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On David McElroy and Robert Hedin

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friend, of the awful killing of a pure mystery. This book of poems knows it, and the poet is showing us.

Rick: these poems reflect the hardshipped world, as when Conrad Aiken said: "... to be the ambassador of all you are to all that is not you." Here is that tension and fear, behind Tom's deceptive frivolity. Rick, here in Browning I have eaten the salmon and loved this book. It is raining now, snow later. I won't pull the raincoat out just yet.

Love, Lee.

Lee Bassett

Making It Simple
David McElroy
Ecco Press, 1975
New York, New York
$2.95, paper

Snow Country
Robert Hedin
Copper Canyon Press, 1975
Port Townsend, Washington
$3.00, paper

Let's say it's weather that connects these two poets, and in particular, the way weather — through its instruments of wind and snow — manages to confound what was formerly sure. Both men spent a great deal of time in Alaska, so it shouldn't be surprising that the landscape, its changing face, forms such a central concern — even when the locations of some poems lie in a more temperate zone. Each writer's response, however, is utterly individual: so much so, in fact, that leafing through the books, noting the differences in tone, manner of statement, you'd swear that if these two ever met they wouldn't get along. Maybe start arguing, even. But don't be too hasty. While McElroy seems to use the extremes of weather and circumstance toward an ongoing redefinition of self, and while Hedin uses the same, it seems, to arrive at a more proper stance with regard to what's out there, you must remember that these two notions are not that far apart. Both concede — surrender, if that's your word — to the fact

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that we are alone, mortal, and the only halfway reliable points of reference when everything else is being blown away, or losing its contours in snow. Sharpening becomes vital to both.

Making It Simple opens with both a genesis and a death, the spawning of eelpout in a northern Minnesota river. It doesn't take long to get a sense of this as an image of the poet's own struggle for identity. In this poem, “Females plant gravel/with clouds. Flocks of males boil in a kiss/ and make a hundred million chances work.” The violence of this dynamism continues through the book's four sections, each of which in some way points to a stage of physical or psychological death and maturation. It is as if there is never enough time for rest. The impulse is to take each scene as a test of the self-definition he has arrived at: “Doors are open/ as if to ask, Are you a breeze?” And elsewhere:

We will be slow to call this wisdom:
the third shepherd talking to zero,
the messenger who brought us forty-one kinds of failure last year still surviving,
Tornado Frank pivoting over Kansas
on its cock, the weather in Qomox,
the writer who makes happen
as little as possible, the clouds
compared to crumbs on blue china,
and you, with no more hallelujah
than a glass of juice, not noticing
me not saying anymore I love you.

(“One for Your Hills and Sea”)

Nothing much is sure. The more rapid the changes, the tougher McElroy seems to get — embracing what is not static, but with a voice stronger in defense against it:

I thought I'd made it.
I went south, doubled back
in snow, walked backward
in snow, dissolved my trail
south again through water.
In soft shoes I lost my smell
in Seattle and New York, New York.
It didn't work.

(“Molt of the Winter Soul”)

As the lines that follow these suggest, the speaker is being made a continual ophan by circumstances which negate the former base of
his response to the world. There are always new bearings to be found, and the glib ones will not do: "So when the good girl on the panel for peace implied/ your copter was evil, I felt like hooky." The fact is, McElroy's poems are revolts against glibness, against arriving at some self-definition unable to be modified or challenged. Nest warmth won't do. The obsession is with movement, even in the latter poems that deal with maturity, those in the last section — "Approaching Some Ocean". There is no arrival there: "These tracks curve into the earth, vanish to a point/ you're walking to, the next rock after crust."

Perhaps the poet's concession to the violence of change explains why the Alaskan landscape shows up so much in his poems. A good many of them, maybe half, are located elsewhere, yet the references appear nevertheless. Perhaps it's that backdrop, and the emotional content coincident with it, that lends his poems so much of their force — as here, in "Up the Alcan":

I open Sister Mary Gilbert's
book across the horn
on the wheel. On the one hand
I steer. On the other, I push
the words flat against the page
so they won't bounce off
across the tundra with the bears.
This poem's about the undertow.

This road was built for war.
Curves, loops and doodles
on a flat plateau made convoys
safer from strafing that never
happened here. The chrome ram
on the hood sweeps the horizon
in a steep turn. I'm a hero
on the prowl.

