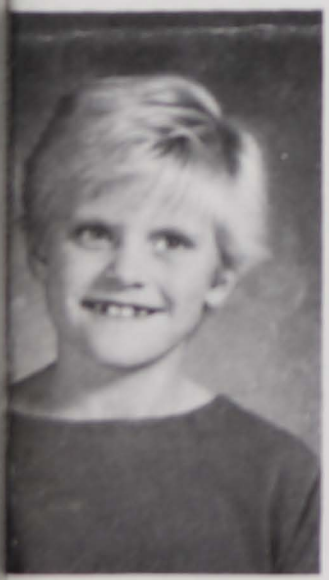
hole 6

Found outside Royal Oak pub on Bank Street, Ottawa, October 1994

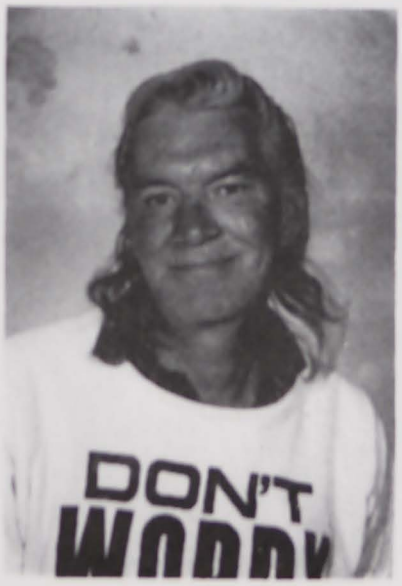
Found across from peacekeeping monument, Ottawa, 30 June 1995

Found in Bank of Nova Scotia, St. Catherine Street, Montreal, 24 February 1994



ound near National Gallery, Ottawa, June 1995

Found across from peacekeeping monument, Ottawa, 30 June 1995



Found outside Molly McGuire's, Ottawa, 7 June 1993

Germaine Koh is a visual artist and curator based in Ottawa. Her project *Knitwork* has been shown recently across Canada and in the United States. She will exhibit new work at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, Ontario, in summer 1997. Portions of **Lisa Robertson**'s epic, *Debbie*, recently appear in *Critical Quarterly* (UK). Meow press (Buffalo) has published *The descent: a light comedy in three parts*. She lives in Vancouver. **Fred Wah** works from Calgary. *Mixed Grill* is forthcoming with NeWest Press. **Susan Holbrook** (Calgary) recently has had poetry published in *West Coast Line* and *Capilano Review*. She is co-editing the queer issue of *absinthe* (forthcoming). **Clint Burnham** writes from Vancouver, for numerous magazines including *BOO*. **A book of poetry is forthcoming from ECW. Johan de Wit**'s review series, *Linear A, B,* and *C*, includes numerous books by contemporary writers from Canada, the U.S.A. and the U.K. He lives in London, England. **Mike Magoolaghan** writes from Seattle. **Nathaniel Dorward** (Halifax, Nova Scotia) runs a website on formally innovative contemporary British poetry at http://is.dal.ca/~ndorward.

hole 6

Poetics & Reviews

Fred Wah.

Loose Change

(A Molecular Poetics)

the of
and to a in
that it is I
for be was as

(and/or)

"Now I know I have a heart because it's broken."

"Loose Change" is meant, variously, as "what's left over" (and rattling around), what you can piggy bank on, what you can spare. I'd like to set notions of the "cents" in writing alongside notions of aggregation and difference. A "Molecular Poetics" would be, then, a set of tools in writing that amplify the minute and particular, the discernment of cells in composition that indicate a potential for presence, residue, evidence. Or, like the Tin Man's "Now I know I have a Heart because it's broken,"now we know we're reading *writing* writing (as opposed to some confessional realism) because its language is in pieces. Words as Cents. Histology, the study of (word) cells. The *punctum*, the beat, the gap, the gasp, the pulp, the pulse, the suprasegmental sigh, the sign.

