

George Stanley

(an interview)

with

Barry McKinnon

George Stanley

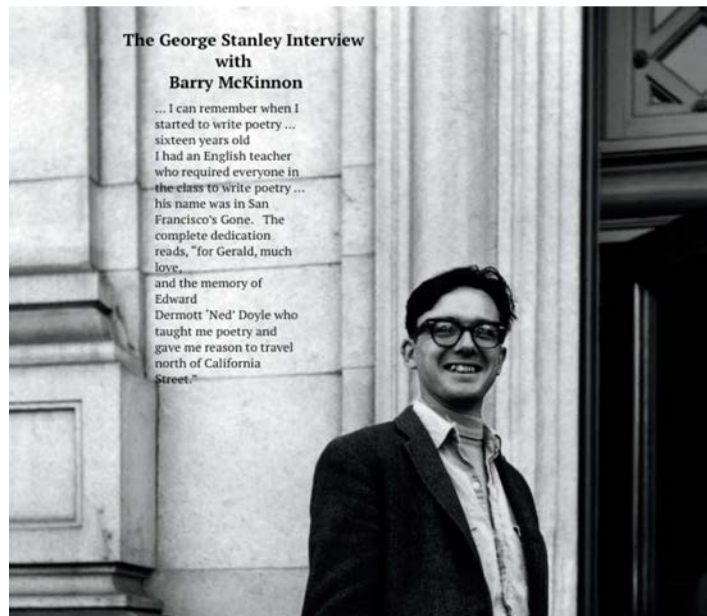
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Tove Neville Photo of George Stanley at UC Berkeley 1965
for *The Capilano Review George Stanley Issue: 5.14, June 11, 2019.*



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Bibliography

Barry McKinnon: I was thinking this morning that there is a point where a young person becomes a writer or calls himself a poet . Do you remember when that happened with you?

George Stanley: I can remember when I started writing poetry, but I cannot remember when I started calling myself a poet . I'm not really sure if I call myself a poet now, but to go back to that - sixteen years old I had an English teacher who required everyone in the class to - this is third year high school - to write poetry, and his name was in *San Francisco's Gone* , Edward Dermott 'Ned' Doyle.

B: Yes, and, "for Gerald, much love ..."

G: That's my brother.

B: The complete dedication reads, "and the memory of Edward Dermott 'Ned' Doyle who taught me poetry and gave me reason to travel north of California Street".

G: California Street when I was growing up was the farthest north in the city that anyone in our family would have any reason to go.

B: Was it like a boundary line?

G: It was kind of like the experience of a boundary line. It runs over Nob Hill and it isn't higher ground all the way through the city - it was a cable car line that ran at one point all the way from Market Street to Presidio Avenue which is about two thirds the way across the city and on California Street, or just south of it were doctors offices, big hospitals - and that was one reason you might want to go to California Street was to visit a doctor but no other reason and I think this probably has to do with ethnic background; that is, my family is Irish and north of California Street would be either rich people of English descent or it was Chinatown and North Beach, so going north of California Street -- Doyle as I said, gave me reasons, two reasons: one was that when I eventually came back from the army in 1956 I went up to North Beach which is north of California street and that's where the poets were. And the other was that Doyle was gay, so that appealed to me too - anything that was oppositional or contrary to accepted morality was also happening in North Beach. So that's really what I meant, but to get back to writing poetry when I was sixteen - and all wrote poetry and he told three of us later on that we had some talent for writing poetry. Now one of the three was my friend Manuel Teles and the other was a boy named John Tsmisand. Manuel was writing John T's poems for him for money (laughter) so we can leave John out of it . But Manuel and I had some talent. I lost track of Manuel many many years ago. I don't know if he's still writing poetry.

B: So literally, your first writing came out of an assignment in high school?

G: Came out of an assignment, in literature, in English class. So then I wrote poetry that year and then I stopped and then I wrote some poems again when I was at university in Salt Lake City and again stopped and then I wrote some poems as a matter of fact - now that's not quite right because in between high school and going to Salt Lake City I was one year at the university of San Francisco and I know I wrote there because I think they were published in the University of San Francisco literary magazine, and then at Salt Lake City I was at the University of Utah and it's interesting that - this is before North Beach - this is 1952 so it's before the beatnik era began and so going to Salt Lake City - which is one of the most repressive cities in America, from San Francisco which is one of the most liberal - that when I got to Salt Lake City I found myself in the counter culture for the first time because anyone who was not a Mormon was in the counter culture. So the counter culture

consisted of Catholics and Anglicans as well as gays and lesbians and communists and poets - anyone who was not part of the Mormon establishment - so there I met all these bohemians, that's the general term "bohemian types," but isn't that paradoxical! I met them not in New York or San Francisco where I was born, but in Salt Lake City. So there I published some poems in a literary mag we started at the University of Utah which was called *Context* and then I stopped writing again. I went into the army and when I was in Mammoth Spring Arkansas living on separate rations in sort of like an auto court by the river working as an assistant poultry inspector - I was very lonely. I started writing poetry again there. But each of those three times I stopped ... but then again I didn't stop because I was always writing some and then I came back to San Francisco after I was out of the army and I went to the University of California Berkeley and I had an old friend named Gerry MacKenzie from Salt Lake City and he was living in San Francisco at the time, so we got together and went out to a bar - Vesuvios bar - this is 1956, late 56 in North Beach and while we were in there we met another man whose name I forget. I think it was Stanley McNail - I don't quite have that name, and he said to us, "do you want to go to a real bohemian bar?" So we went with him up Grant Avenue to a place called The Place and it was either that night or the next night or the next week when I went back again that I met Jack Spicer there. I remember having my first conversation with Spicer; it was about Emerson and Thoreau and I met Joe Dunn there along with Spicer and Knute Stiles and a couple of other people, and at some point I had shown a poem to somebody and I think I went over to Joe Dunn's house on Bay Street. Spicer was there - and he liked the poem I showed him which was "Pablito" (?) the first poem in *Flowers* and I remember walking back down to Spicer's house or towards where he lived down Polk Street in the middle of the night and him telling me I should join his workshop in poetry, and I eventually did that and I dropped out of university and spent the next eleven years of my life in North Beach, except for a year in Greenwich Village, which was the same place, writing poetry so that's how all that started.

B: Ned Doyle did something to your curiosity in terms of going past California Street.

G: Well to go north of California Street meant to break away from my family.

B: And once you do that, of course, at that age, most young writers have to find the teachers or connections.

G: Yes, so I found the teacher - Spicer.

B: I remember reading that he had a pretty odd and sophisticated test before a student could take his poetry workshop.

G: Ya, he did and I don't remember much about it; it's all in some of that Spicer material. It was a test made up of questions about literature, history, and philosophy and I met him later after the workshop had started. I got into the workshop without taking the test, but later on I saw a copy of the test and - I was very much of a- shall I say, an academic kind of intellectual kid and I would have answered the test quite straightforwardly and to display my....

B: erudition?

G: my erudition, ya, and if that had happened then I would not have gotten into the workshop because the test was to screen out people who could pass it (laughter) or who would take it seriously or if you were so ...

B: I think poets *always* have to fail the test! (laugh)

G: Or if you were someone like Ebbe Borregaard then you would just crumple the whole thing up into a wad of paper and say, "I'm not going to do any of this bullshit!" and then you would get into the workshop.

B: The test is the test! What were your first feelings about Spicer?

G: I admired him immensely and got drawn in by Spicer into these wars that he would have with Robert Duncan and Robin Blaser where I was always on the wrong side, the losing side.

B: Was there some kind of test of loyalties that had a dimension in poetic thinking? Fights over theoretical matters?

G: Well, yes, they were fights over ... I can't remember. I mean one time I know that Spicer was accusing Duncan of having sold out to New York, and another time he was accusing him of having too many Egyptian gods in his poems and these things were very very serious to Spicer. Robin would tend to feel aggrieved and Duncan would simply dismiss the whole thing and joke about it, but for Spicer these were deadly serious issues. Spicer wrote about the human crisis in one of his poems. I mean, Spicer really did see what was happening to our species.

B: You see amazing risks in his lines, a kind of seriousness - his life was on that line.

