

# THE CAPILANO REVIEW

*25 Years*

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SINCE 1957

LE CONSEIL DES ARTS  
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DEPUIS 1957

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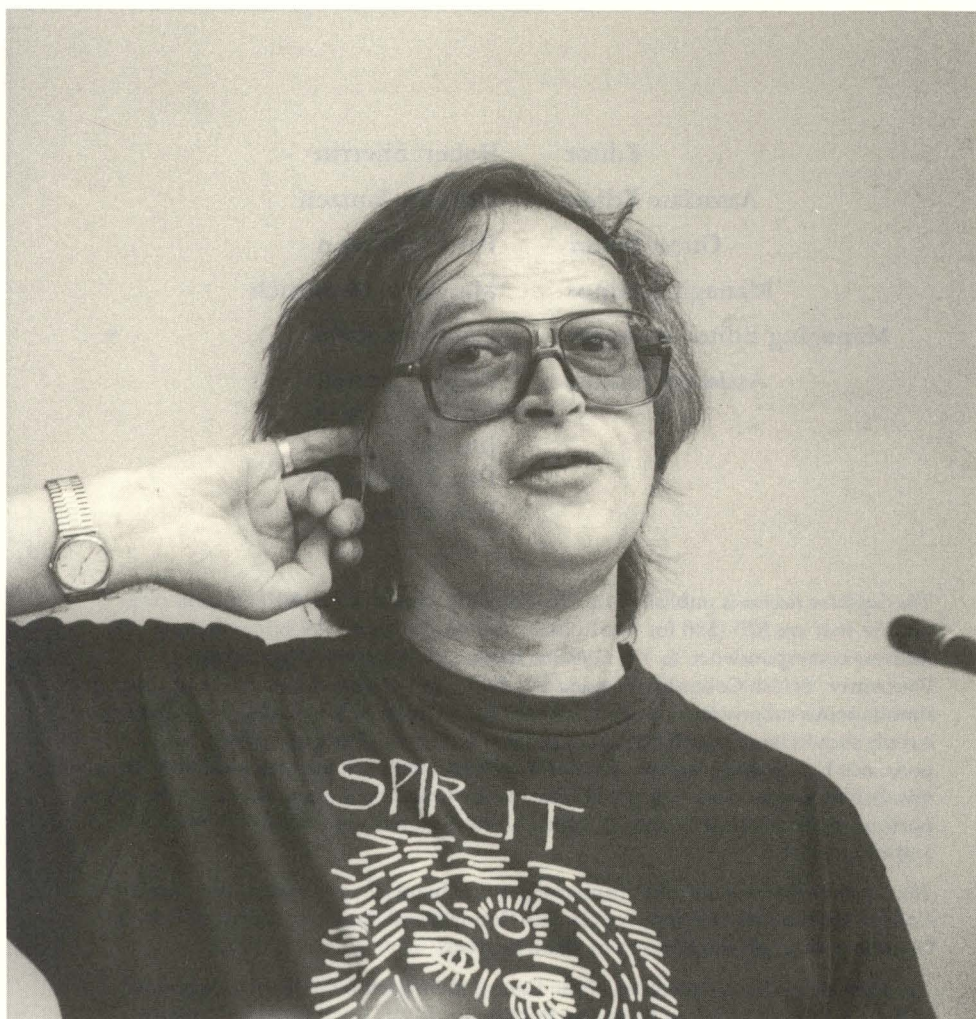


Photo: John McKenzie

sum temporaree home

— bill bissett





# THE CAPILANO REVIEW

Series 2, No. 23

Fall 1997

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*th rivr is shaking* (detail)

#### BACK COVER

*th rivr is shaking*

Artist: bill bissett

Photo: Allan Rosen

Collection: Brian Debeck

## INTRODUCTION / Bob Sherrin

This special issue of *The Capilano Review* exists because Sharon Thesen and Patrick Friesen, through a season of conversations, concluded how fitting it would be if writers and artists publicly celebrated bill bissett and his inspirational contribution to our lives and work. Patrick proposed a public tribute and Sharon a text of appreciation. They both approached *The Capilano Review* with the wonderful idea of producing a festschrift. Their enthusiasm sparked the process. Patrick ultimately and eagerly took on the challenges of being this issue's guest editor. To them both, my heartfelt thanks.

The range of authors and material presented in this festschrift is remarkable. They respond to bill's person, as well as to his work as writer and artist. They present a variety that will alternately startle, amuse, illuminate, and stimulate. In their warm and wide response I believe we see and feel the presence of bill bissett in the lives of others, a gift given and regiven.

My hope is that within the limited time and space at the review's disposal, we have made but one contribution to an ongoing process of recognition and tribute that others will carry further. My disappointment is that TCR could not publish more, and I hope that any gaps in this offering may be much tempered by the multi-layered pleasures of the texts — and the shared joy of raising our many voices in celebration.

Finally, we have also the continuing presence of bill bissett, not only within this issue, but more importantly within our larger, living, breathing, speaking embrace.

Please enter.

PATRICK FRIESEN is a poet and playwright. His most recent book is *A Broken Bowl*.

SHARON THESEN is a poet, editor, instructor and writer. Her latest book of poems is *Aurora*.





Jamie Reid / th pome wuz a storee nd is th  
storee: th erlee daze uv blewointment

In a way, it has always been pointless to talk about bill bissett's past. His work in poetry, painting and performance art has always pointed toward the living present and toward the future, never toward the dead past. While others change and adapt, compromise and take on new public personae, bill bissett only seems to emerge as more and more of what he was before, as though perfecting and protecting an original image of himself. His program has never changed: from the beginning, his work in every genre has aimed to mobilize the crudest, simplest, oldest and most primitive pictorial and verbal techniques to invoke a state of mind and being that he calls "ecstatic yunyun," the linking of the phenomenal and the transcendental world, the vulgar and the celestial, the earthly and the heavenly. This semi-mystical pursuit has been expressed in one of his constantly recurring graphic images: two faces, one male, the other female, turn toward each other in the impending moment of an ecstatic kiss, hot and sexual on one hand and full of aching spirituality on the other. In this sense, he is the inheritor of the romantic tradition of Hollywood as much as of William Blake.

The wild bohemian bill bissett was before the Beatles and Bob Dylan, a beatnik, a real one and really here in Vancouver. In those days of the early 1960s, he seemed strange, almost otherworldly, a kind of alien. Now he seems the most familiar of them all. hard t beleev.

Not nostalgia, nor even objective memory, can ever unearth or replay the terror and dismay we all felt during those times of the late 1950s and early 1960s when the threat of nuclear annihilation was always concretely present to our bodies and our minds. We lived every day and dreamed every night with the fear that the city might actually be incinerated, the entire earth of people wasted and destroyed. These nightmares are played and replayed in bill's poetry of the time, and in the work of all the rest of us, too. Easy now to forget that Hiroshima



was right close by in time and history and there were plenty of current reminders that it could happen again: the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, the assassination of Kennedy, and later the new holocaust of Viet Nam, the burnings in Watts and Detroit. They didn't happen here in Vancouver, Canada, but they made us sit up and take notice, added a chemistry of desperation to our young lives—a sense of mission, because we felt we had to act to save the future, but also a sense of recklessness, because there might not be a future despite all our utopian efforts.

Of all the people who came forward to make art their life in those days, bill and some of his friends were the farthest out, the strangest, the ones whose rebellion and rejection of established order was most complete. The first time I actually spoke to bill bissett was in 1959, when I was finishing grade thirteen at King Edward High School, now burned out of existence. Through *Time* magazine and my mother's literary curiosity, I had already encountered the work of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, spent weekend evenings at the little beatnik clubs that began to spring up in Vancouver in imitation of the real thing in New York and San Francisco: the Black Spot, the Cellar, the Inquisition, the Flat Five, The Den, Goof's Pad — the names say it all.

bill was seen in all of them, a highly visible and distinctive presence. I knew who he was before I really met him. I wanted to know him better because he seemed the embodiment of the truly hip, a real Ginsberg, a real Kerouac, right here in Vancouver. In those very early days, he was a strange, shy, fey, gaunt youth, with the haunted look of a recent runaway or escapee, somehow loose and nervous at the same time. His expression then, as now, slipped between a sleepy, cat-like sensuality and a kind of surprised bemusement, eyebrows up, lips slightly parted. He sometimes wore a charcoal suit with stove-pipe pants, and looked to me for all the world like the poet in the drawing on the cover of a popular paperback anthology of modern French verse — sensitive, starved, ragged.

Because he was so different from everyone else in those days, he was the subject of quite a lot of gossip and comment. Rumour said he came from Halifax, that he was from what was reverentially called "a good family," that he was openly bi-sexual, at a time when a life of open homosexuality was not only forbidden, but truly dangerous.

There were scary but also intriguing rumors: bill mainlined heroin, I heard, and believed it when it was also said he had even mainlined novocaine. I couldn't imagine the effect it might have had, apart from total body numbness. With his ambiguous sexual orientation, his purported drug use, and his politics, which, if not outright communist, were in any case very far to the left, bill bissett managed to embody within his own single person everything officially stigmatised as dangerous and radical. And yet, to my officially-trained right-out-of-high-school eye, bill bissett radiated an attractive angelic insouciance, a palpable aura of sweet charisma.

In my imagination, bill was the product of the original Vancouver bohemia, the one that was rooted in downtown Robson Street, the real early bohemia, not the American-media-created bohemia, the so-called "counter-culture" of Fourth Avenue that emerged after the middle '60s, though bill was raging at the centre of that later movement, too. Robson Street in the late '50s and early '60s was definitely not the realm of bright, upscale boutiques and cosmopolitanism it has now become. Instead, it was the old existentialist pre- and post-war Europe, a grey and dingy, somehow exotic and exciting collection of decaying shops and restaurants, owned and run by German and East European immigrants — "DPs" as they were labelled then. These "displaced persons" had experienced directly the reality of world war, seen both communism and fascism first hand, understood politics and its horrors in ways we never could. The people who lived on the street seemed to me dark, cranky, world-weary, or alternatively strange, shy, and frightened. They seemed to live with the realization that their condition and presence were precarious and fraught with hidden danger. bill seemed able to find acceptance easily within their circles — a kind of wraith, neither of their world nor of mine. He knew people whose names were Ivan, Valdemar, Gudrun, Birgit, and seemed naturally in his element among them.

bill bissett was always associated in my mind with a wistfully melancholy little man who ran a tiny egg store on Robson Street. With his sad and knowing gaze, the little man looked unnervingly like Peter Lorre. Day after day, he sat gazing sadly out on the street, waiting for customers, I supposed, though I never saw anybody in the store besides the man himself. A single small sign in the window, which dis-



played no visible goods for sale, read "Cracks: 39¢ doz." Who would buy cracks, I wondered, and what were they anyway?

Milton Acorn once shyly intimated to me his weird conviction that some of the shops along Robson Street seemed to appear and disappear mysteriously, unaccountably changing places in the street from day to day and overnight. I knew exactly what he meant: I had often felt similar crazy intimations. Now the whole of the old Robson Street has disappeared, but behind the new facades, the erased faces of the old shops keep peering out, like the multitudinous human and animal faces hidden in a bill bissett landscape.

And so it was too with the little shop and the sad Peter Lorre in its window. The egg man's character, when I finally met him, was like one side of bill bissett's character — mild, sweet, kindly, almost saintly in an old world way. bill was like him in other ways, too. He seemed to unaccountably appear and disappear. Where you might expect to find him, he wouldn't be. Then suddenly and unexpectedly, he would be there, in a completely unexpected place, crammed into a corner at a party, or waiting outside a laundromat for his clothes to finish drying. In those days, you couldn't imagine he would ever actually carry out any merely practical thing like laundry. Beatniks lived in the spirit world and never did their laundry. They simply wore the same clothes always until they fell off their bodies, I supposed, and then found new ones. But there he would be, nonetheless, outside the laundromat, waiting for his clothes to dry. Once I told him I had to look for a job. "Oh, that's too bad," he said, deep sympathy vibrating in his voice. Another time, imbued with the notion popular among Canadian intellectuals at the time that American movies were an inferior, even a destructive, form of culture, I asked him how he could stand to watch so many movies. He told me he sometimes viewed as many as three movies a day, sometimes three times a week, and made no distinction between American commercial movies and European "art" movies. "Oh, it's cool, you know," he explained. "Everything becomes, like, the same after a while." And that made a kind of sense to me.

It's hard to remember the depth of the cultural wasteland in the Vancouver of those days. There was the Vancouver Public Library, UBC, the Art School and the Art Gallery. Our only contact with European culture was through the Cinema 16 program at the University,

and free lunch-time concerts of the full cycle of Beethoven Quartets, which were attended on at least one occasion by a delegation of bearded beatniks from the Art School headed by Roy Kiyooka, and with him Curt Lang, Fred Douglas, Judy Copithorne — the “down-town” poets — all wearing youthful looks of world-weariness and scorn for us university intellectuals. The Art Gallery’s most important room in those days was the permanent Emily Carr collection, which seemed to have been put together by someone who construed Emily as a kind of frontier Van Gogh, all schizophrenic swirls and spirals, quite dizzying in fact. To enter the room was to be thrown into a kind of vertigo which would remain even after you had escaped into the street. The rest of culture was taken up by Izzy’s, The Cave, The Penthouse, a distant night-club sophistication and phoniness, which we, in our customary indigence could never afford. There was one (one!) commercial art gallery dedicated to contemporary (or at least, modernist) painting. Friday evenings we went there to view the latest opening: Roy Kiyooka, Claude Breeze, Jack Shadbolt, B.C. Binning, Gordon Smith, Takao Tanabe, Audrey Capel Doray, Peter Aspell. We went there to meet each other and to suck up the cheap free wine and food, later in the evening adjourning to the Georgia and the Cecil, staying until closing time, then buying cases of beer and driving to all-night parties in private houses, returning home with the first appearance of dawn in the sky.

Once, before I knew him very well, I witnessed bill in the midst of a poetry reading at the Cellar, a legendary jazz club in the dim alley behind Doug Hepburn’s gym at Broadway and Main. Poetry and jazz together was big those days. Jack Kerouac himself had appeared on television accompanied by Steve Allen’s piano. Local genius and bebop pianist Al Neil accompanied Kenneth Patchen in a pioneer example of the genre recorded at the Cellar, still one of the best around, both for its music and its poetry. The Cellar really *was* a cellar — a cold concrete floor, low ceilings, a permanent dusty darkness inside. Men went there after the bars had closed, carrying brown bags filled with whiskey bottles. There, they bought ice and ginger-ale at inflated prices, and talked drunkenly over the sounds of local and visiting jazz artists, drinking until 2 am in exciting semi-legality.

bill that night was perched unsteadily on a narrow, wobbling



formica table, looking ragged and vulnerable, reading his poems in a breathless, high, feminine voice. The place was filled with drunk and hateful males, men in their thirties and forties, who began yelling the worst insults they knew, inspired by their deepest homophobic fears: "Fruit!" "Queer!" "Fairy!" Then they began throwing things. A piece of hurled crockery struck bill's cheekbone, drawing a drop of blood. By a kind of fatal synchronicity, the next line of bill's poem was "I want to kill you!" bill read the line with full venomous volume, drawing hoots of ugly laughter. I was surprised and impressed with the sudden venom and rage in bill's response. I had always thought he was a gentle and completely retiring soul but had not reckoned with the Scorpio side of his birth sign, on the cusp of Sagittarius and combined with the doubleness of Gemini rising. I admired bill that night even while despising my own cowardice for regarding his hot courage as merely foolhardy. From that moment, I understood that underneath the soft and pacifist exterior that bill bissett shows to the world, there lies a core of hard steel, an unbelievable stubbornness and brave anger. Without that core of stubbornness, it would have been impossible for bill to have lived the kind of life he has sustained, now going on for forty years.

First he lived in the West End, the old west end of huge old decaying blue houses, dark rented rooms surrounded by the seashore on all sides. The first time I remember visiting him was one of those ominous dark and gusty February Vancouver days, full of rain and penetrating damp. I went to view his manuscripts with the aim of selecting some poems for *TISH*, of which I was a contributing editor. bill was there with Judy Copithorne, and someone else, my memory fails me, probably Martina Clinton, bill's partner of those days. Martina was a dark, seemingly sullen and mysterious presence, often silent, who sometimes broke out in excited utterance of startling eloquence and insight. bill placed a ragged pile of manuscripts two feet high on the floor in front of me.

"Can't you choose some poems for me?" I asked, at a loss. He reached into the pile completely at random and pulled out two or three poems. "How about these ones?" He hadn't even looked at them, and after I read them, I was unable to find anything to distinguish them from any of the other poems in the pile. bill asked me



what I thought I might be looking for. I said I simply wanted some of the poems bill himself might regard as his best, or at least “good” poems. “But how will I know?” he asked, with what seemed to me a maddening mixture of ingenuousness and cunning.

Years of later experience have taught me that bill really does not make distinctions between the “good” or the less good in art or in life. It is all only experience to him, his constant effort being always to make two different worlds cohere: the world of ordinary daily grime and ugliness, of real life and hardship on one hand and the inner, celestial, spiritual world of sunshine, stars and flowers on the other hand, to effect that Blake-like ecstatic “yunnyun.” *blewointment*, like his iconic paintings and his poetry, was simply one more material instrument for creating that human connection — ragged, improvised, ink-smeared. At first sight bafflingly various, the succeeding issues of *blewointment* gradually brought the magazine into focus as the product of bill bissett’s vision and engagement with his own social world, his effort to sponsor creative efforts of all kinds within the living context of the city and its artistic community. He carried copies with him everywhere, constantly exercising his patient skills as a salesman, explaining to anyone and everyone the importance of making financial contributions necessary to the survival of *blewointment*, and consequently to the very survival of the Vancouver arts community.

bpNichol once wrote that *blewointment* was “more interested in the news than in preserving great literature.” This is as true as anything ever said about bill bissett and his work. His poems, paintings, chants, prayers and performances, like his daily acts, appear only as individual events in an on-going life process and its work. Ideas of “good, better, best” simply don’t apply. This is one of the reasons there is little use in talking about “influence” in bissett’s work. He has been “influenced” and affected by everything valuable in modern art and literature: Picasso, Joyce, Stein, Whitman and Blake, Emily Carr, the movies, and literally all of his artistic contemporaries — the works and deeds of his entire vast circle of friends and well-wishers. And his enemies and persecutors, too — the police, the judges, the prosecutors, the politicians, and the bankers and businessmen they protect, as well as the literary establishment, frosty professorial poets, fat-cat poets and impresarios who labelled his anti-establishment politics as “mere

paranoia.”

bill and his friends seemed to move around the city like birds, finding first one nest and then another. It seems to me today strangely appropriate that hardly any of the houses in which bill bissett ever lived still exist. Most of these ramshackle structures have all disappeared in the new Vancouver, like most of the ephemeral copies of the original *blewointment*. It wasn't difficult in those days for any of us to move around: none of us possessed enough worldly goods to make moving house a very heavy chore.

The next time I remember visiting bill, he was living on the east side of Burrard Street, the southern foot of Hornby Street, when it was still a residential area. I remember only a vast space on the bottom floor. Its walls and ceiling were painted extravagantly in shiny enamel black. There was no floor, only damp, bare musty-smelling earth. The place seemed to me like an anthracite cave. I feared that bill and his friends who lived there would succumb to tuberculosis or pneumonia, like Nova Scotia miners, or natives in the North. bill was already afflicted with a deep bronchial cough. Typically, though, he was ecstatically enthusiastic about these new lodgings, exclaiming raptly about the beauty of the shaft of sunlight entering the gloom from the door opening onto the field of weeds outside.

Later, he lived with his partner Martina Clinton, in various places around Fourth Avenue, but especially the huge warehouse studio space on the bottom floor of the building on the corner of Yew and York, later occupied by the artist Gordon Payne. Upstairs at various times lived Gerry Geisler and his wife, John and Susan Newlove, and, in the other apartment in the same building, Gladys Hindmarch. Within a block or two, and at various times, the apartments and suites were occupied by George and Angela Bowering, Gary Lee Nova, David Shiletto, Rick Kataieff and his wife Anne, Marcia Stone, Roy Kiyooka, Jack Wise, David Mayrs and dozens of others lived within walking distance. It was common in those days for people simply to wander through the neighbourhood, visiting their friends, looking at new poems, new paintings, collages — whatever was being produced. bill's huge and draughty downstairs warehouse studio with its heaving floors was the site of many loud ecstatic parties. I cannot begin to name all the people who came there, but I do remember one night responding to a knock on the door to find the smiling and quite radiant presence



of Margaret Atwood.

