

... it should be easier, so I go **When "I" Left the Stage: A Realm of Attention/Intention**

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Barry McKinnon

back

- some uttered language, rooted in the void,

as driving N.E. of Giscome - to McGregor - not making it - running low

on gas - the sun blinding - a sense of being

nowhere, suspended & scary. the truck

moves along,

between mountains, a train, slag heaps, (a copper mine? thus

the green ring that edges the lake?

such descriptions, without a meaning - or I am without

a meaning,

When “I” Left the Stage: A Realm of Attention/Intention

•

Somewhere in the vast range of modern/post modern writing is a practice /approach – a way of life in poetry that got lost in what the American poet Ammiel Alcalay calls:

the miasma that has shrouded the public word and too much of our poetry (made up of careerism, social networking, strict self-policing, and hyper-production in which information only rarely makes the leap from consciousness to knowledge), obscurity is a badge of honor.

Added to this statement supporting Kenneth Irby’s poetry, Ammiel states: Irby

took his cue from Charles Olson to “jump” into the interior of the land and the self and the sound of language, into the mind as it acts in actual space, always measuring signs of the time. Irby’s collection *Intent On* is yet another identification of one of the paths not taken in a time of disaster, that point in the 1970’s after “I”, as Ed Dorn so cogently put it in *Gunslinger*, had left the stage ... Irby’s collection brings us back to a realm of attention Irby has never abandoned, and one we are ever more in need of.

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land, self, sound, mind, measuring – a realm of attention

Where do I stand and place myself as a poet within the vast range/miasma? I hope to outline here my ideas, approaches and prosody based on reflections and reactions to a few of the poems, as Robert Creeley would say, “I was given to write” – to give a sense of “my realm of attention”/intention.

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On Arrhythmia for Sharon Thesen’s, *The New Long Poem Anthology*, Coach House, 2001.

When I started writing at the age of 16, I wrote fast, filling boxes with quickly scribbled lyrics dashed off with a sense of excitement and risk. I never knew what I was about to say or where the page was to take me. Now I’m 67 and the energy and pleasure of the writing process hasn’t really changed, but I wait much longer between poems. I’ve had to learn patience. Much writing and thinking for me is practice in preparation for the event when the poem arrives.

I’ve also learned to live with another paradox of its activity: The poem simultaneously identifies its writer to the world, but only comes into being when the writer, so to speak, is out of the way. What a strange occupation and process that requires obliteration of self at the same time that it reaffirms it. I think I knew this early on.

Here’s part of a paragraph I wrote for Sharon Thesen:

“... I write the long poem/serial/lyric sequence, a form that gives me the necessary range in which to articulate the poem’s central truth from various & variable angles & perspectives. I see the long poem, also, as a way to log my experience & record what I value most in a context of forces, subtle or not, that threaten these values...”

When I wrote the sequence, *Arrhythmia*, I literally had the sensation that my time on earth was shortly up. Arrhythmia is a condition of irregular heart beats (“glandular prosody” as I joke in the poem) that, in my

case, created a great sense of anxiety that didn't lift until I was diagnosed – thus the poem's final line of release and relief: "knowing is paradise". Poetry, in many ways, has saved my life, given it to me.

The composing principle for *Arrhythmia*, and I hope all of my work, was in line with W.C. William's dictum that each poem must sum up the poet's life to that point. I wrote *Arrhythmia* daily with the sense that if I had anything more to say I'd better get at it. If the word "subject" is still in the post-modern lexicon, I believe the poet's subject is time – and that language discloses the actualities therein. Emotion is the poem's fact.

I've always needed the accumulation of experience and a push from some unexpected angle (a political/social/personal condition, the corporeal - a heart condition) to throw me into the process of the poem. A woman I met in Hamilton asked me at a reading if I wrote traumatic monologues. I had to agree, instantly, *yes!* and therefore with her slip on the word dramatic, created a close description of what I do.

As D.H. Lawrence writes: 'We've got to live no matter how many skies have fallen.' I believe the poem helps us live because it also contains our affirmation, hope, and joy.

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I Wanted to Say Something – a response to Derek Beaulieu and his essay “Linguistic Fragmentation as Political Intervention in Calgarian Poetry”. (Open Letter 13th series, number 6. Summer 2008).

Derek Beaulieu creates, for my ear, an oddly ridiculous argument for a fragmented neologistic language (as practiced by Jordan Scott and Ryan Fitzpatrick) against what he claims as the “stranglehold” of traditional rural-focused prairie narrative. In particular, he critically mentions my long prairie poem *I Wanted to Say Something* (self published in 1975 and later reprinted by Red Deer College Press in 1990). He ties this poem to all the current “isms”: colonialism, capitalism, consumerism, industrial “progress” and overall corruption that forces young Calgary poets to a language and attitude of “disgust” - as a moral and political reaction to the “prairie” poetry that precedes them.

The poem in question is based on my grandfather's stories and photographs, and the particular and brutal hardships he and my grandmother encountered as pioneers coming to Alberta in 1908. The poem is not without ironies that Beaulieu misses, or misreads. The poem is not without political content that might somewhat support his large generalizations; he needs a keener eye and closer reading. Indians were “pushed further east by the government”. “I wanted to say something/*was wrong*”. (*italic mine*) etc. etc. “the lovely land” was in actuality, in many ways, its opposite.

Yet the poetry Beaulieu cites in opposition to this poem, avoids “meaning” per sae and provides no social or economic alternative or analysis that makes dialectical “sense” (being that these poets' politic and protest is against “sense” as such). Without linguistic clues to the world as we know it, what *more* “politically correct” world do they have in mind? Socialism, communism, or Pound's imagined world in which the poet is the cultural “antennae” with a welcome place in say, Mussolini's fascist Italy?

Beaulieu makes a big claim when he cites Fitzpatrick's lines

Fan nub
nex homusch
Apprais catalo
stack plasma.

as having any force versus the evils of what these poets presumably see in the corporate world. The theories they use, based on their studies in the post modern university English courses that feature the thinking of Derrida, Foucault and Marx et. al., dubiously make no sense at all, at least in the contexts Beaulieu attempts to define in his essay. I *do* see Jordan Scott's work, however, connected to a real corporeal condition (stuttering) as prompt for an interesting language of human engagement, discovery, and possible liberation in its disclosures. Scott *is* an interesting poet but from perspectives outside of Beaulieu's view. Beyond that, I fail to get Beaulieu's large claim for the work of Scott or Fitzpatrick as social measure, or that it can be conjured as a rejection and counter to Alberta oil driven capitalism and "consumerism". This confusing circle of non sequiters sways widely off the track, though within its assumptions and suspicions, would make my comments and defense here even more so suspect as part of the "disgust" Beaulieu claims these poets give voice to.

I remember hearing about Robert Creeley at a conference with some young Canadian poet/theorists. After a lengthy incomprehensible discourse by one of them, Creeley replied with a question: *Where did you get this language? Who the hell did this to you?*

Amen to that!

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Head Out (A Letter, Essay, Poem – to Cecil Giscombe)

Preface:

My friend the American poet Cecil Giscombe and I took part in the *Philly Talks # 18: a Dialogue with Contemporary Poets*, in the Rosza Centre at the University of Calgary on Feb. 2nd, 2000, at 7:30 p.m. The reading, talk and discussion took place with a live audience (and an audio web cast feed for those who wanted to listen and ask questions live via the *Philly Talks* web connection).

Short weeks before the live event Cecil and I exchanged new writing that became the focus for the *Philly Talks* newsletter web document. This material was accompanied, also, by responses/reviews/reactions to our work by 3 other poets: Wayne Compton, George Elliot Clarke, and Giovanni Singleton.

What follows here is my written response to Cecil Giscombe's e-mails to me prior to the reading: it is a response to Cecil's poems/poetics/& concerns as I see them. In this edition the text has been edited and Joy McKinnon's Giscombe photos added.

I've decided to let *Head Out: a letter, essay, poem to Cecil Giscombe* stand alone as part 5 of a series of poems I'm working on called *In the Millennium*. I do, however, prompt any interested reader of this chapbook to see the full context of *Philly Talks 18* - which as a whole consists of the poems, essays, statements, e-mails, queries, and written post responses that arose out of the live web cast discussion. (*The Philly Talks # 18* and *Philly Talks Post Response #18* are at phillytalks.org).

I'm not sure that during the talk/discussion part of the event Cecil & I made any teleological advances - even without the pressure to do so; however, we both agreed the next day of feeling - the word we simultaneously blurted out in laughter - was: *stupid*. When in the range of intelligent, huge, hairy, and difficult questions that we were asked - concerns of place, race, meaning, form, content and the intents of poetry - our answers, or a least mine as I remember them, went out by the seat of my pants. If only had we *more* time to *think!* To say what we *really* mean! To revise the spontaneous inaccuracies *with* felicity! etc. ...

Nevertheless:

never apologize, I once heard it said:

risk to let the voice and writing stand.



Head Out

Cecil: On the phone I asked: *What are we going to do?* - a question regarding the why, when, what and where of the *Philly Talks*. We both began to laugh/ nervously. But this to say, you've plunged ahead and given me a wonderful essay/letter, new poems and notes I'll respond to here - make a plunge that I hope gets me to *somewhere* and *you* - to connect our journeying / returns

into the large concerns of our talks: *poetry &...*

the complex practice of it that we may stand *reaffirmed / ashamed* together, also in a kind of happiness and laughter - bound as we are to attempt its secret/lead our lives by it - baffled dumb/ to want/ any need to journey / return.

Twenty-one years ago: you in Normal Illinois and me in Prince George, B.C. - an unlikely geographical connection, your voice on the phone - smooth, subdued, quiet, intelligent and polite - introducing yourself via George Bowering's suggestion that you contact me - you a poet with a project, making a simple request: you needed an invitation and a letter to support your plan to track the black explorer and miner John Robert Giscome's journey and life in the mid 1800's viz. his presence in B.C based on your serious premise of a family blood tie.

