Frank Davey

1940-

WRITING A LIFE

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***Weeds* (1970)**

In the bush below the house there are no weeds or else every tree and bush and plant is a weed. Weeds are both biography and not biography. You can't get all the weeds into one life or one garden. A life can begin with "W" for war but the weeds are here first, as unselected as a newborn child. As war is selection. A crude selecting as the planes or guns or rockets rain bombs or Agent Orange on people and plants that have abruptly become weeds.

***War Poems* (1979)**

A cool sunny day. A child is sitting in a pram outside the Abbotsford village real estate office. On his head is a green hand-knit cap embroidered in red with his name. The billy goat that is tethered beside the office to trim the grass leans in and eats the cap.

The wearer of the cap was born nearby in Vancouver, B.C., April of 1940, but began thinking of himself as I much later. "Frank wants," he would say. And he really did. He does not remember the billy goat. He remembers Frank. Yet he was already I when I sees his father, just come in from work in his rough jacket and trousers, upset beside the back door, and his mother then upset, and his father has just brought the newspaper from the porch, and they are upset about ships that have sunk. "Those damn Japs," his father is saying. And there are photos, and the ships are the *Repulse* and the *Prince of Wales.*

"What's your name?" "Frank," the child replied. "Hank, your name is Hank?" "Frank!" the child replied, or thought he had replied. "Hank?" He remembers his mother's story about his hat and about the billy goat but does not remember the billy goat.

Some time later his mother and father are upset again, and I is a lot more I, and his father has again just brought in the newspaper, and across the top in four-inch black letters is the word "DIEPPE". In both scenes I is a small pair of eyes near the doorway from the dining room looking down the length of the kitchen over the worn linoleum to the back door where his mother and her mother are gathered around my father and the newspaper. From the child's point of view there is a major problem of context, although there are also letters arriving from his grandmother's sisters-in-law, letters which his grandmother reads aloud to my mother and that

tell of English houses crushed by bombs and the miraculous escapes of children hidden beneath staircases and dining room tables.

I lie on my back on our front lawn beside my father and look up at the blue sky. That's a Halifax, he says. A Lancaster. Those are B-17s, Liberators. That's a Mitchell. Much of identity and identification is memory, and memory flashes pictures of a young man in soiled work clothes holding a newspaper by the back door, of my grandmother reading small cramped pages of letters, of Commonwealth Air Training Program planes droning in orderly formations toward the mountains.

***Tish* (1961)**

Tish is where all the words began and for many where they ended.

bp said that for anthologists and historians there could be only one *Tish*-poet and that until Daphne and Fred stopped being *Tish* poets and started being some other kinds of poet that needed representation they would not be in many anthologies. That's bpNichol, Daphne Marlatt, Fred Wah. For a long time bp was the anthologists' pick for representative concrete poet, but now anthologists no longer represent concrete poetry.

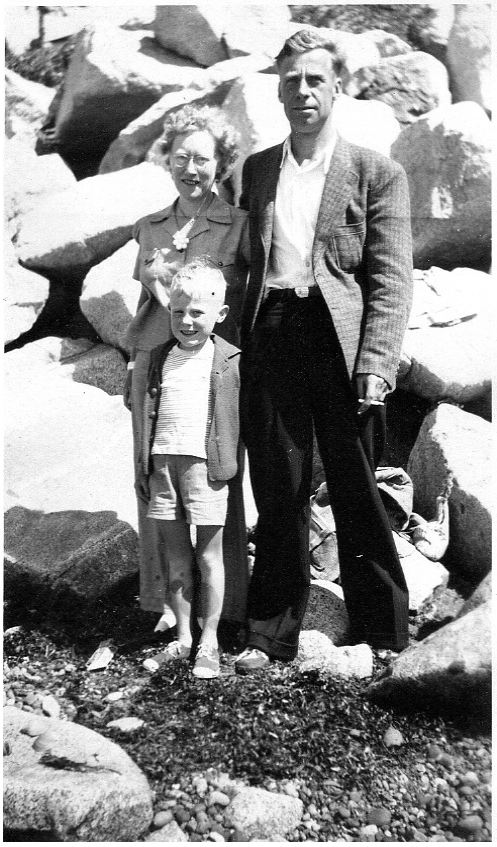
I was living at home and reading meters during that summer of 1961. Bill Walker and I would load up his tape recorder and drive in to Vancouver for the Sundays at Warren's and for each night of Duncan's lectures. Fred was driving a tractor in a Fraser River cranberry bog. Bill taped each lecture and I still have copies of the tapes although I haven't listened to them for 30 years. My reel-to-reel tape player is plugged from dust and grime. One of the nights after a Duncan lecture Bill and I are speeding home on Highway 7 west of Cloverdale and I don't see the unlit freight train going slowly across the highway and he does. So much for the vagaries of literary history.

Frank Davey, waiting for a donkey in Santorini, Greece, 1989

The story goes that a bunch of us student writers kept meeting in (Professor, but none of us called him that) Warren Tallman's living room, on evenings and Sunday afternoons in 1960 and 61 to discuss poetry and poetics whether he wanted us there or not. He usually did. The story goes that we collected money so Robert

Duncan could come to Vancouver that summer and give a week of lectures in Warren's basement on modernist poetics and he came up on a bus from San Francisco because that was the only fare we could afford, and talked for four or five nights and days in and out of Warren's basement. Warren was more impressed with us than we were and so arranged for us to give a reading to Duncan and others in a room at the university. After, we are all sitting around again in Warren's living room and someone, probably Fred, probably Pauline, says we should start a magazine, and some of us were still thinking about Duncan's story of Carl Sauer's figuring out when rice was domesticated in the Amazon basin by examining fossilized human feces, and of how Charles Olson had interpreted that story in *The Maximus Poem,* and so one of us said we could call it "shit." Duncan, who had encouraged us in our interest in phonetics, said no, how about "Tish?" We have all told this story so often that it must be true, and it probably is.

Once when I was in high school a bunch of us got together to form a club and had a secret ballot to choose a president and I got all the votes. I so happy to be president and so humiliated to have every one know I had voted for myself. When the five of us chose one of us to be managing editor of *Tish* I was happy we did not have a secret ballot. Everybody wanted me to be the managing editor, god knows why, and I did not have to say that I did too.



With my parents at White Rock, BC, 1944

Nineteen months and nineteen mimeographed issues of *Tish* later the five us—myself, George Bowering, Fred Wah, James Reid, and David Dawson—who got together to edit, print, and distribute a magazine were famous. Well, semi-famous, wherever four or five poets gathered together in Toronto, New York, Montreal, Vancouver, or San Francisco.

In the nineteenth issue we all wrote something about the most important thing about *Tish*. Some of us have done this several times since in other magazines or books. The most important thing about *Tish* I should have said was that it made us enact ourselves as writers. Made us write poems every day because there was an issue coming up that needed them. At the end of the nineteenth issue we each had a bookful. No, maybe that wasn't the most important thing. Maybe it was our opting out of the whole circuit of sending poems off

to other people's magazines in Toronto and Montreal and asking to have them legitimated. Asserting our own legitimacy. Publishing ourselves over and over and over. As Peter Quartermain wrote of *Tish,* "If a man says 'It's all rubbish!' once, you shrug. But when he says it once a month for a year and a half, when he says it for 409 pages, you begin to pay attention...."

No, there was another most important thing. There were the friendships, that continue so far, closely with George, Fred, and Lionel Kearns, and more distantly, and with more interruptions, with David, Jamie, and Daphne. These were the first close friendships I made that kept enduring despite separation and slowly diverging interests. We made these friendships in part because George, Lionel, Fred, David, Jamie and I lived virtually as siblings for nineteen months. As teaching assistants, George and I had coincidentally been assigned by the University of British Columbia's English department to a large common office in an old World War II army hut (the third person in the office—demonstrating the coincidence—was not another writer but W.H. (Bill) New, later to be editor of *Canadian Literature*). George and I bellied our two desks up against one another in the middle of the room, and for those nineteen months exchanged poems, bad puns, shouts of outrage, and reflections on poetics. We made the room, despite Bill New, unofficially "The *Tish* Office." Lionel Kearns—another coincidence, had his office across the hall. We wrote pairs of poems for our *Tish* paired poems page. George and I would spend eight to ten hours a day in the office writing, marking, reading, and editing, and Fred, Jamie, David, and Lionel would also spend one or two of these hours here, reading *Tish* mail, arguing, conferring, gossiping.... In a cubicle attached to the office we set up our printing press, first a Dutch-made mimeograph machine and later a second-hand Addressograph-Multigraph Model 80 offset. Fred hung out inside as our official printer.

Most of the issues of *Tish* had a map of B.C. on the cover. We figured we were all outsiders and so we presented ourselves as regionalists and outsiders. Outsiders to the English department from which we sometimes stole paper. Outsiders to Daphne's parents' middle-class living room which I could see from the doorway. Outsiders to all the famous mythy poets in Ontario and the social realists at Contact Press most of whose poems we liked anyway. Before the nineteen issues were all published other people in Toronto and Vancouver and Montreal were calling us insiders. We had made the inside feel outside and our outside look inside. Later John Guillory would explain what we had done in a book called *Cultural Capital.* We had turned the *Tish*-office into a Canadian cultural capital.

After nineteen issues we all got married and moved to other places—Fred married Pauline and went to Albuquerque, George married Angela and moved to Calgary, I married Helen and moved to Victoria, David married Deena and moved to Seattle, Jamie married Carol

and moved to the CPC-ML. These events happened quickly but took a couple of years. But for many people we are still the *Tish* poets and that is all there is to be said about us.

***SwiftCurrent* (1983)**

Fred Wah had been born in Swift Current, Saskatchewan, and I had grown up in Abbotsford, B.C., and it was 1984, and we were creating the first electronic literary mag anywhere. We were doing a *Tish* with pixels. We knew we were the first because we were print kids who called our project a 'mag' and never thought of a 'zine.' We got the Canada Council's new Media Section to give us money for software development and for time on Bell Canada's packet-switching data network, called Datapac, and got York University and Simon Fraser University to kick in with UNIX-based computer space. Our software idea was that two identical databases would be set up at the two universities and would update each other automatically with whatever new poems letters or stories had been contributed to them. Vancouver and Toronto writers with computers could hook up by modem over their local phone lines, while others connected via their local Datapac phone number and we paid their Datapac charges. What we were trying to do was create the World Wide Web in two Canadian cities except nobody could tell us about the World Wide Web.

Like good *Tish* writers Fred and I worked hard at theorizing what we were doing. We were transferring much of the editing of a magazine from its editors to its contributors and readers, each of whom had a "D)elete" command that could remove any text from their view of the database. All Fred and I hoped to do as editors was 'edit' who could be contributors, mainly attempting to separate those who wanted to write interesting texts from those who wanted an electronic space in which to exchange their ratings of pizzas. We were also transferring the printing of texts from the publisher to the reader, who could print out a *SwiftCurrent* text for his or her private reading. In the far distance we imagined *SwiftCurrent* becoming the hub of an electronic bookstore, distributing texts to readers or booksellers who had their own high-speed duplexed laser printers and bookbinders. We thought Canadians should start doing this before Americans started similar Canadian businesses but without Canadian texts. We published a bunch of stuff about this in 1986 in a book we edited called *The SwiftCurrent Anthology.*

That is, *SwiftCurrent* was even more about power and its claiming and redistribution than *Tish* had been before it. Instead of eastern-Canadian skeptics critical of a Vancouver 'clique' we had defenders of literature worried that *SwiftCurrent* would have no literary standards, that anyone could post anything and call it a poem or story or essay. Writers like John Harris. That floodgates would open and there would be too much to sort and read. Such multiplicity had

always been present at the level of writing but had been contained by floodgatekeeping editors who sorted out the undesirables on various grounds including aesthetics and content and fitting in with the literary family. On the World Wide Web in the 1990s many electronic literary zines were also edited by gatekeepers who sent submissions off for peer review before deciding on publication. Who is a peer? My great-grandmother Davey was a Peer but her late-loyalist family were Pennsylvania Deutsch and didn't own land and didn't have much say in nineteenth-century Ontario. Fred and I were giving the say and the D)elete key to readers and letting them be gatekeepers and waiting at the gate were old familiars like J. Michael Yates, Ken Norris, and David McFadden and not-so-familiars like Jim Wong-Chu and Richard Truhlar and Gerry Shikatani. However, not even getting to the swiftcurrents of the floodgate were very many women writers, most of whom told Fred and me that they couldn't afford computers or were wary of computers which they thought might be guy things. Soon after I wrote somewhere that the history of our culture had led women to justifiably view alphanumeric keyboards as potential sites of servitude. I should have added that in 1985 computers were owned mainly by prosperous men like me and Fred, or by even more prosperous men who could employ women to use them. Now it is still mostly writers like me and Fred who have free internet accounts through our work and fancy new computers through our research grants.

