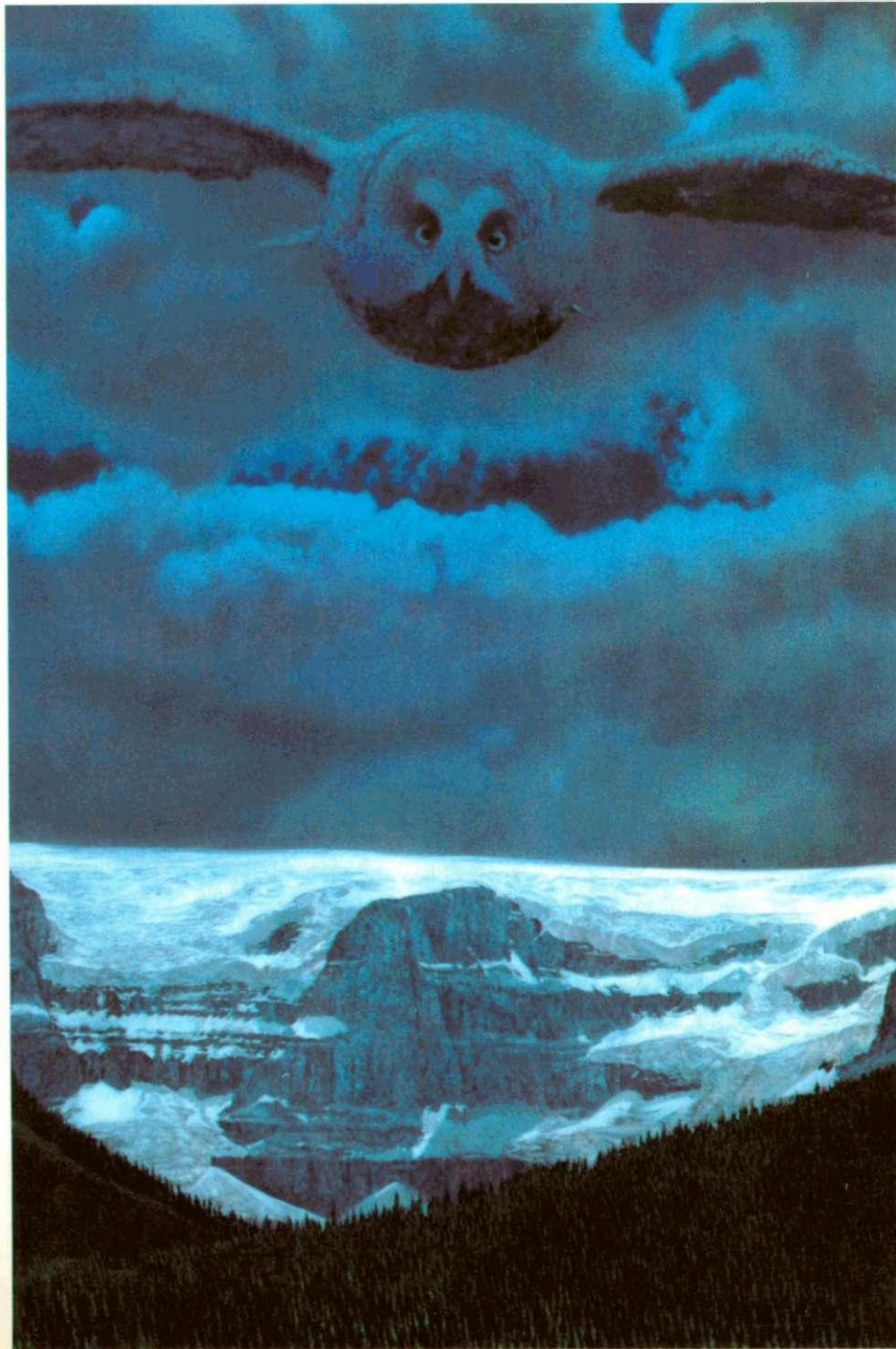


Loki Is Buried at Smoky Creek  
**Selected Poems** / Fred Wah



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Selected Poems*

# SELECTED POEMS

Loki Is Buried at Smoky Creek

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**Fred Wah**

Edited with an Introduction by George Bowering

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### The Poems of Fred Wah

For years I have been reflecting in my mind's eye a picture of Fred Wah, with his wife Pauline, skiing down the length of a glacier somewhere in the Kootenays. It is apparently something that he does from time to time; but more important to me are the metaphoric & metonymic implications to be drawn from the image. The poet making new tracks rather than riding on prepared ones, over the surface of a natural flow that makes time by way of space, or *vice versa*, & both skier & ice-river doing what they are doing at home, in, as Wah says, "the interior."

The skier knows where he is going when he gets there, his aspirations no more willful than gravity. The poet's sense of form is of a continuous becoming, as natural as all outdoors.

Fred Wah has also been for more than half his forty years a jazz musician; as a teenager he played trumpet along with Lionel Kearns the saxophonist in a band called the Kampus Kings. In the time just prior to the invention by him & others of the famous poetry newsletter *TISH*, he was a music student at the University of British Columbia. Music, the art that falls upward behind you, is a kind of indoor skiing, isn't it? Wah still skis, he still plays jazz, & he still lives in the Kootenays, where he learned these things.

His father's side of the family was Chinese, & his mother's side Scandinavian. Thus his background is atypical, but symbolic for the creation of our west. He first saw the world in 1939 on the prairie, but moved to the mountains when he was four, to grow up in Trail & Nelson & the surrounding forest.

While at UBC he joined with Frank Davey & others in producing

*TISH*. In fact those two young poets, encouraged by the visiting Robert Duncan, were the two most enthusiastic founders of the magazine. Wah became its printer in fact, & began a lifelong history of the publishing of other people's works. After UBC & the dispersion of the *TISH* group in 1963, he went to Albuquerque, where he studied at the University of New Mexico with Robert Creeley & edited his own journal, *Sum*. After that, he studied at the State University of New York at Buffalo with Charles Olson, and helped to edit the important little magazines, *The Niagara Frontier Review* & *Magazine of Further Studies*. He was becoming an integral voice in the American post-Olson generation of poets. But he returned home in 1967 to teach poetry at Selkirk College in Castlegar, & to encourage the growth of young writers there, partly thru his editing of the magazine *Scree* & an anthology of West Kootenay writing & photographs. He is also on the editorial board of *Open Letter*, a journal of post-modernist criticism & literary theory, & he is editing Daphne Marlatt's poems for this series.

He now lives with Pauline & their two daughters in a remodelled farm house on the edge of a cliff overlooking the Kootenay River near South Slokan, midway between Nelson & Castlegar. But one should not imagine that he has somehow retreated from the heady experiences of life among the famous poets in the sixties. In a note for a recent anthology of poetry in B.C., Wah writes:

I live in the "interior" of British Columbia and such a qualification affects my particular sense of what the world looks like. We go "down" to the coast, which is the exterior, the outside, the city. The spaces between here and there are part of a vast similarity. The towns become predictable in their activities and appearances. Castlegar and Prince George, though specifically themselves, share certain aspects of distance, colour and taste. One feels at home nearly anywhere there are rivers, pulp mills, trucks, the mysterious gravel roads further inward, and similar "local" inhabitants. Down and out there the exterior becomes more. Vancouver leads to other cities and countries, etc. But all of it, out there, is measured from in here. In the particularity of a place the writer finds revealed the correspondences of a whole world.<sup>1</sup>

The information that Wah finds himself at home in the world is to be found in all his poetry. A glance at some of his book titles, *Mountain*, *Tree*, *Earth*, would alert even the dumbest reader to the fact that here is a poet who responds to the particulars of his ground with an eye to the singularity of each, without any semiological distancing

that would be signalled by a "definite" article. When addressing one's neighbour, one does not call him *the* neighbour.

Critic & fellow poet Frank Davey noted the relationship between the eye for particulars & the feeling of home in Wah's poetry:

The concept which dominates Wah's writing is that the geographic and human particulars which immediately surround a man not only contain all place and all history but together form a place that is for that man the true centre of the cosmos.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, says Davey, "there can be no exit." One makes a home by articulating the language one grows up in; or as Wah puts it in a comment on Barry McKinnon's poetry. "home is where the story is."<sup>3</sup>

It is no secret that Wah derived early sensibility from Charles Olson & Ed Dorn, poets who found ineluctable relationships between a sense of place as signified, & projection of the body's consciousness as signifier. Once Wah found himself in place, he encountered his central theme of home. A question of home is the most often encountered theme in British Columbia writing, from Allerdale Grainger to Daphne Marlatt. Usually it is seen in realist novels in which people are seeking a home in an unsettled topography or bifurcated psychology. In no other writer's work are we able to find such an integration of consciousness & surroundings as we will find in Wah's writing. It is perhaps in the light of his Scandinavian background that we recall the ON root, *heimr*, which denoted "world," when we find Wah so much at home on the earth.

So we will not encounter the usual B.C. wilderness verse in Wah's books, not the adjectivized scenery that sets a mood for human plaints, not the customary cruel nature as backdrop for personal moral lessons, &, thank goodness, not the standard appropriation of fancied Indian mythology as structure for bourgeois tourist mysticism. Language is not to be a vehicle on which to ride into the mossy backwoods. In appreciation of texts by bp Nichol & Gerald Gilbert, two poets whose "worlds" would seem to be distant from his own, Wah commented: "The language seems very much at home. I don't need a referential language going on."<sup>4</sup> (What effrontery, we remark, of a descriptive poet to call her writing "The Song My Paddle Sings." We know we are never going to hear that, but only reference to it.) In that same discussion, Wah said that he was impressed by Ed Dorn's statement that after years of digging into his own local earth he thought he could now see his way clear "to a spiritual address." There is an exact ambiguity in the last word—a doubleness that should be remembered in one's reading of Fred Wah's poetry.

For the *TISH* tyros, one of the most influential texts was Duncan's *The Opening of the Field* (1960), whose first poem ends here:



Often I am permitted to return to a meadow  
as if it were a given property of the mind  
that certain bounds hold against chaos,

that is a place of first permission,  
everlasting omen of what is.

