

*Douglas Barbour*

**Review Article**

**The Poets and Presses Revisited: circa 1974:**

1.

1974 may have marked the beginning of a major recession in Canada, but you wouldn't have known that from looking at publishers' lists. The twenty-eight (!) books of poetry — from small presses only — which I have under review here represent far less than half the poetry books published during 1974, and already it looks as if 1975 will be another bumper year. Admittedly, the large presses publish only a few books of poetry (mostly by name authors), but poets in Canada, as elsewhere, have always had to depend on the small literary presses to get their work before the public. That a number of new presses are springing up even as some of the older ones begin to falter is one sure sign of the continuing vitality of Canadian letters.

The small presses tend to divide into two groups: those, like Talonbooks and Coach House, and the new Four Humours Press in Winnipeg, who are especially interested in producing books which are beautiful artefacts; and those, like the new Borealis Press in Ottawa, who are concerned not so much with a book's aesthetic presence as just with its presence — in the bookstores. I tend to appreciate the former more than I do the latter — a lovely book is always a delight to hold — but I can only give thanks that all these publishers continue so selflessly to serve the Canadian poet and his public.

What strikes me most about the poetry under review is the general level of competency displayed in all 28 books. I think it can be safely said that we have reached a stage in our literary development where most — perhaps all — of the writers who reach book publication know how to write. All these writers possess the basic tools; technical ability

can be taken for granted now. This is one of the strongest signs I know of Canada's literary maturity, but it puts new responsibilities upon the reviewer. No longer searching eagerly for a book that is merely well-written, the reviewer must apply his or her highest standards.

What I look for in poetry, what makes me sit up and say "Yes, this is the real thing", is something in the writing that will jolt me with a moment of intensity that ordinarily adequate writing fails to provide. Be it a quirkiness of vision, an intense concentration of image or statement, an articulation of pure emotion or moral insight, the poems I am enthusiastic about are energized by something that draws me back to them again and again.

An eclectic, I like variety and can find that moment of recognition, that jolt, in many different kinds of poetry. I delight, therefore, in the wide range of poetry available to the reader today. It is the quality of the poetic statement that counts, for finally we have to admit that there are only two kinds: the good and the bad.

Of course, these evaluations of 28 different books are finally only one person's opinion, and I can only hope I make clear the reasons I have for enthusiastically placing a book high, plainly putting it in the middle, or shortly kicking it to the bottom of my list. Since the space is limited and the books are many, I have decided to begin with those I like least and move in more or less orderly fashion to those I find most exciting and interesting.

## 2.

Dedicated to "the tradition" and its high priests, Etienne Brûlé, Northrop Frye, D.G. Jones and priestess Margaret Atwood, *The Last Adventure*<sup>1</sup> is Eldon Garnet's big attempt to write "the Canadian epic of survival in the terrifying wilderness". That is its major fault. Written, it seems, for thematic critics, it is nothing more than a patchwork attempt to flesh out an abstract theme. Despite an occasional sharp image — there are a few sections describing the killing of a pregnant doe in winter that work quite well — the poetry remains unfocussed and abstract; it does not have the *feel* of articulated experience.

The characters — at least two, a man and a woman — are characterless, and I'm never even sure which one is speaking. There is a journey, with mythic overtones intended: I cannot follow the *periplum*

of the travels/travaills of these abstracted folk, nor do I feel any mythic depth in their lost perigrinations. Garnet completely fails to touch me personally with what he says here. I prefer Toni Onley's serigraphs: their abstractions are eloquent, capturing my eye as Garnet's poetry fails to catch my ear. Given the lack of gut feeling in this poem of supposedly gut-wrenching terror, I almost wish it might prove to be his *Last Adventure*.

Gerry Gilbert is a compulsive collector of the ordinary. For me, the problem with *Skies*<sup>2</sup> is that he seldom, if ever, does anything interesting with what he collects. There are drawings, photographs, collages and "poems" here, and while a few of the visuals offer some light entertainment, the writing tends to stay stubbornly banal, or at least lumpishly unilluminating before me. I think Gilbert is trying too hard to be cute, and though one may crack a smile at something like "montreal is ½ way to paris from vancouver / st johns lies on the same latitude with paris / paris ontario is to paris france as / ottawa is to canada", I must admit it fails to interest me for very long even as light entertainment. I'm not against humour, but Gilbert's writing lacks the kick I seek in good comedy.

Sporting a neat cover by Greg Curnoe, *At War with the U.S.*<sup>3</sup> is George Bowering's latest attempt at a serial poem, and, despite my sympathy with Bowering's sentiments in this poem, I don't think he quite brings it off.

Bowering is giving us one perception on top of another here in a book containing what his mind and heart said from January 11/73 to August 15/73, as he thought back on his hero-worship of the U.S. Army in the early forties, his awareness of Viet Nam and all it implies — including Canada's involvement as an arms producer — and his awakening love of and fear for his baby daughter. As I read through the book I was occasionally caught by an apt juxtaposition, a stray phrase that suggested deeply felt anger or love, but, on the whole, Bowering's language, his serial articulation, was not sufficiently interesting to hold my attention. Bowering has shown he is capable of more powerful statements; *At War with the U.S.* is one of his minor pieces, of interest, really, only to the dedicated Bowering fan.

Although *Journies and Shows*<sup>4</sup> is a well-written collection of poems, and although Jan Michael Dyroff reveals that he has studied the craft of verse in its many forms, very few of these poems engage my interest to

any degree. I see nothing distinctively Dyroffian in these poems, except perhaps in the long poem, "My Own Death Show", in which some wicked humour manages to break through the arch posturings that continually threaten to blank it out. I am most likely unfair to Dyroff here, for he does reveal an obvious intelligence at work. But these poems fade quickly in my mind to a common greyness. They are successful at what they attempt — and a poem like "Skinny-Dipping" even approaches human warmth and comic self-awareness — but they never attempt enough. This book will lie forgotten on my shelves.

