

BARRY McKINNON

by

JOHN HARRIS



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Readers not conditioned to McKinnon's poetry can find it evasive or ambiguous. However, if McKinnon is shy of standard patterns of logic and association, finding them automatic and thus inaccurate, he is not at all evasive in presenting the immediate details of consciousness and a complex but inevitably conventional "message." He has a profound, and very conservative, set of values, an almost primitive attachment to home, family, and friends, and a concern for exact detail. McKinnon's perspective is that of the truly conservative person, the perspective that often leads to satire. McKinnon, however, is not normally satirical; he seldom detaches himself, to that degree, from the details he examines. Rather there is considerable irony and (sometimes) a dark comedy in his writing. It is this element of humor in McKinnon that counters for readers the initial difficulties they may have with the style and perspective of his poems.

McKinnon has no theories about the world. He has instead the most rudimentary concept of right and wrong, an instinctive reaction to anything phoney, a distrust of systems of thought, a sharp wit, and a strong and unquestioned sense of familial, parental, sexual and fraternal love. Every poem is an encounter between these essentials of human nature and some tangible immediacy -- a classroom, a bar in the afternoon, a radio talk show, a daughter, a wife, a new truck, a bathtub race, a migraine headache. This world both comforts and scares McKinnon. Domestically, it is a world of stress and

misunderstanding, but the domestic world is bathed in the golden light of love -- the sense of continuity, balance and security that only love can provide:

*Claire has 4 teeth
& can stand*

*high enough to turn
the radio off*

*& throw my baby picture
off the shelf*

*what questions can I
ask*

*about these things
I watch my girl*

*grow. I am grown up
& must bend down*

*to turn the radio back on
& put my picture back I*

Outside the circle of family and friends, society is a dark place. It may be represented by the *lit fluorescent halls* (85) of a college, the dimly-lit interior of a bar, a plastic suburb or shopping centre, or the gutted landscape of the interior of B.C. In all of these places, people are forced into some kind of compromise, and their personal struggles can lead to overt violence (in a bar) or (worse) the covert violence that is

propagated by outwardly responsible and reasonable people.

McKinnon, however, is no social reformer. He is the exact opposite. He does not believe that people (including himself) can be much better than they are, though they must try for their own sakes to be better, and he especially does not believe that some system can give support to human nature and make it better than it really is. The shortcomings of any political system are, as the bible originally pointed out, absolute. The object is not to call for reform but to remind people that society can do nothing for them. It is simply the state in which we exist. It does not stand against Nature, though of course it protects us from certain aspects of Nature that we consider foreign. Rather it is itself the Nature of our natures. We were made to survive in a pack and the rules of the pack have not changed and will not change for us any more than they can change for wolves or termites. These rules are illustrated in what to me is one of the greatest, most painful, and funniest of McKinnon's poems, "The Organizer:"

*Jack the organizer must
look sober. (who cares for any of this.
I am as
sad as I can be -- think of our 15 billion
years -- how any
tribe must dance and choose their queen
-- the eternal
goddess (in this case, dressed in red,
pump shoes,
a corsage. kiss her Jack*

*the band will play after the watered
food. the band
is watered -- a part of the ritual to
think music is
required for dance. wasted days and
wasted nights our
cheating hearts. kiss the music Jack*

*I am Jack the organizer. I wear
elevator shoes and
am responsible for everything -- the
trophies, the paper plates
must choose those who win. assume
all else is
lost. I drink alone*

*poetry won't allow all to be told. This
is a fact. stew
is stuck to my pants. 60 cents a drink.
it's hard
to be humble when you're great. in my
own way, I love
you all. this must be my real purpose*

*you are the organizer and are
responsible for paper plates.
you must be less drunk than anyone.
who will clean
up -- who will see the last drunk home.
who will
care. you will Jack*

*Jack doesn't know his own mind and is
therefore a kind of
poet. he knows the unbearable
pressures and is therefore, also*

human. Jack can't think of the right
thing to say -- can't
get the mike to work. can't really do
anything but
be responsible. here's to you Jack

carnival drunks. carnival drunks. the
boldest grab
these mikes/carry off the queen or
ladies in waiting, or
last years queen or anyone. you can
tell something in the way
a man will dance of what he says.
someone just said

"tomorrow there will be no children's
bowling"

do you bowl Jack -- are you bowled
over
is your finger on the Nike Zeus.

one communist could push you over the
edge. but Jack you're
already there. you're through. you're
invisible. you
will disappear so
easily.

stack these chairs. you're nothing
Jack, in your
elevator shoes. they chose you for no
reason. but

they knew you could do it. (67 - 68)