The "as if" is a favourite *geste* of the Romantics, a phrase that will not allow us to choose, (or, speaking positively) that enjoins us to embrace both paths of the alternative.

I think that Wah's favourite Romantic is Coleridge. It is Coleridge whom he quotes to preface *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.* Recalling what we have read about the implications of place & the word "interior," we should not be surprised. I am led thru various agencies to Coleridge's "On Poesy or Art," especially to this passage:

In the objects of nature are presented, as in a mirror, all the possible elements, steps, and processes of intellect antecedent to consciousness . . . and man's mind is the very focus of all the rays of intellect which are scattered throughout the images of nature.

So the poet's occupation is to:

make the external internal, the internal external, to  
make nature thought, and thought nature,—this is the  
mystery of genius in the Fine Arts.

And it is the process by which Wah generates his text. Even the poem, "Don't Cut me Down" handles irony like a practical two-way saw, refuting & proving Coleridge's statement.

There is nothing more exterior than writing. The moment it is done it is forever outside. There is also nothing more interior than speech, than the body's saying. It has no meaning save when it accompanies movements inside the mouth & the ear. Speech & writing are therefore eternally separate. Yet the poet survives upon the ambition to entwine them. Thus Wah will not be caught *describing* nature, the act that would render the latter forever passive, without ears.

It is not hard to see that writing *about* a subject is a sure way to keep the subject at arm's length, & it is not hard to see that any writing that tries to close that distance will be frustrated in the end. Yet one can minimize it, & Wah, with his refusal to subject his home to description, comes closer than anyone I know, to success, to enacting an holistic image of the world. Closing the invocation at the opening of his book *Earth*, he cries: "Oh inward-moving beams/ who whirl as the orb whirls." Notice that he said "who," rather than "that." We are

given a perception not of relativity so much as of totality. We are certainly not given the usual Canadian lyric poet's picturing of it-the-world as opposed to me-the-stable. Wah moves away, being around "what's going on where mind, eye and lake meet to provide name and home."

In the Genesis myth, the particulars of other life are paraded past enthroned lordly Adam, who names them & takes possession of his world. Adam, of course, made one false move, & could not go home again. Christianity teaches that we are all away from home. That is why we build stable garrisons—to prove that we are not that-out-there.

But Wah keeps moving, in a setting that itself never stops. "I fade into everything around me," he notices while skiing an instant path made crooked by the exigencies of the topography. Such a view, for one who is trying to make writing out of speech, holds certain implications for the language of the poem. "The level of meaning at the moment of writing is the important thing," said Wah in literary conversation.<sup>5</sup> In his own tongue, Wah is like Robert Creeley, not wishing to fix for all time the appropriate description of thing or event or feeling, but catching at a moment, when the writer is acting the way a bobcat does, say, while putting feet down one after the other, at home in the wild. "I'm active too. I'm not just simply standing back, as in a travelogue, commenting."<sup>6</sup>

Let us look at an early Creeley poem for a moment. It is called "The Innocence":

Looking to the sea, it is a line  
of unbroken mountains.  
*etc.*

The contextual affinities are obvious. But I would like to pay attention to the process in the slipped syntax at the beginning. The dangling modifier is no mistake. It directs us from the seeing to the seen. The viewer, though we were led to think he would be, is not going to be the subject of the sentence, hence not of the poem. We are at perception ground zero.

Wah depends upon like aptitudes of language:

And we just stood there  
in the Forest  
look  
at everything around us  
looking  
surrounding

That is something a lot different from errors in grammar, which are simply failures in attempts at power, which render the external further



away.

The title of Wah's first "selected" poems was *Among*, & that denotes his stance in the area of all nature, including the air that feeds speech. The word "among" is kin to "mingle," & if that is what you feel you do, you cannot allow your sentence to say too much in the way of subject-predicate-object. Even when the self is denoted as indirect object, teachers of the white world would have the poet begin the poem "Among" this way: "For me the delight," missing not only the point but the line between it & the next point. As "For the Western Gate" reaches silence, the "end" is not the end; "to look for" is more important than the sought object, the goal in the mind's eye. "I go as I look," ambiguously, & beware, reader, who would ask the poet to look where he's going.

In "Note" Wah tells us straight out (& in), "I try to be the place." Please note that here again the language does not, even in a written message, try to describe with the bossy watcher's adjectival phrases & their servant similes, but to construct, as Chinese or Hopi do, perhaps, a "sun-in-the-clouds." The eye, there, knows that to be true, while the dissociative mind would try to have the sun *shining thru the clouds*.

That is to say that Wah's poems tangle with the phenomenal, the first act of noticing something, & they try to signify it without over-using "society's" name for it, which latter is next to be peeled away after we have discarded abstraction & description, & their similes. In the poem "Here," we catch the poet's attention as it is caught, attention being for Wah more important than reflection. Thus rime is more important than reason. One is directed to the wrapper notes for *Among*: "I just say it and you know right away that that's what I mean." Of all the writers who have developed out of the *TISH* experiment, Wah was & is the most poetical. He does not, as the others do, write prose. The story, as he takes it, is not for recounting, but for happening upon, upon the moment. He offers spirit, not history.

So in *Earth* he writes: "Sometimes the feet find out what a trick the mind is. A necessary disguise for what the heart expects." For a maker of verses the foot is the part that keeps one in touch with the earth. We remember that Coleridge & Duncan both insist on a co-operation (& varying leadership) among the physical-mental faculties, rather than the generalship of the mind in a composer's individual's chain of being. And keeping in mind this poet's identification of self with ecosystem, we associate his poetic with the view that Pierre Dansereau argues for flora, that different plant species naturally co-operate on site, as opposed to the basic puritan-capitalist (E.J. Pratt) idea that they compete for range. Dansereau says that plants share in overall process rather than battling for dominance. Wah, I believe, would agree, & include in the process the spirit of people. See "Hamill's Last Stand."

There is here no fake-shaman play-Indian poetry denying or ignor-

ing the frontable fact of machine industry. There is no retreat into catalogues of "romantic" gathering-society myths. Characteristically, when Wah turns to Indian stuff, it is to the visible pictograms, rock drawings that are to be found where they were perhaps a century ago put on the surface of the planet, not esoteric oh-great-father-in-the-sky legends feeding away in the purported subconscious. The name that Wah gives to the poems he makes in response to the found drawings is "transcreations." That is, they are neither translations nor descriptions. They might resemble Williams' pictures *from* Brueghel.

Thus it is no surprise that in the pictogram book we find Wah leaving a record of his customary concerns:

The wish  
from what is inside  
for what is out

It is a complex poem, & one that can be better understood by relating it to the picture than by relating it to explication. In all likelihood the contemplation of the two forms will remind us of wishes in fairy tales (& in children who hear them); a wish is something we have (inside) for something we do not have (outside). The granting of a wish is something hard to imagine, for is a wish granted not something to have, & isn't a wish a wish for something not had? I believe that Wah's poem much more quickly presents the conundrum. I think too that his quickness in an earlier phrase, "sunning the insides of myself," pretty well sums up, in Coleridgean terms, what the imagination is doing here.

But never to express oneself nor to impress another. If anything is expressed it is air, of course, air, the element that goes from outside to inside, & back again. After the books of earth, Wah's most recent is *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh*, his book of air, poems of the breath, written after his father's death.

Before the publication of the Talonbooks edition, Coach House Press ran a limited typescript edition. The first thing one notices is that the cover stock has the same texture & grey colour as that on *Pictograms*, & the large CHP logo on the cover is the same weathered red that is used for the illustrations in *Pictograms*. Blood on rock, perhaps, the internal made external, & employed as language.

But breath feeds blood, & name arrives with home. In this book, the poet reminds us that in Sanskrit the verb "to breathe" means "to be," & as he breathes out, the sound comes, "hu" & then "wah," his name, said to the world. He will, in breathin', breathe out, & if the internal is to be external, breathing out will be to breathe in, to the world. This is not sophistry, it is composition.

The death of his father causes the poet to bring to life his memories of earlier life with the no longer breathing Wah. We are reminded that Wah *films* was a trumpet player, the breath artist, & that when the



Kampus Kings were playing, there was a dance standard called "Deep Purple." It said: "In the midst [or was it "mist"?] of a memory, your voice comes back to me, breathin' my name with a sigh."

Roland Barthes points out<sup>7</sup> that there are really two musics, the music you hear & the one you play, the difference being that while you are playing music your whole body feels itself taking place in the act. (Many editors of small presses & magazines have told me that they read & understand another poet's verse differently when they run it thru a typesetter.) Jazz improvisation approaches the moment, for the player, when the two musics might become one. It would be as if speech & writing were to become one. Not only does jazz improvisation make the composer & the performer one, at once, but it makes a listener of the composer. He is hearing what he is playing for the first time. The player, in fact, is part of the composition—the body & the work, especially for the horn player, are clearly continuous. It is no surprise that when it comes to the composition of poetry, Fred Wah wants to conflate the spoken & the written, out.

Wah has himself several times indicated the relationship between the feeling of being "among" the music, & the collective, co-operative nature of his art. At the end of "I'm going to keep on dancing," the take-out of the poem, he says he wants Lew to read it because it has to be voice, speech, & it can't be until it is received, & he wants himself to be receiver too, as he is of the dance, as the girls were of his music.

When he made his quotation from Coleridge for the overture to his pictogram book, he could have been thinking of the trumpet player listening to the pianist's solo, & preparing to meet it, during the moment when he lifts the instrument to his mouth: "Not the qualities merely, but the root of the qualities is transcreated. How else could it be a birth,—a creation?" Exactly. There too is a musical echo, a rime, of Olson's third Maximus letter, the "tansy" sequence, one of Wah's favourite poems in the early sixties. Olson argues there that "polis," his desired social amongness, cannot be known as localism, but as a matter of "root person in root place." Roots properly in place, the musical branches may reach outward, indicating a world, as does the Scandinavian Yggdrasil. In Wah's "plan of a tree":

the spread is the gate of earth  
lighted by the luminescence of its plan  
the system of itself  
is larger by the picture of it  
and by the winds of space  
pathways through the branches  
it's only part of the plan  
yet a part  
and looms out  
from the middle of a place

part of itself  
now part of  
any

Wah said: "I see things from *where* I am, my view point, and I measure and imagine a world from there."<sup>8</sup>

The world enters that way, too. Wah finds various ways to say that when one bit of language appears, it has behind it all of language, as a bit of the earth is the face shown to us of the whole. One should keep that in mind while reading the short solos. You will then see the folly of description, that amortization. Wah said: "If you take something out of context where does it go? My sense is that it goes to another context."<sup>9</sup> What the referential-descriptive mind sees as disorder (Chinese or Ayler music, for examples) is really part of another order. & not a competitive one, either.

