

gone south
Author Barry McKinnon
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Notes on *Gone South*

My cultural investigation into Cascadia brings me way north to a new poetry chapbook entitled “gone south.” Barry McKinnon is the author and has long been a force for literature, writing, teaching, publishing and curating events in Prince George, BC, since 1969. I got his new chapbook and had this sense that I needed to read it, write about it and engage the material in a close and serious way. Few books have this pull on my consciousness and my understanding of the material is deepened (clarified) by writing about it, if not as a review, at least as a series of notes on phrases and images from the book that I find interesting and why that’s the case. Finding affinities with a poet new to me is also a blessing, as we poets are insecure enough to wonder (more regularly than the average person) if we are the crazy ones. The answer may still be “yes” but at least there are people in the bioregion who’ll talk to me in wherever it is they put we crazy ones in these chaotic times.

And gone south is a play on the notion of McKinnon’s escape to the Southwest U.S. as well as the notion that misfits and dead people have “gone south.”

I am fascinated by the simple phrase:

In Arizona
the desert - weather within

Not sure what this means, but it makes me think. Why am I always dehydrated? Isn’t it the emotions that are likened to water? Is it an emotionless place, the inner desert? Am I starving my body of needed emotions by continuously existing on the edge of hydration?

There is no discernable season in the January desert, in the desert in general. As a person who grew up with real winters and who appreciates the “change of seasons,” I get the feeling the author conveys with the phrase:

weather - no discernable season, sense of its ancient

It throws me off, too, makes me an outsider with the author wanting to know what self-knowledge will be gained in this quest. This venture into unfamiliar territory. That the author, Barry McKinnon, in a previous essay quoted William Carlos Williams, was informing my reading that there would be a chase here in this short series of poems. That understanding gave me something approximating a plot. The quote:

The composing principle for Arrhythmia, and I hope all of my work, was in line with W.C. Williams' dictum that each poem must sum up the poet's life to that point. I wrote Arrhythmia daily with the sense that if I had anything more to say I'd better get at it. If the word "subject" is still in the post-modern lexicon, I believe the poet's subject is time – and that language discloses the actualities therein. Emotion is the poem's fact.

I'd forgotten his notion about emotion being the fact of the poem, which provides further illumination to the two phrases cited above, that the inner landscape could be seen as a desert (emotionless) and that there is no emotion in the desert due to its dry state, if you see (as many ancient cultures do) emotion being represented by water. At this point of the first poem I am fourteen words in and already getting a sense that I've an affinity for the protagonist, I, too, have a spiritual chase at the heart of my existence. I try to see things through the lens of the mythic (there is a potential message in that which we notice, especially in nature) and that I'm an outsider with the author in the desert where the alien nature of the landscape is allowing me to learn about my self through McKinnon's quest.

In the fourth stanza (stanzas being a poor way to describe this poem composed as a field, but all I have) there come the first tangible images

growth - the Sequoia? tree, names I don't know - the desert sans name / or taxonomy/ but
for this little burst, minute, pink to cactus red buds to take as measure. What was or is it in a
temporality /does not need us nor, without a mind, need itself.
thus, ... it's worse than the
puzzle it appears.

Getting the poem transcribed here properly is difficult and McKinnon's use of slashes goes against proper duplication here, as those slashes are his and not mine attempting to convey the linebreaks. The lines continue on the page and total four lines in the original, with end words being "but" "a" "the" and "appears."

We get a glimpse of the how the red buds of the cactus are the measure for the poet. We get a sense of the mind at work in the moment. (Whalen's poetry as "picture or graph of the mind moving" is clearly evident here in McKinnon's process.) It's unfamiliar territory and he does not know the plant names, but is drawn to the color and the blossoming of the cactus buds. And the situation, the unknown, the complete and utter independence of the cactus or the combination of all this is worse than it appears, but there is potential for a blossoming. In the human this is individuation.

In the seventh stanza, the notion of fear is expressed, the poet revealing vulnerability again (as in not knowing the names earlier) but deeper this time in any risk one can take.