"The Organizer" is not a sad poem, though it does state the sad realities of politics more clearly than any other poem I know. Jack himself is a comic character; the inconsistency between what he is and what he tries to be is evident, and the detachment necessary to comedy is maintained by the narrator. The picture of the situation that Jack is in is grotesque -- filled with caricatured humanity and the crassest of consumer junk. McKinnon is fond of calling this style "Woolcoco." We discover in the course of the poem, however, that Jack "cares." There is no reason why he, in particular, was elected to care, but *they know [he] could do it*. He exhibits for all of us the essential paradox: we were made to survive only in a pack, and we were made to think and feel as individuals, forever alone, alienated from the rituals that maintain us (*how any/tribe must dance and choose their queen*). Our lives, consequently, find fulfillment not in the laws of society, but in the laws of society as we want them to be. Jack is comically out of his depth. The mike won't work. The drunks take over. The communists will push him over the edge. But Jack exhibits the things we want from our leaders. He shows us that *he knows the unbearable pressures and is therefore, also/human*. He is one of us. He is also willing to assume responsibility for all those things with which we cannot cope. He will care. Nothing else, finally, can be expected.

"The Organizer" also exhibits McKinnon's characteristic style. The poem describes a

scene in the most graphic and complete detail — the paper plates, the cost of the drinks, the songs played by the band, etc. It also contains an onlooker's (the poet's) musings on the scene. All of this is done in "complete sentences;" the details are conventionally clear. But the larger units of the poem are not complete or unified in any standard way. For one thing, McKinnon rejects the grammatical or phrase line that characterizes the free verse of the early Canadian modernists (Smith-Souster). Grammatical and line units are enjambed; this is a technique brought into Canada by the Tish group. 2 McKinnon characteristically lops adjectives from nouns, adverbs from verbs, prepositions from their following phrases and clauses, subjects from immediately following predicates and predicates from immediately following objects. This slows the reading of the poem, makes it hesitant, and creates a contrapuntal emphasis on those words at the beginnings and ends of lines. Also, the sentences uttered by the narrator seem fragmented — are more self-contained than attached to a sequence. The effect is like a jig-saw puzzle gradually coming together but (if it is a good puzzle) making no sense until it is almost together:

*the band will play after the watered
food. the band
is watered -- a part of the ritual to
think music is
required for dance. wasted days and
wasted nights our
cheating hearts. kiss the music Jack*

In the larger context, too, the point of view of the poem shifts. It shifts from the narrator (*I am as/sad as I can be*) to Jack (*I am Jack the Organizer*) and then back to the narrator who addresses Jack in the second person (*you are the organizer*) and then the third (*he*) and then the second again. The narrator assumes many levels of involvement. In addition to telling the story, interpolating Jack's thoughts and describing his own, he gives instructions (*kiss her, Jack*), asks questions (*are you bowled over*), proposes a toast (*here's to you Jack*) repeats a public announcement (*tomorrow there will be no children's bowling*). He assumes all possible angles of perspective, using a range that might characterize a novel rather than a short lyric.

McKinnon, compared to most poets of his generation, has not published much poetry. All of his poetry from the Seventies, the bulk of his mature work, with the exception of the long prairie poem I Wanted to Say Something, is contained in the ninety-page The the, published in 1980 by Coach House. It seems that he puts little down on paper, finding in the act of writing an unbearable level of pretension, and composes mostly in his head, so that his poems need little or no further refinement once they are on the page:

For me, writing sort of accompanies what I do. I do write very quickly and I don't spend a lot of physical or literal time on it. For me it's a process of waiting for it to happen. It takes time

*to make the observations and outstalk
the poem or wait for it. 3*

Because he is always laying for the poem, letting it come as naturally as possible, he tends (like a jazz musician) to give his books tentative or hesitant titles and subtitles -- I Wanted to Say Something, The the (fragments, Death of a Lyric Poet: Poems and Drafts, and Songs and Speeches. All of the poetry, however, taken as a unit, tells a detailed, complete, and very profound story. The very definite (and unqualified) title of the Coach House collection, The the, is no pretension.

McKinnon's first book, The Golden Daybreak Hair (Aliquando Press, 1967) was printed (very beautifully) when the writer was 22 years old. The poems were composed, for the most part, when McKinnon was between the ages of 18 and 22, living in Calgary and Montreal. There are a few poems that stand as artifacts ("My father is an older man," "Grandmother," and "For Joy") and the rest are rather vague, but the book in general makes pleasant reading. The poet comes across as generally sad, alienated from his family, prone to sitting in coffee shops and making midnight phone calls to the girl he loves. There could be in this an element of teenage posturing, but even at this early stage McKinnon is rooted deeply in his sense of family, the need to conventionally belong to father, mother, lover. He is saddened by, but senses a profound mystery in, the aging of his parents. He tries to understand the significance of the prairie farm that he knew

as a child and that represents a rapidly disappearing family past:

*Grandmother
if I asked of the dust
that
blew on these plains
(during depression years)*

*you would point
to the north room of
your prairie house (where I used to
sleep
and say*