We never did get our Simon Fraser site up because neither Fred nor I were at Simon Fraser and our flakey young woman computer programmer vanished after getting the York site almost running. Or fled from wage servitude. We wrote to all kinds of Canadian writers asking them to participate but most didn't have computers and many others didn't have modems and were having trouble using their word processors. Alice Munro replied that she still had trouble using a typewriter. Once the York site was up we had a good number of young Toronto writers like Stuart Ross and Gary Barwin and Kevin Connolly using it to post poems and reviews and argue about politics and writing and we also had a bunch of pretend writers from out-of-town who found our Datapac account a really cheap way to exchange love notes. Wonder how they could all afford computers. We had the York computer services people complaining about our Datapac bill. Every night I had to spend a couple of hours answering e-mail queries from users unable to upload a poem or get through on Datapac or get their friend listed as a new user. Or from users who had forgotten their *SC* login name or whose first-generation personal computers could not distinguish upper and lower case letters or lacked a 'Ctrl' key -- both features being necessities on *SwiftCurrent.*

Fred and I brought *SwiftCurrent* to an end in 1990 when I left York and didn't feel like spending two or more hours a night keeping *SC* going at the University of Western Ontario. If we

had hung in a couple more years *SwiftCurrent* would have been a famous web site and I would have been a web site manager and no longer an obscure but prosperous writer.

***Surviving the Paraphrase* (1983)**

I am of course making this all up. Not making up the events but which ones I tell, how I am telling them, and how they are telling me. Saying something about them by not saying much about them. I'm not much of an authority on most of them, not having paid much attention to many things while I was living them, and not having wanted to remember some things while they were happening. My first year in *Tish* I was still remembering wanting, and wanting, to spend my hours talking with Daphne Buckle, and she was elsewhere making plans to marry Alan Marlatt. This is difficult to sum up. A lot of the energy I put into getting my *Tish* buddies to publish nineteen issues in nineteen months was more than likely displacement of the energy and anticipation I had felt talking with Daphne about art and writing and life over hours of coffee or tea in Dean's Cafe or the Black Cat Cafe in the winter and early spring of 1961. *Tish* was good for poetry and good for self-esteem. I had also bought myself a TR4 sports car late that June—the car that appears with me, George, Bobby Hogg, and Red Lane on the cover of *The Writing Life,* the first book about *Tish.* Daphne was good for *Tish* and for at least one new car sale. The day after that photo I would set up my typewriter on a picnic table in a nearby campsite and cut the stencils for *Tish*'s first issue.

Over the next decade I would get a reputation as being something of a phenomenologist of poetry and skeptic about what passed for Canadian literary criticism. This was partly because I knew I didn't often understand what was happening to and around me and couldn't see how others could pretend to understand most things about something else. "Art does not seek to describe but to re-enact," Olson had written. This made a whole lot of sense to me about literary criticism as well as art, particularly when the people you care about rarely tell you everything you'd need to know to understand. Or don't know it themselves. Or know that you'd rather not know it.

Not that I was in a hurry to write literary criticism. I submitted a collection of poems as my Master's thesis at UBC in 1963, the first of only three such theses to be accepted by the department of English before the setting-up of the UBC Creative Writing Department in 1964. George and Lionel wrote the others. That summer, while George and Lionel and Fred and Jamie and David were taking part in the legendary-in-1963 Vancouver poetry workshop that Warren Tallman had organized, and where Olson, Duncan, Robert Creeley and Allen Ginsberg were all teaching, and while George and Lionel were each sorting through various teaching offers at

universities elsewhere in Canada, I worked at a very junior summer position in the UBC library acquisitions department. Helen and I had married at Christmas of 1962. She was one year from her UBC degree and obliged by degree requirements to complete either on the UBC campus or at the brand new University of Victoria which had been until 1963 a UBC affiliate. She needed to live during 1963-64 only in Vancouver or Victoria. For love, Creeley had written. Mid-way through the summer a small notice on the English department bulletin board announced a job in English at Royal Roads Military College, in Victoria; I obtained the job, to my surprise, largely on the basis of my now numerous poetry publications: a book, a guest-edited issue of Louis Dudek's *Delta,* and various poems in a dozen journals in three countries.

In Victoria I continued to write poetry, publishing *City of the Gulls and Sea* in 1964, *The Scarred Hull* in 1965, *Four Myths for Sam Perry* in 1970, and writing most of *Weeds* in 1968-69. I began imagining myself as a poet who would need secure university employment to continue writing, but noticed that tenure usually required a Ph.D. I began looking for a doctoral program that might fit with my writing and steal the least time from it. Avoiding grad schools that required a lot of course work, I enrolled in the summer of 1965 at the University of Southern California, doing the course work in the summers of 1965 and 1966, writing the 16 hours of comps in the winter of 1967, and defending my thesis in August of 1967. Although I eventually published parts of this thesis ("Theory and Practice in the Black Mountain Poets") in a chapbook as *Five Readings of Olson's Maximus* and as an article in *Boundary 2,* I had little interest in writing criticism until my chair at Royal Roads, Gerald Morgan, urged me to write papers on Canadian poetry for the 1968 and 1969 meetings of the local chapter of the Humanities Association of Canada, of which I think he was president. Gerald and Janka had a cute daughter named Monica, who was studying law. I remember protesting that I knew relatively little about Canadian poetry other than the contemporary, and him replying somewhat irrelevantly "but you write it, don't you?" My 1968 paper on Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan was soon published by James Reaney's *Alphabet,* and my 1969 paper on the politics of E.J. Pratt's poetry by *Canadian Literature,* and both reprinted in anthologies a few years later. Gerald was a Conrad scholar and before that a master mariner. I used to like to think his wife was Polish. The Cohen/Dylan paper took me to my first meeting of the Association of Canadian University Teachers of English (ACUTE) at York University in Toronto in 1969.

A year later I had a tenurable job at York, hired, I came to believe, with Eli Mandel's support, as a poet with a PhD who could teach Creative Writing, American poetry, and Canadian literature. Clara Thomas, one of the senior York Canadianists, was rumoured to have been skeptical about my appointment because she figured I would soon want to return to British Columbia, but we became friends and co-authors anyway. The next year the department appointed William Gairdner, who had just completed a thesis on contemporary French literary theory, and Barbara Godard, who had completed one on Canadian fiction at the Université de Bordeaux, and who was working to convert it from French to English for publication by New Press. The three of us were thrown together as lecturers to a 12-section 300-student Canadian literature class. It was there in Bill and Barbara's lectures that I began hearing about the European analogues to Olson's phenomenology—Merleau-Ponty, Poulet, Bachelard—and was drawn for the first time to look seriously at structuralism, buying and reading Barthes' *Writing Degree Zero* and *Elements of Semiology* and *On Racine* in 1971, *Mythologies* in 1973 and Jameson's *The Prison House of Language* in 1974. Bill later left York and now writes right-wing tracts about heterosexuality and family life.

The immediate effect of these books was to offer another route to the phenomenological text-based poetics I had been developing since the *Tish* period, and to my skepticism about criticism. A poem is itself its only adequate enactment and representation. A poem does not represent something prior to itself but enacts the moment of its own construction. Criticism cannot represent a poem or novel but merely be a new text that enacts a reading of those texts. In the course of my working my way toward such propositions, and of, in a sense, attempting to bridge *Tish* poetics and French structuralism, came the founding meeting of the Association for Canadian and Quebec Literatures (ACQL), at the University of Toronto, at the Learned Societies meetings of May 1974. Thematic criticism, with its source in Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* and its recent popularization in Canada by D.G. Jones' *Butterfly on Rock* and Margaret Atwood's *Survival,* and its methodology of using bunches of plot summaries to develop general paradigms of one unified Canadian Literature, had within the past five years installed itself as the dominant approach in Canadian literary studies. I took advantage of my invitation to speak at the

Me (second from right) with Robert Hogg, George Bowering, Red Lane, and unknown friend of Lane's, in Oliver, BC, 1961

conference to take apart the assumptions of this criticism, using not Atwood, whom I had already critiqued elsewhere, but Jones as my example of it. Some scholars have called the moment of my lecture a turning point in Canadian criticism. I remember the seats in the amphitheatre were filled and that there were people standing in the aisles and doorways. I remember Miriam Waddington grabbing me as I left the podium and saying "that's good, you're not a structuralist, are you?" Perhaps, like many others, she had mistaken Jones' and Atwood's criticism as structuralism. Then I noticed Doug Jones, and his wife Monique, sitting quietly near the centre. I wished they'd been somewhere else.

***The Scarred Hull* (1966)**

I wrote *The Scarred Hull* in Victoria in 1964, and my friend George published it the next year in Calgary as an issue of the long-poem magazine *Imago.* It's a fairly simple long poem that juxtaposes accounts of nineteenth-century shipwrecks on the west coast of Vancouver Island with narratives about children whom my first wife, Helen, was teaching in a "special education" class at South Park School, across from Beacon Hill Park in Victoria. It was her first year of teaching. Many of my friends decided to read the poem's ships and children as metaphors, not just for each other, but for my life as well. Warren Tallman had started this kind of reading of me in 1961 in his introduction to my *D-Day and After,* calling its context "the haunted house of the lost object." He was thinking of Daphne. There are many lost objects in the sea. I think of *The Scarred Hull* as a step toward *The Clallam* of 1972, and toward thinking about issues of class, justice, fatality, and power. The lower your class the worse your luck. Although in my memory schools had always been sites of class-conflict: working class children and middle-class teachers and school boards. It was probably more those schools in Abbotsford, my schools, than South Park School in Victoria, that I produce in *The Scarred Hull.*

But when I think about those schools I don't see them right away. I see instead the gravel road between my home and the school, and the kids loitering beside it. My parents' house was on a small lot on the edge of a small village, five blocks from the elementary school, two blocks up a hill from the post office and four blocks from the B.C. Electric maintenance yard where my father worked. Much of my early life took place on the wooden sidewalk that ran from the brow of the hill to the concrete sidewalk at the bottom. Walking to town with my mother and grandmother on their shopping trips. Walking to school down the hill and across the railway tracks. Walking home and back for lunch. Some boys my age lived further up our road but I met them only when we all began school. We would wander slowly home, throwing rocks into the various empty whisky and rum bottles that reappeared each day in the grass between the sidewalk

and the road, and they would tell me about the New York Yankees and Roy Rogers and Hopalong Cassidy. I knew something about the 1930s and something about Passchendaele and Coventry and Northallerton and Southampton, something about George Formby and Gracie Fields, and about my dad's favorite trumpet player, Harry James, but nothing about baseball or cowboys.

When I was 5 ½ I won second prize in beginners piano in the Mission City Music Festival, playing "The Blue Bells of Scotland." When the adjudicators reported, I was humiliated to be jokingly praised for having counted out loud. During a recess in Grade 1, I became exasperated with Perry Long and threw a piece of a broken crockery at him and cut him for 3 stitches over the left eye. When I was in grade 2, I won our elementary school's piano talent prize. The school had eight rooms, grades 1 to 8. When I was in Grade 3, Patsy Leary, who lived three houses up the lane, got run over by a car but all the wheels missed her and she was unhurt. "I'm dead," she cried, from underneath the car. When I was in grade 4, I was elected class president. When I was in grade 5 John Piper and I competed in drawing scenes of MIG-15s and F-86s dogfighting. When I was in grade 6, Patsy Leary asked me to be her partner in the schottische which our class performed at the Mission Festival. When I was in grade 6, I became pretty good at badminton and persuaded a tough guy, Allan Thompson, to be my doubles partner. When I was in grade 7, Allan got Patsy pregnant. When I was in grade 8, I played in the B.C. table tennis championships, and also won second prize in the B.C. Pulp and Paper Association essay contest. Alan and Patsy had just got married and were wheeling their new baby around the village. When I was in grade 9, I got exasperated with Bob Gilberg for jacking around with a football and suckerpunched him in the stomach. Two weeks later he helped me walk off my exhaustion after I placed last in our junior high's half-mile race.