George Stanley, one of the many Californians who have immigrated to the West Coast of Canada, writes poetry in line with much of what has appeared on the Vancouver scene over the past ten to fifteen years. *The Stick*,<sup>5</sup> a slim collection of poems from 1969 to 1973, contains a mixed lot. Some of them are coolly, calculatingly bizarre and fragmented, but the effect is merely one of deliberate obscurity. In others, however, a kind of sexual passion and despair leads to an articulation that even in its slippery lack of finality holds and intrigues the mind. "Ignorance", "Beauty", part of the long poem "Phaedrus", "Science Fiction", "Orphans of Orpheus", and the frightening "Two Poems" achieve a dream-like intensity. "Two Poems", especially, offers profoundly personal revelations of what parents can do to one. *The Stick* is a strange little book, and will not be to everyone's taste, but it contains some interesting explorations of rather *outré* states of mind and flesh.

David Bromige, on the other hand, is a hugely prolific transplanted Canadian now living in California. In the last year or two, he has published a number of books in Canada, of which *Birds of the West*<sup>6</sup> and *Spells and Blessings*<sup>7</sup> are the most recent. Both are interesting, both have their moments of boredom. *Birds of the West* reveals both Bromige's faults and his many intelligent capabilities. I feel he is at his best when he works in a very tight, short form, for he seems to lack control when dealing with the inevitable looseness that a longer poem entails. As most of *Birds of the West* is made up of two long poems, "Pond", and "The White-Tailed Kite", it contains a lot of slow stretches. Some of the shorter poems are sharp in their observation and to the point in their insights, however, and there are sections of "Pond" — on the philosophical aspects of group nude bathing, for example — which I find fascinating. The most interesting piece in *Birds of the*

*West*, however, is the afterward, called "Proofs", a fascinating prose exploration of the poet's sense of his poetics. Although I remain unconvinced that Bromige always succeeds in realizing what he wants to say, I find his articulation of his concerns here a most engaging piece of thinking. The poems in *Spells & Blessings* are all short, and they emerge from Bromige's sense of the numinous in everyday life. A few falter and fail, but most are enjoyable little spellings, attempts to hold the moment of perception sharply in focus.

*Chaim the Slaughterer*<sup>8</sup> is the work of a solid, honest man. Despite the specific Jewish content of many of these poems, they are rather Maritime poems than Jewish ones. Joseph Sherman speaks with the quiet, undramatic poetic voice one associates with the Atlantic Provinces. His poems do not excite, but, at their best, they hold one's interest because they have a certain generous presence. Many of the poems in the first two-thirds of the book are personal reminiscences or discoveries. Sherman recalls growing up in Cape Breton or pays homage to his wife and newborn baby, or he tries to present some character. I find many of these poems disappointing because they fail to create a living tension in their presentations of personality. The first part of "The Hired Help Hotel Indian", however, moves strongly beyond Sherman's normal quiet understatement and is powerfully evocative. Sherman's best qualities, his honesty of emotion, his sense of tradition and place, his feeling for people, are all present in the long title poem of the collection, "Chaim the Slaughterer", while, for the most part, his defects are absent. Speaking through the persona of the old ritual slaughterer, Sherman achieves a sense of personality lacking in the earlier poems; perhaps because this character's life exists in the tension between ritual and ordinary behavior. With only a few slack moments, the twenty-two-poem sequence speaks the long and changing life of Chaim in a genuinely interesting manner.

Peter Stevens has taken on a big job with *And the dying sky like blood*:<sup>9</sup> to do justice to the truth and legend of Dr. Norman Bethune. A brave venture, it is not wholly successful. The sub-title, "A Bethune Collage for Several Voices", reveals where some of the problems lie. I have always thought of Stevens as a personal poet, a poet of the lyric mode. Bethune calls for an epic poem, a poem beyond his powers. *And the dying sky like blood* is not an epic poem, it is a collage: of found

material, poems in various "voices", and prose "reminiscences", many of them the author's fictions.

Stevens fills in much of his context with snatches of popular songs, newspaper stories, headlines, and advertisements. His cutting and mixing sometimes work, sometimes come across as merely pretentious fiddling. Some of the poems are in Bethune's "voice", one in the "voice" of his wife (I found it felt forced and awkward – and did not believe it), others in various "voices" of people who knew or had contact with Bethune, and a few are in the author's voice. Stevens does not successfully change character in these poems, as he does in some of the prose pieces. Although a few of the latter appear to be quotations from the two biographies of Bethune, most seem to be Stevens' own fictions. For some reason prose seems to have freed Stevens from the need to strive for highly "poetic" statement, and though there are some lapses in tone in these sections they are the most successful and gripping parts of the book. Peter Stevens is to be commended for choosing a theme of such heroic dimensions. Though he does not quite manage to pull off a major work, his attempt to deal with such important Canadian material is still praiseworthy. *And the dying sky like blood* is worth one's interest even if it will, finally, fail to hold that interest after the first, important, reading.

In one of his poems, Victor Coleman advises his newborn daughter: "Go / moist // and deliver unto them / a chance to see themselves in pain". It strikes me that he could say the same thing to both his recent books, *Speech Sucks*<sup>10</sup> and *Stranger*.<sup>11</sup> Coleman's poems are about: sex and pain, love and pain, friendship and pain, isolation and pain; and though one can often see a dry verbal wit playing across the lines, usually expressed in the way punning connections structure the poem's forward movement, the poems are essentially graphs of private suffering. They are also very private poems, addressed quite often to a small, tightly-knit group of readers: the particular artists groups in Toronto, on the West Coast, and scattered loosely elsewhere, who share many of Coleman's attitudes and perceptions. This means that the general audience will often find Coleman's poetry obscure in its deliberate personal references. I suspect Coleman doesn't care one way or another that his poems have such a limited appeal (indeed, he might argue that poetry has for a long time now appealed to only a small circle of readers, and that he is merely facing the fact and writing

directly for the small circle he knows), even when, as in many of the selections from *Stranger*, they are powerful emotional statements.

