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P O E M S

M I C H A E L M c C L U R E

Introduction by ROBERT HUNTER

Dolphin Skull Rare Angel **Dark Brown**

"The most fantastic poem in America"
—Jack Kerouac on "Dark Brown"



Once this was all Black Plasma
and Imagination

DOLPHIN SKULL

FOR PAUL who knows
this poem better than I do
AND SEES

MORE
into it
as if
it is

a
MAIDA
sculpture

Michael

Doc Bay

INTRODUCTION

Right understanding of late twentieth century poetics can be impeded by use of critical tools of other times. *Direction* is more often to the point.

Though Michael McClure's images do double service as symbols, he is not a symbolist. His objects are clear and present, things in themselves, not a referral service for ideal forms. That they express the world of the ideal is rather an inevitable side effect of rigorous objectivity. The work is endowed with emotion and morality and a decidedly anarcho-leftist politic, but these features are largely exterior to a more specific aim, a purely poetic gesture.

Though McClure's poetry is neither programmatic nor perversely exclusive of meaning it is needful to grasp what he's trying to achieve in order to realize how well he has succeeded. The key is this: he does not make things up. He reports with exactness. Fastidious exactness.

This may seem an odd estimation when his lines routinely exhibit the hyper clarity and thronging of image peculiar to hallucination, but his trademark rhapsody is the natural dance of clearly observed items. Fantasy is minimal, though the sensations and types of imagery associated with it are everywhere present.

Fantasy is the imagination of the imagination; the envisionings of

abstracted vision. The phenomenological iota is set aside in favor of associative chains which recede further and further from the conditioning image. It is essentially the troping of trope leading to dream territory; an engrossing and sometimes powerful mode of poetic procedure but *not* McClure's territory. Not to denigrate the fantastical approach here, simply to delineate the realm of the surreal and differentiate its effects from McClure's area of primary concern.

Although a certain surface sensuality gives itself easily enough, it is impossible to read McClure's work quickly at depth. Time must be taken to envision what is indicated, to link visions with the poet. Reading his words without making an effort to engage their visual and visceral potential is an exercise in page turning; a postcard in place of a sunset.

Appreciating the long-term presence of a theoretic bias grounded in specific objectivizing technique is crucial in apprehending the essentials of McClure's poetry. It is his poetic faith, one that locates him alongside elders William Carlos Williams and Charles Olson in the canon of Projective Verse.

Neither a word collagist, nor one who allows himself to be much influenced by the suggestive directions words tempt a poet to take by virtue of their customary associative potentials (most prominently in rhyme), McClure firmly guides words to report objects of experience, however visionary these objects may be. If, as sometimes happens, his subject matter is precisely the evocative power of a particular word, such as *aelf*, a similar approach is employed. Unlike more austere practitioners of the Projective form, he makes little attempt to remove himself from the equation, recognizing the viewer to be as much a part of the skyscape as the clouds.

While adhering to the Projective canon, McClure's conceptual forte is grounded in an informed Zen mode of perception, focused at ease within the moment. His other purely stylistic concern is the specific attention to breath groups in spoken poetry characteristic of the Beat movement, of which predilection he is a recognized germinal feature.

McClure professes and employs Projective method primarily to report movements of what can only be called primordial ecstasy in the life of the biological organism, the visions of its biologic mind, and its

essential animal spirit. That this requires a sensation of at-oneness with the subject matter is not surprising. Spiritual precision, if that is not a self-cancelling description, is his specialty, and it may be that no poet does this particular thing better, employing the technique, as he has, throughout the better part of his lengthy career. His work, to be seen aright, must be viewed through that lens; his relative success and failure judged by reference to how closely a particular poem approximates his avowed intention.

If it may be maintained that a *true* reporting is an act of poetic perfection, hence completion—if perfectly referential and adequately represented in words—it would follow that McClure's work is perfectly complete at any moment, insofar and just so far as he is true to his method, and this seems to be the case. The work does not progress towards some distant apex of excellence. It simply inhabits that excellence and accumulates. It is instructive to see the subjective changes wrought by long experience upon the projectively perceived object, but the castle is already captured and only the itemization of its contents remains to be completed. Poetic Reality is at work here, that rare angel most convincingly summoned by being true to a worthy idea for a very long period of time.

Reportage is the key in appreciating McClure. Should spots of red fruit appear squashed on a white cupboard, the image is one actually experienced. You can trust McClure for that. The spots were not yellow. It is good to know this.

—Robert Hunter

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

There are three lives here in one book: *Dolphin Skull*, *Rare Angel*, and *Dark Brown*. Each is like a living being with eyes and ears and fingers, and each is as different from one another as living creatures are unique. I wrote all three spontaneously in Projective Verse, using the syllable and the energy of the breath as the structure of the poem.

To write spontaneously does not mean to write carelessly or without thought and deep experience. In fact, there must be a vision and a poetics that are alive and conscious.

