



**THE BRAVE  
NEVER WRITE  
POETRY • JONES**







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Coach House Books, Toronto

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*This one's for Robyn*

I wanted to give myself to something,  
even something false

– Yukio Mishima, *Forbidden Colours*

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## Foreword

In the summer of 1982 I decided that I would be A Poet. Since arriving in Toronto in 1977 (ostensibly for the purpose of studying the humanities at the University of Toronto – a worthless undertaking from which I many times withdrew and finally abandoned), I had already written several hundred poems. Yet while many of my friends thought of me as a poet, I had little interest in refining my piles of scribbles, publishing them or reading them in public. For five years I worked at more than twenty odd jobs, spending my many free hours and days reading widely, travelling, wandering the streets and hitting the bars of Toronto, each day drinking excessively – a habit I have indulged in since adolescence. My friends, with youthful aspirations to literature, were mostly off searching for something in Europe; I thought that I might have found whatever it was in the cantinas of southern Mexico and Guatemala. Mostly I wished to do as little as possible in terms of being a productive citizen, and Toronto seemed as fine a city as any for this. If I had any

credo, it is best summed up by John Glassco in his *Memoirs of Montparnasse*: ‘What do I mean to do with my youth, my life? Why, I’m going to enjoy myself.’

Then, in May 1982, through a government make-work program, I landed a desk job in the office of the League of Canadian Poets. The executive director at that time often said she had hired me because I had a ‘cute ass’ and I was to do little more than keep out of the way, picking away at such menial tasks as she couldn’t be bothered with. I admired her in some respects and the job was ideal. I would wander in late in the morning (already well into the day’s drinking), take long lunches at a nearby tavern, and leave whenever I was too drunk or sick to keep up a reasonable pretence of efficient idleness. There was a large library of members’ books, boxes of archival material, and a case of good scotch left over from some league function; I spent a pleasant summer absorbing each of these.

And that summer I took a good long stare up the asshole of the monster that had become Canadian Poetry. Prior to then, I had thought of poetry mostly in aesthetic terms. My own poetry was awkward, meditative, written in isolation and often imbued with the spirit of Zen. The poets I naively admired were great men and women, joyous and tragic saints far above the everyday world and yet writing the poems that could change that world. Few of the poets I admired were then members of the League, or at least not active members. Through my participation in that summer’s Annual General Meeting, the reading of the office’s daily correspondence, and the endless telephone conversations, I discovered a massive and absurd mutual-admiration society where poetry was nothing more than the currency that bought greater currency – grants, teaching

positions, writer-in-residencies, government-financed reading tours, sex and ever-elusive fame. Half of the poets had nothing to say and no particular skill in saying it; in a way the quality of the poems was irrelevant. Most were professors, instructors and civil servants; they wanted two things – a career in poetry and as big a slice of the Can. Lit. pie as they could lay their hands on. And these they would get in any way possible. Self-promotion, backstabbing, ass-licking, bitching and fighting for readings and contracts were the order of the day. Canadian poetry had become a huge and corrupt bureaucracy. It was ugly, cynical, full of pettiness and hatred. I loved it. I too wanted a slice of the pie. I was going to be A Poet.

That fall the executive director of the League moved up the ladder of Canadian bureaucratic manipulation and fled to Ottawa. Suddenly faced with having to work if I wanted to stay on, I too fled – back to my old life of relative idleness. I had a pleasant study in the attic of an old house on Bathurst Street south of Queen, a large collection of books, a portable German typewriter, and the beer and wine stores were only two blocks away. From this base of operations, I began to write prolifically, organize readings for myself, occasionally mail stuff out to the literary rags and hobnob with other poets; essentially I was playing the poetry game. In the winter of 1983 Unfinished Monument Press brought out a chapbook of the best of the poems I had written during that period. Most of those poems are reprinted here, in the second section of this book, for the most part unaltered except for errors in the original printing.

From 1981 to 1983 I also wrote a large number of haiku, the best of which were collected and published by HMS Press in the winter of 1984. Most of these are reprinted in the third

section of this book, along with the original introduction to that chapbook. It should be noted that dates and the chronology of events mentioned in that introduction are somewhat inaccurate due to my faulty memory and do not correspond with some of what has been written here.

Just prior to the publication of *Jack and Jill in Toronto*, my personal life began to take a rather bad turn. I had destroyed a relationship with a woman I loved, my drinking was completely out of my control, I had no money, was too sick to work and badly in debt. I moved to a rooming house on Adelaide Street and managed to hang on for another several months, borrowing money, playing the horses, often ending up in a detox centre and somehow producing a large body of poems that have never seen print and probably never will. In the spring of 1984 I found myself in the psycho ward of Toronto Western Hospital.

