

New Little Habitats:

An interview with Cam McAlpine

Cam McAlpine: Can we begin the interview by talking about your book *Pulp Log*?

Barry McKinnon: [*Pulp Log* is] socially critical, but also a record of the personal in a tense relationship to an industrial, social and bureaucratic context. But I found it can a problem for a writer actively living in a community when the writing is to some extent critical of the community.

CM: But you're not going to get your average logger to read the book.

BM: Well, you know, there is a fairly big name guy who I won't mention, an old friend of [Brian] Fawcett's who's in a big time logging family. Fawcett said, yeah, he's reading it regularly in the mornings; he reads a section a day. I don't know what he saw in the book or got out of it. But I don't want to be misunderstood or mis-read either: the central poem in the book contains some positive and hopeful notions. An English teacher at the college, who missed this aspect, sees the book as very negative about this place. One day he said to me, "When are you going to write something good about Prince George?"

CM: Well, you're not a public relations officer.

BM: No, that's the point; exactly.

CM: I get the sense that your somewhat empathetic. It's not like you hate this place. Otherwise you wouldn't spend 25 years here.

BM: No, exactly. And some people do hate it here. And they do leave, pronto. I think, in many ways, what I'm trying to express is the idea of *communitas* - the communities we form within communities. That's why the D.H. Lawrence quote [epigraph to *Pulp Log*] is so important. My feeling is that the industrial aspect is the largest aspect that governs us and is, by design, least visible in some ways. So, "Where are you living?" is the question I was trying to address. I was interested in the idea of public silence about things like pollution and the overall quality of life, isolation, industrial management systems that are here for—let's face it: they're interested in making profits or making their projects profitable. They might make some sort of half-hearted effort at showing their philanthropy or their social conscience or whatever. I think, however, we must try to see the system, complex as it is, for what it is - and not be so easily bamboozled. I don't think a writer or poet has any business not confronting these questions and must take the risk to say: this is the way it is - even if, in the context of poetry, you don't always know *quite* what you're saying. Why is it that a town that is known for its vast pollution hasn't had any serious long range medical studies or any government studies that will tell you what's going to happen to your young son, or my son, or my daughter? I came to this town as an adult, but what are the long range effects of the toxic stuff in the air and the water on our children who didn't choose to live here?

CM: Yeah, we moved out of Vancouver partly to get away from that sort of thing, and then we move here and find out that this is more polluted than Vancouver.

BM: Yeah, but the irony is that our jobs depend on logging and pulp. I mean, basically, as we work up the industrial chain, or down the chain, we're all dependent on the thing that is, in

a way, the measure of its own depletion. How much wood is left? But I feel closer to loggers who are actually logging the trees and making the clearcuts than I do to the mills. I think if you look at the ownership and outbound profits and the ecological irresponsibility, and the laws companies break for a slap on the wrist ... Their not held accountable. They just have free reign, free licence it seems. There's an odd attitude in this town— maybe it's everywhere— and *Pulp Log* is trying to get at it. For instance, there's a controversial fibreboard plant proposal in front of city council right now. It's controversial because the plant will emit formaldehyde in an industrial sight within the city near a residential area. There are public hearings, but only *one* person that I know of showed up to these hearings. I mean, who has time, right? There's the feeling that you can jump in and say your piece, but if you're all working, you can't sneak off to a public discussion and go through the rigamarole. And so we're failing in the sense of how the democracy works. We're sort of failing at that end of it. But there are other reasons why we're failing.

CM: And it's not just a matter of going and voicing your opinion. If you really want to have any kind of effect, it seems, you have to do a lot of work, and not everyone has that kind of time.

BM: And you have to know what their experts know. We're bamboozled by a language of experts. They can't say, "We're going to reduce the Nechako River to a trickle." They're going to give you flow patterns, charts, graphs and an incomprehensible technical jargon that euphemistically says the fish won't be affected much by a huge water reduction. We all know that this is not true. But at the city council meetings—you watch the aldermen, alderladies or whatever you call them— alderpeople— on the basis of a very limited presentation, hold up their hands and say, "Well, the minister of the environment is doing a study of the pollution," and because they trust the studies that favour development, they have no trouble quickly voting for an expansion of a questionable industry. The question is "How much formaldehyde is going into the air and how will those emissions affect the health of the people." One argument the company gave is that the old beehive burners can be shut down, and that the new plant would pollute less than the beehives, blah, blah, blah. A rather odd comparison and justification for polluting. Anyway, I was kind of mad about the speed with which the civic politicians unanimously accepted what looks to be a dangerous plant. But what can people do about it—well, most of the time you see it, and then have little choice but to go on with your own life. *Pulp Log* was trying to get inside some of these dilemmas. Every day I'd see something that looked odd, strange, or ironic and just start writing. Each journal entry became a one page chunk of personal-social thinking. I didn't know where it was going to go.

CM: So, when you started it, you didn't have any conscious thought of it being a book in the end?

BM: Not really. But it started to take on momentum as I went along. With anything I write, the long poem primarily, there's the fear of how or where am I going to end it? Which is also part of the excitement. Where will this end, and how? With *Pulp Log* I think I gave myself a time limit. I think I was getting ready for a reading. There was some kind of pressure on me. It could have kept going, but it seemed after 50 sections it was time to bring it to a close; it said what it wanted to say. With *Arrhythmia*, the sequence ran from the beginning of this erratic heart thing happening, to the point where the condition was no longer a threat, to the point where I knew exactly what it was that was the source of my depression and discomfort. But when you're writing long poems, yeah, that's one of the questions. But I've been lucky, because, literally, with *Pulp Log* and *Arrhythmia*—the endings have come to me in a dream usually, or I wake up at night with a line, which is usually just a quick ending or exit. It's just wham, wham, wham, wham, that's it!

CM: Whereas *PulpLog* seemed to have an overtly political dimension, *The Centre* seems to inhabit a much more personal space. Do you make this a conscious choice in your writing? Like you say, *PulpLog* didn't start out as a consciously chosen book, but it ended up that way. And unlike your other books, such as *The Centre*, it's an entity in itself.

BM: Well, the book *The Centre* started 15 years ago or so. The poems start to attach themselves to the social, but there's no full blown sense that they are so-called social poems. But when you get to *The Centre*, you start to see some complicated pressures and politics. "The Centre," deals with what I call institutional terrorism. Ironically our institutions, on the surface, might look benign and welcoming, inhabited by managers supposedly moving about in an ordered and civilized manner. But once on the inside, past the chamber of commerce versions that define our cities and institutions, you see the car accidents, the levels of poverty, the cruelty, and arbitrariness and the undemocratic nature of these systems. So, more and more I started, as a writer, to get into those dimensions because I believe that as Fawcett once said of the poem, "It's the one place where we can let all the burners go." If you're just writing out of your own personal, lyrical reaction to the world, then it's of interest to you and maybe your lover or your wife, but how far can it go beyond that? So, he believes writing is a social responsibility, and I took that approach early on. At least I've tried to incorporate it—not in a conscious way, not in an overt way—because if you get a writer who's a Marxist or has some other idea to grind, then those messages can overpower and override the function of poetry. The "idea" in a poem has to emerge, not as a generation of some preprogrammed message or line of propaganda.

