

if wants to be the same as is

ESSENTIAL POEMS OF David Bromige

edited by Jack Krick, Bob Perelman
and Ron Silliman



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CONTENTS

<i>He Gets Better Every Year</i> by George Bowering	<i>xix</i>
<i>Nearer to the Future Than Ever</i> by Bob Perelman	<i>xxv</i>
<i>Editor's Introduction</i> by Jack Krick	<i>xxxix</i>
from <i>The Gathering</i> (1965)	
She Rose Up Singing	3
We Could Get A Drink	4
At Last	6
Affair of the Lemming	7
With Someone Like You	7
Down In The Dance	8
My Failing	8
The Sign	9
A Project	10
To Helena	11
Dejeuner Sur One Rye	12
Revolving Door	13
The Reverie	14
The Gathering	15
“Sitting Across From The Mother”	17
The Wall	18
<i>Please, Like Me</i> (1968)	21

“Why I went there”	72
Value	73
A passive voice —	75
Precept	75
Example	76
An Imperfect Failure	76
A Man, Me	77
3 Ways with the Same Sentence	78
Logical Conclusions	79
Whatever it is	79
Fresh from Sleep	79
The Ends of the Earth	84
Threads	85
“Once . . .”	87
The Reels	87
“So”	89
from <i>Ten Years in the Making</i> (1974)	
Poem for friends	92
In it	92
from <i>Birds of the West</i> (1974)	
I: BIRDS OF THE WEST	
A Rime	93
Next love	94
“This time not shot”	95
Person	98
Outside	98
Sonnet	100
Because	100
Beyond the Constellations Here & Now	101
A Nest	101
The Lyre Bird	102
Born again	103
II: POND	
A Diction	103

<i>My Poetry</i> (1980)	167
Able to Describe the Verses	169
My Typos	171
Psychoanalysis	176
SIX OF ONE, HALF-A-DOZEN OF THE OTHER	
A Defect	179
A Final Mission	181
Weight Less Than the Shadow	187
Lawrence's Irritations	192
Only Fair	194
"I Can't Read, & Here's a Book"	196
Back to A's Place	200
AN AMERICAN HERITAGE HISTORY	
Our Tongues	204
An American Heritage History	205
Authority	211
One Spring	214
WHAT THE PERSON BELIEVES IS PART OF THE POET'S MAKE-UP	
Seeing That You Asked	222
Credences of Winter	224
What the Person Believes is Part of the Poet's Make-up:	
8 Soliloquants Each with an End in View	
Meet Atropos & Are Stuck With It	226
In the Kitchen, We Find the Norwegian	236
By Visible Truth We Mean the Apprehension of the	
Absolute Condition of Present Things	237
My Career	238
My Plan	240
HIERATICS	
Hieratics: A Triptych	242
My Palaver	248
<i>American Testament</i> (1981–86)	
A Sample Hurt	251
A Squeal Of Approval	263

Open wide	378
The poet strolls at evening by the river	379
Soyez raisonnable	379
Don't drool when you say lot-split	380
Tubal legislature	381
Clearings in the throat	381
Clocks	382
Art as revenge ^u	382
Might be right	383
Meanwhile	384
Orphic	385
Trance ending	385
Da capo	386
Personal (1)	387
Personal (too)	388
So, a poetry of immediacy	388
Where we came in	389
from <i>The Harbormaster of Hong Kong</i> (1993)	
And again	390
Couplets	391
Discourse-Thrower	392
Doubt not thy name is certainty	394
I.D.	395
I Lays Down the Law (for Charles)	397
Lies	398
Lines	399
Logic	404
Outside	405
Set of Twelve	406
The Harbor-Master of Hong Kong	411
Lines <i>Upon a Distant Prospect of Lines</i>	415
3-5 poems of friendship	
Preamble	421
For Bob Grenier	422