So Wah is essentially a musician. He does not write fiction because his aesthetic is not geared to construction. (Once, trying to build a cabin, he put the hammer thru his front teeth.) Rather his muse urges continuity, making a line of music that disappears as it goes, like mist thru the branches. He blows solos that derive their meaning from their con-text (see how many of his poems are "letters" to other poets), in the whole forest of the composition. With others he conspires to sound our world.

He is the most musical of us all. As Warren Tallman wrote, commenting on *Tree*, Wah is "most consciously proprioceptive, celebrating a literal affinity with trees-in-himself in a speech so deeply musical that it sways tree thoughts, presences and impulses into the presence of the words."<sup>10</sup> Robert Duncan once turned to Carlyle, who maintained that at the very heart of anything one would encounter its special music, its contribution to the widest harmony.

As early as the first issue of *TISH* (1961), though his language was not sophisticated, Wah was defining the poet's action as "a merging of himself with his natural surroundings . . . and this alliance, this new equilibrium set up, is the energy of musical release which is the poem, be it good or bad." In the third *TISH*, he made it clear that the music was not the kind being played at the time by the young Montreal poets: "No one gives a damn about you, the one, but you the inter-mingler." A decade later, in *Earth*, he will suggest that we all can sustain ourselves with the music of *this* sphere: I think earth is a condition of ourselves we all have access to."

"The energy of musical release" is a good phrase to denote the elan of jazz improvisation, of course, & goes a long way to explaining the fact that Wah's poems are usually trying to articulate something based on but blowing away from the beat of European syntax. Excellent lyric poems do not contain or illustrate ideas, though the poet without ideas is a dud. There is no doubt that Fred Wah is full

of ideas, but the best of his poems are not full of anything—they are themselves emptyings, of the vessel. In a verse called properly “Song,” we hear how a poem is born, “as my own breathing, a rhythm in the chest picked up by the blood (pulse), short puffs of white steam from my mouth. In this the words come.” To my ear, this resembles a jazz group moving into a piece, instrument by instrument, beginning with rhythm section & building to horn or voice. Significantly, this poem says that its speaker felt the poem begin after he sat down to *rest* from hunting. But of course the hunting got him there.

Cry me a river, says the lovely old song, & in his most recent book, Wah goes to the river for an image of both the poet/person’s life & his issuing of it forth:

Not so much all of us dying  
or nobody else living or even one  
one shining master of light  
but a procession forth  
into I like the movement  
in our syntax goes  
something like a river Daphne  
so it is still “how” we do what  
and give a punch we hope  
words to take off on us  
will still be the line all of us  
dying to do it the best way we can.

Poetry is the expenditure of the breath, & that leads to death. What Wah makes is not a mausoleum, but a funeral song. Yet the river feeds what it passes by, whether the tree that was once Daphne, or a later Daphne, Marlatt, she of the great river poem, *Steveston*.

The most musical of us all (not to be confused with precious tinkle poets), Wah has always been impatient with ideas & images of stasis. One of his earliest poems is “Acrobat on a Ball,” & it is not difficult to imagine the young poet musing on an apartment wall print of Picasso’s oil by that name. When the poet wrote the poem he was the age attained by the painter when he painted the picture—so we may expect an argument about composition. The first four stanzas each finish with the bald statement that the details of the painting, even the round or “living” ones, do not move. Though the signifieds, ball, acrobats, horse, are things noted for their motion, the signifier must remain unmoving. It is reproduced art in a frame, lookt at on a city wall. The process has been turned into product. In the second half of the poem, Wah supplies (by way of imagination, of *saying*) a scene that is taking place on the other side of the bare Michelangelesque hill, inventing a running man in a swaying forest under a moving moon. This scene *becomes* when the poet (or reader) gets there, an idea that

Wah pursues in his latest poems about a man walking thru his own emitted breath.

The young Wah just simply would not believe that a boy can stand for years on an unmoving ball. The image is a curious (European museum art) opposite to the world tree, which is rooted so that it might be always in motion. An uprooted figure who shows up in Wah’s poetry from time to time is Kerkyon, the tyrant & champion wrestler who was slain by Theseus, who won his victory by lifting his foe off the ground.

\* \* \*

If you have lived in the Interior you carry with you an image identified with that part of Canada: scree. Scree is the slope of rock debris at the bottom of a cliff. I didn’t know the word (derived, again, from Old Norse), but when I was a kid I used to run down shale slides, a good test of quickness of whole-body, because you have to step before you know where your foot is going to light, or you will fall & be fallen upon. For years I told people about that stepping when I was trying to convey my sense of composing lyrics.

Fred Wah uses the word often, & even called his Castlegar poetry newsletter *Scree*. It makes a good concrete image for evidence that all things of the earth, even mountains, are always moving & changing. In sentimental paintings of wild grandeur one sees mountains & forests, but not scree. What causes scree is what the glacier causes; it is deconstruction, transcreation. It would be silly & homeless to try to shore up *those* fragments. “Don’t put it all together, it is,” says Wah in a poem that both resembles & mentions a rock slide. Concerning pictograms or poems or nature’s signs, Wah says:

It doesn’t matter does it that the things mean  
they return to you  
in the simplest and most obvious, really,  
configurations.

The point is that neither poems nor lives should be made by an aggressive act of the will. That to me is the magic of the

nv s ble  
tr ck

that is performed when i is removed, or when the eyes are covered. Or are we askt to put them into the (con)text, invisibly, among the (con)sonants? “Move right at it so that you are in it,” says another pictopoem. That is the obverse of another theme that runs thru that collection, the wisdom of keeping safe from predatory animals (includ-



ing the self) in the forest home. Home includes everything, as D.G. Jones insists in the introduction to his *Butterfly on Rock*—it is not a refuge, not a fort, certainly not a garrison. In fact, in one poem we see a combativeness (“I walked into battle/with the forest”) turn into a dance with the natural, after the speaker has covered his obstreperous head with the “buffalo-horn headdress.” It is a magic dance, & makes real for the poet an essentially romantic conviction:

one by one one can  
become the other  
  
such as night serves  
to show day’s stars

The confrontations evaporate & the dualities co-operate.

In his most recent poems, we see the Interior walker of woods, viewer of mountains, now digging, shovelling, bringing up memory. We learn early that the recent death of his father forces him to realize that there is now no generation between himself & death; so that he proceeds to meditate on his body, his age, his past, & his life in poetry, & even beyond these things to roots, the inherited past of Chinese name carried by his blonde & blue-eyed daughters.

The image of the shovel is, though, preceded by the image of the axe. His own death is now “clear cut,” a phrase that in one of its meanings relates to the “tree murder” in an earlier book. He is left on the ground, what remains after the axe has cut him off from his father, or rather now his father from him, so that now he is no chip off the old block. The first poems in *Breathin’* relate the ebb of the urge to live after one’s father dies, then the next ones fight for resolve, & the third movement digs in.

There are memories of shovelling snow to melt on the cook stove, coal for the neighbour’s hopper, earth in the garden, gravel for making concrete. There is even a picture of the kid riding on a shovel down the packt-snow street. Shovelling is the basic image of a man working on the earth, & anyone who has shovelled much knows how necessary are the lungs filled with air, & the conjunction of breath & arms. Until, that is, one is completely out of breath, & shovelled upon.

In the pictogram book, the lyric says of death, “They say one carries equally/what has been lived into death/so that I will be sheltered there/by my life.” Home, especially in its aspects of shelter, is all one’s life somehow connected with one’s parents. In this post-parent book, the speaker’s life has become a place, a home to return into, “as the dogs scratch at the door for the warmth there.” He is now the parent, & has to provide a place—death can wait.

Air brings poetry & change. Breath is life. Becoming breathless,

having the wind knockt out of him, he seems tempted to share his father’s condition, voicelessness. Then (in psychological terms) he fights for breath in the poems—do I want to come back to the world my father is not in?—& thru poetry, he survives it, being in the world. The childhood memories are necessary to this movement. He remembers deaths & near-deaths. He returns to a faith in the cyclical ecosystem:

next spring  
I’ll go out to the garden  
and with a stick  
plant myself  
and eat me in the fall

Then follow three poems concerned with eating flesh. Hunger is the centre of continuing life, for the whole globe, where even the waves “lick” the shore.

Feeding, continuing, he moves, & as he moves he listens to the breath he makes & then walks into. The sound of them is “waahh, waahh,” his father’s name & his own, a sigh that sounds like a cry. One’s breath, life, name goes out in front of one. As Wah has always said, the real is manifest when you walk far enough to be among it. “Breath can reach my toes,” he writes, & the external & internal are being made each other with every step. Then he remembers “the only bird of poetry,” & we recall that in Duncan’s poem<sup>11</sup> that is the owl, the bird that rimes with “vowel,” the sound made by unimpeded breath. Duncan says that it gives intimation of eternal life. Whether or not Wah is speaking irony here, he has come a long way by means of poetry, exactly, from the throat’s constriction in the first poems to this book. Like an old horn-player he “ends” it with the creation of words out of the first sources made inside the bag of flesh—“huh wu wu / nghuh nghuh / w\_\_\_\_\_h”

Perhaps the painful, positive journey presented in this later book, & the Wah poetic & creed-of-being, might be found in these four short lines from a poem called “How to be something,” & publisht here for the first time:

let yourself be caught  
catch  
move  
very fast

George Bowering,  
Vancouver, B.C.  
June, 1979.