CM: In regards to that, in *The Centre* three of the five sections consist of long poems, two of them are more traditional, lyric, short poems. Would you define those poems as "lyric," or is there a constant battle within yourself, a resistance against the lyric? You say Brian Fawcett demands some kind of social responsibility in poetry. When did that really become an important part of your work? You have said that when you started out you used to write in a more traditional, lyric mode before beginning to move away from that, but it seems you still use that mode to a certain extent.

BM: I like to feel that the poem can go pretty much anywhere it wants. The *Arrhythmia* section deals with, literally, a health condition that threw me into a state of confused contemplation. In the poem, "The Centre," I was thrown into a desperate state because of the place where I worked. I had been layed off with the threat if I protested it that I'd never work as a teacher again. The I got rehired, sort of demoted, and harrassed in a very deliberate way, and—I don't know if I'm answering it—but I had to work from the personal condition and experience that that context prompted. The lyric voice has more to do with a personal urge to song; and also, to me, lyric means short. To use the old terminology, I usually write serial poems. What you're referring as lyrics are probably in "The Petting Zoo," section where the poems are individual pieces. In other words, they can stand on their own: whereas if you took a chunk out of *Arrhythmia* or "The Centre," it would be without the overall context. So I know the ones you're talking about.

CM: Well, for instance, in the poem, "The Petting Zoo," you use the metaphor of searching for the poem as if the poem were "out there."

BM: Yeah, there tends to be some of that. I don't like doing that too much, but at the time I was living in Burnaby, so that explains it! "Where is the poem?" And just to come back, Prince George is a really interesting place to be as a writer, because there is a clarity here, and I love the place for that. We don't easily get fooled. When something happens here, you see it; you experience it first hand. If you're in the suburbs of Vancouver, you have no connection to where your food's coming from, where the water comes from, where the wood comes from etc. In other words, you're just part of the big North American conglomerate of

fast food chains, chains of stores, and the freeways that connect it all. Prince George is smaller, rawer, and as one friend aptly put it, "peeled back." I think the alienation in big city places is worse, because you have no sense of place—or if you do it's all premanufactured. I have a hard time measuring myself in it. I mean I found myself wandering around the malls in Burnaby wondering, "How the hell can I locate myself?" So that little sequence of poems is what I managed to salvage out of a bad year.

CM: What were you doing at the time?

BM: My wife was taking some courses and I was working a book of interviews called *Poets and Print*. I had a year off from the college. One of the reasons we went up to SFU was because the rent was fairly cheap, and as a student she could get into residence. It was a bad, bad year. Nobody would come to visit. It was just unheard of to drive up to Simon Fraser and getting off the mountain was tough. Buses didn't run past midnight, and if you were drinking, you had to get rides home. Taxis were \$25. So I used to try to connect with people at the Railway Club in downtown Vancouver on Saturdays. But anyway, "The Petting Zoo" poem is about an experience in The Louheed Mall and seeing a wide range of excited people petting and holding the animals in the petting zoo. To me it just became a measure of some kind of alienation. I don't like that word, necessarily, but people who ordinarily look a bit glum seemed gleeful around the animals. I found myself going towards the gate, and petting the animals myself, and I felt good. I started to remember being on the farm as a kid, and so on and so forth. But then the outer context of that sentimental situation, is Bobo the clown who is getting maybe minimum wage and is just really uptight about everything. The kids are bugging him, the mall itself—which is a place where there's grand commerce, right—and there were all those tensions going on, so it's like a little world of activity, the community, except that there was this possibility that was quite real and beautiful. And that was just to hug an animal. So it's a bit maudlin, perhaps, but the poem was trying to deal with that and what it says about our alienation, or how it seemed to disappear for awhile around the animals. I guess the reversal is that—if I can remember the metaphor—is that the poem itself is a trapped animal. So while we're viewing the animals kind of anthropomorphically, what they're trying to do is get more food, and to escape from their cages and the people mauling them. Why would they pay attention to us? Because we feed them. So it has nothing to do with "this lamb really loves me." He's starving. And we are in a sense, in another way, starving, too. So the poem contains this odd mingling of sensations.

CM: It seemed to me that it was—in the way that having a bunch of animals penned up in a mall in order for people to see and touch them—that's as unsatisfying as having to "make" a poem.

BM: Yeah, because you can't consciously make a poem. Although the reference there is to where to find the poem? I think I found it, but there's a bit of a self-consciousness there. Yeah, it's a metaphor on a couple of levels. The other poems in that sequence are,—I don't know, if you've felt like this in your own writing, but somehow I had to include that section even though it's the weakest section of the book. I think it was Ginsberg who said to Creeley, that it doesn't matter what you write anymore, it's still going to be sort of OK. - you've paid your dues, so if you have a few crappy poems, it just means, yah, you're capable of writing a few crappy poems. If that's all you can do at the moment, then do it. And sometimes the crap might reveal more than the polished stuff - to write so that poem literally falls apart in its own condition. The accidents and little errors, and the inability to write a complete sentence, to me, is quite alright. I think that the poem should reflect the condition that it's expressed in. If you're having a nervous breakdown, you're not going to be writing Joseph Conrad sentences. I admire Lorna Uher, for instance, because she can start a narrative and complete it, and you think, "Well, this is a well-crafted poem." So, I can admire

those poems for their craft but I can't write them myself, nor would I be interested in being able to.

CM: She may not appreciate you calling her Lorna Uher, either.

BM: Oh yeah, what is it now? Lorna Crozier? Lorna Lane? But I think a lot of Canadian poetry hides in tired forms, and I really don't—this is, I guess, what I learned early on, from the open form poets from the States, was to write in open form. And I think that a lot of Canadian poetry still works with closed forms. It's safe. The poem contains a story and it contains a metaphor and it contains "knowledge", you know, anything and everything you would expect from a poem. It's just that, usually, with that kind of poem, I don't want to read it more than once. It doesn't interest me.

CM: It's more like a story.

BM: Yeah, it's this skillful kind of one shot piece; put enough of them together and you've got another book.

CM: When referring to the American form, I assume you're referring to Black Mountain?

