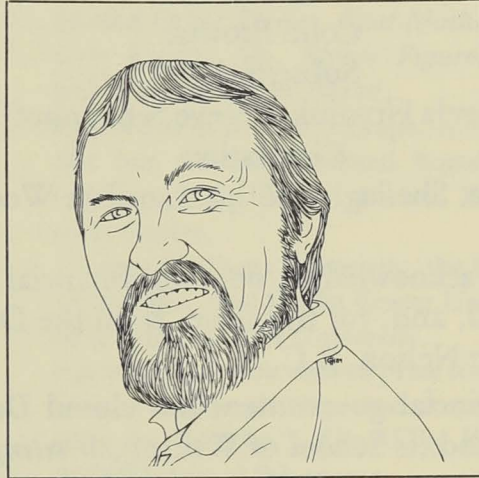


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Writing 9

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Writing gratefully acknowledges ongoing financial assistance from the Canada Council, and, for this issue, from the David Thompson University Centre in Nelson, B.C.

Although the provincial government has closed David Thompson University Centre and its School of Writing, *Writing Magazine* will continue to publish regularly. Your subscriptions are now more important than ever.

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c/o 1871 EAST PENDER STREET, VANCOUVER, B.C., V5L 1W6.

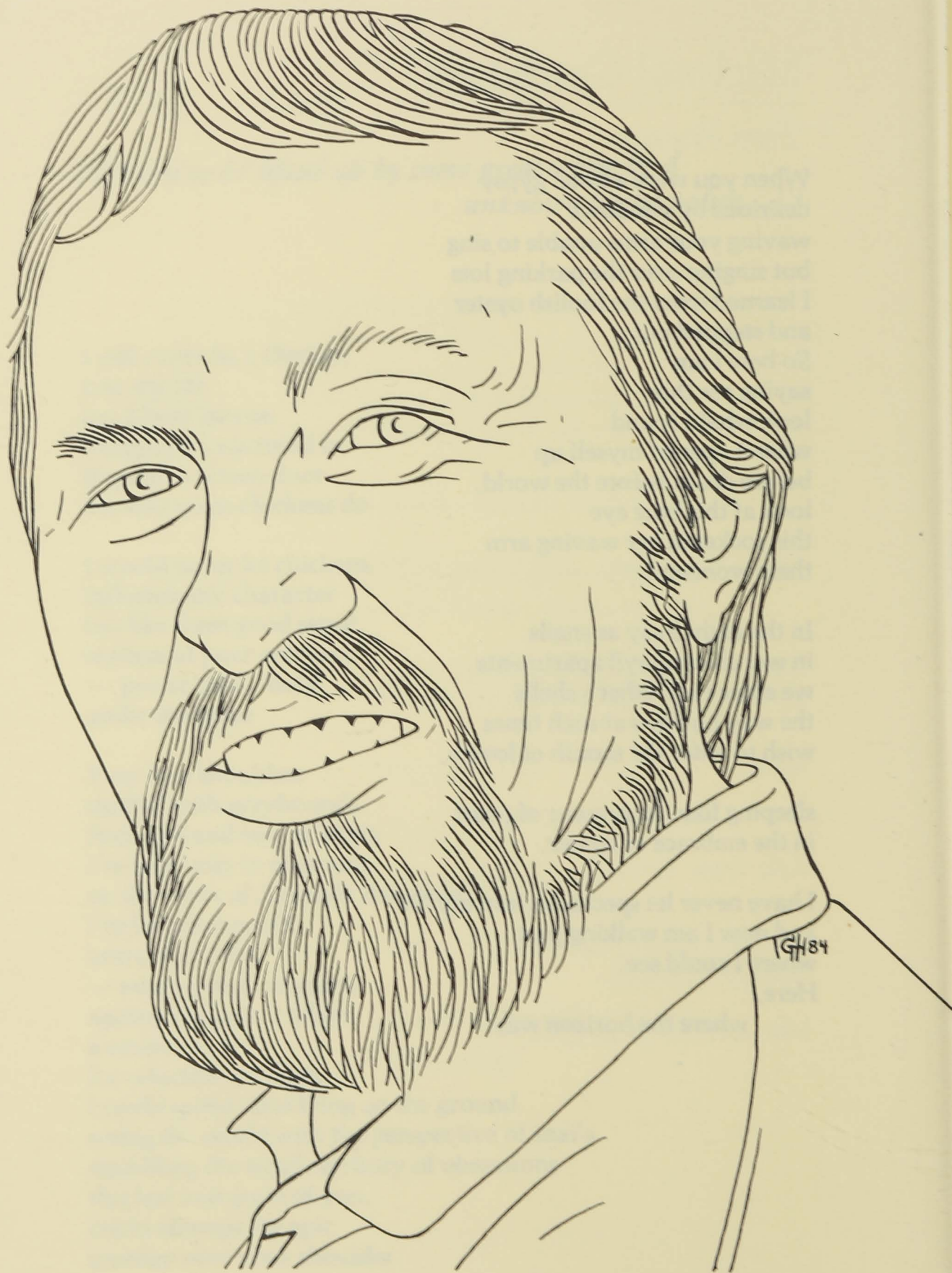
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Current and back issues of *Writing*: \$3. Subscriptions: \$10 for four issues.