Coleman may wish to write poetry "to beguile night", but usually what he articulates is "a grievous emotion". This is especially true of the love poems — poems of lost love — presented in "Strange Love" and "Stranger". Coleman's language slips occasionally — his use of the term "index" seems silly in context — but these are savagely honest poems, probing "the sick need to fuck" and the deeper emotional states that lead to it again and again. As I have implied, Coleman's poetry will not meet with everyone's approval, or even appreciation, but, at his best, he achieves a kind of pure statement that is savagely provocative in its stark, staccato enunciation of personal pain.

Eugene McNamara has developed, in his best work, a unique and personal tone of voice. It's a tone I like, and I enjoy his tightly constructed fables of the dark and questing heart, his fast film clips of everyday life inside the head. McNamara's basic stance is ironic, the articulation of his awareness of man's all-too-human weaknesses, an awareness bound by a bed-rock sympathy based on his knowledge of his own humanity. *Diving for the Body*<sup>12</sup> satisfyingly reviews McNamara's talents as a writer, despite the weak or failed poems that fill about one-third of its pages. There are some chillingly funny visions of youthful sexuality, like the sardonic "Greasy Kid Suite", a few movingly understated love poems, and one or two brilliantly precise evocations of family interaction such as "Family Matters" and the almost religiously intense poem for his daughter, "Mary Singing". The few rather banal stabs at social satire do not really take away from the successes of the better poems. *Diving for the Body*, although not up to the really high quality of McNamara's previous collection, *Passages*, is entertaining and lively, something we are often too solemn to demand of a book of poetry. I enjoyed reading it.

B, Christopher Wiseman's character in search of a noble life to live, first appeared in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1971). In *The Barbarian File*,<sup>13</sup> he has returned in full, if energetic, flight — from and to everything. This is an outraged and outrageous book, bitter and funny, expressing a basically dystopian vision of modern Canadian society, especially as seen in/from the academy. B is a perfect persona to express the dystopian visions of his creator: all he wants is to teach in a quiet little English department, and he is willing to "teach anything /

except / composition / bibliography / black literature / women's studies / poetry of relevance / Scottish literature / Canadian literature / Spenser Milton / Johnson James / Joyce Betjeman / Rod McKuen or / Ayn Rand"; oh yes, and he wants a good woman to love.

B, the British immigrant who remembers the war years as years of peaceful childhood, who wants real culture, actually, and can't possibly find it in Calgary, who is, paradoxically, a great Canadian, for he is a survivor at all costs — B is a shifty bugger who exists to make points, and on the whole Wiseman presents him with enough wit to make us sit still and listen, and enjoy the exercise to boot. Even in the poems where B is not specifically named, the "he" or "I" appears to be another of B's protean personalities. Barbarians like B must wear many masks, for only then can they manage to make it through another day in ironic semi-safety. Wiseman's control of his tone and technique are not spectacular, but are sufficient to engage the reader's interest. The few poems where he is satisfied to merely tell a joke will not repay re-reading (e.g., "His Revenge" and "Barbarian in Calgary"). On the whole, however, Wiseman's obvious didacticism emerges in taut lines, witty images, and sharp oaths.

Myron Turner's long prose poem, *The River and the Window*,<sup>14</sup> is part mythological journey, part fairy tale and part dream. It is, of course, a Quest, in which the nameless I sees enough during his long voyage to finally recognize himself in the mirrors of both river and window, thus to awake, at last, into the world once more. It is a strange little book that often reminds me of George MacDonald, say, after a strong dose of Jungian analysis. Although it refuses to engage in cheap sensationalism, it does have an elvish appeal that is at least partly due to its essential conformity to an ancient tradition. Turner's sureness of touch in his language is one of the delights of this book. He manages to sustain the delicate balance between fairy tale and sexual romance that one of his acknowledged influences, Cupid and Psyche, demands; the result is a subtly engaging poem. Myron and Susan Turner manage Four Humours Press from St. Paul's College in Winnipeg, and they intend to publish at least four small books per year. All will be hand-set and illustrated, and if the first two volumes are any example, all will be lovely examples of bookmaking. Mark Nisenholt's illustrations add greatly to the total impact of *The River and the Window*.



*What Is On Fire Is Happening*<sup>15</sup> is prairie metaphysics. Kenneth McRobbie's poems are calculated as coolly as any earthly philosophy, yet they shine in their carefully carved images like diamonds. This is a collection of subtly orchestrated lyrics in which the recurring images of fire, shadow, stretched horizon, rain, dust and never-changing wind slowly build up a world. McRobbie holds this analogue up for our admiration, but he does not invite emotional commitment. These are poems of poise and discrimination: "Prairie smokes do not burn or explode. / They drift and reform like memories / of what was unfulfilled, / safely loved ghosts or wild flowers of an / invisible and therefore no purpose." We are asked to contemplate, with the poet, both the scene and its meaning. I cannot say that these are poems which grip one, but they infiltrate the mind like an intelligent spy network. I find the cool appraisal — of both subject and reader — of these poems bracing in its *savoir faire*. *What Is On Fire Is Happening* is poetry for the waking mind.