In the next stanza, the poet is going north, the opposite direction that he states in the introduction about "going south" as a euphemism for death, stealing or escaping responsibility. And envisioning his head blown off by a man who's packing a gun should he (the poet) say the wrong thing. (The Gabby Giffords shooting still too fresh for us all.) He notes that this is the culture by stating "(AZ law)." Simple as that. I feel like Arizona and Southern California are foreign countries to me, so I can just imagine what a Canadian thinks, yet McKinnon and I are Cascadians, so I feel an affinity in that along with a sense of shame or disgust by having countrymen (USAmericans) that pack heat makes me feel all the more Cascadian.

Fear again as the first poem in the series wraps up, as he could not look down the one mile drop. I feel the acrophobia and he ends also with an image of being in the forest stumbling. Dante's forest. Robin Blaser's Holy Forest. Forest (whether McKinnon) intends it or not, as "the realm of the psyche and the feminine principle. A place of testing and initiation..." according to An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols.

Part of writing this way - as discovery - you can tell this is his method by how we are made aware of McKinnon's thoughts in the same sequence that

HE becomes aware of them (not knowing the plant names, how the fear is triggered by the unknown and by being a potential target for uttering a random comment, among other things), is that the spiritual chase is a huge part of what drives the practice. There is the use of language of how we stack up in that quest to become more fully human. Writing as discovery, writing spontaneously, allowing one's self to be vulnerable, communicating a sense of place and managing one's affairs as a poet in a strange place are all what give this work energy. This after only two readings and the text's density requires more and surely more would be revealed after repeated readings. Clearly there is a mastery here, an humilitas, an urgency and it is a high energy construct.

dog minutes

The second poem is called *dog minutes* and this is a play on the notion that each dog year is the equivalent to seven human years. We get that McKinnon is about 70 when the poem states: "my human dog age 10." Again some of the inner thought of the poet is included into the poem. Not sure what you'd call the kind of poetry that would say "you have to edit out that stuff" maybe the school of workshop poetry, or the conventional school, MFA poetry, whatever, the reader here is part of the poem as an event, not as the record of an event, in Robert Duncan's parlance. Poetry's fourth wall, as it were, is toast and we wonder what the long sentence is that leads to the line:

a long sentence that precedes its meaning/ leading to a bridge.

That the bridge is over the Fraser River has McKinnon back, we can assume, to his thoughts about the association of how time functions. Remember, McKinnon is on the record as believing that the poet's subject is time and how 100 years ago, as he states in the 6th line of *dog minutes*, is not that long ago. That he would extrapolate dog minutes to the notion of time is one of those "why didn't I think of THAT" moments as a writer. The dog minutes here are spent how to release old patterns of self, communicated as "tensions of fight and flight" and again the notion of each poem summing up the poet's life to that point comes to mind, along with the human qualities of forgiveness (harder than it sounds) and the ability to allow one's life to unfold naturally.

The poem's second part comes after a lone, bold period on the page like:

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And then more interior monologue about editing and how he might call what he was working on “a draft” and the need to do the task for its sake. Am reminded of the Ted Berrigan line: “Some people prefer the interior monologue. I like to beat people up.” This noodling, this tangential (his word) thought about the moment leads to something huge.

thinking beauty of river tree and wind in no sentimental way - a kind of
of
clarity without knowing but its moment.

Again the end words are “of” and “moment.” And the spaces IN the line are his too, replicated here. THIS moment is the nugget for me in the whole short series, at least it was on my first reading. There is a moment when the interior monologue and the exterior circumstances merge and there is a knowing. I think having these moments in my own life is part of why drugs never could provide the same experience for me as moments of clarity, as drugs prevent this kind of clarity and the high they give is no match. I could easily count ten such moments in my life and there is no way of telling how strongly the moment is etched into your memory until years later. How it’s so aptly worded:

- a kind of
clarity without knowing but its moment.

The juxtaposition of thinking “out loud” with aspects of the drive out to or near Cottonwood Island and the river’s (*mindless*, the poet called it) flood and its revisions to the landscape.