As writers, some of us have attempted to dis-shelve textual transparency through the use of any heterocellular aftershock we can lay our hands on. Even silence. Particularly silence, because of the excessive noise it makes. Anything in language or its action that is dysmorphic, that will work against reading's vested interests in a coherence of form and meaning, reading's preferred attention to the words as symbols and connotations rather than, as Maurice Blanchot characterizes,

> Nonunifying words which would accept not to be a gateway or bridge (*pont*), which do not "pontificate," words able to cross both sides of the abyss without filling it in and without reuniting the sides (without reference to unity). (46)

It is at these points (not *ponts*) and recognizable gaps, where, Blanchot continues, our "waiting assures not only the beautiful hiatus that prepares the poetic act, but also and at the same time, other forms of cessation...and always such that the distinctions one can make between them do not avoid but solicit ambiguity" (47). Writing needs waiting. Writing needs to stop itself to know what's possible, impossible, to get within the silence of waiting.

You should sit on a log in order to hear yourself think, in order to contemplate how lost you are. This gap that interruption condenses reveals nucleotidal alphabets neces-

sary to proceed and recover the terrain.

> To say: "I don't undertand what this means," is, at least, to recognize that "this" means. The problem is that meaning is not a totality of sameness and predictability (**but a totality of difference and surprise**). Within each word, each sentence, meaning has slipped a little out of sight and all we have are traces, shadows, still warm ashes. The meaning available from language (**when one writes it**) goes beyond the actual instance of this word, that word. A text is a place where a labyrinth of continually revealing meanings are available (**interdependently**), a place that offers more possibility than we can be sure we know, sometimes more than we want to know. It isn't a container, static and apparent. Rather, it is noisy, frequently illegible. ~~Reading~~ (**Writing**) into meaning starts with a questioning glance, a seemingly obvious doubloon on a mast. The multiplicity can be read, should be read, even performed. But then again, perhaps meaning is intransitive and unreadable, only meant to be made. No sooner do we name meaning than it dissipates. As a sure thing, it eludes us. It arouses us to attempt an understanding, to interpret. But this is usually unsatisfying since whatever direction we approach from only leads us to suspect there is no one direction. No single meaning is the right one because no "right ones" stand still long enough to get caught. But because we do not know does not mean we are lost. Something that is strangely familiar, not quite what we expect, but familiar, is present. That quick little gasp in the daydream, a sudden sigh of recognition, a little sock of baby breath. Writing into meaning starts at the white page, nothing but intention. This initial blinding clarity needs to be disrupted before we're tricked into settling for a staged and diluted paradigm of the "real," the good old familiar, inherited, understandable, unmistakable lucidity of phrase that feels safe and sure, a simple sentence, just-like-the-last-time-sentence. One makes (the) difference. Meaning generates and amplifies itself, beyond itself, but never forgets; fragments of its memory and its potency exceed itself with meaning full of desire and can only be found hiding between the words and lines. (Wah, *Alley*, 5-6)

Further, I can see meaning, as Bruce Andrews does, as a material totality that, he says

> isn't just a negative restrictive thing, or some deterministic program. It's also something that's reproduced by action within a system and...a source...of something like what Foucault calls 'positive power'. The social rules that are involved in it are positive, enabling, constructive, and constitutive. (53)

In other words, I want to consider a molecular poetics as having both social consequence and social responsibility. It all adds up. Piggy-bank poetics. A writing that wants to include the change in the total price as a way of recuperating the excess beyond consumption for a face-to-face repatterning of restricted economies.

Those little words that I'm posing as a poem called "Loose Change" are the 14 most frequently used English words as determined by a 1918 survey by Godfrey Dewey, son of Melville Dewey who devised the Dewey Decimal System [cf. Charles Bernstein's poem, "I and The" — eds.]. And "the" apparently occured twice as often

as anything else. I immediately think of Louis Zukofsky's "Poem Beginning 'The'" and his 40-year long personal epic, *"A"*. Or Barry McKinnon's *The the.*.