G: Yes, with every poem. Once we had a poetry meeting and he read some poems, and I think it was Joanne Kyger who said, "well Jack those are pretty good poems, typical Jack Spicer poems" and he immediately wadded the whole thing up and threw, no it wasn't Joanne who said that, I think it was Duncan, and Jack just wadded the thing up and threw it in the waste basket, and Joanne went to grab them out of the waste basket and said, "Jack these are beautiful poems, don't throw them away" ... but Jack would do that. The least hint that he was doing anything that would be immoral - of course he hated the whole concept of morals so that wouldn't be the word he would use - something "whorish", that was a word he would use, anything that was whorish that was in some ways selling out to the English Department of the soul or to New York, he would say, "alright that's it, destroy that."

B: So he was tapped into some notion of the purity of the act of writing poetry?

G: Ya and he came to believe that there were forces outside the poem, outside our universe perhaps that were giving him poems. It's important that he did not identify those with language.

B: No, his source, he might say was the radio, or the martians.

G: And various people such as Creeley had said something about the poem coming from language- I believe Creeley said that at one point and Spicer rejected that. The language is just the furniture in the room. But this is all on record in some interview that Spicer did - the Vancouver Lectures.

B: I think Creeley would claim that he is responsible for writing the poem - he generates the language. However, if you're going to talk about the ego, super ego, or the unconscious as sources for poetry, then you might just as well talk about Martians.

G: The source is outside. That's what Blaser titled that essay: "The Practice of Outside". Spicer's word was that it always comes from "outside"

B: Did you connect with these ideas and teachings in terms of your own writing?

G: I was influenced by Spicer's poetry, by Creeley and I was influenced by Zukofsky and all of these I think were not particularly good influences on me; they sort of narrowed my poetry down, made it more tight but then again I was - Spicer noticed this when I wrote *Pony Express Riders* he said, "well you're finding out - like when I wrote *Flowers* that was just juvenilia, unexamined undisciplined exploitation of feeling and lyricism and pain and emotion, and then when I started trying to create a poem out of language in poems like *Pony Express Riders*, I was influenced by people who were doing very small poems like Creeley and poems of Creeley wit and Spicer's poems and Zukofsky's - but I don't think these were particularly good influences on me. The influence that I picked up at that time that really did, that was crucial for me was Charles Olson - the use of history in the poem.

B: I can see all of these influences in your work. This morning reading poems "after Creeley" shows that you mastered that short line and then of course in the new work, *San Francisco's Gone*, I can see history - personal family history.

G: Well, the biggest influence on my poetry all the way back is T.S. Eliot. TS Eliot of *Prufrock* and the *Waste Land*.

B: That's interesting, because T.S. Eliot was not well accepted in certain circles of modern American poetics.

G: That's right, ya. It was that ironic stance in Eliot's poems that I find deeply influenced my poems for good or for bad. I got this sense of you could use history in a poem from Olson - I also got that at the same time from Robert Lowell - his book *Life Studies* and those 3 Eliot, Olson, Lowell seem to be the people who affected me the most and they all go back to Boston.

B: Absolutely. Eliot's large brick family summer home in Gloucester and Lowell of course lived in Boston, and I think they were all connected with Harvard.

G: I don't think Olson was but it's just such a coincidence all of those 3 influences, in a way, going back to Boston. My father's father's father may have come from Boston. So may have my father's mother's father come through Boston from Ireland, but I sense that there is some connection back there with Boston or with New York.

B: It's funny you mention Eliot because he's the first poet I heard on CBC, a recording of him reading, when I was 15 years old and starting to write. I was dumbfounded. I didn't understand the poem, but I heard the music and I guess - he was reading an iambic line of sorts. His rhythm carried a tone of great seriousness and drama and I loved it. Anything else on the radio in those days in Calgary, would have been country and western music.

G: It's that kind of ironic detachment that I picked up that "I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be."

B: Well I find that in your work, but at the same time I find what I call self - your ability to see yourself, but with a detachment.

G: Ya, well that's the character of my poetry - that it is all about self and it's also the limitation of it, and when I feel good about what I say - well, after all, Montaigne wrote

about nothing but himself but somehow I don't feel that that's a reflection of good faith and what I'm most happy about my poetry is when it gets out of self and it seems to me that so rarely does it get out of self - it does in the last part of a couple of new poems "The Berlin Wall" and of a poem called "For Prince George."

B: *Pony Express Riders*, an earlier poem, has a "subject" - it's outside of the self.

G: That's true - that poem is totally outside of the self.

B: It might be kind of an unusual poem in terms of your collected works, I would think. I see much of your work characterized in lines like: "my heart is broken permanently / it works better that way." when I see that kind of surprise in a poem, it sends shivers up my spine. You could have written "my heart is broken" - a cliché - but you add "broken permanently." But then there's that ironic detachment and surprise: "it works better that way". The negative becomes a positive that contains a kind of energy of faith and I think your best poems do that, even when you might feel you have no faith ...

G: Well, I think you have to. That's what we were talking about last night - the need to have faith starting with that line you had quoted from Coleridge, "the willing suspension of disbelief" and Spicer in one of his poems a willing suspension of disbelief has as much chance as a snowball in hell (laughter). I think that little poem, you heart is broken ... I don't know to what extent we think of our poetry as lasting if you want some of your poems to last - but with the very best poets, not much of it lasts. It's not a question of it lasting after you're dead, it's a question of it having the character of a poem that you could imagine lasting, and very very little of my poetry, or I think from probably putting yourself in the consciousness of any poet, he or she would probably say, well, very little of my poetry has that character, but the fact that some of it does, a little bit of it does - there is something absolutely crucial, absolutely wonderful about that, unquestionable about that.

B: I agree. Poetry is a gift and once it's out there, it's hard to say what will last. The irony is that what might last is the thing you wouldn't expect would last.

G: (laughter) Gelett Burgess's purple cow.

B: Ya, something like that. You have many lines that stick with me, lines like "going to the store/ for a pack of cigarettes, going to Prince George."

G: The first poem in *Mountains and Air* - "light up the world with your faith."

B: I see those specific details that I really like in your poems, but you also manage to get lines that have meanings that are very important - meanings that lift out of all those details.

G: Well that poem I really like. *Mountains & Air* is now 10 or 12 years back and that seems to me like we were talking about our greatest hits - that's one of my greatest hits. I go back and I still like that poem. I like the way it is just filled with all kinds of random stuff like Julia Child, or that pack of cigarettes, or the pictures of the graduating class of Prince Rupert Senior Secondary hanging on the wall or the other pack of cigarettes that the pilot holds up and says, "okay smoke" It is so filled with that random stuff that it is in a way like the world untouched by the so-called creative mind. So the great stuff in those poems just comes out unexpectedly without any rhetorical preparation, and it goes away just as quickly and the whole poem at the end seems to have been almost a kind of a natural event rather than a contrived structure.

B: It really reflects the experience. You'd have to be in a small plane above Terrace to ...

G: Well, the poem starts in Terrace, not knowing why I'm there because it was one of the biggest changes in my life to suddenly be in Terrace- a kind of place where I'd previously never lived except for a very short period of time when I was in that little town in Arkansas. I never lived in any city of less than a quarter of a million people.

B: There is a kind of wonderment about the place in the poem "Places."

G: That poem does express that sort of wonderment about the place - about the bears, about planes, the mountains

B: But not in any, as you say, in an extended narrative about the place.

G: Well the narrative is implied. The narrative is fragmentary. Sharon Thesen paid me the greatest compliment when she wrote this in an essay - that that poem reminds her of David Hockney, David Hockney's great art. And David Hockney has that wonderful quality of things not having taken any particular effort to have come into the forms they are

B: I think that's a real secret to poetry. No matter how hard you might work at it - and maybe its part of that detachment you're speaking of too -you want the poem to float by without any screaming, or devices to gain attention - but to be real among other things. Your work does that.

G: So that's when at a time which was very - a lot of change going on in my life. I wrote a lot of those poems in those little light planes in a sense to control my anxiety about the plane.

B: Many of your poems mention airplanes.

G: Ya, that's true - that's another characteristic of my poems - a lot of them are involved in some form of transportation. Those poems came almost accidentally and they do retain that kind of accidental quality which paradoxically gives them a kind of a permanent value, but the other side of it is that when you hook onto a poem like a big fish and it's something that you have to struggle with - and you may struggle with it for months and months before finally realizing there isn't any poem there at all, or the other side of it, realizing, yes, there is a poem and it's taken me 6 months of work and it'll take another 6 months of work and all the time in putting all that work in - a great deal of that work is to erase any evidence of the work, so as to kind of fake that quality of having come into the world without any anticipation.

B: Or preconceptions.