*my lungs are the
upstairs rooms*

*your grandfather
is dead*

*this house is a
monument.*

*my lungs are
the upstairs rooms where you
used to sleep. (II)*

In his relationship to his girlfriend ("Joy," his wife, to whom The the is dedicated in 1980) he is both lover and father:

*I tried to comfort
the pain of nightmares as a paternal
gesture
or satisfy your thirst with*

*an offering of water from
the kitchen tap (12)*

There is a terrible, unsatisfied yearning in The Golden Daybreak Hair. It is not an obscure yearning, however; the desire for a place (a person to be, people to love, something to do) is a basic need felt very strongly in our teenage and early adult years, and the book identifies it very clearly. The book also demonstrates McKinnon's knowledge of how it is satisfied, and the difficulties implied in satisfying it. There is a strength and determination illustrated in this; McKinnon understands a good deal. He knows that what he doesn't understand may turn out to be very painful. He sees his parents shocked by the knowledge they have gained. His father, for example, is

*quiet to sons
wondering
winter silence*

*an older
man (10)*

Nevertheless, McKinnon is determined to be a man (though not necessarily, or entirely, a quiet one) too. He will find out what it means to love:

*I have not said I love you
for over a month . . .*

walking home my legs are

*the sidewalk
my hand is holding
you above my drowning*

*and I am saying it over
and over (27)*

In The Carcasses of Spring (Talon, 1967) the message gets clearer. The terror (carcasses) of love seems to overpower the promise (Spring), but the promise is still manifest. Carcasses goes over the same territory as Golden Daybreak Hair, but in infinitely more detail. The poet passes by the carcasses, the coyotes, the grandmother (*old/with many deaths*), and goes off into the fields

*searching for
simple flowers
in some simple*

earth

(*"The Carcasses of Spring"*)

There is an overpowering sense of death and despair in the poems -- *the old mad man, the dead/hanging limp over trees,*

*and we return to our rooms
half mad
hoping that they arnt there
or that someone has put flowers
near the sink*

And that "someone," "his lover who takes care of his rooms," usually does provide the flowers, though not always dependably:

*and it should be mentioned that
children
run away from him
because he is
gentle
and his wife for the same reason
runs away
but is known to
return
because there is something
about him ("Short Story of a Gentle Man")*

"Letter II: for my wife," anthologized in West Coast Seen (Talon, 1969) and by Al Purdy in Storm Warning (McClelland and Stewart, 1971) and George Bowering in The Contemporary Canadian Poem Anthology (Coach House, 1983), epitomizes McKinnon's first two books, the story of how love is found and of the wars fought over it. The poem describes the self-conscious lovers walking down to the high grass by the river to make love. The central word in the poem is *pain*, but the outcome is a victory:

*but it was not beautiful
and the lies were to my friends*

*it was not beautiful
but I had come
to love you*

In 1969, the McKinnons moved to Prince George, to a job teaching Creative Writing in the new college. "The Land," at the end of Carcasses, chronicles his initial reaction to

the city and its surrounding area. Due to a complex set of circumstances, this move had great significance for the community, for McKinnon, and for Canadian literature. Prince George had already produced Robert Harlow, Brian Fawcett, and Sharon Thesen, but these writers had all left to do their work. Now a young but maturing poet had arrived to work in the place -- and not simply, as it turned out, to work on his own writing and to teach writing. Because of his experience as an editor with Talon in Vancouver, McKinnon had developed an interest in printing:

I became obsessed with printing and the technology of it. Also, in the summers, I wasn't used to having big clumps of time, and it made me nervous sitting around. People would say, aren't you writing? I'm not a prose writer and I didn't require lots of time so I think the press provided a situation for a few interested people to get together. We were always putting a monkey wrench to an A B Dick. It was a nice physical activity and I think also very creative because we got into wierdo book designs and experimenting with the technology.
4

These "weirdo designs" are now considered classic. Many Caledonia Writing Series chapbooks like Pierre Coupey's Terminal Series and Four Island Poems and McKinnon's own I Wanted to Say Something, Sex at 31, and Songs and Speeches as well as the broadside issues of

poems by Birney, Purdy, Lane, Creeley, etc are "state of the art" publications that have influenced small press layouts across the country. 5

McKinnon's student assistants in the early years of the Caledonia Writing Series included Harvey Chometsky and Bill Bailey. Later, Paul Shuttleworth, an Irish-American poet and editor of Aisling, joined the college faculty for a year, and worked with McKinnon. 6 The CWS was tied in with a series of readings that McKinnon, as an instructor in Creative Writing, managed for the Canada Council. Many major Canadian writers (Atwood, Birney, Page, Purdy, Newlove, Kroetsch, Lane, Bowering etc) read at one time or another in Prince George, and most of these readings were accompanied or immediately followed by a publication — either a broadside (Lane's Certs, for example), or a chapbook (David Phillips' Snow Poems, Ken Belford's One Word, or Andy Suknaski's Phillip Well). The effect on the visiting writers, Creative Writing students, and the community in general was galvanic, but as is often the case with institutions the college, originally supporting the work by providing simple facilities and official encouragement, gradually withdrew its support. The larger the college became, the less room there seemed to be for Creative Writing, until finally the Printing and Creative Writing courses, though always filled to capacity with students, were cancelled. McKinnon moved the operation into the basement of his own house, changing the press name to Gorse St. Press. 7