J.R. Giscome / C.S. Giscombe

And within a year, there you were in the parking lot of the Downtowner Motel in Prince George. Did I wave first or did we wave simultaneously? (we gave no physical clues for identification. I knew from scant

historical information that J.R. Giscome was black/you couldn't be white (I'd have been very suspicious if you were!

the blood ties.

now, here, your return via John Giscome to begin the long journey - almost a decade ahead of you - into the poem:

Giscome Road

our immediate connection / spontaneous

difficult talk/easy talk. We, familiar with similar materials or lack of them, and *questions* - and a sense of a share in a cursed journey, if it were not for the almost promise that its very activity is what could equally save anyone on it.

We talked

into the night - back porch beer epiphanies/ and over the years of our talks to a kind of necessary knowledge - as if by articulating a shared skill, concern, and practice, each step ahead be taken more assuredly - give simultaneous courage in the foolish prompt to risk

words

the wilderness

the nothing

dumbly / head out

as early miners packing each thing for a journey into vast unknowns, up the physical canyons, thru miles of bush I can barely walk a block thru (Cecil, that day on the Giscome Trail in the sheer and wonderful context of the "historical" moment, being with you, I was also being bled by many species of carnivorous bugs - and in fear noted trees shredded by recent hungry bears. How far did we go until we got the idea: this, *now, here*, the literal Giscombe Trail/ *his* portage on

to Summit Lake/the water

shed divide at 54 40 - longitudes and latitudes of history. I watched

you swim out quite a way.

our subject? What tools, what corporeal/ mind/ necessity let us start with an agreement, spit out without a thought, yet a *thought* we continuously return to by virtue of its curiosity - to a "theme" of sorts: "this is a place we decided, *but there's nothing here.*

right and wrong

the name's the last thing to disappear



Giscome / Giscombe

no more Saturday nights there

Who cares in the expectation of dislocation as normal in the Canadian northern corporate practice and ethos? In recent history (the 50's) the Cheslata Indians "removed" from their land by the Alcan/Kemano project, given scant hours notice before the flood. Giscome emptied on scant notice in 70, (there's a long list of other towns and people) - and most recently Tumbler Ridge * where I write this (a coal mining town shutting down) - a place in a huge transition that very much attracts me. In its disintegration to become a ghost town for eco tourists, old age pensioners, snowmobilers, poets, and misfits - I begin to feel, illusionary or not, a sense of being, temporarily, out of dislocation: these beautiful mountains, and air and cheap real estate - a real place in the detritus after they've gone, whoever they are (innocent or not). I'm thinking of the *what&who* in the ruthless discard of primal economy. What of value can be kept? What's changed in America, the north -

here

& Giscome, the town in 71, where Joy and I felt *not* at home, but that this place *was* a home; she photographed each house, street, church, train station, mill, machines/ machinery and *every thing* abandoned.



* Tumbler Ridge was becoming a ghost town in 2000. The world price of coal dropped and allegedly the TR supply was dwindling, so the mining companies shut down/moved out. By 2005, world prices went high enough to attract several companies who have since opened or re-opened mines. TR is now integral to the new global economy - namely China's requirement for resources in its move to the next stage of industrialization. Add to this the oil and gas reserves and activity in the northeast BC region, means the local economy is, as they say, thriving (but not without, also, new threats of serious social and ecological costs). Further note: In the spring of 2014 because of lower prices and world demand for coal, the mining companies laid-off hundreds of workers and left with little notice. Tumbler Ridge is again reduced to a skeletal population waiting for a viable economic future.



On one of those trips to Giscome I drove out along Eaglet Lake until I feared going on. This sense of nothing ahead. A road to end without reason. Where would I be in this momentary terror - my soul I literally sensed, *gone* - cast from the earth into *the diffuse centerless light*. Is this *the* dislocation, or *the* terrified connection - (poem, now, as portage of our own necessity and making - words as map, tendril, trail and path to return to where? - the poet going forward/ back on a syntactical bridge only strong enough, *in* this necessity - because we're traveling light - to carry only his/her own weight? The words/ words

got *you* *to Giscome Road.*

no back drop

here

you made words/large fact of a world once blank, *almost* empty, *almost* nothing/ went back -ward for/word into terrestrial multiples: Jamaica to the babbling old man/ - a long lost Giscom(b)e on a front porch - knew nothing you needed *to know*: no evidence at the primary source: *therefore*

Cecil Giscombe on a ten speed bike, poet peddling into the centerless light: Jamaica, North America, Normal, Prince George, Giscome, the prairie Midwest - into

diffuse light.

(feet, head, and eye

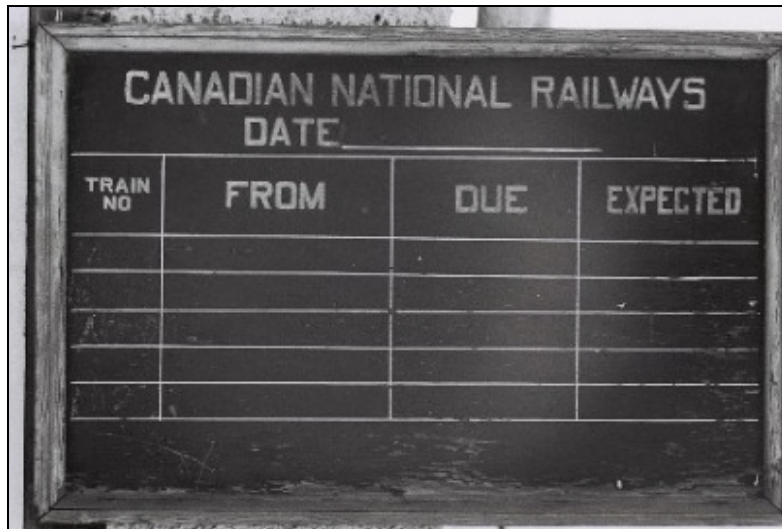
into –

nowhere/somewhere, far, two directions, with open return. into & out of ...

describing it

head out

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Endnote

Many of the thoughts in my improvisation bounce from Cecil's title *Into and Out of Dislocation*. I think I'm just beginning to understand it (beyond the medical description of Cecil's injured/dislocated arm as described in his book) - in terms of his life and writing as an African American writer in America, and Canada. The title poses a great millennial question: if we know, with varying degrees of intensity the arbitrariness of what being *into dislocation* is, (aren't we *all* in it, or about to be?) - then what is it to be *out of dislocation*? The *place* this question imagines is open to what human values we would presently wish to define it as (a real *place* without compromise or illusion?). What presence & location do humans anywhere have in the current psycho/sociology of what has happened/happening here/anywhere you care to look? The world's largest clear cut in the Bowron valley is 40 minutes from Prince George - large, invisible; it's "nothing", they say. The unrecorded world, *this* close, (20 minutes from Giscome) - yet, minimal fact given the human dislocations & disturbance of the larger daily world eco/human diaspora. A question:

the task of poetry?

poetry/

What I've wanted. The poem itself (an artifact/ *real* place) - & I've also wanted the very moments of its act & its energy (integration/location) - to include, as well, a necessary, disintegration of its conscious *and* unconscious premises? By this I mean the practice I think I see in George Stanley's new work: he writes / builds a line that seems dismantled *at the same time* - to reveal accurate processes of mind and life moving to their jagged truths. This want of a new world! This want of the new poem! Get a life, I hear them say while "real life goes on" into and out of the language and world at hand - *into & out of*....

I think the task - & Cecil so large among the others I admire for taking it on - is to break form, break ground, *be* ground (*not* back drop), so that when the radio is on, the static clears.

Now voice and music are heard, and the pleasure of the information to make what need be known and said, visible.



Notes/ Works Cited for Head Out & Endnote

The line “journeying and returns” is the title of an early book by bp Nichol.

The line “reaffirmed/ashamed’ is from William Carlos Williams’ poem proclaiming: “I am a poet! I am a poet!”

References to “this is a place, we decided...” is from Cecil’s essay “Border Towns, Border Talk” published in *Diverse Landscapes: Rereading Place Across Cultures in Contemporary Canadian Writing*, (Prince George: UNBC Press, 1996. Eds. Beeler & Horn).

“The name’s the last...” is from *Giscome Road* (Normal II: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998).

Various titles I’ve taken from *Prairie Style*, Cecil’s ms. in progress.

“Real life goes on” is a Robert Creeley quote on the back jacket of Cecil Giscome’s *Into and Out of Dislocation*.

Post Response: Supplement to The Philly Talks # 18

My job as a poet is to see and to unravel arbitrary and preconceived notions and definitions of reality, including what I might conjure as my own: the poet can't help but do this because of the very nature of the energy & process of the language that's chosen him or her. What has been mapped by manipulative and self-interested forces, from whatever source or reason, is firstly what the poet must at the most rudimental start of the thinking and writing process attempt to take apart. I must find myself asking unanswerable questions; there is no choice. The poem is a process that defies the static, the set, the static arbitrariness that herd most populations thru life and language. The poem is verb: there are no nouns in nature: nature has neither centre nor periphery.

Place becomes for me the perception of that moment when my eye sees an instant and then sees thru it/knows it; the poem moves at it, in it, becomes both it and not it. This written instant is of a/the world unmapped, immediate and excitingly incomprehensible, (now there and visible for "gradual awareness") and by that fact more real in its assertion than the lower-order uses of language that manipulate to create static, noise & stasis. In these manipulated claims of the "real world" by those obsessed with power, the dramatic premise is that once a thing ceases to move it is easier to kill (literally or metaphorically) - the poet included. If Cecil and I share anything, I hope it is a clear sense of these margins, bounds and conditions and that we are neither black nor white (but a multiple of complex human activity which may include these designations*) - while in the heart and moment of the process of seeing and writing, terrified or not, in this necessary disappearance of the preconceived.

This is part of a poem I wrote in the 1970's that Cecil referred to - having an importance to him - shortly after we met.

... it should be easier, so I go

back

- some uttered language, rooted in the void,

as driving N.E. of Giscome - to McGregor -not making it - running low

on gas -the sun blinding - a sense of being

nowhere, suspended & scary. the truck

moves along,

between mountains, a train, slag heaps, (a copper mine? thus

the green ring that edges the lake?

such descriptions, without a meaning - or I am without
a meaning,

not clearly, at 35

driving ...

