

26a~Brian Cullen to Fred Wah.**“across the potato field”**

Dear Fred,

About four years ago I wanted to get directions from you about how to get here, where I am now in Argenta at the head of Kootenay Lake, B.C. I was in Quebec then, and had only passed through Nelson, south of here, once. The rest I 'knew' was from looking at a map. I could see this relatively uninhabited end of a lake, and a town – 'Argenta' – at the end of a road on its eastern shore – and across the water there was 'Lardeau.' I knew that you had written a book of that name. Thought you might know what it was like around here.

Well I never did get your directions before I came; I discovered they were already here when I arrived. And I've since been arriving. I guess that's the way. How it happened was I found *Tree* in the Argenta library, read all the poems, some sounding right away, almost, familiar, and then at the end your "Biography" about the time in which the poems had been written and the book produced: "[...] Yesterday I talked about Love in the World Problems class in the Argenta Friends School and started typing plates" (April 28, 1972). As you probably know the Argenta Friends School is no longer, which I think has something distant yet important to do with the fact also that Love and World Problems are still kicking around, mostly without informing each other. I was tempted to say without the first, Love, informing the others, the World Problems, but it would seem that not even a tree can really be conjured out of such a polemic, through a preferred transcendence of that impurity which it appears to gain, an 'unnaturalness' within the apparently loveless exchange of all our politicized contraries. In any case I don't think that *Tree* pretends to avoid such 'contamination' (and in saying that, there is a consciousness implied for it which I think is already immanent in the fact of its particular materiality, and of course its naming). I'm wondering what you talked about that day in the Friends School? For now my reference is *Tree* and the conjunction of those two ideas of "Love" and "World Problems." Which is itself problematic to go by in the same way as saying that "I knew that you had written" such and such a book (probably by seeing the title listed in the cover of another book that I had actually read by you): it's not far from being misled by the authority claimed by a map.

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

(“Havoc Nation,” *Tree*)

In asking where this book originated what am I asking for if not some kind of 'truth' from the writer/human "Fred Wah" named on the cover. And yet as a 'map' of this area I think that *Tree* enabled me to enter here specifically because in its writing it does not presume to be the extension of any human geography. I'd like to look at the working possibilities of that 'admission' and see what they might still mean for you. Thirty years later, love and world problems. And the equivocation of one of the early poems in the book, "Don't Cut Me Down," is a still pertinent and difficult entry for the reader, into an unexpected relational perspective: the book as a place also, the trees in it as real as the language the writer is attempting to be present to, and in. I say unexpected because such an imperative as "Don't Cut Me Down" must be sympathetic with the first innocence of a tree, is the habitual thought ('cause that's poetry right!?) and then it becomes clear that the apparent helplessness of the plea itself is inflected, by the anger of a logger in defense of his craft. This is not the voice of a tree but the particular violence of a restricted economy: a problem not just of the word 'tree' but the object tree; a problem of their habitual interchangeability, towards an expected exploitation, usage (I see this as part of a general problem of an image of language: specifically, the dominant view of language as instrument – contrary to language existing largely according to its own environments).

With the reader's sympathy complicated by these early conflicting registers, I see the possibilities of a 'tree language' becoming spread beyond the apparent 'entitlement' of the book *Tree* itself, to include the identity

of the writer in the risk that is love – of language essentially, and of the encounter with it through the mostly solitary activity of writing, through a mostly enabling environment (the dominant conditions of flow of the earth, at ground level, as opposed to the 'panopticed' and territorial world, to extend a distinction made by Daphne Marlatt between "earth" and "world"). Although as I said before without preferentially avoiding an inevitable 'contamination' between the two (conflicting 'perceptual registers' extending through any poetics?...Blake's fluctuating contraries have always seemed more constructive to me than static oppositions; in any case I'm reluctant even to think in terms of 'two' here). And I think it would be helpful to look at this, as I think you already have, as a problem of reference, particularly in terms of image, i.e. the tree itself, and the word 'tree': how we see what a tree is through writing and vice versa: "[...] image as not only concrete things you see outside yourself and outside of language but as the idea carried in language," as you say in "Mrs. Richard's Grey Cat": A Discussion with Steve McCaffery and Pauline Wah about 'The Politics of the Referent'" (1978). In other words, the relation is already there, but it would seem that it's not a direct correspondence. At least to state a direct correspondence between word and thing would seem to defeat the vital purpose for writer and reader, of the work involved. I mean it ultimately doesn't shift any ontological ground to say that that is this because I see (know) it. If I'm right about what you're saying, to get to "the idea carried in language" you've got to learn to swim, and not all the information is always provided. I think what you're also saying though which is quite important here, and implicitly in *Tree*, is that the information does exist, and that it's by being in a particular linguistic environment (writing/a book) that you have been able to make/sense the inscription. That's what interests me here, the shift of ontological ground in such an encounter with language, as contrary to a more generally accepted use of it (and its discursive, or not, arrangements in the world) on the materiality of the page.