The subject of mind comes up again in the fourth section of the poem (as measured by the dots separating segments) as

the mind when it did not *know* its future stretched /a field/ to darker
clouds - when
you’re wordless perplexity *was* the mind as body of the world’s
impending exit
to what’s already gone

Again, lineation mangled here, but the notion of an understanding of (for me) the implication of non-locality the quantum physicists (& Buddhists) would call it. The capacity of the mind to tune into resonances that preceded us, as in Chief Seattle's famous speech that we'll never be alone when his tribe's been wiped out, or Whitman's parting words that we'll find him "under your boot soles." There is a Buddhist feeling to this whole poem, attachment to anything, in this case the past, the *dread of what remains* and how that must be experienced, but not with the attachment to drama. The conclusion reinforces that with the last line, indented a third of the way across the page:

in harsh oppositions gain truer self & being

This is a poet nearing the end of his life, but at the top of his craft. About 70 is a good age when you still have the energy to write projectively, you have time (being retired) and you have decades of life experience from which to cull, but the oldness of real old age has not yet set in. (Of course there are exceptions.) Maybe it's a 52 year old poet thinking HE'S not so old, but I am with McKinnon on his quest and have a sense of what potential there is for me, if I play my cards right, as a poet of 70, trying like hell to get the main themes of my life right and coming close, but never nailing it, the beauty of writing in serial form.

desert notebook

Back from Northern BC into the desert in the final poem in the series and an assertion that

solitude sans meaning become dust

Is the author suggesting that the difference from solitude and loneliness is meaning? I have gone into recent writing retreats missing my family, sure, but excited about the possibility of creating something and having the mental space to not be interrupted. The most severe restrictions on outside access have proven to be the most productive and the threats of loneliness (am thinking of Jack Nicholson's character in *The Shining*) and of non-

production have failed to materialize. The opposite of dust, I'm happy to report. This is part of what having a purpose in life means to me. It helps that my poetics and cosmology are the same and I get the feeling that is the same case for McKinnon. A seamlessness, which deepens the meaning; delays the dust.

Again the sections of the poem by bold periods and in the second section McKinnon recognizes that the desert is also a field and in the third section this notion of the field as region of intelligence, as extension of mind (or mindless), it remains

the mind "undescribed" by elements that form / elements and
meaning sun & / literal ...

Again here the line break comes after "&" and the ellipses. And this perception of the desert dwellers

the characteristic - (*suffering* humans
in relation to this basin/valley - heat bowl / persistent as
a force that rejects them -

the desert lives like water

.

nothing becomes another thing

The desert dwellers are suffering, which in its original context meant *undergoing* and that they do undergo, they persist, shows them to be as tough as the elements, elements quite alien to the moisture-rich Cascadian landscape that McKinnon has called home for 45+ years. The last line in the poem adds depth to what the experience is in the desert for McKinnon.

body in mind in context indistinguishable from what defines it -
gone south

One take is that it is a recognition of a certain experience of non-locality. A Cascadia poet goes south (for a respite from the brutal, long, Northern winters (as opposed to the Gentle Northern Summer to which his friend George Stanley would allude) and finds a certain mindlessness which is an

extended mind, in a way. Life lived well is a flow and the desert has mastered this, like the river in the middle poem of this offering because *the desert lives like water* McKinnon says. A systemless system, that the poem can be when in the hands of someone who can recognize their place in the scheme of things and not “become” the desert (*nothing becomes another thing*) he reminds us, yet somehow it is now part of the field of which he is a part too. There is an inherent connection deeper than simply noticing. This is a prehending. That a poet comes into this environment with 50+ years of writing experience, with a “practice of outside” as the late Casacadian poet Robin Blaser would describe the sublimation process which can be utilized to hear what the language and the place itself is saying, with the recognition that reality can be seen as various fields intersecting and those intersections are where the energy is, all contribute to the context which gives this short series depth.

And like any poetry written this way, the “meaning(s)” gleaned from the poem will deepen, expand and multiply, for the close reader and for the poet himself, I’m guessing. He has gone south, literally and we sense the figurative “gone south” still to come is a bit easier for McKinnon because he has the intelligence (or is it courage) to ponder the end that is not really an end, but is in our death-denying culture. *what everyone dreads* he says earlier in the poem. Understanding the meaning we make in our time here is part of the body in mind in context. This is meaning making which makes life worth living. To have committed a life to it lets we readers reap the rewards of the sacrifices McKinnon has made to make the poem like this. Poem as summation of the poet’s life up to this point. It makes the kind of poetry not written as an act of discovery quite tame and trite by comparison. McKinnon’s is the kind of work that interests me. That, as a USAmerican I am supposed to ignore Canadian poets is something I reject. That there are others in Cascadia who understand the depth of such a gesture and have developed a degree of mastery with it is an exciting discovery of my own. I have some catching up to do.

5:01p - 3.21.14
Bremerton Ferry