G: Or preconception, ya.

G: As if it just occurred to me, except I've been working on it for 9 months (laugh) and often it does. Cynthia Flood, she was telling us about W. D. Valgardsen. He had been working on a story and he'd done something like 19 drafts of this story and on the 19 th draft it occurred to him that he didn't need the first 7 pages, and that sort of thing will happen too in poetry . I remember sitting on the beach at Aquatic Park with Spicer and I was writing a poem in a notebook and I erased a line and put another line in its place. Spicer was watching me and Spicer said, "George always has to put another line in when he erases a line - but of course, I've gotten beyond that. I'm willing right now to say I'm working on say a 3 page poem and say I don't need the last page or the first page, but I may not realize that till after 19 drafts of the poem. So it can come either way. It can come

just unexpectedly - a wonderful poem - or you can spend 6 months working on something that turns out not to be a poem at all, and finally with a great expression of relief - throw it all away.

B: You were saying a couple of weeks ago it's not really work. Do you remember that conversation?

G: No. I may have been referring to the use for example Hannah Arendt makes when she talks about the difference between labour and work, and action. she would have said that writing a poem would be more a form of action, and Olson would have said that too rather than work. Work would be something like workmanship - making a good piece of furniture.

B: Were you saying you were feeling a bit guilty because it looks like work, it is work, but its not really...

G: Well of course there is that bourgeois way of looking at 19th century paintings and the intention seems to be to make the viewers say, "oh how much work must have gone into that, how wonderful it is" and that's just the opposite, the opposite. The phrase is "ars celare artem" - the art is to conceal the work.

B: I was going to ask you, since we're dealing with biography, about your initial connection with Canada.

G: I went up to Vancouver because Blaser and Persky moved here in 1971. My father died in December 1970. My mother died in January 1968 - about 3 years apart - and I just finished my M.A. See, I had gone back to university after being out for 11 years in the bohemian beatnik hippy worlds,

B: At this time, you're still basically in San Francisco?

G: Still basically San Francisco, except for 1 year in New York and I had my M.A., my parents had just both died, the 60's were over; it was time for a change. I just wanted to go somewhere., I had no concept of Canada. I thought of Vancouver as being someplace like Denver. The fact that it was in Canada was less important than the fact that they both ended with the same syllable (laughter) - so I came up here and I got stuck here - that's basically what happened. I ran out of money. I spent the small amount of money I had. I went on a trip to Europe with Scott Watson and then I came back here and I started working for Duthies and then I started working for *The Grape* which was an underground newspaper, and then I worked on Opportunity for Youth (OFY) grants with New Star Books and and eventually I ran out of money, then I had to go to work loading trucks for CP transport.

B: Out of that experience at CP you wrote the poem, "Donatello's David".

G: "Donotello's David," ya. So the fact was, all during those years - the early 70's which I think were horrible years for everyone - the hangover after the 60's - and what we didn't realize at that point what we were going through was the transition out of bourgeois society and into post modern society, or the global village.

B: and that you *did* have to go to work to support yourself.

G: Ya, that too, plus dealing with sex and love and drugs and I almost went insane in around 1975. I was seeing a psychiatrist, but I just got stuck in Canada and all during that time I was thinking I should go back into the belly of the beast. I should go back to what

Stokely Carmichael called Babylon, and I was thinking that I was chickenshit for not going back to America. But I finally got over all that and ended up just stuck in Canada, and after 5 years in Vancouver and then 2 years up in the north, 7 years which is the traditional time after which they consider that you're dead and gone, I realized I have now become a Canadian; in fact, the actual moment I became a Canadian was really great. I realized it because I had all these ideas about Canada and some of them were true and some of them were false, but I think one day I was talking to Scott Watson and said something like "what a boring country this is", or something like that and Scott said, "well, now you've become a Canadian - that's how Canadians feel". (laughter).

B: Just after "Donatello's David" there is another poem about Vancouver - full of great humorous diction. I remember the line - "a 'passel of assholes' - and Vancouver as a bourgeois gray city.

G: That poem is "Vancouver in April". I think it was April 75 - an attempt to imitate Patrick Kavanagh's ...

B: Ya, it says "after Kavanagh". "It's pretty shitty/ living in a protestant city/ and my heart too bleak for self pity."

G: Ya, the idea is terza rima- writing in triplets with funny rhymes. That's what Kavanagh did in a poem I think called "A Summer Morning Walk." Anyway, to finish that one thing about Canada, I realized that I had become a Canadian and so then I went and applied for citizenship which many at that time, of my American friends had not yet done, but I thought it was something I should do so that when the judge asked me, "why are you taking out citizenship?" I said because I realize I've become a Canadian, I want to formalize the relationship (laugh) and then he asked me which provinces had joined confederation in what years - and I knew all that - passed the test - so that's how I became a Canadian, but the further irony, the historical irony is that I had come to Canada, come to Vancouver thinking it was just another American city like Denver. After being here and becoming a Canadian, I realized what all Canadians know, Canada is a vastly different country than America. But now that Canada - we were talking about last night - Trudeau being the last Canadian - Trudeau, George Grant, Al Purdy - that Canada is no longer - it is no more. We're now all part of America because of the global village. There's an interesting conversation recounted recently in *The Nation* where Marshall McLuhan talked to Ted Turner. It seems to me that McLuhan must have been dead before Turner founded CNN ...

B: I think so ...

G: But nonetheless, it said in *The Nation* that McLuhan had said to Ted Turner about CNN "this is the global village" and we're all part of it. So this is not Stephen Leacock and Margaret Laurence's Canada, it's not even Margaret Atwood's Canada. It is part of the global village. It is Los Angeles. Terrace is downtown Los Angeles.

B: and to think of how hard people like Al Purdy worked and thinkers like George Grant and ..

G: Hugh MacLennan

B: Yes, to establish an idea or sense of place - an identity, that is now - not *exactly* erased - but altered.

G: But no sadder than this: at the very time this period that George Grant writes about in *Lament for a Nation* between Diefenbaker and Pearson, when Pearson's Liberals were

selling out Canada to American capital, was the very time that the same thing was happening to California, and so California also had its own independent regional culture, with our own banks, and department stores and a way of life that was different from the way of life in New York, and so Canada is a little bit more different because it was part of the British Empire and because of Quebec, but California was different too and the south is different, so I don't see any loss of Canada because of Canada becoming part of America. Canada retains its distinctness, just like California does, but then again they don't because of the global village.

B: And various political moves that affect our trading relationships etc. Al Purdy when he was asked about writing his novel, said it was a lot of work requiring many hours a day, but in another way it was great, he said, because he didn't have to think about the worst prime minister in history of Canada. The novel kept his mind off his obsession with Brian Mulroney and what's happening to this country with free trade negotiations, in which we, as a country, seem to be the losers.

G: Ya, I'm sure that for a native born Canadian this must be far more terrible than it can seem to me because I can relativize it in a sense to California.

B: We're in a strange period, but I don't know how poetry or working as an artist which is in a sense part of the process of articulating what place is - how we're going to be affected by this globalization. Where will the writing go? This goes back to your writing too: Terrace is now a place in the world.

G: Terrace is an outlet of the global village - the distribution point for goods that come through the mall. When I arrived there in 1976, it was part of the Margaret Laurence /Stephen Leacock Canada. There was no cable. There was only CBC television, black and white or was it colour? I guess it was black and white and there was a local hockey team and all locally owned businesses, and then came cable and then came the mall, and then came McDonalds and now its part of the global village.

B: and then came the college and college students (laughter)

G: No, the college students have changed over the years too, but they have not changed for the better. Their education, their educational attainments have declined in proportion to the amount of their mind space that is taken up by their being programmed as consumers through television and videos.

B: Your teenage boredom poem in a pretty involved way, explains that. And yet it's complicated. You don't want to just say TV did this.

G: No, TV is simply a piece of technological apparatus and when TV is used, say, when you've got a ball game on ... this is what I've noticed about TV. If I'm in the bar and it's almost impossible to get out of the sight of the TV anywhere, but if I'm in the bar and the ball game is on, I can sit drinking and talking to people and the TV doesn't affect me because the camera is following that action, or even better, golf where long shots ... but if you're watching something like a commercial or a sitcom, or anything where television is televising itself, in a sense, then the frame changes more than once a second and so you have this constant flashing, changing bright light which I think affected us 100 thousand years ago; that is, we are genetically programmed to turn our heads and to pay attention to a changing flashing light. I'm not sure why.