Footnotes:

1. Sandy Wilson, ed., *Western Windows* (Vancouver, CommCept, 1977), pp. 223-224.
2. Frank Davey, *From There to Here* (Erin, Press Porcépic, 1974), p. 258.
3. Fred Wah, "To Locate," *Open Letter*, 3rd Series, No. 7, Summer, 1977, p. 111.
4. bp Nichol, "Transcreation: A Conversation with Fred Wah," *Open Letter*, 3rd Series, No. 9, Fall, 1978, p. 45.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
7. "Musica Practica," in *Image - Music - Text* (New York, Hill and Wang, 1977).
8. *Op. cit.*, Wilson, p. 223.
9. "Mrs. Richard's Grey Cat," *Open Letter*, 3rd Series, No. 9, Fall, 1978, p. 59.
10. Warren Tallman, "Wonder Merchants: Modernist Poetry in Vancouver During the 1960's," in *Godawful Streets of Man* (Toronto, Coach House Press, 1977).
11. Robert Duncan, "An Owl Is an Only Bird of Poetry," in *Derivations* (London, Fulcrum Press, 1968), p. 132.

from MOUNTAIN

MOUNTAIN

Mountain that has come over me in my youth  
 green grey orange of colored dreams  
 darkest hours of no distance  
 Mountain full of creeks ravines of rock  
 and pasture meadow snow white ridges humps of granite  
 ice springs trails twigs stumps sticks leaves moss  
 shit of bear deer balls rabbit shit  
 shifts and cracks of glaciation mineral  
 O Mountain that has hung over me in these years of fiery desire  
 burns on your sides your many crotches rocked  
 and treed in silence from the winds  
 Mountain many voices nameless curves and pocked in shadows  
 not wild but smooth  
 your instant flats flat walls of rock  
 your troughs of shale and bits  
 soft summer glacier snow  
 the melting edge of rounded stone  
 and cutting of your height the clouds  
 a jagged blue  
 your nights your nights alone  
 your winds your winds your grass  
 your lying slopes your holes your traps  
 quick blurs of all my dreams  
 Mountain poem of life  
 true and real  
 reeling Mountain burning mind  
 stand word stand letter  
 voice in whisper secret repeating cries  
 stand in rock stretch out  
 in all ways to the timber line  
 spread over all valleys run cool the water down  
 from luminous white snows  
 your cracks

O creek song flow always an utter pure of coolness  
 spring from the rocks  
 sing in the hot thirst my sticky tongue  
 my jaw catch below the bridge  
 Yes my jaw for your waters hangs  
 catch of water soothe the sweat  
 sweet cold on teeth in flow and eddy  
 in swirl my gut it fills and bloats with fluid Mountain

White  
    over  
all the air the valley shifts  
    shift up  
    the valley's shape over all the cup the earth it makes  
                    of the cottonwood  
O the cottonwood  
    float a hillside up with fluff rise  
eyes of the world whirling through me  
    clamor some sky-like music  
    fill the currents of the valley white  
                    clumps the eyes of the trees  
even slits in her sides dark alder gulleys hide under  
    white fluffs your cotton smooth earth-covered earth  
                    blurry in in  
semen spray soft cottonwood cotton  
    cotton  
            cotton  
        cotton

Wherever you are wherever  
    you can believe in pictures of the earth's contours  
            and just because its dark out have words enough  
the earth tonight can't wait —  
            the moon is gold the stars are  
somewhere the snow glitters back the ice shines  
            a cold moon the white makes  
and the eyes of Marblehead take in spaces as deep as their faces  
            black pitvoid voice the mouth hole  
the words all are places and distant the snowbird  
            a bowl to the white moon's brightening



fucking brown the fall airs O  
the end of August rains turn snow  
the dirt is hard around the rocks the leaves are warm  
around those rocks the snow is warm the dirt is  
O so Co-old

even the eyes  
along the road the map plots  
move as once moved  
time took from even the eyes switch  
turn with each bend  
bridge the creeks cut  
even the eyes the fences make  
and lumber yards the sawdust fills  
even the eyes scan  
along a lake the ditches' bottles weed and beaches' sand  
or gravelled air of gravel  
even the dust the eyes recall what the map shows  
as trail flag stop railway  
trestle the creosote planks  
or powerline the cut is or clearing the legs' relief  
from elevation intervals ridge to ridge  
the contour eyes make boundaries shot  
chains traverse the timber lease  
or lookout eyes look lookout of  
even the eyes a lake is or creek fills  
and the map the eye is a circle makes  
the Mountain isn't

Hey Mountain there  
spring up in the sky my skull holds  
a blazing green of scree and trees  
Hey our ice your ice  
it hides  
moves and slides  
white and cold as corn of summer smooth the winter's snow become  
so be your peaks in a very blue sky indeed  
squat where the legs of you slope  
flower out in the lakes of my eyes shimmering Kootenai waters green  
dark green  
flow down and into  
RISE

BENT  
the beat my self my heart's  
BENT BENT  
Bear system Fur quivering at the tree's roots  
not even a growl the gut flowing in cloud  
the vaporous red dream the horse's cock  
by the field the river  
erect to mount the mare  
beating  
FUR FUR  
in the valleys the hot afternoon  
the animals screwing  
all their mountains all the  
Ya Fur Fur

I stand the upright Mountain  
at its base I stand in roads in valleys  
in standing desire its quieting gravel ways  
stand roots upturned at the roadside  
turn in and twist deeper the head's nerves  
and gentle sinking stump my body warm

I look out at it to its tree branching  
boughs bird's wings  
flap in green in sun light light brown needles  
ground is covered dried shit of deer bed old

the old tree stand my axe is melting  
in bite the grain of the trunk  
burning the fire down to its roots black the bark hard  
the upright tree the Mountain's burn look out at it

stand in it turn cover the ground  
take off the thought's eyes go in

go in  
go in the flaming base  
sink in the skins of the Mountain's earth  
along the road  
far from the road  
in gravel

stand through the twist in desire the gravelled road inward  
to the base of the upright Mountain  
its quiet burning  
its evening still  
its my eyes have gone my eyes my birds' wings  
fluttering

O Mountain stand is set my roots the sun is in my legs

from LARDEAU

## MY HORSE

I never had  
who carries me  
so secretly  
is dead.

I think  
he bucked  
& threw me  
on a mountain  
at the bottom  
of the path.

O my dead horse  
I never had  
such dreams  
as dreams of you  
not there  
when I ride past.



### THE SMILE

That is, the night  
being dark & hard to see out of  
by moonlight  
but the next day  
we are right out  
from the southwest hills  
on the level  
road  
    a trading-post  
of red mud  
& the good-looking Navajo girl  
against it  
stands in the morning sunlight  
to let me see her figure's length  
stretch  
    in her velvet blouse  
how  
to beguile my looks  
at her hand-woven shoulder-blanket  
which is for sale  
but she sort of smiles too

### THE OCTOBER ARGUMENT

She says that I cling to the past  
trees, places, people and things  
but my cheeks are cold  
in the walk around the block  
tonight

we are both here together  
now what more is present  
than a memory  
my cheeks get warmer  
and the darkness is out there

my love there is no compromise  
if you will not wait  
while I drag my ass  
in the past.

## ACROBAT ON A BALL

the boy stands  
balanced on a ball  
which does not move

the man  
sits on a blue cloth  
on a blue box  
which does not move

on a hill behind  
the woman  
& two children  
with a dog  
do not move

a horse eats  
on a further hill  
but the eating  
does not move

& the blue sky  
is a blue sky too

behind the last hill  
is not there  
though a man runs  
down a mountain path  
which ends  
when he steps into  
a dark forest

the tall trees hide  
where he runs on to  
& sway in the wind

when the moon begins  
by then  
the man is not there

though the moon moves  
behind the last hill  
& the stillness is too

## A FABLE

There somewhere  
a big pounded meatball went loping.  
As it went loping along the road  
one was lying there somewhere beside the road.  
The loping one said  
to him, that coyote

Are you lying here?

The coyote said

Yes, I am lying here

I am about to die of hunger.

That big meatball  
said to him

You must take one big bite of me.

And he did take a bite of it  
and ran along the road again  
stopped and lay down over there  
in front of it, the meatball,  
where it was rolling here  
loping along the road,

And are you lying here?

He is and with hunger also

and so that big meatball said to him  
that coyote

You must take one big bite of me.

And so he did three times  
running down along the road again  
to stop and lay down over there wherever  
in front of where the rolling was  
all the time for one big bite.

Oh, you are that same one  
moving along cheating me  
for he saw himself  
in amongst the coyote's teeth.

LARDEAU / SUMMER 1964

I said we slept in a shack  
at the bottom of the valley  
watched the sun set after supper  
over an ice field to the north  
an unnamed glacier, then  
the mountains about us  
left white by the moon.

And I said it was a hot day  
where we were I had a headache  
at noon the blue above turned  
to a green blur of moving trees  
the felled log rolled under me  
and we began the afternoon's cruise  
looking at ourselves in the forest.

About the Lardeau?  
There is little to say.  
It is green, it rains  
often, the mountains  
are very beautiful,  
there is a moon at night,  
the unnamed glacier is the shape  
of a bird in flight, with stars  
in its eyes, my logging boots  
make me feel strong  
but too heavy to use strength,  
the rivers and creeks  
flow south to the lake,  
there are mosquitoes, the name  
is Marblehead.

At the end of it  
it was all a dream  
I said from looking up  
up an eighty-foot pole  
at lunch and he:  
well, I'll be here all winter  
and the cruising's easy on snowshoes  
though this summer has been a nice one  
gotta get that left shock fixed next time in town

I said  
you must be finishing labor  
at the top of Meadow Mountain  
for she was born at 9:15  
and we neared the top then too  
I had pains in my stomach.



climb

Climb up get a way through to the top  
of this rock face for a view much better  
for the possible road into this canyon  
no you climb and we'll wait here at the  
bottom by the coolness of the creek meet  
you in a while sure but the stupidity and  
risk to get such a view on the way back down  
weak muscles shake feeling a way through  
this cliff I freeze on a shelf and cannot  
go down and cannot go back up.