It was during this residency, while in the state of heightened perception only possible during extreme alcohol withdrawal, that I first thought out the idea of a massive book (originally something on the scale of Progress Publishers' collected writings of Marx) to be called *The Brave Never Write Poetry*. In May, when I received the first of several honourable discharges, I typed out some of the poems I had been composing in my mind. Then I didn't write for a long time. Early this spring I wrote the last of the twenty-five poems contained in the first section of this book. Now I've rewritten everything a few times and collated it and this is all there is of that great idea that I can barely remember now.

Some of my friends find these poems depressing and 'confessional.' I find them all rather amusing and the protagonist is a stranger to me, though (coincidentally) I seem to

have done most of the things he's done and know most of the people he knows. All of the poems that are obviously bad have been accepted by various magazines and anthologies.

With the publication of this first major collection of my work, completed with the assistance of a government arts grant, I suppose I have joined the ranks of the 'career' poets. I doubt that this will inspire great joy among my new colleagues; I'm not sure that I'm too happy about this myself. Every day I tell myself that I will never write another poem, yet again and again I find myself at the typewriter. Perhaps I just have nothing better to do. Perhaps I somehow believe that if anything can save this mad world, poetry will. I'm not sure I care about saving the world. I don't know anything. I'm twenty-six years old now; sometimes I feel fifty-six. I've been off the booze for several months. If the liver and brain can hold out a bit longer, you can expect more of the same soon.

Jones

College Street, Toronto, 1985



**THE BRAVE NEVER  
WRITE POETRY**



## The Brave Never Write Poetry

The brave ride streetcars to jobs  
early in the morning, have traffic accidents,  
rob banks. The brave have children, relationships,  
mortgages. The brave never write these things  
down in notebooks. The brave die & they are  
dead

It takes guts to watch television,  
get your hair done, have a barbecue. It takes guts  
to blow up the Canadian bomb factory & plead guilty  
to twenty-five years

Josef Brodsky was exiled for his poetry & now he  
lives in the land of the brave. They like his  
poetry there. But the brave don't read it &  
in Moscow they are lined up in the streets  
to buy food. It takes guts to know some happiness  
& not make a poem of it

& alone in my room

I am calling someone now, anyone. Someone give me  
the strength to be & not question being. Someone  
give me the strength to stay out of the cafés &  
libraries. Someone give me the strength not to  
apply to the Canada Council for the Arts. Someone  
give me the strength not to write poetry

But nothing. No one. The streets have not  
exploded. The streetcars pass. The clock has  
moved another inch

Ernesto Cardenal will no longer write poetry while the U.S. makes war on his country. I read this in *Playboy* magazine. Later I stare at the image of a naked woman, her legs spread across the centrefold & I know, as the semen runs into my hand, that she would never write poetry

It is springtime in Toronto. I am in love.

## Two Poets

A couple of afternoons a month, we  
run into each other at the post  
office. Silently we sort through  
the contents of our boxes, looking  
for the returned manuscripts, looking  
for the cheques

& then the rejections:

‘Sons of bitches don’t know good  
poems from their arseholes’

&:

‘So & so’s too busy diddling  
his secretary to know when he gets  
the real thing’

Or:

‘Goddamn academics, they should  
all be lined up & shot’

Sometimes a  
small magazine takes a poem or  
there’s a cheque & we walk up  
the street to a bar & over beer  
the talk turns to the women who left,  
the races that were fixed, past-due  
bills & whatever the bloody Americans  
are up to now

His hair is going &  
his stomach & his hands shake now  
when he lifts his beer

& we drink  
the beer & talk until the bartender  
cuts us off & we stumble uncertainly

onto the street & home to our separate  
apartments, where we will sit all night,  
drinking coffee & smoking cigarettes,  
writing the poems that will make us  
immortal.

## Better Living Through Chemistry

Toronto was starting to get to me,  
I was feeling hemmed in, bored,  
maybe even murderous. I went to see  
a shrink

‘What seems to be the  
problem,’ he asked

‘Well,’ I said,  
‘it’s like this: everyone I meet seems  
to write poetry. They’re everywhere,  
they’re suffocating me, you can’t know  
how awful it is’

The shrink leaned back  
in his chair & closed his eyes. After  
a while he stirred & began to mumble:

‘Um ...  
schizophrenic paranoia ... stelazine’

He wrote  
out a script, shook my hand & went back  
to his notebook. I looked down  
as I was leaving: he was writing a poem.  
I rushed to the pharmacy

I went to a  
coffee house a few weeks later. There  
were thirty people sitting around, drinking  
herbal tea, looking bored, hunched over  
notebooks & briefcases. One by one they  
went up to the mike & read from pieces of  
paper:

one man's woman had left him & he  
couldn't find another;  
another had experienced  
some sort of existential enlightenment while  
sniffing a pine cone;  
one woman remembered,  
with tears in her throat, the death of her  
grandmother

It was all very beautiful. I  
felt wonderful. I sang quiet praise to the  
stelazine. There wasn't a poet in the bunch.