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McKinnon's work has evolved in the last decade into a series of voices, most of them, but not all, aspects of his ever-evolving grip on the world and of his private journey through it. "Grip" is the appropriate term to describe what he does. McKinnon's opus is the record of the hand-holds he has managed to secure on his subject matter and in his life, in both of which, because he is accurately post-modern, he acknowledges are usually flying blind if not free. He gets a grip, then his hands slip and he gropes and fidgets—sometimes for years of passionate silence—until something again offers him enough purchase for a renewed han-hold.

Most of what now passes for poetry is the groping and fidgeting of poets merely trying to locate something that feels real to them—or will look attractive with their ensemble. McKinnon has never had much patience for that sort of silliness, and now, seemingly, what little he once had has evaporated. He records only that which he is sure constitutes a hand-hold even when he can't connect it immediately to anything else.

This method of proceeding is curiously akin to how fellow Northerner George Stanley deliberately decided to work decades ago, perhaps on the basis of similar evidence. Their work seems different because they are men with profoundly different minds. Stanley's intelligence is structured by philosophy and tempered by his broad understanding of the degree to which styles of cognition dictate morph and meaning. McKinnons is first and finally a musician, a very pure one who possesses, arguably, the best set of pipes of his generation. For him, no real meaning can exist outside of music, and he understands that melody is only a minor part of what music does.

The voices in his new poems have the singularly spare character of being willing to testify only to that which they are certain of—even if it is only a fragment of a sentence or a thought, or an image connected to another poem-fragment he wrote down four years ago—or was written 40 or 400 years ago by someone else and subsequently found by McKinnon and packratted into the opus. Real poets, and McKinnon is one, are thieves and packrats.

At the surface, therefore, these poem-fragments will appear extraordinarily spare and abstract. This appearance is deceiving. The surfaces in McKinnon's imagination have wholly disintegrated and these poems we are instead in the midst of a time-space construct of McKinnon's experience and insights that has been building—and gaining breadth and depth—for thirty years.

It is possible to see the new poems as self-revelatory, but it is possible, with effort, to follow the real-world revelations and to learn from them. Only morons believe poetry has a duty to be easy, after all.

With McKinnon, the effort is well spent. He is, as usual, trying to be true to two radically different kinds of experience—erotic and domestic, and to find some way to respect their differing protocols without compromising their integrity.

So that what one gets—in the same sort of paratactical successions with which reality washes over all of us—is admissions, submissions, instinctive constructions, insights, and parcels of practical wisdom, thus:

I wanted not to go, necessarily, went
warily, without a
care

drunk

next to a
scottish rhododendron, whispered, give me back
my heart

wondered where it went without blame or fault.

(in this life
I think the worst,
consequence then comes as diminished surprise...

So, it isn't that nobody cares about poetry, but that too few care about it, or about the language and thought of which poetry remains the sharpest edge not designed to wound or kill.

As in these poems, wherein you learn not about McKinnon's feelings on love and desire, but are given a demonstration of the two in practice. Who else would teach you that love can have the flavour and scent of cranberries and not conventional roses and honey.

BRIAN FAWCETT