According to what I think you're saying then, I see 'work' for the writer and reader being based not on the absence of information (or the compensation of lack) but on the idea of its presence implicit in the instability of reference on the page; in other words, the fact of its moving. Interpretation is left relatively open. And at first this is a friendly gesture because it 'takes place' there as it were, identifiably on the page, in order to accommodate particular needs of the writer and reader. But I also see the act of allowing for partial omissions (i.e., the "nv s ble / tr ck" thing from your *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.*) as being less territorial, and not necessarily comforting then: we are left without a habitual arrangement of signs to go by; and yet there is an order/ing of signs nevertheless I'm wondering, is this apparent disjunction strategic? I'll try to explain what I mean.

Because the syncopal bearing on the "i" and so "I" in this poem subverts its authority in an obvious ('graphic') way. Although I see the same process taking place also in *Tree*, but more at a macro level, syntactically. The line is there, and then it's also in the trees, and then it's back again but changed, and the lyrical instance is extended then by the fact of having trusted that the forest was there and still is (will be?...is that the emerging sense, too, of a possibly broken context of trust which the words nevertheless extend across in love?). It would seem in both instances, whether of the graphic elision or the more obvious semantic regulation and distribution of the phrase, that it is by giving up a certain degree of control that a space is actually admitted for writing – to be the environment which the writer is in: an epenthetic re-insertion.

You've written in *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* that "[...] where was never the problem animal is / I still have a name 'breathin' it / with a sigh.'" In these lines I see the process re-vers'd as it were, for "the problem animal is," as contrary to "where," would appear to still be one of being in a place, in the conscious re-arrangement of what composes it. The book again as a foregrounded site of this ontological shift/ing. And in this sense I see the self-reflexive "'sigh'" as a sigh of regret at the static nature of identity and one's inevitable naming through that personal intent contained in the written gesture. This despite the more positive significations for 'sigh' in later poems in that book, as part of a self-consciousness gained (emotional investment partly returned) through that same intent, and the inclusive shifts again of the written gesture: "To select out of a pattern of things having to do with any of it has to do with all of it" ("Preface"). But all of it ain't what we can ever always know. I'm thinking of the problem of animal again (and vegetable too I guess -- as when you plant yourself at the end of *Breathin'*). And I'm reminded of George Bowering's
Elegy 8 in *Kerrisdale Elegies*:

If this hairy dog trotting down Yew Street

Do we have (or need) a conceptual apparatus to begin to describe such relationships anyway? Or do we always fall short of the so called mark by requiring a descriptive presumption to begin; in other words, if how *Tree* is written is what you're already in, how do you get 'there,' and can you without perpetuating damage? In other words, in other words...?)

The last part of my question (the part not in parantheses!) is misleading in the sense of being so specific to our species, and oriented to our survival. My interest here is trees, and *Tree*. At the same time I'm starting to see some potential problems with my focus (distance). As Alan Gilbert paraphrases to Nancy Shaw about her own approach to writing: "[...] you argue for an approach to both the writing of and thinking about poetry that doesn't abandon the notion of language as materiality, but doesn't go on to reduce all forms of materiality to language, or conceive of all social formations as discursive ones" ("Open Letter 3a, Notes on 'Cultural Poetics,' *Open Letter* 3/11, p.19). I see a potential imbalance in my own preferred disregard for "social formations" here, in my focus of them into a potential opposition: as the "World Problems" threatening the earth and a certain peace I gather among the trees. There is the danger of seeing such problems exclusively as 'ours' then, by simply re-territorializing them into an 'all too human' enterprise: is this the love of nature, or an apologetic misanthropy? There is the risk of becoming lost in the "fetishized" perceptions (McCaffery) of my own preferential sign-postings; in other words, by claiming your book, like the place I am in, as 'home.' I'm not comfortable with doing either. But in terms of finding a way to talk about such love, I think some grounds have already been established through my reading of *Tree*. I see these are the grounds that *Tree* was written on, a kind of ecology. If "style is the art of omission, " as W. Somerset Maugham says in *Cakes and Ale*, then the gradual and conscious omission of style (effect of intent) in writing might begin to approach an interesting critique of absence, demystifying absence by eradicating the need to domesticate its threat. Is such presence really the 'passion' in the love of an art!?