(The the. 88)

* I'd like to question large and assumed categories and nominals even further as when poet George Stanley writes to announce: "I am not a man..."(68). Similarly, here is Leonard Cohen saying: "... in an embrace you're neither man nor woman - you forget who you are. Once you have experienced yourself as neither man nor woman, when you are reborn into the predetermined form which you inhabit, you come back with the residue of experience or the residue of wisdom which enables you to recognize in the other extremely familiar traits". (Crouch 21).



Here is part of Cecil Giscombe's poem "Far":

It's that this far inland the appearance of a fox is more than metaphor. Or the appearance is a demonstration. Sudden appearance, big like an impulse; or the watcher gains a gradual awareness - in the field, taking shape and, finally familiar. The line of sight's fairly clear leaving imagination little to supply. It's a fact to remember, though, seeing the fox and where or, at night, hearing foxes (and where). The fox appearing, coming into view, as if to meet the speaker.

Push comes to shove. Mistah Fox arriving avec luggage, sans luggage. *(Inland 5)*

I see these lines as a conjunction in our thinking and writing - poets moving into/out of sudden appearance to trace the fact of a dislocated moving place.



Works Cited for Post Response

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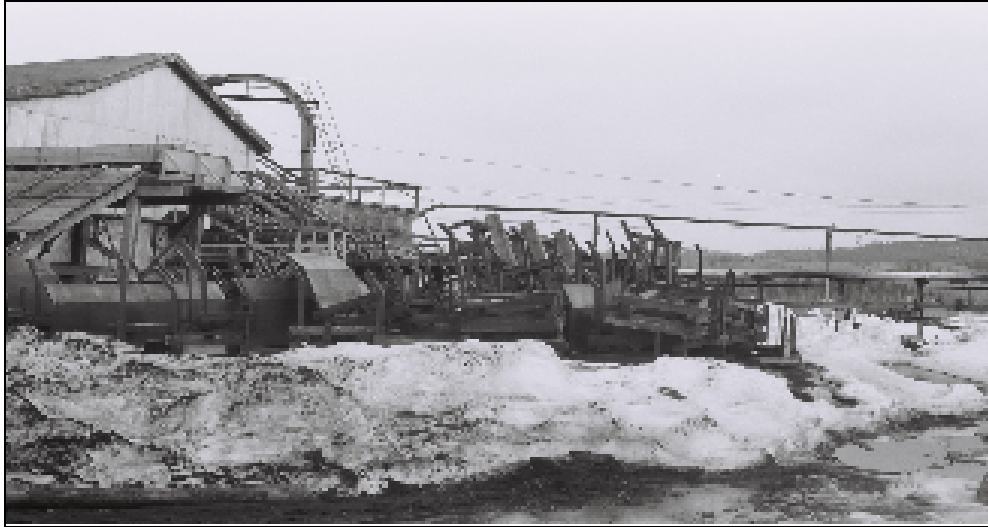
A Note on the Photographs:

Joy McKinnon took the Giscombe photographs that appear here. In the early 70's when we heard the town was being abandoned or bulldozed - as is a common history with Canadian company towns, Joy decided to make a photo record before the town's impending fate. Taki Bluesinger, a Vancouver photographer and media artist, was visiting at the time; he also took an interest in our project to create a visual document of a place about to disappear. In conjunction with Joy's black and white photo document, Taki and I convinced a colleague at the College of New Caledonia with a pilot's license to take us up for an aerial view. It was a bumpy ride with Taki at the controls of an old style video camera the size of a small suitcase, panning the town below. I've heard that someone in Taki's family has his archive. I hope the shaky video film still exists as part of it - in the black and white of what we saw 40 years ago.



APPENDICES:

1. BAYDAY (w/note) from *The Death of a Lyric Poet*. Barry McKinnon
2. (THE UPPER FRASER ROAD ... from *Giscome Road*. C.S. Giscombe
3. NOTES INCORPORATING ... from *Giscome Road*. C.S. Giscombe



Appendix 1

BAYDAY

Giscome shack town, no more
Saturday nights there. one man remains

to watch the mill. he knows nothing
can be carried easily
away. but the people willingly
were
on one month's notice. ... *the answer to their problem* ... C.B.C.

(some houses are livable yet
bulldozers to scrape it all away, as if some natural
cycle is at work

but people people lived
there
as C.B.C. goes on:
we are capable of understanding

the culture ...
etc.

as the local radio goes on jingling
and jangling
the nerves:
you've got 55 seconds
to come out & see what

you've

won.

Note: This poem was written shortly after the town of Giscome was evacuated and bulldozed. A local radio station in Prince George, most likely CKPG at the time, was running advertisements for the Hudson's Bay Company's "Bayday" promotion which involved a roving car equipped with a loudspeaker that randomly stopped at various houses at various times of the day. If a "lucky" resident happened to hear and respond to the bullhorn line: *you've got 55 seconds etc....* they'd win some kind of prize. My sense was that if someone in Giscome came into the street for the "prize" they might have had their house bulldozed while their backs were turned. The italicized radio lines were jotted and spliced in as I wrote.

Appendix 2

The Upper Fraser Road

from *Giscome Road*. C.S. Giscombe

(the Upper Fraser Road makes a long S across the tracks & goes on.)

first view:

the church with its giant cross, the steeple rising above trees & visible too, through those, a red Blazer wch I assumed – from a quarter mile off – was many parked cars or indicative of them, it being Sunday morning

following:

the 5 houses,

Giscome School w/its windows all decorated for Halloween & the banner inside WELCOME TO GISCOME & their gym shoes in cubbyholes visible too through one window,

the CN trackside bldgs,

the single vehicle, the Blazer, parked out from the church right past
where a little dirt road stopped,

the floating green edges of the lake past the flat where apparently
the mill was

(the district inhabited if sparsely, unhaunted).
(the view on out Eaglet Lake at the mountains



Appendix 3

Notes incorporating 2 lines by Barry McKinnon

from *Giscome Road*. C.S. Giscombe

1

(On the long road back from there I drifted
- I was on my English bicycle -
down through some commotion I made
in the landscape.)

2

there's no center where
similarity would begin
nor annotated wasteland out there leaning

on the easily borrowed heart for an announcement,

there is no-

where to go out there-

3

came to necessarily centerless space, though (or the intimation of that
& out of that the specific, there

4

to which I came up some ways

(I'd come up through a long silence on the way up

to Giscow up the Yellowhead

X miles out of Prince George, N.E. of there

5

& turned back into the direction I'd come out of,

out of the gap of the landscape there, a
named edge: the juncture of this one little edge
in the line of trees,

the gap of that lake's many edges -

6

no more/ saturday nights there

the town bull

dozed but the evidentness on passing even quickly through of some -

thing having happened there, some things having taken place
there, even people

fucking, say, in the houses (those gone & the few ones left)

or in the fields just past there,...





Barry McKinnon & Cecil Giscombe at Giscombe B.C. October 14th 2012
i Phone Photo by Joy McKinnon

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Introduction
to
The Centre: Moving North: Poems 1970 - 2000
(2004)

The past
is a foreign country

- John Newlove

•

The eleven sections in this collection contain experience and language informed by a range of places in this urge to reveal a world in relation to all that is / was to become a life: family, work, sex, friendship, health, the politics of person and place – these large complex inaccurate dissolute human categories as prompts for whatever the poet is given to reveal. The particulars of these contexts and places I hope I partially found / made visible - as they sought me in the poems that follow.

it is the road
and its turning that is the traveler,
that comes back and remains unexplained

- Robert Creeley
Poem for Beginners

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Introduction for rob mclennan's *Collected Sex* (an anthology in process)

The poet Brian Fawcett in our many talks since we met in 1970 always pose and provokes the large questions he believes a poet needs to ask. He once said that the poem was the one place where the poet could *let all of the burners go* in his or her pursuit of truth and beauty. We've also agreed that the poet lives in a context of political, economic, social and historical dimensions – realities & insistences hardly evident in most Canadian magazine verse. Perhaps not so odd, then, that our shared aesthetic and practice of open verse and the long poem would also lead us to add sex as a large “subject” which we could then try to write “about” at some point in our lives. We might have briefly shuddered at the notion of a self-conscious project to direct the poem's event, but instead, I think we laughed like evil twins with a new chemistry set – and eventually embarked on sex at 31. Open sea ahead!

•

It really began like this: I asked Fawcett: “What is the most difficult thing to write about?” “Sex”! he said.

We were both 31.

•

If sex is the subject, where to begin? What occasion within the subject's range prompts a poet to write? This may be what the literary snoop wants to know but need not know. The poem becomes evidence of its own detail/energy and in some instances, evidence of the poet's struggle and inability to get to "it". Sex at 31 was written, if I can remember, in about a week. But I can't forget the intensity of the emotional mess I was in: fear, guilt, and threat of loss – the sexual heat of jealousy. It wasn't a game. It wasn't a subject. It wasn't "writing". But I knew my life depended on its articulation in poetry. *Sex at 31* was about as close as I could hope to get.

•

Brian finished his poem in the same year before we turned 32. He published both poems in *NMFG* (No Money from the Government) – a 100-copy mimeo mail out.

Sex at 31 was now out in the world!

We next decided for some important or arbitrary reason to set a 7-year span before we'd tackle sex so directly as a subject again. Once young men (now in our later 60's) we moved on to Sex at 38, 45, 52, 59, ... poems that became autobiographical reports, & I hope, as well, perceptive measures of age, love, and sex – accounts of where we'd been on the stormy sea.

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I confess, I never finished Sex at 45; it's lost somewhere in a file – a few tattered pages of low intensity notes. Sex at 52 is part of a manuscript in process, *In the Millennium*. In the fear of turning 60, I forgot to write Sex at 59, but did write a poem called *Sixty* that moves more so to poetry's other large dimension and preoccupation: *Time*

•

But sex is still the oldest story in the book.