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ISSN 0706-1889

Audrey Thomas recently completed a term as Writer-in-Residence at David Thompson University Centre. **Gary Haggquist** lives in Victoria, B.C., and will continue his series of portraits in future issues of *Writing*. **Michel Beaulieu** lives in Montréal. His most recent book is *Images du temps*; forthcoming is a collected entitled *Kaleidoscope*. **Paulette Jiles** teaches at D.T.U.C. Her latest collection, *Celestial Navigation*, will be available soon from McClelland and Stewart. **ICTUS** is an internationally-acclaimed theatre collective based in Santiago, Chile. **Alexander Hutchison** lives on Vancouver Island. His *Deep-Tap Tree* is available from MIT Press. **Diana Hartog**, of New Denver, B.C., has just completed a new manuscript of prose poems. **Jeff Derksen** lives in Vancouver. His chapbook, *Memory Is the Only Thing Holding Me Back*, is now available. **Margaret Hollingsworth's** most recently produced play is *War Babies*. She lives in Toronto. **John Marshall** is an editor of *Island* magazine and lives in Lantzville, B.C. **Michael Ondaatje's** *Raccoon Lighting* will appear in the fall from Coach House Press. **Fred Wah** helped establish the School of Writing at D.T.U.C. His "Music at the Heart of Thinking" appeared in *Open Letter* (5/7).



Drawing by Gary Haggquist

An Interview with Fred Wah

Fred Wah was born in Swift Current, Saskatchewan, in 1939. His family moved to the Kootenays when he was four and he grew up in the mountains around Nelson. He went to U.B.C. to study music, but he met other young writers such as George Bowering, Frank Davey and Lionel Kearns, and changed his studies to linguistics. He became a founding editor and Gestetner-cranker of the poetry newsletter *Tish*. Later he went to the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, where Robert Creeley taught. Next he moved to Buffalo to study with Charles Olson at the State University of New York. While in Buffalo, Wah helped edit *The Niagara Frontier Review* and *The Review of Further Studies*. He returned to the Kootenays in 1967 and taught at Selkirk College in Castlegar. With the opening of the David Thompson University Centre in Nelson, Wah helped set up the Kootenay School of Writing, where he now teaches. The School of Writing has become a nationally-recognized centre for writing, but its fate is uncertain now with the closure of DTUC.

In 1982, Wah received a senior Canada Council grant and travelled with his family to China and Japan. While in Kyoto, Wah published the poetic diary, *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail*. From January to April 1983, he was the Writer-in-Residence at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg.

Wah has published eight books of poetry, the most recent of which are: *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.* (Talonbooks, 1975), *Loki Is Buried at Smoky Creek: Selected Poems* (Talonbooks, 1980), *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh*, (Talonbooks, 1981), and *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail*, (Nagata Bunshodo, Kyoto, 1982).

Fred Wah was interviewed in his office at DTUC in April, 1984, by Meaghan Baxter, Jeff Derksen and Angela Hryniuk. The drawing on page forty-four is by Gary Haggquist.

WRITING

Could you talk about your interest in the narrative form that developed in *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail*?

WAH

With the diary form, and the journal, there's always a temptation to get seriously involved in the short story and prose fiction. My sense of prose fiction is one of trying to manipulate a narrative line. I find that I'm not comfortable moving too far into that. I'm more attracted to the poem as an activity that informs me about what's going on in language, in my life, in my perceptions. As a poet one way to get into narrative without going into a prose fiction is through the long poem.

WRITING

Is the "Fish Series" you're working on a long poem?