The moment of writing is complex and at the same time it is natural and vigorous. I do not know of a more adventurous gesture than to write spontaneously. Whether a poem is born from exuberance or depression, there must be ebullience, hunger for freedom, and imagination. When the poem is finished I listen to it and look at it on the screen or in the ink of the pen, and see that it has a deeper consciousness and brighter thoughts than I was aware of while writing. Sometimes there is difficulty in a poem. The obscurity, the un-understandability, is not there for the purpose of evasion, but it is the energy compressing and leaping and rippling, just as a wave ripples with silver in the moonlight. Even in darkness one can see that it is a silver wave. Goethe believed that poetry should be incomprehensible and

incommensurable. All art is that way to some degree, but much art seems flat and lacking in courage because it neglects to be difficult.

If poetry and science cannot change one's life they are meaningless. The meaning is that we may become more able to ring true to our deep selves. If a poet risks being accused of esotericism in order to be vigorous and to give meaning to the poem, then that's a small price.

What is urgent is not the *quantity* that is understood as one reads a poem, but how much one uses the richness of one's being to have the experience of the poem.

Dark Brown was written when I was a young man and I used poetry to revolt against society during the fifties Cold War, but equally as important was to rebel against my own customs and habits. It was a dark night of the soul, and I wanted to use liberational methods to discover the substance of spirit. I believed that spirit was one and the same as the body. My intention was to discover the true shape of spirit and love, and I found I had to invent them: they were not there unless I created them. After the first stanzas of *Dark Brown* were written, a word vision occurred as "Fuck Ode," and then, beyond that, I was surprised by the last section of the poem, "A Garland." How can a young man search for his body and not come to speak of sexuality?

Dark Brown is about the biological roots of the impulse to freedom and how that struggle relates to poetry, and it is about setting language free from censorship. My earliest essay, "Phi Upsilon Kappa," is about writing *Dark Brown*, and another essay, "Revolt," is about the biology of it; both could be used as notes for the poem (both essays appear in the collection *Meat Science Essays*). To bring light to my dark cloud I followed renegade paths and also immersed myself in scholarship. *Dark Brown* contains words from Old English and dictionaries of archaisms and argot. This was a search for language to describe the states for which I could not find contemporary words. Moreover, I was looking at natural history and trying to understand the principles that join living organisms together in simple and complex structures. Not knowing where I was, except for my presence there, I studied the physics that was complementary to my state, and found it in the ideas of Wolfgang

Pauli and P.A.M. Dirac. My novel, *The Mad Cub*, describes some of the personal life behind the poem.

In beginning *Rare Angel*, the second poem of *Three Poems*, I determined to write directly from sensations of my body. But preceding the writing there was much studying and traveling with friends who showed me Nature and the environment. I was fascinated by Whitehead's thoughts on Reason and by the physics of Hwa Yen Buddhism. *Rare Angel* is motivated by some of the same impulses as *Dark Brown*, and it strives, like our bodies, to be in the present, the past, and the future simultaneously—in the “uncarved block” of the Taoists. Some of the experiences in *Rare Angel* are spoken of in *Scratching the Beat Surface* and in *Lighting the Corners*, two books of interviews and prose.

Dolphin Skull is in two sections: “Stanzas in Memory” is written directly from the unconscious in the sense that Jackson Pollock’s “psychoanalytic drawings” were from the unconscious—what I saw was simply there and was not planned in order or method except the systemless one that is the creative act. “Portrait of the Moment,” the second section, begins with the twelfth stanza of the first section, repeats it, and then continues without interruption to very *consciously* and spontaneously explore that single moment for as long as it unscrolls in sensory images. Consciousness melted my travels through Kenya and Tanzania, when watching eagles and lions and baboons, in with the primal stuff of infancy, youth, manhood, and the present—all in one moment. I see now that all moments are one and the same moment.

Following *Dolphin Skull*, there is an afterword describing the writing of the second section of the poem; it also explains the poem’s title.

My gratitude to Dave Haselwood and Andrew Hoyem of Auerhahn Press, who first published *Dark Brown*, and to John and Barbara Martin of Black Sparrow Press, who initially published *Rare Angel*. Further thanks to editor David Stanford, who herein first presents *Dolphin*

Skull, and to the workers at Viking Penguin press who made this book possible. The first public presentation of the opening stanzas of *Dolphin Skull* were with Ray Manzarek playing piano at the Great American Music Hall in San Francisco. The dates on the title pages of the poems represent the year of earliest publication.

My gratitude to photographer Harry Redl for the use of his author portrait on the cover of *Three Poems*.

Thanks to poet/lyricist Robert Hunter for his Introduction and to scholar Harald Mesch for use of our interview. Thanks to all my friends who show me ways to become myself in darkness and light, and to see that the universes are the messiah and the tathagata. Special thanks to my family and to the artists and biologists who lead me, and to Amy Evans who is by my side.