Without warning the road
coils in a pile behind a tree.
Caught in the vortex,
both hands on the wheel,
the words fall down, break,
and the page comes tumbling after.
A coyote whips by.
One quick look:
the zeros in his eyes.
Like the first book, *Snow Country* opens on a form of death, in this case the exhaustion of psychological means "at the end of the open road." Like McElroy, Hedin uses the landscape as a starting point for self-inventory, and here — where the landscape disappears — there is nothing left but the two sorts of responses the self makes to a scene devoid of any shape or distinction. The speaker addresses Louis Simpson:

before us still lies the darkness.
in it we think
we see trees, giant sequoias
that break around an open marsh,
and are compelled to give them green
to give them sway
a hard mossy bark,
rain dripping from the leaves.

Listen, a bullfrog's call.
smell the moist calm in the air.

We wait for the moon
for the song of a white bird

Any backdrop
of light.
("End)

There is active imagination working here, and also that other sort of response, passive, implied by the listening. The individual mind asserts, creating in a photo "the voices of miners fading north/, The bray of animals, the echoes/ Of stones piling up to stake a claim." And it chooses no assertion, as when it concedes that the wind "is always taking/ You down/ In its arms,/ And making you heavy/ With its words." When these two impulses are harmonized, when the self is asserted and presented at the same time as only a small part — probably insignificant — of an entire whole, the tension created is dramatic. Here, in full, is the title poem:

Up on Verstovia the snow country is silent tonight.
I can see it from our window,
A white sea whose tide flattens over the darkness.
This is where the animals must go—
The old foxes, the bears too slow to catch
The fall run of salmon, even the salmon themselves—
All brought together in the snow country of Verstovia.
This must be where the ravens turn to geese,
The weasels to wolves, where the rabbits turn to owls.
I wonder if birds even nest on the floating sea,
What hunters have forgotten their trails and sunk out of sight.
I wonder if the snow country is green underneath,
If there are forests and paths
And cabins with wood-burning stoves.
Or does it move down silently gyrating forever,
Glistening with the bones of animals and trappers,
Eggs that are cold and turning to stones.
I wonder if I should turn, tap and even wake you.

("The Snow Country")

This approximation of balance, this juggling of impulses goes on throughout the book. Perhaps because the speaker is preoccupied not only with himself, but also with himself-in-the-world, these poems come off quieter than those of the first selection. And no criticism is implied for either in saying this. The purposes of both are different enough to be taken on their own merits.

Where McElroy's poems show a tendency toward an abundance of forms, and the strengthening of personality in the face of such profusion, the subjects in Hedin's tend toward being "whited-out":

Here on this ridge all is so white
It all seems dark.
The only color left is my wife,
and soon she too will fade.

* * *

I hear the bushes in the ditch
Crouch and paw at the white.
The stones under my feet
Are struggling to rise into swans.
Far off I hear the strike of a match.
And I see my wife's hand open
Stroking a growing white flame.

McElroy confronts his scenes with a voice, Hedin with a desire for clarity— even if it means his voice must lose out to the wind's, even if his last and only friends are "A cricket who's run out of songs,/ A jagged piece of rock/ Termed muse."

Where both these poets meet is in their knowledge of their moving. They know it is always snowing, wherever they are — that any minute
now the road they thought before them may be lost in an overlay of white. Their direction becomes wisely tentative. Lucky for us, they write about the human response to such bare fact, not just the poetic response. I lied to you earlier: these two would probably not even think of arguing. Hedin's poem, "Transcanadian," may very well speak for the both of them, showing us the more important thing on their minds:

At this speed, my friend, our origins are groundless.
We are nearing the eve of a great festival,
The festival of wind.
Already you can see this road weakening.
Soon it will breathe
And lift away to dry its feathers in the air.
On both sides the fields of rape seed and sunflowers
Are revolting against their rows.
Soon they will scatter widely like pheasants.
Now is the time, friend, to test our souls.
We must let them forage for themselves,
But first — unbuckle your skin.
It is out here, in the darkness
Between two shimmering cities,
That we have, perhaps for the last time, chance
Neither to be shut nor open,
But to let our souls speak and carry our bodies like capes.

Rick Robbins

Making It Simple is still available in bookstores and by order from the publisher. Snow Country is out of print, but copies are still available from Spring Church Book Company, Box 127, Spring Church, Pennsylvania.