These little words are workers. They are part of what William Carlos Williams, in a letter to Louis Zukofsky, called "Actual word stuff, not thoughts for thoughts" (cited in Quatermain, 90). Most of them are not nouns (except as syntax might make them, when faked as in the above poem, for example).

But "Forget grammar and think about potatoes." Gertrude Stein suggested this in 1931 (*How to Write* 109). Think about words as a kind of Derridean dietary supplement.

ROAST POTATOES

Roast potatoes for.

(*Tender Buttons* 51)

Stein has inserted that preposition "for" into a syntactic and poetic site that suddenly multiplies productive possibilities in at least five ways: its aural ambiguity, ever-present within the written paragram, allows the preposition to be heard as the number noun "four"; it shifts the power to control the sentence away from "Roast potatoes" as the syntactic subject; it increases the morphemic value of "for" to a verb (as Ron Silliman [85] has noted); it leverages into perception not only the sentence as an incomplete thought but the autonomous and infinite silence of the period; it activates the ambiguity available between "Roast" as adjective and "Roast" as verb; and the period, under this extreme dictional pressure, is suddenly forced into motion and translates into a question mark (why, what, when, who).* Suddenly the potent particularity of this preposition, its ability to perform, implodes, breaking up the transparent syntax easy reading allows.

The particular attention to the plasticity of language by Williams, Zukofsky, and Stein has been well documented as the response by writers for whom English is a second language to the imperializing dominance of British English.** Stein spent her first six years in Vienna and Paris probably first speaking German and most of her adult life in Paris speaking French and writing English. Zukofsky grew up in a Yiddish-speaking New York neighborhood. And Williams learned Spanish and English simultaneously. The familiar "So much depends upon" of Williams' "Red Wheelbarrow" flags both the poignant necessity of objects ("so much depends upon *things*") over symbols as well as the social praxis sought after through the poetics I'm discussing here. There is an immense difference between Eliot's connotative, symbolic, and culturally inscribing

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* I discuss the period in "The Poetics of the Potent."

** See Peter Quartermain, "Actual Word Stuff, Not Thoughts" (98-103); also Charles Bernstein, "Time Out of Motion" (106-120). Quartermain usefully contextualizes this disjunctive poetics:

> The situation of the American writer in the first thirty or forty years of this century bears distinct resemblances to the situation of the writer in the postcolonial world where the grand hegemonic authority of rule by imperial standard is giving way to a frequently bewildered and more often than not anarchic series of disagreements which threaten to render the social and political fabric utterly incoherent.

"multifoleate rose" in "The Hollow Men" and the dissipating and liminal roses of Stein's rose-gram. That difference has remained apparent, though sometimes only representationally, throughout the poetics and politics of this century.

Robert Creeley, for instance, chose, out of some avowedly New England class consciousness, a much more contentious kind of poetry than, say, Robert Lowell. Creeley is a virtuoso poet of the little word and the little poem and one of the small poems in a small book of Creeley's, *Places* (published by a small press) pivots on a pronoun to flip back both into the poem's workings as well as into any referentiality we might have assumed and slid past:

Was

Say Mr. Snowman *can*
play a song for me

yes *you*

Creeley's recuperation of the pronoun from the normally transparent syntax of pop song is exaggerated by his twist of the verb "Was" into one of the *Places*, one of the names, titles, nouns. Verb to noun. The poem, in effect, tracks not stasis but kinesis; the words, at least there, in the poem, are not fixed but flexible. Or the title poem:

Places

Tidy, specific —
my head
or yours.

The specific. And the local. Creeley notes: "No matter what becomes of it, art is local, local to a place and to a person..." (*Essays* 484).

Before I discuss the local as an aspect of this poetics, however, I'd like to briefly note a few more particular units of composition resulting from molecular attentions.