In grade 1 Miss Chappell, our teacher, who retired the next year, strapped Rennie Harms. My mother and grandmother always spoke respectfully of Miss Chappell. Maybe they were thinking of chapels. Rennie kept grinning in order to avoid crying, and so she strapped him again. He kept grinning.

Reading 'KIM' Right **(1993)**

I've always had a weakness for blonde women but never been involved with one. You can read about this in my "Dead in France" poem about the death of bpNichol or in "Amber" my poem about visiting the Amber Palace near Jaipur except there I forgot to mention that the girls and women were blonde. Sometimes I think I have this weakness because my mother was blonde. Sometimes I think it's because I grew up in the years of Monroe, Mansfield, and Diana Dors.

Except my blondes usually look more like Doris Day.

Or maybe it's because I grew up during World War II and my father liked to read men's magazines with stories like "Irma, Queen of the Nazi Death Camps" with the predictable drawings of a leggy blonde with black whip and jackboots. A woman as young as your imagination and old as Chaucer's "merciles beaute." A sign of a woman.

Prime-ministerial candidate Kim Campbell, born in Port Alberni, educated at UBC, took me back to the signs and images of my youth and all those beautiful middle-class right- wing co-eds who wouldn't look at a scruffy student poet and were going to marry guys in Law and Commerce. Why would I want them to look at me? Campbell didn't marry anyone in Law or Commerce but a mathematics professor who had written that we should kiss the feet of land developers. Now that's a bad sign. Of course it wasn't just me who had a weakness for this blonde woman in the spring of 1993. Enough Canadians to elect her leader of the Conservatives; enough, the pollsters said, to re-elect that party of businessmen and military spending. All of the above is about the semiotics of some relationships that women have to power, or to male power—marrying it, offering to lead it, enacting its fantasies. All of these enough to make a guy angry, or an angry guy write a book.

Reading Canadian Reading **(1988)**

One of the problems with me trying to write autobiography is that I've been writing it for a long time. That comes from my starting out as a phenomenological *Tish* poet. & then becoming a self-reflexive *Open Letter* poet. Anybody who wants to know in detail how I have claimed to have spent my childhood should read my *War Poems.* Or how I have pretended to have spent my adolescence should read "In Love with Cindy Jones" in my *Popular Narratives* or "For One of Them" in *D-Day and After.* I had a long adolescence. And anyone who wants long reflective narratives about my writing my early books of criticism—*Earle Birney, From There to Here, Surviving the Paraphrase, Louis Dudek and Raymond Souster,* or *Margaret Atwood: A Feminist Poetics*—should read my *Reading Canadian Reading,* in which I wrote chapters on each of them. My critical life as a critic.

Postcard Translations **(1988)**

Sometimes I've thought that life was a long semiotic adventure. Everything's in code. Everything open to interpretation and translation. Including the cogitating 'I' of "I've thought that life was a long semiotic adventure."

I inherited a collection of Edwardian postcards from my maternal grandmother, who had

acquired them in rural Yorkshire. Many had been mailed from India by her brother. Postcards are not merely photographs but products of visual construction. Politically, I've often been interested in making subliminal messages liminal, so I began translating the postcard photos into language, and later the postcard photos my wife Linda and I were sending from Florence or Nice or Salamanca. Translation can free a writer from the confessional and the biographical, from the obligations of lyric. Or free a critic from the analytical. I began translating the architecture of Europe and India. Translating my childhood. Translating tanks, armoured cars, field guns, submarines, the Heinkel bomber on the roof of the Frankfurt airport. I translated India and Abbotsford in *The Abbotsford Guide to India.* Translated Camille Claudel in *Popular Narratives.* In May of 1989 Linda, our daughter Sara, and I drove from Thessalonika to Skopje to look for a conference that was supposed to begin the next day at the university. I strolled over to the university the next morning, and was referred by the security guard to the library where there was a booklaunch. The book being launched was a translation into Macedonian of my *Postcard Translations.* The Canadian embassy's attempts to send me news of the project had been lost in my temporary translation from being a writer into being a European traveller.

When I was on the staff of Royal Roads Military College, Victoria, BC, 1964

All of the above and the following are of course also "I" translations.

Post-National Arguments: The Politics of the Anglophone-Canadian Novel Since 1967 **(1993)**
In manuscript I had titled this book *National Arguments,* planning it to be a book about how the arguments within a nation about its cultural choices, together with the discourses in which those arguments are conducted, constitute its nationhood. But so many of the novels which I examined located most of their crucial events and signs outside of Canada that my editors suggested the 'post-national' title.

It is difficult for Canadians to distinguish between the post-national and the colonial, just as it is often difficult when travelling outside of North America to distinguish between the multinational and the American. This is the price Canadians pay for having created a country of modest economic and military strength—its cultural productions are modestly regarded and valued, both inside and outside the country. The cultural value of the productions of more powerful nations is inflated by association with the symbolic value of the military and economic

power of those nations. Canadian artists who have successfully exported their works have in most cases been marketed in ways that disguise their Canadianness: Margaret Atwood's books appear in their US editions to be the work of an American; Ondaatje is often constructed outside of Canada as 'Commonwealth' or Sri Lankan.

When I was growing up in the 1940s or 50s most successful Canadian novels were published in London or New York, and writers often wrote with those cities' publishers in mind. Poets often sent their poems for consideration by British and US journals, although in terms of the book publication of poetry, Canada was virtually a closed field. Canadians could hope only to get book publication in Canada, and only Canadian poets were considered by Canadian publishers. There were eleven books of poetry published in all of Canada in 1961.

Me and Bowering at the latter's home in Vancouver, 1973. Photo by David Robinson.

In the 1960s and 1970s the establishment of dozens of new publishers and journals, mostly assisted by the Canada Council, changed everything. Novelists began writing only for Canadian readers and publishers. Poets found numerous publishers and numerous review journals, and stopped hoping to receive book reviews abroad. Most of us stopped caring what foreign readers and publishers might think of our writing. Writers who did care, and who did publish abroad, were either thought of as unspeakably commercial, like Janette Turner Hospital, or unspeakably colonial, like Daryll Hine, and indeed few of us spoke or wrote of them. Sometimes a non-Canadian publisher would discover and be impressed by a Canadian text or writer, and publish it—as often happened with bpNichol's poems and with Margaret Atwood's early novels, but these events were much different from the publication of work that Canadians had constructed from the beginning for foreign readerships.

This is the literary field in which I've done most of my writing. It was a closed and boundaried field in terms of implied audience, book and periodical distribution, and book promotion, but not a closed field—and could not have been—in terms of intertextual relations.

Popular Narratives **(1991)**

I was sitting just inside the glass patio doors of our villa at Université Canadienne en France at Villefranche-sur-mer, just east of Nice. Linda was there too—she'd taken a month's leave from her law practice to spend October with me. It was warm but dark. I was probably sipping wine. Linda was probably washing Belgian endives or stirring a boeuf bourguignon. There was a hesitant tap at the window—it was 'Dean Doug' Parker, dean of this little hilltop campus. He had a telegram from my friend Elizabeth Humphrey, executive assistant to the chair of English at York. She is very restrained, thoughtful, and formal. "Regret to inform you," it read, "that bpNichol has died."

Doug was nervous. He didn't know how well we knew bp. We were astonished. We didn't know Barrie had been ill or had been in any way facing death. He slipped away. We said how can it be, what has happened, what about Ellie and Sarah, how could this happen to him, he was our best friend, end of an era, end of Coach House, end of poetry, and other most predictable things. We kept saying these things for several days.

bp was my best friend in Toronto and unlike many of my other friends also Linda's good friend. When someone dies who fits into your life and your expectations of what life is going to be you usually begin reconsidering. I was having to reconsider who I was writing for. Who I was sharing *Open Letter* with. Who I was editing for Coach House Press with. In Toronto I had shown bp almost all my new writing within a week or two of writing it. He would drop by sometime between nine and eleven at night, on his way home from a meeting, or on his way from three or four visits to other friends. He'd have a folder of his new writing, I'd make some Earl Grey tea, he'd read from his folder aloud, then I'd look at it while he looked at mine. I'd been in France since early July. Had begun writing a poem mostly for him on sunny afternoons in Paris, in Père Lachaise cemetery. Sitting near the tombs of Héloise and Abelard—of abbesse Héloise who somehow reminded me of ex-nun Ellie. Not far from the grave of Apollinaire. Quite a ways from Stein's. This fall in Villefranche I had been writing other things that I'd wanted him to see. The story of a medieval barmaid in Augsburg. Of my learning junior high school courtship rituals. Of learning to read the postcard art of European tourism. bp was this kind of reader, of inchoate road signs, maps, people, stories. Now ...

The most important thing that happened to me that year in Europe was bp's death. I had got food poisoning from a slice of millefeuille in Beauvais. My 17-year old daughter had played in the violin section of the Cannes Symphony Orchestra in concerts at Antibes, Menton, Cannes, and Nice-Acropolis. I had stood in the same week on the ramparts of Mycenae and Troy. I had looked into the gold eyes of Alexander's father. I had been struck by lightning on the slopes of Mount Parnassus. I had driven past smoldering army vehicles in Kosovo. When I got back to

Toronto Coach House Press was in ruins, *Open Letter* needed new editors, and my living room was empty almost every evening.

***Open Letter* (1965)**

I began the journal *Open Letter* because I missed my *Tish* buddies. In Victoria in 1964 there were a few writers but they got together mostly to impress each other. I imagined a journal which would be a sort of virtual *Tish* office. Each editor—myself, George, Fred Wah, David Dawson—would have a section in which to publish a letter to the others, some writing, and writing or letters they'd gathered from other writers. The big gossip in 1969, the year I left Victoria, was that Robert Sward had punched out Robin Skelton at Ivy's Bookshop. So I opened *Open Letter* to be a virtual *Tish* office and Daphne Buckle wandered through with curious prose poems. bpNichol dropped by. And Victor Coleman.

The virtual office was working rather well. I learned how to write prose poems by misreading the prose poems Daphne was sending me and *Open Letter* to publish. I could have asked her how to write them—after all she was in grad school studying how to translate French prose poems—but I was too embarrassed to ask. David Dawson wrote so much that the seventh issue became a Dawson book. Each issue cost around $270 to print and $20 to mail.

I saw Victor Coleman for the first time in June of 1969, in Toronto, when Linda and I were scooting across the country in my TR4 toward Montreal and Sir George Williams University where I was going to be writer-in-residence. George was at the Learned Societies meetings at York University where I was presenting the Cohen/Dylan paper, and took us down to the Huron Street Coach House to meet his publisher. Victor was puzzling because he was always earnest and serious except when he was laughing so then you began to think his laughter was serious also. A few months later Victor came to Montreal to visit George and saw the prose poems I'd been writing after misreading Daphne's prose poems in *Open Letter.* He and Coach House published them the next fall as *Weeds,* with the text handset by Nelson Adams. By then I was living in Toronto, and Victor suggested that Coach House take on the publishing of *Open Letter* as a much larger journal. I got bpNichol and Victor and later Steve McCaffery to help out as editors. Someday I should thank Victor for all the years I had working on *OL* and other things with bp.

***Margaret Atwood* (1984)**

Not everyone can name one of the minor characters in their lives 'Margaret Atwood.' All the time George & Lionel and Fred and David and Jamie & I were becoming *Tish* poets she was

scribbling away somewhere in the tree-lined streets of Toronto's Annex the poems that were going to appear with ours in Colombo's anthology *Poetry 64* and change what was the eastern-Canadian poetry we were responding to. We had heard of Victor Coleman and David McFadden who were poets who lived in eastern Canada but were not to our eyes or ears eastern-Canadian poets, but we had not previously heard of 'Margaret Atwood.' After that we would see and hear about her a lot and she would become the most famous eastern-Canadian poet ever and inadvertently fill up the borders of many of the pages we had imagined ourselves filling. She was to become our companion in Canadian writing whether or not we wanted an eastern-Canadian companion. This was not true of John Colombo or Daryll Hine or Alden Nowlan or Roo Borson whom if we ignored would not become companions.