B: So obviously terrace and that 15 year chunk of your life, - do you see it as a phase that's ending?

G: Yes, I do. I see this whole Terrace period of time pretty objectively. Arriving in 1976, like I say, in that town, I just was becoming a Canadian and eventually I started teaching Canadian Literature. That's why I didn't get the job at Capilano College. I would have been at Cap College and never would have come to Terrace except that I failed the interview because I didn't know anything about Canadian Literature. So I began reading - of course I realized as the only English instructor at Northwest College I had to eventually offer a course in Canadian Literature, so I began reading it and I read the 2 books that I think of - Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* and Margaret Laurence's Manawaka books which showed me what a Canadian small town was like and of course Terrace is an Ontario town because the people who founded it are from Ontario. Terrace was founded in 1911. There had been settlers there before, white settlers, but the town was started because of the mill to cut ties for the CN - whatever the CN was called then- the Grand Trunk Pacific - and the man who founded it, George Little, set up his mill to cut the ties and then by 1913 there was this enormous pile of tie ends, heap of tie ends, and someone thought it was a great idea to set this on fire - a day I think that was very much like the day of the San Francisco earthquake in 1906. It was hot and windy - a great day to start a fire on a hot windy day and the resulting fire leaped the Skeena River twice and destroyed 70% of the usable timber within 3 miles of Terrace. So as a result of this, the city fathers then brought out all these saplings from Ontario and planted them along the streets of Terrace, so all over Terrace there are now 80 year old trees from Ontario of various kinds and it has the little straight streets and the main street that leads down to the lake, except it's a river, like in Leacock. So that's when I arrived and as I began teaching I realized that here I am in the very world that Leacock and Laurence and also Sinclair Ross in a starker way describes a town called Horizon in *For Me and My House* but then I realized it was changing - it was becoming something else, it was becoming what it is now - a terminal of the global village and so that in that period I can see the whole transition from bourgeois society which was based upon the main street to what we have now based upon the mall. I can see it as a period in my understanding of society under capitalism and I can see it as a period in my understanding of what Canada was, and what Canada was, is coming to an end, has come to an end and I can also see it, I guess, as the centre of my life in a way, my mature years, so to speak, spent in this activity of teaching which I hadn't done much of before, which I don't really intend to do much more of from now on unless I have to for money. I probably will. I don't mind going back and teaching every couple of years, a couple of sections, but ya, I feel that that period of my life - the Terrace period even though my base is still Terrace, my base really is the North. As soon as I get out of Terrace, like on the bus a couple of miles away from Terrace, I realize that this is the country where I live. I really love this country, but I forget that when I'm in Terrace because I know just too much about both the small town politics of the place and also seeing it as a terminal and outpost of the global village. So ya, I think that period has pretty much come to an end although, you know, I have another long poem in manuscript now - called *Terrace Landscapes*, so that now maybe that I think of it I started out in Terrace with *Mountains and Air* and maybe I am finishing it with this other long poem which I haven't even looked at yet and my plan for this poem, because the last manuscript I have been working on I've gotten, oh I think 5 poems out of it now, 2 that are published in *North Coast Collection* and 3 in the *Capilano Review* and there are about 3 or 4 more poems to come out of it, but it's been a very tortured and complicated manuscript to work with. I've been working for 6 months, 19 drafts etc. as I was describing before - of a single poem which is maybe 2 pages long and then deciding well, it's not a poem - balling it up and throwing it in the waste basket. So with this new *Terrace Landscapes* I've decided I'm not going to do anything with it at all - not change a single word, maybe not even a misspelling until I have a clear idea of what it

is in its entirety - so I'm going to read it over and read it over, and read it over until I can almost live with it in my mind away from the page before I do anything with it.

B: It's curious at this point that you go back to write *San Francisco's Gone* which takes you back into family and some real contemplation and description of that experience.

G: The poem "Opening Day" was the first attempt at dealing with that material. They're all focused around the earthquake of 1906.

B: So living in the North in a small town, particularly when you talk to the sophisticates (laugh) in places like Vancouver, often raises questions: why would you stay in the place? What I've admired about you is your defence of the life here, despite its difficulty.

G: Lately I've begun to miss the very obvious things like movies. It used to be that if a movie came out you'd see it eventually - it would come back as a rerun in a neighbourhood movie house or repertoire house. Now, I didn't see Mel Gibson and Glen Close in *Hamlet* and I'll never see it. It's possible that I might look at it on video but ... really it's lost to me. A movie came out last week and as I'm going to Moscow next week - it was a movie from Moscow called *Taxi Blues* - it came to the Ridge Theatre in Vancouver. It got 4 stars. The reviewer Elizabeth Aird gave it 4 stars. I thought it'll stay at least 2 weeks but it was gone in a week. It's gone, so I'm beginning to miss the obvious things: movies, maybe the occasional concert, but other than that there's no particular reason to choose Vancouver over Terrace unless you happen to like being in a big city, you like the congestion, the pollution. People who are no less sophisticated or more sophisticated in either place - there is just the same tremendous variety of people in Terrace as there is in Vancouver so I don't see the point.

B: In Terrace you did things that you might not have done in Vancouver like running for the school board, and getting to know a community on all of its various levels, and meeting people you wouldn't have met in a larger city - people of all different backgrounds and interests...

G: That's true.

B: People who also accept you as a writer: "George writes poetry" (laugh) without any prejudice.

G: And also being at the college which is so small that each of the departments consists of one instructor, and so having faculty meetings where the general conversation is not about literature or psychology or whatever, but it's about the entire world of intellectual and scientific discourse, and so you're talking to biologists about geomorphology or a psychologist about things in his field.

B: I think too that one of the major things poets have to deal with is the whole idea of place - it seems cliché now but

G: Yes.

B: I wonder about the city poets. I don't envy them having to deal with a place that is, or seems so accelerated.

G: I think it's more accelerated in the small towns. There's less to sweep away. The cities have larger structures - institutional structures, networks of like-minded people who retain conservative or liberal values - whole shopping streets that may be held together by one

ethnic community or by the counter culture like Commercial Drive that are a lot harder to sweep away than what little remains in a small town. When the mall comes to the small town - Terrace was lucky because the mall is so close to the downtown shopping district. The older downtown was able to survive, but I've heard that has not happened in other communities like Williams Lake.

B: So much of the power structure seems invisible, even in the small towns. But living in a smaller place you might personally know the mayor, the aldermen etc. My neighbour for instance was president of the Socred Party; we've had a few beer together over the years. He's also owns a fairly large mill and was involved, or blew the whistle on a major lumber grading scam that involved major politics and economics. So I had the privilege to be involved in the details of a major case ...

G: That's true and you're insulated from that in a city. In the city you're usually with your own group of friends who are interested mainly in the arts.

B: Right. and those conversations often deal mostly with politics and poetry - but I sometimes wonder if their work has failed to include some of the subject matter were forced to deal with in these smaller settings?

G: Yes - the direct exploitation of the environment by say a company like Alcan, and you happen to know people who are in the environmentalist movement who are opposing that - and people in the native villages. In Vancouver that simply is an item of the business page of *The Sun* which you may not even read the details of.

B: Those items are abstract.

G: Exactly.

B: Here the literal stink in the air is noxious. There is no way around it. It's there.

G: And you learn that there are inescapable restraints upon reality; that is, that if forestry damages the spawning stream and causes erosion then the conditions in that stream will not be right for the fish to spawn and then there will be no more fish. That kind of connection doesn't occur for people in the city. I mean they are intelligent enough to understand it, but they very rarely reflect upon it because they have so much in the world of culture to reflect upon. But it's also becoming invisible to kids in school in places like Terrace and Prince George because their world is becoming one of videos.

B: The Bowron clearcut is visible from outer space. It's 20 minutes form town. I ask my students what we have in common with the great wall of china, which they say is also visible from outer space and they don't know that it's the Bowron clearcut. It could be turned into a major tourist attraction (laugh) - a huge scar on the landscape. It's interesting to go out there. I don't now how this connects with poetry, but no amount of lying can cover the fact that there are no trees there, although it's ironically, also called a living forest - which means that little little trees are starting to grow...

G: I notice that David Suzuki really takes on Jack Munro and Frank Oberle in yesterday's *Citizen* .

B: Do the students really care about these issues?