The social and cultural yearning for more authentic, as opposed to inherited, forms of writing runs right through from imagism and objectivism to the technologizing of the body (and thus concretizing and palpable) so typical of modernism. Williams' "a poem is a machine made of words" through Olson's "the poem must...be a high energy construct" through Philip Whalen's "poetry is a picture or graph of the mind moving" continues into Charles Bernstein's "Poetics as a sort of a*pplied poetic*, in the sense that engineering is a form of applied mathematics."

The results of technologizing the poem are intriguing and various. The objectification of the book over the past forty years is one facet. I'm thinking here of everything from Ferlinghetti's City Lights $1 Pocket Poet series to finely crafted (yet cheap) mimeographed books and magazines to letterpress on handmade paper earth-tone cover stock to our still-complicated fetish with "book works."

Type (*typos)* was recognized as individual. (We sixties poets were trying to find our own voices). That sense of the individual imprint, outside of tradition, outside of an inherited world of form, became immediate. We used the Gestetner, the letter press, the typewriter. Type became letter as literal and letter as object.

The alphabet. Think of, among so many, bpNichol's investment in the graphemic (what he calls "The Optophonetic Dawn" in his essay, "The "Pata of Letter Feet" [80]) throughout *The Martyrology*:

i want the world
absolute & present
all its elements
el
em
en
t's

o
pq
r

or bd
bidet
confusion of childhood's 'kaka'
the Egyptian 'KA'
soul

rising out of
the body of
the language
(Bk.4)

That "body of language" in Nichol's poem comes from a substantially different (male) extrusion of anti-technology than a concurrent crucial touchstone in a feminist and sexual poetics that also seeks to conflate body and language. Nicole Brossard's

river moulded in the calm
flood as fierce and floral fl
("Articulation (sic) Deformation in Play")

posits the fragment not so much as a foregrounding of graphemic potential, as in Nichol, but as a "ritual of shock" (*Public* 3). Nichol's use of the lower-case "i" for first-person we

is likewise reflexive and indicates an experiential insistence in language. What is important here is to recognize, particularly with Brossard, the sincerity and desire for social change.

> I could perform quite well in language — you know a few tricks and you can do nice things — but I'm not interested in just performing. Because there is so much at stake for me as a woman that I want to explore and to communicate a new posture, a new perspective — and this means working with language in a way that shocks are necessary, but also memory of the body, sliding into meaning. (*Politics of Poetic Form* 84)

Or, if I think back to Bruce Andrews' notion of going for the total, I might be misreading if I think of this as essentially oppositional writing. As Brossard puts it, "I am not creating an oppositional writing, I am describing a pattern that follows its course in the expression of one's identity" (84).

Concrete (or visual) writing (along with Dada and sound, which I won't get into here) has also been an attractive form for many of these writers and the dynamics of image-text, particularly in Europe and South America, provide a structural poetics "beyond paraphrase, a poetry that often asked to be completed or activated by the reader, a poetry of direct presentation...using the semantic, visual, and phonetic elements of language as raw materials" (Emmett Williams, vi).

One of the most serious and consequential concrete poets has been the Scots poet Ian Hamilton Finlay. Finlay has practiced concrete writing as a life writing centred in his poetry garden, "Little Sparta," south of Edinburgh. He has spent the past thirty years installing the word as a three dimensional aura, a sculpted text, on four-and-a-half acres of sheep-ringed Scottish hillside. Tree, bush, stone, and word come together into an assemblage of classical and neoclassical allegory and metaphor tweaked into our own paradoxical complicities with a savagery that is definitely not "noble." Climbing over a stile faced with the text "Thesis fence Antithesis gate," I am stopped suddenly in the midst of my own assumptions about fences and language. Finlay's attention to the plasticity of words is a good example of resonating and auratic possibilities available to a poetics of the specific, minute, and particular.