It's astonishing now to look back over the issues of *blewointment*, read the tables of contents and see the names of so many now well-known, even outrageously famous Canadian writers and poets: Al Purdy, Earle Birney, Margaret Avison, Milton Acorn, Dorothy Livesay, Pat Lowther, Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, George Bowering, Eli Mandel, Colleen Thibaudeau, Red Lane, Pat Lane, John Newlove, Gerry Gilbert, Robert Hogg, Roy Kiyooka, Carole Fisher, Brian Fisher, Al Neil, Seymour Mayne, C.H. Gervais, Gregg Simpson, Barry McKinnon, Mina Forsyth, Gladys Hindmarch, Judy Copithorne, Maxine Gadd, Susan Musgrave, Gwen Hauser, Steve McCaffery, bpNichol, Nelson Ball, David UU, Colin Browne, Andrew Suknaski, Scott Watson, Robert Zend, Carolyn Zonailo: all names which have continued to appear with new poems in the current literary journals throughout the country, and all the people who have made unique contributions to the cultural life of the country. There are, besides, the names of many lesser-known, but still well-remembered Vancouver personalities and their valuable poems: Lanny Beckman, p.x. belinsky, Charles Boylan, John Burton, David Cull, Lance Farrell, Jock Hearn, Peter Hlookoff, Neap Hoover, Martin Jensen, Curt Lang, Scott Lawrence, Jöy Long, Rosemary Hollingshead, Shirl Jackson, Dennis Jackson, Beth Jancola, Doug Mawhinney, Jack Mawhinney, Jerry Matsubishi, Beth Perry, David Phillips, Dallas Selman, Beverley Simons, Colin Stuart, Robby Sutherland, Roger Tentrey, George Vagenas. These names may have disappeared from the public eye, but the poems and stories that bill published under their names still resonate and still speak and call to mind the excitement, energy and joyful camaraderie of those days when we all still believed that the world could really be changed, and that our own activity was relevant to the future. I want to name them all because they all had a part in making the city what it was then, and in an underground way, what it remains today.

In those days, the later-to-be-famous-and-successful were still the not-yet-successful and the little-known. It was generally recognized, of course, that Al Purdy and Milton Acorn were great Canadian poets, and that John Newlove and Margaret Atwood were rising stars. But we all met with each other on the streets and houses of the city as equals — person to person, without the protocol and distance which was

bound to come later. Artists who become famous as Margaret Atwood has are quite properly compelled to take on public personae and habits that protect them and their creative lives from the demands of a voracious celebrity-hungry public. But in those days, they were simply Peggy, Al, John and bill, fellow residents of the neighbourhood or the city, literary and artistic fellow-travellers. bill has steadily maintained the same public persona, and has developed a repertoire of deliberate devices to smooth situations and to create a visible aura which allows for both opening to exchanges of intimacy and the protection of his own personal security and privacy. His typical greeting — “Lightning and magic rainbows. Are you raging?” — is one of these devices, a way of achieving a stability of personality, remaining recognizable but recognizably different through time and space. He is, all the same, probably the least private of any public or semi-public figure — now as then, he is available to anyone at all, in his poems as in his life. He is always ready to speak without reserve to practically any unthreatening stranger he encounters on the street, from the most opulent to the most abject.

Like that other famous dadaist Kurt Schwitters, people at first find bill strange, but soon become conscious of his harmlessness and his good will, easily become accustomed to him, fall into conversation, exchanging observations, easy intimacies and confidences just as if they had been friends for ages, or as if they had discovered a new friend who for once allows them to speak freely and without reserve. His gift for momentarily liberating the inner lives of strangers seems to work on almost everybody.

bill is a complete democrat in his social habits, makes no prejudiced assumptions about any human being in advance. His meeting with the Queen is a hilarious example: Susan Musgrave reports that bill, dressed in pale purple tuxedo and a purple ruffled shirt, told the Queen she was much prettier in person than her pictures on the dollar bill, and later complimented her, “You look smashing in yellow, Your Majesty.” The mental image of the two of them together, tête-à-tête, Elizabeth the Queen in her yellow frock and bill the gentle fool in his violet tuxedo, is a ravishing one. I hope there is a photograph somewhere, or even better, a film of this ineffable moment. Carol Bolt tells the story of slipping out to have a pee while waiting impatiently for the Queen’s arrival, returning moments later only to



view the Queen and her retinue rushing away from her out of the hall. Spying Carol's crushed disappointment, gallant bill in his purple tuxedo immediately sped down the hallway to catch Her Majesty up. Oblivious to every protocol which forbids mere subjects from daring to touch the sacred body of the monarch, bill caught the Queen from behind by her shoulder, breathlessly exclaiming, "Your Majesty, Your Majesty, Carol wanted to meet you!" Carol said the entire security corps went stiff as statues, ready to seize poor bill and tear him to pieces. Unfazed, the Queen graciously halted the procession long enough to shake Carol's hand — surely sweat-moistened by now, and only said to Carol, "Oh, yes, I did so want to meet you," and then regally passed on.

To my mind, this moment typifies the poetic persona of bill bissett: he is the perfect image of The Fool of the Tarot, the young man who steps smiling into the abyss of the unknown, the purest kind of poet and individual bill bissett was and remains. bissett's childlikeness is the result of a decision taken as an adult, a role which he strives to grow into or back to or through to.

"We listened to Ornette Coleman a lot, Mingus, Al Neil — and got into a lot of trouble, hard times," says bill. Not all was joyousness and light and foolery in those days, or even during the years of hippie "peace and love." There was plenty of tragedy and darkness, too. Michael Coutts, a talented and disturbed young poet and bill's close friend, died of a heroin overdose at the age of 21. Red Lane, Pat Lane's older brother and a major influence on Pat's life and poetry, died suddenly of a brain aneurysm in 1964. Sam Perry, a young man of huge energies and intelligence, a scientist, an athlete, a highly creative film-maker and writer, the organizer of the original Vancouver Trips Festival, shot himself in his studio in 1966 and sent the entire community into shock and crisis. Neri, Maxine Gadd's younger brother, jumped off the Burrard Bridge. bill knew all of these people personally, and was extremely close to Red and Sam and Michael. These tragic local events blended with the apocalyptic confusion of the times, so those days were lived with a sense of loss and darkness that would not go away. We argued and talked incessantly amongst each other about what was hip and what was not hip, what was Zen and unZen, about violent versus non-violent resistance in politics, the limits of the sexual revolution, drugs, friendship, money, the impor-

tance or non-importance of this or that artist, this or that school of poetry, art or music, the relationship of politics to art, anarchy vs. structure, form vs. content, the necessity for crafted form versus unrestrained spontaneity, etc., etc.

Our utopian hopes were finally crushed by the activities of the local authorities who were unrelenting those days in their harassment and intimidation of key members of the rebellious community of youth. bill bissett was one of its leaders and therefore the target of a long campaign of surveillance, harassment, beatings and intimidation. bill's home was invaded many times by violent representatives of the law who finally succeeded in arresting him and sending him to prison in 1968 for marijuana possession. Among the many poems that document and comment upon these events is one written in January, 1969 while bill was in the Oakalla Prison Farm:

either way, as if what yu decide  
to feel determines th turns  
taken of such blinding flow

who dusint lie as especially  
(liberal) indignation becums

an impossibility, when  
as life/death is also absurdity,  
yu sit behind bars, turning to  
endless vapors, huh

heres that crook again back  
home, just wait'l i get to  
scoop him twice

it's all one school, and if (learn, nut)  
yu are aggressive so are the screws  
so, cool it, we're all part of this

historical mistake, even love

may now be possible, tho, don't  
hold yr breath, be seein' ya,

mother earth

both th prosecutor at th last sentencing nd  
Louis Dudek at th Poets Conference in T.O.  
sd if he's any good as a poet he'l write just  
as well inside jail as on th street:  
i think this is a lousy pome,  
what do yu think, shit-head reader.

where do you think yu are, heaven (already)

These events, to my mind, closed a chapter in the history of resistance by the Vancouver artistic community to the power of established authority. We became aware that something more than utopian idealism would be required to break that power. bill's later struggle with the philistines of the House of Commons, who attacked his work as part of an allround attack on government funding for the arts, belongs to a separate chapter, and is another story and another poem. That later attack was in fact the most signal honour of bill bissett's career and deserves special treatment.

**NOTES:** Part of the title, and some of the subtitles and quotes in this article have been taken from an interview with bill bissett by Barry McKinnon entitled *blewointment*, (*Open Letter*, Seventh Series, Nos. 2-3: Summer-Fall 1988). Grateful thanks to Gene Bridwell and Charles Watts of the Special Collections Library at Simon Fraser University, the current site of the most complete collection of the publications of *blewointment*. I would also like to acknowledge the contribution of Karl Jirgens' very thoroughgoing article called *bill bissett* which appears in *Canadian Writers and Their Works: Poetry Series*, Volume 8 (ECW Press, Toronto, 1992), and especially for his treatment of bill's concept of "ecstatic yunyun."





## INTERVIEW

nowun duz it like yu

*David McFadden interviewed bill bissett in Toronto in the Spring of 1997.  
This is an edited version of that interview.*

DAVE: Do you spend too much time alone writing and painting?

bill: I've thought that sometimes but I think that's not as true as it was. I think it was true for a while. Less so now. I think I've put more in my own life to focus on myself. I don't have such a reclusive need as I did for a while. And I'm enjoying the writing again in a deeper way. I've always enjoyed it but for a while I was thinking, my God, a writer spends a lot of time by him or herself. I was wondering if that developed propensities for isolation that people in other jobs don't experience, cuz they're working with other people and stuff. And they know when they've gotten off work, so they can party or chill, or do what they want to. But for us as writers we never really know when we're off work. And it makes it tricky for us to live with other people too. Cuz they might want us to be off work and go see a movie or something and we may be in the middle of a poem which is only occurring now. And we can't, like agendize it to occur later necessarily. But I think the longer we're at it we can get more flexible. I'm thinking, I don't know, it's only a theory. But we can sort of almost agendize it and we'll get back to it later. But still I know, if I go through a whole day and value a lot, and I feel very lucky to be a part of all that, but towards two-thirds of the day being done there's a sort of nagging feeling inside me that, oh God, I better start writing or painting or I won't feel I'm all right for myself. I'm sure that's true of other jobs, where people really love their job. But it's just the hours are a little tricky. Other jobs have that too though, like a lawyer's job, all kinds of jobs actually have that trickiness, where they might get an

idea about their job in the middle of watching the ballet. But I'm more used to that now than I used to be. I think. I can handle it better.

DAVE: What would you attribute that to?

bill: In my case, becoming less co-dependent in my relationships. But that's just in my case.

DAVE: Do you talk about this in the new book?

bill: Yeah, a lot. *loving without being vulnerabul*. And the follow-up book, *scars on th seehors*, addresses that some more too . . . I think I'm starting to understand something about life now. It's not required to be constantly married, whether in a church or whatever. To be constantly living with someone is not required for a useful and happy life. A lot of single mothers and single fathers are realizing this too. It's not required to have the other mate there, it really isn't — that's just culturespeak. You know, previous generations. So a lot of people are coming around to this in different ways and from different contexts. Like you can go dancing without looking for a mate, you can be into the music for your own soul and body getting together. It doesn't have to be socialized by looking for a mate. So those are things that if I started understanding earlier my life might have been quite different — not necessarily better at all, but just channelling change. It's all developmental. I don't know what's true.

DAVE: So no one escapes being brainwashed by our culture — not even bill bissett.

bill: I don't think anyone escapes that. We all spend a large part of our lives unravelling it, trying to find our own place for ourselves in life. But it provides a lot of humour, all these societal constructs, a lot of slapstick. And of course a lot of tragedy too. A lot of people feel really terrible that they haven't been able to sustain a lengthy relationship. But that's not the only game in town.



DAVE: You certainly portray these problems in a very gut-wrenching fashion. For instance in one poem there's a character who's saying "I'll do anything if only you'll stay." And the beloved says "I know you will, that's why I'm leaving."

bill: That's right. That's a true conversation.

DAVE: I just felt like crying.

bill: Well thank you.

DAVE: What a horrible thing to happen. It's true though. And you can see yourself on the other side, saying the same thing. But you find yourself mostly on the masochistic end, do you?

bill: I wouldn't say "masochistic," I would say co-dependent. But I don't know if I would say "mostly" either. I was given the task of writing a lot of unrequited-love poetry — more than a lot of poets are given the task to do in that sphere. I was just given that genre to really plumb.

DAVE: Who gave it to you?

bill: Yeah, I think the writing guides gave it to me, and eventually I thought I'd done enough in that area. And they've given me other tasks to explore.

DAVE: But you're still dealing with it in the current book.

bill: It's a genre that's there. But sometimes unrequited-love poems have a lot to do with longing for God, or for the Goddess, or the infinity of goddesses. You can interpret them on so many levels too. I think that's why they're a handy genre, but that's not the reason I've ever written them. They were written because it was a way to find expression for what I was feeling . . . . But I have done the other thing too, where I have left people because they were too dependent on me. And I think admitting that I've done that too helped me release

myself, to the extent that I am released, from that whole dynamic, cuz if I thought I was playing only one side of that then maybe the suffering would never end. But I've begun to admit, which I think is helpful for everyone, that they play both sides of it, and they too have left people because someone else was too clinging or whatever, the life changing. So then why do I need the dynamic then? So it's very liberating. I don't think that was the main characteristic of all the relationships I've been in, the live-in relationships. But there were times when it was a potentially debilitating ingredient of the dynamics, and of course that's usually what comes up when people break up. But it's not required to.

DAVE: What about your early life in Halifax? Are your parents dead?

bill: Yes, they're both in Spirit.

DAVE: And your sisters?

bill: My big sister's in Spirit, and my slightly older sister is still in this dimension. She lives in Nova Scotia. We're in contact now. My big sister I got along very well with too. But back then the elements of the struggle to be a poet, cuz that's what you want to do, and to be surrounded by people who benignly or less benignly believed in the work ethic — art was considered threatening, and being gay was considered very threatening. And so I ran away from home more or less when I was sixteen. Because I didn't see at that time I'd have an atmosphere congenial to what I wanted to do. It's much more congenial now. A person could do now what I wanted to do then in Halifax, I'm sure, and not have so many challenges and put-downs laid on them.

DAVE: Did you know you were gay then?

bill: I knew from when I was six or something except for two relationships much later. And then there's a long period of adjusting to the family and how they feel about it, and of evaluating how restrictive your avenues of socializing your sexual orientation are, and how much opposition there is to it. But people don't mess with you today the way

they did when I was a little boy — so much, although it still occurs. Nelligan, that couldn't happen to him if he were living today, he couldn't be put in jail or a mental hospital because he was gay. That could not happen, and that's a huge progress.

DAVE: You're referring to that film about the Quebec poet Emil Nelligan you saw on Bravo last night.

bill: Right.

DAVE: What kind of a kid were you?

bill: I was sick a lot, with all kinds of stuff. I was in the hospital for about two years with peritonitis, which is inflammation of the peritoneum. And I had a bunch of operations. And I sort of had interest in ballet which I was never allowed to pursue. Also an interest in figure skating which also I probably wouldn't have been allowed to pursue. These were considered "sissy" occupations.

DAVE: Were your parents alarmed about your sissiness?

bill: I think my father was, but I think he was more alarmed that I wouldn't have job security as well. So I think these two issues were combined for him. My mother was very sick with cancer. Endless amounts of operations. So that there was a lot of turbulence in that home life, as there is in any home life with a lot of illness in it. And the peritonitis resulted in taking a lot of abdominal muscles out, with all of the operations. And so I thought that I would become a writer, and a painter, so that way there could be some dancing on the paper. This wasn't done out of self-pity, this was courageous. I was eleven and I just said fine, cool, it wasn't like oh me! And at school I couldn't do sports for a while, and boys wouldn't play with me cuz I was gay. I wasn't effeminate. Some people who are effeminate are actually straight . . .

Lyrical poetry was starting to happen in my head, and I think a gift for lyrical poetry is partly neurologically based. So when my mother went



to Spirit I helped take care of my dad for a few years — cleaning, cooking and stuff. I was fourteen, and fifteen, and when I was sixteen I left. My big sister came back. She'd been away for a couple of years at McGill I think it was. There was a mini-Emil Nelligan episode a few years later when my dad was very concerned about me and I was writing writing and writing visually and not spelling correctly and, for me, wanting writing to be really different than it was introduced to me in schools and stuff, though I liked a lot of that, no question. So I think my dad was considering some kind of drastic measure cuz I wasn't turning out to be a lawyer. I understand parents worry about their children, and that their children won't be able to take care of themselves. I think that was part of the ingredient too. So my big sister flew out to Vancouver and then she protected me and told him that I was totally fine. Her name was Elizabeth. She went to Spirit five years ago.

DAVE: You wrote a terrific poem on her death.

bill: Thank you. *my big sister is dancing*. It's in *th last photo uv the human soul*. Elizabeth was the buffer between me and the family. I was actually disowned by my father.

DAVE: Was that ever rescinded?

bill: Well, he's in Spirit now, it's kind of . . .

DAVE: And you didn't inherit any of his dough?

bill: No.

DAVE: Your sisters got it?

bill: Yes. And that was like okay with me. When he went to Spirit I really grieved for him. Even parents who have sometimes done things to us that are harsh, they're a part of us and we have some of their characteristics good and bad so-called — quotes quotes.

DAVE: You gotta forgive 'em.

bill: And it's the only parent you're gonna have. I forgave him, and I hope he forgave me for not living up to his expectations. Expectations are a huge problem in relationships and family life, all these things, aren't they? And people just want life to be the way they want it to be. I've certainly done that a lot too in other areas. And eventually we understand that life is not the way we want it to be, and even our disguised attempts to make it the way we want it to be are still just trying to make it the way we want it to be. And we can only do that with our own basic minimal self, if that, cuz everything else is open to all kinds of issues of other people's lives and wishes and our own health issues, our own genetics, our own thinking. We learn to be more flexible in our thinking. And it's amazing. I think it would be great if in the first years of school students were acquainted with the flexibility of thinking. And to acquaint students with the fact that there isn't anything black or white. It would help us to understand more the worry of our parents, and to understand that it's not required to be one particular kind of person. That way we wouldn't feel tormented or guilty if we don't live up to the expectations of someone else. A lot of things like that we could be taught at a much earlier age. I don't think it's always a good idea to teach only social tableaux. The terrible things people go through in divorces — the guilt, the accusations, and all these things — could be maybe lessened. I don't wish to trivialize the disappointment that people feel, I understand that's very real. But if they were taught more flexible things much earlier in life I think it might help them later, that's all I'm saying . . .

DAVE: How do you see your writing having developed over the years?

bill: Like I like to work in a range, except for the fusion poetry or the poetry which tries to dislodge meaning — or plays with meaning, or goes beyond meaning. Fusion poetry, I call it. I wrote poetry like that in the beginning of the writing, and then got more and more gradually into storytelling and narrative, which at the beginning was something I consciously didn't want to do. And I got more and more into actually doing that, which is of course how life is, it's surprising us all

the time. And then since *hard 2 beleev* (1990), I think, I started getting more into fusion poetry again, in a different way than at the beginning.

DAVE: A little more ambitious perhaps.

bill: Like in "*evreeewn needs a gud fuck n th rest is bullshit jack sd*" in *inkorrect thots* (1992), and the poem about going to the Spirit World in *inkorrect thots*, which is something about the mirror people. And those involve themselves with music and snippets of narrative but not necessarily a congealing consistently threaded narrative throughout the work, and parts of which are for sound only, not for the meaning, cuz sound poetry for me, sound is a big element in poetry and there are some poems in which it is a major element or the only element, so that's outside of conventional or unconventional meanings.

DAVE: Why call 'em fusion?

bill: Because they have elements from different things, like the way the word is used in jazz — so elements of different genres in the same work . . .

DAVE: You mentioned you've been using your own spelling since you were sixteen.

bill: That was sort of a gradualist developmental thing, where the spelling became more and more phonetic. It wasn't as phonetic in the beginning as it is now. It's become more phonetic over the years. Now it's about as far phonetic as it's probably going to go — although new things keep occurring and appearing to me. So that's changed a lot. And for me it's an important element how the poem looks — and how it sounds and stuff. And it adds an increased for me element of tactility, if it's visually closer to how it sounds for me in that poem at that time it has an increased tactility and adherence to the paper. And it accentuates how it's being said, or how it can be said, and hopefully makes for a closer relationship between the leader — the reader, heh the leader — and the poem. So that's changed. And the other as-



pects, like visual poetry, sound poetry, anecdotalist humorous poetry, the humour I think is of more recent vintage, although the word “recent” is fairly ambiguous. But I think there wasn’t much of an element of humour until the seventies, which is a helluva long time ago now. So that took a while to kick in maybe, the humour thing. And it’s more fun for me now. Some of them I don’t think they’re funny when I write them, and I think I’ve heard stand-up comics say this. When they first write a joke or experience a humorous story they don’t think it’s funny, they think it’s just what happens somewhere. And when they say it, well this has happened to me, speaking of myself — I read it and people laugh and I realize it’s funny but I don’t really know that until people laugh. I would never set out to write something that was deliberately funny, cuz it probably wouldn’t be, and I don’t want to do that. Like I never really want to consciously set out to write anything, except what I’m experiencing or is being given to me. Some writers could write really great doing that, and I’m sure they do. But for me the intentionality doesn’t work. I’m the kind of writer who doesn’t do well with a lot of conscious intentionality . . . .

DAVE: What can you tell us about your head injury?

bill: Oh that’s when the humour came, after the head injury, also the chanting in non-English.

DAVE: What year was that?

bill: Sixty-nine. A longggg time ago.

DAVE: What happened?

bill: I fell down some stairs, and there was a door that was disguised to look like a wall, and I was leaning against it, me and these other people, and then me and the guy who was closest to me that I was talking with, we both went through the door because I think we were leaning against it and the latch wasn’t there because, as it was said in court, they went down, meaning the people around the house, to feed their cat, or to put cream in the cat’s dish at the basement, this was consid-

ered testimony. And the person, they must have latched the door, which leaves the obvious question how did we go through it? Well it was after a certain time they always [he snaps his fingers and laughs] take cream down for their cat at say 10:15, and the accident happened maybe 10:30. So obviously the door was latched. So then I said "Excuse me, your honour. Does that mean the accident didn't happen?" I was serious. I thought well maybe my God it didn't happen. It took me a few years to get sort of what they used to call "right in the head." [He laughs.] So I don't know. I don't think. So it was very cool. Well no, it wasn't very cool. So I was in the neurology ward and blah blah blah, anyway I got better and I'm really lucky.