BM: Yeah, yeah, I've always been associated with them, and I haven't tried to deny my attraction to them. The trouble with it is you get in terrible fights in this country, because of a lot of misinformation and a lot of misunderstanding about, I think, just different ways of approaching writing. If I'd learned to write from Pablo Neruda, then somebody from a certain school might say, "Well, gee, you're OK." If you mention Robert Creeley and to a bunch of Surrealist poets from Victoria, they would tend to dismiss you perjoratively as a Black Mountain poet. End of discourse. So there's a lot of that fighting going on, but I can understand it up to a point, because in the 60's Canadians weren't getting access to their own poetry or their own literature in any way. So you had people like Robin Matthews pretty bravely fighting against, literally, hiring Americans for English departments, because they tend to propagate their own people and literature. And this is still going on. The fight was never won. And then the Brits. Add them in, and we've got a real problem. So poets were trying to, in a way—and I think another large function of poetry, in a very general sense, is to locate identity in place. And how can you even begin when you're not in the place you're in because the culture is so dominated by foreign influences. When I was a young poet in Calgary I was reading Robert Creeley and Charles Olson because I could find those books in bookstores. Of course the Beat writers were pretty visible if you were in high school in those days. You could get a hold of Kerouac, the Coney Island of the mind guy, ah, Ferlinghetti. It was a bit of a lifestyle thing. You'd go to parties and you'd have these books in your satchel. As young intellectuals, bohemians, musicians and poets, this was your situation, right. These were the people who you read and who created the style. We didn't have much access to Canadian work. But around this time, 64 or so, I saw Layton on TV with Leonard Cohen and I decided to, literally, go study with him. I'd finished a couple of years of college and transferred to Sir George Williams University in Montreal. For some reason, even though I was publishing in Talon and knew about Tish, and knew George Bowering who was at U of C at the time, I wasn't attracted to the west coast. I was drawn east, partly because Mount Royal College had transfer arrangements with SGWU. Anyway, I thought then Leonard Cohen was a great writer. He was a tremendous influence on me. Talk about the lyric. I mean, he's the master. So to kind of come back to your question, or comment, the American stuff was in the beginning more accessible and interesting to me. It seemed more exciting. I could learn more, because these writers also wrote about their writing in an interesting way. I mean I tried to struggle through Olson's "Projected Verse," which I still don't entirely understand, but there are some sections there that talk about process that are really important. So, if you're a young craftsman, you can't limit yourself to the colloquial.

You've got to search wherever you can. Which means you include the Irish writers, the American writers and the Canadian writers, as much as you can get your hands on. But I do understand those politics. The schools were in those days dominated the American and British curriculum.

CM: With reference to place—now this is kind of a funny question—but do you feel like sometimes you're immortalizing Prince George? Or would you look at it from a more postmodern perspective in which you've located yourself so specifically as to render the local not immortal, but rather entirely transient?

BM: Yeah, that's an interesting comment. I'm probably closer to the latter. I don't think it's really the function of poetry to immortalize anything. Place is organic and shifting, changing. The poem is a flow of language that picks up specific detail and also becomes an artifact in the world. Soon the place names and the actual localities will be unrecognizable. As we walk through this landscape, in a hundred years Zellers will be, like—it has a 'Z' in it, so there might be some odd sense that there was a god, Zellers, or something. But nobody will know what the hell it is anymore.

CM: I think that what I might be getting at is, I'm thinking along the more extreme lines of a Jack Spicer idea that nothing can be immortal. His attempts at putting something "in" the poem doesn't immortalize anything anymore than a painting or anything else.

BM: Well, I think the nature of reality is such that you can't; immortalization implies that you've frozen something.

Well, especially language. Because, like he said, a dog's howl, maybe, but a word—someone comes along in 2000 years and digs up the city of Prince George, BC, that they won't understand what "Zellers" meant.

BM: No. I mean we don't either. Maybe in the most general sense, you just want, if there is an immortal aspect, which implies there's a future, and that there are future readers, whatever number of years that implies, you want people to know "what it was like to live in a place," I think, in a most general sense. You don't think of that consciously, but we read, or I read, partly to discover what is that writer dealing with? What's that conscious experience at that time and place? And what was operative then? We don't want fairy tales, right. Unless they contain the goods. So that, yeah, the question of, what is Prince George? Well, is it what the public media say it is? There are so few records, actually, of any of the things I'm talking about. So to me, a function of poetry, if there is one, is that it has more to do with the emotional, the person in the place who's reacting to it with more than just mind or the idea of historical document. It has to do with how that person lived, what their imagination could give them about living in that place. So it's a record of sorts. But with poetry it's already been devalued to such a point that even the most blatant statement is taken as symbolic. It's misunderstood.

CM: I can see 200 years from now, students studying over and over again the line, "and I am standing by the oil," and trying to decide what the oil means.

BM: Yeah. If you know enough about poetry, you know that you can know when the literal's the literal, and you're not going to confuse it - make it into something else.

CM: And it seems sometimes that it has to be meaningful and deep and full of multiple layers of meaning, and, like you say, it seems people can't accept a literal reading.

BM: Right. Like Sharon Thesen has a line, the opening line in her book is "I drive the car." Well, I can just see people trying to push that to some metaphoric depth. It's not there. I mean there are metaphors in that poem, but yeah you're right, sometimes there's no depth at all to it. That's the secret. It's like, somebody said to George Stanley about his book *Mountains and Air*, "This book is about absolutely nothing," and Stanley says, "Bravo! You've got it, man!" A+ to you.

CM: I'm going to grab that opportunity to ask you another question. While you seem to make use of many aspects of Modernist and contemporary poetics, it seems that much is made in what I have read about you and the interviews with you, of the more literal, domestic element in your poetry. For instance, I read John Harris's book on you—and I think that was one of the main themes of his essay—he kept returning to the domestic. On the back cover of *PulpLog*, there's David Phillips saying, "the terrible separation of self and other, self and self... which is the central issue of these times." I want to know what you think of this focus. Do you think there's too much emphasis on that domestic, personal aspect, or do you see it as an acceptable point of entry into the work?

BM: Some of the work deals with, in some ways, the difficulty of family and family life. But for me it's always the outside forces somehow working against the thing that, in one way again, somehow keeps you together. Just think of it this way—I don't want to be cynical—but say you've got your "family life." Just think of the industry that's built around the disintegration of that life. As soon as there's a marital breakup, you've got a doctor involved, a lawyer involved, a psychotherapist probably, a pharmacist, you know, on and on down the line. So, here we have a society that promotes its own domestic unit, and then, in a sense, also promotes its dissolution. But the key for me, maybe to explain that, is that the Lawrence quote is very important, because the house and the family becomes the habitat within a larger system, which most people have trouble with, let's face it. If you shop in Costco, it looks like everybody's just absolutely well—cars parked out there, buying enough toilet paper to keep you going for five years. I mean the world works, right? It's like stocking up for the apocalypse, actually. Which, according to Lawrence, has already happened. So we don't have to worry about it disintegrating; it's already happened. We're just walking around in the rubble. And that's what's kind of neat about it. But the family, or the house, or whatever you can create in your own mind as habitat—it could be the cat, you know, it could be your dog, anything that locates you and gives you some sense of your self, literally, some sense of your self that helps you survive in the outer struggles—I guess that's part of the subject matter in those earlier books. There's a lot of irritation, too in a world where things are distorted. That sensation often prompts the poem.

CM: But it seems you still see that fake exterior to the happy domesticity of the Costco family, and yet it's still your refuge. Not necessarily your immediate family, but your community.

BM: Yeah, I think you're onto it. We start talking about literal family and we're into a whole other mess. Family can imply—and again you don't want it to imply the Charles Manson version—but your community per se.

CM: It seems it's most like a series of concentric circles wherein you move from the individual out to the immediate family and onwards; outwards.