But back to page text. Much that has led to a recognition of the materiality of the signifier (free verse, the breath line, shifting margins, voice, improvisation, and so forth) depends on the work done around the juncture — the space, gap, abyss, hiatus between words, before and after words, and under and over words. The democratization of verse into poetry (and lately of poetry into prose) has been sustained by attention to that site and the multiple evidence of form located there. For many writers this has meant, simply, some astute awareness of pitch, stress, and juncture. Others have felt obliged to make compositional decisions aimed at undercutting the transparency and predictability of traditional notation. For many of us, our writing lives have been largely devoted to notating the voice (after we found it, to be sure). But the juncture is also seen, variously, as regulatory and interruptive, as containing and open, as silence and noise. bpNichol chose to not use punctuation in *The Martyrology* (just as he chose to write a novel with

no pronouns) as a way of contesting the closure of inherited notation. Silence as pulse, without connotation. Not silence as absence, but, as Blanchot (and John Cage as well) suggests, silence as transformative, again, liminal.

> Now to this hiatus — to the strangeness, the infinite between us — there corresponds, in language, the interruption that introduces waiting. Only let it be clear that this stop is represented not necessarily or simply by silence, a blank, or a void (how crude that would be), but by a change in the form or the structure of language (when speaking is primarily writing)....(46)

That loose change rattling around in the gap includes the *punct* (perhaps not unrelated to Barthes' notion of the *punctum* in photography, the liminal spot in a photograph off to one side that mysteriously appeals, and shimmers the photo into something more than it seems). Note the recognizable plasticity Steve McCaffery plays with in a chunk of *Evoba*, one of his most "molecular" expeditions.

a spell.
a sphere.
a star.

a table,
a taste,
a tautology,

a telegram;
a tendency;
a tension;

the microscope:
some milk :
a mistake :

if i say, but
if he says

we might be

alluding

this. and. this. and. this. (78-79)

The spaces here seem to implode by strangely juxtaposing meanings. The suffixing of punctuation to these triads catches attention, and the colon in "the microscope:" stanza changes expected patterning. The discursive difference between the cascading cadence of voice (in this selection) is unsettled or deflected by those colons; they shift poetic value away from stanza and cadence to just the kind of interruption and waiting Blanchot refers to. A change in reading has occurred; the "loose change" of punctuation has reoriented the textual interface to a more comprehensive terrain.

The so-called "infinite between us" mentioned in the quote from Blanchot above is also the disputed space of race. Nathaniel Mackey, in a pertinent essay titled "Other: From Noun to Verb" (*Discrepant* 265-285) utilizes Amiri Baraka's way of describing white appropriation of black music, "Swing — From Verb to Noun" ("the 'noun' [swing, jazz], white commodification, obscures or 'disappears the 'verb' it rips off, black agency, black authority, black invention") by re-versioning the dynamic of "other" as the most recent container of difference provided by white hegemony. "Artistic othering," he advises, "has to do with innovation, invention, and change, upon which cultural health and diversity depend and thrive. Social othering has to do with power, exclusion, and privilege, the centralizing of a norm against which otherness is measured, meted out, marginalized." Mackey's "focus is the practice of the former by people subjected to the latter." In this context, we might note such recent slippages, however slight, as: Marlene Nourbese-Philip's ironic shuffling of the letters of "silence" ("the land of the SCENILE") in her *Looking for Livingstone* (19); *Asiancy*, an essay by Roy Miki; "Ms. Edge Innate," essay by Camille Hernandez-Ramdwar; "e face," poem by Mark Nakada; *Loveruage*, Ashok Mathur; and so forth.

I'd like to, finally, come back to some of the social action of a molecular poetics that can be enabled through that "local" Creeley hints at above. The "local," as it becomes useful (necessary) to a feminist poetics, demonstrates some envious (at least to me) latitude.