*The Earth Book*<sup>16</sup> is Tom Marshall's latest addition to a projected quartet of books based on the four elements — earth, air, fire and water — of medieval cosmology. There is much here of high merit, presented in Marshall's distinctively ironic, and often elegiac, tones. The title poem serves notice of what is to follow, as well as revealing many of the ways in which Marshall chooses to speak in his poetry these days:

The earth-book is the book I have not  
written. The book about crack-up.

It is not informed by the driving fire of vision  
or by the cruel sanity of the transparent sea.

It is the earth-book. The book about  
germ warfare and smeared excrement. Earth-crusts

crackling and buckling, faults  
made permanent. Seismic agitation along the nerves,

sagging flesh and alcoholic, hollow eye.  
A hurricane is rising, trees

toss behind soiled windows like giant broccoli.  
A man sits and broods, monolithic

in a darkening room, the walls  
of his city tremble, at its edge

the proud high-rises glow like ash-heaps.

So much of this poem sounds like straight, cut-to-the-bone commentary. The poems of *The Earth Book* eschue most of the poetic vocabulary Marshall mastered in his earlier works, yet they gain in intensity as a result of the frightening clarity of their statements.

Not that all the poems are as deliberately bare of ornament as "The Earth Book". There are two longish poems, "Indian Summer" and "Cosmic Photographs", in which deliberately stretched and broken syntax is mixed with some powerfully evocative images and metaphors to achieve the sense of desolation and the pain of loss with which they deal. The long poem for voices, "MK and the Implosion of the FLQ", is a mistake, failing to engage the political reality it attempts to explore. Despite some evocative passages, it drifts away into barren silence at the end; it is vague. Marshall is basically a writer of personal politics in the lyric mode; the form of a verse-drama does not suit his primary talents. The four poems for women with which he ends *The Earth Book* bring us back to the satisfactions of his personal voice of feeling, especially in the moving elegy for Susan Alliston, "The Lamb". It is in poems such as these that Tom Marshall claims our attention, and there are enough of them in *The Earth Book* to make it a volume of definite value.

David Helwig's *Atlantic Crossings*<sup>17</sup> is a series of four longish poems in the personae of an Irish monk, a slave trader, Christopher Columbus, and Gudrid, a Viking woman. As the title of the book implies, the subjects of these poems are voyages to the new world — a world both inner and outer, a world where individuals, in the empty spaces of unknown seas and lands, may discover themselves. "May", for these poems are about personal human failure, except, perhaps, in the case of Gudrid.

The poems of *Atlantic Crossings* represent a continuation of Helwig's work in the long title-poem of *The Best Name of Silence*, his last book. It is a poem for voices, concentrating on the characters of Bluebeard and his latest wife. I found it an interesting experiment, but it seemed to me that Helwig too often gave in to the temptation to be theatrical and baroque at the expense of moral subtlety. In the poems of *Atlantic Crossings* he has pulled back a bit from the emotional fustian of "The Best Name of Silence", partly by sticking to only one character per poem. These are meditative monologues, and Helwig often manages his dramatic ironies with skill. All four poems contain absolutely blistering sections in which human pain and suffering are rendered with great

sensitivity. Helwig's ability to present states of consciousness in which psychological pain and *angst* are the focus of all thought makes this book a rewarding if not exactly happy reading experience. Nevertheless, I am not completely satisfied with what Helwig has done.

"The Middle Passage" is the poem that fails most completely, despite the awful power of many individual lines and scenes in it; and the failure, if such it is, has to do with Helwig's inability in this poem to distance his slave-ship captain properly. The captain is all too aware, in much of what he thinks, of the evil in which his ship and crew are engaged. His own acts, of rape and then murder, upon the black woman tied in his cabin are rendered with an almost phantasmagoric intensity, but there is no sense — *in the poem* — that we are to understand the depths to which he has fallen. His moral schizophrenia is present, but it remains opaque.

Both Columbus, in "Columbus in Jamaica", and the Irish monk, of "Voyage with Brendan", are presented so that the ironies of their various self-inquiries are made more or less clear. Though both poems fall into blustering rhetoric occasionally, they don't blunder morally the way "The Middle Passage" does. "The Vinland Saga" is the most successful poem because it perfectly balances the felt history of Gudrid's community and her own inner visions. Perhaps Helwig achieves this balance precisely because he must be more careful and distant with a feminine persona. At any rate, it is the most engaging poem of the four, the most successful in avoiding the emotional overstatement that tends to destroy artistic and moral balance. I am forced to speak of morality this way because these poems confront moral problems at every step. What Helwig is doing is important, and even in his failures he grapples with large issues, profoundly human problems. *Atlantic Crossings*, for all its failings, is a significant addition to the literature dealing with the roots of our civilization.

*take away the names*<sup>18</sup> is E.D. Blodgett's first book, and, as is usually the case with Coach House Press, the book itself is beautiful, every page a prairie horizon with the poems floating on sky. The visual effect is perfect for these poems, in which each word, curiously at large in the writer's imagination, seems ready to float away from its normal tethers to "real discourse". These are strange poems and they do not readily admit strangers. Words float in the void, and when they finally settle into patterns they do so with new and different meanings. That

this difficulty is deliberate becomes clear as one proceeds through the book. Blodgett is a careful craftsman and his command of technique is obvious; he is, however, concerned to evade normal critical response, and, on the whole, he succeeds. I *enjoyed* many of these poems; I do not pretend to comprehend them. *take away the names* has a powerful and disquieting effect upon me: I feel as though the poems are perfectly clear statements about another world, just slightly askew to the one I believe we — I and you — live in. The clarity is there; it just does not apply to my normal perception of things. Meanwhile, the repetition of key terms, key images, in poem after poem, builds up a sense of the universe where poems like these articulate what is.