BM: Absolutely. And you can be having great trouble with your mate or your family and still be within the larger, one of the concentric circles that takes you to your friends, who can be, in my case, wide-ranging. So that becomes the community, and then, of course there's the writing community as well—the only other people who seem to pay attention to the kind of work that you and I are talking about here. If you can have a sense of an audience or a group

of ten or fifteen people, it's great. So yeah, that's a kind of family, in a way. The family of poetry and those who believe in it. To me it's crucial to have those kind of people around. To have people who know what it is. So most of my friends, whether or not they're directly involved with it or not, know what it is, and so that's quite important.

CM: A while back someone I was reading used the phrase *fin de siecle* fusion of the comic and the grotesque to describe what's going on culturally and socially today. I see that fusion working in your poetry. Do you think it's an element in your work? for instance, the poet standing next to an aisle full of oil.

BM: Sure. Well the comic—somebody reviewing *PulpLog*—I don't know who the hell it was—said it was hilarious, and I wouldn't go quite that far, because that's not my intent at all.

CM: It's almost a tragi-comedy, in a way.

BM: Yeah, I guess so. And it's never as bad as it... well, maybe it *is* in some cases, I don't know. One goes on. You have no choice. I grew up reading all those texts that dealt with "the condition," as they say, and the absurd as an operative in one's life. So much of literature reflects that. But I have to believe that there is a real world in whatever flux it occurs in. And that language can address those conditions. As a kid said to me the other day, something to the effect of, "this language is all you have." You can imagine yourself without it. poetry is a way of pushing the language into directions where, to me, there is value. I think with the language writing, what bothers me a bit about it—and I'm getting to like some more and more of it—is that, I guess it's the old McLuhan thing that the medium is the message. I find it confusing in that it doesn't always, for me, connect with the rhythms of the earth—I think poetry has to connect with the rhythms of the earth, which then connects us to our relationship with that tree, or the oil in Zellers, right. These probably aren't very popular notions anymore. I read to find out. When I read Robert Creeley, I'm feel, "ah, here's a human being in the world." I don't care how mystifying or difficult his work can be; I know he's there. And I take comfort in that. I read William Carlos Williams the same way. Ken Belford. Everybody with that notion of—George Stanley for sure—even if there is no narrator per se, there's that sense of person in world, language as bridge. And that has nothing to do with understanding their world. William Carlos Williams, as complex as he is, once said that he wrote just to ease his mind. I thought that was a very human admission. You're not writing to immortalize anybody. You're not doing it to describe the world. You're not doing it even for anybody else. Ultimately it's just to ease your own mind. In that process you might write nonsense syllables to do that.

CM: Yeah, but in another person that could be taken as solipsism. If you're just writing for yourself, keep it to yourself.

BM: Oh, I don't think he ever intended that. We know the poem is also a public act. But I think that most writers talk about that sense of trying to—it's kind of a reversal, because you find out you that you don't know anything. You write, maybe as a pursuit or pressure to find out exactly what you do know, if that's possible. That's what poetry does for you. I was talking to Cecil Giscombe about this—it's probably not a new idea, that revelation that the poem is always smarter than you are. "How could I write that?" How can I know that? So certainly the poem is—I don't know if the writer or poet can take responsibility for it, because I do believe it's the "outside," or it's the "muse," or it's the "Martians," or whatever term you use for it, the "unconscious," and all that stuff. So I don't know how the language poets are dealing with these old notions; there's nothing new about them. You're given that poem. You're the receptor for it. That idea goes way back.

CM: Maybe they consider themselves less of a filter.

BM: Yeah, the oil filter. I don't know. I'm trying to learn more. I find living up here, because you're so far away from major centres, you're ten years behind, so, as you know, it's hard to find people to talk about these things. Trying to keep up on the current thinking, which is usually generated in the larger cities — nothing is generated from here, in terms of art, it seems. It really bugs me that, if you live in a place like this, you're not taken very seriously. How to get around that?

CM: It seems that in this town, if you can't beat 'em, you've got to join them. The women that are active, at least in the economic sense, have joined.

BM: Yeah, without too much decision-making power in a sense. I don't think a woman sat down and said, "Gee, we have a spruce bug here. We better create the Bowron clearcut. Boys, let's get in those trucks and get to 'er. Time is money."

CM: Take our paper, for instance, or the Citizen. Half the staff is women, but all the managers are men. Who knows where that comes from?

BM: Yeah, just organizing this series of women writers [*WordsWomen*] my feeling is that, it's almost cliché, but if the town is really male-dominated, which it is, it seems to have a... It's hard because you start of talk in clichés and stereotypes. But I just thought about a year ago that, with all the push of feminism, whatever that is, there's still very few venues where you see women speaking their minds about things. And again, being a writer, there's some woman writers I really like a lot, and I like to hang out with them. The ones I know I've hung out with a bit. I've tried to publish some of their work and so forth. I thought it'd be important, not with any feminist agenda, but just to hear the female voice, if I can still say that, in a place where there isn't a forum for that. So it's no big deal. It's just that I want to hear some women read in the public, in Prince George, and draw everybody together, maybe, for a while, in a place where a lot of the battles and fights can just disappear for a while. Or start up again.

CM: Get them out of Vancouver and Toronto.

BM: And that's another thing. Vickie Walker, one of the readers coming, asked, "Is it safe to read in Prince George?" And I thought, My God. That was her feeling, you know, that this place has such a hostile mythology. I think the town does have a mythical quality.

CM: Do you think you've contributed to that in your writing?

BM: Well, no. If you're talking about having some fun — yeah, I've had some fun with the stereotypes but I try to get at a larger context. I have one line in the poem, if I can remember it, about a bunch of guys in Joe's Place, a strip club, all dressed the same - about having logo hats on, I think they call them. So there's the company logo on the baseball cap. The line was, "northern costumes of despair." You get so many of these guys together, drinking in a strip club, and it just added up to a costume of despair to me, because whatever possibilities the world could have for those people — and again you can't generalize about these things — I wondered about our ability to get beyond the trap of the stereotype. You know from your own work and living here that the place is pretty brutal and people don't have a lot of prospects beyond, literally, what they have to do. And God bless them for it. I would never, never say anything bad about a logger. As far as I'm concerned, keep cutting the goddamned trees, you know; lately there's lots of talk about a different approach, or a different consciousness, or a different management systems. But these are people - talk about being in the world! They have to make a living. I'd hate to be misunderstood by presenting people here as being only the stereotypes we put them in — because that would make me arrogant if I thought that I was any better than anybody else here. I do different kinds of work, that's for

sure. And I feel that I can live here. Although, in one sense, I've never taken root, but I don't know if you're supposed to anymore.

CM: When they were doing these presentations for your 25 years of service at the college, someone asked you why you didn't leave, and you said, "I have nowhere to go."

BM: No, I said I didn't *have* to go anywhere else. Because every year was different here. And it's sort of true; it's not entirely true. But what they didn't say at that 25 year thing was that for 12 years there was great movement to get me out of, not only the institution, but out of the town. I haven't talked publicly about that.

CM: Perfect timing, because I've got a series of questions for you. I'm just getting into the meaty stuff now. Now you may or may not want to answer a lot of these questions or you may want to evade them. That's up to you.

BM: Yeah, that's fair. I'd like to talk a bit about it.

CM: These kinds of things interest me, because talking to you, not just now, but in the past, it seems like there are certain issues that are under the surface that maybe you can't or won't talk about. I'm not talking about getting into your personal sex life or anything.