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My thanks to rob mclennan for his research and resuscitation of the *Sex at 31* story (See *Poetics.ca*) and his idea for the *Collected Sex* project as a prompt and invitation for other poets to write *the difficult*.

Sex at ...A Few Other Notes.

At various times and occasions other poets wrote their versions of *Sex at ...* poems. Artie Gold wrote his *Sex at 31* during a visit to Prince George – and as I often did with visiting writers – we printed the poem on my Chandler Price letterpress as a Caledonia Writing Series broadside. I'm not aware of how Margaret Atwood got a copy of Artie's poem, but she included it in her anthology, *The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse*, 1982. Pierre Coupey and I during one of his readings and visits to Prince George went to a party and in one of our humorous and sardonic exchanges, scratched out *Sex at 31* in a matter of minutes on a cigarette pack. The next day we printed the poem as a literary satire – complete with sewn cover, dedication to Wally Stevens, a minimalist non/poem text, a fake press name

(Weasel/Throne) & then preciously signed and numbered each copy with a fine pen. We got to laugh all the more!

Brian Fawcett and I, as part of the 7-year cycle agreement, independently wrote *Sex at 38*, but hours before we were to give a double reading at the Western Front in Vancouver, decided to experiment. We shuffled individual stanzas and verses of each poem to form a collaborative duet. At the reading, he would read his page, and then I would read my page. The commingled text worked well: 2 voices – 2 takes on the same subject. I later printed the duet as part of my Gorse Press series. Instead of the usual 126 copy run, I think I ran out of paper, time, or was otherwise waylaid by a demanding circumstance. I have the 3 extant copies on my shelf. Both of these poems, however, were published by Karen Mulhallen, the editor of *Descant*, as part of the *Male Desire* issue (Fall 1988).

The Peck's bad boy of Can Lit George Bowering, reversed the title & wrote a very funny satire: *38 at Sex*. A few years ago, George Stanley wrote the erotic *Sex at 62*.

This is to say that the various sequences Brian and I wrote exist as serious writing, but that we also had fun with the collaborations and the overall evolution of the project. We might now admit that none of the writing is really about sex at all – in the sense of D.H. Lawrence or Henry Miller's graphic and literal accounts, but rather writing as a temporal/corporeal inventory of one's complex relationship to the other as sexual being – and what that being inspires.

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Transliteration: Bushed to Lost Along the Way

Sometime in the early 90's I got a letter from a professor at Sichuan University describing his literary project: to select Canadian poems for a Chinese anthology. He found my poem "Bushed" in Margaret Atwood's anthology *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English* and wanted permission to reprint it for his proposed *Selected Canadian Lyrics*. I sent off a quick note to say yes and forgot about it. In 1995 I got a copy of the book and curiously searched through its 190 pages to see what my poem looked like graphed in Chinese. I couldn't read a word, but the overall company of poets felt good: George Bowering, Daphne Marlatt, John Newlove, Margaret Avison, Al Purdy — 33 Canadian writers, each with a short poem translated for millions of Chinese readers.

Later, chatting with the writer Calvin Wharton in Vancouver, I mentioned the anthology and that I was curious to hear what "Bushed" was saying in Chinese. Calvin offered to ask his partner Lian Zhang to do a translation from the Chinese ideograms (without, we agreed, letting her see my original poem in English). Lian agreed to this and translated the Chinese version of "Bushed" into "Lost Along the Way" (and also included a translation of the Chinese translator's notes about my "unknown biography" and "his idea").

I'm moved and cheered by Lian's transliteration from "Bushed's" dark mood to something more sanguine. Such delight at the surprise of the borderless light poetry looks for / the beauty it finds.

Bushed

I am in a desert
of snow. each way
to go, presents and equal choice, since the directions, &
what the eye sees is the same

if there were some sticks, you would
stay & build a house, or
a tree would give a place to climb
for perspective. if you had a match, when
the wind didn't blow, you
would burn the tree for warmth, if
the wind didn't blow & you had a match

there is this situation where love
would mean nothing. the sky is
possibly beautiful, yet the speculation
is impossible, & if you could sing, the song
is all that would go

anywhere

麦金农

迷途

我正在大雪覆盖的荒漠上
每条小径都是平等选择通向远方
因为每个方向和放眼所见都是一样

如果这里有一些木棒
你就留下来，建造一间住房
如果这里有一棵树生长
你就爬上树去朝远方眺望
如果你有火柴，风也不扬
你就燃烧这棵树来暖暖身上

真有这样的情况
爱情不将任何意义附上
天空多么美丽空旷
在这里不可能沉思默想
如果你能够放声歌唱
那歌声定将传遍四面八方

巴里·麦金农 (Barry Mckinnon, 1944—)

生平事迹待考。这是一首具有现代派特色的抒情诗，所描写情景的时间地点不明确，诗人的感情也没有在诗中得到直接的表露，他只是用象征、暗示的手法去引起读者的联想和感受，委婉曲折地传达了自己的思想：即使是处于困境中，也不要灰心丧气，要努力创造条件、发扬乐观精神，去战胜逆境带来的艰难和挫折，开拓美好的未来。

Lost Along the Way

I am in a deserted wilderness covered with snow
every road is an equal choice towards the distance
because whatever you can see, as far as your eyes can see
in every direction, is the same

If there are some sticks
you will stay and build a house if there is a tree growing
you will climb to the top and look into the distance
if you have matches and there's no wind
you will burn this tree to warm your body

So this can be true: love has no attached meaning
the sky is so beautiful and spacious
and here it's impossible to be silent and thoughtful
if you can let your voice go to sing as loud as you can
then your song will be carried to every corner of the world.

Translator's note:

His biography is unknown.

This is a lyric poem in a modern style. It's not clear where and when the poem is written and the poet's own feeling is not directly expressed in the poem. He uses only symbolism and suggestion to help the reader make associations and feel the experience.

He indirectly expresses his own idea: *Even if you are in a very difficult situation or are trapped you shouldn't be discouraged and lose heart. You should try to create positive situations and be optimistic to defeat all the difficulties and twists brought by adversity, and open up a beautiful future.*

Lian Zhang's note: The sound equivalents for "McKinnon" in Chinese, mean, in this order:

Wheat / Gold / Peasant

•

A Note for Sharon Thesen's *The New Long Poem Anthology*, Coach House Press, 1991.

In the spring of 1970 while revising a short, unfinished poem, I sensed that the subject was too large for the kind of lyric I was in the habit of writing. The urgency, impulse and push of its untold story kept me writing steadily for the next three weeks. The route this little fragment opened seemed to say: you can sum up your life to this point *if you keep at it*. Yet, I was afraid that this emerging long poem with its complex set of elements and conditions (fragments, images, ideas, and memories based on a series of my grandfather's photographs and stories about his life at the turn of the 20th century) - would fail and end nowhere. The pleasure of the writing, however, was to be in a poem with such a large context of space and time - to be in a form that, paradoxically, gave me new energy and confidence. I didn't know what I was doing but I was doing it. The result was the book-length poem, *I Wanted to Say Something*.

Since then I've been writing the long poem /serial sequence, a form that gives me the necessary range in which to articulate the poem's central truth from various and variable angles and perspectives.

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Afterword and Method for *Into the Blind World*: Part One & Part Two

This poem/fragment is based on a selection of lines sent to me by Arianwen Goronwy Roberts, a young student, poet, and artist who I jokingly referred to as Virgil one night when she soberly drove me home after a drunken literary event in the fall of 2009. I got Arianwen curious to read Dante & at some other drunken literary event asked her to send me the Dante lines or sections that she liked or

stood out for whatever reason. This she did from an on-line translation (<http://www.readprint.cm/work-7/inferno-dante-alighieri: The Divine Comedy: Hell> - no translator given). Within those stanzas, verses, and narrative fragments I could see certain words/phrasings and images that prompted my own “translation” and improvised responses.

I’ve made no dramatic attempt to describe sinners being dipped upside down in hot tar – or include any of the other dark & menacing monsters contained in Dante’s hell. Instead, I took only words, phrases or images from Arianwen’s choices that I could then reconfigure *without*, I decided, any presumption to condense the narrative in Book One, or make any literal reference to snakes, lizards, and lions etc. (though somehow a lone fox trotted in).

The “ending” does not wholly contain the sanguine possibility Dante recognized in Canto xxxiv – a “return to the bright world”- “to look once more upon the stars”. More so, I believe it when the poet Robert Creeley writes - “the darkness surrounds us” - yet within it we must live and experience whatever range we are given or decide.

When the writing stalled, I also took lines/ideas from Arianwen’s poem – the *forest of knives* image, Matt Patryka’s poem for his line *the ghost of myself*, Cecil Giscombe’s email - *these days* the sisters *incoherent, unrequited, incomplete* and Robert Creeley’s line *happy in hell* – sources that kept me going for awhile longer on the hidden road.

Otherwise, all else is missing.

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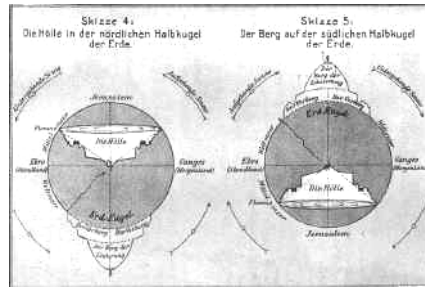
Part Two is jagged meditation prompted by various lines from Dante’s *The Divine Comedy: Purgatory*, translated by Dorothy L. Sayers. As in Part One, I’ve left out literal details or reference to the various characters being punished for their various sins, *or* the specific imagery of Dante’s ascent into purgatorio’s mountain landscape; instead, I wanted to get to some measure of my own thought and experience via fragments/statements, or as Robin Blaser said - a “reopening of words” - to let them go their own way - & to be ahead of any thinking that might hold them back. The task & pleasure was not to immediately *understand* what was written, but to sense what I hoped, a kind of frayed truth about my own emotional life and experience. I wanted the abstracted language/ loops to contain and reveal contradictions, ironies, cruelties, & various forms of human folly anyone with eyes open will perceive daily in the present world. Another task with the writing: to avoid the presumption that one is exempt from the various conditions described: “the world is blind / And thou are of it”(Canto xvi). The *presumption* was to enter the beauty of Dante’s knowledge and truth as the basis for whatever inspiration I was given in and an attempt to speak within the themes of exile and desire.