DAVE: What was the nature of the injury?

bill: I had an inter-cerebral bleed, aphasia which developed into epilepsy, partial paralysis on the right side . . . I remember my first epileptic seizure, my first grand mal . . . It was amazing. I was still paralyzed on my right side, and I still didn't miss not knowing my identity, cuz it was like a breath of fresh air. And then I think I was just totally lying there and little bits of memory were starting to occur and it was fine, but I felt very serene . . . And then it was like this huge eruption, and it was like lightning in my head, in my body, everything was crackling, and then apparently it was such a grand mal I broke the bed. In my head though I was transported to this village in Africa. And it was a village where all the grass huts were in a circle. So a person with knowledge of Africa might know where that would be, even, because different villages use different architectural motifs. And they might know something from that. And I was one of the persons living there. And I felt so good and so connected, like with the previous life, but I didn't know it was — quote — previous. Cuz you know a lot of the language we use is hopelessly linear, and it doesn't give us immediacy, does it? . . .

DAVE: You were telling me on the phone before our first taping that you think that this new book of yours, *loving without being vulnerabul*, is going to change the world when it comes out in the fall.

bill: That was self-mocking.

DAVE: And it's going to change the way people think about their relationships. Tell me more about that. Let's get it on tape.

bill: [Laughs.] Well first do you know when the Greendale Pharmacy Post Office closes? Five or five-thirty?

DAVE: Let's guess five-thirty.

bill: I went to get the mail today but now I have to xerox four copies of this. Okay, we'll get another paper clip. Okay cool. See if this fits into an envelope. I'll do a test here. What was the question again?

DAVE: *loving without being vulnerabul* changing the world.

bill: It's like the spiritual self-help spirit quest I'm on, that I think everyone is really on, how do we live with enjoyment, satisfaction, mutual sharing, agreed-upon ecstasies and pleasures, and work, work is really important for people or they don't feel a lot of good self-esteem — and without getting hurt by our disappointed expectations or situations, or hurt by other people. Some people don't come into our lives to give us pleasure, some come into our lives actually to hurt us, for their own problematics they're carrying, whatever, etc. And many people come into our lives or ask us into their lives to enhance the journey. And so how to find, how to experience, that fine line between sharing and becoming co-dependent. Okay? So we've discussed this a zillion times, haven't we? It's so great to think about. Because there's people we really love and all this, and we want them to be totally happy, and we're totally upset if they're not totally happy, and so like all human things, and they're all beautiful, and totally we don't want to get hurt if they're mad at us, and we don't want to get hurt if they leave us, and we don't want to hurt them by our leaving them, and all these things, and so loving without being vulnerable, that's a big thing we're all involved in. We want to love, and the dance inevitably changes, all kinds of reasons, all kinds of constructs, involve changing dances. And so how to go through all this, cuz that's the



inevitable destiny of all of us, without moaning and groaning all the time about the dance changing, and we didn't authorize it, so what do we do about our will and our ego, how to lessen those and downplay those, so we can have more serenity, instead of objecting in absolute terms: "I didn't want the dance to change." It's changing, hello? So all those issues, around all those things. And the goal being hopefully to live in the moment with one's own serenity, with neither a grandiose nor a too-self-deprecating belief in one's own being . . .

DAVE: I think that's all I can handle.

bill: Okay, cool. Is it too cerebral? Too intense? Too emotional? Too frightening? Too uninteresting?

DAVE: Not at all to all of the above. Certainly not too uninteresting. Particularly the questions. And we'll call it —

bill: *loving without being vulnerbul?*

DAVE: No there's already a —

bill: *scars on th seehors.*

DAVE: No there's a book with that title already.

bill: Okay.

DAVE: NOWUN . . . DUZ . . . IT . . . LIKE . . . YU.

bill: Oh thank you!

DAVE: Spelt your way.

bill: That's true of everyone, no one does it like everyone. This can be ironic or praising. Or many other things infinitely speaking. Very cool. Raging. Excellent.

## Sharon H. Nelson / A JUST MEASURE: breath, line, body in the work of bill bissett

bill bissett is a poet of many passions. Although bissett is a poet of intense intellectual passion, his most abiding passion may be moral passion.<sup>1</sup> It is the thread that runs through his writing, that connects diverse styles, genres, and subjects. In bissett's poems, moral passion is tempered by compassion and moral outrage is tempered by humour. Via political analysis, moral passion and compassion undergird the dissentient political content of bissett's work.

bissett's moral passion is manifested in a quest for justice that is modified by compassion to a demand for social justice. The combination of compassion and moral passion leads bissett to propound political action that supports community initiatives and mutual aid. Simultaneously with compassion and moral passion, bissett's writing displays a self-deflating humour that camouflages, perhaps intentionally, the acuteness of the political analysis that informs his work. The humorous banter characteristic of bissett's performances, which occasionally enters the writing, diffuses and defuses the radical edges of his analyses.

bissett works in many genres and in several arts, including performance art, writing, and painting, so it is not surprising that his poetry displays many formal and visual concerns. Each of bissett's texts is a carefully constructed articulated body. Many are visually striking, but bissett uses visual elements, formal organization, and technical devices primarily for communicative rather than aesthetic purposes.

It has long been recognized that bissett's nontraditional spellings are intended to subvert and to signal the need to subvert the use of

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1 Kenneth Radu discussed moral passion as a motive force of writing in "Speaking Daggers: The Poetry of Sharon H. Nelson," *Matrix* 35, Fall 1991.

language as a tool of oppression.<sup>2</sup> In “why i write like ths poetree is for komunikasyun,”<sup>3</sup> bissett points out that the presentation of language in agreed-upon symbols encourages standardization of responses and understanding, which “promotes th stabilitee/uv the state.”<sup>4</sup> One purpose of bissett notation is to discourage standard responses. Another is to disorient the reader. Disorientation encourages fresh responses to language. bissett notation visually disassembles complacency. It suggests that standard responses to words may be inappropriate or even dangerous. It sends a clear message that there is an immediate need to review the ways we perform the act of reading, that most basic of intellectual acts.

The political content of bissett’s poetry often exposes the paradoxes and double meanings of political discourse.<sup>5</sup> bissett notation signals a warning that all may not be as it appears. It alerts us that meaning is constructed and that language and politics construct it. bissett leads the auditor or the reader step by step to an understanding that each is a party to the construction, whether as questioner or collaborator. In a review of Jerome Bruner’s *The Culture of Education*, Clifford Geertz discusses Bruner’s move away from the Cognitive Revolution, with its emphasis on the mind as a machine, towards “Cultural Psychology” and “the entry into meaning.” Geertz summarizes and contextualizes Bruner’s arguments.

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2 Len Early, “Introduction,” in bill bissett, *Beyond Even Faithful Legends; Selected Poems* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1980) p. 13.

3 bill bissett, “why i write like ths poetree is for komunikasyun,” in *what we have* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1988) pp. 84-88.

4 bissett, *what we have*, p. 84.

5 In “Dissidence and Creativity” in *The Dissident Word; The Oxford Amnesty Lectures 1995*, ed. Chris Miller (New York: Basic, 1995), p. 155, Nawal El Saadawi proposes that we “need to discover new ways of exposing the paradoxes or double meanings in the many new and old words that are endlessly repeated.”



To argue that culture is socially and historically constructed; that narrative is a primary, in humans perhaps the primary, mode of knowing; that we assemble the selves we live in out of the materials lying about in the society around us and develop "a theory of mind" to comprehend the selves of others; that we act not directly on the world but on beliefs we hold about the world; that from birth on we are all active, impassioned "meaning makers" in search of plausible stories; and that "mind cannot in any sense be regarded as 'natural' or naked, with culture thought of as an add-on" . . . amounts to adopting a position that can fairly be called radical, not to say subversive.<sup>6</sup>

Theoretical Psychology apparently has caught up with bill bissett. In an ongoing performance, bissett demystifies the buzzwords of western culture, whatever they may be at any particular time. In many poems, he reveals the discontinuity between the words and meanings of political discourse as a first step in destabilizing the practices of oppression, which, as bissett is at pains to demonstrate, "is socially and historically constructed." bissett often draws the reader's eye to the discontinuity between grandiose political premises, ensuing promises, and actual effects. Thus he connects the use of language to unjust practices and to a failure to achieve social justice. bissett has long argued that art is not an "add-on" but central to human experience and an excellent navigational guide to life. His work develops as if narrative is a primary mode of knowing. bissett is an impassioned meaning maker who creates plausible stories and exposes the implausibilities of the stories we're told. bissett's texts perform complex communicative tasks. Their complexity is not a stumbling block for reader or auditor because of the clarity of bissett's reasoning and the way it is expressed. bissett is a poet of "incredibul control"<sup>7</sup> whose

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6 Clifford Geertz, "Learning with Bruner," *New York Review of Books* XLIV:6 (April 10, 1997), p. 24.

7 The phrase is from "love is th greatest gift," in bissett's *inkorrek thots* (Vancouver, Talonbooks, 1992), p. 78.

primary purpose is to create and communicate meaning. bissett notation is one of the tools he employs.

An immediately striking feature of bissett notation is that words take less space than standard spellings require on the page. The attenuated spellings stress the phonetic and aural. The peculiar shapes of words signal strangeness and create visual excitement. In his "Introduction" to bissett's *Beyond Even Faithful Legends; Selected Poems*, Len Early observes that bissett's work "crosses boundaries rather than closing them down, for an experimental poetics has never prevented his simultaneous and often skilful use of more traditional lyric and narrative forms."<sup>8</sup> For instance, bissett's texts may be at the same time "abstract *and* representational," "non-narrative *and* narrative," "lyrical *and* polemical."<sup>9</sup> Many of bissett's narratives are lyrical in their treatment of human suffering, while his lyricism often moves in and out of the ironies of politics. bissett's lyrics display an economy of language and a cleanliness of diction and of line made poignant and obvious by the attenuated spellings which determine that not a single letter is wasted. Each has a communicative purpose.

bissett notation expands expressive capability. It enlarges the lexicon by offering nuances unavailable in standard English.<sup>10</sup> In bissett notation, *you*, *yu*, *u*, and *yew* are different words, different expressive forms. The meanings they signify, denote, and communicate differ from each other. Such usage at first may appear playful, which in some cases it may be. It is easy to see, however, that it is extremely useful to be able to distinguish, for instance, the "I" from the "i" from the "eye" from the "eyee" as a first person singular.

bissett notation is akin to the notation used in a musical score.<sup>11</sup> It combines verbal and visual wit and enables bissett to integrate diverse

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8 Early, *Beyond Even Faithful Legends*, p. 12.

9 Writing of the paintings of Seymour Segal, Hugh Hood articulated these "oppositions" in *Scoring: The Art of Hockey* (Toronto: Oberon, 1979), np (16).

10 bissett, *what we have*, p. 85.

11 bissett, *what we have*, p.85.

formal and conceptual elements.<sup>12</sup> The auditory, the denotational, and the emotional are framed — or perhaps it is more accurate to say un-framed — by the alphabetic, grammatic, philologic, and visual interplay of words and letters, their positions and juxtapositions. bissett uses this notation in combination with the physical shape of a poem on the page to resolve some of the tensions between substance and form.

These tensions, especially for a writer for whom “poetree is for komunikaysyun,” are the tensions between intention and communication, where intention includes, among others, impressions, thoughts, reasoning, and feelings. In a poem, intention is approximated in expression. In the same way that the flesh embodies the spirit but the spirit is not entirely expressed by the body, though it is of the body, integrated with and inseparable from the body insofar as we are able to apprehend it, so a poem’s form embodies the writer’s intention, which is never fully contained by the form the poem takes. The problem for the poet for whom “poetree is for komunikaysyun” is the tension between substance and form, intentshn and xpresshyun.<sup>13</sup>

bissett notation is but one of a host of technical devices bissett employs. Clear, logical argument and standard syntax are others. The thicket of peculiar shapes and forms created by bissett notation may preclude an awareness of just how carefully and syntactically constructed bissett’s writing is. bissett displays a rigorous attention to form and technique. He provides for the reader a host of keys, from the regular, grammatical, expected ordering of phrases through internally consistent use of symbols to a clear narrative line, a logical structure of argument, a transparent process of logic that leads by steps to reasonable conclusions, all of which are of course interrupt-

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12 In *what we have*, p. 88, bissett identifies the “spiritual political vizual sound nature narrative romantic” that “all feed each othr.”

13 The spelling of *intentshn* preserves the physical representation of the word *intent*. The spelling “intenshun” is a closer approximation to the phonemes we speak, but in this instance it would be contradictory to include the notion of shunning in the construct of *intentshn*.



ible by asides, stage whispers, and parenthetical information.

Of all the technical devices bissett uses, the most important are those related to breath. In many of bissett's poems, the technical devices that control the way the poem is read, such as the line breaks and the spacing, are controls of breathing. A poem's musicality often is constructed in relation to breath. In Old Testament usage, there is a single word for breath and spirit. In the Book of Genesis (2:07), the divine breath (*ruach adonai*) inspirits matter, and human life begins. Thus in the Old Testament creation myth, and through the ages in Judaic theology, breathing joins matter and spirit. Conceptually, breathing references not only respiration but inspiration; it is through the breath that we live *as human*.

There is an obvious parallel between the formation and inspiriting of matter and the formation and inspiriting of text. In Genesis, the Old Testament deity creates by naming, an act which suffices to call into being whatever is named. This literary tradition frames the use of language in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic cultures where to use language is to act powerfully; language is the first creative principle, and the creative use of language parallels divine action. In a second stage of the process, what is human is separated by inspiration from the rest of what has been created, literally a process of breathing spirit into matter.

bissett has made continuing use of the breath as creative principle, image, and metaphor. In "it tuk 80 milyun,"<sup>14</sup> bissett writes

**it tuk 80 milyun**

years 2 develop  
ths moment th line  
for th eye n th  
lid n th brow  
breething out from  
th blank papr ium  
drawing on

---

14 bill bissett, *inkorrect thots* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1992) pp. 36-37.

Here, as in other of bissett's works, breathing is associated with vision, creation, and delineation. The process of drawing is associated with the process of calling into being and references the breath as well as the line. The present moment is associated with the prescient moment and with momentary presence. The line is associated with the "i," and both are extension and expansion of the eye. Vision is associated with personal development: what we see around us creates who we become. These components are placed in history which provides context and continuity for the acts of breathing and drawing, and human creativity is placed in the context of a natural progression. So creativity is, as the cliché has it, as natural as breathing.

As in Genesis, breath is infused into substance: the paper is blank, but also, "th blank papr ium." The act of creation is not an act of ego, as we see from "ium." As Scott Watson wrote in his discussion of bissett's work in *fires in th tempul*, the catalogue Watson prepared for bissett's 1984 exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery, bissett's art "asserts that the point of view of consciousness from which art is made is the soul, not the ego."<sup>15</sup> The act of creation in this stanza is an act of generosity, an act of giving in making; it is a "breething out," a "drawing on." The tone is one of wonder. The artifact rather than the creator is the focus in this description of an act of creation.<sup>16</sup>

bissett's poem, "tell me what attackd yu,"<sup>17</sup> shows how bissett uses the breath and extends its symbolic connections and content.

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15 Scott Watson in bill bissett, *fires in th tempul* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1984), np. (5). This is the closing line of Watson's discussion of bissett's oeuvre.

16 This is a revised version, a reversed vision, of the language-based Hebrew creation myth.

17 bill bissett, *Beyond Even Faithful Legends; Selected Poems* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1980), p. 44; rpt. from *where is miss florence riddle* (Toronto: Fleye Press, 1967).

the green broom  
i criticizd him  
most peopul have been led to believe  
by th emergd middul class, that art  
and politikal involvment greet each othr  
only across sum imponderabul chasm,  
the middul class sz yeah its a good pome  
but what use is it, th professors  
lift up our hearts, in repudiation of that,  
to th credo that art transcends use, either  
view is nowhere, art is all use; only  
th technicians of a fragmented society,  
interested in propagating such a nightmare  
encourage us to believe in realities  
that split our breath into filing cards, p  
for politiks, a for art — th full breath  
is what knowledge is, is human, is  
wholly real, includes what is  
in all things

The poem opens with an image and a statement of relationship in which ideas are shared. The introductory image is followed by a proposition of the sort we might find in a book of Euclidean geometry. The proposition, as is often the case in bissett's work, is directly and openly political: "most peopul have been led to believe/by th emergd middul class, that art/and political involvement greet each othr/only across sum imponderabul chasm." The discussion makes explicit the notions and relations implicit in the proposition. The poem addresses a central theme in bissett's work, the denial for political purposes that art is useful and a powerful political force. This denial maintains a social organization that fragments human society and drains individuals of energy. The fragmentation of our breath is the fragmentation of our being and of our society. Being human is related to knowledge. Crucially, individual identity is inseparable



from social and political identity.<sup>18</sup> The poem concludes with “th full breath” as a unifying image by which being human is defined: “th full breath/is what knowledge is, is human, is/wholly real, includes what is/in all things.”

The poem that closes bissett’s 1980 *Collected Poems: Beyond Even Faithful Legends*, “th breath,” is a bissettian creation myth that reiterates the symbolism related to creation, creativity, and breathing.<sup>19</sup> The breath

is continuous  
is how we move holds th seas within  
of our moshun  
is the same as th eyee  
opening  
all the worlds of green snow fold  
inside th heart . . .

our desire moves  
thru our lungs  
not to speek this time th silence inside  
letting each line roll out to its  
return  
each flame brighttr th sparks of  
th log th creature moves tord us  
upon th same breath th same  
endless wave . . .

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18 Cf. El Saadawi, “individual identity or individual responsibility is inseparable from social identity or social responsibility,” p. 164.

19 bissett, “th breath,” in *Beyond Even Faithful Legends*, pp. 153-156; rpt. from *th high green hill* (Vancouver: blewointmentpress, 1972).

what also yu cannot say  
cums to yu turns into yu is part of  
yu  
yr spirit being dancing in th fire each petal of  
th flower  
opening to th light th warmth  
for th opening seed th ice all  
around th breath moves . . .

th breath  
cums to yu is yu for a  
while  
is evry part of yr moving flesh

The beat of breath and beat of heart, which are "nevr measured," develop in rhythm with the beat of ocean tides, and waves are both ocean waves and light waves. The poem moves its actors syncretically toward

th same changed shore  
wherin it was too dark to write  
and th cries of each limb were  
all mercy bathed

inside th great breathing waves

The poem culminates in an image of

th fire burning its song thru yr blood

of all th peopul animal plant creatures  
dancing along th flames of all th colors  
shapes expressions fierce loving and nameless

th one blood stream

In bissett's poems as in the Old Testament creation myth, language is the creative principle and breathing is the crucial act that enlivens. For bissett, as for a number of poets, a poem serves as an invitation to breathe. The attentive reader breathes the poet's rhythm, breathes with the poet's lungs. In effect, the reader experiences the poet's breathing and the poet's body. It is almost as if one were inside the poet's body, breathing with and through it. At the same time, the poet's breathing rhythms control those of the reader, who shares the experience of the creative act of breathing the poem. It is as if the apparatus of breathing is shared. That is a powerful physical experience and one that parallels sexual experience. Our conscious experience of sharing someone else's body is almost wholly sexual. Sexual excitement changes the rhythms of breathing, and the sounds of rhythmic breathing are used to suggest sexual excitement.

In his "Introduction" to *Beyond Even Faithful Legends*, Len Early observes that bissett's poetry "implies a powerful vision of enduring spiritual forces associated with sexuality and with the radiance of nature."<sup>20</sup> In Scott Watson's words, bissett's "is an art of polymorphous eroticism and spiritual tension."<sup>21</sup> In many of bissett's works, erotic, spiritual, and natural forces connect or intersect in the breathing body. In both paintings and text, luminousness is a key image that signifies a spiritual dimension. In bissett's work there is often little distance or difference between the luminous and the numinous. Dancing, an important metaphor, references the spirited and inspired movement of bodies. In "th breath," the image of "th fire"

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20 Early, *Beyond Even Faithful Legends*, p. 16.

21 Watson, *fires in th tempul*, np(2).



links sexual passion and spiritual passion which burn together as "song thru yr blood," an image that links language to passion and the imagery of respiration and oxygenation to poetry. The world is peopled by spirits made manifest in flesh and by "magik animals" who dance. While dance primarily signifies expression, song, which references poetry, primarily signifies communication. The sexual and the erotic are expressed and link in dancing and singing which, like breathing, are integral to being human: "our desire moves/thru our lungs" and "th breath/cums to yu is yu for a/while/is evry part of yr moving flesh."

Human bodies regenerate constantly via the processes of respiration. bissett conceptualizes art as systemically regenerative in the same way that respiration is systemically regenerative; art is the oxygen of societal organism. Regeneration via inspiration is as necessary for human *spiritual* process as regeneration via respiration is for human physiological process, and both are essential for human social organization. Thus a number of the oppositions posited in Western culture and Western philosophy resolve in the breathing body, which serves as locus, symbol, and metaphor in bissett's texts. Spiritual energy and physical energy become a single regenerative force that flows in and through the body as it flows in and through the universe. bissett conceptualizes the flesh and the breath, substance and spirit, as indissoluble in reality, regardless of how we theorize them. Erotic energy is defined as regenerative, a wellspring that, like breathing, revitalizes us as fully human.