BM: Sex? Life? Personal?

CM: Moving into the book, *The Centre*, what is the 'centre' for you? Before you answer that, I'll just give you an idea of what the sense that I got from the poem. Starting with the Blaser quotation [epigraph to "The Centre"] it reads to me as if you're using it to refer to the centre as that state of non-existence pre and post-life from which we all come and to which we're all destined. In a way, being the only solid ground in life, outside of life. The other way you could see it is that which can only be defined as such by its relation to its opposite in the margins, or, as you say, "the edge." That the centre is a solid thing, but it's constantly in flux. And that the centre then becomes something that you become personally resistant to, yet inexorably drawn into.

BM: Yeah, what you're getting at is the whole metaphor. Well I'll start with this—it just popped into my head now. Keith Jarrett, the great jazz piano player once said that he liked to stay in the centre, because it was the place that didn't move. I guess it does rotate, but if you think of the further out you go, I guess, the faster you go, and at the centre, he said he preferred to be in the centre where there's very little movement at all.

CM: Not the faster you go; but the faster you seem to go.

BM: Exactly, something like that. But the centre in the poem... Literally there was an attempt to get me out of the college for I don't know what reason. I'm not going to go into it, but I was put into this place for marking where students were kind of packaged up, or the courses were packaged up, and my job was marking and so forth, in a place called the Developmental Centre.

CM: So you weren't actually teaching there?

BM: Well I was still teaching a couple of composition classes, but I was sent to the Centre for the rest of my workload. It was a place. I was put into this place, so you could view it as a demotion of sorts. Although, ironically, I had so much time on my hands that I wrote the poem while I was at work, for the most part. But it was also scary, because there was so little to do there that I got paranoid. Something was saying, "We've laid you off once; now we'll

get you again because you have no work load down here—we'll really get you next time.” And so it was partly the English department that tried to, that did shift me back into a regular work load, which, ironically, I find very very difficult. But being in the Centre, time moved very slowly. It was a painful time, so that the poem became a way of literally, daily, saving myself through a kind of daily jotting. I was trying to—talk about locate yourself. If I didn't have that poem and that language I would have been in real trouble. So I just kept a daily kind of journal. But then I guess the Centre as a metaphor takes on—think of being in the centre of things, well what are you in the centre of? What I'm saying is the Centre was a literal place It was called the Centre. And a lot of English teachers ended up there off and on. It was a detention zone. That's why that chair [painting by Pierre Coupey used as cover illustration for *The Centre*]. The chair on the book was kind of tricky, because it had to be—for me it had an echo of the South American torture chamber where they put you on a chair and go at you until you confess. So that's why we manipulated and altered the cover slightly with a line through the chair.

CM: So that line's not actually in the painting itself?

BM: No, it's not. But Pierre agreed to that, I think for the reasons I'm giving you now. I didn't want an overpowering metaphor. It also looked like a bit of an electric chair. Or could. If you read the book and then looked at the chair, you could say, “Well, hey, now I know why that image is there.” But I didn't want it to dominate totally as a metaphor. But the Centre, yeah, I think as I go through that poem I'm trying to define what the centre is. Time is altered. The Centre is a place from where you can watch. There's a meditative angle, but there's also a speed to the writing and an urgency that I had to get it down before it disappears. So the poems are written very much the way I write—kind of on the fly. And it's a place where, if you're not, again, active and engaged in the world outside of you—if you're put somewhere where all you can do is think about yourself and your predicament—you go really inward. So I was doing that in there, and not coming up with very many answers.

CM: It seems there was a constant fear of becoming the centre, yourself.

BM: Yeah, there were some references to that.

CM: Or that you've already become that. You know, you say, “...staple, submit *look this up* I have become they/ the centre themself...”

BM: I found the Centre was a metaphor for everything I didn't like about just about everything. Students were brought in—it was like a place of punishment, because if they failed at grammar they had to come to this place to learn grammar. The point is they could never learn grammar there, because it was all packaged and separated from anything that would teach the reality of how language works. So I had to administer spelling tests, which I didn't believe in. I had to administer punctuation exercises, which I didn't believe in, because all this stuff was set up as being the authoritative model—the prescription for writing and composition. So it was just going against me, and the poem, in a sense, was saying, “Look what I can do with language without any of these stupid rules.” If you have these rules, you're not going to be able to do anything. So it's like everybody in there was trapped. And what maintained it, of course, was an authoritative system that believed that this was the—again the grand lie was that all teaching was some day going to be like this, where people just wander in, or are forced in, given a package or a module without any human connection at all, or any connection with writing, which was supposedly what they were having trouble with. That's really what that poem's about—how people are separated and kept that way in absurd activity. So you say you're going to teach somebody to write, and you try to teach them these little bits and pieces. And when it doesn't add up....

CM: So the breaking down of the language within the poem itself becomes part of the message?

BM: Yeah, I'd steal lines the students would write ... There was one line in an exercise, something about being along the river with the Hindu faithful, and it was meant as a punctuation exercise, and I thought, fuck, get me to the Hindu faithful, man. You know, I wanted to go into the world of that sentence and not its punctuation. If we're trapped in the world, so to speak, the imagination through language can take us to those faithful places.

CM: That's the space between the comma and the word.

BM: Yeah, "I have seen the space," and I think the next line was I could see meadows in there. So that, in a way, is probably similar to what writers in exile and prison do. There's an urgent pressure to say something about your experience.

CM: That's the situation, but you're not someone who's in South America writing against something like that. Maybe it's absurd to make that kind of comparison, but at the same time it's our own sort of prison.

BM: I think it's great subject matter in this country. I had friends in Vancouver, however, who—and I didn't get in on all the debates—but people who didn't like the poem. They thought that this level of anxiety being expressed and this kind of—it's hard to explain—I think that it was hard for them to believe that in a fluorescent room where you have rugs and chairs and computers and people wandering in and out, that there's anything wrong with that. Or that, if there is something wrong with it, it can't be as serious as what you're saying is wrong with it, right. So people didn't believe, and I think that generally in this society you can't believe, that anybody could feel this way in a context that looks, by its physical aspect, pretty benign.

CM: For me, if you'll let me say what I got out of it, because I wasn't aware of the situation it was written in, or where it was written—the subject matter wasn't so important for me in terms of the place as, say, *PulpLog* was.

BM: *Pulp Log* was "out there," and this is "in there."

CM: And even more so, it seems as though it's in there, inside the head. So what appealed to me about it was the process of the writing. There was a tension between the subject you wrote about and how you wrote about it, and that seemed to be the poem more than anything you were writing about.