It became important for me and George and others to write about Margaret Atwood because she had by the mid 1970s shifted the field we were writing in, and many other writers had to re-mark their positions within it. She had shifted its weight back toward Toronto where only some of it but not most of it belonged. She had shifted it toward women, among whom we had not had enough companions in writing. We were subconsciously glad to have her detached and ironic companionship, although it was costing many Canadian writers large parts of their audience. She had also shifted the field back to Frygian thematics and away from language as the ground of culture and politics, even though her own words were precise and complexly political. We could not forgive this superficial structuralism in Frye and its glib generalizations about Canada and we could not at forgive them at all when Atwood wrote *Survival* and defined out much of the Canadian culture and writing we valued. This was when I began writing about her writing—a review of *Survival* and *Surfacing* in which I pointed to their tilt toward Frye's and George Grant's Ontarios. Ontarios which they and she called Canada.

With my wife Linda and our children Michael and Sara, Abbotsford, BC, 1975

After this review she commented to my wife Linda that I must have "female-Hitler evil-stepmother" fantasies about her. Although it might have been amusing to think of Atwood's face on one of the jack-booted Aryan girlie-bodies of my father's deathcamp magazines, I had to

remember that it was Atwood who was constructing this image of herself rather than me or my father constructing it. Among the things the remark 'said' was how lightly Atwood was taking Canadians' various struggles for cultural power, and how 'natural' she thought Ontario Tory dominance of Canadian cultural paradigms to be. Her own assertions of authority were to be seen as just and appropriate; those of others, and their objections to hers, as absurd or neurotic. I could suggest more, particularly about the Hitler reference, but presumably only at the risk of being accused of fantasy.

***The Louis Riel Organ and Piano Company* (1985)**

One of the conventions about biography is that one is more shaped by events early in life than later in life. I had plastic models of British battleships, the *Rodney* and the *King George V,* to float beside me in the bathtub. What if the source of this convention is the bafflement of a child about a world already underway, sailing and flying in such precise squadrons. I had gun-metal models of a Sterling and a Lancaster. Later events pass with similar precision, but we are accustomed to their passing and our bafflement. I had bright-coloured plastic models of a P-40, a Hurricane, and a Spitfire. Or we imagine our bafflement to be understanding. I had a thick colouring book of jeeps and battleships and half-tracks and bombers and escort cruisers. On my fourth Christmas I received a large clockwork army tank, with guns that were sparked by lighter flints when it clattered across the floor. During dinner preparations on New Years Day I was winding it and something happened to its gears and it catapulted itself in 2-3 large leaps across the kitchen and into my mothers and grandmother's legs. I was in terrible trouble.

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At dinner time my father and grandmother would sit across from each other at the kitchen table and argue about politics. My mother sat at the end, near the sawdust stove, that later became an oil stove. I sat on my father's side of the table. I still do. My grandmother always voted Conservative because her father in Yorkshire had voted Conservative and Churchill was a great man. My father always voted CCF and talked about not wanting my mother to cancel his vote. Most of the details of these scenes are lost to me now except for my father's story about rail cars filled with scrap iron passing through Vancouver in the 1930s on their way to the docks and Japan. All the working men, he would say, knew this scrap would be coming back to them as bullets, but the businessmen, they didn't care, as long as they got their bucks. Bucks, he said, not dollars. What I know now about the scene are long stories about how my father and grandmother got to this table. My father's grandfather had come from Devon to southwestern Ontario as an

illiterate farm worker in 1849, the last year of the Talbot Colony. Had married a Canadian-born Quaker widow, fathered a son and daughter, and died. My father's father had become a farm worker, a logger in Michigan, a piano and organ tuner in eastern Ontario. Had married a Methodist farm girl from north of Oshawa, moved to Vancouver to work for the B.C. Electric Co., bought a house on Vancouver's working-class east side, fathered sons in 1904 and 1910, driven his wife with his temper and fists from the house in 1913, and divorced her in 1914. My father left school at 16 to work as a labourer, was 19 when the stock markets crashed, and 28 when he found his first "steady job" as a laborer with B.C. Electric and married my mother. This is not a biography he ever recounted, except some of the later parts, and these only in anecdote.

My grandmother told her story often, of a County Durham childhood in large houses among apple orchards. Her father had owned a brewery or tavern, one of her brothers had managed a tea plantation in Darjeeling, another had been a ship's engineer and sent her postcards from Archangel, Amsterdam, New York, and Singapore. Her husband's family still owned a large farmhouse near Moulton in east Yorkshire, "Kilnsey House." She had trained and worked in Newcastle as a telegrapher before marrying my grandfather, giving birth to my mother, and moving in 1913 to Vancouver, where my grandfather found work as a carpenter at the Rat Portage Mill. Then came the war, and he enlisted in the Duke of Connaught's own, and served, fought, as a machine gunner in the 7th Canadian Infantry Division at Passchendaele and Mons. Marched into the Rhine in 1919. Returned to a maintenance job with the Vancouver school board. They saved money, bought a house on Vancouver's middle-class west side, bought a car.

My father's family heirlooms were a set of Model-T socket wrenches and an alarm clock, both of which he'd bought himself and smuggled past his angry father when he left home in 1938 to marry. My grandmother's were two oil paintings that had once hung in her father's tavern, three albums of Edwardian post cards, six packing crates hammered together in northYorkshire by her husband and that now served as jam cupboards in our basement, and three large photos of her husband in army uniform, two of which hung in my bedroom. Private Albert F. Brown. The 'F' was for Frankland. Frank.

Louis Dudek and Raymond Souster **(1981)**

One of the tasks of the writer, beyond being a writer, is to shape the literary field that one's writing must fit within. This is partly done by the writing, through the intertexts it invokes and the discourses it reworks, and through the institutions with which it becomes affiliated. But a writer can also intervene as an editor, as Louis Dudek and Raymond Souster did in founding their numerous little magazines, and in founding in 1952, with Irving Layton, Contact Press, or as a

critic and theorist as Dudek also did in writing *Literature and the Press* and *Selected Essays.* When we began writing in Vancouver in the 1960s the field of poetry was dominated ideologically by a modernist theme-based "mythy" poetry written mostly in Ontario linked to the theories of Northrop Frye. This was a poetry that for the most part implied that power resided outside the social—thus masking as 'natural' its own socially and materially founded power in the universities and magazines and publishing houses of Central Canada. The largest exceptions to this dominance were Raymond Souster's minimalism and localism, and Louis Dudek's insistences on poetry's connections to history, economics, and technology. Their writing, and that published by Contact Press, and by Dudek's magazine *Delta,* was the Canadian writing that in 1961-63 most engaged us.

No matter what you think of the above story it still works for me. I continue to regard Louis Dudek as one of the major Canadian poets of the 1950s and 1960s. One whose readership has been limited by literary fashions of Ontario, by his repeated critiques of Frye, and by his insistence—long before Foucault or Bourdieu—on the influence of technological change and institutional power on literary production and critical judgment. Such theories are always resisted by the literary dominants—and Dudek paid the price, being excluded from numerous academic anthologies produced by the major Toronto publishing houses, and ignored by critics like Jones or Atwood. The dominants resist because their own power rests on transparency—on its material ground *not* being visible. In the 1980s I not only published this book on Dudek and Souster but also, with the help of bpNichol, published a special *Open Letter* issue of Dudek's essays, *Texts and Essays,* and through Coach House Press the Dudek poetry collection *Cross Section: Poems 1940-1980.*

***King of Swords* (1972)**

Like many kids, I first became class conscious at grade school, although it took me rather longer to learn the concept of class consciousness. I first learned about the New York Yankees and Brooklyn Dodgers from boys whose fathers had the leisure to think about baseball. My father never mentioned baseball. Later I would know enough to think that this was because of class and also gender. The same boys knew all about the Carlsbad Caverns and the redwood Trees of Mystery because their parents had cars that could travel to New Mexico or California and the money and time to drive them there. These were the Ford dealer's son, the village policeman's son, the doctor's son. We got our first car in 1948, a '46 Chev that you can read about in *War Poems* and that would safely cover the 50 miles to Vancouver. My subject position was behind my dad in the backseat, and beside my grandmother, who was seated behind my mother. This

allowed me to identify with my dad but did weird things to my relationship with my grandmother. On Peak Frean's cookie tins, the king sits beside the queen.

I also had class problems with books. The car dealer's son had a *Book of Knowledge* and his parents a subscription to *Reader's Digest* condensed books. He could give smart answers at school. I had my father's old Henty books from his own childhood, my grandmother's atlas of the counties of England, and a subscription to a British magazine *Open Roads for Boys.* Later I would realize that mine was a problem in ethnicity as well as class, but by that time class mobility had brought my parents their own subscriptions to *Reader's Digest* and Book-of-the-Month Club.

Coming to an agreement with Robert Creeley about the beer, Vancouver, 1979. Photo by Michael Christopher.

When my father bought a new 1951 Chev we began driving in his summer holidays to Banff and Yellowstone and Reno and Salt Lake City and all the places that the car dealer's son had taught me were exotic and important. Except we never got to Carlsbad or California. I persuaded my grandmother that these long distances would be hard on her health and so managed to change my subject position to that of what I thought was a normal kid, between my father and mother in the front seat. I have often felt guilty about what I told my grandmother who had contributed money to buying both the cars and who I know got the message that on these trips she wasn't wanted. A question about kings and princes: how the centre of the front seat has more status than the driver's side of the back seat.

King of Swords is a marriage poem marked by the king's role. By the many-castled England of my grandmother's memories. By the stupid identification with the rich and titled that has sent countless uneducated soldiers to war in defence of their king. The hero sits on a horse or on the driver's side of the front seat. His woman sits in his lap, or clings to him from behind the saddle, or huddles at his right side behind the steering wheel. You can read about the codes that govern the latter in "In Love with Cindy Jones," the opening section of *Popular Narratives.*

What I gave up in persuading my grandmother not to accompany my parents to Yellowstone and beyond was someone to talk to during the travels. The best my mother could do was read travel brochures aloud with my father correcting her pronunciation. My father would

talk to me while putting up the tent or lighting the Coleman lantern—about how to put up a tent or light a lantern. He liked to strike up conversations with the other men in the campground. These comments appear to be caricatures but they resemble what I remember.

***Karla's Web* (1994)**

Karla will be remembered as the beautiful bouncey blonde young wife from St. Catharines, Ontario, who helped her husband Paul rape and murder slightly younger women, including her little sister, and videotape his raping. I called the book *Karla's Web* because of the web of technology they wove around their crimes and the fans of their murders wove at the internet address alt.fan.karla-homolka, and because Paul used Karla as the reassuring 'bait' of normality in luring one of his victims to his car. The question now is to what extent am I or you caught, discursively or otherwise, in Karla's web. This is a big question because it's a huge web. A web of culture that led Karla not to find it unusual that her husband occasionally beat her, like my grandfather beat my grandmother (though she found it unbearable), or raped other women, or one night brought home a 14-year-old 'sex slave' he had grabbed from her back yard and already raped. It's hard not to think of women as losers since statistically more of them are poor, more receive low pay, more are unemployed, more are single parents, more get raped, more get murdered by the other sex, more weep in war movies. My grandmother was not a loser, and that may have bothered my father. He always looked after my mother, his "little girl," and kept her from wanting to weep. I was in part a student of my father's practices. Karla also rhymes with the blonde Nazi women in jackboots on the covers of magazines my father used to read in the 1950s. I always wondered if he wanted to save these young women or be their prisoner. Or if you save these women do you also become their prisoner? And would they be at all interesting once you'd saved them?

Anyway, those questions may be why for me Karla has remained a signifier—a blonde jackbooted female drawing, or an ominously tranquillized face on a book cover (mine). A signifier that gives one subject positions—above or below, saving, beating, or cringing. Ironically, the historical Karla and Paul also saw themselves as signifiers, preferred to see themselves so—as actors in their own continuing porno/snuff movies.

Now that I think of it I suspect that my grandmother, my father's mother, was also one of those women, the first, who terrified my father. These are awful things to be putting together. By having walked out on him, his father, and brother. By having worked scrubbing floors in order to own her own house and buy gifts for her sons. By having defied his father by sneaking back to see them. My grandmother was so emphatically not Karla. Did my father ever forgive her?