In bissett's work, bodies connect and relate to their environment and to other bodies as well as to their own and other histories. The body is the locus from which social and cultural commentary flow and a symbol by which the personal is extended into the historical and political. For bissett, the body breathing "th full breath" cannot be disintegrated, nor can it be socially, culturally, politically, or historically isolated. bissett's insistence that "poetree is for komunikaysyun" simultaneously threatens and subverts the notion of aesthetics as separable from social organization and politics. bissett insists that art grows reciprocally out of and into the personal and the political and that aesthetics cannot be separated from social, cultural, and political life. At the same time, and in parallel, the body as a metaphor grows

out of and simultaneously impinges on the development of the personal and the political. It signifies the meeting-ground of private and public. The body serves as metaphor for the human totality, and the denial of the body serves as a metaphor for the denial of the soul. Breath is the thread and fire is the image that connects the sexual with the spiritual. Similarly, song is the thread and dance is the image that connects the breathing body with others in processes of expression and communication. Breath symbolizes the integrity of spirit and substance and also references human relations and connection. In many of bissett's poems, the breathing human body, its hungers and its pains and how it is abused or loved, is both a key image and a central metaphor that references human connection.

In the exploration of relations among bodies, and especially the sexual dimension of relationship, bissett explores the moral dimension, for the ways sexual relations are structured mirror the ways that other kinds of relations are structured. In bissett's work the body symbolizes the possibility of an integrated human existence, one that is "fully human" and inspired. Sexual expression extends the sphere of the fully human from the individual to the relational. Thus sexual acts integrate the physical, spiritual, and relational aspects of human existence. The structures of sexual relations and especially of sexual politics mirror the structures of political relations and provide an image of and metaphor for them.

bissett often uses his own body and images of his own body as a focus and a reference point in poems.<sup>22</sup> He adopts a pseudo-confessional mode and apparently offers the details of personal experience, but he does so to make statements about "the universal particular" which can be defined as "th sweeping meta/physics byond th calling out from th specifik particulars."<sup>23</sup> Thus although bissett's poems abound with the personal, the personal is used for political purpose.

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22 Just as the body of the text is an artifact, the body in the text is an artifact. The body in the text is no more the body of the poet than the persona is the person.

23 bissett, *what we have*, p. 84.

Scott Watson has suggested that bissett's art is part of a West Coast "tradition in which the calligraphic and the painterly gesture are subsumed in one another."<sup>24</sup> To quote Scott Watson in a changed context, in bissett's work the colloquial and the literary, the personal and the political "are subsumed in one another." bissett's work, his entire oeuvre in all forms and genres, questions categories.<sup>25</sup> It blurs boundaries and attempts to subvert the making of categories, "all those imposed/separations" that isolate people and fragment communities.<sup>26</sup>

bissett's poems sometimes achieve a political dimension by means of developmental and dramatic actions and the inclusion of a commentary about them which sometimes is explicit and sometimes appears as an aside or a parenthetical remark. bissett's texts abound with quotations and "conversations" in which the voices of those around him speak directly to the reader and thus are granted full artistic "reality" and mythic existence. Many of bissett's poems are as rich as novels in their portrayal of character and dramatic action.

In some of bissett's books, as in some of his series of paintings, works are organized so that themes, characters, and images develop and move through the texts. The images that occur through a series of poems or a group of paintings can be read in much the way a novel can be read, with attention to development of character and plot. No single image is completely readable or communicates fully in isolation from the others that extend and support it, and individual poems in a series may refer to, comment on, or extend the meanings of others. These techniques extend the novelistic and dramatic qualities in

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24 Watson, *fires in th tempul*, np. (2).

25 The subsumption of one gesture into another and one form into another may be described usefully as category crisis. See, for instance, Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (N.Y.: Harper Perennial, 1993).

26 Sharon H. Nelson, "Because of Everything; dissolving critical distance: bill bissett's iconography *dansing magik animals hearts n rings* acrylic on canvas 18 x 24 inches, 1991," unpublished.



bissett's texts, the range of bissett's discourse, and the resonance of his politic.

In *inkorrekthots*, for instance, bissett addresses apparently diverse issues such as queer-bashing and trade policies. He translates political obfuscation into understandable terms and reveals how the political actually is personal, how, for instance, trade policies and systemic homophobia impinge on our daily lives through policies that affect fiscal 'envelopes' which define health care budgets, which translate into the health of individuals, which translates into the quality of the lives and deaths of people we know. In these expositions and explanations, bissett's rage about what happens to people in an increasingly inhumane political culture is matched by his tenderness and caring for individuals who experience the political as part of the pain of their lives. In many such poems, the body becomes the locus of the action.

"Timothee sz/ther is no death," one of the concluding poems in *inkorrekthots*, exemplifies the synthesis of moral passion and compassion, lyric and narrative, rage and gentleness in bissett's work. In eight dense pages, bissett traces the deterioration of Timothee's body but not of his spirit in response to AIDS. Intense, emotional, caring, political, analytical, this biographical novella integrates social, cultural, and political perspectives in the portrayal of a single human life. It is as if one of "th peopul animal plant creatures/dancing along th flames of all th colors/shapes expressions fierce loving and nameless" had been named, a representative human who signifies "th one blood stream." The essential component in this work is compassion: "and th cries of each limb were/all mercy bathd/ / /inside th great breathing waves."

Scott Watson, proceeding from an argument by Robert Kroetsch about Canadian poetry, suggests that Canadian artists have failed "to create community; solitude and isolation have been our art's major themes."<sup>27</sup> In numerous ways, bissett's work addresses, contradicts, and attempts to ameliorate the "failure to create community." Against solitude and isolation bissett sets a vision of community that includes community of purpose and community of action, each of which serves

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27 Watson, *fires in th tempul*, np. (1).

as a theoretical construct parallel to issues-based politics and issues-oriented political coalitions. For bissett, art is essentially communicative rather than expressive, and consequently it is communal and cultural; we do not see, exist, envision, or survive, nor, as theoretical psychology now tells us, do we create meaning or understanding as solitary beings. Against art as the production of the solitary ego, bissett offers the idea of communication in a living, breathing universe where compassion and moral passion together would define the rules of human relations and thus community. So in bissett's texts, the embodiment of poetics and the embodiment of politics are inseparable.

bissett's lifelong work in communicative arts, like his constant travel on behalf of poetree and on behalf of komunikaysyun, is a way of connecting with and building a community. bissett's politics and the political substance of his writing imply and assume the existence, or at least the possibility, of a community. One tension in bissett's work is between the human need, on the one hand, for communal support and action and, on the other, for solitude. bissett posits within a democratic community a solitude that does not isolate or alienate.

bissett's "dansing magik animals" and the characters who people bissett's works themselves constitute a community. When all else fails, they are a cast of companions who with the writer and the reader constitute a community of purpose. Thus bissett's oeuvre denies solitude and isolation and promotes and creates involvement in community. The form, substance, spirit, politics, and poetics of bissett's work deny the notion that solitude and isolation are necessarily human fate. For bissett "the entry into meaning" is an ongoing and essential human process, and we are all "active, impassioned 'meaning makers'" for whom narrative, in the broadest sense, "is a primary . . . mode of knowing." Kommunikaysyun is a primary means, if not the primary means, by which we construct culture and organize society, and "poetree is for komunikaysyun."

Susan Musgrave / "when we get there can I smoke?"

*A Reading Tour of Britain and France,  
with bill bissett, November, 1981*

"I don't know how they keep this train on the tracks," says bill. We pull out of London's Paddington Station. "In two weeks I will be chopping wood in the Cariboo."

I've left my life, a marriage gone to sleep with a glass of wine in its hand, "Emotional Rescue" turning soundlessly on the record player. I have no one to run back to, no place to hide. "In two hours I can smoke," says bill.

We've been travelling for days — the trains, the lonely stations. In Norwich we saw a church that had been bombed by a zeppelin; in Oxford we read to a college of gay Quakers. In London, last night, we went to a party at David Hockney's flat and bought tickets to see *Camelot* and then have dinner with Richard Burton, but didn't go.

Instead, as bill would say, we raged into Wales. In Cardiff we compare parasites, take in the Impressionists and Gwendolyn Davis's fake bronzes, including "The Kiss." We meet a Trotskyite in a wine bar, eat fortune cookies under a photo of the Grants of St. James (land grants, mostly). I get "Romance is iffy."

bill isn't convinced; he's been told Cardiff is a hotbed of vice. He finds "The Private Shop" whose windows had been whited out to keep the public from looking in, and an array of potions to make love last. Longer. It is International Rugby Day in Cardiff. "They talk on the telephone with their drawers down," we hear someone say. Romance is looking iffier.

In Coventry there is fisticuffs in the hotel at night. I dream I am too refined to eat sugar. bill always asking me, "Are you feeling festive



yet?" In Coventry I get a wake-up call: "Your cold breakfast is coming up."

We wake up in Yorkshire, too, with stone pigs stone cold at the foot of our beds. Mrs. Jackson, the landlady, says the cold is piercing. "We don't have summers," she says.

At the Church of Spiritual Healing we climb the blue staircase, kneel before the blue bear on the altar, the starfish on the altar cloth. bill gets a message from a Hindu in a green robe, through Mrs. Peel, the healer, whose people were taken in caravans from their land of red rain, long ago. Mrs. Peel says there is a question in bill's life.

I get a message on my palm, a red wound, a stigmata. bill sees it and touches it — a miracle! bill will be cured, too: no more parasites! I light a prayer paper and a little cloud goes up. "Blessings can go through walls," bill says.

In Heptonstall we go looking for Sylvia Plath's grave and find a blue suitcase, the weeds in lovely riot. The suitcase matches the blue shoes bill always wears, the ones he's worn out with so much travelling.

At first we couldn't find her, the cold was making it hard. "Maybe she did it to get warm," bill says. That could have been part of it.

At Lumb Bank, a writers' workshop, we meet Damian who's been questioned by the police because he looks like the Yorkshire Ripper, and Colin, who's written two books called *Panic* and *Asylum*, who questions bill's syntax. Later in the village there are fireworks and bill dances away over the hills, dances back with the young girls who have been awakened by shooting stars. White moths come out of the hedgerows, drawn to the light around bill's body, settling on his hair, on his face, all over his clothes.

I don't know how we keep this train on its track, with all the distractions we have to face daily. Glasgow, Dundee, Edinburgh, Leeds. A newspaper headline in Newcastle reads SEVEN YEARS FOR SEX BEAST and I think of Camus: "A single sentence will suffice for modern man. He fornicated and he read the papers."

Romance consistently iffy. I don't know how we keep doing it — behind the walls of hotel rooms, pubs and guest houses, B&Bs, the small smoky rooms where we read our poetry. I dream bill and I have an adobe in Arizona. "I heard some good news today," says bill. "We come this way but once."

Then over the sea by British Airways to Paris (bill asks "When we get there can I smoke?") where we read at the Canadian Embassy. We visit a bookstore that has been bombed by extremists, and laugh with a firebreather who wants me to go with him, afterwards; bill says you have to wait two years in between major relationships, so I don't leave, I stay. At the Louvre I watch bill flick a booger onto the Mona Lisa to see if it will set the alarms off. It may still be there, bill's booger, to this day.

"Is everything brilliant?" bill asks, when, on our last evening in Paris, the sirens start playing our song and the man bleeding on the sidewalk asks for a smoke, a light. "Got flame?" he says, in darkness. bill gives him his last cigarette.

And flying back to Vancouver the next day, "You are My Shining Star" coming in through our headphones, our faces messy with tears, the terrible parting yet to come. bill going back to chop wood in the Cariboo, asking "Are you feeling festive yet?", me thinking I might head down to Colombia to drink orange juice and talk about emeralds.

"Brilliant," bill says, when I tell him.

## bill bissett / THREE POEMS

### loving without being vulnrabul

manee timez

i was considring th wayze uv sunnee  
n murkee possibiliteez yet ther was is ar  
onlee th wayze that can happn he sd as i was  
am accepting ths evreething opend up 2 b  
sew much eazier yes as iul nevr b as i was  
onlee th inkredibul non logikul un translatabul  
wayze uv being as i am wun n multipul n  
present within WHAT GOWD th WATR N  
SEE KREESHURS wer FLOODING thru  
evn th clod windos thees opnings involv  
not being pressurd he went on by anee othrs  
my selv or schedules accepting YES th  
kontra dicksyuns embray sing th process sure  
unknowing th goal like whats th point ok xcept  
we b 2gethr ar flying undr th giant looming sew  
neer sew far sew manee manee ITS A NU GAL  
AXEE star flamingoes constellaysyun bneeth  
th selestshul shaydee evr reeching branches  
comets shooting hi liting go on suddn path wayze  
luxuriating in th sensitiv breezes yes th ocean  
ripping thru us in all direksyuns each wave n  
us disapeering now they see it is not how it is  
if yr not vulnrabul how ar yu in love he askd  
its a nu kind uv loving i sd n its reelee possibul  
may b n is reelee mor wundrful whn it can happn  
uv kours not always me ium ths close 2 happee  
ness i sd yet th scene changes melting in anothr supr hot  
spell whats th point uv lerning lessons if we cant  
remembr them  
our speeces skreemd in2 th deep turquois whale  
nite teeth sew rippuling shine swet dripping off  
them tusks prodding gnashing our legs off blood



spurting    s h a r k s    interrupting our picknick  
ing   or   us trappd in anothr ice age   brrrrrr   big  
time   or   *caut in a suddn tidal wave*   its th big wun

fine   ride it   out   arint we   sew small  
squishd undr all ths watr   is it still calld  
th atlanteek   or   burreed undr   an un  
announsd   erth quake   ar they evr   ANNOUNSD  
WHAT AR YU   SAYING

dont give yr   heart		unless
dont give yr   heart	s h a r e	its a
dont give yr   heart		transplant

from *loving without being vulnrabul*

i was driving in 2 hundrid mile hous  
in th karibu northern bc

n saw big sign on th left sd

ANIMAL HOSPITAL thot 2

myself well thers nothing reelee

wrong with me now but if i take

anee turn 4 th wors i cud go in

2 see doktor racoon or nurs squirrel

its reassuring 2 know thers help

sew close by well wud yu go

in2 a building sd PEOPUL HOSPITAL

iuv bin with peopul

*from loving without being vulnrabul*

## lookit th pickshurs uv yr self

takn 15 yeers ago th face is  
almost unrecognizabul th mind also has bin  
replaysd manee timez

yu want 2 say th minds  
th same yet is ther a same n in replaysing  
ther is replenishing

cud we b whol like a grain  
field bfor harvesting isint it all process  
onlee wher is th freez frame or

anee capturing uv image port  
abul bfor carving imprintid in th fluid cells  
uv our brain how we act evn is

sew changing ahhh attachment n th nausea

hed rest phones bulletin bords flexibiliteez

th hungree soul 4 certaintee sure is a hot wun  
he sd picking me up n takn me farthr along  
th road

colors uv stamina n optimism evree  
thing changes th fethrs we weer starting out  
agen yr kinda young lookin 2 b out on ths road  
ths time uv nite by yrself he sd 2 me

sure is wet he sd pickin me up by th gulch dont  
usualee see guys middul age like yu he sd out  
hitchin whirling in th wind n th moistyur

montage sequens uv pick ups wher did th yeers uv  
travelling begin 2 put it ther pin point th  
needul in th our fingrs touching as we ar

passing th glass btween our compatibul beings



fire erth

a day uv sun moon stars sew far away them  
selvs glowing th memoreez uv our previous  
lives we carree with us in 2 th simmring  
phases uv what we dont know it  
all wayze turns out or oftn tho we know sew  
hard we hurt ourselvs fine it mostlee changes  
bfor we can grayze its suddn n resilient  
messages fly off us

e tuk off his hat she sat down in2 th  
flowring ground wher sparrows had bin  
swimming in th sky

n he sd 2 him look i dont know i cud wait  
til sum wun passes by

or letting go uv th stanse onlee th rumors uv  
immortalitee sustain us or regardless  
uv that what i want 2 focus on my self  
selvs

it happns ovr n ovr agen xcellent until th  
appetite changes oh i dont know i sd its  
evreething els peopul getting brutal n th virus  
thats whats changing all that 4 me now evn 2  
protekt myself from disapointment eye dont  
hope its a plateau a harmone colliding with  
uv kours poetenshul opnness 2 sumthing happning  
sum wher els its a verree spiritual phase reelee with  
a lot uv greef 4 all individuals evree wher no wun  
is immune from th changing privaseez n ownr  
ships uv emosyuns dont n dew interest me sail  
ing n grounding n arint we all each day left  
with our own intrpretasyuns uv our own lives

evasiv deskriptiv passages n ths fleeting

boiling time

*from loving without being vulnrabul*

## Adeena Karasick / bill bissett: A WRITING OUTSIDE WRITING

Through a re-politicization of socio-historic linguistic structures, bill bissett engages in a writing praxis which inscribes an unofficial, outlawed discourse. A discourse which is improper, contaminated and *out of control*. And though Frank Davey, Stephen Scobie, Karl Jirgens, Jack David and Len Early <sup>1</sup> have at various times labeled bissett's writing "metaphysical," "transcendental" and "idealistic," according to Derrida what is "metaphysical" is that which does not fit into a system, (excluded like voice, like semen, like vomit, like writing)<sup>2</sup>, and cannot be absorbed; what is "transcendental," is that which is heterogenous to all hermeneutic totalization; and what is "Ideal" is generated only *through* and *by* repetition (a repetition which brings with it an alterity that forbids the unity of the foundation it was supposed to insure, and thus re-presents nothing other than, in Derridean terms, **a production of difference**). Thus, bissett's writing must be reviewed as *metaphysical*, *transcendental* or *idealistic* only insofar as it is a differential productivity of effects; a range of discourses distinguished between disadjustments, promiscuity, syncretism, juxtaposition and integration, and refuses systematization.

Like Abraham Abulafia, a 13th C. mystic, who was convinced that through contemplation of the Hebrew alphabet, one could be free from *ordinary* perception engaged in a praxis he called, "the science of the combination of letters," bill bissett employs a schizop(oet)phrenic aesthetic whereby "particulariz[ing] and atomiz[ing] language into word, morpheme, syllable, vowel, letter and sound,"<sup>3</sup> text becomes "a continuum of letters," a network of echoes, traces; displaced in a palimpsestic process of rupture, supplementation and dis-ease. Writing "evn without th sentens or transitiv verb konstruks," bissett foregrounds the materiality/"pateriality" of language and thus inscribes a textual space where "langwanga collidz" into a "molekular dissolv," engendering an ever-expansive mode of meaning production.

So, as in *sa n th monkey* or *sa n th crystal ball*, **SA** as sublexical unit, signs and re-signs as Soul Arrow or “Savoir Absolu,” the trace of **SA** sacrificed, circumcised remains in avowal, as a sublime vocable, as trope or ellipsis that accumulates swells into “ciseaux, scie, si (if) si s’il [. . .] is put to work, ça, ci” <sup>4</sup> as **SA** salient, signifies, soars on the threshold of la sememe, the sublime circumscession of **SA** stretches, separates. Folds into a memory confessed as **SA** the signature signs, assigns between the signans/signatum; as enseign sein desseins designs and resigns dasein in a countersignative insignia resurrected on the skin of these syllables **SA** surges **SAL**vaged as **S** the story of [a] signs as cenere solace cinders in insignia seigneurie swill salus in sanguine sluice. **SA** stretched in the cinder of a sentence, in the idiom of an opening, **SA**’s **SAG**a seizes in liaison and striction comme *ça* or **A.S.A.** (acetylsalicylic acid), which as the Pharmakon, heals by making sick, [sic] as both the poison and the an(ec)tidote, **SA**, sal, sullies **SA**, as Sender/ Addresser questions *reading* as an intra-productive economy. **SA** as the sign of metaphorical reversal, where “a little **SA** sinning” <sup>5</sup> escarres, scars, carts, succours, **SA** supplements or stands in for what’s said in a **SA**id which cannot **SA**y its **SA**ying (essaying). As **SA** (*ça*) slips between languages and cultures. Between genders and legacies, **SA** as “immense and finite sponge pregnant like a memory” in the naked spectacle of wounds and witnesses, caresses swells into its lexicon savoured in **SANI**.

*ç’est sa*

Further, through the infusion of “unreadable elemnts” <sup>6</sup> bissett questions any notion of what is spoken, what is written as oral and graphic lexemes bleed into an invaginated chiasmus of edges, folds, flaws, laws. “dansing dimesyuns byond re/hersals,” bissett foregrounds how writing “luxuriates” in the “ekstasee” of words, sounds, breath; bodies into an erotics of articulative textures where solypse slip in a ventriloquist kiss n ex-schize as “verokia” caresses lexica intersects. And though his pointallistic, lettristic, concrete work can be read as “notaysyun” it’s a notation for an orality that always exceeds itself.