BM: Yeah, I see what you're saying. It's very much inside. And again, it's not poetry's job to explain, like it is sociology's job. And I think what's important to make clear here, in one way, is that I'm not interested in sociology at all. I think you're getting closer to it. It's the way the language itself generates its own meanings. It shows you directions, takes you places in your imagination, and, you know, if it hits a few spots on the way out in that process, then that can be interesting. I think you have to realize you can't really change much. Although you're active in your own world etc., that's about all you can do. In terms of the centre, and one of the central metaphors, again, to come back to it, is being trapped in a place and what's at ransom? Well, you either stay, or quit and you don't have a job, right. I mentioned about being threatened - literally I was told by the principal tht if I protested the lay off I wouldn't work anywhere again. This wasn't the dertermining factor for me staying, but I got mad and stubborn because of that threat and had to fight as best as I could, with the help of many others I might add. So there's lots of blackmail going on in these systems, and I was trying to deal with that. Actually, for a period of many years and I could not not remember having

supper with my family because of an institution that got me into such a paranoid state that it was just hard to function in a normal way. I wasn't being exiled from paradise, man. It was a pile of shit to begin with. So I'm being exiled from the pile of shit, but made the decision to stay on it—or in it. So that's what I did. But it came at great cost. The closest thing I can see that relates to how a system works in all of its complexity, and a book that is absolutely crucial to me, is *Heart of Darkness*. This is a book that goes beyond surface, goes beyond—talk about the centre. It goes to the centre and finds something that can't be explained; yet exists. If we talk about the inadequacy of language, at least Conrad made an incredible attempt to write about something that can't be fully expressed. You know—"the horror, the horror" when you read that book. So I think it's a great book and a great metaphor for our times, and I don't think too many poets venture into our version of the heart of darkness. So this experience gave me a huge insight into how people behave, how systems behave, how people survive, how language works. Just the metaphor of the centre that we started off with—the centre implies a place, but it can disappear quickly as well. It can be arbitrary. Prince George is—there's a sense of this place being the centre, right, because it's geographically located in the centre. And it's funny, too, because you think of centres as being elsewhere. They always are. The difficulty with that book is that if I start talking about it, I have to give you the sociology, and the source of the emotions that generated the book. Maybe I'll someday have to get into the larger story. It's about human evil. And to get into that I'd have to name people and go through the institutional methods meant to keep guys like me scared all the time. Except I wasn't scared; I was just ground down.

CM: You find yourself in kind of an ironic place in that, you know, here you are, I think it was at your launch that someone referred to you as "the granddaddy or father of poetry in Prince George." In one sense you're that—I mean you have to admit that you're the most prominent literary figure in the community. And also here you're being recognized by the college for 25 years service, whatever that means, and yet you seem somewhat underappreciated, obviously—judging by what the college did—in the academic community, and in the larger literary community. Do you think that's a factor of the distance from elsewhere? Do you think it's a factor of your unwillingness to kowtow to their demands, so to speak?

BM: Well, I'm not much of a rebel. There's that great Creeley line that goes, "when I know what others think of me I'm plunged into my loneliness." On the one hand, as a writer you want to be invisible; on the other hand, if you're publishing you're in the public eye. There's a kind of a paradox with it. What point is there in being famous in Prince George? Or anywhere for that matter. Why would one want to be treated any differently than anybody else? You can think of so-called writers-in-residence who wander around, you know, just an inch from putting on the ballet costume or something. Playing up those parts, right. I think the first thing is to live, and to.... Somebody said to me about winning that bp Nichol chapbook award that, "Gee, you must feel great," and I said, "No, not really." I knew Barry Nichol, and I thought it was a nice irony, you know, that he's up there in the heavens saying give it to me. Because he was my editor for a number of years, and a wonderful editor and friend in poetry. But I said, "No, I have no ego for such things," and she couldn't believe me. It just absolutely, it meant very little to me. What does it mean to get a gold watch after 25 years?

CM: Are you wearing the gold watch?

BM: No, no. It hurts my wrist.

CM: Spiritually or physically?

BM: It pinches the hairs in my arm. It's tough, because it's—I think all a poet wants is to, if you're in pursuit, it's like you're in pursuit of your own life, you know what I mean? As if you don't even exist yet until the poem gives you that legitimacy. So if somebody gives me a prize or a gold watch, you have to nod and acknowledge it, but it really has very little to do with my consciousness. I've known writers who've gone coo-coo for recognition and so forth. I think it's not good for the poetry to get too much of it. There's not much danger of it anyway, really. So I don't know if I can answer your question, but you can't go on an ego trip. But on the other hand, you want poetry to be recognized. If I'm doing anything, I'm working for that. And then that reflects into what can be a community of these imaginations we're talking about. If we're not getting the news from the newspaper or on television—or just parts of it—a fragmentary sense of the world, then I'm just trying to get poetry into whatever world we have here by organizing readings or promoting books or whatever - that it should be a possibility amongst others to get people thinking. And that's my work. I'm just happy to be writing when I do. Every two or three years I get to write a poem. Because I'm not doing it every day, I don't need time for it, I don't need money for it or anything like that. I think of William Carlos Williams, who worked as a baby doctor, and just wrote at night or wrote when he could, and just did it. I'm sure earlier on he probably wanted more recognition; I think he was in his fifties before anyone really recognized him. Because it is important work. It has to be recognized somewhere along the way.

CM: Well at some point I think everyone wants some recognition, because, fine, you can write poetry for yourself, but you're not going to send it out to get published for yourself; you're doing for some other reason. And maybe that's to keep the poetry alive, or to keep your self alive.

BM: Exactly. And it's, you know, little presses, magazines, this reading series I'm working on—it's a tremendous amount of work, but I'm just really enjoying it, because it's, like, putting it out there again. Because this community, it seems to me, really does love poetry, in an odd way. More people here will come out to a poetry reading—I don't think Lorna Crozier could get, I hear she had a hundred people, I couldn't make it that reading, —and Denise Chong, with her book, a family memoir, had about 200 people. So there is an audience for it, and I think that's what people want. I think poetry is—it's a source of information about the self and the world. We don't have very much of that. So, I mean it is a big deal in that sense - to make life a bit more bearable.

CM: It's almost like we didn't even know it, but we were culturally starved for so many years that all of a sudden things seem to be happening now. "All of a sudden" even though you were doing this 20 years ago.

BM: Yeah, off and on I've been doing it. I've tried to keep doing it. You *have* to keep doing it. I mean part of the trouble I'm talking about is that, you know, is that literally I got into trouble for it. I think the reason that I was in trouble at the college in '80 and '81 was that—it's not because of me so much; it's because of what poetry could have represented to that group of people that didn't want it around. I think they were embarrassed by the idea that—like, they made a mistake thinking that poetry was somehow a specious activity, or unimportant. I mean the real world is industrial, right. Poetry is some kind of meringue.

CM: And for the college to justify its own existence it has to have tangible results.

BM: Yeah, you get a bunch of rednecks and industrialists and know-nothings running the college and they see poetry, art and drama—I mean what is this? It's not that it was a threat to them. They made the mistake of not knowing what it was, or they would have gotten rid of me for sure. Because poetry is one way of revealing the world that they don't want anybody to know about, really. It's the most dangerous thing that they could touch. So I think they

thought it wasn't dangerous; it was embarrassing. Do you understand what I'm saying? And they had it all mixed up with homosexual activity or something. You know, god knows what they were thinking.

CM: Well they don't understand it, so they can't justify it.