G: Well, I've got to qualify that again too because the Gulf war got through to people's minds and the Americans attempted to sanitize it so that the horrors of war would not come

home to people through the TV screen at supper time and this is when TV is playing a valuable role just like when it's showing the ball games; it's showing you something that's happening far away- tele: "far away." But what happened was that I think most of the college students that I've talked to are aware of the issue; they are aware of the fact that the Americans censored the war and then of course the situation of the Kurds. The Americans have somehow lost the, or they aren't able to, didn't catch up fast enough to cancel that information. So I qualify it again - so much information. Eliot wrote about how what understanding and knowledge have we lost in the name of information. It's like the story of the leprechaun - the man who caught the leprechaun and when you catch a leprechaun. He's supposed to tell you where the pot of gold is buried; it's under a particular tree, but the man didn't have a shovel so he had to go back to town and he knew that when he got back the leprechaun wouldn't be there, so he made the leprechaun paint a white ring around the particular tree. So then of course he went and got the shovel and came back and every tree in the forest had a white ring around it. (laugh) - so this is the effect of information. We're just drowned in trivia so that the facts that should have tremendous emotional and political force and validity, gets lost. So, ya, the kids are aware that the Americans are censoring the war but that's a piece of information that they know in the same sense that they know what Madonna is doing and what Madonna is doing is important.

B: Do you think poetry brings a judgement to these issues as part of its function?

G: Does poetry have any social and political function? Poetry has a function and you can't go any further than saying that it has an effect upon the person who reads it - that is, a person can be affected by a poem. I know that Harvey Chometsky was affected by some of my poems - he told me he was and I have been affected by poems of other people: Margaret Avison, Blake. Beyond that? I don't think it goes beyond that. It has an effect. There is a kind of inter animation; that's a word of John Donne's - there's a word like that where 2 souls meet. Walter Benjamin said that reading is like telepathy - you are encountering another person's thoughts.

B: Over the last 20 years you've have been some interesting connections with writers. I think I know the writers you feel connected with.

G: Well, you, to start. I still feel connected with the group of us that were in *The Body* in 1979, I guess that was. So with you, David Phillips, Ken Belford, Pierre Coupey, Hope Anderson, Sharon Thesen, and going back even before that, Scott Watson, Stan Persky, Brian Fawcett, George Bowering - this is the group of writers I've been connected with in B.C. Stan recently said to me, "I can't understand why there is not more attention paid to your work". So I thought, he means Toronto (laugh) - and it's true, but then again there are not many people who pay attention to my work in Denver or St. Louis and I wouldn't expect it. So it's just this accident of Toronto. Now I'm not saying that I wouldn't want people in T.O. to be interested in my work, but I think it's nothing that I would expect as a matter of course, whereas I'm happy to be recognized in British Columbia as I was in the 60's, that very brief moment with the Beat Generation when there were about 20 or 30 of us around San Francisco.

B: Sure. You were in a couple of major anthologies as an American writer.* Part of my motive for doing this interview (these interviews with you, david Phillips and Ken Belford) is that I feel that some very important writers and their work has been dismissed in a way. Some of those great poems - I'd like to have on the record. (**The New Writing in the U.S.A.*, edited by Creeley and Allen, and *Open Poetry*, edited by George Quasha

G: Ya, I used to feel that much more strongly than I do now.

B: Eliot said something to the effect that what makes this poet (whose name I forget), so beautiful is his lack of ambition.

G: yes, I like that.

B: I think the writers that we've been connected with, haven't made "careers" with their writing; they didn't get it mixed up with that careerist aspect like many others.

G: Well, I think we grew up into a world where, or at least I did, being now 57 - the world that I grew up into in the 1950's was a world which a number of modernist poets had made careers as poets I'm thinking of W.C. Williams, Marianne Moore, Robinson Jeffers, Wallace Stevens and maybe 10 others - Eliot and Pound - and it was a world, the bourgeois world where things stood out from each other. It was not this background of static and trivia. The world now is sort of like those diagrams that they give you when they're testing your eyes for colour blindness - nothing stands out (laughter). But at that time, I think, and beginning to write poetry and having all of the ego problems that an unhappy young person has and wanting power and fame all of that, I sort of imagined, well, that's what I was aiming at, say, looking at myself as 19 years old where would I be at 50. I would think, well, I'll be a well known poet in New York with my selected poems being sold in bookstores, and department stores. I didn't know that there would no longer be any department stores (laugh) or bookstores. No one could predict. Another trick of perspective is that I knew in 1950 that the world had changed tremendously in the last 50 years but I also sort of knew it was never going to change anymore. We'd come now to the final stage. so I imagined that idea of having a career as a writer would continue, but then gradually that, particularly when I came to Canada and I got involved in literary fights with people and I had a feeling which was half that I wanted to still make it again except it was Toronto rather than New York, and the other half was sort of an oh no feeling. I've ruined my chances of making it by having this fight with oh Frank Davey or Warren Tallman and gradually the whole subject has just faded out of my consciousness - the whole thing has just faded out of my consciousness and I've become aware that the fact is not that there are a certain number of people who have made it and a certain number of people who have not made it, but that there are - that every writer, poet, has his or her individual relationship to friends and magazines and his or her own ego. I mean look at Margaret Avison. I don't think Margaret Avison has any connection with the group of writers that are in Toronto that are connected with writers in Vancouver. It doesn't matter to me anymore.

B: That's important in the sense that you as a writer aren't mixing up things that have nothing to do with this art.

G: Well those things too - I get in these arguments about language poetry for example. I used to have more of an emotionally committed argument. It seemed like this kind of writing is taking over and our kind of writing is losing out and we gotta fight back. Now I see this as a - well it obviously is, a language game. To me it's a lot of fun to talk about because it raises questions in linguistics and philosophical questions about language and question of artistic intent, and I'm beginning to think about abstraction and discourse and things like that.

B: And meaning.

G: Yes. I mean the battles with Tom Wayman's poetry. Tom Wayman has somehow set himself up as a sort of a major kind of obstacle in the language game. You have to argue about Tom's poetry, which I find is wonderful, but I don't feel any moral commitment that Tom is right or that I am right. That part of it has gone out of it and it is simply a kind of a

language game which one can play or not - which is, by the way, what I think of politics. It's a game.

B: Well, we used to take these matters awfully seriously at one point. You'd lose friends.

G: It was a disaster- its a caricature, waking up the next morning and saying, " oh what did I say at that party to that influential critic?" (laughter).

B: Or, "oh no! Now I'll never get a grant!

G: I'll never get a grant! Ya, and it turns out we never got a grant so, so what? We still have beer! (laughter).

B: And we're still having fun, being in such an obscure occupation.

G: Well it seems to me why I'm writing poetry ... somebody who I read recently put it much better than this, but something to the effect that - oh ya I remember what it was, but I can't remember who said it - that that's the one thing that when I'm doing it I don't even have the shadow of a thought that I'd rather be doing something else.

B: Right. There is that famous Jackson Pollock line: "I'm in my painting."

G: uh huh, well you're sort of dealing with that court of last resort in a way, which is your own ability to judge in a completely unprejudiced way what you're doing so you ...

B: Surprise yourself at the same time?

G: And surprise yourself at the same time too,ya, and be willing to be surprised and the next day come back to it and say," it went flat "
(laugh). There's a line that's been in my mind for a few days now. This is a one line poem: "this line has no force"

(laugh)

B: A self referential line - the line that defines itself! (laugh)

G: Yes, that would be a wonderful line for a poem, and then I thought, well no, it is just a poem - it is a one line poem. It doesn't have to be printed, except I guess it will be printed now (laugh). There are the anxieties of living and of growing old, mortality - and nothing really relieves them for me like poetry does. Poetry is that activity that seems to have a kind of a transcendent value, unquestionable, -- absolute, that's the word I'm searching for, absolute value while I'm doing it and then even I can look back 5 or 10 years. What I find is that when you look back about 5 years - I look back about 10 I can see some things that still seem to me to be good poems and that's a kind of a secondary pleasure you get out of poetry, is seeing that. Well, even though I'm having trouble with this poem I'm writing right now, I did 10 years ago write a good poem. I did one year ago write a good poem so it doesn't matter really whether the tangle of words and concepts and emotions I'm involved in right now ever gets anywhere.

B: I was asked by Al Purdy: are you writing? And I said," no, not for about 2 years."

G: I have a standard response for that: I always have a couple of things in the works.

B: Yes, you're always working on a poem.