Haunted by repetition, reproduction, a network of replacements and substitutions, it recreates a *transformance* that can never be transcribed:

. . . *sound* is huge element uv writing wanting/ 2 let th words on th surface tactile intaglio look as much/ as possibul as each *sound* in that pome in that place s/ spelling th medium sew thers growing phonetik deepning/ wch can seem fairlee konistent n is thru ovr all allows/ inkonsistenseez as th mood flavour n th sound nuance/ emphasis itself changes evn within wun pome . . .”<sup>7</sup>

And if, according to Edmond Jabès, “identity is, but an assemblage of letters,” bill bissett *becomes* his writing. And in so doing, does not privilege lyrical realism at the expense of language; does not engender a Platonic schema (where writing is the parricidal son of the logos), but acknowledges that writing is always already a network of referrals inscribed in diversity **and** consistency, dispersion **and** gathering; repetition, absence, risk, loss, death, and produces a system of irreducible iterability. bissett rather, inscribes a “hypothet/ikul/ unavoidable present”; a present-non-present or resonant present “wher/evreething . . . alredee with us.”<sup>8</sup>

Simulacric of the “ecstatic” writing of Abulafia where the course of nature can be changed through the context of manipulating language, or how “changing the order of the letters . . . expresses a deleterious state in such a way that the form of a noun will have the effect of transforming reality,”<sup>9</sup> bissett’s texts foreground that what is “real” is only “reality producing.” Producing *effects* of the real. And as “the real” “is not inseparable from the idea of the idea (of the idealization of ideality) as effect of iterability”<sup>10</sup> what is “Real” is “irreal,” serial and [reels] in a complex flex of conflictual “fakts,” “kaleidoscopik ficksyuns.” And thus, bissett’s work acknowledges the fiction of its idiom, and inevitably foregrounds that *the world* and *language* are not two separate realms, but are inseparable from discursive structures and systems of signification. So, not only is “every letter a wor(l)d in itself,”<sup>11</sup> but “**we live inside language.**”

And though through letter combination, bissett interrogates traditional notions of orthography and models of spelling, “punktuayshyun,” he does not set up another standardized “offishul” colonial code; a new Order, a new Law, but with “the manee n varied language notaysyuns,”<sup>12</sup> language structures become simulacric of politico-cultural syncreticity; directly synechdochic of the gaps, caesuras, and silences which exist between language(s), cultures, codes.

wanting 2 bring/ 4 me th lettrs th words 2 theyr sound  
 oral textyur bite/ changing may help vivify th language  
 2 disrobe th bull/ shit inherent in th inheritid big  
 tennis game binaree/ konstrukts no wun is 2 blame 4  
 habit significans etset/ era say sew that egalitarian  
 societee can be evolving at/ leest 4 me in th writing sins  
 poetree is not a how 2 manual needing agreed upon  
 symbols ther is freedom 2 play in2 th growing.<sup>13</sup>

So, through “an accidental and graphically imperfect semiology”<sup>14</sup> (always in excess of itself), bissett’s work questions the metaphysical erection of *property* (inscribed in empirical notions of being, purity, autonomy). The *sens propre* (clean or proper sense) is *sans propre*, improper, inappropriate (impropriotous, riotous), depropriated, exappropriated and infects any notion of a pure, clean or “readable” text. And thus, as a hierogrammatic graphematrix of reproduction, diss/*emanation*, contamination, which engenders a hybridity of meaning, forbidden transparency and impossible univocity, bissett’s work not only interrogates a Eurocentric myth of Meaning, a regime of Truth, Authenticity and Representation; an apparatus of Power, and the gendered-political fallacy of genre purity, but foregrounds how language becomes the negotiation of contradictory and antagonistic instances that open up hybrid sites and objectives of struggle.

Sublimely extended — sucked up, thrown out to the “periferee” of a sentence, to the paraphrasis of a signature, “moon sweet/cedar smells . . . erth sun lakes kiyots woolvs and hot love bodeez howling loons . . .” elide in a simulacric economimesis effecting a *language event*, “a langwage xperience,” marked by exile, agonism; spasms in the rhythmized hiatus of a grammatological occlusion and becomes a theatrix, cicatrix of performative differance.

When a bill becomes an Act.

Further, with the infusion of multiple genres, codes, idioms, bissett's texts present themselves as *non-organic* discourses shrouded in anonymity, anachronism and incongruity. Not locked or bound within the idiom of existential analysis or the limits of order as determined by a socio-political condition of absolutism, determinism, Idealism, Metaphysics or Re-discovery, but as a "yuunyun" announced in fragments, a heteroglossic enunciation, a polymorphous activity which binds a range of differences and discriminations that inform the discursive and political practices of ethnic, gendered and cultural hierarchization.

. . . wanting 2 write in as manee wayze as poss/ibul  
spiritual metaphysikul narrativ politikul realism/ his her  
storikul konversaysyunal meditatativ trance long/ n incisiv  
breef sound vizual songs chants lirik romantik/ erotik  
fusun or linguistik mewsik in wch a lot or all uv/ thees  
elements ar present in various n changing emphases vois  
narrator singul telling manee voices coinsiding . . . or  
konscious comments on soshio ekonomik/ hierarkikul  
strukshurs that present th inequitee problematiks/  
thees consideraysyuns . . . dramatik descriptiv/ epik or  
narrativ politikul his her storikul . . .<sup>15</sup>

So, just as the page as *decoupage*, *parages* destabilizes any notion of a fixed regularity, methodology, univocity, every letter becomes a subject, becomes simulacric of an apophatic network of radical indeterminacy. Through proliferating power, savagery, and contamination, letters as intermingling bodies breathe, caress, merge with, move *into*, displace and *enact* a reproductive process, which reproduces text as a sapirous reciprocity of paracitation, quotation, restoryation, appendices and resemblance: where each letter, each graphic unit, announces itself as the possibility of the relation to the other, of the gift, of affirmation, of prayer.



And if every letter is a signature, bissett foregrounds how even the trace of subjectivity can never present itself as a unified agency of emission, but as a Volosinian “clash of social accents,” a syncretic intersect of positions, acts, voices, s(tr)u(c)tures. Gathering into a “kaleidoskopik” spectrality, where subjectivity is dispersed, diaspersed through recontextualization, migration, translation: (“nd I was gone gone into th/ smell uv yu gone into a sea uv yu”).<sup>16</sup> And as the “pomes carree being,” bissett becomes a macrosyntactic signifying praxis; a negotiation of passages, links, bonds, where text/content elide and multiply difference. And difference remains “skreem/ing n vomitting n th crayzd scrambling.”

a private bill, a public bill, a true bill. A bill of Attainder, a bill of fare, of health, of pains and penalties. A bill of rights, of sale, of mortality; bills' receivable and exchanged.

Through “his/her sterikal” monomania, the signifier of reference slips, is “mis or mistr placed” through an extraintentional differential production of palimpsest and dissemination. Through crimes, perjuries, blasphemies, tropological subjectivity is blended with a legendary, complex and variable consanguinity, “his/herstorees,” “mytholojees,” positions, quarantines, s(tr)u(c)tures, codes. Thus, blurry, several, simultaneous, contaminated by “xtraordinaree n revelatoree hallusinaysyuns,” “or customaree vish/yuns,” “tangerine whisprs” or “raisin cookies n siphalis sores,” bill bissett gathers himself into a countersignative contract, which tracks and retracks, contracts into an ever expansive realm of possibility and enunciation.

billy: a policeman's staff which is a little bill or billet. A pocket handkerchief. The can in which Australian station-hands originally made tea and did their cooking. Possibly billa, a creek. Water. billy. Male as in billy goat. A goatee.

Thus, between socio-linguistic subjectivities, bissett puts into praxis a “life-writing,” a “politikul auto biography,” a biomythography or in Derridean terms an “auto-bio-thanato-hetero-graphical opus” — a “circumfession” that “*makes trewth*,” and *lives inside* a “pluralistik” hermeneutic p(a)lace of re-inscription, translation and meaning production.

“Trewth” then gets exiled into all the letters of the text; their shapes, combined and separated, swaddled letters, curved ones and crooked ones, superfluous and elliptic ones, minute and large ones and inverted, the calligraphy of the letters, and the open and the closed pericopes and the ordered ones . . .<sup>17</sup> and their “linguisteeek mewsik”. Fetishizing instability, nomadicism or in Benjaminian terms, “monadicism,” vagrancy, meaning travels (*travaillies*) from place to place [re-*plaised*], or splayed out in hyperspatial interplays. Without static place, meaning or tropos, bissett’s texts foreground themselves as linguistically diasporic; inscribed in fragmentation, rupture and aban*donnement*. Between “vankovr” and “venusland,” “th karibou,” “kingstonia,” “castanets n kiyots.” Between “chalottetown,” “centralia,” “adjektiv windows” or “labial [] glotis n tonguing minds,” bissett moves as his text. Writes himself through a complex of codes, texts, borders; through an exilic reason crept into by detour.

And as a paracritical passage, ellipsis eclipse in the lapsus, bissett re-posita a repast of a past which postulates as a resonant present sends, irrepresentable, and foregrounds how *exile* is not ejective, but introjective, not exclusionary, but engenders a palimpsestic historicity, of promiscuity and possibility.

However, though bissett’s texts are inscribed in exile, migration, nomadicism, they *do not become* a “liberating free play,” a loss of limits — an amorphous circulation of signification or get dissolved into an indeterminate miscellany of inscription, as his texts are always articulated from a specific historical-socio-institutional, ethico-political position (*in discourse*).

we go in2 th dansing find our/ place s 4 ths time in *our*  
society is evr n thn in 2 th biggr/ pickshur s 4 othr  
rendrings intrsekting cross th seksyun weev/ ing thru th  
biggr powr konstruks . . .<sup>18</sup>

As Derrida points out, "there is no pleasure (or meaning) without stricture";<sup>19</sup> *meaning* production can only happen through "separasyuns and konstraints," limitation, bands, *contraband*. Thus, through a process of contraction (and therefore expansion), through a negotiation of varying "sir madame cumstances," processes, privileges, drives and thresholds, what is authoritative, what is accessory synnexes in the nexus, collapses into a surplus space of resonant sense, a consensus of since or *sensucht* (desire).

Yet, as an ensemble of specific discursive practices, as the outgrowth of a determinant mode of production, bissett's texts do not position themselves as a non-hierarchic celebration of opacity as incoherence, but recognize the intensity of ever-firing fibres, fluids as a series of "limit experiences," "possibiliteez," "opsyuns," a "relaysyunal n kontekstual" intersequential circulation of semiological slippage and semantic subterfuge (where "[we find] ourselves in ar curving").<sup>20</sup> So, even in *blur street*, bissett foregrounds that what is outside of a border is not absented and therefore cannot be an experience of lack, effacement, erasure, closure and silence, but "full uv echoez . . . clattring suddenlee" or in "th moistyur murmerings" where "rippuling shine swet dripping" borders become a series of traces, echoes, cinders inscribed in spectral economy of exile, rupture, movement and uncertainty.

Though bissett's texts assault traditional concepts of subjectivity, he never erases the possibility of a potent agency of political action, he never privileges textuality at the expense of the "real world." For bissett, the *world* and *language* are not two separate realms, but are inseparable from discursive structures and systems of signification. It rather works AGAINST a politics that sets itself up as an empirical or pre-political *real* (where domination is invisible), and challenges a hierarchic binary system of exclusions that eradicates difference and leads to totalitarian regimes which ground its prescriptive judgments *outside* signifying practices.



... ium verree aware/ uv th needs 4 pluralism acceptans  
 4 evreeun without monopoliz/ ing cultural identitee  
 spred ovr a geographikul area like mayo . . . th greatest  
 storee is th serch 4 egalitarian societee within n/ without  
 no powr sways uv th rite wing fundamentalist retorik/  
 destroying in th name uv creat ing . . .<sup>21</sup>

So, whether he's writing about "th militaree," "th mountees," drug busts or "toxik" blobs; "mass xecusyuns," "spektakular klass strugguls n abusive rest homes," "death n direleksyun" or the horror of AIDS: "th pain uv so manee peopul dying n th sexual prsonal frustraysyun,"<sup>22</sup> of the slow deterioration of his friends, the "xklusun/ . . . th bellee swelling with cramping/ tortur uv bakteria infeksyun burden,"<sup>23</sup> or being gay and male, living outside the limits of the law, bissett explores the relation between law and inscription. Taking a position *in the work of analysis* (and thus *is never separate* from a political institution), his texts seek new investigations of responsibility, investigations which question the codes inherited from *ethics* and *politics*. So, it never establishes itself as a limitless discursivization of the political which suspends reference (because not only is there reference for his texts, but the effects of reference (or referents) remain *and the referent is textual*. Though inscribed in a "langwage" that is in (in)initely "raging," "[t]ekstatik," the political is not given up to indeterminate play, to a vacuous relativism but, between justice and injustice (through "a star studdid gathring uv th judgd n th judging"<sup>24</sup>), it acknowledges that choices *are not* made from a position of transcendent subjectivity that precedes or stands outside the judgments it makes. In a continual process of slippage and deferral, the subject is not erased, absented, but displaced in indeterminacy, ambiguity, plurality.

thr is / no essenshul storee/ so manee view points/ so  
 manee views/ approximaysyuns<sup>25</sup>

Thus, the subject is reinscribed as a political agency with an ethical subject, *a subject of ethics*, which practices a justice that cannot be "justified" and thus, necessitates "full" responsibility. A subject that asks:

wch memoree wch judg wch storee wch impatiens  
 burning burst/ ing out uv anee mould clasping ending  
 finding turbulent being . . . whos ordr <sup>26</sup>

And performs not an ethics based on morality, but amplitude, thresholds, capacities, arrangements and combinations, variations, relations, transformations. And thus, bissett's writing does not become a tranquilizer in the service of gorgetting "daytime" atrocities but rather, the political is re-inscribed *in* the poetical; in a differential production of language traces (which are not simply traces of traces but refer to an origin escaping the text in the act of grounding it), and secures the text against the madness of permanent dissemination. Thus, bissett's writing can never be reduced to an a-political, non-committal or irresponsible escapist strategy, but rather questions "how our lives can b defin'd/ sew much by opposisyunal arketypal konstruks . . . th/ feers from th inventid universalisms . . ." <sup>27</sup> interrogating Phallogocentric, "oligarkikul" notions of Truth, Authenticity, Legitimacy, Reason, Meaning or Closure.

So, even to say "we live inside language" is not enclosing text in a prison-house of language, but opens language to the *Other* in general — returns as the singularities which, by remarking their singularity, explode the received limits of a law which never presents itself. Thus, bissett's texts acknowledge that "what happened" cannot be grounded in irrefutable certainty, but in radical translation, which is NOT *Idealistic*, *Transcendental* or grounded in chaos, but as "there is no law in general except of a repetition and there is no repetition that is not subjected to a law," <sup>28</sup> he inscribes a law that cannot be contained.

Through a series of trials and re-trials, *travaillies*, entrails, bissett questions how can "the Law" be defined when "the law is incomprehensible; when it plays itself out between an undesirable, unverifiable, indecisive absence, and a presence which is not a presence but promise, appeal . . . (emitting) its radiations from the point of its imperceptibility" <sup>29</sup>? And if according to Saussure, "language is always received, like the law," and according to Derrida, "every law finally communicates with an absolute out-law, which would be in a 'transcendental position' with respect to any given legality, and which we have called

the gift of the law of the promise,"<sup>30</sup> bissett (as out-law or bi-law) acts as law (*in the being-law of the law*) and exceeds the law, or in Cixousian terms, "blow[s] up the Law . . . tears the law apart,"<sup>31</sup> re-marks a law that is before the law and exceeds the law; a law which allows itself to bind itself maintain itself while dividing itself in the process, and *becomes* the letter of the law that is never given, but is always already analytically entailed by the force of repetition, contamination, difference.

So not a "Writing *Outside* the Law" or as McCaffery might say, a "Writing *Outside* Writing," but if according to Derrida, *ousia* is "spectral presence," bissett must be seen as not *Outside* but OUSIDE Writing, OUSIDE the Law. Ousted *out of* and *into* a political economy of parasitism, grafting and divisibility. Introducing an absolute heterogeneity in the modality of the possible, bissett maintains the trace of a passage through an irreducible iterability, an undecidability, where meaning and truth are constituted contingently, indeterminably, like "daily fashyun n fushyun n fushyas blooming." And in substitution and exchange produces a paratactic sacrifice apostrophized in a liminal toponymy of textatic accumulation, where to the letter of the law, every letter a law.



## ENDNOTES

1. Frank Davey in his 1972 critique of *Nobody Owns the Earth* asserts that bissett writes "of an unqualified, pure, archetypal, visionary world — a world distinguished from ours by its lack of pluralities, multiplicities, divergencies." (*The Canadian Forum*, July/August 1972, p.45). Karl Jirgens account of bill bissett in *Canadian Writers and Their Works*, reports how bissett "attempts to instate an "idyllic myth" (p.49), "embraces a timeless transcendental philosophy" (p.73), and whose "various signifiers ultimately refer to a single cosmic union" (p.75). (*Canadian Writers and their Works*. eds. Robert Lecker, Jack David, Ellen Quigley. ECW: Toronto, 1992).
2. This concept of the "metaphysical" is explored in *Jacques Derrida*, Glas, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr., and Richard Rand (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), as well as in Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics" in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
3. bpNichol, "Passwords: The Bissett Papers" in *Brick*, No.23 (Winter 1985), p.15.
4. Jacques Derrida and Geoffrey Bennington, *Jacques Derrida*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p.212.
5. Jacques Derrida and Geoffrey Bennington, *Jacques Derrida*, p.101.
6. Similarly, through incorporation of extralexical inscription through assemblage such as "The Fields Ar Gold," where antithetical elements from outside traditional forms of painting and sculpture are incorporated, bissett effects a contaminated polyphony of hys/hersterikal texture, where the "Field" opens into an antiabsorptive interdisciplinary s/cite. Becomes "a field of blood," "of fire," "of

force," "of footsteps;" a "field of vision," "allowance." And so far afield, must be seen as a savage field, of conflict, of discourse, of struggle.

7. bill bissett, personal correspondence to Adeena Karasick. Toronto-Malawi, Jan. 1997. This point is further articulated in that "n gale reserch vol 19 contem/ poraree authors detroit 1994 th editors who we wun/drful 2 work with themselvs did a translayisyun in2/ 'korrekt' english ther wch they placed following my own/ text 4 me that was interesting in that th nuances uv/ th words lost sum xistens vizual textyur part uv saing/ n uv kours de accenshuating th sound itselvs th eye hope/ theyr intrvensyun helpd sum reedr s journee phrases in/ langwages have oftn bin usd 2 prevent xperiences manip/ ulate peopul imprison sew 4 me writing can b a drilling/ thru thos obfuskaysyuns or letting ordr s go n playing/ in hopefulee mor opn spaces espeshulee as indikativ/ in th poetiks in s th story I to blewointment 1971 n/ 'poetree is 4 komunikaysyun' in *what we have* Talon/books 1988".

8. bill bissett, "Let th watr sit 4 a day n th chloreen evaporates" in *Carnival: A Scream in High Park Reader*, ed. Peter McPhee (Toronto: Insomniac Press, 1996).

9. Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), p.26.

10. Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit, eds. Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellerby (California: Stanford University Press, 1993), p.8.

11. Abraham Abulafia recited in *Moshe Idel, Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (London: Yale University Press, 1988), p.81.

12. bill bissett, "(no tay syun) pome time pome staysyun" in *Open Letter*. Fifth Series, No. 2, 1982.

13. bill bissett, personal correspondence to Adeena Karasick. Toronto-Malawi, Jan. 1997.

14. Steve McCaffery, "Bill Bissett: A Writing Outside Writing" in *North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973-1986* (Toronto: Nightwood Editions, 1986), p.195.
15. bill bissett, personal correspondence to Adeena Karasick. Toronto-Malawi, Jan. 1997.
16. bill bissett, *RUSH what fukin thery* (Toronto: gronk press, 1972).
17. Sefer ha-Yihud, cited in *Moshe Idel, Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p.189.
18. bill bissett, personal correspondence to Adeena Karasick. Toronto-Malawi, Jan. 1997.
19. Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p.43.
20. bill bissett, "mistr n ms wintr" in *loving without being vulnerabul* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1997).
21. bill bissett, personal correspondence to Adeena Karasick, Toronto-Malawi, Jan. 1997.
22. bill bissett, "blur street II" in *the last photo uv th human soul* (Talonbooks: Vancouver, 1993).
23. bill bissett, "much 2 celebrate unemployment n hungrs th esteemd committee sd gud nite" in *loving without being vulnrabul*.
24. bill bissett, "from th memorabul gala at orangevilee n neepor landing" from the upcoming, *scars on th seehors marvara text fragments*.
25. bill bissett, "(no tay syun) pome time pome staysyun" in *Open Letter*. Fifth Series, No. 2, 1982.



26. bill bissett, personal correspondence to Adeena Karasick. Toronto-Malawi, Jan. 1997.
27. bill bissett, personal correspondence to Adeena Karasick, Toronto-Malawi, Jan. 1997.
28. Jacques Derrida, "Difference" in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, eds. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle, p.123.
29. Hélène Cixous, *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, trans. Sarah Cornell, Deborah Jenson, Ann Liddle, Susan Sellers, ed. Deborah Jenson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p.151.
30. Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, pp.282-3.
31. Hélène Cixous, "Laugh of Medusa" in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, p.316.

## Judith Copithorne / THE CONTINUOUS PRESENT

Three authors who used the continuous present: Gertrude Stein, Mickey Spillane, James Joyce, and more recently it has been used by bill bissett and other friends of mine.

Visceralisations a lot of the time blewointment was inclusive, not reductive; intelligent, not pedantic. Not much proofreading, spontaneous was the way. Pretty classy, phonetic spelling, line drawings, energy spilling off the pages.