WAH

The "long poem" is so varied that it can't be defined. For example, there is the argument between whether it's a long poem or a serial poem, or how the serial poem is related to serial music or serials on television and radio. This matters when you are looking at a particular piece, but the description or categorization of the long poem is pretty loose. The "Fish Series" comes out of *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh*. I found that what happened there was that I was intensely interested in the structural possibilities of the long poem. I was watching the poem to see what was going to happen, and I found myself manipulating the poem. When it was published, my sense was that it was just going to continue. Later, certain tendrils, or new roots started shooting out from that long poem as serials in themselves. The "Fish Series" is one of half a dozen different tendrils that have sprouted out of *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh*.

The "Fish Series" itself started in Winnipeg, the geography of which is an old lake bed. I had the sense of living in a lake bed, of living with a bunch of fish (laughs). From that I picked up on that whole idea of the salmon, and what I have grown up with here, the kokanee—the cycle of returning to your source of birth. I love that idea of the fish trying to make their way home.

So now I have this root system spreading out. To be in it feels unwieldy because when I go to write a poem I don't know where I am going to be in that root system. I like the idea that the poems are going to generate more than one of themselves. I really believe what Jack Spicer said—that the poem can be no more alone than we can. The idea of the poem being so separate or a little gem out there is not a good vision.

All the poems I am writing now are pieces of information. One poem is informing another. I feel more and more that everything I'm writing is part of one poem.

WRITING

Is "Music at the Heart of Thinking" a tendril from *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh*?

WAH

No, it's not a direct tendril, except that more and more it is getting to be one long poem. The writing is becoming informative of itself and reflective of itself. I've always been interested in trying to find different critical ways to deal with poetic stances. I'm not that happy with the traditional expository methods. bp Nichol requested a piece on notation for the *Open Letter* series. Writing some notes for notation, but paying attention to the writing process allowed these things called MHT to get going.

WRITING

Your interest in language has been affected by your background as a musician. Compositionally, do you think your MHT work as pieces of music?

WAH

I think I'm a poet in the oldest sense of the word. I'm interested in what the lyric, the music of language, the song does. That's my primary interest in language.

WRITING

Are you interested in the writing that is coming out of Québec?

WAH

I think that the Québécois feminists have paid some significant attention to what's going on in language. Nicole Brossard specifically has delighted me with what she has moved through in language. She seems to be at the forefront of all the technical information that you can bring to writing poetry. What interests me is that she's not dealing with the politics; her writing is the politics. She's insisting that the language structures have to change or else the language will regenerate those old structures out of itself, including the ways we look at ourselves, our bodies, our minds, and I believe she's absolutely right. Language is change—a response to how people want to change. I don't know that a simplistic approach to language, or that using the old forms is going to bring about change. I'm interested in the argument that Brossard proposes: You can't talk about it, you have to do it. If you're the writer, you do it in your writing.

WRITING

Have Nicole Brossard's arguments affected your relationship with political writing, or writing as a political act?

WAH

Yes, she clarified it for me. I felt for a long time that I wasn't political. I felt uncomfortable writing for political reasons. I've always found that very difficult. I've never felt comfortable racially with white society. You can't not be political, so in the last fifteen years I have started trying to define myself as a political person.

The political writing I had seen had turned me off. I felt guilty that I wasn't engaged as a political writer. Brossard came along and relieved me of that guilt, she gave me another argument. Now I feel that just about all the writing I'm engaged in is political in that basic Olsonian sense; I'm paying attention to what I see. I think that MHT, or the whole idea of estrangement is a political form, and allows us to develop a politics, a polis.

WRITING

Do you use estrangement as a political process in the writing?

WAH

Here's what Shklovsky says in his essay "Art as Device":

And so it is in order to restore the feeling of life, to be aware of things in order to make the stone stoney that there exists what is called art. The aim of art is to give the feeling of a thing as something seen and not as something recognized; the device of art as the device of making things strange and the device of impeded form which increases the difficulty and duration of perception since the process of perception and art is an end in itself and must be prolonged.

How's that for 1917? The idea is that through art one prolongs one's perceptions, one's view, one's seeing of politics—which is the problem of labels, which is the problem of groups in schools, which is the problem of Marxism. I'll agree with Shklovsky; the purpose of art is to prolong the perception, which is why you have to make the medium estranged and, by doing so, discover difficulties which you then have to deal with. This is what holds the possibility of revelation.

WRITING

How do you, Fred, deal with the closure of DTUC where art is going on? Does such a decision have an effect on you as founder and teacher in the writing department here?