G: Right now I've got 3 poems that I'm working on actively which I've brought with me here to the hotel. I have 2 more that are at a slightly lesser stage. I have 2 that I haven't started yet and I have this long thing so I've got probably 7 or 8 poems that are in the works.

B: Work which will keep you busy for a year?

G: Well I'm going to get a journal out of going to Moscow, so that'll turn into something. I always have things that I'm writing. This is a kind of a method which I guess has come to me in the last few years. I'm always writing first drafts and then putting them away and not looking at them again for 6 months, whereas I'm working right now on stuff which I wrote the first draft of in late 89, so it's about 18 months.

B: For me there seems to be a 10 year period until enough work accumulates to become a full size book. That goes counter to the common notion some writers have that if you're not prolific, there's something wrong. That doesn't seem to bother you .

G: No, again, it's another aspect of looking at the situation of the literary world and seeing that it is much more complex and specific than I had thought - looking at all of the poets of all time and seeing that some of them were extremely prolific like Pound, and others were like Catullus, who wrote only a small number of poems, or Hart Crane. So there is no particular virtue of being one or the other. It's like - would you rather have blue or brown eyes?

B: Purdy said that if he wasn't writing, or if he went 2 years without writing he'd kill himself (laugh). I accept the silence.

G: Well I find it inconceivable that I would go any length of time without writing because A) I need to write for the reason that I've already said, - it's the one thing that sort of makes me feel that I'm in touch with some sort of unquestionable absolute value that makes me happy, and B) - and I think this may be the reason why some people have these lapses when they don't write - is that I know quite well that when I write something that it's not going to look or feel very good when I'm writing it. I'm not the kind of writer who gets his best, or can recognize something as being good until a little time has passed; in fact, it's almost the other way around; it's almost like if what I've written seems to me to be very dull and boring, it's probably pretty good. And just the opposite: if what I've written seems to me to be really imaginative and making wonderful leaps and all that - it's probably pretty shitty.

B: Ya, I know what you're saying. For me the test is when I write something that gets me really curious about its structure and meaning - and a kind of astonishment: that sense of, where has this come from? Later I can look at a line and wonder where the comma should go. But initially I can go back and read it over and over and revise until I feel finished with it and not read it again, for as you say, 5 or 10 years to see if it still stands up. You must feel that your work, what you've published stands up.

G: I can't know that. I think that it's impossible to objectify yourself or your own work. I can't know what kind of a person I am. I can know - I seem to know what kind of person you are, or what kind of person Scott or Stan is, but I can't know what kind of person I am because I'm *in* that person. I have a sense of your body of work or Creeley's body of work, or David Phillips' body of work, but I don't have any sense of my own. I am it in a way - I'm too much in it to see it, so I go by what other people tell me. If other people tell me that - well, no one ever talks to you about your work, I mean other people tell me about a particular poem ... George Bowering once said to me what really makes

him happy is if someone will point out to him something about a poem that he wrote that only he knew what's in there - a little secret message in the poem, and sometimes it'll get across to someone - someone will say, "I saw that." I like it when someone says, "well, what I like was ..." Going back to *Mountains & Air* which I still think is such a good poem, is that Harvey Chometsky and Brian DeBeck both had these sort of astonished reactions to parts of the poem which were - I remember Brian saying: "this is about nothing!" (laughter). That's a good point. This whole poem is about nothing, and that's exactly what I was feeling - the emotional state was a state of that absolute nothing was going on. So I like that.

B: DeBeck had a real understanding of the poem.

G: But mostly it's just my own approval of the poem when I say, "ok, that poem is finished," and usually what I mean is I can't do anything more with it. It is a poem and not one of the things balled up and thrown into the waste basket; in fact, I no longer ball these things up. I just throw them into the waste basket without balling them up (laugh). But it is a poem if there is no more I can do with it. One of the sources of my method in writing poems is from the abstract expressionist painters. So I relate very much to that. I knew a number of them in New York in the 60's and that's what I picked up from going to New York was not so much the poetry as the way the painters would work. They would get a canvas and they would just do anything to it. Like Jasper Johns says, "do something to it and if that doesn't work, do something else to it." One of the analogies that I have is, I'm working on poems there in my studio, the studio is the folder, and I go back to the studio to see how much paint has fallen off, by which I mean, how much language when I look at it after a month, I think, "oh, that's a lot of bullshit."

B: I went to a friend's studio and one of the painters sharing it with him had a huge wall-sized painting. He was painting over a painting - a painting that he'd put on display. I thought, why would he do that? One reason is that he was saving money by not buying a new canvas, and the other thing was that he didn't, or no longer liked it. The first version wasn't so precious after all.

G: Well one thing I like about the computer - I don't like computers, but one thing I do like about it is that if you don't like something you can just touch a key and it's gone. You can destroy things completely so you don't even have any drafts left. That I like, but I don't want to talk about computers.

B: Readership is interesting. There's a lawyer in town who gave me the same kind of surprising insight and response response that Brian DeBeck gave to you - the least likely person I thought would pick up the poem - and says hey, "this is good". Do you think that the more sophisticated the reader, the greater or more accurate the response?

G: Well I depend on Stan Persky - the one person I will always show a new poem to. This is again, kind of a tradition which I got from Spicer. Spicer could always depend on Robin Blaser and even when Spicer and Blaser were feuding and not speaking to each other, Spicer would have some new poems, and he'd go up & there'd be a truce and show the poems to Robin, and this is the one person you could trust as much as your own judgement without the partiality that's inevitable in your own judgement - and Persky does that for me.

B: Did you know Persky in San Francisco?

G: I met him in San Francisco. He was a sailor and he had -I guess he had met Ginsberg and Orlovsky before he came to the writers meetings in San Francisco, and so ya, I've know him since 1958.

B: He functions as your editor?

G: uh, sort of a close friend in the sense that ... I mean we've had battles over the years. There was one 5 year period when we weren't speaking to each other. But there is a special kind of friendship there which is kind of like the dividing up of the world.

B: Our group or generation have mostly been drinkers.

G: Yes, well with the 60's, the group around Spicer and Duncan has sort of been submerged in literary history into the Beat Generation group but we were an actually quite different group, and one of the differences, once difference was that we were more homosexually oriented than heterosexually oriented, although there were gay writers in the other group, like Ginsberg. And another interesting thing was that we were, because of the influence of Blaser and Spicer and Duncan and the influence on them of a professor Ernst Kantorowicz at Berkeley - we were all very interested in western history and philosophy, whereas the other group were more interested in eastern philosophy and mysticism, and the other difference was that we were more oriented towards liquor, and the other group was more oriented towards hashish and marijuana. Not to say that most of us didn't get puffed up except for Spicer, who absolutely detested drugs. Once somebody gave Spicer drugs without his knowing it - it was terrible.

B: William Burroughs talks about the difference between body drugs and mind drugs. Alcohol and cocaine would be body drugs and the whole range of hallucinogens would be classified mind drugs.

G: I can't do anything if I'm on alcohol or marijuana. I cannot do anything at all. It used to be that I just couldn't write. Now I can't read. If I'm doing any drugs the only thing I can do is talk, and I suppose I could make love if that situation came about, but as far as any sort of reading or writing, I just can't do it. Its' almost getting to the point where even with one beer I can't even read the *Vancouver Sun*.

B: There is the old myth about writers drinking and taking drugs to get in touch with the muse and writing, but I don't know if the process really works well that way.

G: I don't think so. I used to be able to do some work with grass. It used to help me in revising poetry because I felt that maybe it has an effect on the brain that in some ways makes it more sensitive to shades of meaning. But I don't feel that way anymore. What I do, however, when I'm writing poetry, apart from the first draft when I'm just writing, when I'm working on a poem - I'm working with a dictionary and I'm constantly referring to the dictionary because I don't really know the meanings of words, and as I refer to the dictionary I feel there is something else going on in my mind - it sort of splits in 2 and the discourse of the poem is allowed to rest and perhaps get less constrained while I'm searching for a specific word, and when I come back with that specific word or without it ,then I feel that I'm less -I'm not bearing down so hard upon the thread of discourse - that's just one of the many tricks because I really do think you do have to - and I found I have to trick myself, trick my mind - ultimately write the poem despite myself.

B: Exactly. I hear what you're saying.

G: Despite my knowledge, despite my intention, despite my emotions. you've got to somehow- this is really something I guess I learned and inherited from Spicer - how to get somehow all of that stuff out of the way even if what comes through the finished poem does use a lot of personal stuff --- uh pause. ya.