Dance/a community rag against the possibility of losing your voice. Hanna Wilkie said, "When people get so annoyed with the content that they refuse to look at things formally then it is necessary to continue."

At twenty we all danced into the spider's web. Sunshine like today when bill gave me the 1st blewointment. I think it was during the '63 poetry conference at U.B.C.

Marg Piercy argues that poetry is deliberately censored in North America by means of ridicule and discreditation.

"The revolt of the 'haves.' In the recession of the 90s there has been virtually no drop in profits."

Involuntary poverty/against poverty of the mind beyond the life force/rifting on the river/revisiting our vicissitudes.  
blew ointment/blue sky/blue as coloured photocopy ink.

Oh Martina Clinton's poetry in issue #4!

... gosh they're really like  
Respighi those birds the orchestration  
they've got going — that huge yellow globe

on top  
of that tree  
... "

I love rereading this poem!  
It's a hard act to follow poetry as primacy  
blood sugar/ligature/survival  
below – in a kind of touch of garlands never  
extreme lace extemporaneity pansomatic



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And *thank u bill*.

\*

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

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

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



## Patrick Lane / bill bissett circa 1967/1968

We walk around the room and talk about poetry as we collate the pages of *blewointment*. They are stacked on tables and chairs and we go in a long slow circle picking up page after page of poems until we have a single issue of the magazine and then we staple it. We've done a hundred copies and there are hundreds more. It's a huge issue and bill has poems from everyone he could think of in Canada and the States. It's as if everything has coalesced around bill out here in Vancouver and he is the center of some kind of revolution, some kind of vortex that draws in words from everywhere. It's taken him days to print it on his antiquated Gestetner machine and the text is poor and faint. As I move I pick up a poem from Margaret Avison and then another Raymond Souster, Al Purdy and Milton Acorn, bp Nichol and d a levy. The list goes on and on, the pages piling up and then the snap of the stapler and the magazine is done, ready to be sent out. The sun pours through the window as we listen to the music of Country Joe and the Fish. The band was here in Vancouver last week and we all sat around bill's place and smoked and drank and talked about how everything was going to change now, everything was going to be different. That was last week and now the magazine.

Our own books have come out last year and we've sold them out and got our money back. bill's talking about breaking away from Very Stone House and starting his own publishing house that he wants to call *blewointment* press. He wants to start publishing the more experimental poets and I'm not so sure of some of the quality of the work, but bill believes everything is poetry and everyone is a poet. I'm not sure of that either, but I appreciate his absolute belief in it. He and Milton Acorn agree on that, though Milton changes his mind every week about who's a poet and who isn't. I want to select the best writers and do their books. Like Pat Lowther's new collection of poems she's going to call *This Difficult Flowering*. It'll be out in another few months. But right now that's not what's happening. *blewointment* is happening,

the magazine a hodge-podge, a compendium of a hundred poets from all over North America.

Out on Fourth Avenue the poets and painters and musicians mix with the hippies who've gathered here from everywhere. There's no difference between San Francisco and Vancouver. People walk the streets with flowers in their hair and incense burning in their hands. Some are begging, most are sharing, but where the money comes from to pay for all of them is beyond me. It doesn't really matter. Milton bursts in the door with his black, twisted cigar stuck in his face. He's yelling about the workers and the hippies getting together and starting an even larger revolution. bill grins and so do I. Milton rages around the room, dishevelled and dirty, shouting about the Marxist-Leninists and how they've betrayed everyone in Vancouver, and how he was turned back at the American border yesterday and how they told him he was an undesirable alien because he is a member of the Communist Party. *The bastards*, he shouts. *The rotten Capitalist pigs!*

I think about bill and I and Mary and Martina coming back from Seattle two weeks ago. We were down to see the opening of a new show at the Seattle Art Gallery. bill had a painting in it. After the show we ate down at the Market and then wandered over to a gay bar bill knew about. Mary had never been in a gay bar and while we were having our beer a group of nine lesbians came in. They were dressed tough and talked tough in their baseball caps and jeans. Mary said that she thought it was great that there were baseball teams for women and we all cracked up, Mary a little embarrassed when I told her they weren't baseball players. Coming home the next day we were stopped at the border and pulled over. bill and Martina had brought bags of herbs they'd bought at the Market and Customs thought they were drugs. I told them they were oregano and thyme.

The Customs men stripped my old Morris, tearing out the back seats and the floor mats, searching the wheel wells and trunk for drugs. bill tried to exorcise their bad spirits and began to dance and chant. We all joined in. The Customs boys were very amused and said that if bill didn't stop they'd arrest him for something. bill just kept on dancing and chanting. They finally let us go and we put the car back together. Before we left the head Customs guy told me he thought it would be a good idea if we didn't come back to the States



any more. We left happy and laughing for home after dropping bill and Martina at their place in Kitsilano.

Milton is reading a copy of *blewointment* while we continue to walk around the room collating more. He chomps on his cigar. The kids come in from outside and Kathryn and Ooljah run over to him shouting *It's Uncle Miltie!* They both love Milton. He is completely bewildered by their love. I think they see the child he is and know he's no different than they are. He leaves with the little girls pulling him by the hands as they tell him about what they are doing outside and how they need his help. I watch him go.

bill looks exhausted. He's getting thin, his body so lean it is like he is only long clean muscles and bones. I don't know what it is, whether he's not eating enough or what, and I don't ask, don't want to know. It's not my business though I worry about him, worry about how he's going to keep on getting by with so little money. Somehow it doesn't seem to matter to bill. All that does matter is his writing and painting, his magazine and the new press he's starting. But his eyes that almost burn with electric fire seem hollow and dark today. As we finish the last copies of the magazine Martina and Mary come in with a jug of kool-aid and some sandwiches. We lean back on the cushions on the floor and eat and drink. *blewointment* is stacked in piles by the door. It's done and I can see the pride in bill, at what he's done, at how exciting it all is to have such a collection of the new poetry put together. It's been a long time coming, the last three or four years of talking and planning and now it's done. On the wall above bill's head are the silk-screen prints he made when he came back from Tucson at the end of the summer. They are entirely beautiful, scorpions and strange dancing figures in pale umbers and golden yellows. I bought two from him last week and they're on the wall back home on Capitol Hill.

The sun slips through the window, its rays cutting delicately through the motes of dust that float around us. The afternoon is almost done and soon I've got to gather the kids together and head back. But right now it just feels good to sit here with my friends and know that a great good thing has been done here and it's all bill and his dream and vision of poetry in the world. Mary leans against me, her brown hair soft on my shoulder. For the moment we're happy. I



know she doesn't want to live like bill and Martina do but I also know I can't keep on working at Van Waters and Rogers much longer. The job is killing me. There's a whole new world happening and somehow I feel I'm just on the edge of it all and not in the centre where I want to be.

Maxine Gadd / THE FLYING EAGLE  
1966

This was on the north side of a very big hill in Vancouver. Some of us lived where it suddenly dipped as though about to dump you into the silver-green sea. Once you realized it was the giant bear-shaped black mountains inducing this hallucination you attempted to relax. A terrifying visual, a solid abyss, set out to fade you to cinders in a time long enough to experience being in the direct path of a radiating lava flow changing daily but getting wider and more entrapping; but no, that was the actual capitalist system, with all its deadly tentacles we could see coming, and most people in Pompei saw they could not outrun it and stayed there as many sentences making a statement. themselves as stone.

on this hill facing north into that black set of pages over a lake behind an infinity that cannot yet get to Lil'wat, there were many old amazing buildings with large rooms, the cheapest of which were dark and cold so individuals had to learn to be cave people again, those who remembered how necessary it was occasionally to live and survive asteroid assaults and to discuss the necessity of storing, having observed those little mouse gods who had stored as long as anyone could talk about remembering. My concern then as always was how to keep my body warm and the possessions few and essential enough to move out on a moment's notice, something i no doubt had picked up in england where i was born in 1940, more or less in the epicentre of the second world war in europe, we never discussed the other guys, god we're a cantankerous species but i guess all species are that way, no peace, never any peace, but maybe this is just an angle from an ultimately artificially constructed subject once dignified by the word "ego" and "soul" which was not the femininely human image of Psyche, butterfly, and mistress of *technes*, having been taught by the goddess herself

no, it was with some sort of pacifist warrior class of monks i found myself, a class who took for themselves the privilege of living and working and acting together due to a rumour of crazed monsters flying over the sea to slaughter the inhabitants wherever they landed, to cut them open where meet the gut and the lungs and the heart (a criss-cross shape) and to turn them inside out, alive, the heart beating, the lungs breathing

this they called "the flying eagle"

BERSERKER watch!

and so to watch  
Joan at her fire  
Pope Joan doing DOS  
dis dos  
we're talkin now  
what constitutes a community  
is it a lot of ideas?  
this line allowed by dos but breaking words at an end so meaning is either stopped dead or shattered

but there is nothing here, nothing left, nothing gone, there was nothing  
a great, black shimmering emptiness, a Home-hardware molded fibreglass front door hanging in a wall of nothingness with nothing before and nothing behind

but somehow if you went out and met it, there was the earth  
there was slime  
cold or warm  
terrifying  
alien  
flesh  
to touch and shrink  
or open to its glory



there still was somewhere a forest, pretty close to the sea, a beach  
a place to build a fire  
it was fire we were always after, a way to keep warm, but our improv-  
vised methods produced nothing but smoke and soot and unburned  
keratenes, and tooth decay and a continual illness that always seemed  
to be a product of our condition. We had our visionaries, those who  
would say, no, it really isn't that way, don't yah see and it set yu back  
for long enough to talk till bill was tired out and i went home and  
maybe wrote a poem with a little of the holy herb

occasionally bill or bill and martina or bill and lance farrell or bill and  
diane di prima would drop by and bill might leave with some poems  
or deliver a blewointment. i never knew how he did it, i was lucky  
enough that a poet as yet unbeknownst to me named f.r. scott, had  
recently invented welfare; i could not fit into capitalism and i tried and  
tried, possibly i would have fit into socialism but i doubt it, somehow  
hippies were, in my subjective evaluation, trying to effect a truly primi-  
tive and authentic communism, which ultimately died of its contradic-  
tions which capitalism will too and take a lot of us with it as in every  
inhuman social cycle...genocide a consistent ceaseless, inconceivable  
nightmare under the shimmering electric vulva of chaos  
shifting aurora of pierced liquid  
slugs, snails, worms, slowly- moving underground slime-moulds  
eternally observing spiders, scientific flies, fleas, ants, grasshoppers,  
meat-eating mantises, no other image is needed for this sacerdotal  
alien, the scholar

*"and all the little birds  
in yon merry green broom*

*with her blo od THEY*

*should aa all have their fill"*

this is owing, an accounting, a sanctifying, a measuring, a cheating, i  
hate it. this is the way it is

this is not forgetting the huge cold damp dark studios, astounding,  
frequently confounding the soul in cold black shivering with fear and  
ecstasy of their beauty, cold cold heart a real but negative concept,

sustaining prussian blue oils oozing over  
the eagle's beak  
*a focusing in labyrinths of sometimes cosy hippy households bookish  
mousehouses*

study a strange cerement  
for each of these creatures

in yon tender green broom  
with her blood

once we heard them gossiping, now, having planted our fields with  
sunflowers and oats  
they have moved off till next winter

*poem for a new bill*

at one point or another we all lived on this big hill facing north with  
many good streams, bushes, berries, grasses, animals, fish, birds

smoke came and the murder of the woods  
what are his claims?  
steel came, noise came and never died

so it is we listen to the birds conversing in their crazy and beautiful  
anxiety

just listen

then whistle

•



crow comes  
chuckles  
crow sees me every day  
knows where i am

gulls discuss immediate existence, with their political sopranos  
the linnets' bitching and fear

turns into triumph  
the triumph of the river

•

the triumph of the river

the 430 vancouver schoolboard jobs cancelled  
the smashed-up squatter houses                      Knight Street Bridge South  
side of the River

*jan 96 b.c. n.d.p. gov't cut all employable people under the age of fiftytwo \$48  
dollars a month; \$500 a month for rent, food, medicine, transportation  
communication bus and telephone to people on welfare:\$500 a month and a  
75% tax on anything they might try to earn*

*April 1, 1997, sick , old unemployable people to be cut back \$97.00 a month.  
In this way the government will reduce the living of 16,000  
therebye saving the taxpayers        \$23 million  
which would have gone to retailers and real estate owners*

*Apr 23, 1997    vancouver schoolboards cut 300 more jobs*

i dream i'm in a world wide flood stream in a kayak  
without a paddle



## Renee Rodin / SOME TIMES

I can't remember if we met in the 60s so my first strong memory of bill came from the late 70s when I was at a rally at UBC organized by Warren Tallman because bill's poem "a warm place to shit," in his *pass th food release th spirit book* published by Talon, had offended some powers who were trying to censor him and a lot of people were there to protest against censorship and PX Belinsky then the *enfant terrible* of the literary scene was kicking up his raucous which caused some brawnish beings to seize him in order to throw him out which was a supreme irony because this was all about free speech but I guess free speech for some people meant tolerating it only when it got expressed in certain decibels and I think it was in the student union building and bill was standing on stage because he was about to read or maybe he just had read and he beamed "hi PX" and PX beamed back before he started yelling again and then the eviction party went into high gear and ejected him and this event stood out in my mind partly because it marked my reunion with Belinsky who I knew from Montreal but mainly because of bill's sweet gentleness as he said "hi" in the midst of such reactionary anger and later in the 80s and the 90s bill and I had good talks about many things and got a couple of pool games in and he did some very inspired readings at R2B2 and once there at the bookstore, though there were others around who may or may not have turned out to be customers, a song came on maybe it was "You and the Night and the Music" and it seemed just the thing to do which was to have a waltz with bill in the middle of a sunny afternoon

bill bissett / Artwork





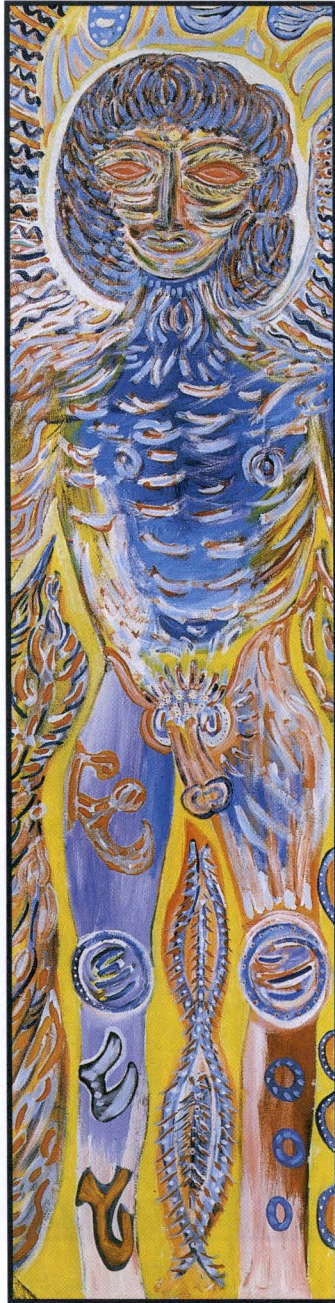


Plate 1 bill bissett, *th first light*, VAG accession #86.7. Courtesy: Vancouver Art Gallery; photo J. Jardine

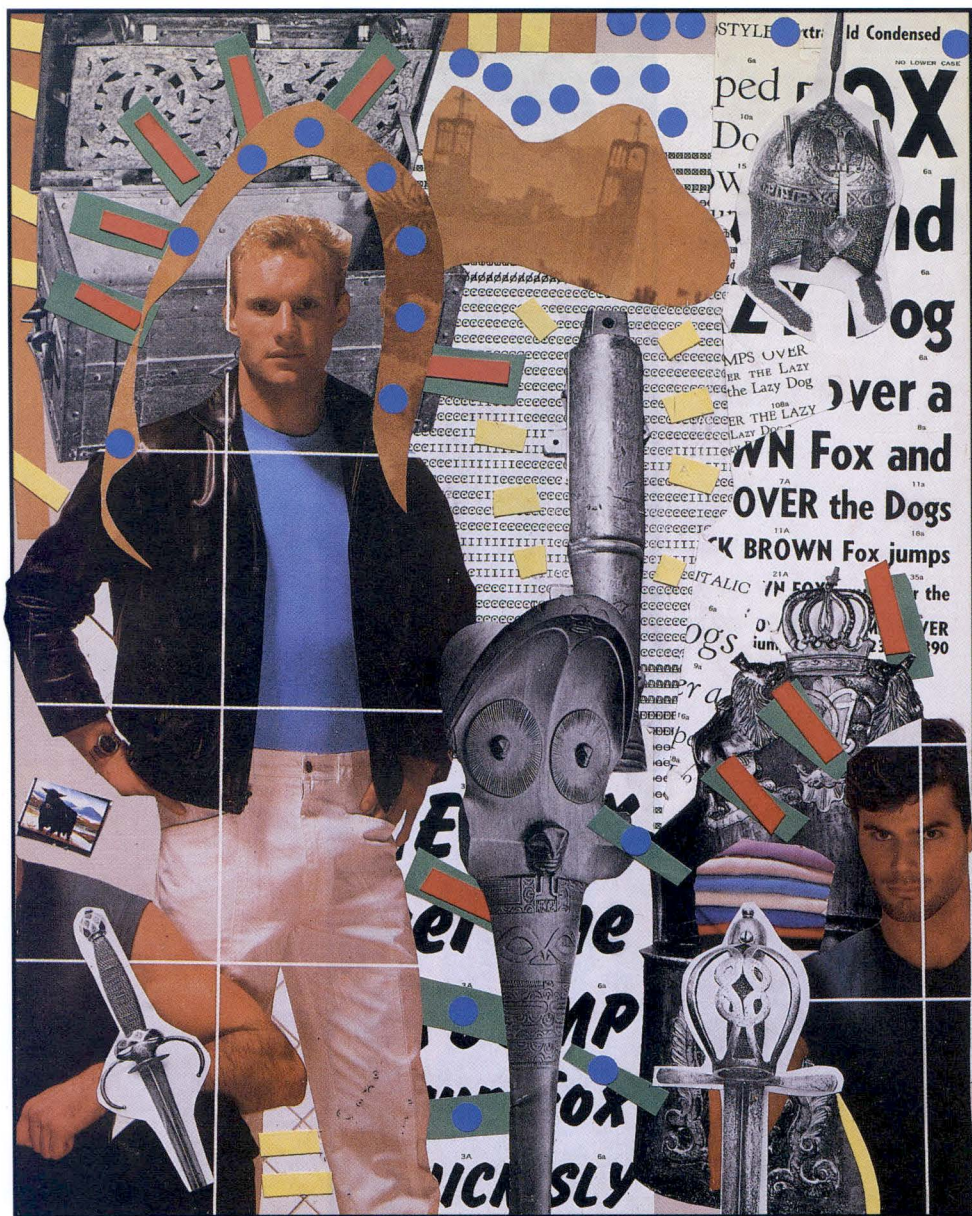


Plate 2 bill bissett, untitled collage. Courtesy: Vancouver Art Gallery; photo J. Gorman.





Plate 3 bill bissett, *redecorate now*. Courtesy: Vancouver Art Gallery; photo J. Gorman.