It is nearly impossible to suggest the particular quality of this book in a short quotation. Although it is made up of short poems, they are more powerful and more emotionally specific in aggregate. *take away the names* will not be to everybody's taste, but those who persevere with this book will slowly find themselves hooked into an articulate universe which is so like yet unlike ours it exerts a considerable fascination. And the beauty of language given pattern is always there to make the entrance possible.

*The Rooms We Are*<sup>19</sup> is sub-titled "Poems 1970-1971", which, among other things, tells us a lot about the vagaries of small press publishing. Scobie's fine *The Birken Tree* (Edmonton: Tree Frog, 1973) is a later collection, and reveals some of the directions the poet's work has taken since the poems in *The Rooms We Are* were written, yet we only get to see the earlier poetry now. Well, no one ever said things always happen as (or when) they should. All of which is preparatory to saying that *The Rooms We Are* is a most enjoyable collection of poems. Themes from folk song, modern song, history, myth, film, his Scottish birthplace and the place he now lives (Alberta) all find their way into this collection, and they often intertwine in entertaining fashion. There are a number of personae in this book, from the gay troubadour of the nine-part poem, "The Gay Science", to the map-maker and explorer of some other poems. And throughout, the lover, of a woman, of words, speaks his piece.

One of the aspects of Scobie's work I most admire is his sense of humour. It is always good to have some light poems in the midst of heavy statements, but when a poet can make you laugh even as he is making serious statements, then the accomplishment is truly worthy.

"Stesichoros to Helen", a long poem in which the ancient poet, now known only because he recanted his poem in which he placed Helen in Troy so that the goddess would give him back the sight she had taken from him as from Homer, expostulates with the fair lady about what she has come to mean to all men, is both very funny and savagely ironic. It is possibly the collection's high point. *The Rooms We Are* contains two experimental prose poems of high quality, a number of short and evocative lyrics, the intriguing "The Gay Science", as well as some shorter comic pieces and "Stesichoros to Helen". They are all enjoyable, many are provocative, and the whole is fine entertainment.

Although the poems collected in *Milk Stone*<sup>20</sup> are from the period circa 1969-1971, and do not fully indicate what Ms. Lowther has been doing recently (see her powerful political poem, "Chacabuco, the pit", in the October 1974 *Canadian Forum*), the best of them reveal a passionately wide-awake intelligence engaged in articulating an intensely personal vision. The poems in *Milk Stone* cover a wide range of themes and topics. The author's intelligence is present even in the weakest works, often manifesting itself in an isolated arresting image or phrase. The weak poems appear to suffer from the fact that they are too obviously written to a pre-conceived idea. The more open poems of exploration, of an idea or a situation, are more energized, perhaps because they more obviously take chances. The best poems in *Milk Stone* are both elusive and allusive; they shift through their internal changes, often with breath-taking elisions which appear like the gaps sparks jump across. "Artic Carving", "Vision", "For Selected Friends", the three "Burning Iris" poems, as well as parts of "Woman On/Against Snow" and "In the Continent Behind My Eyes", all have this electric tension. Note how "Vision", the shortest of them, shifts metaphoric shape before your eyes:

The woman looks out of the whale's bone  
 her eyes eroded  
 sinking  
 into the marrow  
 the source of vision.  
 The whale cutting  
 the water  
 sings like a huge machine.  
 all his bones  
 have eyes.

Finally, there are five diptyches: parallel poems placed in evocative counterpoint side by side on the same page. All five poems are technical experiments of great interest, although the first one does not quite succeed because its political stance emerges in rhetoric rather than poetry. Two later ones, "The Electric Boy" and "The Journey of the Magi", the latter of which is an sf vision of a post-holocaust world, engage the reader politically through the poetic intensity of the images. These poems are perhaps the most intriguing works in *Milk Stone* and are alone worth the price of the book, for they engage a reader's feelings as well as his mind. *Milk Stone* is one of the best books Borealis Press has give us, an opportunity to read the work of a poet who deserves greater recognition and appreciation than she has thus far been granted. In it, Pat Lowther offers us some examples of just how powerful and stimulating she can be. Reading these poems is a good experience.

Sub-titled "A Book of Written Readings", and dedicated to "the other three horsemen", *Dr. Sadhu's Muffins*<sup>21</sup> is an exhaustingly inventive experimental collection. That its epigraph is taken from Gertrude Stein, one of the great experimenters to whom The Four Horsemen pay due homage, perhaps helps to suggest how little "normal meaning" plays a role in these poems.

In a "Note on the Method of Composition", McCaffery says:

these poems were an attempt to produce texts which directly present language-material without the intrusion of my own consciousness, this in itself formed part of a wider attempt to write poems that were mutually revelatory to both reader and writer, as such my concern was less with presenting statements and ideas and more with the accurate transcription of a pure perceptual process of the writer functioning as reader.

McCaffery adds that he used numerous chance and random techniques to choose the words that would eventually be grouped together as the poems in this book. "as a poet," he says, "i took responsibility for the page but not necessarily for everything that found its way onto the page." He is interested in a purely formal creation here, then, one in which meaning plays a secondary role, if any role at all.

The prime question such an approach to creation raises is, What makes Steve McCaffery's written readings more worthy of one's attention than anybody else's, including one's own? The answer is that McCaffery brings a formidable intelligence and wit, as well as a

delicately tuned ear, to bear upon these experiments. If I do not find many of them satisfying as pleasurable reading, I do respect the efforts that went into their production. Moreover, for me, some of these pieces work very well indeed; they provoke an emotional response through their short-circuiting of many normal ways of reading/responding to poetic language. Parts of "Between Two Worlds", some of the "Anamorphoses", "Human is a Leap", "Devotions", and some of "Shakespearitalicology" are marvelously surrealistic constructions. *Dr. Sadhu's Muffins* is not a book one turns to for easy enjoyment, but if you wish to discover some of the more arcane explorations at the borders of language, Steve McCaffery is one of a handful of guides who will take you there.