B: Going to the dictionary would break up well, there's nothing worse for the poem and writing than when you have that self conscious feeling - "I'm writing a poem."

G: Ya right. It's like living a life - it gets to that level of generality. Many years ago I would have said, "oh I'm writing a poem! I'm being creative!" But now I would no longer say that anymore than I would reflect upon "I'm living a life." What else is new?

B: Ya, right (laughter)

pause

B: Bob Creeley is such a clear light.

G: Creeley I think is the one American poet; of course Creeley is great - no question about it. Creeley is among all of us. I think he and Al Purdy perhaps are the - I want to say the men, but the one poet to me that is most important is John Ashbery. Al Purdy has the common touch. Al Purdy is the one poet, and the other one is the late Alden Nowlan who you can read a poem of theirs to anyone who has never heard a poem before or perhaps dislikes poetry or thinks that he or she dislikes poetry and they'll immediately react. I don't know what it is - there's very very few poets like that. Those are the only 2 I can think of. I can't think of any American poets like that. It's not true of Creeley. I don't think it would be true of Olson or Duncan. It's only true of those 2 men: Alden Nowlan and Al Purdy. It's the common touch.

B: Their ability to tell a story, the timing of the humour.

G: A kind of having the same receptivity as the reader - being like the reader. Purdy and Nowlan can get across to insensitive people.

B: When you think of Nowlan's poem about the moose - there is no mistaking the horror and cruelty of the experience he describes. Who else but the poet can capture that?

G: Yes, Nowlan has a great sense of human meanness and cruelty in some of his poems.

B: I hope poetry doesn't lose that sense of human experience and emotion in its progress toward wherever it is going.

G: Well, again, the variety and individuality of poetry I guess for 2 reasons: 1) is that as one gets older one has a more complex view of the world, and then 2) is that the world is becoming more complex because the activity of poetry is not set apart from other things as it used to be - so it all gets lost and so where it's going immediately my answer to that would be who do I know? What young poets do I know and I find it very hard to think of very many poets younger than myself. I don't know whether - maybe it's changing into something else. I have no idea what's happening with poets... the young people are doing language poetry, and as I was saying earlier I do not understand what that activity is all about and it's again my ... I no longer have this - I no longer think it's some moral battle I'm fighting. I simply don't understand it. I don't fault them for doing it except in a way both Brian Fawcett and I were talking about this - I kind of have a resentment or a

disappointment that so many of these - the very bright and talented and sensitive poets in the language poetry movement didn't deal in some realistic discursive way with the events that are changing people's lives and consciousness in the 1980's, but instead went after what Fawcett calls, quite rightly, virtuosity. But even that feeling - I don't fault them for it. I mean why should I say that Jeff Derksen or Dorothy Trujillo Lusk or Peter Culley should do something with their lives and their minds other than what they're doing (laugh). Only, oh I wish I understood it, I wish I understood what the principle is by which they get from one word to another.

B: And hoping that the explanation of that wouldn't be more difficult than the poem itself (laugh)

G: Well, yes, I read articles about Derrida. I just read recently an article by the writer Kate Soper in the *New York Review* about deconstruction and about the metaphysical justification for Derrida's theory of *differance*. I just bring that up to indicate that I'm able to understand things at that level. So why is it that I have never found any comprehensible explanation of language poetry? I just don't know how to understand language poetry, but every so often I read something like Dan Farrell's review of Jeff Derksen's book in the *Front* magazine that suggests that I'm not - that no one is intended to understand it - that my expectation should not be understanding it, but rather participating with Jeff Derksen in the production of the poem, and on an abstract level I understand what that means - I understand what the words participate in the production of the poem means, but I don't know what it is I should do with my mind to participate in the production of one of those poems and how will I get from this word to that? Something's missing.

B: So your experience of reading and thinking has been disrupted by a form or an approach.

G: That's right ... disruptive, that's true and if it's intended to be disruptive that's fine. I admit to being disrupted. Disrupt. That's what Whitman would say.

B: When a poem does that to you is it almost the opposite of what T.S. Eliot would do?

G: Well, Eliot, or Ashbery or any of the other poets. I read Ashbery because there is, I'm sure that's the word - interanimation of minds going on so that it is a kind of telepathy like Benjamin says -that I can feel Ashbery's mind dealing with this human situation we're in and at the same time dealing with New York and art and landscape and other features of our beautiful world. Then, of course, there are other poets who want to make us squirm and scream with horror like Sharon Olds. She has a poem about her father dying of cancer that is so horrifying that it almost ... well, you wonder at - but then if it's necessary for her to do that, it's necessary for me to read it. It's in an anthology. A lot of university students are reading it. It's necessary for them to read that and know. And it's funny that there would be no question raised if this were in a novel, say, but the fact that this particular piece of horrific description of a man's agony is put in lines as a poem, it's framed in a way and I *want* to question the reason for the framing, but I don't question it.

B: I'm not quite clear about what you're saying. How does her poem relate to Nowlan's poem about the moose?

G: It's called "The Glass." It's about a man dying of throat cancer. Atwood comes close to that too in some of her poems about torture but Atwood doesn't bring us into the physical ...

B: Her ability is to create a distance from the cruelty which puts even more emphasis on the cruelty.

G: But the physical experience that Sharon Olds deals with ... I don't know. "In my father's house there are many mansions," and in poetry there are many things that people do ... I was listening to a cowboy poet yesterday - it was a convention of cowboy poets. They started out with 500 people. They had 8000 people come to Elko Nevada last year for a convention of cowboy poets. So there are many things that are called poetry and what they have in common is that people organize language in lines on a page and say, "here, here is a poem!"

Exerpts from *Chairs in the Time Machine (unpublished)*
by Barry McKinnon

□

When George Stanley, Stan Persky and Robin Blaser moved from San Francisco to Vancouver, they were immediately recognized as important figures coming out of the San Francisco Renaissance inspired by Jack Spicer, and his notions of dictating martians and radio-spooks as poetry sources - and his notion that the serial poem was a more open possibility for spontaneous composition. In those UBC days I'd often see Stan on campus. He was studying Anthropology and sociology, but was also heavily involved as a student activist in campus politics and politics on all levels, writing poetry, essays, and articles for the *Georgia Straight*, and later the *Georgia Grape*. He also edited *The Georgia Straight Writing Supplement* (8 ½ x 11 mimeod format) that featured Vancouver writers Gerry Gilbert, Scott Lawrence, Daphne Marlatt, Brian Fawcett, Frank Davey, Judy Copithorne, Chuck Carlson and others – and he edited the last issues of *Tish* before moving north to Northwest college in Terrace where he taught for many years before moving back to Vancouver to teach philosophy at Capilano College.

□

George Stanley was kicking around Vancouver working at various odd jobs – primarily as writer for *The Straight* and as a warehouse man, until he too got hired at Northwest College to teach English. I think Stan and George's reputations - and what I initially sensed as aloofness – was because I was somewhat intimidated by their incredible writing and intellect. To use the argot: *They were heavies!* Whatever sense I had of them then was altered when they came north. I imagine that there weren't many with similar minds and backgrounds to talk to in Terrace, but a few of us in Prince George, who did read the San Francisco poets and admired George and Stan's work, invited them to read at the college in Prince George, talk, party, and hang out. How could I ignore these extraordinary "Americans in Terrace", as I called them, being in such close proximity. I sensed then that we were all bound by an abrasive but generative northern context that defined our activity as writers.

George and I, in particular, became non-stop ontological talkers over many years and beers in Prince George, New York, Terrace and Vancouver - and immediately began to share our sense of luck as poets in the boonies inspired to write out of its intense reality. And in those many times in various bars talking poetry, we would blurt out in gleeful agreement with exclamations such as: "poets can't write!" or, "I miss Prince George even when I'm here.!" Then, another round, as the talk goes on and on....

□

I also remember that someone commented that George's chapbook *Mountains and Air* – a sequence describing his flights to teach in remote communities – "was about nothing." He said: "you're absolutely right!" George has a quick and disarming mind that can reverse in a second what you think you know – a kind of poetic dismantling process that cracks open the most seemingly mundane elements of living - like returning a broken vacuum cleaner, a bus ride to work on the North shore, a lonely drink in Calgary, Moscow, or Prince George – these poems of surprise and depth that reveal his great mind and heart in the world.

□

George Stanley and Louis Zukovsky on the corner of Cranberry and Fulton ...