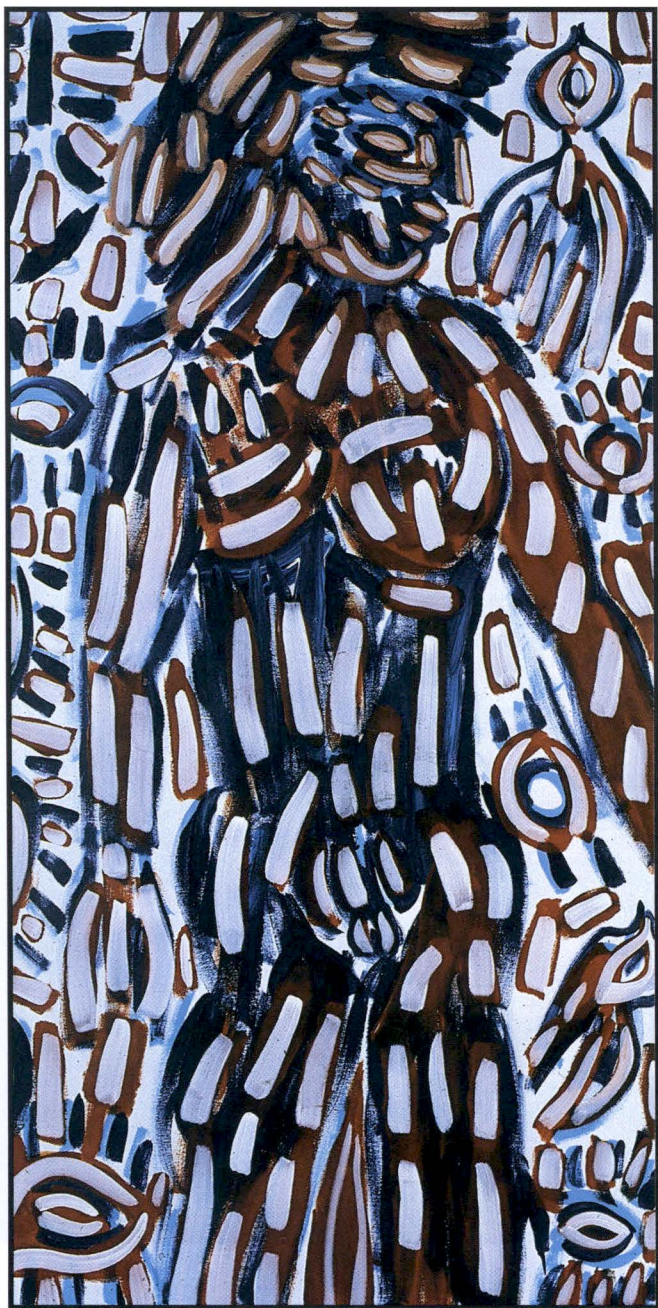


Plate 4 bill bissett, *walking*. Photo: Allan Rosen



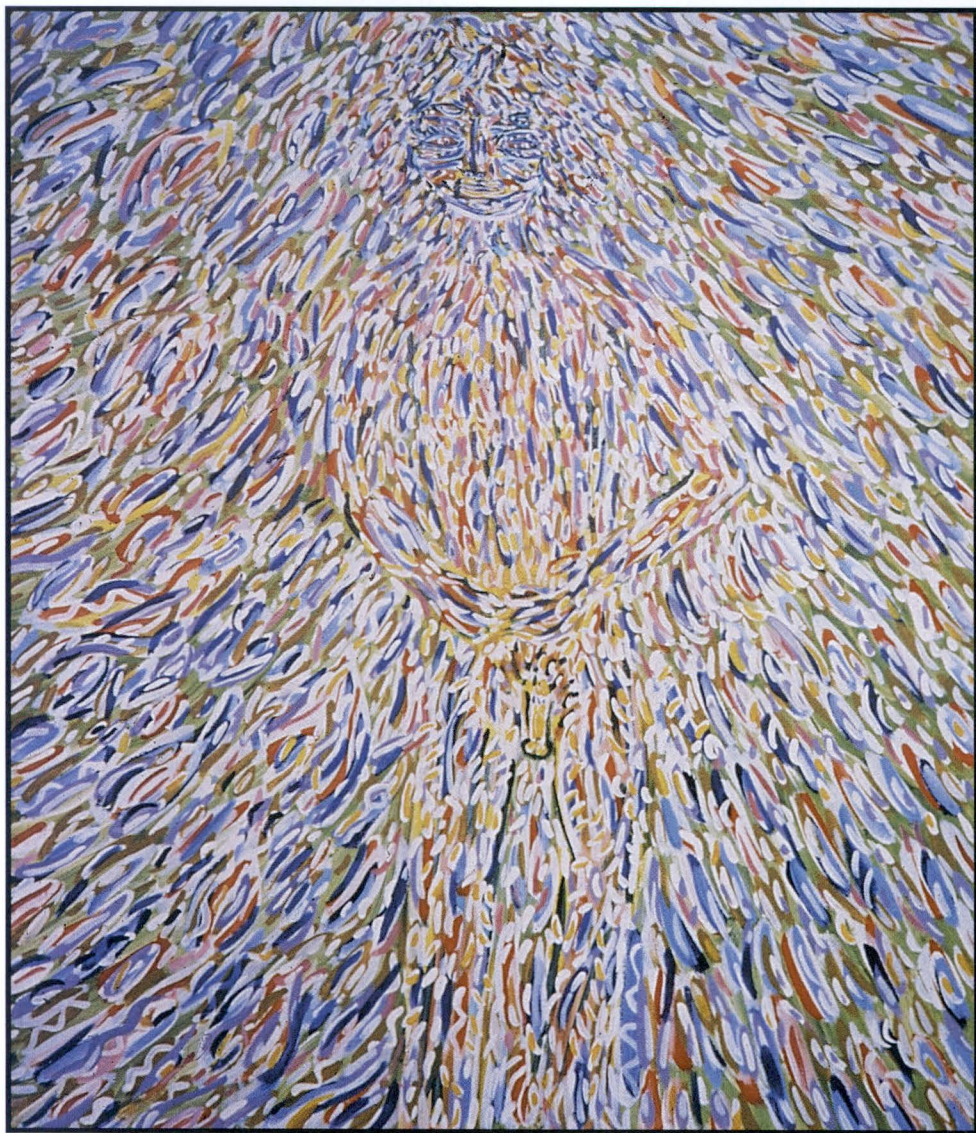


Plate 5 bill bissett, *molecular dissolv*. Photo: Allan Rosen





Plate 6 bill bissett, *wizard*. Photo: Allan Rosen



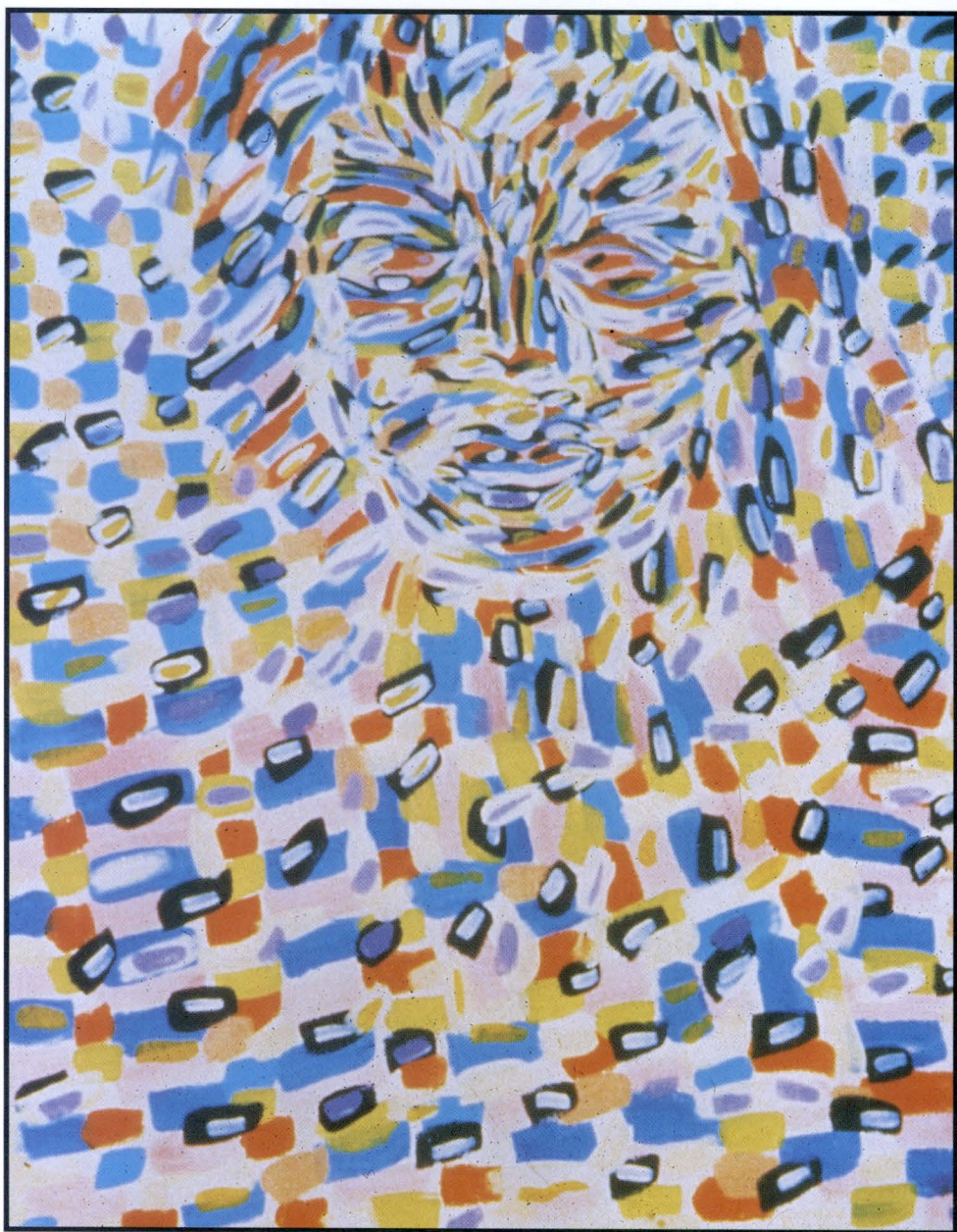


Plate 7 bill bissett, *summr.* Photo: Allan Rosen

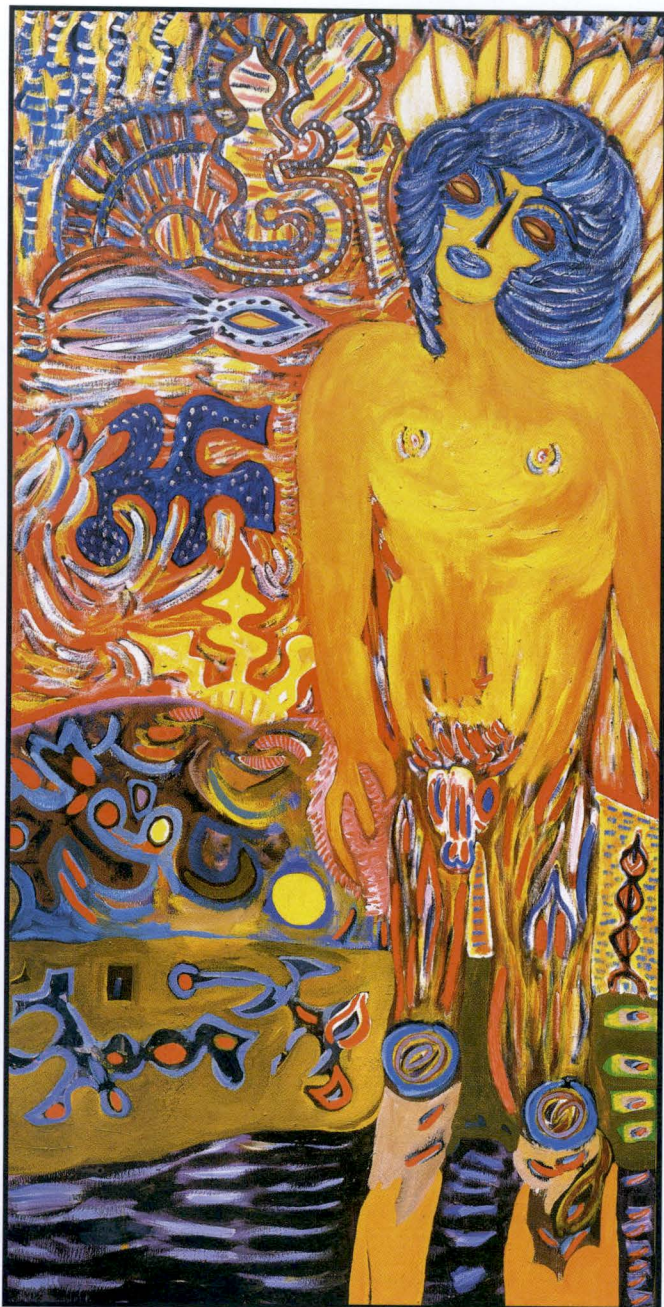


Plate 8 bill bissett, *asura king*. Courtesy: Vancouver Art Gallery; photo J. Gorman.



## Robert Enright / COMPOSITION BY FEELED THE VISUAL ART OF bill bissett

In a radiant explosive nature poem called "in the forest" bill bissett writes rapturously about the connections between the world of nature and the whirled of the flesh. After inviting us as readers to join in the rutting game — "an touch an suck an kiss bodee yr/cock yr running bliss cum th/dawn of yr heart" — he begins a mantric invocation that is as much persuasion as desire. "th skin is opn opn/to th touch nd th mouth running endless/dreems" the poem tells us and goes on to open up the field to a world of limitless expansion. "th skin is opening/with our touch n th treez moov thru us/ th earth moov thru us watr sky cum thru our/limbs our flesh nd th skin is nd th skin is opn to our/touch thru our belly th spine uv th universe all is/opn skin is opn thru our soul." This is a wonderful conceit: the body realized as a space whose dimensions run a range from the corporeal to the cosmic. It's in poems like this that bissett's charter membership in the Whitman College of Ecstatic Poetics becomes clear; the field he moves in makes adjustments of scale and kind with the ease of a caress. The world is a place that must not only be imagined into existence but also must be tangibly imagined. It's a kind of figuration by feeled, to do violence to a phrase of Charles Olson, in which bissett's head and hand stroke the body into a unity that is indissoluble.

As goes his poetry, so goes his painting. bissett has been making visual images for as long as he's been making literary ones and they share with their literary twins a Dionysian fervour. Let me pick an early example of his commingled imagery: in "th first light," [Plate 1] an acrylic on board done in 1976-77, bissett conjures up one of his characteristic self-portraits, a figure either on fire or of the angelic party. Either way, he's a character of immense attraction, alive with an irresistible vitality. A good deal of this energy comes from the simple way that bissett makes marks — layered strokes of colour that are often outlined in such a way that they radiate the surface. This image is a



riot of colour and undulating lines whose solitary figure is a man with many faces. bissett renders the figure as a series of surrogate animals, so that the intermixing of the human and the natural world is complete. The sex of the man looks like a disgruntled bull, its nostrils flared open and its horns the points of definition for the human waist. What seems to be driving it wild is the conjunction of a pair of metonymic cunts that hang between the man's legs — spikey and large they are a match for this bull in a vagina shop. Even the figure's chest is realized as a benign bear with a nocturnal and spacey feel about it, the nipples wide and round in the realization that the world is a transforming place in which all god's creatures share an angelic and a sexy disposition. Genesis is not the originating book of the edenic world that bissett creates in this marvellous painting, but parthenogenesis is. It is a painted world that is capable of auto-eroticizing its component parts in an infinitely ecstatic sexual dance.

It's important to realize that bissett is part of a tribe of painters (to appropriate and change a notion from Margaret Laurence) that begins with Indian art and comes through Blake and the aboriginal tradition invented by Norval Morrisseau. There are quotations from other painters along the way as well. The female sexes that tempt the frenzied bull in "th first light" are familiars yanked out of the rapacious sexual terrain of Miro while the vaguely hieroglyphic quality of the shapes that decorate the figure's body comes from the same language source as a diversion of painters running from Adolf Gottlieb to Niki de Saint Phalle. Throughout bissett's career it's possible to see the painters and sculptors who have been on his mind, if not in his mind's eye; there are boxes that look like junk-yard Joseph Cornell and assemblages that scramble about in the refuse-romancing of Arman; there are collages that Richard Hamilton would have made had he been into the homoerotics of pop culture [Plate 2]; there are collages that have the uninflected intelligence of Kurt Schwitters [Plate 3]. And many of bissett's curious shapes — they seem like highly stylized pieces from a jigsaw puzzle you'll never figure out — anticipate the strange pictorial language of Keith Haring. But even when bissett appears to have been more a borrower than a lender (he certainly seems to have suggested a palette to an artist like Laurence Paul Yuxweluptun), the paintings still seem entirely his own. He has

created one of the most uncompromisingly authentic bodies of work in Canada and he seems incapable of a dishonest visual gesture. This doesn't mean that the paintings always work but that they always have a reason for being what they are. One of the most pleasing aspects of bissett's work is to discover the degree of figurative resolution in the paintings; a figure will be clearly defined, with broad, discrete brushstrokes (as we see in "walking" [Plate 4]); the figure will barely be discernible in a shower of tonally proximate colours (as "molecular dissolv" [Plate 5] makes clear). Wonderful paintings emerge from this technique — like "wizard" [Plate 6] in which the subject of the painting emerges in an all-over composition of indecent colour. What is intriguing about this work (and others like it) is that it duplicates the disintegration of the subject found in synthetic cubism; the subject loses identity in the process of finding its place in the composition. But Picasso and Braque were after an insistence on pictorial invention — a revolution in seeing. What bissett desires is a revolution in the way we think about our relationship to the universe. Except as a by-product, his concerns are not painterly, although they most assuredly end up being perceptual. Then in work like "summr" [Plate 7] he will make marks that look like they belong to Salomé, the German painter of dazzling swimmers and pretty boys. Always with bissett there is the sense that these individual figures have conceived of themselves as participants in a world of insatiate, polymorphous sexuality. At the same time (and this is a paradox that seems to sit at the heart of spiritual devotion), there is something of the quality and reach of religious art in these works to the extent that they trace the figure's movement towards a radiant invisibility, a condition of tonal oneness with the charged space around them. It's a kind of trippy transcendentalism, equal parts Renaissance and Tantric art mixed in with a brew-ha-ha of hallucinogens. Certainly no other Canadian artist has been as thorough in his investigation — both technically and experientially - of the condition of cosmic yearning; bissett is a space-age Browning, his reach obliterating his grasp in an almost unbearable super-nova of cascading colour. "th dreems ar endless" he tells us from the vantage point of his forest hideaway, and so it seems is his visual embodiment of that limitless reverie.

bill bissett / THREE POEMS

itself  
th words dew

themselves	gathr	in2
a strengthening	or	
letting	go	
uv	each	ordring
n	tripping	th
feathrs	n	ankuls
changing	love	n
feeling	uv	onlee
2	b	2gethr
how	it can	b
again	yes	what
can	u	ask
4	or	try
xcept	what	is
alredee	givn	that
we	find	sum
living	space	n
air	breeth	in2
yu	heart	veins
2	moov	tord
what	yu	bcum
equal	with	n
what	yu	on
yr	knees	2
can	eet	uv
n	what	th
prson	can	eet
uv yu	entr	yu take
n give	from	yu
is	n	that
2	is	onlee
part	uv	th
	thred	
	threding	
	yu	



## top scientists ar saying

th univers is way smallr thn they had  
thot tho they add reassuringlee  
its still infinit

n life th cell evenshulee us was cawsd  
by lightning hitting th primordial soup

ahh i thot ths scientist ths was on late nite  
teevee has red mary shelleys *frankenstein*

me iul take a bowl uv hot primordial soup  
aneetime espeshulee on a cold  
wintrs day or nite

eye wundr whethr langwages wer creatid  
by lightning hitting sum alphabet soup

ths wud predate *campbells* manee thot  
a veree untrustworthee klan by millenia

if infinitee is now mesurabul is that helpful

if lightning strikes us ar we doublee creatid  
twice enlivend

from *loving without being vulnerabul*

*life* may b apokriful

yu wait n wait 4 his call is it an ice kreem or is it  
a wall a nippul a wave a save sum rippul

or a touch uv gold glistn in th  
moonlite shade changing as th moon n erth turn  
tord sparkling darkness from th previous lites

yu rêmembr th voyage we tuk in th land uv snow  
 icikuls gatherd sumtimes 2 close around our  
 hearts n  
 th monkeez uv our minds playd 2 hard sumtimez  
 against ourselvs n th remindrs wud flow inside th  
 tentakuld harbor way b4 th glacier wud start melt  
 ing

whats th importans we thot a littl erlee spring  
adventur th card *procrastinate*  
came up n we pushd on thru th huge blocks  
spires uv ice verree filld n chopee seez it was  
reelee 2 erlee in th tidal turns th astronomee n  
klimate 2 ventyur ths far out in 2 th various n  
moodee oceans

we saw walruses jumping on unstaybul ice sheets  
huge see lions glowing restless intro spektiv  
pacing n looking 4 chomping studeeing th aqua  
mareen green watr 4 fishes who wud want 2 go  
undr with them b that wet thundr lightning  
ice cracking thn shifting continuing silens creek  
ing th breth uv th world

dew yu remembr us tipping our way thru th ice  
kastuls floating sew deep almost 2 th bottom  
spires shooting out from anee moment we cud  
split opn our watree path n th times we layd 2

gethr aftr cumming whn bells wud sound in yr  
hed n yu wud go back on yr watch

iuv sumtimez talkd uv ths with frends that we cud  
nevr go out 2gethr tho eye wud have n why wud  
that have bin a destroyr 2 yu uv our majeek timez our  
getting it on seklusyuns

it was anothr long wintr th ice slow 2 melt i dont  
evr know whats going on 2 happn next with peopul  
or life chill listn 2 th sound uv woolvs in th nite wer  
heer now on ths erth pleysyurs surround us eye  
wonderd why did yu take sew long i want 2 put it on  
yu th feelings eye had pennd up inside my summr  
heart konstrained  
with sew much waiting time isolate lerning howevr  
faltringlee 2 put th focus on myself eye found ths

ice world vizualee sew beautiful entransing th molekular  
tensyun uv ths glaying world tho i knew it cud crack  
n chomp us down like yu sd wun time it isint  
fair 2 yu indikating me n eye thot whats fair  
frends ar dying horribul deths they sum  
timez find theyr pees with n peopul we love  
byond imagining leev us we konfind by kontekst  
arint availabul 2 othrs we hurt by not being with them  
we spend 2 much time alone 2 digest n let go big moans  
why digest thn go out dansing get our soul n bodee  
2gethr 4 us 4 me in2 th mewsik

ths is reliabul getting it on i dont think i want aneemor  
*either* etsetera n othr skripts storeez mooveez as  
if eye wer a charaktr in a scene life full time can b 2  
much sorrow attachment chill get in2 th dansing n  
thn waiting 4 yu 2 call walking ovr an ice field 2 get  
back home snow falling thru th skeleton treez draped  
in ice lyrikul brave n th ground undr hard n may  
b shuddring

it was a green island we made it 2 washed ashore on



th translucent n hot beech creashurs uv morsels  
succulent n digestibul hung from thees tropikul  
treez oranges as well appuls bananas we made  
rice fields n at nite th winds wud cry howl uv  
delishyus pleisyurs tastes n strange sub equatorial  
feers sparks from th fire roasting cobblr fish  
hypnotizd us

what is th ironee th twist uv fate plot device  
wayze in 2 th art making abt th self esteem  
weemsbee remembr him wrote in his diaree th  
sew long dayze n nites giant panda fish falling from  
ice clouds or was th world just turnd upside down

ther wer spirits in th winds i wud listn 2 chilling  
as in no longr wanting reelee 2 moov 2 find yu bcum  
doubtr reclews th *yu* shifting be leef seeing is it  
anee storee n beleev agen as i dew find n agen yr  
*in* evn with all my sumtimes cawsyun n inward  
ness in th voyage

eye moov my hed btween yr legs find agen

sum temporaree home

new poem from upcoming book *scars on th seehors*

## Carol Malyon / we ar always on th 401: the use of fiction in bissett's poems

For several years bill bissett & I co-rented a succession of downtown Toronto apartments, a different one each year. We took turns using them, the way Florida tourists time-share condominiums.