At one point in *Medicine My Mouths on Fire*,<sup>22</sup> Bill Bissett says, "we don't know wher th words cum from we / speak to dissolv th lines in our forbrain" and this sense of taking chances, of writing the poem as the spirit moves him, is paramount in his poems. Bissett wants to "dissolv th lines" everywhere lines act as boundaries, walls to keep the universe or people out, or in.

All the kinds of poetry represented in this collection, long narratives, erotic lyrics, chants, concrete visual games and poems in which all these are gathered together, all these poems speak of radical freedom: from rules of grammar and rhetoric, from laws of traditional behavior. Bissett is performing the role of shaman in his poetry, and it is exciting to watch him at it. The record of Bissett reading his work which accompanies the book is a bonus that should add greatly to one's appreciation of Bissett as shaman/performer. In many ways, owing to his spelling and apparent disregard for form, Bissett can be difficult to read. I believe, in fact, that his work will be best preserved for the future on video-tape or cassette, for much that looks obscure and opaque on the page — because we cannot come to grips with its odd appearance — comes brilliantly alive when Bissett speaks his poems. In *Medicine My Mouths on Fire*, readers get the best of both worlds: they can read Bissett while listening to him. It's an exciting experience, providing many insights into contemporary experimental poetry.

bp Nichol doesn't spell as eccentrically as Bill Bissett does, but he's every bit as much of an experimenter. *Love: A Book of Remembrances*<sup>23</sup> is a beautifully put together collection of some of his more *outré* experiments, divided into four sections: Ghosts, Frames,

## Love Poems, and Allegories.

Ghosts, Frames and Allegories are visual experiments. Love Poems looks like straightforward poetry. But Nichol has created in his Love Poems a series of lyrics in which the letter replaces the word as the basic unit of the poetic line. Indeed, the love in these poems is directed, really, to the alphabet Nichol as poet and troubadour serves. Read aloud, they sound fascinating, for the rhythms and rhymes capture one's aural imagination, even if understanding is left behind.

In the other three sections of the book, Nichol's longtime interest in comic art comes to the fore. This is especially true of Frames, a sequence of hand drawn words and images utilising the standard comic-strip frame as the basic unit of discourse. I find these Frames moving and delightful, and suspect that anyone, young or old, could derive great enjoyment from them, as well as from the Allegories. They are also indebted to comics, but they are more specifically based on individual letters of the alphabet, as are the smudgy and wraith-like Ghosts. All make a direct appeal to our visual imaginations, and they are all highly entertaining. In *Love: A Book of Remembrances*, bp Nichol pushes his explorations of the unknown areas at the borders of language's landscape ever further afield. That he manages to do so in such an enjoyable manner is a tribute to his great craft.

Robert Fones' first publication was a collection of *Kollages*; in his second, *Anthropomorphics*, the art of collage played a large part. There are few illustrations in *The Forest City*,<sup>24</sup> and the best of these are abstract drawings, but it soon becomes obvious that verbal collage is the name of Fones' game. Sometimes the results are brilliant and moving; sometimes they are confusing and opaque; always one is aware that an original mind is at work.

These are *some* of the elements — the knowledges — from which these poems are constructed: old movies, Shakespeare, the Romantic poets, advertisements, Scientific American, comic strips, Dada, Rock music, forestry, science fiction, mythology, children's books, the pre-Socratic philosophers, photography and holography. Fones doesn't make what one can obviously label as allusions, but references of a kind are tumbled about in these poems as they struggle for articulate shape. Fones' fondness for puns also makes itself felt throughout these almost Borgesian creations.



There are a number of poems in this collection which fail to engage my interest, but most of the long title poem and a goodly number of others succeed in hooking me in, even if I remain somewhat bewildered. For the most part, I find even the successful poems cool and distanced, but towards the end certain poems like "Modern Times", "Eel Erect", and "Springbank" achieve a kind of passionate despair which is genuinely moving.

One poem I especially like is "Hotel Memory", a good example of how Fones works with language:

In the eye of the desperado  
 a star shakes its needles of light  
 as a porcupine in defence, his quills.  
 Like those novelty pens  
 encasing ink-clad women  
 who undress when inverted  
 the pupils  
 of his eyes  
 did a strip-tease with the real. The skin  
 of their faces, cracked and dry  
 fell off in flakes  
 bones surfaced in the flesh  
 like rare white fish.  
 In the back of his quicksilver pocketwatch  
 he saw the desperado  
 and the precision of his draw  
 knew beauty  
 pushed thru the needle's eye. Felt the lawman  
 on the other side of the mirror  
 who would never let him rest dead or  
 alive.

It is one of the most traditional and straightforward poems in the book, a fact which possibly reveals my conservatism. I find enough of interest in *The Forest City* the first time through to draw me back, awkward and unsure, again. Fones is a poet for special tastes only, but there is something solid — the hearts of his precious trees — at the centre of his work, and it's worth some trouble to discover it.

*The Intervals*,<sup>25</sup> Stuart MacKinnon's third book, is a single long poem, a meditation on the state that "interval" means. It is not a simple poem, for it moves from selfish concerns, through personal awareness of others, through political awakening, to a muted sense of possible hope, all seen in terms of what the interval can metaphorically show us of ourselves. This is a poem deeply rooted in Kingston,

Ontario, the home of the writer. As he moves through the cityscape beside the lake, through the seasons of a year, aware of the walls of hospital, prison and university, the persona slowly comes to see what the intervals he exists in demand of him. With savage subtlety he shows us how he feels, thinking his way into new spaces for living. He begins with the nauseous panic he feels when approached by a poor deaf and dumb man, with whom he fails to communicate anything. Moving through various trance journeys, relations with friends and lovers and family, he comes to realize he must throw out "second hand gear / from the academy of fine ideas". Life in the hospital, and the vision of four Doukhabor women who "will not swallow bureaucracy", lead to a prison revolt during which he tries to confront political realities. I am not sure MacKinnon handles his response to capitalist justice with absolute balance here, but the confrontation he is dealing with is decisive in the poem. For rather than choosing purely political-revolutionary rhetoric, the poet chooses the vision of Heraklitos as seen in the present, and in the intervals he now knows to be wholly natural he sees "the space between the steps / that take us to the future".