BM: They don't understand, you got it. You don't understand it; get rid of it. They understand a course in pulp and paper technology that draws 3 students and costs a million dollars to run, but they don't understand 30 kids in a room discussing a poem, you know. Or maybe they do. You know, I'm really flying off the handle on this one, but I think that's sort of what happened. It's a threat when you get people thinking this way, - you get them thinking the way the mind demands you think with poetry, then you're subversive, you know. There is no literal A-B-C rational world, mechanical world. We've imposed an idea that that's the way the world and the system does work. And that's why people are trapped, knowing it or not. It's just that their minds and bodies do not work the way the system says they should. So, lots of tension.

CM: Now I have a loaded question for you. We've been talking a lot about distance, the distance from the centre, being part of a centre, Prince George as a locale that's often forgotten and what not. You've said that you often feel that distance in terms of being left out of the mainstream literary community. Something that I came across as I was reading some of your older work was *I Wanted to Say Something*.

BM: Oh yeah, that goes way back.

CM: You probably haven't thought about that in a long time. What was it, '69, '70?

BM: I wrote it in 1970.

CM: The edition I read had a forward by Andrew Suknaski, and he talks about the influence that your poem had on the rest of the prairie long poem tradition. And yet what I found is that I enjoyed that poem, but I got angry as I read it, and I got sad, in a sense, as I read it, too, because I think that Suknaski is right in saying that, yeah, you had this influence. And yet someone such as Robert Kroetsch, who wrote *Seed Catalogue*—which now, in light of reading your poem, seems to me to be a complete rip-off of your poem with no acknowledgement whatsoever—in *The Lovely Treachery of Words* he never mentioned your poem. Your name is not even in the index, in spite of the fact that he has one essay devoted specifically to the Canadian long poem. I wonder if you feel that in a sense it was some sort of rip-off, and if so, how does that make you feel in terms of being here?

BM: It's probably my destiny. Again, I know what you're saying, and there have been periods when I've felt...just odd, and maybe it's just one's character. I don't know. But back to the Suknaski thing. I had a couple of people—and Suknaski really promoted that book in what he called the *samizdat*, because it was xeroxed for years. He used to carry that around.

CM: Surely Kroetsch must have seen it.

BM: Oh sure he did. But you know you've gotta pay your debts. It's like, none of this exists in a vacuum. See, the real kingpin, for me, would have been John Newlove who took on that subject matter quite early on in his long poem called *The Pride*. But the writing of that book is a different story. I ended up self-publishing it years later. So I finally got it out.

CM: Was that because you couldn't find a publisher?

BM: Couldn't find a publisher. It went the rounds and I couldn't find a publisher. So I published it myself and sent out maybe a couple hundred copies. And then, being up here, again — Williams had a book called, what's it called? — *Sour Grapes* — which is sort of a neat emotion in a sense. You want to feel cheated, you know, everybody needs that once in a while. I remember there were conferences on the long poem and I'd never even get the brochures for these things let alone some money to go to them. And then really having a rush of prairie books after that — Kroetsch's for sure, Gary Geddes had a book called *Snakeroot*, and Eli Mandel was working on a long prairie piece — and other writers followed.

CM: Well you can never say that this is a rip-off or a copy, but it just seemed that those 2 were way too similar to be a coincidence, and yet it seems to me that, you know, here's Kroetsch, the internationally famous author/poet, whose obviously a big self-promoter too, taking credit for something that I don't think you've been given due credit. I don't know how you feel about me saying that, and whatever you say about it we can edit it out if you don't want that, if you don't want sour grapes.

BM: Well it's, it's like this — in music it works this way sometimes. When I started to listen to jazz, I'd get my mother to buy me the odd record when we shopped at Safeway. Occasionally you'd snag a so-called jazz record. It always had a title like, *Like Cool*, or something. And so you get this version of jazz and you think, well, yeah, I can hear it, but a year later you buy your first Thelonius Monk record, who's considered absolutely weird, but you knew this guy had, he was the source of a certain kind of, again, imagination. Well, what happened to Thelonius Monk? He couldn't play in New York his entire life, or most of his life, because of a trumped up dope charge, which meant he lost his union card, and he was banned from playing in the place that produced him and most needed him. I'm not comparing myself to him, but it's just the story that sometimes — and now I'm thinking of the great A.M. Klein poem that says that sometimes the poet gets cuckolded, so to speak. The people who take what there is — which is very little, unless you get a big grant or something — sometimes take that recognition and don't deserve it, because nobody's checked to see where the sources are. You know, if you're going to listen to, let me see — Holly Cole's a great singer, but Abbey Lincoln, who's in her mid 60s now — has the weight Cole doesn't because every syllable of her singing contains her life. You're not fucking around when you're hearing her. And then somebody would say, well Billie Holiday, who Abbey sounds a bit like, is the source. Well, sure, but Abbey Lincoln would acknowledge that everything she knows came from Billie Holliday. So I think it happens that lots of people are overlooked, people are ignored, people are discovered. The wrong people are rewarded. People who need Canada Council grants because they're starving don't get it, but the professor will get it, you know what I mean? Andy Suknaski is really talking about himself as well, and I feel worse for Andy than I do myself. My rule is — not a rule, but my mode, my modus — is very simple: as long as I worked, took care of myself, I could exempt myself from some of the politics we're talking about. I didn't have to hustle; I didn't have to promote myself; I wasn't looking for a professorship; I wasn't looking for a — I've had a few small grants, but that's nothing really. So I was never hustling for grants. I never joined the League of Canadian Poets; I never joined anything, because I worked. I guess it's an old prairie upbringing — something I learned growing up was always try to keep a job and have a few bucks in your pocket and have some independence from all the shit that's going on, right. So I learned that somewhere. So I always had a few bucks in my pocket — of my corduroy sports jacket — a couple of beers stashed in the fridge, and a good bunch of friends; I want to be independent of corrupting forces. I'm a fan of some of Kroetsch's writing, but somewhere along the way you'd like to be a footnote in some of this activity. I've had my footnotes, I suppose. Sometimes in the earlier anthologies, there would be — there's this standard line that, and you've probably run across this — it would be "If we had room or space to allow it, we would include Cam McAlpine, Barry McKinnon, John Harris..." you know. So I got into a lot of

those introductions to anthologies. You know, the editor says "if only I could make a bigger selection, I'd include so and so. etc."

CM: "Due to space constraints, we want to give a fair selection of the poets presented."

BM: Yeah, so I don't know. I've had sort of some fun with it in one way. Sometimes you have to do that. You have to just go completely somewhere else. If you had one reading in London, then people would take you more seriously. It's the politics of literary activity, which can drive some people just crazy, because there are very few spaces, right. Margaret Atwood can occupy a space, which she has for a pretty long time, and I think it's OK, because she's talented. But, you know, who else is going to come, who's the next to occupy that space? I still really have to self-promote. So in a way, what you're talking about is being recognized, but at the same time I'm no different than a young man I talked to today who's sending his book around to publishers. And I thought, well yeah, thankfully this one went through with Caitlin, but it got rejected everywhere and I had to self-promote like crazy, and I hate doing that. Just to get a reading, you've got to make up a little sheet, and pretend that you have a literary agent. So you know, I've had fun with it. The guy who gets more bitter about these politics, I suppose, is John Harris. He attacks the writers he thinks don't deserve anything, and yet seem to have all of the benefits. At some point you're going to come to this problem yourself. If you've got a book—where do you get it published? you'll be forced into self publication. In this system where somebody who's as gifted as Ken Belford or David Phillips, who've been active Canadian writers - I'm talking 30 or 35 years - cannot find publishers, or anybody who's interested in their writing, even in the places that they live in ... I mean they've got it worse than I have.