***Griffon* (1972)**

I wrote the short 'long poem' *Griffon* in the early 1970s, as part of my looking-around my new home in Southern Ontario. It's a minor poem, a mid-continent analogue to my *The Clallam,* written around the same time, both focussed on ships as vessels of a founding North American capitalism as uncontrolled and as disdainful of life as any form of capitalism we encounter today. Not much of a surprise here, except that people in most 'democracies' go on allowing even larger exchanges of life for profit, frightened by possible job and investment losses even more than by possible death. Father Hennepin lamented the loss of the *Griffon* and its cargo but not the loss of the sailors' lives. Our own governments' pension policies push us into retirement plans that invest in companies that may or may not be endangering us in order to enrich us. By 1972 I had purchased for both my children life insurance policies that reinvested various dividends into the stock market.

***From There to Here: A Guide to English-Canadian Literature Since 1960* (1974)**

In 1985 at York University the English department's search committee asks if I would let myself be nominated as department chair. Historically, the department has usually elected the candidate least likely to change things, so I think that I could stand for office without fear of election. I hadn't had a lot to do with the department. About a third of its members were concentrated around its departmental office, and the rest scattered in various college buildings around the campus. Most of us attended more college meetings and parties than we attended English department meetings. A couple of years before I arrived at York the English department had deposed a chair widely perceived to be autocratic and had re-written its constitution to limit a chair's powers and give most power to the department meeting. Most of the members had been hired when York's primary mandate was undergraduate teaching and everyone was expected to teach first and second year classes. Many thought it was irresponsible to take time away from teaching to write books or articles and to accept pay increases

"With Victor Coleman at Ron Mann's shooting of *Echoes Without Saying,* Toronto, 1983. Photo by Michael Ondaatje.

awarded because one had published. One year when the university offered merit pay, the majority of the members voted to give the department's share back to the administration. Another year they voted that its members were all equally meritorious. I'm not sure how I got hired—maybe because I wrote poetry and hadn't yet published any books about writers or literature. Sometimes the department, which also acted as a hiring committee, tried to hire the candidate least likely to be distracted from teaching by books or articles they might want to write.

In 1973 I was recruited by the deans of Arts and Fine Arts to chair a committee that was to attempt to set up an inter-faculty creative writing program. The English department had one introductory creative writing course, now taught in 7 sections, but had resisted teaching upper-year creative writing courses because members feared that honours students might take them for degree credit and dilute their degrees. Irving Layton had managed to establish a third-year poetry workshop. In 1975 when our committee tried to create courses in fiction-writing and a second poetry workshop, the English department declined to offer them and so we had to offer them to the Humanities Division, which eagerly accepted. Playwriting and screenwriting were already offered by the Theatre and Film departments in Fine Arts. The next year the dean named me Co-ordinator of the new Creative Writing Program, and the Humanities Division hired Clark Blaise to teach its new fiction-writing courses. Much of my job was to walk between the various buildings that housed the English, Humanities, Fine Arts, and Theatre departments. The Program office was on neutral ground, in my college.

Part of the arrangement I managed to negotiate for the program was that the hiring of part-time instructors for any Creative Writing courses, including the English department's introductory course, would be done outside the union hiring rules and in consultation with the Program coordinator. The English department was thus persuaded to hire bpNichol to teach sections of the introductory course and sometimes Irving Layton's senior course. Because of a shortage of space part-time teachers often had to share a windowless office with five or six others. I volunteered to share my courtyard-view office with bp, and so twice a week had great conversations with him over lunch and unmarked poems and essays. We made Coach House and *Open Letter* plans and co-authored essay plans. It's a long way from there to here.

I gave up being Coordinator in 1979, after one three-year term. I don't remember why, although the fact that Clark Blaise had resigned after one year because of his wife Bharati Mukherjee's encounters with Toronto racism, and Dave Godfrey, whom Humanities had hired to the same position, resigned also after one year, with the result that the money that funded this position was lost in the recurrent politics of funding cutbacks, may have had something to do with it. I am good at starting or expanding things but am an unenthusiastic caretaker. In 1980 I

was briefly acting master of my college. In 1984-84 I was acting master again. Calumet had been a fine-arts and creative writing college for most of the 70s and early 80s and now was being overrun with business students who wanted to close the creative-writing reading room and stop holding concerts and poetry readings in the common room because these disrupted their bridge games. John Bentley Mays and I and others had inadvertently brought these students to Calumet by establishing in 1979 York's first microcomputer room which we thought would inspire writers and visual artists. John Bentley Mays had left Calumet to become Fine Arts reviewer for the *Globe and Mail.* Maybe I was ready to leave Calumet.

Back at the English department the Graduate Program had just received its provincial review and the reviewers had given it only temporary re-certification. Many of the faculty who had been hired as undergraduate teachers and had done little publishing had been teaching regularly in the graduate program. Because of the small size of graduate classes, the teaching of such classes was perceived by the department to be a bonus which was to be distributed democratically, like merit pay. The review committee threatened to de-certify the program unless all faculty who had published fewer than three articles in past five years were purged from its faculty. I remember discussing this with Barbara Godard and our both being amused. The purge was done and the program re-certified, and the undergraduate department was left with numerous members unlikely ever to be considered qualified to teach a graduate course.

The main reason I let myself be nominated for department chair was to have the chance to complain indirectly about various policies. Except for the annual grades meeting and the occasional meeting to decide hirings, I hadn't been to more than three or four department meetings since the mid 1970s because everything I suggested got voted down by the democrats. I took this personally because I considered myself a democrat. After being nominated, I told the department that it needed to hire new members with research records that would enable them to teach almost immediately in the graduate program. This should not have been an extraordinary thing to propose but what is extraordinary is of course a consequence of context. I told them I would be a chair who would be visible in the academic and arts communities. I thought saying these things would guarantee my defeat but on the first ballot the first candidate had 19 votes, I had 18 votes, and the third candidate had five voters. On the run-off, I was elected 23 to 19. In 1989, while I was in France on sabbatical I was re-elected by a vote of something like 34-3.

Reconsidering all these events makes me sad—sad mostly, I suspect, because of all the people who I worked with through these years who were there and are now elsewhere—not just bp and Eli Mandel who are dead but colleagues and friends from various Calumet, Creative Writing, and English Department committees. Also because of all the people "I" in the name of

the department hired during those years and left behind in 1990 when I moved to London. Some people were sad when I left York. They threw me a party. Some felt, I was told, betrayed. The University of Western Ontario, in London, is an old university, founded in 1878, but to many at York a rival for status and grad students. I was tired after twenty years in Canada's largest city. I missed bp. Western offered me research money and additional time from teaching to write things like this autobiography.

***Four Myths for Sam Perry* (1970)**

We started *Tish* at the beginning of the Sixties and had no idea about what was starting. Bobby Hogg used to come into the *Tish* office and squat in the far corner smoking pot and we had no idea about what was starting. While we were writing poems at our *Tish* desks the Russian and Yankee Cuban missile boats kept getting closer and closer but the postman kept delivering our copies of *Gramma* and posters of Che Guevara. I remember the issue of *Evergreen Review* that had a tattered Kennedy election poster on the cover. Then I moved to Victoria and Kennedy was shot just before coffee break at Royal Roads Military College and a little later Jack Spicer was dead and film and acid had joined poetry as the things to do in Vancouver and Helen and I had a 12-string guitar and Blew Ointment and Very Stone House were the new Vancouver publishers to take very seriously. I used to come to Vancouver from Victoria to go to readings and visit friends and feel very old-fashioned. Maybe I was.

In Los Angeles in 1965 Helen and I lived in an apartment on the Southern Cal campus near Jefferson and 37th Ave South, and here there was no new or old-fashioned only people scrambling not to get crushed on the Harbour Freeway or shot down by a fellow-shopper at Pay n' Save Drugs. Every day you could be mugged or sunburned. Cars still carried "Goldwater 64" bumper stickers. The morning paper carried yesterday's Viet Nam body count in a front page rectangle beside the weather forecast. Helen and I arrived in LA just after dark in my little TR4 and looked for a motel near USC. The motel signs all announced hourly rates and clean sheets. Our second month there the Watts riots began and soon had spread all around the university. We began to hear the first of 37—I counted—gunshots. On television we could get pictures of our neighbourhood food markets burning. Some of the fraternity boys went up on our roof with rifles but the elderly building manager went up and disarmed them. Our building had no corridors, just exterior walkways overlooking Exposition Boulevard. On the third day the National Guard set up road blocks below and yelled at us and pointed guns whenever we opened our door onto the walkway. To visit a neighbour you had to crawl along the walkway behind the shelter of the concrete railing. People still wonder why I don't like the US. On the fifth day the curfew was

lifted and we drove out to the nearest unburned market to get food and as usual we were the only white customers. I always feel relaxed in supermarkets even after riots and was wandering around and browsing while Helen filled our cart. A great big black guy grabbed me by the shirt, cocked his right fist, and accused me of stalking his sister—who was nearly as big and had no front teeth. Despite her lack of teeth and the fact I hadn't noticed her, I thought he had some justice on his side. I was pleased he hadn't yet hit me. The obvious thing to say was that his sister was so goddamn ugly that no man would think of stalking her but here the obvious was obviously not useful. I told him we hadn't been introduced. If I were a big black guy and just hours after the Watts riots found myself a middle-size American white guy to punch out, right there in my very own unburned neighbourhood supermarket, I would be so punch happy. He still hasn't hit me and I think this is a good sign. Helen arrives with our cart and asks what's going on? I tell him again that we haven't been introduced. He lowers his fist slightly. He looks puzzled. She looks puzzled.

On the way back from the market we are overtaking a truck full of national guardsmen when a nearby car backfires. All the guardsmen leap up and point their guns in all directions including ours. Later that year the U.S. blows up Amchitka Island in an A-bomb test. In Los Angeles there is a 4.7 earthquakes that dumps the books out of our bookcases. Back in Canada Sam Perry, poet, filmmaker, drug explorer, onetime *Tish* editor, shoots himself, November, 1966. The event is one of millions of irrational, apolitical acts that are happening in a world overdosing on war and politics. I am reading, among many other things, John Speirs' book on the non-Chaucerian tradition of medieval poetry, Margaret Murray's *The God of the Witches,* Robert Graves' *The White Goddess,* Alan Watt's *Easter.* A Euro-American community that has brought into being in the U.S. Black Panthers, Weathermen, and Students for a Democratic Society, that in Canada is about to create Rochdale College, and in Europe is about to explode into the demonstrations of 1968, is also producing psychodelia, magic mushrooms, be-ins, and Aquarian astrology. One of the younger *Tish* poets is in New York City, struggling with heroin addiction. Another is rumoured to have joined a Buddhist sect in Tibet—friends are wondering aloud whether this is a sect that requires castration.

I found 1965-75 extremely difficult and exhilarating years. So much was possible and yet so little was being done. So many people imagined that their clothes, their communes, their drugs, their mysticisms, their folk musics, their sit-ins were changing society while in fact, the only actions that were changing society were ones of raw power: the US Civil Rights demonstrators who risked and courted violence; the gunshots that killed Kennedy, Evers, King, and Malcolm X, the mailbox bombs in Quebec, the polls that persuaded Lyndon Johnson not to

seek re-election, the plots that ended the career of Diefenbaker. When the oil crisis of 1973 raised prices and unemployment, we were back in a society as materialistic as that of the early 60s. Unable to evolve a sustaining internal politics, Rochdale College, with its mysticisms of non-interference and spontaneous cooperation, fell to the drug-dealing entrepreneurs who had seized its upper stories and to the banks that foreclosed its mortgage. Students who in 1972 had wanted to write poetry and read Leonard Cohen now wanted to get into business school and read Ayn Rand.

I can remember in 1969 sitting with Clark Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee in their Montreal living room, while Clark recounted how he had come to share on Bharati's "Indian" response to a burned-out light bulb. She would walk into a room, notice the bulb burned out, and think 'how interesting,' he told us, as if the fates had ordained it to be burned out. But it would not occur to her that she had the power to replace it with an unbroken one. Within the various circulating 1960s discourses of mysticism, that story made sense to me in 1969. Today I would be more likely to refer the story to Bharati's upper-class Calcutta childhood, in which burned-out light bulbs would be mysteriously replaced by servants. Or to think of the story, and of the mystical discourses of the 1960s to which it belongs, as a sign of the feelings of political powerlessness so many people experienced even as the US Civil Rights movement and the various anti-Vietnam-war demonstrations were unfolding.