*The Intervals* is a difficult, humane poem of the body politic. Because it never falls into party propaganda, it is an intelligent attempt to come to grips with the home-space that is our country today. It offers no simple solutions, simply a clear-eyed vision of what can be seen in one place as time passes by. It is a poem to read many times with great care, for there is something terribly real in what it says.

Richard Sommer's mind is an open door through which words pass in the strangest combinations. *Blue Sky Notebook*<sup>26</sup> is about "those stray sounds, seeds of worlds" which can be played with, though never fully conquered, for they are like flowers, "they bloom everywhere in the mind-space. / They are poems, blue sky poems". Sommer's earlier small book, *Homage to Mr. MacMullin*, doesn't really prepare one for the openness to every thing, the light playfulness, the joy in language, the nearly mystical acceptance of earth's all which pervades *Blue Sky Notebook*. Sommer has learned to love words for themselves, and then to lovingly shape them into groups which reflect a distinct vision. I think of the absolute rightness of the words in this passage from "Easter Letter": "this is the first day / the sunlight has thickness / to it, any real heft." "Heft" is Sommer's word, here, he has claimed it for this image as his own.

There are concrete poems here, found poems, poems in which the fun lies in the way he plays with the clichés of ordinary speech, some outrageously funny japes, and a few sublimely distanced meditations on life, love and death. All are engaging, all give enjoyment. At least half of them will continue to do so as I reread them in the future. This is because Sommer has found, in the best of these poems, a personal syntax for his vision of wide-awake acceptance of what is. Change is, and memory, and the deep meaning of what is the caught vision a poem articulates, as in "For Denis Levertov:"

A bluebird is in the mailbox  
and sits quietly when I open it.

It is a corrugated box in ordinary  
early sun, on some dirt road.

If the sun is heavier than usual  
at this hour, when I go down

I think nothing of it. If  
the box casts a longer sharper

shade from its post across  
the wet ditch grass,

I notice nothing,  
but a blue stillness when

I let down the latch makes  
another country altogether.

If you like the sound of the voice speaking here, from such "another country altogether", you will find much to delight you in *Blue Sky Notebook*.

Joe Rosenblatt, bless his pen, is one of our true originals, a poet whose unique voice can be heard in almost every line he writes. *Dream Craters*<sup>27</sup> is one of his strongest collections, and a marvelous journey through a strange and always shifting private landscape it is. It is also a very entertaining book.

Rosenblatt's poems dawdle carefully through animal nature, the fading pathways of myth and legend and the dangerous tunnels of dream; they represent unique articulations of what he has perceived and undergone in those places. It is Rosenblatt's articulation that im-

mediately catches one's attention, for he has discovered an exhilarating and personal syntax that brands his best poems his. Moreover, Rosenblatt, like his editor Newlove, has an absolutely wicked sense of humour, which irradiates his poems with a glowing blackness.

Rosenblatt's poems are full of eminently quotable lines, but they are best savoured whole. "All Worlds lead to the Lobe" is a good representative piece; if you enjoy this poem, I am sure you will find this a delightful and provocative, funny and sometimes terrifying book.

Spirit, I want it to happen:  
every morning is bright & early  
& crocuses are popping insomniacs  
nudging the tempo of summer.

In the garden of moments  
the holes walk off a golf course  
over to where the sunlight stirs a toadstool  
& white rabbits run into the tunnels of tomorrow.

The robin who left his memory down south  
returns to the seeded ground to hunt the cheated worm,  
the smallest sentinel in my world hops  
to the vibrations of love, oblivious of hunger.

Time signals, & bullfrog people leap  
into sweating ponds seasoned with flies  
circumferences of splashes, widening kingdoms  
for the torrid days creeping into the brain bud.

The oceanographer of the inevitable collects  
the drops of blue laughter, the nerves of dreams  
wind around the incandescent body of the chief voyeur  
& grasshoppers of my senses are slaves of ecstasy . . . .

Reflections bounce off the billiard table  
solipsist spheres roll into the pockets of ears  
& little people in boots of metaphor await the thunders  
before the minnows of happiness change into adults.

Rosenblatt's weird metaphors work like a distorting X-ray mirror. What you see is what you just might not want to know you are. But he tricks you into looking, and then you just have to face up to it all. *Dream Craters* are what remain after the meteors of poetic imagination have crashed into the lunatic brain: these poems are strange photographs, and they demand your attention. This is a major book, and could possibly be the one to garner Rosenblatt the attention he has long deserved.

The epigraph from James Agee, "seeking to perceive it as it stands", suggests the nature of *Steveston*,<sup>28</sup> a collection of powerfully evocative photographs by Robert Minden and an extraordinary documentary poem sequence by Daphne Marlatt. From the map on the cover, of the Steveston area in the Fraser River delta, through the stark black and white photographs of the place and especially the people of the place, into the tremendously packed long lines of Marlatt's poems, *Steveston* is a marvelously complex homage to a town, and to the spirit of documentation represented by Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

But Marlatt is not concerned merely to repeat Agee's work, and her poems are, in certain important ways, a more complex and at the same time more humane exploration of the B.C. Fishing & Canning town she has chosen to re-present. I have watched Marlatt's poetry develop over the past ten years or so, and while I have always respected her poetic talent and her formidable intelligence, I have often felt that she has willfully courted more obscurity in her verse than was always demanded by the material. In *Steveston*, the verse, the articulation she creates, remains extremely complex, at times even clotted in its grasp of many perceptions simultaneously, but it is always clearly in service to the spirit of people and place she seeks to encompass in this book. These are difficult poems, yes, but they offer great rewards to the reader willing to persevere, and, even on first reading, the sense that something emotionally and intellectually true about roots, about how working people live in a place where death and sex at its most basic — the spawning of the salmon — is the basis of life, comes through with overwhelming clarity.