Dante in the last *Purgatorio* Canto xxxiii is renewed, and again, as in *Hell* Canto xxxiii he is “Pure and prepared to leap up to the stars”. In both Part One (and Two here) I make no reference to “stars” but I do repeat the phrase “light ahead” to indicate the onward journey.

the ascent beckons/ as the descent beckoned is a variation of the first line in William Carlos Williams’s poem “The Descent.”

“what *was* it/you saw sent you – /into the world/packing” is a slight variation of lines written in a notebook by poet Katia Grubisic during a conversation in the Arc Lounge in Ottawa (March 2012).

My conversations with artist/poet/teacher Graham Pearce prompted other thoughts/lines/considerations.



On Charles Olson's Proprioception and Robert Creeley: A Process to Poetry

Here is part of Olson's explanation of proprioception during an interview with Canadian poet Phyllis Webb.

"I am of the belief that the area of the body which is really just not felt or thought of at all or even experienced, the area which lies between the organs of the inside and its skin, is the tremendous transmissive, transmission area properly called "proprioception" and is almost like, say, the balances or the gyroscope that is left out of most of our awareness of ourselves, this crazy distance which is really nothing but transmission..."

My friend, the painter/poet Pierre Coupey explains proprioception with this metaphor: formula race car drivers *not only* experience the machine with the basic senses and mental /physical/temporal/corporeal actions – but that much of the information about the car's performance – and *overall* performance at very high speeds - *comes by the vibrations of the speeding wheels and chassis through to the driver's ass!* The *whole* body (and that part we might not think important for race car driving or poetry) is also crucial to the actuality – including *that* body part, for the driver, literally closest to the ground.

Creeley, for my ear, exactly juxtaposes emotion (source of projection) to exacting rhythms – and is an exemplar of Olson's projective/proprioceptive method. When Irving Layton expressed his perplexity and request to Creeley for an explication of what Projective Verse is about, Creeley makes a long and detailed reply: Here is part of it.

Thinking of Olson's open verse. Perhaps that is a hard introduction although he doesn't at all mean it to be such. ... it's been such a bible for me in many ways that I can almost quote it by heart. The concept of "open" verse (granting the obvious perhaps antithesis of "closed") bases itself on the assumed necessity (or proven as you will) of making each poem autonomous – which is nothing very new. But the further assumption is that form accepted from another time or usage carry with them a predetermined character which may or may not prove inimicable to the given poem under hand.

Olson's notion of proprioception and *Projective Verse* – is a landmark essay with its initial complex puzzlement, but once studied, reveals a practice that emerges sympathetically with Williams' lessons in

prosody – and further opened/& still opens a way to the modern post/modern tactic.

Creeley and Olson, for my ear then and now, of all the new American poets (most now dead) mentored by Ezra Pound & W.C. Williams, seemed best skilled at the variable foot/ breath unit/open verse; their emotion (energy) determines the content, as the content determines form: *form is no more than an extension of content* – and as Denise Levertov comments about Creeley (& would also include Olson) the poems show “evidences of intelligence”.

I hear Creeley’s poems as a kind of breakdown in the best human way. *The house* - as Creeley once remarked for the need for urgency in the poem - *is on fire!* The poem’s fact must be announced in an immediate and demanding manner - *to say things!* as he once said of Charles Olson’s profound ability, also, to write lines that stick as spontaneous truths in the world:

To Say Things

I had to learn the simplest things last / which made for difficulties

people don’t change they only stand more revealed

that which exists through itself is what is called meaning.

And likewise Creeley:

When I know what people think of me / I am plunged into my loneliness

If you never do anything for anyone else / you are spared the tragedy of human relationships

•

*it is the road
and its turning that is the traveler,
that comes back and remains unexplained*

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Pierre Coupey: Caledonia Writing Series Bibliography, for *The Capilano Review Blog*, November 2012.

Coupey, Pierre. *Terminal Series*. Prince George: Caledonia Writing Series, 1973. Seven collages and 7 poems with each poem/collage in a folder that fits into a slip cover package. Offset text with a letterpress cover and folder titles. Cover printing is raised. 9” x 14”. 110 copies.



Terminal Series: Pierre Coupey

Coupey, Pierre. *Four Island Poems*. Prince George: Caledonia Writing Series, 1975. Printed by Robert Moen. OFY project. Letterpress. 7" x 10 ½". 12 pages. Approximately 300 copies.

Coupey, Pierre. *Rainbow*. Gorse Press. 1981. Letterpress broadside, 10 x 16. 126 copies

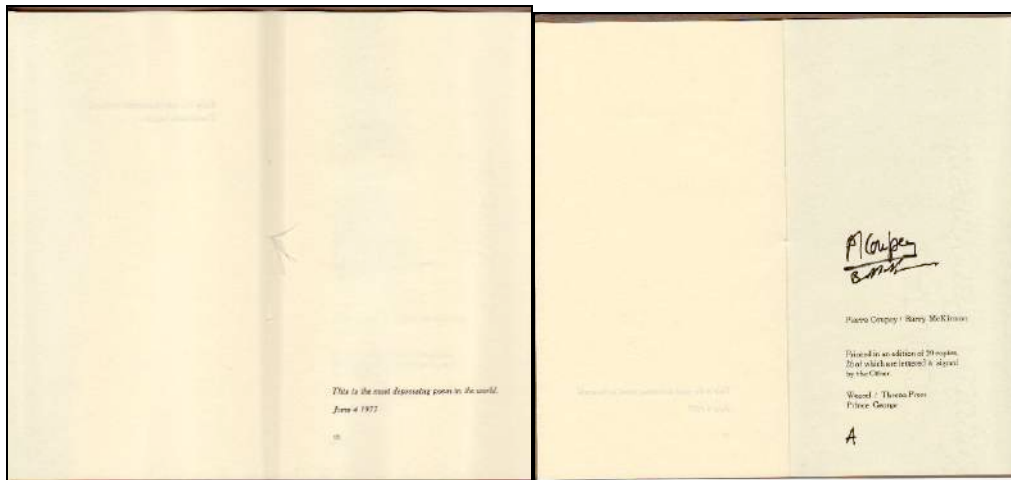
McKinnon, Barry, and Pierre Coupey. *Sex At Thirty One (for Wally Stevens)*. Prince George: Weasel/Throne Press (aka CWS), 1977. Letterpress. 7 1/2 x 4 1/2", 4 pages. 50 copies, 26 signed and lettered by the authors. A satiric text written on a cigarette package during a party and printed the next day in McKinnon's basement.

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FOR WALLY STEVENS / SEX AT 31: Pierre Coupey & Barry McKinnon

Only the awkwardness remains – I'm almost happy.

This is the most depressing poem in the world.



Pierre Coupey • Barry McKinnon

June 4 1977∞ Printed in an edition of 50
copies
26 which are lettered & signed
by the *Other*.

Weasel / Throne Press
Prince George.

A

rob mclennan's blog: Monday, February 25, 2013

[A short interview with Barry McKinnon](#)

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I originally did this interview with [Prince George poet Barry McKinnon](#) for the Prince George issue of *filling Station*. The piece was posted in four sections on the *filling Station* blog ([one](#), [two](#), [three](#) and [four](#)) as an online extension of the recent Prince George, British Columbia issue, but I thought it might be worth posting the entire interview here as well.

this interview was conducted over email from October 16 - 30, 2012



Barry McKinnon was born in 1944 in Calgary Alberta, where he grew up. In 1965, after two years at Mount Royal College, he went to Sir George Williams University in Montreal and took poetry courses with Irving Layton. He graduated in 1967 with a B.A. degree. In 1969, he graduated with an M.A. from the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, and was hired that same year to teach English at the College of New Caledonia in Prince George where he has lived and worked ever since.

Barry McKinnon's *The the* was nominated for the Governor General's Award for poetry in 1980. *Pulp Log* was the winner of the Dorothy Livesay Poetry Award for the B.C. Book Prizes in 1991 and *Arrhythmia* was the winner of the bpNichol

Chapbook Award for the best chapbook published in Canada in English in 1994. His chapbook *Surety Disappears* was the runner-up for the bpNichol Award in 2008.

His most recent trade collections include [In the Millennium](#) (Vancouver: New Star, 2009) and [The Centre: Poems 1970-2000](#) (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2004). He launched his chapbook, [Into the Blind World](#) (above/ground press, 2012) in Ottawa in March 2012 [at the second annual VerseFest poetry festival](#).

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rob mclennan: [In her review of your most recent trade collection](#), *In the millennium*, in *The Bull Calf*, Gilliam Wigmore wrote that "*In the millennium* is a continuation of Barry McKinnon's lifelong project to process the meaning of making a home in an essentially inhospitable place." How do you feel about that description? What does it mean to you

as a poet, or even as a resident of Prince George?

Barry McKinnon: There are several levels to Gillian's statement that interest me; at first it looks accurate but also seems too general given my complex relationship with and in Prince George and given the writing this place has inspired via its "essentially inhospitable" surface. I think wherever I find myself, I'm always confronted by complex particulars and as a poet any sense of "making a home" may seem close at hand, but paradoxically also far off. I feel at home perhaps most in New York City with all that's available there that interests me, and then at some point sitting in a bar in the Lower East End, begin to miss the mountains of Tumbler Ridge.

A professor once asked me if I was interested in being a writer in residence at the university here. He later informed me that the Canada Council added a new rule that a writer in residence *could not* live in the same city. I facetiously said: *I don't live here!* but also felt this odd insight: the detached necessary sense of exile that can often prompt the poem. This echoes for me, also, William Carlos Williams' line that for the poet there is the literal place, as say, Patterson New Jersey, but that: "only the imagination is real." So if one works from that metaphysic, where do Gillian's statement and your questions take me? The truth of my experience is in the poems: *The Centre*, *The Centre: Moving North*, and *In the Millennium*. With regards to the question here I've included "Prince George: Part One" as part of this interview. It is an autobiographical piece that might provide an answer of sorts – fragmentary particulars of my experience in the early days (1969 and on).