Five Readings of Olson's Maximus **(1970)**

Once several years ago I had a dream in which I was back in my childhood house and having difficulty getting to the main floor. I could get to the dormer rooms of the second floor, where my grandmother had lived, amid the mahogany cabinets and chairs and English bone china she had saved from her Vancouver home, or I could get to the basement where my father kept his Model-T socket wrenches under a work bench he had built for himself out of old cross-arms and scrap lumber from his employer, the BC Electric. The dream, of course, leaves out my mother, sitting silently in between at the end of the kitchen table. It also leaves out her father, my grandfather, the builder of the jam cupboards that are also in this basement, the Frankland, the unheard voice behind the photos in my bedroom. Your grampa Brown was a fine man, my father would often say me, in tones he did not use for my grandmother. Many of his tools were ones he had inherited from grampa Brown. This dream, of course, was a classic Freudian dream, but does its Freudianness come from the house, from me, or from my having read Freud long after leaving the house?

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There were no photos of my father's family anywhere in our house. There was a 30th wedding anniversary photo of my grandmother and grampa Brown on the mahogany piano. A wedding photo of my mother and father in their bedroom. The largest photos were of grampa Brown in his Canadian Expeditionary Force uniform in my bedroom.

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One of the strongest impressions I have from my childhood is that nothing of much note took place between the year of my birth and the arrival of our first television set from Jimmy Fraser's new TV and Radio store in 1951. Another is that the years before my birth were the years of giant events and people and that it would be years before my own world caught up. The last new car models made had come out in 1941. The streetcars in Vancouver and the interurban tram that carried us from the village to Vancouver, had been made in the 1930s. President's Cars. Our big mahogany dining room suite, our tea wagon, our radio, our piano, had all been bought by my grandmother in the 20s and 30s and been brought to our house after my grandfather had died, in the summer of my birth. In White Rock, the seaside town south of Vancouver where my mother and father would take me during the war for a week of seaside holiday, only the hotel-owner's Austin, that picked us up at the bus-stop, seemed to moving. All the other cars were parked, sackcloth wrapped around the tires, waiting for the war to end.

When the war did end, nothing much changed. The new cars that appeared looked like the old cars. In 1948 my father purchased our first car, a 1946 Chevrolet that looked much like a 1940 Chev or a 1948 Chev. When he took us for our first drives around the Fraser Valley or into Vancouver all the marvellous things that we saw—the Patullo Bridge, the Vancouver City Hall, the power dams at Ruskin and Stave Falls, the Vedder Canal that had drained Chilliwack Lake and created Sumas Prairie—had been built before the war. Across the border in Washington state there were extravagant concrete bridges and highways with dates from the 1930s embossed into them.

The first change came with the car in 1948, and my dad driving the six miles to the Eaton's store in Mission City and buying a record player that could play through the big 1930's radio. A year later he traded both in on an Eaton's Viking radio-phonograph 'combination.' And he bought and played records. "Slow Boat to China." "Slipping Around." "Dainty Brenda Lee." Almost all were young male voices, 'crooners,' yearning for the nearly lost woman. I didn't notice that the singers were also all white, and American. I noticed the resigned hunger for a woman who could never have been my mother.

***Edward and Patricia* (1984)**

In 1975 I had joined the new editorial board of Coach House Press, which had been put together by owner Stan Bevington after Victor Coleman had resigned over his unhappiness with Stan's enthusiastic acquiring of computer typesetting technology. At least once a month the new board—my wife Linda, David Young, Rick/Simon, Michael Ondaatje, bpNichol, Dennis Reid, and Stan—met to select manuscripts and plan advertising strategies. Many of us—myself, bp, Mike, David, and Dennis—were authors who had been published by Coach House, and there was a general expectation that we would continue to support the press by publishing some of our best work with it. One of our first new ventures was "Coach House Manuscript Editions," an attempt to publish books that would be stocked in our computers rather than our warehouse and be printed only as orders were received. Most of these were to be works-in-progress, and to be updated from time-to-time by the author, with the new version effectively erasing the older version from the computer. In 1979-80 I published 3 successive drafts of *War Poems* in this format, Mike Ondaatje published *Claude Glass*, and bpNichol published an early draft of a section of *The Martyrology* Book 5. The new board members worked both collectively and independently, with each able to bring to the press two titles a year, no questions asked, and able in addition to acquire the entitlements of editors who were unable to find suitable titles for a given year. I reminisce lengthily about this process in an essay—"The Beginnings of an End to Coach House Press"—in the spring 1997 issue of *Open Letter.* Collectively, we sorted and evaluated the unsolicited manuscripts and assigned them to individual board members to edit and 'see' through production. bp published *The Martyrology,* Books 3 & 4, in 1976, *Journal* in 1978, *The Martyrology,* Book 5 in 1982, and *Zygal* in 1985. Mike Ondaatje published *Secular Love* in 1984 (after the board had collectively talked him out of the title 'Racoon Lighting'). I published *Capitalistic Affection!* in 1982 and *Edward and Patricia* in 1983.

Explaining to Naim Kattan how to run the Canada Council, Victoria, BC, 1987. Photo by George Bowering.

Both bp and I, however, noticed that the sales of our Coach House books were lagging considerably behind the sales of books we had published with other publishers, and that sales of

my two books and of his *Journal* and *Zygal* were also lagging behind sales of other Coach House titles. My suspicion was that the one or two promotion staff regarded our books as suspect, possibly even as vanity titles, and were making few initiatives of their own to promote them. bp went as far as to say the staff didn't take the titles seriously. Was this because the staff were now up to 20 years younger than us? Was this because bp and I were offering fewer initiatives for promoting our own titles than we were making for those we were editing for Coach House by other authors? bp published only one more of his books, *The Martyrology Book 6 Books,* with Coach House before his death in 1989. I stopped bringing books to Coach House, publishing *The Louis Riel Organ and Piano Company* with Turnstone Press in 1985 and *The Abbotsford Guide to India* with Press Porcépic in 1986.

The wonderful thing about publishing a book like *Edward and Patricia* at Coach House was the interest of the production staff. The type was produced from my Apple II computer's electronic file, transferred by modem to the Coach House Unix system. For the cover I purchased two porcelain dogs at a nearby shop on Bloor Street, which Stan Bevington photographed and made part of the cover. Now, as well as the two porcelain dogs, I also have Sigmund Dog, who sleeps beside me on a Belouchi rug as I write this. He is a Great Dane, almost four, and this week in mid-May is the number two ranking Great Dane show dog in Canada. This weekend we will both sleep in my van in the parking lot beside the Kitchener-Waterloo dog show.

***Earle Birney* (1971)**

When I was young boy I was a boy soprano. No one noticed this fact at home but at elementary school each of six classrooms was configured as a choir and sent to compete at the Mission City music festival across the Fraser River. I always got to sing descant. At the festival I noticed that there were young boy soloists competing who couldn't sing as well as me and so I asked my parents to arrange private singing lessons. As it happens my godmother, Marie Lobban, was the village singing teacher. She was also the wife of Lyle Lobban, the hard-drinking foreman of my father's B.C. Electric line gang, which was how she'd become my godmother. I probably hadn't seen her since my christening. I walked each week to the Lobban farmhouse on Mackenzie Road, past the barking black Lab chained to a tree in the yard, for my singing lessons. For three years in a row I placed second in the Mission festival to another of her students who later became my brother-in-law. On my fifteenth birthday, long after my voice had "broken," Marie Lobban gave me a gift, *Down the Long Table* by Earle Birney. She had heard about it on CKNW radio. It's the only gift I remember her giving me. This was how I found out about Earle Birney, who lived 50 miles away and was the best-known poet in British Columbia.

I read the novel but didn't think much more about Birney until I was at UBC and he was its famous writer-professor who much the time was away in South America or Europe or Asia researching or travelling. In my third year he was not away and I took his senior Chaucer course along with a bunch of graduate students, and he taught as if the prioress and miller and nun's priest were all alive, and at the end gave me an 'A' and less than that to some of the grad students. The next time I saw him eleven years had passed and I was writing a book on 'Earle Birney' because I'd gone to my first Toronto literary cocktail party in June 1969 and Gary Geddes had said "you wanna write a book on 'Earle Birney'"? and I'd said sure because I figured it was about time I wrote that kind of book. Now when I want a Toronto book contract I go there and seek out a literary cocktail party.

After the party I discovered that the more I found out about Earle Birney the more he seemed like Frank Davey. Considering all his conflicts and compromises this was not necessarily a good thing to discover. I was careful to conclude by declaring him an outstanding poet.

***D-Day and After* (1962)**

D-Day and After was my first book, although not my first writing. There was another collection of poems, unpublished, that immediately preceded them in which I had tried to write myself into poetry for a young woman, and before that numerous poems that I wrote to be a writer of poems. For several years those poems took me into the meetings of a student club at the University of British Columbia, The Writers' Workshop, and eventually to the young woman. It was 1960, and poetry could still be a young woman.

I had gone young to university, bored with high school like my son and daughter would be much later, and having completed the last two years of high school in one. It would be two years before I could stop seeing university girls as older women, and break the habit of dating high school girls who, as blond and wonderful as they were, and as fond of White Spot hamburgers, knew almost nothing of my university hours or even that I wrote poems and stories so I could be a writer at the Writers' Workshop. Or revealed much of their own other hours. So far so ordinary. I was yet to learn that someone could be much more important to me than I was to them, or that I could be more important to some else ....

Nevertheless, the University of British Columbia was a pretty good place in the late 1950s for a kid from a one-high-school dairy-farming town in the Fraser Valley. Because my dad worked on the line gang, I managed to win a B.C. Electric Company special scholarship. UBC was the only university and best university in the province, recently enriched academically, like many Canadian universities of the time, by the flight of American academics from the McCarthy

investigations, and from the dominance of cold war ideologies that had followed. (I learned very quickly that among the best Americans are the ones who leave.) There were lots of middle-class kids from Vancouver and Victoria, kids for whom going to UBC was no more momentous than proceeding from grade school to high school. But there were also lots of kids from elsewhere in the province, kids who like me were among the one, two, or three from their high schools to get to university. For some reason it was mostly these who became my friends—among them Gladys Hindmarch from Ladysmith, Carol Johnson (later Carol Bolt) from Fort St. John, Bob Hogg from Abbotsford and Langley, George Bowering from Oliver, Lionel Kearns and Fred Wah from Nelson. Some of their names may now be widely known, but they were new to me and have kept that newness.

***Cultural Mischief* (1996)**

I really wish Greg Curnoe hadn't died. Friendship is sometimes an urgency to listen one to the other. In 3 days I am going to give a reading from *Cultural Mischief* at the local artists-run gallery, The Forest City, which Greg helped found. I moved here to London, Ontario, on the first of July of 1990. I thought of it as Greg's home town although it was also James Reaney's town and Jack Chambers' town, Jamelie Hassan's town and Christopher Dewdney's town. Greg had painted all kinds of abrasive and mischievous work including a public portrait—part of his Montreal/Dorval airport mural—of Lyndon Johnson masturbating as his soldiers died in Vietnam. The day we arrived it was Greg and Sheila's 25th wedding anniversary and they threw a garden party where we met almost everyone they'd ever known in London. Greg was so skeptical of the US that he always refused to be exhibited there. Now another million dollar's worth of his paintings have been bought by the Art Gallery of Ontario and will never be sold in the US. Almost all the autobiographical propositions I would make about Greg and me are hidden away among the lines of *Cultural Mischief.* Silly little things like helping him dig into the river bank below his house for artifacts from the printers and iron-workers and native peoples who had lived there before him. Like finding near Chatham a house that had bullet

Conspiring with Robert Hogg, Ottawa, 1990.
Photo by George Bowering

holes and a rusty US sword from the War of 1812. Like his taking me to see the childhood homes of Christopher and Jamelie.

If writing or painting isn't mischievous, if it doesn't disarrange the culturally familiar and demand reconsiderations, I'm usually not interested. Most of the poetry written these days is just more boring advertisement for the sensitivity of the writer, who then award each other prizes for sensitivity. Greg would rather have been thought aggressively inquisitive than sensitive. My poetry, thank god, like Greg's paintings doesn't win prizes. He constructed dozens of self-portraits, some with water colour, some with large rubber stamp letters, painting versions of himself into being the way a writer might write selves into being. He wanted to know who he could be, and how much of him had already been painted long before he breathed or painted.

