

two new books of poetry

reviewed by Sheelagh Russell

Nobody Owns Th Earth

Poetry in Canada has become a flourishing art, providing Canadian publishing with the means of attracting the public, with publishing houses constantly springing up, and placing before the public a large number of volumes of verse, as well as interesting types of anthologies. Late last year, two publishers well-known in Canada came out with a variety of books, among them these two volumes of poetry, one by a nearly "established" writer, the other, a first volume, but full of promise.

The House of Anansi is well-known for attempting the uncommon, although now even the expectation is accepted; and bill bissett is certainly an uncommon phenomenon. His Anansi book, "Nobody Owns Th Earth" is both attractive and compelling, from the mask-like figure, black and gold, of the cover to the tribal rhythms of the verse and drawings within.

bissett may be described as a more obscure e.e. cummings. The influence is obvious. When bissett is good, like the girl in the rhyme, he is very very good; but when he is bad, which sadly is too often, he is tedious and childish. One begins to wonder, and not a little uncomfortably, just who is the audience here, as bissett constantly appears to be on the verge of the serious, but watching us blinded by his assortment of tricks. An example may make this clearer:

writing on hard
bord

sumbody's fingrs
ar showin thru th
sky

i aint skard

bissett's most obvious trick is his flaunting of grammar, punctuation, syntax, and spelling. If we accepted his intention as explained in the cover notes, this deliberate neglect is an attempt to disrobe oneself of the present rules, to prove that "nobody owns th earth."

"That th way
is clear, th free
hard path, no
correct spelling,
no grammar rules,
Yu can live
without th imperial
sentence . . .

However, the intention is not usually this obvious. However uncomfortable bissett may feel within "th imperial sentence", it takes no uncommon effort to keep constantly in tune with his style; it's like reading an oil painting as though it were braille - possible, even interesting, but not very fruitful.

bissett, in his subject range, is not as creative. His is the modern poet's world - on the road chanting anti-American slogans, off the road busted on a drug charge chanting anti-Establishment slogans. He describes not scenery as much as people, and not people as much as ideas. His imagery, when it can be found is stark, divested of pretension, but what he is saying is usual, although often unclear, one cannot help agreeing with Fred Cogswell, that bissett's great appeal consists in "new corn in an old package."

So much for the bad, Surprisingly, bissett still emerges from all this a little battered but still shining. There is something in his book which pulls one on to the next poem, (or pome, to use bissettese) much as one is fatally attracted to a story, to see what happens next. Above all, bissett appears sincere, even if the

joke is on the reader. And he can be very, very good, with a strange turn in the feeling of a phrase, a moving, changing blend of tension and easiness, as here, in "Water Eyes":

we are such
children we lean

on each other
in the wind

storm, there is no
rest for days

His infrequent love songs are moving, pulsating, dangerously and happily close to tearing their life from the hands of the poet. Perhaps it is no coincidence here that the rules he disparages elsewhere are clearer here. If such a poem as "The Sun Does Not Move" is taken by itself, the value of the volume increases immensely:

In summer
our lagoon is
move into us

We are not only images
coming together

only that is
a season of
olive smell
and not moss

Accompanied by strange, almost primitive drawings, bissett's verses are often rescued from the banal by the right choice of words. But, perhaps there is too much that is cute. What other word for his arrangement of the words "dinah shore meets th ocean" in the shape of two pyramids. And too many slogans such as "LEGALIZE MARRAWANNA now".

There is much in "Nobody Owns Th Earth" that defies description, and much of the defiance is bill bissett's. All that can surely be said is that the book is interesting, amusing, and at times thrilling, and pomes chosen by Margaret Artwood and Dennis Lee can't be all bad.

The Bleeding Clock

Fiddlehead Books, true to its tradition of giving a publishing chance to the new writer, last year published "The Bleeding Clock" by Simon Leigh, and also remained in the field of printing promising, attractive and valuable material.

Called "living time poems", Mr. Leigh's verses capture separate moments in time with a dazzling and shocking clarity. Each instant has its meaning, which is rendered in a few lines of greater depth than the surface would have them appear. A place gives rise to a memory, a memory lives in a scene, the scene holds the thought. For example, "Autumn"

Autumn is voted suicide month
colouring memories, playing a song
on a strand of hair (So costly momentos)

Momenti. Momenti
Mori. Without warning
opposite my door a
tree explodes like a planet
shower of stained glass
on a milk sky. Why this
terrifying beauty? How
can I read the foreign flags, how
guess the future's cards?

I am alone with the tree
trees speak but I cannot take anymore

Mr. Leigh does not deal in the unexpected,

but rather in heightening the expected, by introducing previously unthought-of elements into a traditional description. Rather than going against the pattern, he creates a new pattern with a few new threads.

One appealing aspect of the poems are that they are constantly shifting, not so much in mood as in colour. Each poem has its mood, portrayed exactly; in this sense Mr. Leigh's world is compact and narrow. But added to the enchantment of place names - Angkor, Panama, Killara, - the foreign landscapes and faces is the feeling of a widening circle of the world widening around the poet and the reader.

His most successfully sustained mood is one of tension, most effectively carried in the serene face of the Buddha, or among ancient ruins which preclude the birth of the present irritation. The unmoving decay stands as an ironic commentary to the silent interplay of emotions.

Mr. Leigh evokes childhood nostalgically, though not always happily, but as a world where pain as well as joy is magically exaggerated:

When I was little trees were twice as high
dogs terrifying, pussycats I could meet face
to face
as equals, cheerfully walk into a drainpipe
hide all behind my fingers or under the wheel-
barrow.

But the moments of time of childhood are more to be appreciated.

The poems are often restless, wandering. Often they evoke the feeling that the poet is taking the reader on a journey of the mind; the destination is always where they have not yet arrived. Yet at the same time, each instant is portrayed as separate from the others, as a minor destination in itself, as in "After Meeting a Naga in a Jungle Temple":

All is what it seems.

Stone balustrade becomes a serpent's body
leads to outstretched hand of Buddha
in the gesture "All is well",
the palm becomes a cobra's hood, rears up,
splits into seven heads for the seven rivers.
Wear learning how to see the Naga.

Through a blind door we meet Vishnan
asleep on a fish. From his navel sprouts a lotus
bearing children. (The waiting jungle now
so many months from rain,
red dust floats from our feet to coat
magnetic palms.) We turn, gaze unsurprised at
mirror water bearing lotus flowers.
Clearly the Naga is teaching us to see.

Mr. Leigh finds his images in the folklore of place, in the imagination of childhood, and in the heightening both of art and nature, where trees explode and the poet puts on his wings. Often ironic, he can make intrude into poems of a profound subject, bits of jarring, modern symbols and concepts, which serve to bring bathos to the emotion. The poems read easily, the poetry does not exist in confusion.

Simon Leigh's "The Bleeding Clock" collects a few poems, each of a finished, gem-like quality under the structure of the pattern of time, which both connects and separates them. Enjoyable, smoothly written, they are well worth reading.

Nobody Owns Th Earth
by bill bissett
Anansi 1971
93 pages \$2.50

The Bleeding Clock
by Simon Leigh
Fiddlehead Books 1971
56 pages \$1.00