THEY ARE BURNING

Pitch black up the valley  
in front of us twenty miles  
they are burning the mountains down  
the sky is that kind of orange  
the hillsides are outlined to us  
in just that orange horizon  
which will be gone with daybreak  
when the smoke of their burning  
hangs over the valleys rivers and trees  
drifts slowly on the contours of the land  
and the deadness where no birds fly.

Yes they are burning  
for it is July  
and August and the nights  
with no wind the darkness is cool.

What I thought would be there is not  
I'm sorry to say. What I had expected  
was to sleep for the ride with eyes closed  
not drive into a burning mountainside.

## MOON DOG

the dog barks  
on another street

two dogs bark  
& the one in the sky

the stars  
all bark at

the moon

stop yapping  
& it hides in the mountains

## SHAPE-OF-A-BIRD-WITH-STARS-IN-ITS-EYES

Unnamed glacier  
north  
25 degrees west  
north  
look north tonight  
at white  
the white hump of ice  
the moon the snow  
bright  
shape-of-a-bird-with-stars-in-its-eyes  
go morning north  
road that way to dawns and breakfasts  
morning grass boots wet  
and some morning don't stop to eat  
with the boots keep walking  
ten miles and find out  
then go into it and into it  
the wet grass morning glacier the  
shape-of-a-bird  
there where I arrive  
with my wet boots on  
what should I name it

ISABELLA: 2 thoughts

the green grass grows dark  
under the foot's rhythm  
& the kept time  
& comes to be gone in the end  
forgotten  
what clouds  
fall into the red west  
waiting  
    for a moment  
                        thus  
the final suck  
and all time lost  
at the edge  
    falling

an ounce of energy  
just remembered  
                        forgotten  
from others  
at least that much  
meant more  
than the night (itself)  
and  
to be taken  
    took it  
(the ounce  
    for me

*from Tish No. 1-19*

from AMONG

AMONG

The delight of making inner  
an outer world for me  
is when I tree myself  
and my slight voice screams glee to him  
now preparing his craft for the Bifrost  
Kerykeion he said, the shore  
now a cold March mist moves  
down through the cow pasture  
out of the trees  
among, among



## THE CANOE, TOO

there is all that talk about northern waters  
lakes with canoes sliding silently over the cold glass surfaces  
in the moonlight  
and a mountain rising to the moon in its ice and snow  
the rocky shore and its cold dry branches of driftwood waiting  
for you to return alone in the still night  
shimmering darkness

there is all that talk of this  
and the mind wanders there in a canoe language carries  
like a picture framing you in the black ice water

there is all this kind of talk and you listen to the words

the northern lakes freeze  
over the ice snow covers the valley  
and all the trees

## HERMES IN THE TREES

World word alive  
in the heart circle of the moon  
round and square  
the trees hum and whistle  
the trees bend slightly  
the wind is warm and it moves  
up the valley it moves  
as May 1st has today  
the warm spring advances  
the tops of them crown in the air that moves  
(can their own roots know any of it?)  
O word of the world  
round and square  
give me such graces  
and all accomplishment incline to me  
the blackness and swift flight  
roots held in the dark soil  
bright branches to the sun and air  
in other words the eye of heaven  
consumed by necessity and by its redness  
out through the west wall to my right  
out there in the trees  
as a bird rushes to perch in the moon's limb  
and such a whiteness heard  
that servant and messenger of the inner world  
"the lightning flash that connects heaven and earth"  
out there in the gully the cedar-head that needs  
the cedar-feet out there which wants  
ever to return  
twin-twisted kerkeion  
the warm and dark  
the roots as claws  
under all of this  
moving over  
under

## NOTE

Mike I look through the spruce boughs  
Far out over the valley  
Into sun-in-the-clouds.

And I pivot, Mike  
At the turn of winter  
I try to be the place,  
Till my gaze as tree-face  
Cedar-head, sun-shine.

## FURS

*for Jack Clarke*

I.

Fur

is the woods

fur

the soft bound ball

body slat (down at the river

laid out in

fur

the dead dog the dead fur stiff stuff

corpse

1846

"it was no longer profitable to trap the beaver"

1834

1820 1821

in a dog's yelp

beaver

horses

tracks on the earth

but not beaver

dogs

are our fur's the same thing

the same reach

for beaver

and rivers

go where

the men go those trappers those lyrical

trappers

song-minded americans

in dog's yelping

to Astor

sitting in new Yawrk

sippin gin &





III.

the fur  
    is as clear as can be had  
        as trans-continental  
they occupy little space  
    in a canoe  
not fur  
    at all

in Buffalo — May 1966

IV.

in The Winter of November 1969

(Going now to where this came from  
only to arrest the world as a going on  
“experience of earth” and my friend from Chicago  
says “walk right through all that”

November 14, Apollo 12  
has just been struck by lightning  
and above the Kootenay river  
the affirmation of strength and “infinite possibility”  
straight out the front door  
the very fur Simpson’s men didn’t  
or even Loki  
stretched out under the apple tree sleeping  
as I a joy  
step on this morning  
the lip  
to hold all of it there  
a magnet  
that dog’s eyes  
the obvious  
farnesses)

FOREST

And we just stood there  
in the Forest  
look  
at everything around us  
looking  
surrounding

## ALL EYES

*for Jenefer*

She is as yet  
all eyes to see  
and must look out  
at everyone

(from on her back  
the leaves  
the falling green  
of trees fall to

her eyes o eyes  
her aye well-seeming  
eyes.

## THE FLOWER

The Mountain sits  
in the men's minds  
of the east

flowering  
as some white  
and green lip  
or petal

in the imagination  
of colors  
and size

fragrances and ice  
a timber line  
scree, some grass  
lake and rocky  
streams

all  
in their imaginations  
that it is a mountain  
they sit upon  
crying out up the valley  
"A flower, a flower!"

### A MISSILE

O Jack  
    what a relief  
a laugh  
    this morning

See everything goes anywhere  
that any other place  
is also  
    there.

Believe me  
    it is pure Joy  
to overshoot the Moon  
and find you  
out there  
    too.

### UP THAT HILL & INTO THE TREES

you bastard  
and don't stop-

run  
a turn is a trunk  
the bark the coat of  
a stem that I am  
a sapling it is  
into brush into  
needles my eyes  
the head in the green  
of its branches  
the rough it is  
rough to the face  
my bark is hit  
hair in the pitch  
stick in the crotch  
scrape against the bark  
open the skin  
from the eyes in  
the needles the  
needles the green-blue  
through the bunches  
its shoulders feet  
caught betwixt roots  
twist the boughs  
who give way they  
bend the pitch stays  
the air a shimmering  
sunlit haze of pollen  
I'm into the trees  
my legs the hill



## COVER

this  
is the enchanted forest this  
is Criseyde and Gawain in the rain this  
is too important it is dark  
out under the trees  
    there is too much going on  
        out there  
    the stars  
        are there  
    the fog is  
here its cold the stones  
are wet and slippery  
  
the woodshed is out there somewhere  
they are screwing their lives up  
in the castle the feast is very important  
the kisses are the war was  
the hunt is every day away all day  
the grass is shiny  
    here is the moon and  
    here is his shield  
    his horse  
        carries a ton here  
is the axe  
    there  
is the forest  
where is her palace now  
    why is she here  
        look  
at his heart  
where has she gone and why  
is he sleeping in the rain  
    this  
is really the enchanted forest  
    her picture  
is on the cover

## ... WITH FEELING

Build a big  
uh. . . anything  
  
'Like a, like a  
    drum, a drum'  
  
And hit it now  
all over town, you  
  
Show 'em spin  
their heads  
  
And How  
to make a bang  
  
A Great big  
noise of yourself.

from TREE

**DON'T CUT ME DOWN**

I don't want any of this tree poetry  
shit from you. You don't know what a  
fuckin tree is. If ya think its only  
in yer head yer full a shit. Trees is  
trees and the only thing they're good  
for is lumber so don't give me any crap  
about them bein sumpin else. Fer chrys  
sake you think the rest of us don't  
know sweet fuck all compared to you.  
Well you don't know nuthin till ya go  
out there and bust yer back on em.  
Settin chockers'd break yer ass so fast  
ya wouldn't even wanna look at a  
goddamned tree let alone write about  
em. Then ya'd know what a tree wuz,  
steda yappin about it.

I'm no tree except the part of me  
as roots now new spring up among  
the willows on the roadside shoots  
of alder, cherry, maple runners, buds  
grow at the sky from clay and gravel  
daily now, each day a fraction  
of the snow melts up the bank  
those green plum eyes seep out.

Cedar perfume forest  
sunlight sweet  
so silent, paths  
ahead our eyes  
reaching out behind  
to pull it all  
and move it in  
let it  
see itself happen  
quiet sweet  
a sunlight forest  
cedar noses perfume  
burns into the closeness

## HAVOC NATION

How the earth  
dangles  
eyeing over the geographical heap  
now the nation smothers  
lays onto the private magic state  
its own fake imagination.

Backoff

into my feet  
and onto my own weight  
leap

and into her hair  
Love tangles, in her eyes  
Havoc sleeps.

“Cry Havoc”  
and slip out the dogs of war.  
The first woman will always be  
the first woman and that  
is a revelation.

How do you tell  
someone else where you live? Can you  
reveal it as real a place  
as they sometimes think you are?



In the mountains near here  
there is a woman who is also crow.  
She is overjoyed with tears  
when she meets another likewise crow.  
Even if you knew this  
could you look her up?

I also know a man who is a tree  
and he received a letter  
from a friend back east which ends  
"It must be a very real world where you are  
Love, George"

That man is me  
as well a revelation.

Well dangle then  
the revelation  
revolution nation  
let slip the dogs of war  
out your back door  
Trees and Crows  
are the ones what knows  
this Havoc old Hav Ok  
will stuff it in your Cry  
this magic leaping tree  
will never be the apple  
of anyone else's Eye.