But for a literal background, the sociology of Prince George *seems* simple enough. I've been writing a prose book, *Chairs in the Time Machine*, about my first years here, and a period through the 1980's when the arts got gutted by a "new vision". At the college where I used to work, those with the power and the new management team to carry out their mandate, wanted polytechnic trades training – *anything* technical. Poetry and the arts didn't fit with this thinking, so we found ourselves clinging to the handful of arts courses left – and limped onward into the hostile 80's. This is the story I'm working on now – the nasty confrontations after my layoff on the grounds that creative writing was redundant), pressure to reinstate me (Brian Fawcett and Pierre Coupey got 50 writers to write letters in my defense), another 12 years of survival under the same "management", and my obvious but paranoid revelation that some of us caused so much trouble to the system in an attempt to save what we valued that I would never get hired anywhere else.

To go back. In 1969 my initial sense that the place *was*, if not inhospitable, at least suspicious, driven by the lumber and pulp industry and populated by mill workers, loggers, and "hewers of wood" (as the clichés have it) and populated by a public initially very suspicious of the proposed college and of the bunch of outsider eggheads who were going to either threaten *or* change the established order of things. The mayor at the time felt that the trades school was good enough. A college would be a big tax drain. Later on during a referendum for a new library, he quipped: "libraries are for loafers!" The welcome-mat was not exactly out: in the first weeks here an absentee landlord kicked Joy and me out of our first apartment because of my moderately long hair.

I was aware that in 1968 it had taken two referendums before the city finally voted for a junior college that would offer its citizens, for the first time, university transfer courses. Simply, the town movers and shakers as they've been called – those politicians, business men, & assorted other local professionals and managers – wanted, from what I could see, to determine and define a city and its "real needs" in what they claim is the "real world". But the second vote won. In the fall of 1969 the

college faculty moved temporarily into the high school to teach the range of arts and humanities courses, and open a new possibilities for hundreds of curious, bright, and motivated students. So it seemed that at least some people] *did* want poetry, art, music, the social sciences, history, geography, geology, and the range of literatures we were hired to offer. The college, to use D.H. Lawrence's phrase, became the creation of a "new little habitat" within the larger community. We started a student newspaper, a literary magazine, a small press, a reading series that included over 100 writers (Atwood, Ondaatje, Purdy, Livesay etc – a series that prompted Earle Birney to say that "Prince George is the poetry capitol of B.C.!"). All of these activities along with our university courses prepared our students for transfer to North American colleges and universities - and the larger world beyond.

If the idea of home is too static & what that concept might sentimentally imply, I feel okay to say I have, as the poet Lissa Wolsak once put it, "a very full life" here as a poet and citizen – within the wide range of all *that* living implies.

rm: What is it about the form of the long poem that still appeals after all these years?

BM: This is a Note I wrote for Sharon Thesen's *The New Long Poem Anthology*, Coach House Press, 1991.

In the spring of 1970 while revising a short, unfinished poem, I sensed that the subject was too large for the kind of lyric I was in the habit of writing. The urgency, impulse and push of its untold story kept me writing steadily for the next three weeks. The route this little fragment opened seemed to say: you can sum up your life to this point if you keep at it. Yet, I was afraid that this emerging long poem with its complex set of elements and conditions (fragments, images, ideas, and memories based on a series of my grandfather's photographs and stories about his life at the turn of the 20th century) – would fail and end nowhere. The pleasure of the writing, however, was to be in a poem with such a large context of space and time – to be in a form that, paradoxically, gave me new energy and confidence. I didn't know what I was doing but I was doing it. The result was the book-length poem, *I Wanted to Say Something*.

Since then I've been writing the long poem /serial sequence, a form that gives me the necessary range in which to articulate the poem's central truth from various and variable angles and perspectives.

I would like to add that during a conversation with Robert Kroetsch some years ago – always a taciturn experience until the beer kicked in – I asked if it took a long time to write a poem that is also relatively short in length, does the temporal measure qualify it as "a long poem"? I can't remember if Bob answered but do remember his slight smile as some kind of agreement. My new work *Into the Blind World* runs about 6 or 7 pages for each of the 2 sections. Two years of reading Dante, thinking, and writing words on post-it-notes got me a total of 13 pages. A long poem
A Note On *Arrhythmia* for Sharon Thesen's *The New Long Poem Anthology*, Coach House, 2001.

When I started writing at the age of 16, I wrote fast, filling boxes with quickly scribbled lyrics dashed off with a sense of excitement and risk. I never knew what I was about to say or where the page was to take me. Now I'm 68 and the energy and pleasure of the writing process hasn't really changed, but I wait much longer between poems. I've had to learn patience. Much writing and thinking for me is practice in preparation for the event when the poem arrives.

I've also learned to live with another paradox of its activity: The poem simultaneously identifies its writer to the world, but only comes into being when the writer, so to speak, is out of the way. What a strange occupation and process that requires obliteration of self at the same time that it reaffirms it. I think I knew this early on.

When I wrote the sequence, *Arrhythmia*, I literally had the sensation that my time on earth was shortly up. Arrhythmia is a condition of irregular heart beats ("glandular prosody" as I joke in the poem) that, in my case, created a great sense of anxiety that didn't lift until I was diagnosed – thus the poem's final line of release and relief: "knowing is paradise". Poetry, in many ways, has saved my life, given it to me.

The composing principle for *Arrhythmia*, and I hope all of my work, was in line with W.C. Williams's dictum that each poem must sum up the poet's life to that point. I wrote *Arrhythmia* daily with the sense that if I had anything more to say I'd better get at it. If the word "subject" is still in the post-modern lexicon, I believe the poet's subject is time – and that language discloses the actualities therein. Emotion is the poem's fact.

I've always needed the accumulation of experience and a push from some unexpected angle (a political/ social/personal condition, the corporeal – a heart condition) to throw me into the process of the poem. A woman I met in Hamilton asked me at a reading if I wrote traumatic monologues. I had to agree, instantly, yes! and therefore with her slip on the word dramatic, created a close description of what I do.

As D.H. Lawrence writes: "We've got to live no matter how many skies have fallen." I believe the poem helps us live because it also contains our affirmation, hope, and joy.

rm: You originally moved to Prince George to teach at the College of New Caledonia. What have you learned over the years as a teacher, and what benefits has it brought you as a writer? Obviously, Prince George is a rough town, but I know there have been writers that have emerged from your classes over the years. How does that add to your experience or knowledge of writing?

BM: When I arrived here in July of 1969 fresh from UBC, I was in a panic for many reasons. Prince George looked rough and the air stunk. Joy wanted to turn around and go back to Vancouver, but I don't think the 57 Plymouth would make it. The so-called college consisted of a few portable trailers in a muddy parking lot behind the local high school. The first principal had a "vision" inspired by high art and high purpose that seemed appealing, but his "passions" turned out to be narrowly defined. He fought with the Nazis in WW11, spent time in a prison camp, moved to Canada after the war, and was eventually hired to run a college back east. He was an interesting man, but insistent in a way that rubbed most of us, and the town, the wrong way. We were called "Masters" and had to follow a strict dress code – jackets and ties and were often reminded to get out hair cut. He insisted on a formality that didn't fit the place or the time. After a reading I gave to the new faculty – we were all asked to give an informative talk – he bluntly said to the effect: "I didn't think you wrote poetry like *that!*"

I had never taught before so was confronted with developing a syllabus for 3 courses, and the anxious question of *how* to teach, stay ahead of the students and appear that I knew something. What might have saved me is that my diffidence was misread as me being laid-back. In reality, I was an emotional

mess. Before my first class I vomited. Charles Boylan, also hired to teach English and to become a close friend, walked me to that first class and said: “You’re a likeable guy, you’ll do fine man!” And I did, despite my nerves, do well because the students in most of my classes sensed that my lapses and stumbles were an invitation for them to talk, discuss, go off topic, and take-over. I liked them and got to know them better as friends during the many nights we went to the Inn of the North bar after class. In “The Barn” the class conversations continued: art, poetry, school and town politics, world affairs, gossip and questions like: “What’s up with the weird principal?”

I started to see that the lyric mode I was practicing wasn’t adequate for what I began to experience in Prince George. The town was once described as “peeled back”; beyond the surface I began to see what realities it revealed; it became visible via its many dimensions: social, political, economic etc. and that many of us as writers, academics, and students now had the job of defining and revealing what we saw and felt beyond the Chamber of Commerce clichés. The college was changing the town in important ways. The students wrote articles about the local pulp mill pollution, reviewed the poetry readings, published student poetry, protested the Vietnam War, started a literary magazine, and overall shit-disturbed the established order. I think, too, that the town sensed that things at the college were out of control. Too many lefties, hippies, artists, and troublemakers. The College Board fired the principal at the end of his second year. Life at the college somewhat calmed down as we entered the more benign 70’s, but got worse, beginning in the early 80’s – a complicated and unhappy decade ahead that I’ve begun to document in detail in *Chairs in the Time Machine*.

Many students became friends. They wrote and published chapbooks, helped me organize the poetry readings, and run the Caledonia Writing Series Press, kept me on my toes with their intelligence, curiosity, and tenacity. Names that come to mind, the poets and writers Harvey Chometsky, Bill Bailey, Alice Wolzak, Connie Mortenson, Meryl Duprey, Sharon Stevenson, Barbara Munk, John Oscroft, Randy Kennedy, Steve Stack and many many others I could list. Two other writers I need to mention became dear friends and colleagues that kept me straight on the writing path: The great Western American poet Paul “Red” Shuttleworth who taught a course with me, and John Harris whose books *Small Rain* and *Other Art* tell the college story in all of its ironic, humorous and dark dimensions. I need to add that anyone interested in Prince George must read *all* of Brian Fawcett’s books and Sharon Thesen who grew up in Prince George; her work, I believe, is informed by this fact.