The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem **(1983)**

I cannot remember my grandmother not living with us but I know that she did not arrive until 1941. She had become chronically ill after grampa Brown died, and come to believe that she had been told by her doctors that she had one year to live. He had died of a cerebral hemorrhage two months after my birth. My mother called it a cebereal hemorrhage. He was 57. She said he had died because he had got blood-poisoning in the trenches in Flanders and had received a saline injection. A war injury. Six months before he died he had gone to the army recruiting office to volunteer for World War II she said. Families are full of biographical self-fashioning.

My grandmother died in 1964, almost two years after my first marriage. So I grew up with two women and a war and a father and the memory of another father but the precise dynamics of this grouping are slippery. What can I do, my mother once asked my grandmother as she came into the kitchen as dinner was being prepared. Here, boil some water, my grandmother replied. My father and grandmother sat across the kitchen table and argued about politics. My grandmother did the laundry in the basement with our Maytag wringer washer, while my mother carried the wet clothes upstairs and hung them on the line. My grandmother made our Christmas shortbread, mince tarts, and cake, from recipes she had copied from her mother's in Yorkshire. My grandmother supervised my evening prayers and went with me to Sunday school. My father made me a wooden chair and table and sheet-metal blackboard for me to do school work at in the year before I went to school. My mother took me to piano lessons. My grandmother ordered breeches and short pants for me from Eaton's catalog so I could be dressed like an English schoolboy. When grade 1 began and I refused to keep attending unless I had long pants like the other boys, it was my grandmother who took me to a store to find them.

Sometimes I have been told that I had two mothers. Sometimes I've wondered whether

my mother was the closest I will ever come to having a sister. When I was 10 we walked up the highway together to the fall fair. We had a good time until the horseshow when Ken Turnbull, one of the farmers who was supervising, yelled at us that kids weren't allowed to sit in stands, and my mother yelled back that he should shut his "shitty mouth." When I was 16 my father taught me to drive in his brand new Plymouth Belvedere and she decided she should also learn to drive and so my father enrolled her in a driving school. Shortly after she told my father that she'd heard from a friend that I had rolled the Plymouth but managed to get a body shop to repair it before bringing it back the same evening. When I was eight I disagreed with her about the instructions my piano teacher had written in my book. She slapped my face and I disagreed. She slapped my face with her hand and the stone of her diamond ring and I disagreed. She called my father and asked him to punish me for calling her a liar and I disagreed. She said I had gone out of my mind and that they were going to take me to the mental hospital in New Westminster and I disagreed. She sent my father to back the car out of garage. I don't remember where my grandmother was. I don't remember whether I agreed. All this not remembering is not a good sign. All of this is in *War Poems,* the unfinished book, the book now unfinished for twenty years.

***The Clallam, or Old Glory in Juan de Fuca* (1973)**

The last of my shipwreck poems. So far. I am not anti-American, only a skeptic toward America. The commercial causes of the *Clallam*'s sinking predict the causes of the Westray mine disaster, the Bre-X gold fraud, the loss of the *Titanic.* It was the captain of the *Clallam,* avoiding the assistance of Canadian ships, insisting on being towed back 26 miles back to his US port rather than 2 or 3 miles to Victoria, who invoked differences between the two countries. And the fatality list, which included all the ship's Canadians.

Abbotsford, the village where I grew up, was two miles from the US border-crossing that led toward Bellingham, Washington. The proximity could make one more rather than less aware of difference. Half of the buildings in Sumas, the US border town, were taverns. Most of the American men seemed to have crew cuts and wear military-style clothing. On Dominion Day in 1950 the US Custom's agent made my dad remove the Canadian flag he had tied to our car's antenna. Most American towns and cities could think of only a few strange names for their streets—Jefferson, Van Buren, Lexington, State. The police wore their guns with the butts and hammers visible. The Highway Patrol wore stetsons in which I read the possibly random violence of cowboys. They were about to execute Julius and Ethel.

David Robinson was editor at Talonbooks, which was publishing *The Clallam.* He was a fan as well as an editor, and kept after me to send him more manuscripts—*King of Swords* the

year before, *The Arches* in 1981. He liked the smartass dimensions of my books, the passages that were formally or rhetorically or socially outrageous, the surprise discursive shifts between pages. I do too—poetry that is the putting together of fragments of language that seem never before to have been juxtaposed. Until he left Talon in the mid-1980s he kept asking me to let the press publish *War Poems,* which he'd seen parts of in the Coach House manuscript editions of 1979. His partner Karl Siegler, who now owns the press outright, has been similarly supportive of the rhetoric and politics of my books, their various sardonic edges. It was Karl who helped me sharpen the focus of *Reading 'KIM' Right* and edited its chapters by return fax in order to get it into print by the opening of the 1993 Canadian federal election campaign, and who helps me produce Talon's New Canadian Criticism series.

Robin Mathews, my dark shadow in Canadian poetry and criticism, has probably not read *The Clallam,* or has read and dismissed it as a failed apology. Sometimes I think Robin hates me because he cannot bear the possibility that someone is more US-sceptical than he. Or that someone has seen through his pretence to be Marxist. It is an interesting thing to go through life knowing you haunt another. Anne Murray has her prairie farmer. I have Robin. But not so interesting that I often think of it.

I believe Robin began turning black behind me in the *Tish* days when George and I both wrote about our dislike of the rhetoric of Milton Acorn's poems. But I can't remember when I first noticed that he was turning. I remember meeting his father-in-law, a naval officer, at a dinner in the officer's mess at Royal Roads in the mid-1960s and knowing then that Robin was not a friend. His father-in-law said he was a strange fellow but I attributed that to Robin's not being a naval officer. When he wrote in the 1960s that my writing and George's was "a particularly pernicious branch of imperialist U.S. writing" I thought he was piqued that few people were reading his poems. When he wrote in the 1970s that I was a modern-day Wacousta come to impose American "anarchist individualism" on unsuspecting Canadians I wrote "Wacouster" hoping that Robin might live longer in parody than in criticism. I included it in *The Louis Riel Organ & Piano Company* to prove I was a loyal Canadian.

***City of the Gulls and Sea* (1964)**

The city is Victoria, to which Helen and I moved in 1963. Sunny and cool. On Sundays we would drive around the waterfront because we could think of nothing else to do. If you think this doesn't make sense it doesn't make sense to me, either. In the evenings, she would sometimes have us drive to the Woolco department store, the only large store that was open, to have something to do. Modernist ennuie. Sometimes we argued, and she would run out of the

apartment, get into her Hillman Minx and drive away aimlessly. I would run after her, jump into my TR4 and follow her until she drove back to the apartment. I don't remember what we argued about.

Our first apartment was on Richardson Street, in Fairfield, close to the downtown but about ten miles from Colwood and my work at Royal Roads Military College. Each morning I would drive out along the Gorge waterway to the college, which was located on Sir James Dunsmuir's old estate of Hatley Park. The main building was the Edwardian "castle" Dunsmuir had built with its ballroom and billiard room which was now the officers mess of the college and where the steward, a young enlisted man, would bring me lunch. The Dunsmuir family had made its money at the turn of the century by underpaying Chinese and black laborers to work its coal mines—most of which money its daughters gambled away in Monaco. The cadets were obliged to salute me anywhere on the grounds. In the classrooms they would sit at attention when I entered and the class leader would request permission to "relax dress," which meant they wished to be able to loosen their ties. On average they were 3-4 years younger than me. My tie was one I had recently bought for these occasions. Sometimes I played billiards with the younger officers, who were likeable guys although they seldom had much to say about the ideology of literature.

For Helen the two highlights of the academic year were the Christmas and Graduation balls at the college. For each ball she sewed herself a new gown, determined to present herself more memorably than any of the other faculty or military staff wives. She was young and pretty and this goal, given the possibilities she could identify for herself in this city, delighted her, and why not. There were no women's washrooms in the main classroom block where the ball was held, and so half of the men's washrooms were converted to women's by the insertion of huge sprays of flowers into each urinal. Or so Helen and the other women reported.

Meanwhile, outside the college, the 1960s were unfolding, and male university teachers were discarding their ties and teaching in blue jeans, like I do now in 1997. One of the young officers played a guitar and his wife had subversive records by Peter Paul and Mary. I had no close friends, not even the dark-haired Dorothy, a teen-age poet and evening hippie I sometimes in 67-68 secretly took to poetry readings. I washed and polished the TR4 regularly, and kept it supplied with new Pirellis. After our 1965 summer in Los Angeles we moved to an apartment on Boyd Street in James Bay, an apartment that looked much like the one on Richardson. After spending 1966-67 in Los Angeles, we bought a split-level 3-bedroom house on Cook Street in Victoria that was decorated much like the two apartments. That year, at the New Years Eve party, I briefly met my present wife, Linda, who was married to a new member of the Royal Roads English Department with whom I shared a telephone. He had left her behind in Vancouver rather

than ask her to move with him to Victoria. The telephone sat in a hole cut in the wall between our two offices.

***Capitalistic Affection!* (1982)**

I think of this as my bpNichol book. I think of this as my last book of the poetry years of the 1960s, which began ending in the mid-70s. bp had a comic collection that filled twenty or more feet of specially-constructed shelves that themselves filled, from floor to ceiling, an entire room of his Toronto house. I used to visit that room and re-read the comics I had more innocently read in the 1940s and early 50s, learning how I had learned to believe many of the things I now believed without wanting to. Sometimes beep would arrive at our house with a new spread of colour comics he had just acquired, and sit reading and chortling. *Maggie and Jiggs. Dick Tracy.*

My favorite comics had been American war-celebrating ones—*Johnny Hazard, Terry & the Pirates, Steve Canyon.* I had thought the geometric rows of rivets on a DC-3 or P-51 were the pinnacle of modernist aesthetics. I had thought the Dragon Lady much more dangerously attractive than I've ever thought Margaret Atwood. So much for Canadian cultural sovereignty. So much for sharing years with a woman.

I think of this as one of my lost books. I wonder if the staff at Coach House Press ever mailed out review copies. I think of it as my most Canadian book, punctuated as it is with quotations from some of my least favorite Canadian critics. I re-read the poems about Dagwood's grief and Narda's ennuie and wonder how sad I must have been there in north Toronto in 1980. Maybe some day a biographer will happen by and tell me.

***Canadian Literary Power* (1994)**

Robert Kroetsch said that this book made "possible new understandings of how literature enters into dialogue with politics, economics, and the modes of cultural production in a society ... we call Canada." Terry Goldie said that here was Frank Davey leaping again "from the expected path, changing and growing like no other critic in Canadian Literature." Frank Davey says he hopes they are right, about the leaps, the understandings. But not about the "no other critic." I need this "no other critic," just like I need the "no other writer," to be the writing I imagine myself being. One comes into being relationally. At the time *Canadia Literary Power* was being released I was starting a two-year term as president of the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English (ACCUTE) and I was not going to do this job alone. The story of my life is a story of a field of people in a small house in Abbotsford, in an old army hut briefly called the *Tish* office, in and around a journal called *Open Letter,* in and around meetings and

conferences in Edmonton, Strasbourg, Ottawa, Seattle, Siena, Delhi, Jammu and Saskatoon where writers, friends, and colleagues have gathered, in and around a Toronto coach house still known as Coach House Books or Coach House Printing—places where bp and Barbara Godard and my wife Linda and my children Michael and Sara and my other companions and competitors have all in different and incomparable ways offered possibilities of being. *Canadian Literary Power* begins with a remark by bp but opens from there into the Canadian field of writing in which texts and publishers and awards and journals have provided an array of terms and struggles which over 40 years have helped make my and others' imaginations of 'Frank Davey.' Without them I would not have read, imagined, or responded.