CM: Or they're not part of the current school of thought, or the current movement.

BM: Not part of the current movement - or the new schools of poetry. There's a line from T.S. Eliot who's writing about some poet; he says, "What makes this person so beautiful is their lack of ambition." As I say, you want to work for poetry, but as long as you've got a job and you're taking care of your own business, that means you're independent of all the outside forces. I would hate to have to schmooze to people who were on committees.

CM: I guess it depends a lot on what you want out of it. Like I said before, everyone wants some kind of recognition, so you maybe feel a little bit jealous or upset about some of the stuff that goes on, but at the same time you can feel comfortable. It's almost more comfortable being out of that.

BM: Yeah, well I've done pretty well. I mean I get to read in Vancouver once in a while, occasionally go back east. You know, I'm not—I think at some point I'd like to live a little easier in terms of work, so I had more time, because there's other kinds of writing that do take time that I'd like to do.

CM: Like what?

BM: Just at some point, you know, a memoir about, in a way what we're talking about here, living through these things with poetry as the focus of your life. In mine it's been a pretty consistent one, because I haven't given up for anything, so I feel really blessed that I can still do it off and on. But usually by the time I get to the summer, I'm burnt-out completely. Somebody's was asking me, well, what's teaching like in a college? And I said, well, it's like factory work. Except you have to have a personality, which makes it even worse. So you get into the situation where college teachers go up to university teachers and say, gee, it's great that you've only got, like, six or nine hours of classes and all this other time. I don't know if I'd want that, but some day I'm going to have to buy down my work load so I can do a

different kind of writing. I don't know when that'll come. I don't know what to say about the literary politics. I used to get more disturbed by them. My advice is to—any politics are interesting, and of course everybody would have their version of what happens and how it happens. You know, somebody like Robin Skelton—for God's sake, he was whining even when he was at the top of the heap, you know. He had his job, the system, publishers, publications, and the guy was still whining.

CM: Yeah, I read recently where he was complaining because some people don't appreciate his poetry.

BM: Well, you know, why should they? That's not what it's about somehow. Those kind of sour grapes are despicable. You can do anything, you know, you can be a total nut case, but if the poetry stands up under whatever measure we put to it, then I'll put up with anything. I know writers who are disgusting human beings and I crawl toward them because of their talents. Minor people are winning lots of awards and getting grants and representing the country internationally. I mean I don't want to name these people, but there's people out there who have given poetry a really bad name. Canadians have been really good at it, because there's been a lot of money floating around for international travel. But the other thing, Cam, is that the stakes are so low in one sense. What do you really get out of it if you put too much energy into that part of it? You have to really ask what you get out of it.

CM: That's the other thing that I think a lot of people lose perspective on. You know, you can be a Margaret Atwood or a Robert Kroetsch, whoever in the Canadian literary world, and think you're sort of hot shit, but if you really look at yourself in perspective in terms of the world or whatever—well none of us is of any great importance in the world. But literary figures, especially in Canada, are even less so.

BM: Well, I think you're right. I'm just happy that Robert Creeley can send me an E-mail and say, "Thanks for the terrific book, man." He's been a hero of mine from the age of 16. To me it's an achievement—to have one of your heroes, somebody who, in his case, has taught me a tremendous amount, somebody whose career I've followed - not only his career, I've followed his life. This guy's got the goods. And to have contact with him, I mean, that's really tremendous to me. In other words, you're taken into that company, right. I mean it has been a great life - the writing scene. It's great to be recognized in the company of other people who do what you do, who you admire.

CM: Like any profession. I don't know what makes a good doctor, except that they can deal with my aches and pains and not kill me. So they appreciate a smile and a thank you from a patient, but I'm sure that they also take a lot of pride in respect within the medical community.

BM: Yeah. And likewise. I've met a lot of what I consider the top writers, whether they're popular or not, just by being in Prince George. Something that we should maybe just mention briefly is that, by running a reading series here, people often come for 2 or 3 days, get trapped by a snowstorm or something, and you get to know them. And, you know, you form a correspondence or friendship. You see, in one way the irony is that you can be in the centre of a place and be more alienated than you are here; everybody passes through here eventually. And, you know, I've hung out with all of them in a sense. Atwood was here a couple of times. Earle Birney. Al Purdy. You know, the list just goes on. You're better off here. Ironically. I mean I can go to Toronto and I'll sit there and I'll be drinking beer by myself, and *this* is the centre of literary activity in Canada? You know what I mean? And I'll go to Calgary and I'll be drinking beer by myself. I mean Vancouver is almost as bad. You're going through your address book. Do you think Bowering and Lionel Kearns and all that old generation still hang out at the Cecil? No way man. They're nowhere about. It would be

very hard to access them as writers in a town where the group of young folks hang out now. Because you get older and you get probably more isolated in some sense. But David Phillips and I have talked a lot about this—yeah, you think it's a community there—it's actually a vicious little scene. People are clawing at each other. Nice to you, as it's the habit of Vancouver people, nice to your face, and then bad mouth you within seconds of leaving the beer table. At least that's what I found. And I like Prince George, as I do New York, because people are more forthright. Eventually they come around to saying what they have to say.

CM: Prince George and New York.

BM: Yeah, my 2 favourite places. I was trying to say to somebody the other day—it was sort of stupid line—saying that Prince George is just like New York only New York is bigger or something. But I think what you said is important. To be in a place like this you have to be more self-reliant, you have to generate your own space. As I said to this fella today, I said, you know, if you can't find a publisher for your book, I think, what I've read of it, you can publish it yourself without any embarrassment at all. And if you don't like this reading series, well then you start your own.

This has been interesting for me to talk about this stuff. I'm not putting my finger on it. But the paradox is—Liz Hay and I were talking about this. She wrote that book, *Captivity Tales*, Canadians in New York, and it's a wonderful book. But her problem is, in a nutshell—well, I don't know what her problem is—but her feeling was that, being a Canadian living in New York, she got just simply homesick for Canada. So I said, yeah, I've been thinking about this, that Canadians are kind of double exiles. I said, you don't feel at home here, necessarily, either. How do you take root in a place? Well maybe it's impossible. Maybe it's an impossible notion. But she lived in New York and felt exiled there, obviously, and through her own homesickness comes back to Canada and feels exiled even all the more - triple exile as a condition. So what we're talking about is being in a community etc. etc., and it's really tricky, because in one sense you can't be there. I think you can be in your language, you know, if that's your home. Maybe that's what it comes down to. That's where your home is, in the imagination and your language. Places reject you very easily. The college doesn't love you necessarily. You think the gold watch is something, wait till they start naming buildings after you. You know what I mean? I mean, come on. So where were you? Or where are you? You're always trying to get to it. And you can't.