But, yes, those first years were exciting and inspiring and provided content for various poem/sequences. I’m referring to the long poems in *The the*. that bpNichol published at Coach House Press. The town for me became a kind of chimera, an interesting tattered muse. Later in the 80’s during the darkness described earlier, my writing became as W. C. Williams once said – a way to ease my mind. Writing *The Centre* saved me at the time; it was a daily articulation of a kind of breakdown, but also a poem that defined for myself the irony, ambiguity, cruelty and hypocrisy of the college administration. I think the metaphor it projects is a large one and includes the larger world. *Pulp Log* during this same period became a log in 52 parts that again traced the daily shifts, changes and confrontations I found myself in. My “subject” was the institution itself and what it *was*, beyond what it *appeared* to be.

rm: In the afterword to *Into the Blind World*, you write:

This poem/fragment is based on a selection of lines sent to me by Arianwen Goronwy Roberts, a young student, poet, and artist who I jokingly referred to as Virgil one night when she soberly drove me home after a drunken literary event in the fall of 2009. I got Arianwen curious to read Dante’s

Divine Comedy & at some other drunken literary event asked her to send me the Dante lines or sections that she liked or stood out for whatever reason. This she did from an on-line translation ([http://www.readprint.cm/work-7/inferno-dante-alighieri: The Divine Comedy: Hell](http://www.readprint.cm/work-7/inferno-dante-alighieri:The%20Divine%20Comedy%20Hell) - no translator given). Within those stanzas, verses, and narrative fragments I could see certain words/phrasings and images that prompted my own “translation” and improvised responses.

How did you approach the shift of “translating” the poem into a piece by Barry McKinnon? Did you approach it as a rewriting, akin to George Bowering’s *Kerrisdale Elegies* (1984)? How important was it for you to keep some of the original ideas and cadences?

BM: It’s interesting that writing poems for me can be prompted by a range of various conditions and sources. Here is my introduction for *The Centre: Moving North*.

The eleven sections in this collection contain experience and language informed by a range of places in this urge to reveal a world in relation to all that is / was to become a life: family, work, sex, friendship, health, the politics of person and place – these large complex inaccurate dissolute human categories as prompts for whatever the poet is given to reveal. The particulars of these contexts and places I hope I partially found / made visible – as they sought me in the poems that follow.

Into the Blind World began capriciously with an odd request for Arianwen (“Virgil”) to feed me lines from Dante’s *Hell* via email for what then became a serious writing/collaborative project. This was the first time I’d ever put another person to use for the possibility of writing a poem. I would read each of the *Hell* cantos, think/meditate, and if I could see a connection to my own thoughts and emotions, scribble a note in the margins or on post-it-notes. Arianwen’s lines, in most cases, would throw my mind from what I was thinking, into other considerations – make me risk what became fast and often puzzling lines. If they rang true and kept me wondering about what the hell they meant, I kept them. Here’s an example of my decision-making: I wrote the early line, “some corrupt” and was bugged by how soft it was. What are those moments worth for a poem when you say fuck it! and revise to: *all corrupt!* – the divine comedy for all time that we have lived in.

W.C. Williams once said that each poem must sum up the poet’s life to that point. *Into the Blind World* was both solipsistic, a “translation” from English to English, and a summation of whatever it is one can “know”. Here is Bob Hogg’s email to me that might partly answer your question (underlines and italics mine):

Liked the play you did with Dante’s *Inferno*, drawing his diction in translation into your own voicing, wch it very much fits in the short fragment rob sent along to us all.

Rilke in *Kerrisdale*? Why not Dante in Prince George. You gotta see, also, the bold presumption and humor in all of this.

In the Millennium · Prince George (Part One)
for George Stanley

a man in himself is
a city – (W.C.W)

beleaguered/belied the entrance (himself,

he enters

canyons
in Hade's hot air

.

memory of that travel
fear to a sense of life ahead: the literal city

busted out - clearing forests/ water/ air

not form but what

shapes

the city a body
to its
soul -

.

down
town tribes -

in their source of
detachment, begin to be
themselves again - hunt/

history, the millennial weight: no clear stream/or abode
exists:

these bulldozed souls

no pity or remorse to equal what's imagined

handouts on 3rd/ the giveaway suits
that clothe them.

oh forest, oh bear - vestigial illumination / the
grins
in simple light

they see

.

what do we see so clearly in its lack

to see without image / articulation - a reason

malls fill/downtown empties /history (capital / frontier
without human hope: this is the end, we sing (crows peck puke, buckles in the side walk/holes of
asphalt, piles of blood

.

the man, the city - what parts in
the metaphor, this way of dreaming - is the heart a down
town? 1969: the routes (bakery, bread, meat
balls, a pickle and up 4th to
the Astoria (beer - to the Bay, the Northern, Wally West, I.B. Guest &
down to the corner - 2nd & George, the Canada, the blues,
beer,
the sense of here/not here - this want of places to
be, enter & make
sagacious.

.

libraries are for loafers

no blame to local realities. nothing in the way of what doesn't exist,
in the simple mercantile presumptions

the smell of money - the brushcut hero who could make it
the local ethos: up

before the rest went to bed / with his bulldozer.

and in a dream of this world woke to

every one/every thing: fuck or be fucked

man a city: the female forest -

to imagine the hard/the soft (winter, cycles to summer spring & fall
bleeding to the genderless human want of tenderness.

root hog or die

when a city becomes its coldest hearts
we live in the illusion of its habitat:

the invisible/visible: the city you see/ did good in

becomes an old cliché in the toxic mill cloud that fills the bowl
and drifts with the winds - a swirl of stink in the citizenry /penetrates the corpus while the corporate,
that most visible as the source, least accounted for in the non-existent public square.

I can't breathe

a man must speak, to the threat dismissed, diminished,
coerced by need and want
to sing : they think they
do me no harm.

the they. the who, the us in the disintegrated

disintegration - nothing can be known; its own hopeless
statement - the north /everywhere (but not revealed -

in this what? will we only know the hot day in mid
July 69 into the stink, the heat, the Fraser
bridge / 57 Plymouth packed,

I want to go back

to what humans imagine a version: here / the beer
& coming out of the Barn into that heavy light decide

that moment, to stay.

the apt/penthouse - top floor Trojan Manor \$300.00

where do you think you're going? don't want youse types here.

moved to 1902 Queensway across from Marty's Cafe (shack - 100 a month (now Assman's funeral

home -

the city: a world

you entered - sensed body/parts

missing in the civic need the forces disallow - & that called specious

what saves us - a clarity / conditions born of fog/
suspicion

the love and hate of uneasy

marriage (man/woman - a city unto themselves

.

what is the source of this thinking? ambiguity, contradiction
power, that hidden, conspiracies, pushed
buttons and cliché, until our bodies demotion to banishment.

a shit hole.

.

when are you going to write something good?

.

its activity is also its own resistance: what
to say: what subject, or image - what body part contain
the life / what weakness is strength when

the whole body vomits in nadir (the weakest
now culled once defined: a man vomits
in shame that now the city can not be made

this rotten dark soul, a man
a metaphor, a language convinced of its own rhetoric easily believed (men (the city
its self / fooled
by little stakes/little power (that those governed
men will thrust their outlines - will sacrifice the rest. will
save themselves
others (those sickest

grin

at any scheme sabotaged by its own impossibility - know the inventors require such false faith and fear

.

the city exists / knows itself/ cannot change

easily

oh corpus of belched noxious gas
oh corpus of the fruitless/oh corpus of malignment oh
generous corpus of the material world oh
industrial corpus behind the corpus oh corpus of the beautiful
& gentle wind oh corpus in our misaligned prayer oh corpus
of promise and care

oh grid of light, muscled male

.

stomp the tourists head into the walk - that part psycho
path - the city staggers in a hoedown dance/wild
in iconic illusion of how it sees itself - dressed
to kill any thing in sight

.

arms of the suburbs to father illusion: conglomerate homo unity: turns place /
to no place / same place
to exist only in our attempt to define it

.

(off Queensway embarrassment, then disgust - teen hookers to cross through

the riven world displayed by its line between: us
and them

little girls, the man, a city - /homeless

.

why did you stay?

the density of context peeled was revealed to a momentary
sense of simplicity, that it could be known, and therefore, the man
could know himself, being a city: unto himself, - its maps and routes, the air it breathed, capacious
unbalance to imply the need for its
opposite: nothing to go on - knowledge without proof /its energy.

to work

a language in its attempt to equal
the anxious swirl in an angular world of charts, graphs - the
gizmoed patter claimed & believed as real - that any power required
subservience to its whacko notions, be revealed as public sense: not
agreement, but truth of ones condition faced: bloody head in its
second of consciousness under the killer's boot - in metaphoric
drama

be allowed to live.

.

in the city: Nechako, Fraser

Husky, Canfor, PG Pulp, Northwood, Intercon, Lakeland, CN,
city core

body is thought

through parking lot, plumes

/ trees,

/ polis / man

•

In the Millennium · Prince George Core
for Sharon Thesen



•

city, mind - body.

the mind disintegrates. the body now a shell

“everything must go” . so the shell is left - its last punch thru the wall - broken

windows

empty *for lease/*

for sale

the city

core /

Saturday Jan.12: up 3rd, sense this: *not followed* but what's ahead/ to the thrift store, my fear: I
cannot easily pass thru

/ crack heads /

desperate predation & no sense of *what*
they could ever care

: the city as body - began, arked, disintegrated. garbage strewn, lumps of clothes / single shoes / bags
of needles/ thrift store moved or bankrupt though the goods they sold were free

to my right, natives clumped, stoned and grinning, once dispossessed, to be dispossessed again/ not
mingling, but *clumped* by the abandoned *Food Teller* door

way/ wait for crack, booze and heroin

what it is, *is*. cruel that body and mind sense their own demise. the city is organ. it sees itself. disintegrated. its body and mind its own demise

turning left, sense *nothings left*. “closed / staff shortage”

give shake of head,

fucked / without a voice.