5	<i>"The door to the tomb"</i>	478
6	<i>"Nice-looking dots appear"</i>	479
8	<i>"The lost picture of thinking"</i>	480
9	<i>"Disposed as human"</i>	481
10	(Rhetoric)	482
11	<i>"This calls itself thinking"</i>	483
13	(The Lover) <i>solus & barefoot</i>	484
14	<i>"Sit and cease fretting"</i>	485
15	<i>"Being a child"</i>	486
16	<i>"The name of the game"</i>	487
17	<i>"O begins the occasion"</i>	488
18	<i>"A straight look to the left"</i>	489
19	<i>"Before breakfast the gate"</i>	490
20	Time for speech	491
21	<i>"Majority attained"</i>	492
24	<i>"The hand is a tongue"</i>	493
25	After midnight contemplating illustrations	494
26	<i>"Leaning forward from their rows"</i>	495
29	<i>"Divine effulgence"</i>	496
30	<i>"Where the moonlight had shone"</i>	497
31	Song of a Son	498
33	<i>"The subordination of the software"</i>	500
34	<i>"Subject named after book"</i>	501
35	<i>"He got them to look at what was forgot"</i>	502
36	<i>"Nine-gauge font in a twelve-gauge world"</i>	503
38	<i>"Closure = defeat"</i>	504
39	<i>"Accumulation makes it different"</i>	505
40	Vacation's Bright Idea	506
41	<i>"That's not tragic it's inconvenient"</i>	507
43	<i>"We are the people that we used to be"</i>	508
45	<i>"How old is the swastika"</i>	509
48	<i>"In the interstices"</i>	510
50	<i>"Weighed down with sameness"</i>	511
53	<i>"The moment opes"</i>	512
54	<i>"Imagining no hell"</i>	513

from *Indictable Suborners* (2003)

Indictable Suborners 546

from *Ten Poems from Clearings in the Throat* (2005)

After rakosi 565

Like unity 565

Squeaking wheels 566

Master / of the Trail by Ron Silliman 569

Index of Titles 574

He Gets Better Every Year

by George Bowering

“D didn’t seem to have any morals at all, except where phrasing was concerned.” So wrote David Bromige about an unashamedly autobiographical figure he spoke for in *Piccolo Mondo*,* a comic novel he co-wrote with us other three initials. I remember Bromige’s phrasing very well as one of the first things I noticed about him when we were students at the University of British Columbia in the late fifties and early sixties.

In those days there were a lot of professors from the USA at UBC, many of whom were escaping the California loyalty oath. At the same time, there were a lot of Brits among the faculty of arts students, a lot of them named Anthony. These people took over the arty segment of the campus newspaper, the year-end annual, the players’ club and all other manifestations of arty-fartiness. A star among them was David Bromige, recently arrived from his job as a nurse in a loony bin in Saskatchewan, or so it was rumoured. It was also rumoured that he had come to Canada as a draft-dodger during the Suez crisis.

As the years went by, and Bromige became my friend, I learned the bare outlines of his younger life (he was 2.5 years older than I, but not according to his story). Some things I learned were fictional but always phrased in an

* *Piccolo Mondo*, by Angela Bowering, George Bowering, David Bromige and Michael Matthews. Toronto: Coach House Books, 1998.

interesting way. He was born in London just in time to be a boy in the Blitz, about the time when I was living in an Okanagan orchard, not quite yet learning to grow my animosity for the Brits who would move in and take over my little town and environs.

I don't think that David was thinking of taking over a Canadian orchard when he enrolled at Berkshire College of Agriculture a few miles from the town in which my grandfather sold newspapers as a boy. David proved to be ill-suited for complex modern farm operations such as driving a tractor, so he dropped the academic approach to agriculture, and went to work on a dairy farm in Sweden. I think that the biography at this point takes on the advantages provided by fiction and poetry.

Anyway, Sweden's loss became Canada's gain when David found his way to the Canadian prairie around the time that I was an air force photographer there (incidentally, having an appendix operation that kept me from doing my part in the Suez crisis). I still like the loony bin story, though in the photograph we have of David on the prairie, he does look kind of agricultural. Probably you would say that going from nut-house nurse to UBC undergraduate was a lateral move.

David arrived there during an interesting time. Soon two new official literary journals began there — George Woodcock's *Canadian Literature*, a non-stodgy critical mag, and *Prism*, which was connected with the new creative writing program. The traditional student mags were *Raven*, which was known mainly for its daring design, and a satirical rag no one remembers. There was a lot of theatre, some of it Brecht and some of it original student plays. Art Pepper and Lee Konitz came to play for us. All this stuff got reviewed and analyzed in the arts pages of the *Ubyssy*, edited by David Bromige.

But what poets came to read on campus? Why, those respected by the squares who ran the English department: George Barker, Marianne Moore, Stephen Spender, W.D. Snodgrass. UBC's magazines were full of people who wrote poems like theirs.

On the other side of campus there were youngsters who were reading poets that only two of their professors (Ellen and Warren Tallman) knew about — contrarians such as Charles Olson and LeRoi Jones. And when, late in 1959, their bible, Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960* arrived, the poetry wars were on. Ellen Tallman knew the poets in San Francisco, and