The day when poet David Phillips, artist Gerry Pethick, and writer Arthur Speigleman and I visited William Carlos Williams's house in New Jersey, I picked a lilac sprig from a tree in the side yard near the "Doctor's Entrance". Arthur took our picture before we walked down Ridge Road to a small neighborhood bar for a beer. I asked the bar girl if she knew of the famous poet who had lived just down the block. I can't blame her answer of "I dunno?" There are no stone markers or plaques in the neighborhood to recognize him, and I doubt that he was studied much in the Rutherford schools as the town's famous local poet.

Apropos, I remember a story George Stanley told me about a walk through Brooklyn with Brooklyn poet Louis Zukovsky. They stopped to read a very small commemorative brass plaque on the side of a building where Walt Whitman set type for his first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Zukovsky remarked to George: "If they did *this* to recognize Walt Whitman, think of what they'll do for us!" Such it was that two great poets could share a sardonic smile and pass by Walt Whitman's ghost on the corner of Cranberry and Fulton Street in Brooklyn.

The rose is obsolete
but each petal ends in
an edge The edge
cuts without cutting
meets - nothing...

Crisp, worked to defeat
laboredness - fragile
plucked, moist, half-raised
cold, precise, touching

What

The place between the petal's
edge and the

(William Carlos Williams)



David Phillips, Barry McKinnon, Gerry Pethick at WCW's house in Rutherford, New Jersey, May 1986. Lilac from the bush behind.



Prince George (Part 1)

for George Stanley

a man in himself is
a city -

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 / 69: 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 (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

thru parking lot, plumes

/ trees,

/ polis / man

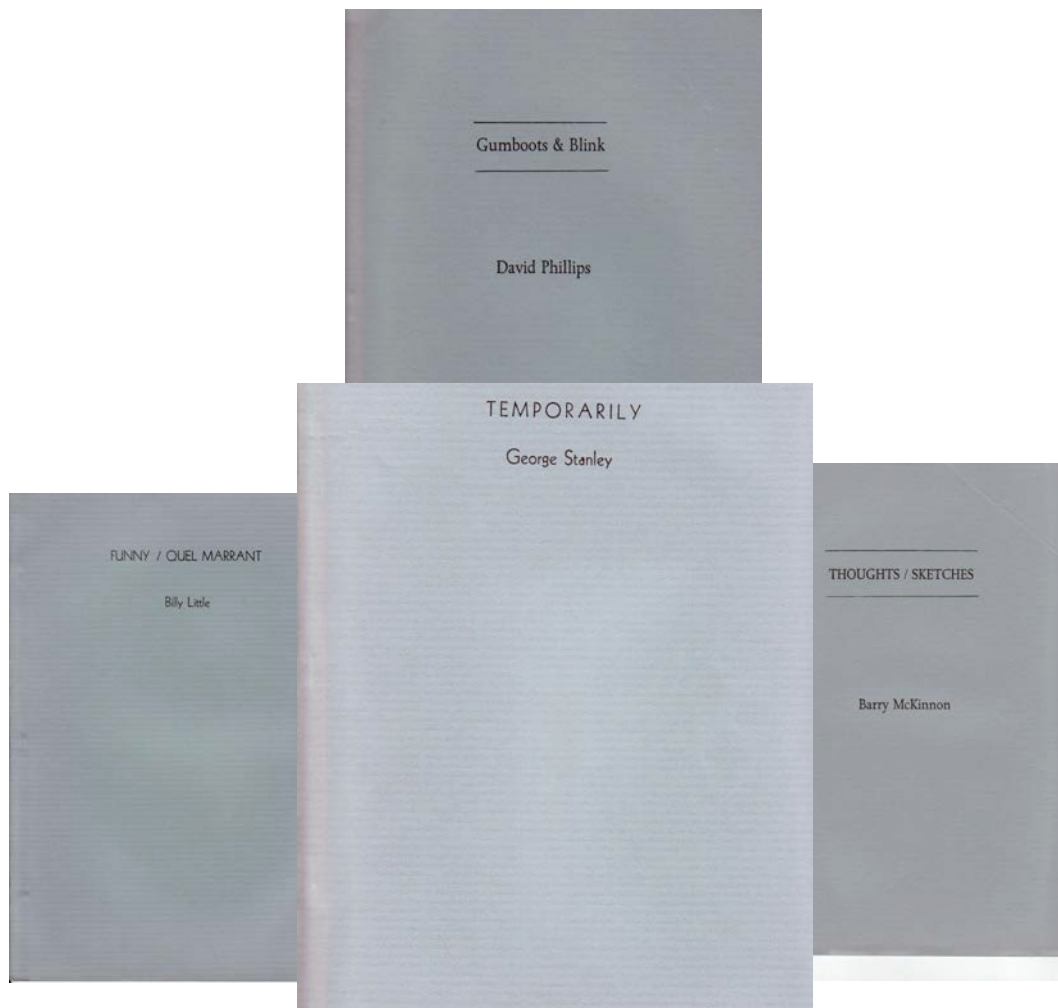
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Barry McKinnon

The Gorse/Tatlow Series with David Phillips

In 1985 I had an educational leave and moved to Vancouver for a year. While my wife Joy attended Simon Fraser University, I worked on several projects: *Poets and Print: talks with 10 British Columbia poet/publishers* published as an issue of *Open Letter*. (Seventh Series, Nos. 2-3: Summer Fall 1988), *The Pulp Mill, an Anthology of Prince George Writing* for Repository Press, and an ongoing sequence of poems. My friend, the poet David Phillips, lived on Tatlow St. in North Vancouver. Over beers at the Railway Club – we’d meet there for “office hours” almost every Saturday afternoon for 8 months - decided to combine Gorse Press with his Tatlow House imprint (with its one notable and important BC poetry anthology: *The Body*, 1979). We decided to print a series of cheaply produced chapbooks. We each had manuscripts of our own, but also wanted to print small books by a few writers we knew, respected, and who were proximate. Over the winter and spring we managed to print 4 titles in the series: a manuscript by **David, Billy Little (Zonko), myself, and George Stanley**. We discussed an overall design format for the Gorse/Tatlow series and settled for what was simple and manageable: a standard 8 1/2” x 11” text page, typed on my daisy wheel electric typewriter, and then Xeroxed and stapled into editions of 100 copies or so. We always claimed a neat run of 126 copies on the credits page for precious, if not slightly pretentious/satirical reasons, so that 26 copies could be *signed, lettered or numbered by the authors*. Very few ever were. I letterpressed the covers on 11” x 17” cover stock (folded in the centre) using an 18 or 24 point Kabel or Garamond for the chapbook title and writer’s name.

Gorse/Tatlow House Press: Series One, 1985



Joy Is the Mother of All Virtue

Goethe

Woke up this morn, felt like a horse
kicked me in the head
Thought I was in Vancouver
but I was in Nanaimo instead,
In bed.

Don't know what
Time-o, no reason or rime-o
Hungover in a motel in Nanaimo
In the Tally-ho motel in Nanaimo.
The hotel Tally-hally-ho
In Na-na-na-naimo.

George Stanley

WEST OF CEDARVALE



**If Spring come,
can Dust be far behind?**

George Stanley
George Stanley

*Given this date 7 MAY 1929
at Prince George, approx.
305 mi. East of Cedarvale
to Barry*

100 COPIES PRINTED AT GORSE PRESS

MARCH 1979

Seventh Avenue

for Dick

That winged chariot behind our ears
flashing on the prisms of the air
like the Aurora Borealis, cheers
no one; so we sit each in his chair

contemplating verity. The charioteer
drives his team through our silences
& with pass & counterpass of his spear
punctuates our dogged confidences.

We never got a proper curtain for
that window, did we? Broke since January.
Your charioteer is just a character
from literature, an advert for a mortuary.

Quiet your ancient fears, let chains of grace
crisscross the faded dining room like lace.

George Stanley
George Stanley

- *Beyond Love* (San Francisco: Dariel Press, 1968)
- *You (Poems 1957-67)* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1974)
- *The Stick: Poems, 1969-75* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1974)
- *Opening Day* (Lantsville BC: Oolichan Books, 1983)
- *Gentle Northern Summer* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1995)
- *At Andy's* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2000)
- *A Tall, Serious Girl: Selected Poems 1957-2000* (Jamestown, RI: Qua Books, 2003)
- *Vancouver: A Poem* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2008)
- *After Desire* (Vancouver, New Star Books: 2013)
- *North of California St.: Selected Poems* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2014)
- *West Broadway* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2018)