In her book, *Writing Diaspora*, Rey Chow qualifies the feminist local as a crucial attention to a political negotiation with inherited structures. Chow argues that feminists, forever vigilant about how they have been constructed as "social objects," refuse "to give up the local as a base, a war front" (70). Thus, "feminine specificity" becomes necessary to those who would trouble the neutralizing postmodernist stadium of "packaging" difference. Or those who would, with Nancy Shaw, explore "the government of the eye or the rule of the gaze" (untitled 90). Further, Chow points out, the strategies of the feminist local tend to be coalitional and not just oppositional. This perhaps elucidates Brossard's anti-oppositional stance (see above, p.11). In other words, a

might be
feminist writer might use a molecular poetics both to intervent her complicity and intersubjectivity (she recognizes the containment of herself as "social object" at the same time she realizes that that is a "self" she can act from) as well as to condition a productive coalition with governing relations.

In her "Preface" to *Sunday Water: Thirteen Anti-Ghazals*, Phyllis Webb explains her insistence on the local and particular as a way of defying generalizing tradition.

> "Drunken and amatory" with a "clandestine order," the subject of the traditional Ghazal was love, the Beloved representing not a particular woman but an idealized and universal image of Love....
>
> Mine tend toward the particular, the local, the dialectical and private. There are even a few little jokes. Hence "anti-Ghazals."

The particular and local, in contrast to the idealized and universal, is what's needed to shift the historical (the histological). Webb's intrusion into literary form (one might argue, even into cultural hegemony and canonization) with her own feminant specificity therefore also becomes a tactical intrusion into social form in the desire to illuminate the total potential. Her "coalition" with this form is even more playful in her subsequent collection of ghazals, W*ater and Light: Ghazals and Anti-Ghazals* where the formal distinctions become so blurred I can't be sure which I'm reading, ghazal or anti-ghazal.

Lyn Hejinian's poetic sequence, *The Cell*, demonstrates a molecular poetics that is relentless and engaging in its "exploration of the relation of the self to the world, of the objective 'person' to the subjective being 'as private as my arm'.... '[T]he Cell' of this work connotes several things, some contradictory: biological life, imprisonment, closure, and circulation" (jacket). Her desire is to write a poem

> which would not be about a person but which would be like a person...which [is] to its language what a person is to its landscape...[a poem that] would be both in language and a consequence of language and [that] would be both identifiable (or real) and interpretable (or readable). (*Poetics Journal* 167)

In other words, she wishes to locate the particularity of the selves in the particularity of language because, "It is here that the epistemological nightmare of the solipsistic self breaks down, and the essentialist yearning after truth and origin is discarded in favor of the experience of experience" (167). The following poem from *The Cell* illustrates how the performance of severed syntax can pressure the reorganization of thought *about* and presence *in* moments of "being":

> This egg is an emotion
> The sensing of a large
> amorour aptness
> It is putting us in
> mind of the other things
> of most thoughts

Endless it
And in defense of our
sex

"But my darling," we said
straddling the line between the
artificial and the natural
If lust and narcissism are
evil they must belong to
social relations
Nothing economizes more than the
economy itself
This is conduct
And in the example before
us it exhibits lust and
narcissism

Meanwhile, everyday life requires common
sense insatiability
A disappearance from history
Thus the breasts are two
entirely different thoughts
One is of tropical birds
and the other of the
Fire Department
Or one is of self-portraiture
and the other of new
tires
Thinking is a pleasant incorporation
It is an emotion of
sex where it resembles the
patience to travel (142)

The "it" of the first stanza is so released from its usual transparency that, in the last stanza, "it" becomes nominative and we can substitute "it" for "thought." Likewise, "egg," "thoughts," "breasts," "tropical birds," and "Fire Department," are released from their normally metaphorical image construct and accrue value as more equal constituents of the poetic constuction as well as, because the poem is a descriptive gesture, possible facts of the self. The facts speak for themselves.

Is "it" pleasure?