The most important thing that happened in the course of the Caledonia Writing Series, however, was that McKinnon's approach to his own work changed. It seems evident now that he began to visualize his own writings as printed objects. The analogy that comes immediately to my mind is William Blake, though McKinnon is a designer rather than an illustrator. McKinnon began to write with the book design and accompanying visuals in mind or taking shape in his mind. He also began to write books, or book-length poems. There is more of a tendency, as he progresses, to discard the lyric poem as a coherent unity and deal in terms of the poem-cycle. It becomes more difficult, as his work progresses, to isolate individual lyrics as "artifacts," though a poem like "The Organizer" is an exception. It occurs in a book of "fragments." It is definitely, however, not a fragment, though it could be argued that it is made up of fragments. It seems that analysis of McKinnon's work must proceed according to the larger units defined by his chapbooks. As a result, his work of the Seventies is only partially (though substantially) available in The the. The four chapbooks represented in The the are also tangible artifacts, and the reader necessarily misses some of their impact in the Coach House format. 8

Lust Lodge, a satire, is McKinnon's only work of prose fiction. It is a parody of a Coles Notes edition of a story of a young man's encounter with a pornographic novel. The book's cover warns that *those who remove the plastic covers will have to pay for*

the book. The novel within the novel is itself a brilliant parody of the style and content of pornographic publications:

... gently he touched the centre of her desire until her senses exploded in a crescendo of pleasure. "Oh Tad, if it could always be like this I would be the happiest girl at this ski lodge." "Don't worry, Barbara," Tad said, as his eyes examined her still erect nipples, "with a love as strong as ours, our happiness will go on forever at this ski lodge."

Marvin is the young man who has entered the bookstore and ripped Lust Lodge out of its plastic bag (McKinnon's book was sold in a plastic bag). He is a "freak" with "broken glasses, partially held together by an old bandaid." While he reads pages 82 - 83 of Lust Lodge, he is watching "the most beautiful woman he had ever seen" move down the sado-masochism section towards him. The story is cut short before we find out what happens either to him or to Tad, Barbara and the nefarious Tim in Lust Lodge itself. The "Student Guide" and "Editor's Notes," done in the Coles typography and format, ask "pertinent" questions about the story (*Is Tad really Barbara's brother?*) and explain that Lust Lodge was published in its incomplete form because it is worth as much unfinished as it is finished, so why finish it:

The embarrassing experience of being caught ripping Lust Lodge apart, it has

been reported, is worth more than the actual contents

On the last page there is a picture of "Rick Torch," the author, with a duck-tail hairdo and motorcycle; the photo was taken by Joy McKinnon. The back cover contains, of course, cover blurbs like *HOT SHIT (Calgary City Star)*.

Lust Lodge is a wholly delightful little satire. It became an underground classic when it was published (sold out of Vancouver bookstores within a few days) and retains that status to this day. It was reprinted (minus the plastic bag) in The Pulp Mill: a Collection of Local Short Stories (Prince George: Repository, 1977).

I Wanted to Say Something (1975) was composed in 1970 in the first years of McKinnon's residence in Prince George. The poem is a search for roots, an attempt to uncover the significance of the prairie past that haunts McKinnon in Golden Daybreak Hair and Carcasses of Spring. It is McKinnon's "birth of a poet," and states the commitment illustrated in the chapbooks contained in The. The book was reviewed (belatedly) by Lorna Uher in Essays in Canadian Writing in 1980.9 Uher's review was worth waiting for. It points out the influence this poem had on Andy Suknaski's Wood Mountain Poems and on Eli Mandel's Out of Place, and it identifies and describes the poem's central theme:

McKinnon's book is not so much

concerned with descriptions of the people and their oral stories which so fascinated Sukanaski. McKinnon is more interested in the process of his own telling Hence, the poem is not only about McKinnon's family and their past, but also about the act of writing, about the growth of the poet himself, and about the importance of finding a language of place and clarity, "speech to take its measure/and secure the/movement/now." (107)

Uher also points out that the book is a visual artifact, a spacious, muted text located around haunting photos from the McKinnon family album.