Out here  
crystal eyes  
only the snow  
make it a gaping mouth  
flesh and bark  
make it a stem then  
skin  
a smooth white hide  
touch to the frost bite  
make it a finger  
branch spread  
canals for warm blood  
steam in the cold air  
make it a heart then  
a heart ring  
good wood  
with a deep breath  
for the star nights  
shine in the moonlight  
snow  
up to the knees  
hoof to the spring ground  
heat for that foot touch  
our heads move  
only to see it all  
shimmer in each of us  
there are so many  
who move through  
we bump and touch  
that's soft  
warm that's love  
sweet birch out here  
under all this winter  
make it a body then  
under under  
its only a weight  
light snow  
well  
its everything  
all of it  
all under  
so we look up for it  
falling over us  
into the core  
cover  
covers us

On the earth  
    *nararupa*  
and In the world  
    *arupa*  
among the trees among  
the distant lights & stars  
a song  
    one endless breath  
each single soul of us  
hearts legs eyes  
flow & shine  
    *eka*  
early one morning  
one man sets forth  
through all of it  
    himself, the mountains, creeks  
& many other creatures  
anywhere

I imagine it  
a memory tree  
birds in my hair  
snow on the ground  
the history of trees  
or rocks of granite  
spruce and birds  
up here  
the wind.

66

for Gladys McLeod

1.

67



only "profit" in the names, no talk  
left about it, so set now  
there is no argument, choices gone,  
nothing left to say  
Forest Ranger.

2.

house of structure wood all leaky  
roof this morning in the rain

sits in the chimney flashing seeps  
through to the roof joists and drips

still upright tree wood (branches?)  
from the floor sill to cross-beams

what cells left without the bark, root-  
less timbers stand in the doorways

and window frames its ok the house  
is "appropriate", our real needs

do not profit us, the hillside trees  
also leak the rain down to their roots.

3.

I admit the industry of it, hot  
summer work, sweat and mosquitoes  
in the headband of the hardhat, chain-oil,  
whine of the diesel among the spruce  
ehrrrrrehrrr of the saw  
to the heart-wood, I admit  
the hi-baller works for a new pickup  
each year, weekends in town  
I admit his skill, I admit that he makes  
a life of his own from it, with a grip  
on the throttle lever, admit it

4.

Probably the trees are warming in the sun  
the mud dries up and hardens on the roads  
streams are full and muddy now in runoff  
a whole forest stretches out the new rings  
probably it all just stands there, amazed  
with the steam rising up from clay banks  
gravel shoulders glisten

in the morning light  
bridge planks shed roofs ditches a contour  
part of a scene, probable and amazing  
for the sun, warmer now towards the end  
of March, a forest moves towards the light.

from EARTH

## CRUISE

. . .so I told myself I would go out wandering not over the world but in the world until I found instant upon instant of that minute contact with a piece of it, say a twig, or a woman but with no other intention than an afternoon walk or a job might be in getting some work done and that at any place along the way I could dwell there forever in a state of property or it might be a more lively endeavor in which things would be counted, three switchbacks, a washout, a city, five gods, etc., i.e. I would be out there in it with everything else collecting measurements with my senses in a timeless meandering through the wonder.

1.

Heavier than air  
on the traverse  
over  
outward through October  
movement rewired as crisp air again  
heavier  
oh so much caught  
in the microscopic particulars of its weight  
just as the padded paw-print, just so.

Now in San Francisco a poet returns  
announced in two about ten-line poems on the front page of the Chronicle  
something in one of them about this is where I have been  
and now I am back I've been in the woods, in a creek in fact

Its morning

fallen  
to the earth

the apples have had frost by now  
pasture's full of em the cows'  
cream becomes heavier

all  
glitters  
picks up the shift and twist

shift  
and switch  
again  
and again

there's music and dancing in the fields and visions in the tall couch grass  
there's nothing new in all of the strangeness of even our dreams these nights  
nor of the moon coming back into the play of a renewed illustration of the tracks  
contained in taste the multi-million flavours of the presence placed

simply placed  
in mouth

the particle  
the hue

outside the room to left or right along the beams and over the door jambs  
the six directions the four gods the seven arrows the nineteenth lunar mansion  
the twenty-two and the twenty-eight the complete circle moebus strip and every feast  
the whole fucking multitude coming through the door at once

each

just so, just  
placed by its own weight  
tells it

now I am here from where I have come crossed on over in the present body like this

I was in the sky above Bonnington Falls

expansive

nearly a full moon  
west from Copper Mountain to Sentinel

(he's a dog  
leg of the river  
or ridge

We said we'd meet somewhere along the river but no one else showed up.  
There was a back road  
light frost on the ditch-grass.

Alone in the night and mist moving  
over the roads and rock outcrops  
river shining up its banks through the treetops.

Someone's back yard

empty

the wind.

Drive around the back  
from Krestova to Pass Creek from Goose Creek to Raspberry Village.

No one.

The ferry doesn't cross at this time of night.  
Drive up river and over the dam.

Back in the sky  
float up the Kootenay to the light  
there's the moon again still crossing over the night between two peaks.

I step off the ride into our own yard  
move some lumber out of the frost  
putter around under the trees  
cedar looming from the moon.

Body tired  
pissed off

In the timber Tiwaz crosses over on a spruce limb  
as a boat over the ocean he flows over the windfalls  
bark flies from his caulked boots and he cracks the dead larch boughs in his path  
so that it thunders through the days and nights above him above his shoulders  
up the valleys through the great cedar stands his crossing over becomes the mountain  
across the river in the enormous distance of his cruise cumulus rolls  
his weight he carries with him in front of himself he pushes out he gathers  
the whole horizon his eyes sight by peaks the straightest intention of his direction  
over which he disappears a gap an arc a glint of light.

In the afterwarmth

the mountains across the river shine as the mist thins

morning shows

morning shows

## 4.

"CHAIN"



1.  
The idea of it. Pictures form and the topography  
gets carried around in a head. Sometimes the feet  
find out what a trick the mind is. A necessary  
disguise for what the heart expects. But the Abney  
Rule and Compass are equivalently off. And so we move  
in on the new territory only to trip and fall over our  
imaginings, get lost.

2.  
Snowed a few inches last night. Went up to the  
Giant's Kneecap — freezing wind snow and whiteout  
at the top. Skied down into Joker Creek a ways before  
we realized we were in the wrong valley.

3.  
There are times moving through the bush so fast  
I fade into everything around me. Zigzag, switchback  
and sidehill force a fadeout between body and earth.  
Such a dance. Touch is some thing itself. A flash.

4.  
Everything's out there larger elsewhere and then  
I add myself who's watching.

5.  
Via the car journeying over the surface is when its  
flat. Maybe boats on still water too or skiing  
across the frozen lake. By plane its always there  
and back so more a line.

6.  
Look out of the cave-mouth at an arched horizon,  
cut-off sky and alabaster rock wall limits. We  
see a night sky, the arch of stars, some heaven.

7.  
The size of a river = its original ridges.

8.  
We moved over the tables making our various tests  
for identification — hardness, specific gravity,  
streak, etc. Just as though we were about to cook  
and eat it all talk shifts to a rumour of serpentine  
on True Blood Mountain.

9.  
Lyles Adopola. Sweet smelling orange mint.

10.  
The Xthonic inhabitants of the sea, ridge-dwellers,  
known as 'the steady ones'.

11.  
One can imagine how difficult it might be to navigate  
a course through some creeks, trails, and ravines  
which are measured both in terms of a surface (the  
map) and the underside of someone's idea of the  
place (the story).

12.  
The magical alchemical inversion of it is that it  
is already.

13.  
Duncan M. says he dearly loves his own back yard.  
Now I do too. The only test we have for it is  
the unavoidable picture.

14.  
High in the mountains, high on a mountain, and spin.  
To ride this horizon of a thousand peaks and sky  
makes me dig my heels into the scree and ice and  
lean back hard, just to hold on even.

15.

Silence leads — sinking into the viscera — gently —  
head feels lighter and drained — a thin, fragile  
wire open now — mind of all the air surrounds me —  
arms and shoulders fall relaxed — carefully and  
softly my body is lifted back up refreshed and  
presented to the food — mouth holds to the first  
taste which fills my head stretched out now over  
the lake and the day.

16.

I get scared sometimes when I'm alone in the bush,  
especially at dusk when the stumps and rocks become  
grizzly bears. Never handled that aloneness, passage  
to becoming all one over extended time in unknown  
strange surroundings except to squint, peer, grope  
and fumble.

17.

I was sick, very sick. And I hoped for deep sleep.  
It seemed to me that the bed was in an east-west  
axis and should be lying north-south. But true or  
magnetic north I did not know. A cow elk appeared  
to me, in a valley, so I checked my compass and  
headed north.

severance spring water

wasp or hornet who cares

it was a toxic arrow full of information of Another World a stream of itself

immense ejaculation knockout zapping nerve box

synapse blackout another place so beautiful Pauline that's where I am

Pauline

No No Here uh yes Here I uh

slapped me back to bathroom pain and muscle struggle I was gone there

taken over

some chemical creek flowed through the dream in darkness

there was nothing to look at or any others taking part

she slapped and yelled at me

I didn't want to return

it was so beautiful this textured cool caress

the spring water I splashed on my eye

Sunday morning

Sun Trees

A Loss A Dream

Voices in the rooms outside me

He needs adrenalin

stretched out and holding on

Needles Shapes Stomach (the vulnerable

fix the spring get the tools

barbed wire

his foot at the nest

bango

a distance road cold fear dead weight

jaw

the viscous fluid flowing through all my body helpless now

that power the wasp informs me of

given

such a look

at the grid of action the bloodstream's also part  
the sting  
it signaled it was ready for and took  
on the way to the hospital she said just keep breathing I hadn't even considered it

AM OSPREY  
BEAK STUFFED WITH STICKS/FISH FLESH

HORIZON WING  
AM LAKE

FEATHERS' COLOUR REDUPLICATE  
SYMMETRY WATER BROWN AND GREY

CLAW CRIMP ON KOKONEE  
OLD TAMARACK LIMB

NECK JERK WORLD LOOK SKY  
SCREECH SHIT BIRD-SHIT NEST EDGE

EEE UHREE REE



## SONG

My eyes strain against the hillside for a movement,  
a shape, a flash of white-ass fur. I'm on the top  
of the ridge below a grove of poplar. This is  
pretty good. It's clearer here. A view with distance  
and I can see more of the bush, alder gullies and  
old burns. If anywhere, there should be some sign  
here or in the clump of trees above; fresh elk shit  
(steaming still), a warm bed, fresh tracks in the  
snow. I stop for a smoke here, wipe the sleet off  
my glasses and rifle scope, sit on a log.

