

# Seasons of Blood

by Henry Beissel

**Reviewed by Gary Geddes**

I think there is a similarity here between Henry Beissel and Joseph Conrad, another foreign writer who became a country gentleman and adopted English as his writing language of choice. Both survived childhoods of disaster: Conrad, the Russian pogroms against Polish nationalists and intellectuals, which took the life of his father; Beissel, the war years of Hitler's Germany, with its false dream, deprivations and eventual fire-bombings, followed by a legacy of shame. Both writers developed what has been described as a spectacular view of the universe.

For Conrad, the universe was spectacle both cruel and benign, where mankind would ultimately freeze in the dark, but nonetheless worthy awe and wonder and intense study.

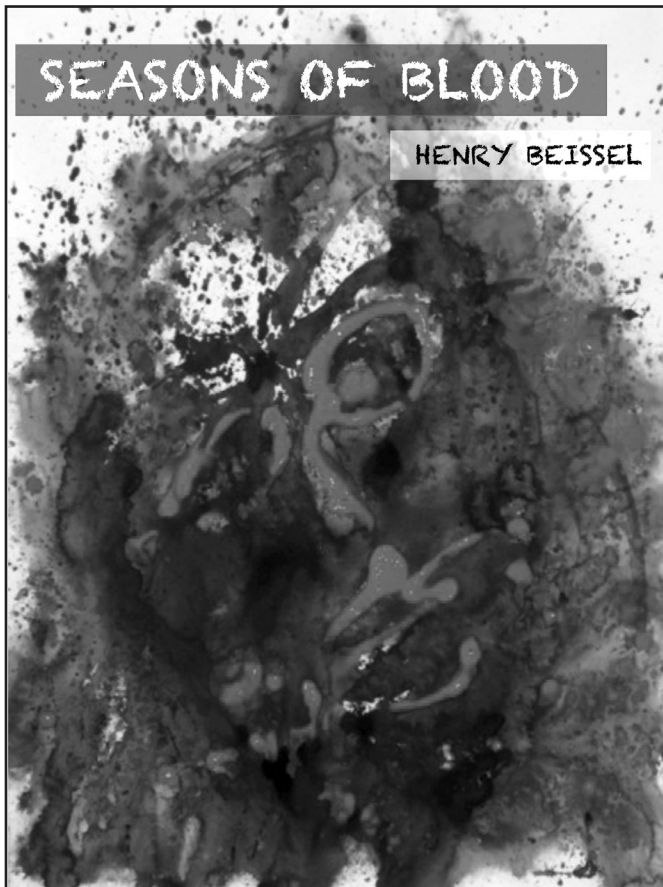
For Henry Beissel, living in the countryside in Eastern Ontario, the natural world, with its abundant creatures and changing seasons, was a constant presence, more sustaining than debilitating, more entertainment than irritant. In this milieu, with the nourishing influence of family and admiring students, he casts a discerning eye on the political world unfolding around him. Like Conrad, he is appalled by ignorance and folly, but mostly by man's inhumanity to man, his indignation further fuelled by a need for the world to eradicate all signs reminding him of the crimes and the depredations of his birthplace.

Beissel's early years in Canada included study at the University of Toronto, work for CBC radio, travels in the Arctic and, eventually,

a career as a university teacher, writer and editor. *Edge*, the title of a publication he founded and edited from the University of Alberta in Edmonton, is, perhaps, an indicator of his perceptions of his place in the universe at that time: edgy, haunting the margins, but hopefully part of a literary and cultural avant-garde, being on the 'cutting edge.' And, indeed, the writings that flowed from the technologies he inherited – pen, typewriter and computer – show a man determined to give imaginative shape not only to his own demons, but to ours as well.

I had the pleasure of publishing *Under Coyote's Eye*, his brilliant play about Ishi, the last surviving member of the Yahi tribe in California, and his translations of the work of German poet Peter Huchel, an outsider silenced by the East German government. Not one to limit himself to success as a playwright and translator, Beissel embarked on an ambitious career as an epic poet, producing a remarkable sequence called *Cantos North*, in which he celebrates both the starkness, cold, novelty, and relative purity of Canada's northlands, where perhaps a new breed of humans might be formed.

*Seasons of Blood* is no less epic in its ambitions, taking on, like Conrad, the world of greed and material interests. It's a bold, impassioned plea to forsake the conflicts and wars that are the legacy of this blindness, in exchange for an immersion in nature and love. Yet the nature Beissel presents here is not just nurturing and beautiful, it's violent and cataclysmic, where



*SEASONS OF BLOOD*

Henry Beissel

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winter is “not a season / but a destiny for every sun” and where spring, we are told, “leaves a train / of blood / up and down / paths of renewal.” Not an easy path, since the mind must journey “on pain of death / to reach fulfillment.” In the face of these challenges, the poet asks:

*Is there not ecstasy enough  
in this perpetual holocaust of creation  
for a love to encompass all?*

Apparently not, as the rhetorical question is quickly overwhelmed by memories of rape, starvation, torture and murder, the ground of which lies somewhere between T.S. Eliot’s *Wasteland*, where “April is the cruellest month, breeding lilacs / out of the dead land,” and Chaucer’s more benign vision in *The Canterbury Tales*, where the soft showers of April “bathed every vein in swich / licour.”

*Seasons of Blood* is, in many ways, a literary tour de force, moving from a richly textured and colloquial free verse to lines that are subtly rhymed and metrical. The range of reference is

phenomenal, from Shakespeare to particle physics. E.J. Pratt and Christopher Dewdney aside, no other poet in Canada has such a profound interest in science and its vocabularies.

Historically, *Seasons of Blood* has no shortage of tragic material to explore, including the holocaust, the Falklands War, death squads in Guatemala and El Salvador, the bombing of Hiroshima, and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict that resulted in the September 1982 massacres at Sabra and Shatila refuge camps in Lebanon. These conflicts are mostly attributed to vested interests dividing the world into ‘hemispheres of power.’

Though steeped in literary and biblical images, Henry Beissel’s epic provides no religious consolation; instead, it is a wake-up call to “fools of faith,” who have forgotten the essence of their belief systems and taken up arms and economics to enforce their versions of the truth. He reminds us, alluding to Mathew 6: 24-29, to consider instead the birds of the air and lilies of the field. In a world that is fast destroying its creatures and eco-systems, his work reminds me of those musicians on the stern of a sinking *Titanic* who, faced with an ultimate choice, rejected both terror and silence and instead struck up their instruments to belt out the message of amazing grace. And it is grace that abounds in this book, the grace of loving attention riveted to a dying world and the grace of language so finely tuned it breaks the heart while it nests in the ear.