Part I, the Legacy, describes family history on McKinnon's mother's side, quotes the maternal grandparents (Fred and Jessie Dalton) recalling the past, and presents and explains the photos. The poem moves both chronologically and as a response to the photos and recollections. The poem begins with the album, the grandparents thumbing through it and recalling the names, places, and incidents that accompany the pictures, the younger members of the family laughing *in the innocence -- that its all past that nothing lasts once the/dream ends.* (no page numbers) The Daltons came from Michigan, in 1908, *to this edge, this/land with obsessions that somewhere/you could be free.* They were from a tough, working-class background, about twenty years old, just married, and *they conceived the*

land as enemy. Their lives gained clarity as they subdued the land to familiar patterns, used religion to *cover the anger,* re-established the familiar, separate roles of the men and women, learned how to use machinery, drove out the indians:

the indian walks away knowing more than you think in just having learned to walk away.

The depression occurs, and the war, the end of the dream. It ended in failure, replaced one form of starvation for another:

that nobody starves -- might have redeemed it starvation takes its forms

In one of the descendents, it becomes the urge to write poetry:

*born within a season
to counter the mechanical
accuracy: (a boy/indian/poet walks)*

innocent thru this field . . .

*in the game he wore a red bandanna,
and covered a beer bottle, for
water, with leather, & covered his
skin with thin
brown leather
and crawled thru coulees in a*

*dream (kept
all the silence within him, gnawing*

as poetry

Thus, the indian returns to take possession; the first cycle completes itself in innocence. One dream of freedom leads to another.

Part II, the Moving Photograph, describes the other side of the family -- mainly the poet himself. Part II begins with the father, Ben, *disinherited*, off the land, making a life in the city, and then it continues the poet's own story. The growth of the poet is part of the cycle of the new dream of experience or self-awareness, towards

*poetry/
speech to make its measure
and sense the
movement*

The song, as he says in "Bushed," *is all that will go/anywhere:*

*I wanted to say something
is wrong and provide an
alternative -- to reclaim the spirit
from the dust, and allow the sun
to appear clearly on the horizon: to say
the animals are always holy -- to
rearrange
the fields in natural
ecstasy*

The movement, however, will not stay for

the poet; the forces set in operation by the previous generation continue to accelerate:

*my father -- born of the decay, who
moved to the city: another
promise/or dream of gold, that would
secure
you inside the bankruptcy. The stories
come*

down:

*benjamin, a farm boy . . .
he had his hand and what he'd
learned
and
all purity
disinherited
as a man searched for
honest work and had to lie to get
it*

Meanwhile, the maternal grandparents have also come to the city -- the grandfather (with grade 3 education) to become a real estate salesman. The families live near one another on a city street lined with trees. There is school and the young poet, in his basement room,

*learns to sing
before he disappears*

That is where we leave him, singing to the end of the book, the *edge/of the moving photo/graph.*

The discovery of roots, then, of locale and home, finally becomes a discovery of a

language that can locate and give direction. I Wanted to Say Something resolves some of the insecurity expressed in Golden Daybreak Hair and Carcasses of Spring; it locates the poet in his craft, explains and justifies the life and work that has gone before and describes the difficulty and establishes the commitment to what is to come. It is important to note that the commitment to poetry is not taken as a kind of abstraction, a dedication to language itself as a symbol system. The language of poetry, for McKinnon, is "open" -- it grows out of the land, not out of itself:

*sing for the land
to return with its gifts
of simplicity, sing for its strength that
it grew inside him as the fluidity, that
he grew inside it and bowed to its
supremacy*

*he will sing before he disappears.
the history, the people sustain him.
The voice taught
by birds, the meadow lark
cutting the air
with a sound*

Death of a Lyric Poet, Poems and Drafts (1975) begins where Carcasses of Spring ends up -- in Prince George. The poems written in Prince George are much different from anything preceding them. Most obviously in this chapbook the original handwritten versions (drafts) of some of the poems are reproduced and the reader is invited to view "work in

progress," to see the changes the poems went through and compare the drafts to the final versions which are in some cases themselves not final, but have corrections written into them. Also, many of the poems ("In the Face of It," "Bingo/Dance," "Pearl," and "Headache") are spread all over the page and "innovatively" punctuated. The poet's meditation and observations seem random, unformed; the reader is invited to participate (in the whole process from "draft" to "poem") in sorting out the puzzle:

*when does innocence end. Shelley
dead at 29. so. it is death*

or

*(last night, the wedding party
requests a bingo dance, some form
to*

*allow the innocent change of
partners*

innocence is

*(whose wife wld mind, or see the
metaphor)*

*bingo dance . . . "theres a storm across
the valley . . BINGO"
(19)*

Death of a Lyric Poet is, as the title poem suggests, about living *at the end of the line*. The book is dedicated to 6 poets who share the same space -- Ken Belford, Brian Fawcett, Brett Enemark, Bill Bailey, Harvey

Chometsky, and Paul Shuttleworth. In particular, it answers the Orpheus series of poems in Fawcett's Five Books of a Northman. The idea of being at the end of the line is explained by the initial response to Prince George registered in "The Land" in Carcasses and explained in an interview:

I've thought at times what would have happened if I'd stayed in Vancouver or Montreal where somehow that edge isn't there I think that this is a good town for a poet because it keeps your senses pretty keen. You keep observing, you keep seeing things that don't quite make sense. You're constantly reminded really what this civilization came to, at least the industrial part of it. 10

As McKinnon goes on to explain, the broader patterns of our civilization are visible in a small town. There is no escape to some highly specialized world that might cater more to an individual's taste. If you want to work at the college you teach in Forestry Technology. If you want to go to a cafe there's a cafe and you go to it. If there's a piano lounge and a country bar you go to them. If you have a radio you listen to the local station. If you don't like it you can stay at home and write lyric poetry.