It begins  
as my own breathing, a rhythm in the chest picked up  
by the blood (pulse), short puffs of white steam  
from my mouth. In this the words come (language  
engraved in the air of a middle silence):

Stand Up  
Stand Still  
Be With me  
Here

I don't look. Just a blue-white blur of air in front  
of me as I listen hard. Within me, carried by the  
breath, the words speak. They and I warm up to it  
and move now with a song, move nowhere, just sit there,  
now somewhere.

It's a red globe not green whirling (let it whirl)  
out of mind and sight. Eyes and a hand or foot  
are required to measure the process between the  
shoulder blades of this burden. This is a ravine-  
like latitude on which rests a weight as solid as  
a lake, conclave held there by foot-step and  
rock-ripple. Arms recognize directions the fingers  
hold to. The whirling motion is a thought similar  
to a blue sky. The fluidity of the lake, frozen  
or not, is a part of the size. It's all pretty  
close to what's going on where mind, eye and  
lake meet to provide name and home.

*I point to my own absolute experience of  
myself as a step towards which all  
my being flows (into) & fills  
and from that there a physical place  
out of which the possible. . .*

*. . . just so's there's a steady flow of breath  
of him who is the turbine of his own sources  
and comes from the base of the neck  
from a small hint of light far back of what is about  
to happen.*

Out of the salt  
tears, grass and browse  
I've never seen a bison  
or a parallel flaked point  
in all my life  
to cut the taste  
I couldn't believe it  
no matter who we were  
cry out salt lick  
eat it up.

I eye a herb  
and flower  
garden pauline  
says so

put your foot  
on the shovel  
for a fat  
red tomato.

Sweet baby!  
Sweet baby!

Chicadeedeedee.



Walk out to the lip  
    over the wet grass walk out  
skin and blood eyes hands boots  
    again and again  
even the eyes move as always moving lines  
    circles  
    of the morning sun  
curriculum  
    of soul

wait for  
the sky to come up  
on the peaks' horizon  
aphorous line  
cloud  
the blue  
stars  
night  
a spinning  
earth  
day  
glacier  
morning star

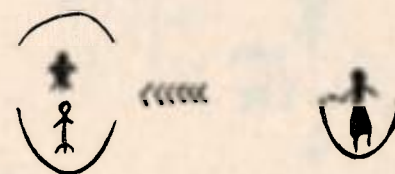
anxious  
to be weather  
rather  
be too wet

rained light  
and concoctible  
limpid sweet  
and grateful  
to taste thin

then rises as a sea  
to a heaven  
called the air

on the b  
on the bottom of the sea  
but in the green and coral  
pleasurably pleasurably

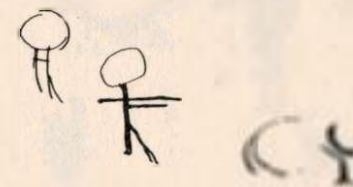
from PICTOGRAMS FROM THE INTERIOR OF B.C.



Under and over  
I see myself rocking  
boat/cradle  
cave to swim into  
over and over again  
home again  
home



How does she know that  
How does she do all that walking  
through the forest  
How does she know the bears won't get her?



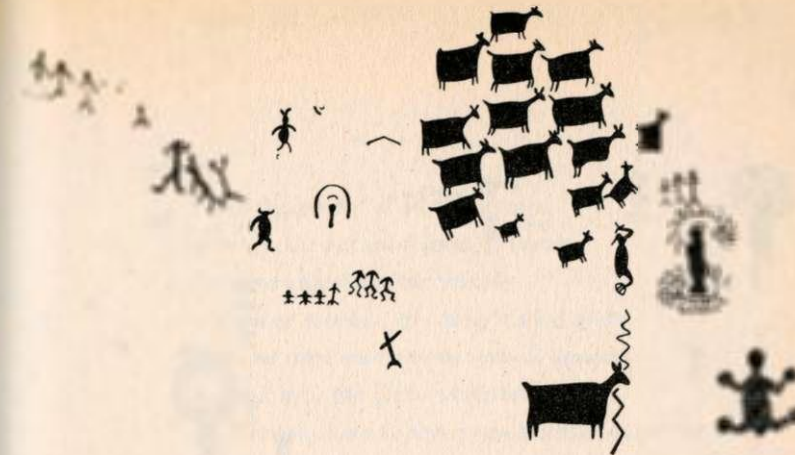
How does the jazz go?  
Autumn moon a bit drunk  
in the tree-tops with Wind  
(north) & Pacific cloud banks  
about 1959 not quite  
jamming it but from here  
to the coast one big  
triple high C and wetter  
than a duck's ass just  
a sliver of a harvest moon.





Northeast  
 (from family, a few friends)  
 I turned  
 since I had accompanied my father  
 that far  
 what was in the world around here  
 became larger

some part of it  
 then all of it

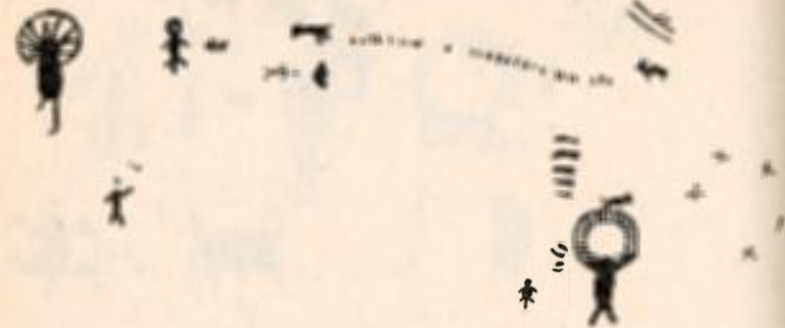


I walked into a battle  
 with the forest  
 I tried on the buffalo-horn headdress  
 things happened to me  
 visions and pictures  
 two or three signs

I pushed one way  
 and I pushed another way

size gave dance to me  
 the deer showed me form

the larva, it  
 opens up.



We are different  
from one another  
in the space between us  
a lot happens  
more than of only you or I

the air  
or through it all  
(dog, turtle, beaver  
fallen trees by the roadside  
I remember)  
I have come to be  
no different from them

one by one one can  
become the other

such as night serves  
to show day's stars

# from BREATHIN' MY NAME WITH A SIGH

I like the purity of all things seen  
through the accumulation of thrust  
forward especially the vehicle  
container maybe / or 'thing' called body  
because time seems to be only *it* appears  
to look into the green mountain valleys  
or through them to the rivers & nutrient creeks  
*where* was never the problem animal is  
I still have my own name it's what they call me  
'breathin' my name with a sigh'

I thought where I came from we grow up  
also only to reach heaven  
and / or what our bodies dictate to us.

Sometimes I remember the 'hinge' too late  
or what we call the 'fence'  
having crossed over it side to side.

Such 'things' and their ideas are 'walls'  
and demand me return into my life  
as the dogs scratch at the door for the warmth there.

I wonder if I can ever pay attention like that  
to my own life and the simple or bare particulars  
of what is its 'number' without making up  
some other cruel paradigm to swim around in.

I feel the spring in me and the water running.  
But I don't know how it does that or where.

I lie here and wait for life again

no one told me this happens

not death but a consequence of it

the physical isn't a world  
at least it wasn't

when I ran up the road this morning  
out of breath

yet that is what I most desire

It's only information

I mean what leads up to death is.

What's it like to hold yourself in for awhile  
settle for that a whole lifetime?  
If I don't pass the impasse what'll happen?  
Maybe I can just stay here  
until thought  
settles like dust through the sunshine  
giving it all back to me  
so I could  
just pack up each day, maybe  
no one does anyway, at least look like  
what they're doing.

Not so much all of us dying  
or nobody else living or even one  
one shining master of light  
but a procession forth  
into I like the movement  
in our syntax goes  
something like a river Daphne  
so it's still 'how' we do what  
and give a punch we hope  
words to take off on us  
will still be the line all of us  
dying to do it the best way we can.



next spring  
I'll go out to the garden  
and with a stick  
plant myself  
and eat me in the fall

outside it's snowing  
they're skinning the bear  
it's snowing  
a small she black bear  
symmetrical paws  
knife  
slit  
down the inside thigh  
to the crotch  
careening  
single sound  
flys from her  
from her  
the snow falls  
from her  
flying from her  
naked now  
bear pig hamstrung, flesh  
a little fat (winter)  
from *her*

It's not enough. I think it should be,  
To be able to. That's all I need.  
To do anything. Complete.  
How does it go? Did it?  
I want to know I'd better  
what's going on. Or *it*.  
I shovelled gravel today. I hoped  
that would be enough and then afraid  
I wouldn't be there right then but  
somewhere else far away in the mountains alone  
I thought working hard in the hot sun  
I know how that goes I would just breathe  
but away from myself. Give it all back.

the build-up  
how I listen to myself try to make it  
'hold on'  
so that the day remains in the light  
the next collision open  
and I catch up to the breath  
breathing somewhere  
the air  
as it comes out  
ahead of me  
'waahh, waahhh'

ok I get a sense of it now  
breath can reach my toes  
I can take there the thought  
and breath goes with it  
simple exercise mechanics  
image disconnected out  
beyond the foot  
remember *hw hw*  
question and answer remember  
the only bird of poetry  
the night  
Sanskrit 'to breathe'  
out only empties the container  
a handful of dead toenails  
*hw hw*

as he leaves her  
as he moves  
as he leaves for the whalehunt  
he blows his breath  
into a kelp bubble  
shaped like a small balloon  
ties it and gives it to her  
to hold for him  
until he returns  
or so that she knows he won't  
when it deflates

around her neck  
she wears his breath  
or over her bedpost at night  
his breath