Again I feel the trees might indicate to me a way, I mean (the ones) outside, and in *Tree*, and also in your book *Among* (also 1972): "[...] 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 [...]" ("Up That Hill & Into The Trees"). I see this 'approach' to writing in/of nature (being *Among* its elements) as contrasting fairly strongly with Wordsworth's deferral: "From early days, / Beginning not long after that first time / In which, a Babe, by intercourse of touch / I held mute dialogues with my Mother's heart, / I have endeavoured to display the means / Whereby this infant sensibility, / Great birthright of our being, was in me / Augmented and sustained" (*The Prelude*, Book II, ll.265-272). Suckling nature in this way, Wordsworth inscribes and cushions a place for the history of his writing to exist in nature, methodically preserved from the threat of its disappearance, and of his own (represented, again in the same very human form, by his mother and her early death, Book V, "Books," line 245 continuing). I'm struck by how much the Romantic respect of nature, as an essential inspiration for writing, is continued but also transformed in your work that I've looked at, Fred. And to give Wordsworth some credit, it seems to me that the noted transforming has been done partly by avoiding what he'd already remarked, and was wary of himself: "[...] that false secondary power / By which we multiply distinctions, then / Deem that our puny boundaries are things / That we perceive, and not that we have made" (Book II, ll. 216-219). Despite the fact that his appeal here is reactive and mired in its own ideology, being clearly against "Science" and in the name of "unity," his words remind me of a more positive transformation of values which occurs at the beginning of the poem "Havoc Nation," in *Tree*:

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. [...]

(n.p.)

A beginning, but an apocalyptic one. The disturbance of a phrasal beginning (the missing imperative "See" that nevertheless announces itself) erupts a relatively unstable environment, where the writing exists despite the fact it is contained in a book but also because it is part of that tree commodity: the body of the writer can only be apparently im-mediate (unmediated, absent) to this rupture. And although "Havoc sleeps," it is not dead but lives still "in her eyes." I'm reminded of the passages which Blake calls "Memorable Fancies" in his poem "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," where he actually ends up writing through a very similar shift in perspective, hanging out with angels/devils over the abyss, in an uprooted world. I wonder what such a "Marriage" looks like today, looking with love into the eyes of havoc, and if it's actually much different than two-hundred, or thirty years ago. And I'm wondering how relevant a writing based in the natural world has continued to be for you, Fred, when the historical surveillance of this country has been such a contributing factor not just to the disappearance of the trees (in order to 'know' where we were), but also to the erasure of human difference, ethnicity, in the name of preserving particular nationalisms -- for example, "unity in diversity"? (I'm thinking in particular of what Jeff Derksen has written about official multiculturalism in Canada). My focus here began with a map, overlooking Argenta and the origins of *Tree*, and it has similarly tended to ignore this 'other' consciousness as it developed later (?) in your writing. How are the issues of identity/non-identity which I think *Tree* and your other early works raise, continued or modified when identity necessarily becomes the re-written focus of a 'hybrid' poetics? What are the 'roots' we hang onto then, while we're turning over in this house, moving, beyond the forced movements of migrancy?

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

("Havoc Nation")

'in writing...'

So what might a tree (hug) look like for you in 2002, at ground level!? I'm curious because the Ministry of Forests here is about to log large portions of the "Argenta - Johnson's Landing Face" (in fact they've already started) out here in the main valley now (less to log of course in the back valleys of the Duncan and Lardeau Rivers), and I'm not sure how to carry my body into the present embrace. I sense that whatever you're doing now in your writing inevitably involves and re-informs the "Information" of that old and difficult dance. If you're up this end of the lake you're welcome to stop by. I live past the post office, off the main road at the end of Press Rd., in the small house across the potato field. Thanks for the work, Fred. My good wishes,

Brian