The poems describe the situation in considerable detail — the *desert of snow*, *40 year/old midget singer with the afro hair*, the *stripper, her pubic hair curled at the edge of a 6 string*, the *Problem Line* on local radio, a *migraine at \$1.49*

day, the death of Giscome, a mill town. The poet's reactions are also detailed. The questions are immense. Who owns the woods? Why won't the stripper's enthusiastic admirers perform the simple (and, you would think, pleasant) task of helping her put her dress back on at the end of her act? What force can carry the entire population of a town away *on one month's notice*? *What is the symbol for the 30th/anniversary?* (20) The poet, puzzling over these matters, is

*entertained
for the wrong
reasons
any sense of myself is
welcomed. I welcome the absurd
(giving me one more thing I know,
to explain (21)*

The sense of self does emerge. Ken Belford is quoted as saying "The worse it gets, the better." (11) The terrible absurdities produce *the pearl*, the poem, and the poem is nothing more than a game, a series of tricks, that can help you locate yourself:

*The weather has changed outside. The
skating rink has been empty
for three months yet today -- 3
children skate there, awkwardly
scrape the ice, move over it, lost in
activity
but not lost. (21)*

*Poetry moves nameless -- is no more
than/the art of thinking of a way to*

cease disturbance. (22) It grounds itself in the clear recognition of the needs of the heart:

*what
has poetry, or the heart come to. What
wisdom can
be discovered. an hour ago I bought a
coke for
35 cents, craved that 5 cent sweet of
my youth & wanted
to tell my wife I loved her, out of the
blue.* (23)

In a country where there is no chance for perspective, where it is hard to light a fire to find warmth, poetry "moves:"

*There is this situation where love
wid mean nothing. the sky is
possibly beautiful, yet the speculation
is impossible, & if you could sing, the
song
is all that wid go
anywhere.* (12)

Death of a Lyric Poet is thus a book of northern poetics. McKinnon, like Robert Frost, finds in poetry "a momentary stay against confusion."

Songs and Speeches (1976) was written during a one-year stay at Schooner Cove B.C. (near Nanaimo), in 1975 - 76, when McKinnon was on leave from the college, studying music at Malaspina College. The book is printed in a small offset format and the poems are

accompanied by drawings by McKinnon's 3-year-old daughter Claire. The poems continue McKinnon's characteristic theme -- the difficulties and importance of domestic life (the drawings) in the context of the absurdities of our "industrial" civilization.

Nanaimo proved to be at heart another version of Prince George. McKinnon was there the day before the famous riot during the Bath Tub Race in 1975:

*in the riot 78 were arrested. broke
windows
with no revolutionary intent,
therefore stupidly enter
jail.
attempt to run a policeman down,
the charge
is attempted murder* (33)

No obvious "cause" turns the hundreds of people, enjoying a holiday weekend near the ocean, into a mob, destroying and raiding stores in the downtown area. As Ken Belford once said, in connection with a similar incident in New Hazelton, "they're lonely:"

*I understand the spooked boy clutching
his radio. I do not
understand those drunk at 10 AM,
standing in double knit trunks
on boats, young, with fu manchu
moustaches, yelling at
all who pass, call me a queer . . . or
yell to some sea queen
herself the businessman's definition of*

*beauty -- expected to
lay down on yachts and receive them
one after another. (33)*

Our concepts of ourselves, or at least our
concept of where we are in the social order, is
so absurd that even poetry might be inclined
to silence:

*yet they will
say of the simplest things
incomprehensible -- so I*

*begin again
clear my parts
of speech
finally would wish to speak
only to whales
who do tricks for food in
Stanley Park (32)*

There is a new absurdity in Songs and
Speeches, and that concerns property, our
sense of what we own and how we are
measured. McKinnon exhibits an intense
interest in the costs of items. In "The North"
it is *a kind of ownership/not to care.*
(11) The land is owned by the government, or
it is turned over for a fast profit. In the
south, however, property is a personal matter.
Everyone wants a fair share of Eden, and
they're willing to fight for it:

*if you come any further you'd better
leave your names with next of kin
sign posted outside of ucluelol b.c.
(28)*

30

Real Estate ads and signs turn out to be "no
trespassing" signs; they can mean that the
property is definitely not for sale:

