I'd probably get the same response if I tried to say that to a Rotary Club luncheon, but there the reaction would at least be based on self-interest.

Unless poets *are* rich professionals and/or technocrats, it isn't in their interest or in the interest of Poetry to remain diffident to social and political ideas. A like difference of the vast majority of people has been the source or the tyranny that manipulates our individualism for economic and political purposes in just about every aspect of our lives. Canadian poets like Al Purdy, Leonard Cohen and Earle Birney, and a depressing majority of my own contemporaries, are really functioning as a kind of lunatic fringe of the Chamber of Commerce. Their ethic, if not their practice and their goals, is the same.

The purpose of having poets as a lunatic fringe is easy enough to figure out. Its existence demonstrates that the system is continuing to function properly and that the outrageous primacy of individual expression, be it poetry or profit-taking, is useful and necessary to all — from the Rotary Club to Artie Gold. The sneer each has for the other really doesn't matter so long as they continue to agree on the basic system of operation.

The proposal is a modest one, to say the least. We have, as artists, no say because we have had so little to say about anything larger than personal feelings that the world has stopped listening. There are more important and maybe even beautiful things to say than how these leafless trees are tied to our heartstrings. Corporate profits continue to grow, people are starved for words that mean something even if all of our bellies are full, and the poor are as poor as they ever were.