WAH

I run it through my mill, I witness it, I don't write poems about it. I can point to the poems that I have written in the last five months—there's language in there that comes from the frustration and anger of being here in this situation. The closure of DTUC forces me to ask questions about education in the arts. In one sense, the closure of DTUC is a good thing—it prevents complacency. It's forcing us to deal with what we want to do, and I think that's good. It's a paradox; unfortunately we're not going to be here next year to collectively consider these problems, and to engage ourselves in them, and respond to one another. For that our art will be poorer. For this moment, I think that the perception it forces one into is probably a good thing. My sense is that we each want to work somehow at our art, and some of us don't know at times how to work at it. Art is this wall we keep moving around in, we keep building this thing and we don't quite know where it's going. The closure of DTUC is really sad. It's going to hurt, and I want to fight the people who chose to close DTUC. I feel convinced the way I'm fighting it in my writing is good—to keep the art going. In the face of this, the tenacity of the artist can be a useful thing. The fact that I can't write cute poems about what is going on doesn't bother me anymore. Ten years ago it would have. I'm an apolitical animal so I can't engage myself with this specifically, but when I'm writing I'm engaged. All spring I've been talking about this metaphor of the fish; we're going to find our way home.

WRITING

Do you feel that you're still finding your way home?

WAH

Yes, that I'm a little fish out in a big ocean and I've got this map that was given to me up in Chilly Creek, and the imprint is starting to glow a bit. I'm starting to recognize in my life certain roads to take. My community is all over the place. We are in the same process as the fish and some of us don't recognize this. What the artist does is explore the details of the map. I'll refer to that Olsonian thing, that the artist is interested in the specifics of the map because maybe new maps will have to be made. The sense of discovery, surprise, also that sense of not knowing. That I know I don't know is a pleasure.

Fred Wah

Three Poems & One Prose Poem

The image came out of the rock
rather than out of my head.

The fish coming out of the lake
coming into the rock.

Black embedded diorite path, memory
mapped everywhere imprinted printed
solstice night sweet south-faced springing hillside
and O'Ryan smelting in the west the shining
all fish shine all rock and mind. Why not
talk about it on the way back
home?

another mht

once thinking as feeling thought then becomes simple and there
crows fly in no pattern through the fir and spruce, already

system takes over voice
today was beautiful, clear, crisp, the trees

expect nothing if not imprint or pre-print time so surrounds all
the birds' caws' last name goes through the air with feather, snow

to not know "the silent life", soft earth, guttural
I mean the quick body as it comes to the throat like that

March Music

Sounds roll beautifully from the piano. A precious accent lines
the air on this mountainside. The present comes again, again
singing, self-looking, circumstantial, ambulant and with a drum,
a drum, a walking dominant seventh rolled on the white snow still
left in the cow pasture of a mirror, ayee, all the work of the
senses, thaw coming through the gravel road, truth rests, that's
right, in memory, symmetric and outside the silent, not so simple
as the dogs barking at the shadows in the tree-line, Thursday,
think of the thunder ahead.

Elite 2

Do you remember how living on the prairies was like living in water, in an ocean or a large lake. Movements, decisions, fortunes were made by undercurrent, a sense of sliding along a large floor, in the night. The night I was with you on a trip, just before we moved out to B.C., it felt like that, the way we moved, probably by train, through unknown territory. Always you had an "intent." You were on business of some sort and the others we met were all Chinese. You could talk to them. They gave me candy and pinched me. You and they talked and talked. Chinese always sounds so serious, emotional, angry. I napped on a couch in some Chinese store in some Alberta town. The old men played dominoes and smoked and drank tea. In the window dusty plants in porcelain bowls and some goldfish. Does it seem strange to you now to see this in words? Do you remember the trip I'm talking about? Late at night somewhere you played Mah Jong. From outside the sound of the click-clack of the pieces being shuffled over the tabletop under the hum of the men's voices, a real music I felt comfortable with. Even though you stayed late you always came back, going somewhere. We moved that night through this subcontinent of prairie landscape, it was summer and the water was warm and hazy, the possible distances, distant.

The School of Writing at Thompson University Nelson, B.C.

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The British Columbia Ministry of Education has shut down the School of Writing at David Thompson University Centre, citing economic restraint, although this and other program cancellations suggest a deliberate governmental policy of cultural and artistic suffocation.

The School of Writing, unique in Canada, will persist, and alternatives are now being considered. *Writing Magazine* will continue to publish the best writing we can find and get it to you first.

We'd like to thank D.T.U.C. and all those who have supported the school over the last five years, and invite your continued participation in our ongoing, careening adventure.

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