*Ed wants \$200,000 for 26 acres.
\$100,000 down, he says
no one has that kind of money. his
flowers sell at
30 cents a flat. his teeth nicotined.
constant rolled
cigarette -- his
protest, to know no one
can buy his home easily, the price
fixed as arbitrarily,
as the arbitrary air.*

(35)

And, indeed, the general rules of the
marketplace don't seem particularly relevant.
A welder *dreams/of money in metal
sculpture* (41) -- to escape economics by
becoming an artist. *New York steak is
\$4.39/a lb, binoculars 7 x 35 (\$35.00).*
(39) Strikes add new kinks to the system:

*the strikes. beer, sugar, telephone,
bread, gas (cheap at 68.9 cents
the phone calls are free if you tell the
operator yr having
trouble getting thru. (36)*

In this context, McKinnon relies heavily on
his child and wife, and on the natural world.
The mayor explained that the rioters tried to
murder the policeman because they were
"carried away" in a good time, and the poet's

31

response is to go home:

*I am carried away
in language of another time
& take my daughter home*

"where are we going"

home

this time I only say it

once (34)

His wife interrupts him *to say/look at the mountains* or reminds him of the names and needs of flowers:

*I must
be taught again, given back my woman's
eye*

*it's spring I guess &
there is a key to our solitude. she gave*

*the purple crocus water & it opens
for awhile (43)*

The deer can get through his fence to eat his garden, and the moon determines when you can swim anywhere on the beach:

*I know
below the tide, anyone*

can swim (38)

At the end of the book, McKinnon is back home in Prince George (*cut banks, fringed with pine* — 44) painting his house. The action is a taking possession, being at home, legitimately, *scrape each board, each inch now/familiar and surrounding me.* (44) A desired order exists in the domestic world only and McKinnon clings to it with tenacity.

Sex at 31 (1977 — the title has inspired responses and sequels by Artie Gold and Brian Fawcett) is a classic example of the printer-poet's art. It was hand-set on 6 x 8 pages, stapled and glued into a wrap-around cover. The classical cover design matches the formality of the poem.

In the poem, McKinnon focusses on the domestic world that anchors him in Songs and Speeches. The "institution" of marriage, the foundation on which the domestic world rests, has proven shakey. The marriage has reached some kind of crisis of *infidelity*.

*I think it was down, & I
couldn't sleep for the thought of
infidelity*

to discover in you what is in me

*we haven't spoken
since (61)*

The "real" or "outside" world has broken into the circle:

*how we had forgotten, in this
awkwardness*

*that others exist -- discovered a
privacy best to be
without. beyond it, is the
real, yet it requires decision -- any
pleasure we
seek. we are this old. to know. &
speechless,
without sounds, to that extent, a part.
I would wish
you love. it wouldn't matter, you said,
who
it was (48)*

*It wouldn't matter who it was he would
still wish her love? It wouldn't matter who
it was he fell in love with she would leave
him? "Leaving" is the threat. His response is
to sit most of the time (49), to wait, to
assume (like Jack the Organizer)
responsibility:*

*I will hold you. I will wash
these dishes. heat up this food*

but where did you go

*like men as
the early going moon. imagine us
at 31 more in love than what we thought
could
be. (63)*

Once again, McKinnon's response is to hold onto what he has. It is a matter of imagination. Aphrodite, the desire to escape the "real" world through sex, something

*simple & intended, some kiss, stolen I
thought (60) is in any woman. But the world
is not a circus with plastic/ducks to
shoot at. (49) It is a dangerous place.
McKinnon chooses to stay in the domestic
circle. His friends thought I was sick in
love. to reach 31/8 get put to someone
else's use. (59) They don't want him
anchored to a conventional marriage. But,
McKinnon asserts, what we look for is a
joke. (57) Imagination doesn't push reality
around very much, if at all.*

In The the McKinnon returned to a much more introspective mode. Except for "The Organizer," the poems are intensely personal, reminiscent of the poem in Golden Daybreak Hair but less tentative, more confidently self-aware. The background of the poet's life — a teaching job, the city of Prince George, is almost uniformly dark. Domestic life continues to provide hope but that hope seems threatened, a flicker in the darkness. Wallace Steven's *weight of primary noon* is dominant. McKinnon is the man on the garbage dump, faced with too much reality.