(horizon of ocean swells and tides  
something like old sealskin  
strip of seaweed necklace  
box of cedar  
air  
you hold for me  
til I get back)

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POEMS UNPUBLISHED

THIS SUMMER WE'RE GONNA GET A PIG  
AND FENCE IT UP IN COUCH-GRASS, PROBABLY  
NAME IT HOG OR PORKY  
FEED IT WHEAT AND CORN.  
GET ALL THAT GOOD PIG-SHIT  
AND COME TO LOVE IT LIKE A PET  
PREDICTABLE THE DAY WE SLIT ITS THROAT

I'M GOING TO KEEP ON DANCING  
FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE

*for Lewis*

Sproul Plaza body writhing on the asphalt  
then swaying in the bandstand, Lew  
did you ever play the saxophone  
in your high-school dance band  
especially A-Train and heft the ax  
in a slight tilt 'till you tipped the music  
and wailed out of your left shoulder  
swirled honky honey blues glissandos  
or maybe later you used your hips  
when everybody switched from jazz to Comets  
you could really pull it all out  
and hump your horn 'till you're on your knees  
and the girls are screamin and wettin their pants  
and pushing their crinolines between their legs  
whew, Lew  
that's what this dancer's doing on the plaza  
so much into it and what you do too  
so that all that Texas in your voice  
sways you into the body, sways you  
and us, here Lew  
read this for me will you?

IT WAS SO COLD  
I COULDN'T WHISTLE  
TO KEEP THE BEARS AWAY

## HOW TO BUILD A FIRE

get hungry  
go around in the bush  
pick up sticks  
throw them over the rocks  
into a pile  
remember the smile of the heat  
watch out for thorns and splinters  
keep going until you've got enough  
past the man at the mouth  
and watch out  
meet everyone else  
with their sticks and logs  
don't forget the rock  
be big and orderly now  
start the fire  
and get the others  
to bring in the crow  
shout and jump around  
maybe pray to something  
scatter the pieces  
bones and feathers  
and remember what's left  
emptyhead

## WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU GET THERE

travel  
when you get there  
get into a corner or something  
take the 90 degree horizon  
and with what you still carry from your trip  
put it together privately  
to the others talk  
tell each other of events since last together  
what you're going to do tomorrow, etc.  
laugh a little bit at the perspective  
its large  
and when things rise in you like this  
come to the surface with a force of their own  
then let them  
sit in the warmth  
be in the middle of the large

## WHEN I WILL BE WATER

was suh  
in the distance  
distance  
ihh-zuh ihh-zuh  
water  
did you hear me  
water  
water  
otter  
ahh

Loki Death Dog Died  
from his stomach  
uyh uyh uyh  
cousin  
mountain  
died  
his death  
uyh uyh  
in his dream  
running running  
uyh uyh  
with his mouth  
with his hunger/love  
death  
with his twisted stomach  
running  
along the road  
trees/sky  
uyh uyh  
breathing  
hard  
death  
clouds in the sky

## LOKI IS BURIED AT SMOKY CREEK

He pointed at the water  
he looked that way  
towards the creek  
then went there  
through the trees and field in the night

aligned body fallen

flowed down mouth

the way the creek does

did



## CLOSE AND FAR

Cause yourself  
move dream-power  
in the midst of all others  
aware yourself for their eyes  
inscribe your own event for them  
only keep what is not asked for  
and be arrogant in your reply  
that you dwell alone  
on the shores of your own possible energy  
at the edges of intuition and feeling  
so flow yourself  
a revelation.

SUBTLE BODY  
THROUGH AND THROUGH  
CATCH BREATH  
RUN UP TO IT  
CATCH BREATH  
LET IT GO  
GO WITH IT  
BREATHE THROUGH  
FILL AND GLOW  
WARM MURMUR

ONE MORE ADEPT AT  
STANDING UP  
AS BIRD  
AND SEE OUT OF BIRD-EYE LOOK  
FROM TREE BRANCH  
THE WORLD IN FRONT BELOW  
AND ALL AROUND  
NOT NECESSARILY  
SINGING ANYTHING

## FIRST PERSONAL POEM

You and I  
(exclude everyone else  
this is a physical metalogical problem

out there  
grow the flowers  
I could put in a vase  
and leave for you

when I am not with you  
I am always with you  
love is a part of it  
also the mind

a picture  
*of* you  
not I  
nor the flowers

let's change the picture  
visualize it  
all, including the problem  
and colour too.

been there  
many times  
or at least

one, Jim Koller  
and two, Paul Klee's painting  
a ship sails by with a face on it  
and also, three, calligraphy is beautiful  
don't put it all together, it is.

The heavy chinese figures my father and grandfather bet on  
the lottery paper of soft tissue with wet purple pencil marks  
time too to remember images of Jim Koller in Oregon  
Wisconsin and Maine signs enough (dogs, travel, cabins)  
or better yet

"Drive .6 miles south from the main gate of the Kohler ranch.  
Stop and look over a small bank on the west side of the Richter  
Pass road.  
There is a rock slide on the east side of the road.  
All the pictographs are in red on a panel two feet by three feet.  
Some lichen is growing over the panel but most of the pictographs  
here are in quite good condition.  
Fig. a is located by itself at another site 100 yards southwest.  
According to Mr. H. Kohler this is a piece of what was at one time  
a huge granite boulder near the edge of the orchard.  
It has since been blasted apart and bulldozed out of the orchard area.  
As these sites are on private property,  
you must ask permission."

(Corner, p. 73)

next time I'll take a photograph  
it doesn't matter does it what the things mean  
they return to you  
in the simplest and most obvious, really,  
configurations.

## PLANT

Not until we've talked to a growing plant  
sat there with it during its own all life-day  
to hear, as with the whales, the music  
a re-enactment of the phrase (shape)  
will the information that we eat from its flesh  
make sense.

Until I've spoken with you  
as you speak among the others  
body to body  
in the screaming pitches of a sensational atmosphere  
will the message, the enchantment of its reference  
take root in me also.

Just as you are fixed I will come to you.  
I am no less held by what I am —  
you spoke first  
was it only the air humming  
a simple signification of presence  
your presence?

Take this too, blue chicory  
dandelion, cow-tree  
we participate in a melody  
so clear and so beautiful  
I reach out to you as you do in every way to me  
so we are in the body, in the body, of the song.

## HOW TO HUNT

Color it brown  
think about it  
ahead of time  
think about it  
afterwards  
listen to you  
how alone you are  
sitting on a log  
in the forest  
look at it about to happen  
completely in your mind  
and the world  
all the trees  
even the sky  
size  
surrounds everything  
did you forget  
say it  
“sheh”  
how heavy the task  
I’ve tracked myself  
to this log  
nothing else nothing  
waits  
get up (later  
you’ll get lost

## HOW TO BE SOMETHING

dream about it  
get the head back  
into the body into  
remembering  
skin  
imprint of shape  
into inside  
and look at what you do to yourse  
doing to yourself  
say “mmm”  
remembering  
don’t move  
let yourself be caught  
catch  
move  
very fast  
as fast as you can  
as you can



## FROM IN HERE. . .

Writing has a lot to do with "place," the spiritual and spatial localities of the writer. I see things from *where* I am, my view point, and I measure and imagine a world from there. Oaxaca, Vancouver, the Kootenay River a thousand years ago or today, my father's father's birthplace, become "local" to me and compound to make up a picture of a world I am native of. Writing is sometimes remembering this image, and sometimes it has to make it up. Malcolm Lowry says he thinks of himself as "a great explorer who has discovered some extraordinary land. . .but the name of the land is hell. . .It is not Mexico of course but in the heart." Writers are wonderers. And wanderers. The American poet Ed Dorn reminds us that the stranger in town is interesting because he at least knows where he has come from and where he is going. Writing is sometimes useful that way, with news of the world out there.

But out there is only meaningful in its correspondence to in here. I live in the "interior" of British Columbia and such a qualification affects my particular sense of what the world looks like. We go "down" to the coast, which is the exterior, the outside, the city. The spaces between here and there are part of a vast similarity. The towns become predictable in their activities and appearances. Castlegar and Prince George, though specifically themselves, share certain aspects of distance, colour and taste. One feels at home nearly anywhere there are rivers, pulp mills, trucks, the mysterious gravel roads further inward, and similar "local" inhabitants. Down and out there the exterior becomes more. Vancouver leads to other cities and countries, etc. But all of it, out there, is measured from in here. In the particularity of a place the writer finds revealed the correspondences of a whole world.

Fred Wah  
December, 1976

## Bibliography

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# SELECTED POEMS

## Loki Is Buried at Smoky Creek

**Fred Wah**

Edited with an Introduction by George Bowering

This volume includes work selected from each of Fred Wah's earlier books of poetry: *Lardeau*, *Mountain*, *Among*, *Tree* and *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.*; in addition to unpublished work and work from the manuscript edition of *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh*.



Fred Wah was born in Swift Current, Saskatchewan in 1939, but he grew up in the Kootenay region of British Columbia. He studied at The University of British Columbia in the early 1960's, where he was one of the founding editors of *TISH* the poetry newsletter. From Vancouver he moved on to study

in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where he edited *Sum*; and Buffalo, New York, where he edited the *Niagara Frontier Review* and *The Magazine for Further Studies*. He returned to the Kootenays in the late 1960's, where he edited *Scree* from Selkirk College in Castlegar. At present, he lives in South Slokan, B.C. and teaches writing at David Thompson University Centre in Nelson, B.C.

"The concept which dominates Wah's writing is that the geographical and historical particulars which immediately surround a man not only contain all history but together form a place that is for that man the true centre of the cosmos."

Frank Davey, *From There to Here*.

"Of all the writers who have developed out of the *TISH* experience, Wah was & is the most poetical. He does not, as the others do, write prose. The story, as he takes it, is not for recounting, but for happening upon, upon the moment. He offers spirit, not history."

George Bowering, From the Introduction



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