•

the heart did not break / became homeless: we stood boneless in a heap / stunned then drunk, *not seen as the map*, the city, the larger world - emptied of resource. no re - course to the map that once led/ to the wilderness back to the path it once was. in this heap, stolen bikes thru snow - the grinning homeless lad either in legitimacy says *hello sir*, the friendly light of human greeting or as sardonic gesture: *fuck you*.

garbage, demise - butts, puke, sand & gravel, the snowy streets. slush to mud by the Ramada */everywhere* - the opera as backdrop, the screeching of a high human voice to keep these humans away - bums on George. what wealth / squeezed, burned, hoarded as the world went / everywhere else but here. so as I, city at last with out illusion or dream or grandeur - or friendly face / sincerity - is it the care of David Petrescu I miss who saw the pleasures and treasures of the dump, the beer as source for possibility, the Cottonwood flood, a sign to move. there is no choice when of a place it is the place you'll be

metaphors of recognition / value of what is seen, exposed. the body, raw, open, sexy in its arc, ugly in demise, aging to know body and soul are *one*. the mind disintegrates/ is the heap of clothes, dumped as the he/she walked out into snow & cold, no light ahead on the dark road beyond

here. decay, cliché - in the shit of the city / of city fathers, I look for ... *vision care. mind care. heart care. body care* - all that's lost but our cheery thought / foolish reminiscence to ask / names of all gone in the toxicity of age itself not knowing how to turn. John Harris would ask for a vision, the alternate. I can't find the grammar machine - make no proposal/

give thanks/

grumble in the arc and demise. sense it always here, *that* beginning illusion. I so lost in whatever task sought - sense of work, to do good & in the face of a force sent out to beat it, but that *that* gave resolve and strength - my endurance in the face of such shallow delights they sought by removing what little delight we had. many will not see:

the imported force, their source unknown, the conspiracy, piracy of those in charge

a world is made - of mud /become bone, sinewed road / a habitat of beauty, raw rivers to meet. the confluent/ myth / abundance - dance of possibility - imagined before global demand became a line / or time, split & frayed by industrial demand no locals could fight or

resist, driven to slick and simple rhetoric - that abundance as goal became its own & pure objective goal. *the trees*. paradise ahead like history

swaths/ rectangles/some messy cuts in the contours I saw in 69. sometimes sense, *much still left*. the mind disintegrates, the body arches & all the more such strength to require faith, some sense of decency in whatever mistake was made. I build a fire, I see it - call it - / the aging body drawn by last wish, not to think: *what's deserved/not deserved*. the fire burns. regret, all not done / what done gone
the old city / core

disintegrates - simultaneously evolves / to malls / outsourced plenitude - the perpetual motion of returned goods - an isolation once sensed defines us being here without

when I saw the dark - became pulp myself / in the glimmer of the dark winter snow

Joy says *let it go* - as if some other force must be known / defeat the past & open an opening brief to future light: *you decide*

in the body's arc / demise -

the mind as habitat. city gone, overtaken - divided: those who enter the bank / those who wait - beg spare change. slush & snow, the diesel air - sense of a shitkick to the soul. some *thing* battered in front of us. the body disintegrates. the mind some final habitat

the city hates itself

peeled back / no false surface, in the surfeit - wealth can falsely bring

3rd & George. no children on these streets, is true, yet so large this recognition/ simple eyes open to what is seen: *no children on these streets*

old days? maybe nothings changed - no sense of going on/ to question the ebb and flow of social energies that the biggest thing cannot be seen: the drivers in the growing economies / talking heads cough slogans / toxic cliché and denial. what was I going to say given this window of opportunity in the 24/7/365 - this thinking a complex mask, or heard as specious airy thought? - no one expelled from paradise *is irony*

in the 30 below. I'm on the streets again - list the close-outs, pawn shops belly-up, though cheer the mainstays - the tenacious: Morrisons, Prudentes, Moffats, McGinnis - the German bakers / the shops on 4th - outsourced to College Heights, Hgwy 16, box store clerks mumbling *have a nice day*

what is left. brooding, landscapes/ ravaged. trees - in many places gone. logging. bugs. stock piles - sense of world fast tracked for the last grab / *this is economics*

sun, bright to my left, south rays intensified. 35 below. chill factor. the tenacious north

what we become

/ this sense of home / the desire to leave

– time and *life, a river* (eddies, swirls / floods / the digital earth

Core Notes

The descriptions/images in this poem, for the most part, are a result of walks from the Millar Addition to and thru the Prince George downtown city core – its centre at 3rd and George.

The Food Teller is an abandoned restaurant on the corner of 5th and George, across from the Ramada Hotel. It is a street of bars, a decaying cabaret, drop in centres, a thrift store, a second-hand book store, a cold beer and wine store, etc. Opera blasts daily from the Ramada, presumably as an aural abrasive to drive away lingerers, dope dealers, hookers, and transients, etc.

David Petrescu was a friend who died too young, but taught me the pleasures of the downtown in earlier days (buns and meatballs from the German bakery, beers at the old Astoria, and the Canada hotels) - and developed my eye for eccentric thrift store junk.

Cottonwood Island at the confluence of the Nechako and Fraser rivers has been flooded many times over the years, and eventually forced the inhabitants of the Island Cache to move to higher ground in the 70’s. Houses and shacks were abandoned and later bulldozed. The present 2008 ice jam/ flood, the worst in 50 years, has backed up the Nechako 26 km and into the suburbs.

The Moffats, the Morrisons, the Prudentes, and the McGinnis family, among several others, are longtime family store owners in the downtown core. They stay and survive despite the heavy competition from the box stores and malls that have killed much of their business.

John Harris is a friend, writer, and intellect of large proportions who inspires much of what I have come to see and believe about place, politics, and literature.

Joy, my wife – impatient/laconic who gives clear-headed advice in disturbing contexts and when I didn’t have a title said: *you’re writing about the core.*

the city hates itself - is a line from my friend and colleague Anna Djuric.

Prince George is *peeled back* - a line of observation from the poet Melissa Wolsak.

life is like a river is a line from Robert Greeley’s poem “A Full Cup” in his last book *On Earth*.

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\'kôr\

**Prince George • Core
Gorse Press
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of
26 copies**

Function:

noun

Usage:

often attributive

Etymology:

Middle English

This is _____

Date:

14th century

Core:

1: a central and often foundational part usu. distinct from the enveloping part by a difference in nature <the *core* of the city>; as **a:** the usually inedible central part of some fruits (as a pineapple) ; *especially* : the papery or leathery carpels composing the ripened ovary in a pome fruit (as an apple) **b:** the portion of a foundry mold that shapes the interior of a hollow casting **c:** a vertical space (as for elevator shafts, stairways, or plumbing apparatus) in a multistory building **d (1):** a mass of iron serving to concentrate and intensify the magnetic field resulting from a current in a surrounding coil **(2):** a tiny doughnut-shaped piece of magnetic material (as ferrite) used in computer memories **(3):** a computer memory consisting of an array of cores strung on fine wires ; *broadly* : the internal memory of a computer **e:** the central part of a celestial body (as the earth or sun) usually having different physical properties from the surrounding parts **f:** a nodule of stone (as flint or obsidian) from which flakes have been struck for making implements **g:** the conducting wire with its insulation in an electric cable **h:** an arrangement of a course of studies that combines under basic topics material from subjects conventionally separated and aims to provide a common background for all students <*core* curriculum> **i:** the place in a nuclear reactor where fission occurs

2 a: a basic, essential, or enduring part (as of an individual, a class, or an entity) <the staff had a *core* of experts> <the *core* of her beliefs> **b:** the essential meaning : **gist** <the *core* of the argument> **c:** the inmost or most intimate part <honest to the *core*>

3: a part (as a thin cylinder of material) removed from the interior of a mass especially to determine composition

Gorse Press

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Endnote

What is evident, without apology, is that Gorse Press in its latter years has been a way for me to self-publish. Even in very limited editions for private distribution, “publishing”, no matter this primal level, completes a process: *to get writing from computer & draft, to its designed pages, and cover - and then to someone’s hand and eye and book shelf.* Now the poem exists, 126 copies on their own. Now, the writer can move on.

Much of my pleasure always was and is to see a text inspire and evolve into a chapbook design. Trade publishers, in my experience, tend to exclude the writer from the design process. In the commercial world – oh how we still mistakenly assume a large audience for the poem! – the book cover must grossly jump from a shelf shouting *buy me!* Yet most poets know the courage required to reduce illusion to truth: there is only *that* handful of readers, *the* remainder bin, & *the* lonely fate of a poetry book on *the* library shelf.

When I taught college, I made my students find these books, - the hundreds of small and rare press items & literary ephemera I ordered for the library over the years. Even if they didn’t read more than one of the poems I required them to design as a broadside, I knew the book would have at least one date stamp – and be out in the larger world for at least 2 weeks. Their incredulousness (*Sir, are these really books?*) increased all the more when I had them do an ABE search, to find, for instance, that bpNichol’s *Bored Messengers* sells for 200 dollars – or that *Elimination Dance* by Michael Ondaatje goes for over 300 dollars.

The rarest items, as we know, ultimately get handled with white gloves in temperature-controlled rooms – having become by someone’s good measure, part of a country’s necessary cultural archive. But until that point, the writer-poet/self publisher/small press person lives in a basement, garage, or study, with a letterpress, Gestetner, or graphics capable computer, a 3 in one printer, rubber collating finger, staplers, sewing needles and thread etc. creating a little but important world that exists entirely within its own intentions, elements, and materials. Often there is a shabby urgency & appearance to the work when compared with the master professional printers and designers who win Alcuin prizes with their “product”, but the small one man/woman press - no matter the flaws, mistakes, and crude demeanor, etc., takes its value by being uncorrupted, and uncompromised. Vanity & self-righteousness?

The small press is *also* an argument – a counter to a slick outer world – a bit of a shout against the odds to say: *I am a poet I am a poet, I stand re affirmed/ashamed.* Or so it has been with me.

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