Most of the poems are fragments, though the book starts with the very tight "The Organizer" and concludes with three formal "dedication" poems, the last to the poet's newborn son, reaffirming the prominence of the domestic world, *a gift of/what language won't allow.* (81) It is important to note, again, that language, the poet's raw material, is a human construct, and so suspect, broken off from the natural world of birth and seasons, chained to "systems." The poet and

his language can be freed only by a return to
the natural world:

*a freshness, of how
a dog barks, after
the baby comes home
the first day, & I'm tired enough
as if a burden released,
momentarily there is a gift of
what language won't allow (81)*

The fragments allow an escape from the
system, allow the accurate fixing of the fallen
human world of The the:

*from one part of the city, you'd swear
civilization has ended, & that here
we stand
amidst invisible wires,
primeval --
very old & our life but an outward
breath,
a long continuance of The
the
(73 - 74)*

There is no coherency to this world, only
details of a stolen block heater, a job (*to
know, to last/human pressure, to
continue/a spin* -- 72), strippers in the
local bars (The Canada, The Hut). There are
those who accept this garbage dump world as a
fixed reference, who talk about "reality," "the
real world" etc as if it were an acceptable
order. The poet rejects this "logic," claims
kinship *across the gap to D. H. Lawrence.*

I defy

*what others know, defy myself in the
self conscious
wish not to lie*

*as if anyone paid attention, given that
there are
those who claim a real world & that we
live to
be given over in the process to
eat our own shit (76)*

Even the idyllic world of Earl's Cove (on the
north end of the Sechart Peninsula, where the
McKinnons have a summer cottage) is infected
by The the:

*Agamemnon channel,
lined with trailers on 1 acre lots (78)*

The last three poems affirm a *momentary*
pleasure -- in the simple act of cutting
firewood, in a mild October wind, and in a
birth. These moments, though, are, in the face
of The the, as transitory as fallen stars:

*crazy bright star beyond the porch.
give your
3 seconds of light before we go on to
what
our lives become (71)*

"Wired Music" was never printed in
chapbook form but appeared in Roothog
(Repository, 1981). This long poem concludes

The the with a more detailed analysis of the fallen world. There is a sense of emergence here, though it is faint. The poet is locating his reference points (Dante, Dahlberg, Li Po) and finding a direction in the chaos, a swimmer coming to the surface, levelling off. The affirmation is there, *to repeat and/go against all that diminishes*. (85) "Hell" is more detailed, personal -- for McKinnon, a college (*lit, fluorescent halls*) located in the light industrial area of Prince George (*I am in a gravel pit . . . with rows of industrial shops* -- 86). The students are waiting for a *library exercise & search for the unfathomable*. (86) Outside, the mill towns, *slag heaps, (a copper mine?* (88), the seasons pass, *spring now, peculiar and northern*. (89) There is the cabin at Sechelt (*house shakes. the ferry's in*) during summer holidays, listening to C.B.C. (*grandmothers lap/dancing*) and then *back in/these woods* (91) in the interior and finally, again, *work: sept 2/80, the hand/& its shadow/across the page*. (92) Continuance:

*I'm alive
in the smoky image of one who
wails
in limbo*

*for the shadow of Virgil, as everyone
might* (90)

And so we all wait for whatever redemption we imagine. McKinnon, like Dante, is a poet,

and a ghostly great poet will lead him through experience to the Truth. McKinnon is a good guide himself, his credibility fixed in the accuracy with which he depicts experience and gives it significance. He may seem iconoclastic in his instinctive repugnance for rational systems, his view of our "progress" as a society may seem too conservative, and his attachment to domestic life may seem infantile. He is still, however, painfully accurate in his description and analysis of the everyday world we all know, and his grasp of the essentials of redemption is firm. In lyric poetry, we seek confrontation with a unique, perceptive, and attractive person; it is in facilitating this confrontation that poetry has its effect in the world. It is this kind of intensely and purely personal confrontation that we experience in McKinnon's poems.

NOTES

1. Page references in the text are, unless otherwise indicated by context, to The the (Coach House, 1980). This poem is on p. 25.
2. Debate over this technique is epitomized in Louis Dudek's rewriting of a Bowring poem in Canadian Literature 34 (Autumn, 1967), pp. 82 - 3.
3. Don Pracosky, "Interview with Barry McKinnon, May 1982," slated for publication in the B.C. Writers issue of Essays on Canadian Writing. See also "Interview with Canadian

4. Precosky.

5. In the Fall of 1982, McKinnon won the Malahat Review award for broadside design.

6. See The Pulp Mill: Stories (Repository 1977) and The Pulp Mill: Poems (Repository 1980) for McKinnon's selection of writings by local poets and prose writers, many of whom studied Creative Writing at the College or worked with McKinnon on some facets of the Caledonia Writing Series. For a complete account of the Caledonia Writing/Gorse Press series, including a bibliography, see Line (a Journal of the S.F.U. Contemporary Collection II (Fall, 1983), pp. 1 - 42.

7. In 1980, McKinnon organized the "Words/Loves" conference at C.N.C., featuring Robert Creeley, Audrey Thomas, and George Bowering. This influential conference was his last public act as a creative writing instructor.

8. For this reason, I will deal with the original formats of these books, while referring to the text (there are some small revisions) and pagination of the Coach House collection.

9. #18 - 19 (Summer - Fall 1980), pp. 106 - 111.

10. Precosky. See also McKinnon's introduction to The Pulp Mill: Poems.

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