Nancy Shaw's book, *Scoptocratic*, along with her explanatory letter/statement about the book provide an extraordinarily useful creative and critical field that reflects what I'm trying to outline. I don't want to oversimplify the range of writing that Shaw activates in this book (it is magnetic in its variety and innovation). But her compositional premise of the writing, "to mess up dominant meaning" by gazing through the "hidden and invisible spaces camouflaged as important sites of hegemonic description" in post-war Hollywood melodrama, delightfully manifests how, for this feminist writer, the infiltration by the "specific" into the total (and totalizing) "allows for a mobility that generates new discursive positions while rigorously contesting hegemonic inscription" (untitled 89). "By inhabiting nodes of excess," she explains,

> I hope to enact a poetic arrest. This is the method that I liken to my photographic examination of cinematic frames [in *Scoptocratic*]. In so doing, I attempt to accumulate a litany of all that changes from one frame to the next, thereby illuminating the most minor details crucial to the seamless constructions of such stories. (88)

One example of this "poetic arrest" (from a section of *Scoptocratic* entitled "It's always the good swimmer who drowns") torques the conjunction "that" as an item normally expelled by narrative (both syntactically and cinematically):

> One false move.
>
> Rumour. Scandal. Passion.
>
> That he became her bodyguard. I have watched you discreetly. One may infer from this episode and begin to take an interest in nature. Ascertaining all her habits. And so on. That the father met the daughter in the company of a lady. (86)

What's arrested here, among other things, is a poetic narrative that vectors back into the liminal loose change that narrative closure usually discards as excessive.

Now I know I have a heart because it's broken but should I fix it now to keep it strokin' or should I hear each piece as it is spoken and stoke heart's heat so hot I smell it smokin' or could this clock made up of parts be jokin' that missing spark a mis-read gap provokin' and little sock of baby breath not chokin' the piggy bank of words much more than tokens not just the gossip love is always cloaked in nor all the meaning text is usually soaked in but roast potatoes for a tender button so much depends upon the things unspoken and if the heart is just this clock around which clusters all that's not and if the of and to an in that it is I for be was as can set these el em en t's far apart so all the floods are fierce and floral fl's and hasten slowly stops me at my selves right now I'll have an egg because I know its yolks inside and what I have to do is crack it open.

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Back issues o.p., except: #5—poetry by P. Culley, G. Gilbert, S. Doris, H. Mullen, C. Burnham, T. Pearson, L. Cabri, B. Andrews; #3—poetry & reviews by J. Derksen, C. Bök, D. Barone, E. Wirth, A. Davies, with B. Andrews & E. Jabès.

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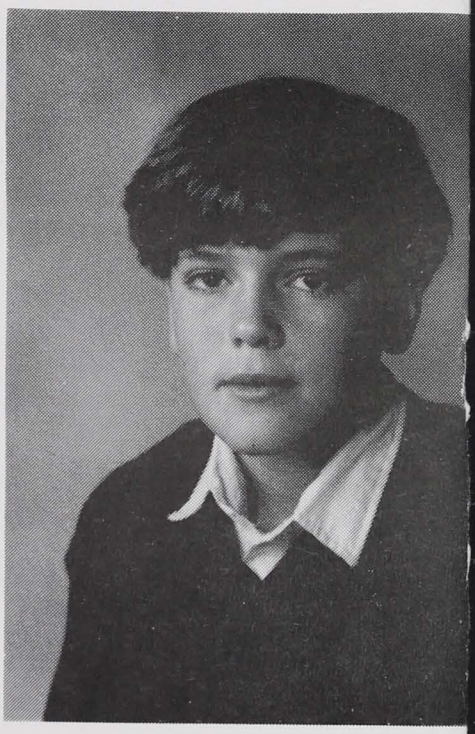
Found on cathedral lawn, St. Patrick Street, Ottawa, 16 June 1995

Found in Billings Bridge transit station, Ottawa, 1 June 1994



Found in Carleton University Unicentre, Ottawa, 28 August 1994

Found on Guigues Street, Ottawa, 3 December 1994

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