Giving the keynote address at an Indian Association for Canadian Studies conference, Jammu, Kashmir, 1996

***Bridge Force* (1965)**

Most of the poems in *Bridge Force* were written in the *Tish* office at the University of Bitish Columbia, and published in *Tish* itself, and then included in my MA thesis, although it took two more years for the book to appear. Robert Creeley was one of my thesis supervisors. A crucial stage in my becoming a writer was a move from writing that was occasioned mostly by emotional crisis and urgency to writing that was occasioned mostly by the satisfaction of having created textual meaning. This is a not a simple or binary move. Even writing that arises from emotional desolation and anguish is motivated in part by the pleasure and recompense of giving textual shape to that anguish. Even the creation of an abstract form is somewhere motivated. When I was in my 20s and early 30s my writing friends and I often talked about other friends who we thought were "crisis poets"—poets who risked their relationships, and sometimes their lives, in order to have crises that would move them write. I think it was Robert Duncan who first pointed out this problem to us. Most of the poems of *Bridge Force* were written in the aftermath of my (self-induced?) crisis over Daphne Buckle. Although there is also in this book a stepping back, a search for historical or philosophical context, for value beyond the hurtin-songs of lost love.

I remember getting different advice from Creeley in a Montreal bar in 1970, when he said I wasn't willing to take enough risks for my writing. This, of course, was the man that once wrote that for love he would break open his beloved's skull and put a candle behind her eyes. I was

beginning to perceive such desires as problematic. I was both pissed-off by his presumption and amused because of how chaotic and chancy my life had been over the last six months, during which I had secretly written much of the prose-poem book *Weeds,* broken up with Helen, eloped on 5-day's notice from Victoria to Montreal with Linda, who then was still married to my ex-Royal Roads-colleague Roger but was now pregnant with our son Michael, and left my job at Roads to live for a year in eastern Canada. I published eight books between 1970 and 1973.

The question of crisis poetry is closely related to the limitations of the lyric and to the repetitiveness of lyric angst. How many times can one fall on the thorns of life, wittily or sensuously bleed, and hope a reader cares? Duncan saw the writing of poetry as a vocation, a calling both into a community of poets and into the much larger community of social concern. The risk to be taken, he wrote in *Tish* 13, is the risk of giving up the personal aggrandisement of "the witty possibilities of political and sexual reference" for "the reality of the City the poets live in." There was another risk that Duncan also urged one take, the risk of breaking with the language forms with which one had become comfortable, of breaking with—as I wrote in *Arcana* in 1970—"poems that reproduce the pages of past living." People have never known quite what to expect when opening a Frank Davey book, which has sometimes been a marketing problem for my publishers but a satisfaction to the writer.

***The Arches* (1981)**

The Arches was my second selected poems and was edited by that other publicly apprenticing poet bpNichol. Anyone who has two selected poems published before he is forty, and one of them edited by bpNichol, is very lucky. *The Arches* was titled after a poem by that name that recalled my father, his building of arches out of old hydro poles and cross-arms beside our house, and his singing, *sotto voce,* sexually suggestive lyrics to 1920's songs. "Underneath her arches," he sang, "happiness is there." My father was preoccupied, mystified, by sex and sexually vibrant women. I was finding out. Did he know that his small boy was slowly understanding his small alterations to the song? Later he was terrified and attracted in turn by both my wives—that they seemed to be women while his own wife was, as he called her, a little girl. That they returned his shy innuendos with jokes of their own, and defied his requests to be specially attentive to their mother-in-law. After he died in 1985 I found a tattered French-language cartoon of beach adventures in which the hero's dick sneaked out the side of his bathing suit and underneath the arches of the crotches of delighted young ladies while their boyfriends or parents stood by unsuspecting. My mother had known it was there and seemed to be waiting for me to discover it. He had died suddenly from a metathesized prostate cancer. In my last memory of him he's in his

pajamas walking down the hall to the bathroom to pass more blood, and looks back sheepishly to attempt a wry joke.

My father was always worried about my marriages, worried that I had taken on more woman than was wise. Sometimes I too was worried that I had. Sometimes I thought he was recalling his own mother, that tall and determined Ontario farm girl whom his father had beaten when he couldn't stop her from earning extra money by cleaning the church across the street on East 29th Ave, who had then left him despite having to leave her sons, had re-married to a meek Cockney man shorter than her, bought a house, and surreptitiously met with her sons despite all his attempts to prevent this. My father had been four, his brother seven. My father adored and feared his mother. When I brought my wives home I loved to see the fear in his smile.

***Arcana* (1973)**

You write a book in which all of the poems are responses to the cards of the Tarot pack and the last poem denies magic. This is the story, or my story, of the Sixties, a struggle for agency. It is one thing to admit one cannot foresee the field of events—the coincidences, aggressions, syntheses that the interactions of agencies produce—another not to know one can change a light bulb. Curiously, in 1969, I pursued my present wife Linda, even when she claimed not to want me to, and not out of any sense of inevitability but because I was fortuitously arrogant enough to believe I could. Mysticism is the opiate of the disappointed. Things are because they were meant to be. The broccoli, I wrote, burns in the pan.

Moving from Montreal to Toronto in the summer of 1970, Linda and I had few understandings of the city, and few connections with it. Those connections—York University, and its English department, which had hired me, and Coach House Press—i.e. Victor Coleman—which was publishing *Weeds* even as we arrived and would publish *Arcana* in 1972, were my connections, and left Linda groping for ways to locate herself. I don't think I understood that, because this particular inequality had never happened to me before. At Coach House I felt partly alienated by my relatively secure job, pension plan, PhD. I missed George. I remember Victor and Sarah inviting us to their apartment in Rochdale, us stepping over the various Harley-Davidsons parked in the lobby, feeling like tourists in their apartment. Maybe Victor felt similarly in the house we were buying in north Toronto. I remember later when Victor was living on Ward's Island off the Toronto waterfront, and we visited him one winter Sunday afternoon for dinner. The only way to and from the island was by pedestrian ferry and the hourly island bus. We took ten-month-old Michael with us in his new snow suit. When we left we had to walk about half a mile to the bus which would take us to the ferry. It was about -10 Fahrenheit, with a

stiff wind. Linda still hadn't got over the BC habit of wearing light winter clothes. The last hundred yards was across a windy field to the bus shelter. About half way across Linda began stumbling, and then said she couldn't go any further. I ran with Michael to the bus shelter and left him inside it, then ran back to get Linda. When I reached her I could see the bus approaching. I was very cold too. She got back to her feet and inspired mostly by the bus managed to walk to the shelter and the now waiting bus. Afterward she said she could understand how people could freeze to death in Ontario within sight of assistance. It had been no time to be mystical. By 1976 Linda had enrolled in the very non-mystical Osgoode Hall Law School, and by 1980 was a lawyer on Bay Street. Despite my misgivings, this address did not require her to become a Bay Street lawyer.

l'An Trentiesme: Selected Poems 1961-70 **(1972)**

Anyone who gets his selected poems published when he is thirty years old is either lucky, unlucky, or precocious. bpNichol and I once reflected that he and I were different from many writers because unlike them we went through our apprenticeships publicly. At thirty years I and these poems had not faded from someone's memory but were being typed up for photo-offset reproduction at the York Street Commune in Vancouver, the city of my birth. There was a sort of direct line from Stan Persky at the commune, who operated Vancouver Community Press, and *Tish,* because he had been its editor in 1969-70 for its last few issues. Then *Tish* segued into Dan MacLeod's alternative newspaper *The Georgia Straight* and became *The Georgia Straight Writing Supplement.* It was a busy year.

1970 was also the year that my son Michael was born, a few weeks after Linda rode in back seat of a speeding Montreal cab with Allen Ginsberg beside her rubbing her large abdomen through her coat and singing his adaptations of Blake's songs of innocence and experience. The cabbie kept turning around to look. The songs and scores were published soon after in *Tish E.* Linda and I took another Montreal cab from our house to the hospital and sat there playing gin rummy until 2 AM and Michael seemed nearly ready to be born. And yet he wasn't ready, Linda later reported, he was born offended, pissed off, enraged by the lights and hard surfaces and other discomforts of the outside world. I could sympathize. Scowling and serious, he reminded me of my father. He is still very serious and fond of women. I remember afterward walking out of the hospital into the cool March night and thinking everything had changed, and of course it had.

Abbotsford Guide to India **(1986)**

India is where Columbus and Cabot and Cartier all hoped to have been going and now I have

been there several times and they have not. I was not born a world traveller. I was not even born in Abbotsford, because my mother and father had moved there only the year before my birth and being a city girl she didn't like the village hospital and rode the interurban tram back to Vancouver to give birth to me. She would not have liked hospitals in India.

Most of my life I have been like my father in wanting to be close to home and to a woman whose presence makes a house home. I think I learned this from my father, and that he learned it in 1914 when he was four years old and his mother left home and did not return except to visit neighbours where she could secretly touch her children. Except when his work on the BC Electric line gang took him away overnight, he never travelled without my mother. This is not easy to write because I made it up too long ago. It also made travelling difficult because when I was away, like in 1974 when I made a reading tour of the western Canadian arctic, I would pay less attention to where I was than to my desire to be back home.

In the 1960s I used to think that it was class and low income that had kept me from travelling outside North America. And in the 1970s low income and small children. By 1982 I had maybe developed some critical intelligence. The cover of *The Abbotsford Guide to India* shows a Hindu tourist relaxing at a shepherds' camp in the Himalayas high above Pahalgam in Kashmir. The horses which have brought her and me there are grazing in the background. When I thought of applying to go to India I had not thought of riding in Kashmir. The Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute had advertised for four specialists in Canadian Literature to conduct a four-week workshop in the spring of 1982 for junior Indian faculty at a university in central India. I had never been able to get myself to leave North America so I thought if I could go to India I could go anywhere. In 1961 when I had been graduating from UBC I had applied to CUSO (Canadian University Students Overseas) to go and work on a CUSO aid project in Sarawak but I must have failed the interview. Instead I stayed in Vancouver and helped start *Tish* and the rest of this 'I' is now history.

I can recall wishing many times I was not in India and many times that I was nearer to leaving India but I can't recall being homesick in India. I was too busy being warm, too busy working to figure out what it might be that I was seeing, too busy hanging on to the back of a scooter, a pony, an elephant. Rosemary Sullivan and I got to Delhi earlier than the other two of our workshop team, and went off to Jaipur to lecture at the university. We spent four days there, most of it in the back of Ravi Das's scooter rickshaw, which I'd persuaded Rosemary we should rent, along with Ravi, early the second morning when we couldn't get seats on the city tour bus. Most of this part of my life lurks somewhere in *The Abbotsford Guide to India.* On the third day Ravi's scooter had labored, stalling twice, up the hill to the Amber Palace. I remember the dry

eroded mountains, Ravi's optimism, the cold Limca sold by the roadside vendors. After the workshop in Dharwad, in northern Karnatika, I stayed another month, travelling slowly, sometimes alone, sometimes with Rosemary, from Bombay to Aurangabad, Udaipur, Srinagar, Khajuraho, Varanasi, and Delhi.

India opened for me onto Yugoslavia, Germany, France, Italy, Turkey and so on into Europe. A reversal of the Aryan migrations. I was back again in 1988 for a conference in Delhi celebrating the two decades of the Shastri Institute. A small narrative of the conference opens my *Popular Narratives.* I spent four days in Bombay afterward visiting the Canadian Studies Centre of SNDT Women's University. I went around Bombay taking photographs of the Victorian buildings that had been depicted on the postcards my great-uncle Jack Kirkup had sent my grandmother in 1905. I returned for three weeks earlier this year, spending New Years Eve in Jammu listening to gunfire and wondering if it was celebratory or political. Nita Ramaiya at SNDT had translated the *Abbotsford Guide* into Gujarati and published it through the university. I rode the amazingly crowded Bombay suburban trains with new friends at the university. At a reading that Nita arranged two of my poems were read in each of Gujarati, Bengali, Maharashtri, English, Kanada, Hindi, and Malayalam. I ate chicken biryani from a banana leaf on the train from Bombay to Baroda. I found a ride to the Shore Temple in Mahabalipuram. I stayed for three quiet days in the guesthouse of Professor Narasimhaiah's ashram-like estate, in the countryside west of Mysore. I took an overnight train Madurai, and another one to Trivandrum. On the latter the young Indian man in my compartment was afraid to leave the train at his stop until a soldier who was standing on the semi-dark platform agreed to escort him. I travelled back to Bombay where all one Sunday men and boys fly kites, from the rooftops, from the bridge over the railway tracks, from the field-hockey grounds, from the cricket grounds. Some kites get caught in strange winds, and dashed to the roofs of seven-story buildings. Some lose their cords and sail purposefully at medium altitude southward across the city.