There is a rich sense of history in these poems, of human misery and suffering, and the courage to rise above such things. Steveston was one of the places from which Japanese-Canadians were savagely transported to interior concentration camps during World War II. But many came back, and Marlatt deals with the whole happening, often on a deeply personal level. Indeed, the way she occasionally insinuates herself into her own documentary is one of the strengths of this book. Another great strength is the metaphorical depth Marlatt gains by using the fish, the river, the moon and tides, as well as the many jobs, in various richly complex patterns throughout the sequence. As certain central images reappear in new contexts, the whole situation of the town in space and time blossoms slowly in our minds.

Not too long ago, Dorothy Livesay told us that the documentary poem was a specifically Canadian form. *Steveston* is a worthy addition to the tradition Livesay's argument uncovered. Daphne Marlatt's most fully realized creation, it is a major work, one which we shall return to again and again, for the massive sense of human place, Canadian place, it articulates in the slow, complex unwinding of its verse. I can't praise this beautiful book enough.

### 3.

Well, there you have it, a survey of just some of last year's covey of small press poetry books. Is it representative? As luck would have it, there are only two books by women among the twenty-eight, which does not fairly represent women's forceful presence on the contemporary poetry scene in Canada. I know that there were a good number of books by women last year, but somehow I didn't receive that many, and those I did I reviewed elsewhere. Canada is very lucky to have so many good, even major, women writers, and I merely want to note that I am not deliberately trying to overlook them.

Despite its obvious limitations, a survey such as this can reveal certain configurations in the general imaginative topography. I see three basic trends in our poetry right now, all three represented among the books reviewed. First, I think it's significant that so many writers are attempting the long poem, poem sequence, or serial poem, often documentary in content or form. Second, many of our most interesting poets are striking out in various linguistic experiments, explorations of the nature of language itself. Third, a few intriguing writers are making surreal or Borgesian poem-fictions, strange dream-worlds of hypnotic beauty. Finally, as always, there is the hard core of more or less traditional lyric poets who provide the still point about which the other forms can congregate. Because so much is happening that is exploratory and new, plus a great deal of important consolidation of the areas already won, these are good years for the dedicated follower of Canadian poetry. Keeping up, these days, is always interesting, often pleasurable, and sometimes extraordinarily exciting. Who could ask for more?

#### THE BOOKS

1. Eldon Garnet, *The Last Adventure* (Ottawa: Oberson Press, 1974), np, \$4.95/2.50.

2. Gerry Gilbert, *Skies* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1974), np, \$5.50.
3. George Bowering, *At War with the U.S.* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1974), np, \$3.00.
4. Jan Michael Dyroff, *Journies and Shows* (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1974), pp. 80, \$3.95(?).
5. George Stanley, *The Stick* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1974), np, \$3.50.
6. David Bromige, *Birds of the West* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1974), pp. 108, \$4.00.
7. David Bromige, *Spells & Blessings* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1974), np, \$2.50.
8. Joseph Sherman, *Chaim the Slaughterer* (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1974), np, \$5.95/2.95.
9. Peter Stevens, *And the dying sky like blood* (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1974), pp. 112, \$4.95.
10. Victor Coleman, *Speech Sucks* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1974), np, \$4.50.
11. Victor Coleman, *Stranger* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1974), np, \$4.00.
12. Eugene McNamara, *Diving for the Body* (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1974), pp. 79, \$3.95(?).
13. Christopher Wiseman, *The Barbarian File* (Windsor: The Sesame Press, 1974), pp. 48, \$2.50.
14. Myron Turner, *The River & the Window* (Winnipeg: The Four Humours Press, 1974), np, \$2.50.
15. Kenneth McRobbie, *What Is On Fire Is Happening* (Winnipeg: The Four Humours Press, 1975), pp. 32, \$2.50.
16. Tom Marshall, *The Earth Book* (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1974), np, \$5.95/2.95.
17. David Helwig, *Atlantic Crossings* (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1974), np, \$4.95/2.50.
18. E.D. Blodgett, *take away the names* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1975), np, \$3.75.
19. Stephen Scobie, *The Rooms We Are* (Delta, B.C.: The Sono Nis Press, 1974), pp. 60, n.p..
20. Pat Lowther, *Milk Stone* (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1974), pp. 94, \$3.95(?).
21. Steve McCaffery, *Dr. Sadhu's Muffins* (Erin, Ontario: Press Porcepic, 1974), pp. 140, \$4.95.
22. Bill Bissett, *Medicine My Mouths on Fire* (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1974), np, \$5.95.
23. bp Nichol, *Love: A Book of Remembrances* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1974), np, \$4.50.
24. Robert Fones, *The Forest City* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1974), pp. 125, \$4.00.
25. Stuart MacKinnon, *The Intervals* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1974), np, \$3.00.
26. Richard Sommer, *Blue Sky Notebook* (Montreal: Delta Can, 1974), pp. 74, \$2.95.
27. Joe Rosenblatt, *Dream Craters* (Erin, Ontario: Press Porcepic, 1974), np. 86, \$4.95.
28. Daphne Marlatt & Robert Minden, *Steveston* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1974), pp. 91, \$6.95.