We moved like ghosts in & out of each other's world, overlapping for a day so we could yak about politics & books & movies & whatever was happening in our lives. One of us arriving at the apartment, loaded down with backpacks, suitcases, manuscripts, a computer, & rough drafts of whatever we were working on at the moment. Plunking it all down wherever there was a bit of space in the small bachelor apartment, in the combination living/dining/bedroom/ office/ studio, amidst the other person's luggage which was being packed, unpacked, repacked. Talking all night long. Next day the other one heading off somewhere, exhausted from lack of sleep, loaded down with backpacks, suitcases, manuscripts, etc.

We tried to remove all personal traces of our presence when moving out, but of course it was impossible. Abandoned clothes hung in closets. Favourite foods were stored in the refrigerator & cupboards. Our paintings still hung on the walls, books & tapes spilled from shelves, & fallen behind them were scraps of paper, scribbled phone numbers, grocery lists, beginnings of poems.

Perhaps that experience carries over for me when I read his work. I move ghost-like through each book of poetry, surrounded by the words & images & stories. The phonetic spelling is a constant reminder that I've segued in a new direction, into the author's original world.

bill begins his readings by chanting & hitting a maraca against his hand, setting up a rhythm, a beat which the audience moves into, shaking off the dissonance of the 'real' world, with its concerns & worries & preconceptions. Listeners gradually move into some other space, & are receptive, awaiting whatever comes next. I'm using the

word *move* in a rather literal sense, because the change seems almost visceral to me, perhaps a shifting from one side of the brain to the other. I think bill's spelling works on the page in much the same way, that it creates a similar effect to the chanting & maraca beat at his readings.

The spelling also keeps me from reading the work literally, which I think would be completely inappropriate. Well, I'm on shaky ground here, but the poems seem more like extended metaphors to me. Perhaps this is because I mainly write fiction these days. bill seems to create poetic fictions in order to share with us his version, his vision, of the world. Real life intersects of course, but I suspect not as often as one might think.

An example:

During an incredibly heavy snowstorm bill & I travelled by bus from Toronto to Kingston, a three-hour trip, which this time took about twelve. Usually the bus was not even moving, & at first we were free to get off & wander around on the 401, chatting with strangers, borrowing car cell phones. We didn't venture very far from the bus though, wanting to keep it in sight, through the whirling snow & the haze, the glare of headlights trying to slice the night. The trip was scary & exhausting, but also exciting, & the sense of camaraderie on the bus was quite wonderful. People joked back & forth, sharing stories, pieces of their lives. I'd brought a batch of oatmeal muffins & we passed them around too.

bill has written a poem using that trip as a starting point:

*th parshul n inkompleet n entire his her  
storee uv th a m a z i n g n e s s*

*... we all  
hed out at a pace uv 1 kilometr an hour til nite sets in n th  
visibilittee zero n th wind chill faktors 50 below ...*

He has taken that trip & created something else: a poem which moves off in some new direction not taken by that bus. Readers have questioned some details: was the driver really going to leave someone stranded at the side of the highway? & indeed he was. However, other



details presented as factual have been invented. The inquiry seems to have been created as a device, a way to approach the telling of the story, enabling him to report events as though these were details brought out at a public investigation. In his poem an abandoned bus has been found & he tells of the notes discovered inside. So the poem's understructure is a mixture of fact & fiction.

But what I find fascinating is the voyage bill takes us on, which goes far beyond the actual trip.

ded going 2 spirit we ar surroundid by our reesyuning un  
reesyuning projeksyuns until we accept we ar always  
on th 401 going 2 kingstonia

. . . we bgan 2 wundr if ther wer aneewher 2 get 2 meta  
physikalee werent we alredee ther . . .

He is able to move the experience into a mystical plane. Along the way he shares his fascination with people & his concern for the elderly or disabled who need some looking after; he also interweaves a miscellany of earthly matters: passing out in a bathtub, rats heading for cheese & getting their tails caught, cut-backs, *chien* spelled backwards, — items unrelated to the actual bus ride, but relevant to this poem.

. . . we werent mooving was th  
snow abt 2 start cracking th windows flood in covr us we  
cud barelee make out each othr th word *mirage* being per  
haps ovr used evn 2 th sound uv sharpr teeth n th memoree  
thing n th appetite thing verree big n th trew love thing n  
th acceptans thing n th loving thing god th loving thing n  
onlee in english is god dog spelld backwards what is chien  
spelld in revers n wer up in th andes wher my fello passengr  
is from wher th u f o s land sew oftn he sz hes seen them  
eye say iuv seen them in th karibu northern bc we take off  
from the andes 2 th next dimensyun alredee inside us flowr  
ing bursting bursting stars grayzing wishes love 4 evree  
wun . . .

Once again bill has taken a happening in earth world & transformed it, using it as a jumping off point, then soaring off into another direction & dimension, sharing with us his vision of a world, — perhaps this one as it could be — perhaps some other — at any rate a land of his imagination, & a far gentler, more loving place than we have ever known.

## Darren Wershler-Henry / VERTICAL EXCESS: *what fuckan theory* and bill bissett's Concrete Poetics

When considering the subject of bill bissett's concrete poetry, the first problem that arises is a major one, with both pragmatic and philosophical components. Where does the "concrete" begin, where does it end, and can it be isolated and described? bissett, a figure the late Warren Tallman was fond of describing as "a one man civilization" (106), has produced a nearly constant flow of art over the last thirty-odd years, and continues to do so without any signs of abating. Much of this staggeringly large body of work is highly visual in nature, and all of it defies conventional notions of genre: collages are paintings and drawings bleed into poems turn into scores for reading and chant and performance generates writing bound into books published sometimes or not. In "bill bissett: A Writing Outside Writing," Steve McCaffrey eloquently delineates the dilemma that the critic faces. In order to address the excessive nature of the libidinal flow that constitutes bissett's art without reducing it to a kind of thematics, "it is not possible to actually read Bissett [sic]. What must be adopted is a comprehensive overview, a reading beyond a reading to affirm the intensity of desire" (102). In other words, critical analyses of bissett's glyphic violations of grammar as ruptures "inside" the restricted economy of writing will inevitably repeat that economy's strategies to repress the gestures of the poems towards an impossible (but necessary) Utopian "outside."

How, then, can a reader or critic proceed? Fredric Jameson writes in *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* that since imagining Utopia is an impossible act by definition, "It is thus the limits, the systemic restrictions and repressions, or empty places, in the Utopian blueprint that are the most interesting, for these alone testify to the ways a culture or system marks the most visionary mind and



contains its movement toward transcendence" (208). bissett's experiments in poetic excess yield highly specific social, historical and technological information about the shape and boundaries of what constitutes the permissible in the milieu of contemporary poetry. This essay proposes the beginnings of a critical enterprise different from, but sympathetic to, McCaffery's essay on bissett: to read along the edges of bissett's writing, seeking the nodes where the poetry pushes itself to the point of collapse. This will not only foment discussion about what bissett's work has accomplished, but will also allow for speculation on what tasks his writing suggests remain for contemporary poetry and poetics.

*what fuckan theory*, a joint publication of bissett's own blewointmentpress and bpNichol's grOnk series, is one of the more interesting nodes in bissett's corpus because it accomplishes several things simultaneously. Not only does it test to the limit the Utopian possibilities that the typewriter held for poetry in the Sixties and Seventies, it also anticipates and presents a critique in advance of the fascination that the category of postmodern philosophy loosely referred to as "theory" holds for many contemporary poets. Both the typewriter and "theory" function in bissett's text as metonymies for the larger category of the *techné* (technology, technique), which *what fuckan theory* approaches as a "reactionary machine of language" that "linearizes and itemizes . . . excesses as a highly differentiated, articulated and quantified movement" (McCaffery 95). Its response is the attempt to dislocate that process of lineation and itemization through what McCaffery refers to as "vertical excess," an overprinting and layering of text and image that strives to destroy the utilitarian function of language through its own super-abundance (103). The result is not a destruction of the disciplinary limits that the technologies of language impose on the poet, but a shifting of the borderline that lies between the thinkable and the unthinkable. This shift in turn suggests the possibility of a different kind of poetic practice, a "concrete poetics" that would allow for the creation of art in restrictive circumstances through the wilful abuse of technology.

From the earliest days of its history, the rhetoric surrounding the typewriter and its manifold uses has always been Utopian. *The Story of the Typewriter*, an early popular history of the machine, repeatedly insists that the typewriter “freed the world from pen slavery” (9). Charles Olson’s famous essay “Projective Verse” makes similarly enthusiastic claims about the machine for the specific case of contemporary poetry:

It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspension even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends. For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had. For the first time he can, without the convention of rime and metre, record the listening he has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his work. (534)

Olson, like many of the poets whose work bridges the gap between the modern and the postmodern, operates within a phonocentric framework that privileges presence over absence, speech over writing, and specificity over chance. For him, any written text is the inferior notation for a legitimate oral version whose authority depends on a fully present speaking subject. While he sees the logic of the typewriter as restrictive, he does not question it, although he perceives it as ironic that the very machines that have alienated the poet from the poem will also provide what he sees as a corrective for that situation (532-33). Ultimately, Olson reinacts the classical argument about the relationship of writing to speech, mistaking something that has always been the case for a recent phenomenon (“the history of truth, of the truth of truth, has always been . . . the debasement of writing, and its repression outside ‘full’ speech”—Derrida 3). Despite the odd bits of aberrant typography that appear in texts such as *The Maximus Poems*, because Olson chose to write within the limits that the typewriter sets (“its rigidity and its space precisions”), the challenges that his “Projective Verse” poses for poetry were all too easily assimilated.

Caroline Bayard presents a similar argument about bissett’s relationship with the typewriter in *The New Poetics in Canada and Quebec*.

Like Olson, bissett is interested in the new autonomy that the typewriter lends the poet, effectively turning him into a kind of mini-press. *what fuckan theory* in particular is a classic example of a pre-computerized small press publication, consisting of mimeoed legal-size typed manuscript pages stapled into a cardstock cover, and adorned with postal stickers and found art. But Bayard also refers to bissett's "predeliction for the typewriter and his quasi-total reliance upon its mechanical means," because of the "conscious and controlled use of the page-space" that it permits (58).

Even in as comparatively glossy and mannered a bissett book as *Soul Arrow*, a perfect-bound picture-book consisting largely of typewriter concrete poems, bissett's "reliance" on the typewriter is never "quasi-total." Although there is no connective text surrounding and linking the typewriter concrete pieces in *Soul Arrow*, they appear alongside more conventional poems, paintings, collage, photos, drawings and mixed-media work. For bissett, the typewriter is only ever one of several means to the same end: the striving for total flow, the abrogation of control. To assert that bissett's interest in the typewriter stems from the ability to use it to consciously control page-space, though, would require the reader to ignore the interruptive and excessive roles played by overtime, hand-written corrections, magic marker lines, tipped-in images, letraset, and text bleeding off the page. If the typewriter imposes an invisible orderly grid onto the page, bissett's sensibility desires to invade and overload it, to push it to the point of breakdown — a riot in the prison-house of language.

This is not to say that bissett's work lacks care or control, or even that it entirely succeeds in its revolt against *techne* (a point to which I will return shortly). However, bissett is never as proscriptive as Olson about either the act of writing or reading, and does not share Olson's proprioceptive poetics, i.e., the assumption that the reader will (re)construct meaning according to the writer's intent. If anything, the opposite is true. Even on the level of semantic content, *what fuckan theory* claims that any given poem presents infinite potential for interpretation:



as say "concrete" whr did yu  
 put th air what yu cant enclose yr tongue yu cin put lettrs on top uv  
 lettrs dreams millyuns uv tiny bubbuls endlessly on all sides thr is no  
 side ideally but what is that  
 what move tord yu what moves in front uv yu th  
 sound like th feeling nd yu at th same time  
 each time different so also th  
 spelling but that not just like sound but picture how it looks to carve it  
 put  
 down to carry for othrs to see what yu take with yu neon fusilage karmik  
 relaxashun not  
 always leading to sum thot  
 inescapubul conclusion what pool  
 uv letters on top uv letters yu cin swim in

bissett's text revels in the play of semiosis, recognizing that each reading or performance of a poem will in effect produce a new work. Moreover, it suggests that the degree of inscription resulting from vertical excess ("letter on top uv letters") — the "concrete" — renders oral attempts to "enclose" the poem through a sanctioned pronunciation highly problematic.

What bissett achieves in texts such as *what fuckan theory* is the creation of an idiosyncratic manner of reading and writing that calls into question the binary oppositions between writing and painting, theory and practice, and concrete and "straight" poetry. Taking into account Charles Bernstein's dicta that "Poetics is the continuation of poetry by other means." Just as poetry is the continuation of politics by other means" (160), one might say that what bissett has produced in texts such as *what fuckan theory* is a concrete poetics, a continuum of image and text informed throughout by a leftist and queer politics. As this essay has contended from its opening, to isolate and privilege any one element, such as the concrete aspects of bissett's text, would be to miss the point entirely. When bissett reaches the limits of possibility in one medium, he switches to another, often in mid-production. In this light, it is significant that typewritten text disappears from *what fuckan theory* several pages before the end of the text; the final pages consist of collages of drawings and Letraset concrete work. By the end of this

early text, bissett has already reached the limits of what the typewriter will do for him, even though he works it harder than most poets ever have. Still, he never arrives at the point that Paul Dutton does in *The Plastic Typewriter*, where the destruction of the machine itself, and of its attendant logic, becomes the engine that powers the writing of the text. What is important to remember about bissett's writing is that the effect is dialogical, in Bakhtin's sense; it is the sum total of many often-irreconcilable styles and approaches that results in the bootstrapping of the entire textual body to another level.

What remains is the question that bissett's text itself poses: *what fuckan theory?* Its title evokes a text that may provide some answers, Michel Foucault's "What Is An Author?" Foucault's essay ends with the same question that begins it, "What matter who's speaking?" (115, 138). His point is that even in an age of "dead" authors, the author continues to have a discursive function "in that it serves as a means of classification" (123), allowing a reader to make sense out of the otherwise undifferentiated mass of literature. The answer to the question posed by bissett's title is similar in that his questioning of theory has itself evolved into a kind of theory and attendant practice, i.e. his "concrete poetics." The most problematic aspect of bissett's work, in fact, is that his poetics have not changed much in over twenty years. Since the closing of blewointmentpress and bissett's subsequent move to publish with Talonbooks, the format and content of his texts have slowly stabilized. The drawings, paintings, and typewriter concrete poems still appear, but have a sanitized feel within the perfect-bound, desktop published, properly literary digest-size confines of Talon's editions. Although his writing has been comprehended by a computerized environment, bissett has not continued to push against the limits of that field in the same way that his earlier work pushed against the limits of earlier publishing technologies (the typewriter, lettraset, mimeographs and small printing presses). Even his idiosyncratic, never-quite-phonetic spelling has become systematic to the extent that it is not only possible to read it as a signatory style ("this looks like a bissett poem"), but also in that it has become an affectation among many younger poets to imitate that style without regard for its implications. In its current incarnation, bissett's writing is the canonical anticanonical text.

The last question that this essay poses is what constitutes the new Utopia, the project that bissett's project suggests lies beyond itself. In the contemporary Canadian poetry scene, the writer that comes closest to the spirit rather than the letter of bissett's work is John Barlow. His *OVERSION*, "the magazine of post-Raphaelite poetry and correspondence," is an ongoing torrent of text and images produced by Barlow and others that strains the capabilities of the photocopier and computer to unprecedented degrees. It should come as no surprise that bissett's poetry and poetic sensibility is a constant touchstone in Barlow's work; the rhizomes of the former extend into the latter, which, as Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* suggests, is always the goal: "To reach, not the point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance whether one says I. We are no longer ourselves. Each will know his own. We have been aided, inspired, multiplied" (3).



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## CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

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**ROBERT ENRIGHT** is the editor-at-large for *Border Crossings* magazine and a regular contributor to *The Globe and Mail*. He is the author of *Peregrinations: Conversations with Contemporary Artists*.

**CATHY FORD** was born in Lloydminster, Saskatchewan and now lives in British Columbia. As a poet and fictionist engaged in the feminist revisioning of the english language, she has published nine books of poetry to date, including prose poems and long poems. As well, fiction and personal essays have been published in literary magazines across Canada.

**MAXINE GADD** has been publishing poetry since the early 60s in small mags. First book *guns of the west* put out by bill bissett's *blewointment* press, in 1967, 300 copies no ISBN. Tried it on her own, 1969 at Intermedia producing *practical knowledge* in coloured Roneo, 130 copies, some with slices of wonderbread stamped by the author. bill put out *hochelaga* in 1970, and Bertrand Lachance Air Press put out a collection of stuff called *westerns* in 1975, a first ISBN no., followed by *lost language* by Coach House Press in 1981. Since then Maxine has tried desktop publishing of *lac lake*, *boatload to atlantis*, *backup to babylon*, and *styx*. She has one large idyll unpublished called *cove* and a nineties sort of book called *subway under byzantium* in the works.

Dedicated to language-centered writing, ethnic and gender concerns, **ADEENA KARASICK** is the author of three books: *Genrecide* (Talonbooks, 1996), *Memewars* (Talonbooks, 1994) and *The Empress Has No Closure* (Talonbooks, 1992) and has published numerous articles, reviews and dialogues on contemporary poetry, poetics and

cultural/semiotic theory. She has recently received her Ph.D (which explored the interplay of 'pataphysics, Kabbalah, feminist and deconstructuralist discourses) and is now based in New York working on her new text *Of Poetic Thinking*.

**PATRICK LANE** has published twenty-three books over the past forty years. His work has been translated into twenty languages and he is widely considered to be one of the finest poets of his generation. He currently teaches writing at the University of Victoria.

**CAROL MALYON's** books include short story and poetry collections and a novel. She usually lives in Toronto but is currently at UNB as writer-in-residence. Her latest book, *Lovers & Other Strangers*, is a short story collection published in 1996 by Porcupine's Quill. A children's book, *Mixed-up Grandmas*, will come out next year.

**DAVID W. McFADDEN's** *Great Lakes Suite* (fiction) is due out from Talon this fall. Talon also published his most recent book of poems, *There'll Be Another* and a previous book of poems, *Gypsy Guitar*. He lives in Toronto and is starting to turn grey — but nothing seems to bother him anymore.

**SUSAN MUSGRAVE** is a poet, novelist and poetry reviewer for the *Vancouver Sun*. She has published nineteen books, her most recent being *Forcing the Narcissus* (poetry) and *Musgrave Landing: Musings on the Writing Life* (non-fiction). A children's book, *Dreams Are More Real than Bathtubs*, illustrated by Marie-Louise Gay, will be published by Orca in 1998. She is Chair of the Writers' Union of Canada.

**SHARON H. NELSON's** poems have been published in many countries and her writing has been translated into several languages. Her three most recent books, *The Work Of Our Hands*, *Grasping Men's Metaphors* and *Family Scandals* form a series about the constructions of language, culture and gender. *The Multiple Meanings of Tongues* is in progress.



**JAMIE REID** is a long-time friend of bill bissett and a former editor of *TISH*, the influential Vancouver poetry mimeo magazine of the early 1960s. He is the author of three books of poetry, most recently *Mad Boys* (Coach House Books, 1997). One of the three texts in the Internet version of *Mad Boys* (<http://www.chbooks.com>) will be published in *bissettese* and will be accompanied by some of bill's graphics.

**RENEE RODIN** was raised in Montreal but in the 60s came to live in Vancouver where amongst other things she has been writing and doing visual art and her book of prose poems *Bread And Salt* was recently published by Talon.

**DARREN WERSHLER-HENRY** is a poet and critic who lives and works in Toronto. His first collection of concrete and visual poetry, *NICHOLODEON: a book of lowerglyphs*, was published in January by Coach House Books.

**bill bissett** born halifax nov 23 1939 same day as gerald lampert  
 p.k. page n billy th kid left at 17 2 go west 2 vancouver seeking  
 freedom from behaviour n sexual role repressyuns n 2 rage out in nu  
 direksyuns in writing painting n living sartid blewointmentpress 64  
 dottr michelle born in 62 kept writing n painting n printing thru n  
 after 3 partnerships now on my own 4 sum time 97 living in toronto  
 painting writing dewing reedings was living part time in london  
 ontario sins 86 til 91 sang n wrote lyriks in band luddites based in  
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 ontario eye call centralia was being writr in residens at western u  
 have writtn ovr 50 books uv poetree manee uv them with Talonbooks  
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